

ABSTINENCE FROM ALCOHOL

POSITION PAPER

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From its inception, the Assemblies of God has been unequivocally committed to abstinence from alcoholic beverages, a conviction firmly rooted in what the Bible teaches about the abuse of wine, the consumption of strong drink, and also in its cardinal ethical principle of love for God and others. Not to be overlooked as well has been the obvious and well-publicized devastation resulting from alcohol abuse in so many homes and communities. Throughout our history, the proclamation of the gospel has been a powerful force in bringing addicted persons to dynamic faith in Christ, delivering them, enabling lifelong abstinence, and enhancing healthy homes, churches, and communities.

Unfortunately, one hundred years after the founding of our Fellowship, consumption of alcoholic beverages has become even more pervasive. In large part, this has been the result of a massive, multibillion-dollar, annual advertising campaign by the alcohol industry over the last several generations touting the pleasures and benefits of drinking. The entertainment media have also played a major role in the transformation of public attitudes by frequent and sophisticated portrayals of social drinking in movies, television, and other media.

Certain widely published studies (now increasingly challenged) have added apparent legitimacy to drinking by seeming to prove that there are medicinal benefits to moderate drinking. Wine especially is promoted as a heart-healthy beverage. The public may well infer that it is not only acceptable to consume alcohol, but also right and good to drink moderately to promote good health.

Over the passage of time, the church world has been greatly affected by these pervasive cultural influences. Regular activities attended by Christian believers—sports events, office parties, social gatherings, business contacts, wedding receptions, and so forth—often expose them to alcohol.

As the pressures to participate in moderate consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages mount, it is imperative that the long-standing Assemblies of God position on abstinence be reaffirmed in light of both the Scriptures and societal practice in order to faithfully witness to each generation and to continue to confront unjust and destructive social ills that harm people whom God loves. By any measure, the use and abuse of alcohol continues to take an enormous toll on people, and entire societies, around the world.

Modern Alcoholic Beverages Are More Intoxicating

Since appeals to approve moderate drinking are often based on wine use in the Bible, it is critically important to understand the differences between the production and use of wine in biblical times, and the more deceptive and dangerous use of alcoholic beverages today. Any study of the use of alcoholic drinks in the Bible must recognize that there is little direct correspondence with today's alcoholic beverages. There are several major

differences: (1) wine of the biblical era generally had lower alcohol content, (2) ancient wine was commonly diluted before consumption, (3) grapes were a staple of ancient agrarian life and commerce requiring preservation of the juice, and (4) the distillation process for liquors had not yet been fully developed.

Wines in biblical times variously are estimated to have been from 7–10 percent alcohol.¹ By contrast, modern breweries and distilleries produce table wines, fortified wines, and hard liquors that often have 14 percent, 18–24 percent, and 40–50 percent respectively. Distillation, that now produces alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content of 40 percent or more, was not invented until the Middle Ages. Thus, hard liquor as it is known and consumed today was unknown in biblical times.

Both ancient Greeks and Jews wrote of diluting wine to avoid intoxication. Drinking “unmixed” wine was considered barbaric in Greek culture. Ratios of 20:1 in Homer’s *Odyssey* and 8:1 in Pliny’s *Natural History* were probably not the norm but a mixture of 2:1 or 3:1 was common.² The Mishnah component of the Talmud gives the ratio of dilution as 3:1.³ Several of the Early Church fathers and the Bible itself allude to the practice of diluting wine.⁴ With a typical dilution ratio of 3:1, wine in biblical times would have ranged between 2–2.75 percent alcohol. By today’s legal standards, a drink has to be 3.2 percent alcohol before it is classified as an alcoholic beverage. Clearly, the wine consumed in Bible times lacked the potency of modern alcoholic beverages. Neither biblical nor historical references to mixed or diluted wine prove that everyone always diluted their wine, but the references do show it was a common practice.

Medical science was in its infancy and wine with its mild alcoholic content had numerous medicinal applications. For example, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the wounded traveler was treated by “pouring on oil and wine” (Luke 10:34).⁵ The healing and antiseptic properties of wine are probably reflected in Paul’s admonitions to Timothy to “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [*oinos*] because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23).

Grapes and the wine they yielded were basic staples of ancient agrarian life providing food, safer and more palatable beverages, and an important source of income. They were virtually a necessity of ancient life. By comparison, alcoholic beverages today are an optional recreational beverage, by no means a necessity, and, unfortunately, are far more potent and addictive. It is historically and hermeneutically misleading to suggest that the wine usage of Bible times justifies today’s consumption of far more powerful intoxicants.

¹ As cited in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament [TWOT]* (2 vols.), (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:376.

² Robert Stein, “Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times,” *Christianity Today*, June 10, 1975, 9–11. Stein references numerous sources from the Greco-Roman world that address specific ratios of mixing water and wine.

³ The Mishnah, Shabbath 77a; The Mishnah, Pesahim 1086.

⁴ James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), vol. 2.2.2; Cyprian, *Epistle*, LX11, 2, 22, 13; Justin Martyr, *Apology*, 1,67,5.

⁵ All biblical citations unless otherwise indicated are from the New International Version (2011).

Other Hermeneutical Considerations

Since the Scriptures are not always specific in responding to modern questions, it is not surprising that sincere inquirers come to conflicting conclusions. Fundamental rules for interpreting what the Bible says involve asking basic questions: What did the biblical author intend to say to his readers? What did the first readers understand the author to be saying? What does the modern reader of the Bible hear in our current context and how are the scriptural themes and principles to be applied today?

There are at least three possible scenarios that help define the connection between biblical cultures and our own with reference to rules which govern behavior. First, when a question clearly relates to fundamental and timeless issues, the biblical response can be very explicit. For example, the Bible absolutely prohibits adultery: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). The task of understanding this biblical rule for extramarital sex in nonbiblical times and cultures is not difficult. In other words, when a modern question is also an ancient question with which the Bible deals directly, the applicability of the answer is easiest.

Second, when an issue relates to a relatively new question, it may be a greater challenge to find biblical references as authoritative for establishing modern regulations. For example, smoking cigarettes has been regarded traditionally among Pentecostals as a sinful practice. In the absence of direct biblical prohibitions, the argument against tobacco was usually based on related themes such as the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, or addictions are fleshly desires to be overcome, or freedom in Christ means deliverance from bad habits. Any or all of these arguments may be valid but there is not a clear biblical rule that says, “Do not smoke.” When a question is raised about a practice which is not specifically addressed in the Scriptures, guidance may be found in general themes or principles supported in the Bible. Ironically, contemporary culture, generally citing health concerns, has largely rejected the use of tobacco while usually ignoring the dangers of alcohol consumption.

Third, an even more complex situation emerges when guidance is sought about a practice that the Bible addresses in many references but does not offer a clear moral precept or directive. Thus the Bible has scores of references to wine and other alcoholic beverages, some of which seem to approve while others appear to disapprove. Conflicting positions develop when the parties who ask the modern question select topical biblical information that may appear to support their predispositions, and then subjectively conclude their point of view is the biblical answer and therefore a universal guide for practice. Unfortunately, principles of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics are sometimes set aside because of strongly held presuppositions. In the face of conflicting conclusions based on the biblical texts, it becomes necessary to refer to more general biblical principles and values for guidance.

Biblical Languages Issues

Since generally we use English translations of the Bible, it is important to examine the pertinent original Hebrew and Greek words to better understand the nature and use of wine and other alcoholic beverages in biblical times.

In the Old Testament, eleven different Hebrew words are translated “wine.” Seven of them are used only once, and two are used about five times each. The two most common Hebrew words are *yayin* (141 times) and *tirosh* (38 times). The Hebrew

lexicons⁶ describe *yayin* as a common drink for refreshment. It usually denotes fermented wine and is often associated with intoxication. *Yayin* was forbidden for Nazirites (Numbers 6:2–4) and for priests while serving in the tabernacle (Leviticus 10:9). While *yayin* was at times used in celebrations, the Bible also warns of its consequences.

Tirosh is defined as “fresh or new wine, must,⁷ grape juice” and most modern translations usually render it as “new wine” (NIV, NASB, NET, as well as KJV). Of the thirty-eight times the word is used, twenty are used in connection with grain and oil, indicating fruitfulness, productivity, and blessing (Proverbs 3:10; Isaiah 65:8; Joel 2:24). Though *tirosh* in a few cases may indicate the fermented wine that eventuates from fresh grape juice, the word is not associated with drunkenness (with the possible exception in Hosea 4:11 where *yayin* is paired with *tirosh*). For both *yayin* and *tirosh*, context determines whether the drink is fermented or not.

A third Hebrew word the Bible uses to refer to an alcoholic beverage is *shekar* (22 times). Though *shekar* can be translated “wine,” it is usually translated “strong drink” or “beer.” *Shekar* can refer to any alcoholic beverage made from grain or fruit. It is commonly paired with *yayin* and is an intoxicating drink, strong in both alcohol content and taste. Drinking *shekar* is almost always condemned in Scripture, except when used for relief from pain in the case of terminal illness (Proverbs 31:6). Those supporting drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation suggest Deuteronomy 14:26 is an apparent positive reference to consuming strong drink (*shekar*). The passage is in connection with tithes delayed until the festal visit to the tabernacle. In such a case, Israelites were permitted to exchange their tithe for silver to facilitate travel and then purchase “wine” (*yayin*) and “fermented drink” (*shekar*) for their feasts at the sites; however, the weight of Scripture suggests the strong drink in this instance would be poured out as a drink offering and not consumed as described in Numbers 28:7.⁸

The primary Greek word translated “wine” in the New Testament is *oinos* (34 times). The Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek Old Testament) uses *oinos* to translate both *yayin* (fermented wine) and *tirosh* (unfermented grape juice). Therefore, the context of the various Septuagint passages determines whether *oinos* should be interpreted as fermented or unfermented wine. Unfermented grape juice or juice in the early stages of

⁶ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (eds.), *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette: APIA, 1981). R. Laird Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

⁷ “Must,” as cited here from the Hebrew lexicons above is defined as “the expressed juice of fruit and especially grapes before and during fermentation; also: the pulp and skins of the crushed grapes.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/must?show=0&t=1405971575> (accessed July 21, 2014).

⁸ The combination of these two Hebrew words indicate alcoholic beverages; however, the following factors contradict the assumption that the beverage in this context may be consumed: (1) this is the only instance out of twenty-three occurrences in the Old Testament in which the recreational consumption of strong drink (*shekar*) appears to be viewed favorably; (2) it contradicts those instances in which what is clearly alcoholic wine (*yayin*) is prohibited, such as Proverbs 23:29–33; (3) in Numbers 28:7 the strong drink was poured out as a drink offering and not consumed, which could have been the intended purpose here and understood by the Israelites in that time. The word translated “eat” in the passage is a general term for consumption and may or may not include the idea of drinking, which raises the question whether specific permission is being given to consume strong drink [See Richard Land and Barrett Duke, *The Christian and Alcohol Theological Review*, Spring 2008, p. 23]; and (4) it seems inconsistent on the one hand to prohibit priests from consuming alcoholic wine in a worship context (Leviticus 10:9) and on the other hand encourage the consumption of alcoholic beverages by worshipper and priest at the accompanying feast.

fermentation is identified in the Gospels as “new wine” (*oinos neos*) (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37).⁹ *Gleukos*, used once (Acts 2:13), refers to “a new sweet wine in process of fermentation.”¹⁰ *Sikera*, also used once (Luke 1:15), is “an intoxicating drink made from grain.”¹¹ *Oxos*, translated as “sour wine” or “wine vinegar” is found six times in the crucifixion accounts.¹²

Representative Scripture Passages

Though it is not possible here to explore all two hundred-plus references to wine or strong drink, a few representative passages will give us a sense of the Scripture’s teaching.

Old Testament

Wine often is portrayed favorably as in verses such as Psalm 104:14–15: “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine [*yayin*] that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.” This theme is also found elsewhere, e.g., “May God give you heaven’s dew and earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine [*tirosh*]” (Genesis 27:28). Also, “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine [*tirosh*]” (Proverbs 3:9–10). Wine, along with other natural provisions, was evidence of God’s blessing and favor. In this context “wine that gladdens human hearts” reflects the joy accompanying a successful harvest, not the inebriating effect of alcohol, as evidenced by the similar expressions about oil and bread—the context is food, not an inebriating beverage.

But the Old Testament also shows that these alcoholic drinks can be devastating in effect. Wine tends to alter one’s good judgment. “Wine [*yayin*] is a mocker and beer [*shekar*] a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1). Similarly, “It is not for kings . . . to drink wine [*yayin*], not for rulers to crave beer [*skehar*], lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” (Proverbs 31:4–7). In this text, rulers are to avoid strong drink and, by inference, the judgment-altering effects would be applicable to everyone. The verses also remind us that others are often harmed by one’s drinking.

Imbibing can indeed have tragic consequences. “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine [*yayin*], who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine [*yayin*] when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” (Proverbs 23:29–32). Intoxicating

⁹ Some have argued that the *oinos* that flows from the burst wineskins denotes unfermented grape juice.

¹⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–1989), 1:77. See also Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [BDAG]. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974).

¹¹ Louw and Nida, 1:77; Danker, *BDAG*, 923.

¹² Louw and Nida, 1:78; Danker, *BDAG*, 715.

drink is definitely in view, and upon providing a detailed description of an alcoholic beverage, the writer does not suggest that it should be consumed in moderation.

New Testament

As noted above, wine is mentioned much less frequently in the New Testament than in the Old. In the Gospels, the word *oinos* is found twenty-one times but concentrated in only thirteen verses, most being parallel sayings in two, sometimes three, of the Gospels. These passages reflect the viticulture and wine consumption of first-century societies which had little change since Old Testament times. Typically, they describe such actions as John the Baptist's abstinence from wine (Luke 1:15; 7:33), Jesus' refusal from the cross of wine mixed with gall/myrrh (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23), the antiseptic use mentioned in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34), and Jesus' apparently oft-repeated saying about new wine bursting old wineskins (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–38), undoubtedly a truism of wine production and storage at the time. The overall impression is that of a largely agrarian society utilizing the products of the vineyard that played such a key role in life and commerce. And, as often documented in the writings of that era, the wine as usually consumed was commonly diluted by several parts.

Almost a third of the occurrences of *oinos* are concentrated in the record of the miracle at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine (six times in John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46). This miracle, the first "sign" in John's Gospel, lay in that Jesus instantaneously turned demonstrably potable water into large quantities of what was judged by the unknowing master of the wedding feast to be the "best" (*kalos*) wine. The text is silent on the meaning of *oinos* in the John 2 passage. We believe the larger contextual interpretation is that Jesus would not have made a product that would be detrimental to the wedding guests.

The Last Supper narratives (Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–38; John 13) are also considered to be important texts in the study of wine use in the Gospels. Like other observant Jews, Jesus participated in drinking from the cup passed at those traditional Passover celebrations. Note Mark's description of the event, "Then he [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it" (Mark 14:23). After this Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine [*tou genēmatos tēs ampelou*] until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). In this instance, rather than the usual term for wine (*oinos*), the phrase "fruit of the vine" is consistent with the prohibition against yeast or fermentation during the Passover week (Exodus 12:15,19–20; 13:7).

All the Gospel references to wine are historical accounts of events or sayings the writers were inspired to include in their writings. While the Gospels reflect practices of the period, there are no commands from Jesus that teach His followers to drink wine (unless His instructions to repeat the Last Supper are taken as such [Luke 22:17–20; 1 Corinthians 11:25–26]).

Surprisingly, there are very few references to wine in the New Testament epistles. *Oinos* is found only five times in the Pauline and General Epistles (Romans 14:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:8; 5:23; Titus 2:3), to be followed by eight occurrences in Revelation (6:6; 14:8,10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3,13; 19:15). Only one of these thirteen references affirms the use of wine, Paul's directive to Timothy to "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). In this case *oinos* is urged only for medicinal use since Timothy clearly has been abstaining from

oinos and drinking only water (probably impure). All other references in the Epistles are cautionary, as in Paul's imperative to the Ephesians, "Do not get drunk [*methuskoma*] on wine, which leads to debauchery" (5:18a). What is startling in the Revelation is that, other than two neutral references to wine as vintage (6:6) or cargo (18:13), wine is used metaphorically for either human sin or God's final eschatological wrath.

What is also striking is the semantic range of the terms used throughout the New Testament to express the risks and abuse of wine. There are eight different words having to do with "drunkenness" found a total of twenty times in the New Testament,¹³ sometimes immediately joined with *oinos* as its correlate (as in Ephesians 5:18) but often standing separately to denote the shameful behavioral condition attributable to abuse of wine. Thus Jesus warned, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness [*methē*] and the anxieties of life" (Luke 21:34). Paul cautioned that neither "thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards [*methusos*] nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:10). Peter dramatically expressed his concern in the General Epistles, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness [*oinophlygia*], orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry (1 Peter 4:3). Certainly, neither Jesus nor the apostles assumed that all people fell into these categories but then, as now, alcohol abuse was a scourge that Christians must avoid and seek to alleviate.

Acts and the New Testament Epistles offer little insight into the use of wine in the early churches but do express a great deal of reserve about its potential for abuse. Paul severely chastised some of the Corinthian believers who were getting drunk at their love feasts where the Lord's Supper was observed (1 Corinthians 11:20–21). In the Ephesians letter, he also pointedly charged, "Do not get drunk on wine [*oinos*], which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (5:18).

Some have thought Paul's previously noted admonition to Timothy, "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [*oinos*] because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23), to be approval of moderate drinking. However, Paul's counsel was instead, as noted, a recommendation for medicinal use. Timothy was probably drinking only local water or other nonalcoholic liquids (likely impure). That he needed to be encouraged to take a little wine for his stomach's sake certainly indicates that regular use of wine was not his lifestyle.

Some Basic Conclusions

The historic commitment of the Assemblies of God to abstinence is well founded, biblically and ethically. This paper has demonstrated the Scriptures overwhelming negative view of what the text clearly defines as a beverage with high alcohol content. The strongest drink possible in biblical times was not a modern fortified wine with 14–20 percent alcohol content, much less bourbon or tequila at 40–50 percent alcohol content, but naturally fermented wine or beer with a maximum possible alcohol content of 10–11 percent. A beverage with high alcohol content was identified by the Hebrew word *shekar* meaning strong drink. The Hebrew word for wine (*yayin*) could also be used to identify such a beverage when paired with *shekar* or when alcohol content is clearly in view (Proverbs 20:1; 23:29–33; 31:4–7). Scriptural warnings could be carefully observed through the common process of diluting fermented wine, which could produce a beverage that would have been categorized as subalcoholic by today's standards. It is

¹³ Louw and Nida, 1:773.

critical to note that the weakest wine or liquor available today has more alcohol content than the “strong drink” of biblical times; therefore, a strong biblical case can be made against even the moderate consumption of modern alcoholic beverages.

As all agree, drunkenness is always condemned in the Scriptures. Biblical stories of Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:20–27) and Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30–38) vividly show that intoxication often leads to tragic ends. God pronounces woe to those who run after their strong drink and are inflamed by wine (Isaiah 5:11,22). Drunkenness is listed by the apostle Paul among the “acts of the flesh,” and he declares that drunkenness will keep one from inheriting the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19–21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). He reminds the Corinthian believers that some of them were drunkards before they were washed and justified by Christ, implying that such behavior is to cease after salvation (1 Corinthians 6:11). The apostle Peter contrasts living the new life in Christ with running with former companions in drunken “wild living” (1 Peter 4:3–4). Drunkenness never has God’s approval and it is always a potential outcome of alcohol consumption.

There are specific dangers inherent in alcohol, against which the Bible gives clear warning. Alcohol tends to alter one’s judgment (Proverbs 31:4–5), frequently brings woe, sorrow, and strife (Proverbs 23:29), and can cause physical harm (Proverbs 23:29,35). It can lower one’s inhibitions, leading to shameful behavior, loose speech, promiscuity, and violence (Proverbs 20:1; Isaiah 5:11; Romans 13:13). Alcohol is a mocker, a deceiver that leads people astray. “It goes down smoothly,” but “in the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” (Proverbs 23:31–32). So deceptive is it that one tends at first not to realize the harm it is doing (Proverbs 23:35).

While the Scriptures approvingly recount the stories of different individuals and groups who abstain from alcohol, they especially set a high standard for spiritual leaders (Judges 13; Jeremiah 35). The clear prohibition of Old Testament priests drinking wine while serving in the tabernacle/temple (Leviticus 10:8–9), the vow of the Nazirite not to drink wine (Judges 13), the tradition of the Rekabites (Jeremiah 35), the examples of John the Baptist and Timothy—all have deep spiritual significance for today’s Christian leaders.

Abstinence is relevant to the whole priesthood of believers; those involved in the holy calling of ministry bear a special responsibility of example. In instructing his coworkers Timothy and Titus on the appointment of elders, Paul emphasized to both that Christian leaders are “not [to be] given to drunkenness” (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). The Greek noun Paul used is *paroinos* which denotes “one who is given to drinking too much wine,” hence “addicted to wine” or “drunkard.”¹⁴ Obviously, this is an area in which the Christian leader must exercise great discipline, setting a good example for all believers to follow and nonbelievers to respect.

Moderation: An Elusive Standard

Moderation is often recommended as an appropriate and desirable contemporary response to the biblical portrayal of wine consumption. However, the New Testament does not advocate moderate drinking. Nor does it explain how one is to know when moderation is being practiced. There is no universal definition of moderation and thus the term is highly subjective. What one person considers moderate, another may view as

¹⁴ Danker, *BDAG*, 780.

heavy drinking. To illustrate the uncertainty, one commonly accepted research definition of moderate drinking describes it as up to twelve to fourteen drinks per week for men (nine for women), and includes a blood alcohol concentration up to .055.¹⁵

Even with a well-intentioned and more disciplined practice of moderation, each user responds differently to alcohol. Though the legal limit for drunkenness is a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08, various aspects of impairment may be present with a BAC as low as 0.02.¹⁶ Alcohol may be the socially acceptable drink of choice, but it is also the most addictive. The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center points out, “Alcoholism is not defined by what you drink, when you drink it, or even how much you drink. It’s the effects of your drinking that define a problem.”¹⁷ One person may use alcohol many times with seemingly no ill effects; another may overdose or become addicted after only a few drinks.

One should also keep in mind the genetic propensity toward alcoholism that some seem to inherit. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) advises that while various factors come into play “genes are responsible for about half of the risk for alcoholism.”¹⁸ The moderate drinker is naïve not to recognize the peril of addiction for themselves or those they influence. No one sets out to be an alcoholic. But with no reliable definition of moderation in Scripture or elsewhere, or with uncertain knowledge of one’s tolerance for alcohol, one may easily move from being a moderate to excessive drinker. Reportedly, 51 percent of American adults drink regularly¹⁹ and more than thirty-eight million binge drink about four times a month²⁰ (not counting the rapidly growing population of underage drinkers). Few if any set out to be problem drinkers but alcohol consumption can indeed be a slippery slope.

Christian Liberty and “Moderation”

Those who champion moderation often do so in the name of Christian liberty. However, the apostle Paul twice reminds us that though all things may be permissible to us, not everything is beneficial or constructive (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). Our choice of an action is not to be based simply on its being allowed, but on whether it edifies (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Some Corinthian believers thought they were spiritual because of knowledge they claimed to have and thought all believers should have as the basis for Christian behavior. They thought such knowledge “builds up.” Instead Paul told them that sometimes knowledge “puffs up” and destroys others. Rather than being spiritual, it leads to sinful pride. The Christian ethic of love always “builds up”—seeks the advantage of another (1 Corinthians 8:1–11; Philippians 2:1–5). However, in doing so the one who loves is also built up. True Christian liberty knows the joy to “honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10). Christian liberty is the freedom to do the good thing and demonstrate spiritual maturity.

¹⁵ Moderate Drinking, http://moderatedrinking.com/home/default_home.aspx?p=md_defined (accessed May 14, 2014). See also <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2014-01-vitalsigns.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2014).

¹⁶ <http://www.nhtsa.gov/links/sid/ABCsBACWeb/page2.htm> (accessed April 14, 2016).

¹⁷ “The Truth About Alcohol,” Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (accessed April 29, 2014). <http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/health-promotion/Pages/ReproMaterial-The-Truth-About-Alcohol.aspx>.

¹⁸ <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders/genetics-alcohol-use-disorders> (accessed May 16, 2014).

¹⁹ http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_260.pdf (accessed May 15, 2014).

²⁰ <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2012-01-vitalsigns.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2014).

Love for Family

Love undergirds and energizes family life. Christ's self-sacrificing love sets the tone for Spirit-filled living as Paul counsels family heads on the application of that love to their extended families (Ephesians 5:18 to 6:9). In a later text, he added that believers are to "learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family" (1 Timothy 5:4).

Children, especially, who often experience peer pressure to experiment with alcohol beginning in their preteens, need the loving counterinfluence of parents, "the number one influence on their decisions about alcohol."²¹ Reportedly, "In homes where the parents were social drinkers, 66 percent of the children experimented with alcohol before adulthood."²² In families where parents are alcoholics, children are far more likely to suffer abuse and are themselves four times more likely to become alcoholics.²³ Moreover, studies report that one in four children who began using any addictive substance, including alcohol, before age eighteen become addicted.²⁴ Children are far more likely to follow our example than merely our advice about alcohol.

Love for Christian Brothers and Sisters

"It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall" (Romans 14:21). In his letters to the Roman and Corinthian churches, the apostle Paul writes nearly three chapters to explain that even though believers may have a personal understanding of things permissible to God, they must not allow that understanding to cause other brothers or sisters to stumble and fall (Romans 14, 15; 1 Corinthians 8). The circumstances and issues of Paul's day may differ somewhat from our own, but the principle of sacrificial loving concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ remains. There are many in our churches who are offended by moderate drinking, believing that drinking alcoholic beverages is a sin. Others may be endangered by following a respected believer's example of moderation that unintentionally becomes harmful and destructive to them. Still others may be hurt because the practice of moderation may make their own struggle with alcohol more difficult. Love always trumps preference—for we are still our brother's keeper.

Love for Church

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). From its beginning the Church placed a premium on unity (Acts 2). Some of the harshest words of Scripture are written concerning those who for their own desires stir up strife and cause divisions between believers (Romans 16:17–18). The apostle Paul, dealing with a contentious issue in the Corinthian church, acknowledged different

²¹ Jan Withers, quoted in Nanci Hellmich, "1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge drinking," *USA Today*, September 16, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/16/extreme-binge-drinking-seniors/2809739/>.

²² Richard Land, "The great alcohol debate," *Baptist Press*, July 24, 2006 (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23678>.

²³ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Children_Of_Alcoholics_17.aspx (accessed May 16, 2014).

²⁴ "Adult Substance Use," The Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-prevention/adult-addiction>.

viewpoints but pointed to the established tradition of the church on that particular point as their guide (1 Corinthians 11:16). In that same context, he severely rebuked the Corinthians for a contemptuous abuse of food and alcohol that marred their Lord's Supper observances and led to the neglect and deprivation of fellow members (11:21).

The Church is about eternal issues. We are part of a church fellowship that has a century-old tradition of abstinence from alcohol that has been gleaned from the Scriptures and practical experience. We easily forget that innumerable converts among us have been dramatically delivered from alcoholism and its dreadful consequences for themselves and their families. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" rather than disrupting the work of God for the sake of a personal preference (Romans 14:19–20).

Love for Society

The second commandment flowing directly from the first, to love God, is, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). Christ followers are to be "salt" and "light" in the world (Matthew 5:13–16). So God's Word reminds us in many ways that we are also to work for a just and healthy society. Paul taught, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people" (Galatians 6:10). Peter added, "Live such good lives among the pagans ['non-Christians,' NET] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). As accountable citizen-believers and agents of health and healing, we are responsible to critically evaluate the impact of alcohol use (and other potentially harmful practices) on our society.

Approximately seventeen million Americans have what the NIAA designates "an alcohol use disorder."²⁵ The annual cost to American society of alcohol misuse problems was estimated at \$249 billion in 2010. Annually about eighty-eight thousand deaths are alcohol related.²⁶ About thirty people die daily because of an alcohol-impaired driver. This amounts to one death every forty-eight minutes.²⁷ Alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of the three million violent crimes which occur each year.²⁸

Alcohol is a pernicious danger to our children and a scourge on college and university campuses. Annually, it is estimated that 1,825 students ages eighteen to twenty-four die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including car crashes. Nearly seven hundred thousand students are assaulted by other students, including nearly one hundred thousand victims of alcohol-related sexual assault and date rape.²⁹ Suicide is the tenth-leading cause of death in the United States (third-leading cause for ages fifteen to twenty-four) and one-third tested positive for alcohol.³⁰ Thirty-nine percent of high school students drink regularly and an estimated 1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge

²⁵ <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics> (accessed May 16, 2014).

²⁶ "Alcohol Facts and Statistics," National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (accessed June 30, 2016). <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>.

²⁷ Centers for Disease Control, http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Impaired_Driving/impaired-drv_factsheet.html (accessed May 16, 2014).

²⁸ National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD). <http://www.ncadd.org/index.php/learn-about-alcohol/alcohol-and-crime> (accessed May 16, 2014).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Suicide: Facts at a Glance: 2012," Center for Disease Control (accessed April 29, 2014). http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Suicide_DataSheet-a.pdf.

drinkers. Alcohol abuse in the teen years may impair healthy brain development.³¹ And, not least, alcohol is now considered to be the gateway drug to tobacco, marijuana, and other licit and illicit drugs.³²

Love for Self

Jesus implicitly taught healthy self-regard when He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). Consciously rejecting self-indulgent narcissism, believers are to nurture their own physical and spiritual lives in keeping with the teachings of Scripture. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and instruments for doing God’s service (1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 6:13).

Therefore, it is important to ask, “What are the effects of alcohol usage (and other lifestyle indulgences) for the believer’s personal health and Christian service?” Consumption of alcoholic beverages is known to be associated with ailments including stroke, hypertension, heart disease, pancreatitis, liver disease, immune system disorders, and various cancers. Some optimistically believe that moderate drinkers will not experience adverse health effects from alcohol but cautions abound. For example, while recognizing limited benefits of moderate drinking, the Harvard School of Public Health also addresses the “dark side of alcohol” and states, “If you don’t drink, there’s no need to start. You can get similar benefits with exercise (beginning to exercise if you don’t already or boosting the intensity and duration of your activity) or healthier eating.”³³ The Mayo Clinic, also noting there may be limited benefits of moderate drinking, is similarly cautious: “Certainly, you don’t have to drink any alcohol, and if you currently don’t drink, don’t start drinking for the possible health benefits. In some cases, it’s safest to avoid alcohol entirely—the possible benefits don’t outweigh the risks.”³⁴

A more recent and unusually comprehensive international study of the effects of alcohol consumption on cardiovascular health co-led by the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania challenges even the limited benefits of moderate consumption. One of the lead researchers reports, “Contrary to what earlier reports have shown, it now appears that any exposure to alcohol has a negative impact upon heart health.”³⁵

To the physical risks are added mental and emotional concerns, especially depression. One who starts out drinking moderately never knows where alcohol may take them.

³¹ Megan Patrick, quoted in Nanci Hellmich, “1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge drinking,” *USA Today*, September 16, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/16/extreme-binge-drinking-seniors/2809739/>. The article is Megan E. Patrick et al., “Extreme Binge Drinking Among 12th-Grade Students in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 167, no. 11 (2013): 1019–1025, <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1738765>.

³² National Center for Biotechnology Information. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22712674> (accessed May 16, 2014).

³³ Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/alcohol-full-story/> (accessed May 16, 2014).

³⁴ “Alcohol use: If you drink, keep it moderate,” Mayo Clinic (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/alcohol/art-20044551>.

³⁵ <http://www.biospace.com/News/a-little-red-wine-does-not-benefit-the-heart-after/339581?intcid=homepage-seekercarousel-featurednews-navindex3> (accessed February 5, 2015).

Abstinence and Spiritual Formation

There are specific, ethical principles of attitude and behavior throughout the Bible which should also guide our life choices, and which, we believe, should lead to abstinence. For Christians, the foundational ethical principle that pervades every step in our spiritual formation is love.

Given the wide-ranging implications of alcohol use and abuse today, there are few issues that loom larger in one's spiritual formation. The believer's commitment to either abstinence or moderation should not be based only upon the Scripture verses that deal with ancient wine use. Given the obvious and much publicized dangers of current alcohol consumption, as well as biblical cautions about the dangers of alcohol, Christian believers must carefully and prayerfully examine their own motives and attitudes. Does moderate drinking really contribute to the mature spirituality and engaging witness taught in the Scriptures? Does drinking enhance the believer's personal and private life? Is it worth the publicly acknowledged risks? Given the price of alcoholic beverages, is the expense a wise application of Christian stewardship?

An Affirmation of Abstinence

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking" (Romans 12:2, *The Message*). To abstain means to voluntarily choose to avoid. It is a choice, not a commandment. The question we should ask ourselves is not "Can a Christian drink?" but "Should a Christian drink?"

Abstinence is the biblical choice. The Bible clearly warns of the perils of alcoholic beverages and negatively views the consumption of what the context clearly describes as a beverage with high alcohol content. Failure to take seriously those warnings has resulted in untold heartache, misery, and ruin. Unnecessary self-indulgence for a fleeting pleasure may eventuate in unacceptable costs to the individual, the family, and the society at large. Moderation may seem a harmless, private indulgence, but may become a very public detrimental influence.

Abstinence is the wise choice. The tragic results of alcoholism will never come to the one who never takes the first drink. Where alcohol is avoided, drunken abuse will not pull a family apart. A church that teaches and practices abstinence should compassionately rescue those bound by alcohol, but also faithfully warn others of its subtle dangers. Prevention is always better than cure.

Abstinence is a moral choice. It glorifies God, protects the individual, honors fellow believers, preserves families, unifies the church, and blesses society. Abstinence reflects both the direct and indirect moral principles of the Word of God. Abstinence is not moral legalism but Christian discipleship, which inherently involves self-denial in following Christ. "The underlying sensibility is taking care of your neighbor, taking care of your family, trying to be a good role model, and not being a stumbling block."³⁶ Abstinence is not grounded in legalism, but in the highest moral attribute of love.

Therefore the Assemblies of God reaffirms its position of abstinence from alcoholic beverages. This position should be proclaimed boldly and clearly throughout our Fellowship, yet humbly and lovingly in faithful ministry to all.

³⁶ Larry Eskridge, quoted in Kevin P. Emmert, "Relaxing Over Drinks," *Christianity Today* 57, no. 10 (December 2013), 22.

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