

Message 11: Convictions Regarding Alcohol

Quote: “Biblical principles warn us against the dangers inherent in alcohol use. Instead of being controlled by alcohol, believers are to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Those who refrain from alcohol consumption will never suffer the ill effects associated with its use. Liberty Baptist Church expects its members to abstain from the recreational use of alcohol. Members are also encouraged to avoid involvement in selling alcohol if possible and to avoid patronizing establishments whose primary goal is the sale of alcohol.”

That is a statement from our church policy manual. Similar language encouraging Christians to abstain from alcohol consumption is contained in the governing documents of many Baptist churches. Baptists typically are not alcohol drinkers.

The Bible provides no comprehensive treatment of alcohol use and abuse, but we may draw some reasonable conclusions from the many passages in the Bible that make reference to it.

Today I want to speak on the topic of alcohol use by Christians. Some Christians think that it's perfectly fine to use alcohol. You may be aware that some of the churches in town sell alcohol in their fundraising projects. Other Christians, including myself, think it's best for Christians to abstain from alcohol.

A hundred ago, evangelicals were very strongly against alcohol use—that was the prohibition era. Most evangelicals did not think alcohol use was fitting/appropriate for Christians. Many at the time thought it was in the best interests of the country to outlaw its use altogether. It was common to hear sermons denouncing the dangers of alcohol use and abuse. Many Christians were convinced not to use alcohol. But attitudes have changed over the years. Today, many Christians have decided that it's OK to drink alcohol. In very few churches will you hear messages warning about the dangers of alcohol.

This summer, I've been talking about biblical convictions, and one area where we should maintain strong biblical convictions is on the topic of drinking alcohol. I believe that the best position on alcohol is to not use it; abstain from it.

First of all at, we should note that ...

I. Some biblical texts prohibit drunkenness and limit consumption.

- A. All Christians of every stripe acknowledge that drunkenness is clearly sinful behavior. Even those who think drinking is allowable would admit that drunkenness is inappropriate and unsuitable for Christians. The Bible repeatedly condemns the practice of drinking alcohol to the point of intoxication. Drunkenness is clearly sin; there is no debate or doubt about that.

The OT reveals the destructive results of drunkenness.

1. Several OT characters got into trouble because of drunkenness: Noah,¹ Lot,² Nabal³ are a few that come to mind.

The priest, Eli, thought that Hannah was drunk, but she denied it, resenting the idea that she was “a daughter of Belial.”⁴ Only worthless people get drunk.

2. The OT also contains direct teaching prohibiting drunkenness or describing the negative effects of drinking.

- a) Perhaps the most well-known warning about alcohol abuse, Prov 20:1, asserts that “wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.”

- b) Perhaps the most vivid biblical description of intoxication is found in Proverbs 23:29-35 (**read**).

The writer depicts the drunk as experiencing woe, sorrow, wounds and bloodshot eyes. Drunken people “behold strange women” and “utter perverse things.”⁵ Although the experience is like being sick or physically beaten, alcohol has such a hold on the drunkard that he seeks to indulge again as soon as he wakes from his stupor. A wise person will avoid wine because at the end it “bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.”⁶

- c) Solomon advises his readers not to spend time among poverty-stricken, raggedy “winebibbers.”⁷

¹ Gen 9:21.

² Gen 19:30-36.

³ 1 Sam 25:36.

⁴ 1 Sam 1:13-17.

⁵ Prov 23:33

⁶ Prov 23:32.

⁷ Prov 23:20.

3. The prophets show equal condemnation for drunkenness.

- a) Isaiah denounces those that “rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!”⁸ He expresses his contempt for the priest and the prophet who “have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way.”⁹
- b) Isaiah condemns the “greedy dogs” who say, “I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.”¹⁰
- c) Hosea asserts that “whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.”¹¹ He condemns “princes ... [who] have made [others] sick with bottles of wine.”¹²
- d) Joel records God’s displeasure over the sinfulness of people who “sold a girl for wine, that they might drink.”¹³
- e) Habakkuk laments one who “transgresseth by wine, . . . a proud man, neither keepeth at home, who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death.”¹⁴ He also expresses woe upon one who “giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, ...”¹⁵

The prophets are not sparing in their derision of drunkenness.

B. The NT also clearly condemns alcoholic intemperance.

- 1. Believers are no longer to walk “in reveling and drunkenness” like they did before salvation.¹⁶
- 2. Paul criticizes the Corinthians for being drunk while participating in the Lord’s Supper.¹⁷
- 3. Unsaved Gentiles engage in “lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revelings, banquetings”¹⁸ and the like.

⁸ Isa 5:11.

⁹ Isa 28:7.

¹⁰ Isa 52:12-13.

¹¹ Hos 4:11.

¹² Hos 7:5.

¹³ Joel 3:3.

¹⁴ Hab 2:5.

¹⁵ Hab 2:15.

¹⁶ Rom 13:13.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 11:21.

¹⁸ 1 Pet 4:3.

4. Drunkenness is included in those lists of sins that disqualify one for the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10). Drunkenness is a work of the flesh (Gal 5:21) that stands in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit.
5. One qualification for pastors and deacons is that they not be “given to wine.”¹⁹
6. Paul commands his readers to be filled with the Spirit instead of being drunk with wine.²⁰ He urges them to separate themselves from drunkards.²¹ He advocates abstaining from wine if drinking causes one’s brother to stumble.²²

One author mentions the following negative effects of overindulgence as reflected in various biblical texts: a slowing of the thinking processes, stupor, sickness, staggering (loss of balance and mental control), arrogance, forgetfulness, confusion and delirious dreams, sleepiness, lack of feeling, bloodshot eyes and poverty.²³

Quote: Drunkenness in the Bible is always associated with terrible things—unrestrained living, immorality, dissolute behavior, and reckless, wild behavior.²⁴

C. Certain people in responsible positions should not consume alcohol.

1. God told Aaron and his sons not to drink alcohol when performing the duties of a priest:

“Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations.”²⁵
2. Those taking Nazirite vows and those selected for special tasks were not to drink alcoholic beverages.²⁶
3. King Lemuel’s mother taught him a wise proverb: “It is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink.”²⁷

¹⁹ 1 Tim 3:2-8; Titus 1:7

²⁰ Eph 5:18.

²¹ 1 Cor 5:11.

²² Rom 14:21.

²³ Normal L. Geisler, “A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking,” *BSac* 139 (1982): 48. Version 2.1b. 2000-2004.

²⁴ John MacArthur Jr., *Living in the Spirit: A Look at Wine, the Word and Songs* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1981), 4.

²⁵ Lev 10:8,9.

²⁶ Num 6:1-3; Judg 13:7.

²⁷ Prov 31:4.

OT believers knew that alcohol impairs the drinker's judgment. You cannot function effectively as a king or as a priest while drinking alcohol.

Even secular people know that alcohol consumption is a dangerous and potentially disastrous behavior. I'm not going to get into all the physiological damage that alcohol does to the human body; you can look those up for yourself. It used to be common for dieticians and doctors to recommend one glass of wine each day, but that advice has been overthrown. Many doctors today urge total abstinence from alcohol because of the negative physical effects of even moderate alcohol use.

A quote from the Mayo Clinic: Drinking alcohol in any amount carries a health risk. Alcohol is potentially addictive, can cause intoxication, and contributes to health problems and preventable deaths.

We are all probably aware of the suffering, pain, and death associated with the use of alcohol. Even the moderate use of alcohol affects your judgment and can get you into trouble. A lot of crime and abuse happens under the influence of alcohol.

The Bible warns us about the wounds, bites, and sorrows that alcohol can inflict upon those who are deceived thereby. It is no wonder, then, that serious Christians of all sorts advocate abstaining from alcohol altogether. I am among those who urge people to abstain from alcohol. The best decision is simply not to drink alcohol.

We find many stern warnings in the bible against alcohol use and abuse. However, to be fair, we should also be aware that...

II. Some texts present alcohol in a positive or neutral light.

- A. Some of us may be surprised to learn that the Bible contains passages that present moderate alcohol use in a favorable way. For example, ...

Drink offerings of wine were part of the sacrificial system (Ex 29; Lev 23). Judges 9:13 and Psalm 104:15 mentions that wine cheers the heart and makes one happy. In Proverbs 31:6,7 it says when somebody gets old and sick and about to die, to give them wine as a sedative to ease the pain. In John 13 our Lord drank wine and ordained the Lord's Supper. Paul told Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach's sake (I Tim 5:23). When the Good Samaritan found a man on the side of the road, he poured wine in his wounds (Luke 10:34).²⁸

We find biblical examples of using wine like a medicine, like a drug to ease pain or promote healing. That's not really the issue today. The medicinal use of alcohol is widely recognized; I'm not against using alcohol as a medicine.

²⁸ MacArthur, *Living in the Spirit*, 9. Emphases his.

The medicinal use of alcohol is not really the problem. The real issue is whether it's appropriate to use alcohol recreationally or as a beverage.

B. The Bible sometimes presents the drinking of alcohol in positive terms.

1. Boaz's "heart was merry"²⁹ after eating and drinking, which suggests that what he drank had some alcoholic content.
2. God promised to give Israel "all the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine, and of the wheat"³⁰ if they would obey his commands.
3. To dwell under one's vine and fig tree was an expression of prosperity and peace for the ancient Israelites.
4. Deuteronomy 14:26 presents a clear statement giving permission for the drinking of wine and even strong drink:

"And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household."

5. Jesus confirmed that, unlike John the Baptist, he came "eating and drinking," for which the Pharisees criticized him as a "gluttonous man, and a winebibber (οἰνοπότης), a friend of publicans and sinners."³¹ This suggests that our Lord drank wine in the normal course of his life. Jesus and the disciples consumed wine at the Last Supper.³²
- C. Further, Jesus compares himself to a vine, his Father to a vine dresser, and his disciples to branches which he expects to bear fruit.³³ During biblical times, the whole wine-making and wine-consuming process was associated with prosperity, peace, and blessing.³⁴
- D. Thus, one cannot deny that in some cases the Bible presents the moderate use of alcohol in positive terms. Even the merry-making, sensory-deadening capacities of alcohol enjoy biblical approval in some cases.

²⁹ Ruth 3:7.

³⁰ Num 18:12

³¹ Luke 7:34.

³² Luke 22:20.

³³ John 2:1-11, 15:1-9.

³⁴ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (1881; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 36.

What is the sincere Bible student to make of the biblical data? On one hand, the abuse of alcohol is severely denounced, while on the other hand the moderate use of alcohol is allowed, at least in some cases. The mature Christian recognizes that alcohol can be a blessing or a curse.

All of that being said, I believe ...

III. There are good reasons to abstain from alcohol

- A. I believe that the best practice is to abstain from the use of alcohol.

Quote: [W]hile wine is not condemned as being without usefulness, it brings in the hands of sinful men such dangers of becoming uncontrolled that even those who count themselves to be strong would be wise to abstain, if not for their own sake, yet for the sake of weaker brethren (Rom. 14:21).³⁵

- B. In other words, given all the biblical warnings about the dangers of alcohol abuse, and given the fact that sinful men tend to corrupt even good things, the wisest course of action for Christians is to abstain from alcohol use.

I see this as an issue of wisdom. The best choice is to abstain.

- C. There are no compelling reasons to drink. In biblical times, there may have been some good reasons to use alcohol, especially to kill germs and purify water. E.g., “use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake.”

In our world, that use of wine no longer pertains to us. We don’t have to drink wine for our stomach’s sake. The issue is not the medicinal use of alcohol.

- D. Refraining from alcohol use is a choice to avoid the dangers, compromises and associations that alcohol represents. We abstain because we take the biblical warnings against alcohol seriously.

- E. We also abstain because modern alcohol is very dangerous. Modern alcohol is far more potent than any ancient brewer or vintner could imagine. Ancient people had not invented distilling. The alcoholic content of modern alcoholic drinks is far greater than it was in the ancient world.

- F. Further, the destructive, corrupting influence of alcohol on modern society is plain for all to see. Alcohol is often an ingredient in the evil things that wicked people do.

- G. Let’s consider several questions may be helpful in motivating people toward an abstinent position:³⁶

³⁵ Fitzsimmonds, “Wine and Strong Drink,” n.p.

³⁶ MacArthur, *Living in the Spirit*, 15-24.

1. Is there a danger that a drinker may be brought into bondage? Alcohol has a capacity to influence and control those who drink. Many people become addicted to it. Moderate drinking can easily lead to drunkenness. Those who abstain can never be enslaved by alcohol and will never be personally influenced by it;

If you never start drinking, that kind of thing would never happen to you. You'll never experience all the problems associated with alcohol if you never drink. You'll avoid all the troubles that drinking alcohol creates.

2. Will it lead yourself or others to stumble or sin? Alcohol use affects the drinker and others associated with him. Drinking alcohol often leads to the violation of the law, offending others, and significant errors in judgment;
3. Is alcohol use necessary for your enjoyment and relaxation? If your joy or peace flow from a bottle, or if you need alcohol to relax, alcohol is clearly a problem;
4. Does drinking associate the drinker with sinful elements of culture? Alcohol use is often associated with all manner of immoral conduct, and alcohol abuse is responsible for immense destruction, disease and death. Christians should not associate with those kinds of things;
5. Will drinking harm one's Christian testimony/reputation? Alcohol use may ruin one's reputation in the church or in the community.

Unbelievers typically do not expect conservative Christians to drink, and fundamental Baptists in particular have a reputation for abstinence. Spending time in a tavern or liquor store, or even buying alcohol at a grocery store could easily tarnish one's reputation in the eyes of many, and it could sully the testimony of one's church;

6. Is drinking alcohol something you can do "of faith" according to Romans 14:23—"whatsoever is not of faith is sin"? If drinking bothers your conscience, or if you doubt that it is acceptable behavior, you should refrain.

We don't deny that the Bible says some positive things about alcohol. But we also recognize that the Bible sternly warns us about the serious problems associated with alcohol use and abuse.

Drunkenness is sin. Sinful behavior of all kinds is often associated with drinking. If we take the biblical warnings seriously, I think we'll conclude that abstinence is still the best option for us. If we desire to live a holy life and to separate from the dangers and corruptions associated with alcohol use and abuse, we will simply not use it. Alcohol may have some medicinal use, but I think it's best not to use alcohol recreationally or as a beverage.

We've been talking about convictions in our Summer Sermon Series. What convictions should we have about alcohol? My conviction is that I will not use it. Some Christians use alcohol moderately, and that's their business. As for me and my house, and as for this church, we are going to abstain from alcohol and encourage others to do the same.