
Abstinence

*This statement on abstinence was adopted by the
General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God on August 6, 1985.*

The General Council of the Assemblies of God has historically opposed the consumption of alcohol in any form. Early documents of the church declare, without reservation or compromise, a position of total abstinence.

In more recent years, however, this mark of separation from the world and this token of dedicated service to God has been questioned by some. Yet the continued effective work of reaching the lost and of challenging all believers to be always filled with the Holy Spirit is seriously jeopardized by a careless attitude concerning the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

For two reasons we urge all believers to avoid the Satanic tool of alcohol which destroys lives, damns souls, and blights society: (1) A studied review of the Scriptures affirms a stern warning against intoxicating drink and a call to separation from this evil for the purpose of better service to God and mankind; and (2) Current social abuses and the public outrage over the high cost of alcohol in terms of human misery, death, and destruction of property cry out with urgency for the church of Jesus Christ to oppose firmly any use whatsoever of a beverage which so insidiously afflicts and binds the bodies and minds of men and women.

The Scriptures Record Tragedies Caused by Alcohol

Although there is disagreement among Bible scholars about the true nature of the drink referred to by the various Hebrew and Greek words for "wine," it is only too evident that some persons in the Old Testament drank fermented wine. Noah, after saving his family from the destruction of the Flood, planted a vineyard, made wine, became intoxicated, and brought disastrous results on himself and his family (Genesis 9:20-27). Noah was no doubt surprised, upon his return to sobriety and clear thinking, to realize his simple act of taking a drink had ended in such shame. The two daughters of Lot made their father drink liquor until he became drunk; then they committed incest with him (Genesis 19:30-38).

Xerxes was powerful. He ruled over a great kingdom and had a beautiful wife. But his foolish action before his drinking guests resulted in the deposition of his queen and the dissolution of their marriage (Esther 1:9-22). Belshazzar, in a state of drunkenness, committed sacrilege with the sacred vessels from the Jewish temple. That very night he was killed as a fulfillment of prophecy (Daniel 5).

Drunkenness, according to Scripture, is a sin. But what about such references in the Old Testament as "wine which cheers" (Judges 9:13) and "wine that makes glad" (Psalm 104:15)? We believe such references are accommodations to human weakness and hardness of heart (cf. Matthew 19:8). The spirit and intent of Scripture emphasize the evil consequences of alcohol.

Scriptural Principles and Examples Recommend Abstinence

Alcohol destroys the body. Even in small amounts it begins its subtle work of destruction, taking its toll on mental and physical reactions. God knew this fact very well when He gave instructions that priests and kings (spiritual and secular leaders) should refrain from any use of alcoholic beverages.

In the Old Testament instruction to the Levites, the spiritual leaders of Israel, priests were commanded to abstain from wine or intoxicating drink when they went into the presence of the Lord to minister (Leviticus 10:8-11). This requirement of abstinence was given so the ministering priest would be able to distinguish between the holy and the unholy, between the clean and the unclean, and so he could be a teacher of all the statutes of God.

Today, all born-again Christians have been made priests to God (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6). As such we should always give our best and be at our best in His service. We believe the standard of abstinence demanded of the Old Testament priest should be the standard of every Christian today. We too must distinguish between right and wrong. We must be Spirit-led teachers in a society that greatly needs divine instruction and godly example.

Secular leaders are also to abstain from alcohol. "It is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted" (Proverbs 31:4,5, NKJV). If the prohibition is absolutely essential for spiritual and secular leaders, it is certainly essential for every believer. We who are kings and priests unto God (Revelation 1:6) must live according to His standards.

A Little Alcohol Is Too Much

The Christian who advocates or condones "drinking in moderation" is providing Satan an opening he would not have with an individual committed to total abstinence. By medical definition, alcohol is a drug. The moderate drinker is naive if he does not recognize the peril of eventually becoming addicted himself.

The condition of the drunkard is tragic; and God's Word gives clear warning of the final tragedy. The individual who refuses to have anything to do with such a dangerous taskmaster is wise indeed. No alcoholic ever intended to become an alcoholic when he/she took the first drink. And no individual who persistently refused to take the first drink ever became an alcoholic. The church of Jesus Christ must take a bold stand against this evil that in the end "bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper" (Proverbs 23:32, NKJV).

The effects of alcohol are vividly described in Proverbs 23. There is a physical and emotional impact. "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?" (Proverbs 23:29, NKJV). The answer is obvious: "Those who linger long at the wine" (v. 30). But the woe, the sorrow, the contention, the complaints, the injuries, are not reserved for the drunkard in the gutter. They begin all too frequently with the social drink.

Just like every other temptation of Satan, the drinking of alcoholic beverages has its attraction. Hence the warning of Holy Scripture: "Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly" (Proverbs 23:31, NKJV). The warning is so strong because the attraction of the temptation soon turns the pleasure seeker into a pathetic embarrassment to the human race: "Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things" (23:33, NKJV). Even the normal physical protection systems of pain and caution are defeated by alcohol (23:34,35).

"Wine is a mocker, intoxicating drink arouses brawling, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1, NKJV). God's will is for His people to abstain from this deceitful betrayer that mocks and destroys the basic dignity of mankind.

God Calls His People to Holiness

The standard for God's people is no less in the New Testament than in the Old. The Old Testament warnings about the abuses and excesses of alcohol become in the New Testament a call to holy living through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). We need to cleanse them from all profane habits, including alcohol. Opening up the human temple to the possible influence and control of alcohol is absolutely contrary to the Biblical admonition to keep those

temples filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). The only safe way is to leave alcoholic beverages alone.

First Timothy 3:3 states that a bishop must be one "not given to wine." A spiritual leader should set the highest example for all Christians to follow. The apostle Paul willingly invited his fellow believers to follow his example, even as he followed the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). A minister who drinks alcohol risks disobedience to the Word of God.

Some well-meaning people have misused the instruction given by Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5. When Paul suggested that Timothy "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (5:23, NIV), he was not recommending wine as a social drink. The fact that Paul had to mention the medicinal use of wine indicates rather strongly that Timothy was committed to abstinence as a lifestyle.

The call to holy living and to total abstinence is most appropriate for a Movement that looks with expectation for the soon return of Jesus Christ and the eventual inauguration of His kingdom on earth. Jesus warned His disciples, as well as all who would live between their time and the end time, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34, 36, NKJV). As we watch and pray for the return of Jesus, our senses should be as sharp and clear as they can possibly be.

The Use of Alcohol Weakens the Christian's Testimony

The use of alcohol violates some basic principles laid down for all believers, whether minister or laymen. One of these important principles is the Biblical caution not to offend a weaker brother or cause a younger Christian to fall.

The apostle Paul deals with the responsibility of the stronger brother toward the weaker brother in Romans 14. "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak" (v. 21, NKJV). It takes a stronger act of the will to abstain from the consumption of alcohol than to participate in this social practice of the world. Yet believers who take their Christian responsibility seriously cannot avoid the obvious importance of total abstinence to their Christian testimony.

This truth is especially significant when it is applied to the young people of the world who are turning to alcohol in unprecedented numbers as an acceptable mind-altering drug. They are going beyond moderation, no matter what their parents and elders say. If Christian parents and adults use alcohol even in moderation or just to be socially accepted, the next generation will use it with less care and self-control. The best example our generation can set for the next generation is to practice and teach total abstinence.

Jesus spoke very clearly to the disciples about the responsibility of the older generation to its children and youth: "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones" (Luke 17:1, 2, NKJV). We must not set an example that will send others to hell and destruction.

As believers we must draw a line on the use of alcohol. If we draw the line at the point of moderation, our ministers will soon find it necessary to exhort congregations to forsake drunkenness. If we draw the line at total abstinence, we will save a multitude of young and old from the sin of alcoholism.

Social Drinking Is Satan's Cruel Deception

The term social drinking suggests that the consumption of alcohol in respectable surroundings is in some way different from drinking in other environments. There was a time when it would have been unthinkable that we would have to speak out against social drinking among Christians. The fact that such a problem has

grown to the currently distressing proportions shows what a powerful and insidious influence the present age exerts on the church of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit can deliver from the shackles of social drinking, and we plead with all Christians who have fallen into this bondage to cry out for God's help immediately.

Many people who experience psychological problems (and some of them unfortunately are Christians) are tempted to seek an easy solution in "a little bit" of alcohol. But what was used as a supposed cure has caused even greater problems. We are set free through Jesus Christ, not through a drug that dissipates and destroys us when we submit to its influence.

Every one of the 13 million problem drinkers in the United States today started on the road to alcoholism with a social drink or an innocent first taste. Half of the fatal automobile accidents in this country are caused by drinking drivers. According to government estimates, the economic cost of alcoholism--including lost production, automobile accidents, health care, violent crimes, and fire losses--exceeds 100 billion dollars every year. [1] Alcohol is consistently linked to a high percentage of reported murders, assaults, and rapes, as well as to suicide, domestic violence, and child abuse. The role of social drinking as the starting point for much of this abuse can only be estimated.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is one of the leading causes of mental retardation as a birth defect in the United States. [2] Whatever alcohol the pregnant mother consumes crosses the placenta and enters the bloodstream of the baby. The result too frequently is below-average birth weight and size, deformed and improperly formed joints and limbs, as well as heart defects. We should not be concerned only about the life of the unborn child; the health of the child is important too.

The consumption of alcohol has become a national crisis, tearing at the moral fabric of our nation. Christians cannot meet their moral responsibilities by a posture of neutrality about alcohol. The problem is not merely economic, cultural, or social. In the final analysis, the use of alcohol is a spiritual problem. Alcoholism is sin, not sickness. Its shocking increase is another manifestation of the permissive, lawless spirit produced by the spiritual degeneration so much in evidence today.

The Call to Abstinence

Alcoholic beverages should have no place in the life of the Christian. Let there be no doubt about the Assemblies of God stand on this critical issue. We declare unequivocally our conviction that total abstinence from alcoholic beverages is the only acceptable way of life for the Christian. We call upon every member and adherent in our Fellowship, including both the ministry and the laity, to teach by word and example a life-style that abstains totally from the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

NOTES

Statistics provided by the National Council on Alcoholism, Inc., 12 West 21st Street, New York, NY 10010. Up-to-date materials and statistics may be secured from the Council upon written request. National Council on Alcoholism, Inc.