

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN VIEWS
ON THE CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL

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Just as the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim 6:10)¹, the tongue is a world of evil capable of enflaming a forest (Jas 3:6), and over-eating is a sin that calls for a slashing of one's throat (Pros 23:2); alcohol consumption can also be grievous sin. Held in the context of the canon, however, none of the aforementioned infers that Christians are to abstain from earning money, speaking, eating, or even drinking alcohol. In some circles in the modern American church the concern over alcohol consumption has been elevated to a level of dogma, going so far as to become denominational distinctive by which certain groups are identified. This article will make an investigation of the following questions: What does the Bible say about drinking alcohol? What is the church's historical view toward alcohol? How did we get to this point? And, How should we move forward? By thoroughly laying out the views of prominent historical Christian leaders, this article will seek to offer a thoughtful assessment of the historical theological positions the church has demonstrated towards the consumption of alcohol. To support this endeavor, this article will examine the views of the biblical authors, the early church fathers, the medieval Catholic Church, the Reformers, early American Christians, nineteenth and twentieth century Protestants, and the views present among church leaders today.

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version Bible, copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Views of the Biblical Authors

In making a thorough perusal of the biblical authors' mentions of alcohol it is clear there is neither an unbridled exhortation to indulge, nor is there an express condemnation of the simple act of drinking alcohol as sin. The biblical authors offer a balanced view towards alcohol calling it both a "gift," and a "mockery." On one hand, King David, a man after God's own heart, extols praise for God's providence in causing "the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man" (Psalms 104:14). Conversely David's son, Solomon, a man of incredible wisdom, writes, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Prov 20:1). In the New Testament, the Apostle John tells readers of Jesus' first miracle, an event coming at a wedding reception in Cana, in which the party had run dry and left the hosts in need of wine. John makes clear that the guests of the wedding party had already been consuming wine when he clarifies that when the wine was gone Jesus' mother expressed concern for the dignity of the hosts (John 2:3). Jesus' response to the hosts' need was as follows:

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now (John 2:6-10).

John here demonstrated that Jesus, without sinning and without being a stumbling in encouraging the sin of others, offered the providence of between 120 and 180 gallons of wine for the purposes of preserving the dignity of the wedding hosts and extending the duration of the celebration.

Responding to the Pharisees specific concerns regarding His interaction with alcohol Jesus said the following, "John the Baptist has come [. . .] drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come [. . .] drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A [. . .] drunkard, a friend of [. . .] sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children" (Luke 7:33-35). Later, the Apostle Paul exhorts the early church, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery (Ephesians 5:18)," but later exhorts his ailing young cohort, the church leader Timothy, "No longer drink

only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Tim 5:23). In addressing the views of the early church toward wine, I. W. Raymond offers the following insightful summation:

[The] favorable view [of wine in the Bible] is balanced by an unfavorable estimate. The reason for the presence of these two conflicting opinions on the nature of wine [is that the] consequences of wine drinking follow its use and not its nature. Happy results ensue when it is drunk in its proper measure and evil results when it is drunk to excess. The nature of wine is indifferent.”²

The nature of the biblical authors’ amoral view towards alcohol itself, consideration of alcohol as both a blessing and a potential danger, and their explicit condemnation of drunkenness have left room for much debate in later generations as to the wisdom of alcohol’s application.

Views of the Early Church Fathers

In the early years of the church, during the time of the Apostolic Fathers, there is little information offered regarding views toward the proper treatment of alcohol in the Christian life. In the oldest surviving written Christian catechism, The Didache, there is a brief mention that anyone partaking in wine should offer the first fruits to the prophets among them (Didache 13:6).

In his writing, *The Instructor*, in a chapter titled “On Drinking,” the church father Clement of Alexandria stated that “the soul is wisest and best when dry.” Clement goes on to state that taking a little wine for enjoyment after the day’s work is complete is considered acceptable so long as a person is not tempted by drunkenness. Clement exhorts Christians, to “be not eager to burst by draining [drink] down with gaping throat,” but drink with proper “decorum, by taking the beverage in small portions, in an orderly way.” Still Clement insists caution, “for wine has overcome many.”³ While the church historian Eusebius indicates that the

²I. W. Raymond, *The Teaching of the Early Church on the Use of Wine and Strong Drink* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), 25.

³Saint Clement (of Alexandria), *The Writing of Clement of Alexandria: Exhortation to the Heathen* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1884), 208.

popular early church father Origen did not personally imbibe, there are no specific writings to indicate he forbade drinking among the laity.⁴

By the late fourth century AD there begins to arise a more clear recording of the direction given by church fathers' views toward engagement with wine and the folly of drunkenness. Augustine, who had been reformed from a life wrought with indulgences, championed the cardinal virtue of temperance. Within this movement of virtue, drunkenness was viewed as a form of gluttony, and self-denial and temperance was instructed. Augustine clarifies his overall view toward the drinking of alcohol when he states, "The drunkard is not always drunk, and a man may be drunk one occasion without being a drunkard. However, in the case of a righteous man, we require to account for even one instance of drunkenness."⁵ It stands to reason that Augustine's concern was primarily with over indulgence, but said over indulgence must never transpire. At the same time, John Chrysostom was teaching that those who would say wine should be prohibited were immature Christians bordering on heresy. John Chrysostom pleaded with believers that they not be drunk for, "wine is the work of God, but drunkenness is the work of the devil." Chrysostom argued, "Wine makes not drunkenness; but intemperance produces it. Do not accuse that which is the workmanship of God, but accuse the madness of a fellow mortal."⁶

Views of the Medieval Church

The middle ages witnessed a great transition in the history of alcohol production and consumption from wine to beer. This change was heavily influenced by the church. As early as the eighth and ninth century A. D. the lack of potable water and generally unsanitary conditions

⁴Eusebius Pamphilius, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 121.

⁵Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, series 2, vol. 4* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 495.

⁶John Chrysostom, *First Homily on the Statutes* (Accessed November 19, 2014 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/190101.htm>), 11.

in the post Roman world led homes to produce ale for common consumption. Unlike wine, which could only be produced when grapes were in season, ale was brewed year round and proved a suitable remedy for the needs of the time. Monasteries in this time discovered they could perform a public service by mastering the brewing of beer, and using the proceeds to fund church works and charity. As monks developed the palate for beer, the drink became common place amongst clergy, and monks began receiving a daily allotment of beer for the use of nourishment during times of fasting.⁷

In the thirteenth century AD the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, expresses his beliefs toward Christians' engagement with alcohol:

A man may have wisdom in two ways. First, in a general way, according as it is sufficient for salvation: and in this way is required, in order to have wisdom, not that man abstain altogether from wine, but that he abstain from its immoderate use. Secondly, a man may have wisdom in some degree of perfection: and in this way, in order to receive wisdom perfectly, it is requisite for certain persons that they abstain altogether from wine, and this depends on circumstances of certain persons and places.⁸

Thomas Aquinas was not the only medieval theologian to speak in regards to alcohol however, and not all orders of monks saw fit to follow in the practice of producing ale. Giovanni Ptolomei founded a movement of aggressively ascetic monks called the Olivetans. The Olivetans were bent on monastic reform and engaged in extreme ascetic practices such as severe public corporal mortification. The Olivetans rejected any concessions of wine, uprooted their vineyards, and destroyed their wine presses. The radical practices of the Olivetans were however short-lived, and the group soon softened its stance toward total abstinence from alcohol, and drew closer to the general view of the day.⁹

⁷Jim West, *Drinking with Calvin and Luther! A History of Alcohol in the Church* (Lincoln, CA: Oakdown, 2003), 22.

⁸Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Raleigh, NC: Hayes Barton Press, 1952.), 3269.

⁹J. C. Almond, "Olivetans," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Accessed November 19, 2014 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11244c.htm>).

Views of the Protestant Reformers

The Protestant Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther, were universally tolerant of the drinking of alcohol. Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was external to the Protestant Reformation, attested to the general truth of the Protestant churches' affinity for alcohol when, being rebuked for drinking on a day of Catholic fasting – on which Catholics would temporarily abstain – Erasmus said, “My heart is Catholic, but my stomach is Protestant.”¹⁰ The traditional view of alcohol among the Protestant Reformers was fairly favorable. Martin Luther said he, “drank freely to spite the devil.”¹¹ The great Reformed theologian John Calvin, shared Martin Luther's sentiments. Calvin wrote in his famous *Institutes of Christian Religion* that, “It is permissible to use wine not only for necessity, but to make us merry,” and that, “in making merry,” those who enjoy wine “feel a livelier gratitude to God.”¹² Calvin further taught that, “By wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls.”¹³ Uniquely, Luther was so insistent that real wine be used in the Lord's Supper that he wrote, “If a person cannot tolerate wine, omit [the sacrament] altogether in order that no innovation may be made or introduced.”¹⁴ The favorable view of alcohol among reformation theologians was not exclusive to Calvin and Luther, but was also shared by reformation heavy-weights John Knox and Ulrich Zwingli. Knox spoke of drinking wine as a daily occurrence, akin to eating bread, and beholding the sun.¹⁵

¹⁰Raymond, *The Teaching of the Early Church*, 86.

¹¹West, *Drinking with Calvin and Luther!*, 33.

¹²*Ibid.*, 53.

¹³*Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 61.

Zwingli so strongly favored his wine that he used the aversion to “good wine” as a parabolic depiction of ones inability to enjoy the Bible. ¹⁶

Views of the Earliest American Christians

When the earliest Christians made their way to the shores of North America, they recorded that they themselves had not made their travels empty handed. The Puritan Reverend Francis Higginson recorded that upon making the voyage across the Atlantic in 1629, for the purposes of acclimatizing himself as comfortably as possible to his new surroundings, he imported cargo of five tuns (1200 gallons) of beer and 20 gallons of brandy. ¹⁷ For all their rigidity and proper reverence, the Puritans were similarly quite comfortable in enjoying alcohol. Puritan Minister Cotton Mather, speaking to the operator of an ale house, wrote, “It is an honest and a lawful ... employment that you have undertaken: you may glorify God in your employment, if you will, and benefit the town considerably.” ¹⁸ While the Puritans are famed for their strict piety, abstinence from alcohol did not prevail among their practices.

Views of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Church

“In the mid-19th [sic] century, some Protestant Christians moved from [the] historic position of allowing moderate use of alcohol (sometimes called moderationism) to either deciding that not imbibing was wisest in the present circumstances (abstentionism) or prohibiting all ordinary consumption of alcohol because it was believed to be a sin (prohibitionism).” ¹⁹ Quite interestingly, the turn from a favorable view of alcohol began among the Methodist movement, and there was not complete agreement even among the founding members of

¹⁶Ibid., 65.

¹⁷West, *Drinking with Calvin and Luther!*, 80.

¹⁸Ibid., 95.

¹⁹Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says About Alcohol* (Lincoln, CA: Oakdown, 2001), 3.

Methodism: the Wesley brothers. Famed hymn writer Charles Wesley was known to drink ale.²⁰ His legendary brother, the evangelist John Wesley, however preached strongly against even the slightest temptation to partake in any alcohol. John Wesley said, “You see the wine when it sparkles in the cup, and are going to drink of it. I tell you there is poison in it! And, therefore, I beg you to throw it away.” Wesley went on to command that his followers should “taste no spirituous liquor . . . unless prescribed by a physician.”²¹ In 1780, at a Methodist Conference in Baltimore, the Methodists denominationally vowed to oppose the production of liquor, thus setting into motion the beginnings of an American temperance movement. As a general sense of prohibitionism arose, nearly every Protestant leader in the United States came to a position that the wisest choice under modern circumstances was for the Christian to willingly practice total abstinence from alcohol. As the abstinence movement grew, alcohol of any kind began to become demonized, and thus it became seen as improper to administer wine even in the Lord’s Supper. In 1869, ordained Methodist minister Thomas Bramwell Welch, developed a process for pasteurizing grape juice, preventing the fermentation of the juice, and thus, Welch’s Grape Juice was born. Welch’s Grape Juice became for many, the appropriate symbol of the blood of Christ.

So impactful was the temperance movement that the Women’s Christian Temperance Union was formed, and by 1919 succeeded in bringing about the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which formally prohibited alcohol in America. While the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed only fourteen years later, the Protestant-American view of abstention from alcohol remained.

Views of Evangelical Church Leaders Today

The views toward alcohol among the church today are a matter of heated debate and division. Among Evangelicals there exists three main views toward alcohol: prohibitionism,

²⁰ West, *Drinking with Calvin and Luther!*, 102.

²¹ John Wesley, “Sermon 140.”

abstentionism, and moderationism. The moderationist view argues that it is within the Christian's biblical freedom to enjoy alcohol responsibly as a good gift of God. Moderation holds that while drunkenness is unquestionably sin, moderate drinking is not. Moderationists believe self-control and not abstinence is the biblical mandate. Among evangelicals, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Reformed churches, and members of the Young, Restless, and Reformed movement are adherents to moderationism. Evangelical leaders holding the moderationist position are notably: Reformation Bible College President, Dr. R. C. Sproul; famed theologian J. I. Packer; and Acts 29 President Matt Chandler.

Both prohibitionists and abstentionists are teetotalers. A teetotaler is one who does not partake in the consumption of alcohol under any circumstances. The main distinction that can be drawn between the prohibitionist and the abstentionist is that the prohibitionist does not imbibe by constraint of law. Either by their interpretation of God's views toward alcohol, obligation of conscience, or legal obligation, the prohibitionist feels bound by law to avoid drinking. The abstentionist, on the other hand, believes he is within his biblical right, and allowed by Christian freedom, but in wisdom he willfully chooses to abstain. Abstentionism is the common practice among Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals. Evangelical leaders adhering to abstention are: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President, Dr. Albert Mohler; Masters Seminary President, John MacArthur; and famed pastor John Piper.

Due to the ramifications of prohibition in the early twentieth century, it is not popular in the present era to openly profess prohibitionism. The line between prohibitionism and abstentionism, however, is more easily applied in theory than in practice, and can be blurred. When each person is allowed the freedom to determine for himself what the Spirit and Scripture has bound upon his conscience, the prohibitionist and abstentionist views remain clearly distinct. It is frequently the case, however, that a person who is a teetotaler by way of personal abstention further intends to impose his choice on other brothers and sisters. C. S. Lewis was outspoken in saying that, "One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing

himself without wanting every one else to give it up. That is not the Christian way.”²² When this person is in a position of authority and seeks to impose a position of willful abstention upon his parishioners, those parishioners – whose consciences are not equally bound by the Spirit to the choice of abstention – are then held under the mandate of their shepherd. The abstentionist leader’s will becomes an external legal mandate that forces his congregants into a prohibitionist response rather than allowing for the same personal choice that the abstentionist afforded himself. Alternately, a person who intends to exercise his Christian freedom by engaging moderately in alcohol can also become an offense, or a stumbling to his brother or sister who is not afforded the same sense of Christian liberty. Held in tension between these two positions is the area to which the Apostle Paul has called the church in Romans 14. The one who abstains must not judge the one who partakes, and the one who partakes must not despise the one who abstains. Instead the two must endeavor to love one another, and find grounds for unity. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [. . .] So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building” (Rom 14:17, 19).

²² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1952), 78.

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