

Why we advocate an alcohol-free lifestyle

A report from a study group of the
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Adapted for the United States

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Adaptation for the United States:

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Introduction

Most Christians recognize that drinks containing alcohol are potentially harmful and they must therefore develop strategies for their own practice in relation to the drug. Bible-based Christians have developed two basic strategies to address the problem.

Many evangelical Christians, and the number seems to be increasing, believe that wine is a gift from God who gives only good things to His people. They point out that Jesus and His disciples drank wine, [Luke 7:³⁴] that Jesus not only made wine [John 2:¹⁰] but might even have encouraged Christians to drink it [Matthew 26:²⁸]. They point out that Paul specifically encouraged Timothy to drink a little wine [1 Timothy 5:²³] and that a requirement for abstinence is not placed on Christians. They would therefore take a little wine perhaps at family celebrations and at the major family meal of the week. They would be horrified at any suggestion of drunkenness since this is specifically condemned in scripture, and would even be affronted if they were thought to have drunk enough to be a little ‘merry’. They would reject spirits, which concentrate the alcohol into a smaller volume and possibly fortified wines like sherry and port because of their much higher alcohol content. Although crude distillation was certainly known in the Near East, drinks like gin and whisky do not appear in scripture. Similarly fortifying wines with additional alcohol content does not seem to have been used. In Jewish culture wine was normally drunk with food. In accordance with the practice of many peoples in the Mediterranean basin even today wine was usually diluted with water. Indeed this is taken as a matter of course in the Mishnah¹. The phrase ‘strong drink’ in scripture usually means any intoxicating drink including undiluted wine, and that prepared from grain, fruit, honey or dates. At Jewish ritual meals diluted wine was invariably used and sometimes non-fermented wine. Even today it is the practice in some oriental Jewish cultures to squeeze a handful of raisins or fresh grapes into water on Friday morning and use this ‘wine’ for the Sabbath². It is extremely likely that Jesus would have drunk diluted wine but we cannot be sure.

Other evangelical Christians emphasize more that scripture teaches principles which must be applied in every age to the social problems that a particular Society confronts. They would note that abstention from alcohol (either temporary or life long) was considered appropriate for certain individuals or situations. [Numbers 6:¹⁻⁴, Judges 13:⁷, Jeremiah 35:⁶, Luke 1:¹⁵] It was definitely not condemned and is usually applauded. Certainly, then, total abstinence is a legitimate position for an individual Christian. But they would also go further than this. Because of the particular problems – social and health – in our society today they would conclude that abstention from

¹ *Berakoth*, vii, 5

² Drower, E.S.(1956) *Water into Wine* London. John Murray (Publishers Ltd). p63

any form of alcoholic drink including fermented wine is the most adequate Christian response to the problems which alcohol presents to individuals and to Society as a whole.

Neither of these Christian responses has a decisive advantage over the other. Both, in their different ways, present religious and practical problems. Christians need to embrace each other strong in the knowledge that both want to live holy lives worthy of their Lord.

Free Methodists have agreed that, as a corporate act of witness to a fallen world, they will accept the alcohol-free position and agree that their lifestyles will, in this respect be radically different from that of the Society in which they live and also somewhat different from some, but by no means all, Christians worshipping in other churches.

The Effects of Alcohol on the Body

The effects of alcohol on the human body are wholly adverse: it is an important cause of cancer as well as damaging specific organs. It is a potentially addictive drug which the body treats as a poison. Its major effect on the body is to reduce the inhibiting higher centers of the brain - the things that make us peculiarly human. Indeed it is widely used for this purpose since it is a valuable social lubricant which makes us seem more friendly in the social situations which most of us find produce anxiety.

In recent years there has been much interest in the increasing evidence that those who drink some red wine and possibly any form of alcohol regularly are less likely to die from heart disease than those who abstain. It has become known, as 'the French Paradox' since the mortality from heart disease in France is less than elsewhere in Europe. The position remains very unclear. Some draw attention to possible other reasons for the French Paradox and to the fact that red grape juice also seems to have similarly beneficial effects to fermented red wine. Two comments can be justified by present knowledge.

Firstly the effect seems to be mediated through the fat levels in the blood. If this is confirmed to be so, alcohol would have to be taken in the way we already take fat lowering drugs i.e. every day and most Christians do not currently drink at these levels. Secondly, it is beginning to look as though the dose necessary to protect the heart will, nevertheless, damage some of the other body organs. One well-known complication of regular alcohol use is the development of addiction. It is important to understand that anyone who drinks alcohol is at risk. Factors involved include the frequency of use and the psychological make-up of the individual. People find that even in very small doses alcohol can create a warm, comfortable feeling which may temporarily reduce the pressures of daily living. For some this sensation becomes a solution to more deep seated psychological problems leading to escalating consumption both in frequency and quantity since, like all drugs, greater amounts are required to achieve the same effects. It

is wrong to associate the addict with the 'skid row' alcoholic. Many shelter behind the curtains of fashionable middle class homes and it may be years or even not at all before disintegration of life reaches the stage of unemployment or marital breakdown. Early warning signs are very subtle - taking a drink before leaving for a party; seeking out the waiter for an extra drink; switching drinks in the hope of not getting drunk; going into the hostess' kitchen in search of booze.

Social & Health Consequences of Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol is a major source of all kinds of problems in our modern society; in particular, problems connected with crime and with health issues.

The following points can be made about the United States:

*** Drinking behaviour**

- Two-thirds of the population drinks, but 10% of all drinkers (those who drink most heavily) drink half of all alcohol consumed ([NIAAA, Sixth Special Report to US Congress on Alcohol and Health, USDHHS, 1/87, p. 3](#)).
- Men are twice (21%) as likely as women (10%) to be heavier drinkers (individuals who consume two or more drinks per day on average).[†]
- The prevalence of alcoholism is highest among people who have personal incomes of less than \$10,000 (17%) and lowest among those whose incomes are \$25,000 or more (6%).[†]
- The prevalence of alcoholism is more than twice as high (19%) among those who have suffered from depression at some time during their lives as those who have not (9%).[†]
- Anyone who admitted driving after drinking three times or more in the past year was either alcoholic (52%) or suffering from an alcohol-related problem (48%).[†]
- A family history of alcoholism in both first and second degree relatives is twice as common among American Indians and Alaska natives (48%) as among whites (23%); blacks (22%); Hispanics of Hispanic origin (25%); or non-Hispanics of Hispanic origin (23%).[†]

[†] Source: *Drinking in the United States: Main Findings from the 1992 National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey*, [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#), 11/98

- More than seven percent of the population ages 18 years and older--nearly 13.8 million Americans--have problems with drinking, including 8.1 million people who are alcoholic. Almost three times as many men (9.8 million) as women (3.9 million) are problem drinkers, and prevalence is highest for both sexes in the 18-to-29-years-old age group ([NIAAA](#), *Alcohol Health & Research World {AHRW}*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1994, pp. 243, 245).
- About 43% of US adults--76 million people--have been exposed to alcoholism in the family: they grew up with or married an alcoholic or a problem drinker or had a blood relative who was ever an alcoholic or problem drinker ([National Center For Health Statistics {NCHS}](#), *Advance Data, USDHHS*, No. 205, 9/30/91, p. 1).
- 62% of high school seniors report that they have been drunk; 31% say that have had five or more drinks in a row during the last two weeks (*LD Johnston, et.al., [Monitoring the Future Study](#), Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 12/99*). [For more information, see NCADD's "[Youth, Alcohol and Other Drugs](#)" facts.]
- People who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin at age 21([NIAAA](#) news release, 1/14/98).

★ Health effects

- Alcohol contributes to 100,000 deaths annually, making it the third leading cause of preventable mortality in the US, after tobacco and diet/activity patterns (*J McGinnis & W Foege, "Actual Causes of Death in the United States," Journal of the [American Medical Association {JAMA}](#), Vol. 270, No. 18, 11/10/93, p. 2208*).
- Among 9,484 deaths attributed to non-medical use of other drugs in 1996, 37% also involved alcohol ([SAMHSA](#), *Annual Medical Examiner Data 1996*, 7/98, p. iii).
- Nearly one-fourth of all persons admitted to general hospitals have alcohol problems or are undiagnosed alcoholics being treated for the consequences of their drinking ([NIAAA](#), *Eighth Special Report, op. cit., p. xi*).
- On average, untreated alcoholics incur general health care costs at least 100% higher than those of nonalcoholics, and this disparity may exist as long as 10 years before entry into treatment (*Ibid., p. 259*).

- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), which can occur when women drink during pregnancy, is the leading known environmental cause of mental retardation in the Western World (*Ibid.*, p.221). [For more information, see NCADD's "[Alcohol and Other Drug-Related Birth Defects](#)" facts.]
- 3.1 million Americans--approximately 1.4% of the population ages 12 and older--received treatment for alcoholism and alcohol-related problems in 1997; treatment peaked among people between the ages 26-34 ([SAMHSA, National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main Findings 1997, 4/99, p. 169, 172](#)).
- Although there are fewer deaths from alcohol-related causes than from cancer or heart disease, alcohol-related deaths tend to occur at much younger ages ([NIAAA, Eighth Special Report, op. cit., p. 16](#)).
- Studies of suicide victims in the general population show that about 20% of such suicide victims are alcoholic ([NIAAA, AHRW, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1993, p. 133](#)).
- Heavy and chronic drinking

--can harm virtually every organ and system in the body (*Ibid.*, p. xxvii).

--is the single most important cause of illness and death from liver disease (alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis) (*Ibid.*, p. 165).

--is associated with cardiovascular diseases such as cardiomyopathy, hypertension, arrhythmias, and stroke (*Ibid.*, p. 172).

--contributes to approximately 65% of all cases of pancreatitis (*Ibid.*, p. 171).

--depresses the immune system and results in a predisposition to infectious diseases, including respiratory infections, pneumonia, and tuberculosis (*Ibid.*, p. 176).

--increases risk for cancer, with an estimated 2-4% of all cancer cases thought to be caused either directly or indirectly by alcohol. The strongest link between alcohol and cancer involves cancers of the upper digestive tract, including the esophagus, the mouth, the pharynx, and the larynx. Less consistent data link alcohol consumption and cancers of the liver, breast and colon ([NIAAA, Alcohol Alert, No. 21, 7/93](#)).

--can lead to inadequate functioning of the testes and ovaries, resulting in

hormonal deficiencies, sexual dysfunction and infertility ([NIAAA, Alcohol Alert, No. 26, 11/95](#)).

--is related to a higher rate of early menopause and a higher frequency of menstrual irregularities (duration, flow, or both) in women ([NIAAA, Eighth Special Report, op. cit., p. 179](#)).

- Each year 4,000 to 12,000 babies are born with the physical signs and intellectual disabilities associated with FAS, and thousands more experience the somewhat lesser disabilities of fetal alcohol effects ([SAMHSA, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Toward Preventing Perinatal Abuse of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs, USDHHS, Technical Report, No. 9, 1993, p. 1](#)).

★ Social and economic effects

- An estimated 6.6 million children under the age of 18 years live in households with at least one alcoholic parent ([NIAAA, Alcohol Alert, No. 9, 7/90, p. 1](#)).
- From 1985 to 1992, the economic costs of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems rose 42% to \$148 billion. Two-thirds of the costs related to lost productivity, either due to alcohol-related illness (45.7%) or premature death (21.2%). Most of the remaining costs were in the form of health care expenditures to treat alcohol use disorders and the medical consequences of alcohol consumption (12.7%), property and administrative costs of alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes (9.2%), and various additional costs of alcohol-related crime (8.6%). Based on inflation and population growth, the estimated costs for 1995 total \$166.5 billion ([NIAAA, news release, 5/13/98](#)).
- 38% of all traffic fatalities (the leading cause of accidental death) are alcohol-related ([National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 5/27/99 press release](#)); alcoholics are nearly five times more likely than others to die in motor vehicle crashes ([NIAAA, Eighth Special Report, op. cit., p. 233](#)).
- Alcoholics are 16 times more likely than others to die in falls, and 10 times more likely to become fire or burn victims (*Ibid.*).
- Estimates suggest that alcohol is associated with between 47% and 65% of adult drownings (*Ibid.*, p. 243).
- One study showed that half of all boating fatalities had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .04; BAC's of .10 or more were found in 31% of the

fatalities(US Department of Transportation, United States Coast Guard, Boating Statistics 1994, 9/95).

- Up to 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol consumption and alcoholism (*M Bernstein & JJ Mahoney, "Management Perspectives on Alcoholism: The Employer's Stake in Alcoholism Treatment," Occupational Medicine, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1989, pp. 223-232*). [For more information, see NCADD's "[Alcohol and Other Drugs in the Workplace](#)" facts.]

★ Effects on criminal behaviour

- Based on victim reports, each year 183,000 (37%) rapes and sexual assaults involve alcohol use by the offender, as do just over 197,000 (15%) of robberies, about 661,000 (27%) aggravated assaults, and nearly 1.7 million (25%) simple assaults (*US Department of Justice, [Alcohol and Crime: An Analysis of National Data on the Prevalence of Alcohol Involvement in Crime](#), 4/98*).
- Alcohol is typically found in the offender, victim or both in about half of all homicides and serious assaults, as well as in a high percentage of sex-related crimes, robberies, and incidents of domestic violence, and alcohol-related problems are disproportionately found among both juvenile and adult criminal offenders (*NIAAA, Eighth Special Report, op. cit. p. xi*).
- Among violent crimes the offender is far more likely to have been drinking than under the influence of other drugs, with the exception of robberies where other drugs are almost as likely to have been used as alcohol. ‡
- Alcohol is more likely to be a factor in violence where the attacker and the victim know one another: two-thirds of victims who were attacked by an intimate (including a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend) reported that alcohol had been involved whereas only 31% of victimizations by strangers are alcohol-related. ‡
- Nearly half a million incidents of violence between intimates involve offenders who have been drinking; in addition, 118,000 incidents of family violence (excluding spouses) involve alcohol, as do 744,000 incidents among acquaintances. ‡
- 1.4 million incidents of alcohol-related violence are committed against strangers. ‡

- 70% of alcohol-related incidents of violence occur in the home and begin with the greatest frequency at 11 p.m.; 20% of these incidents involve the use of a weapon other than hands, fists, or feet. †
- Victims were injured in 60% of alcohol-related incidents of violence, with men and women equally represented, but with men more than twice as likely to have sustained a major injury due to a greater number of severe lacerations. †
- Among the 5.3 million convicted offenders under the jurisdiction of corrections agencies in 1996, more than 36% were estimated to have been drinking at the time of the offense for which they had been convicted. This translates into just under 2 million convicted offenders nationwide on an average day, including 1.3 million individuals on probation; 85,000 in local jails; 360,000 in state and federal prisons; and more than 200,000 under parole supervision. †
- Four in ten violent crimes involve alcohol use by the offender; alcohol use is even more common in public order crimes (such as driving while intoxicated, weapons offenses and commercial vice) and assault. †
- State prisoners convicted of murder reported that alcohol was a factor in about half of the murders they committed; those who murdered intimates reported drinking the largest quantity for the longest period prior to the offense. †
- Among convicted offenders, beer is the most commonly used alcoholic beverage, by itself and in combination with distilled spirits; 30% of probationers, 32% of local jail inmates and 23% of state prisoners had been drinking beer before committing their crimes. †
- Inmates of state prisons reported drinking the equivalent of as many as 15 beers up to eight hours before committing their crimes. †
- 30% of state prisoners described themselves as daily drinkers; this population began drinking before age 17 and were the most intoxicated at the time of their arrests. †
- About half of all state inmates who described themselves as daily drinkers prior to entering prison had received some form of treatment--most often participation in a self-help group--at some point in their lives. †
- College students reported about 463,000 (31%) alcohol-related incidents of violence in 1995. †

- 90% of alcohol-related incidents of violence involving college students occurred off campus. ‡
- Per capita arrest rates for alcoholic beverage law violations (including prohibited manufacture, sale or possession of alcohol and maintaining illegal drinking places but excluding public drunkenness and driving-related offenses) are highest at public, four-year colleges. ‡

The Consumption Model

In all the countries for which the relevant statistics are available, the average amount of alcohol consumed is directly related to the extent of individual and social harm in that society. Moreover, when the average amount of alcohol consumed in a particular society is reduced, the levels of harm also decline. When countries increase the average amount of alcohol consumed, the levels of harm also rise, as the preceding section makes all too clear.

So, if we want to improve the public health by reducing the amount of alcohol related harm the most effective method would be to reduce the amount of alcohol which is consumed. Such a strategy puts us into opposition with the alcohol industry which exists to increase consumption and so increase profits to its shareholders. The alcohol industry is very well aware of the implications of the consumption model. Indeed it denies its conclusions. It has let it be known that it will fight every step of the way since it considers that the tobacco industry succumbed too readily to the health campaigners. When we consider the dishonesty of the tobacco industry which has only recently come to light, together with the enormous economic and political power of the alcohol industry, it is obvious that a big, dirty and protracted battle is coming. Christians, like everyone else in our Society, will sooner or later have to decide which ‘side’ they will be on in this battle. In the meantime, a policy of misinformation is taking place like the exaggerated claims made for the health benefits of red wine and, indeed, all alcohol products.

Free Methodists are unambiguously clear that they are on the ‘side’ of the poor and weak in our Society and these are the groups most at risk in the coming battle.

Reducing Abuse

It is often assumed that alcohol consumption in a population can best be reduced by persuading those who drink most frequently to reduce to ‘normal levels’. Quite apart from the immense practical problems of this policy (for example,

‡ Source: [U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), "Alcohol and Crime," 1998.

most people who go to a public house have no intention of measuring out the amount of drink they consume with the precision of a pharmacist in units they do not even understand), it is unlikely to be the best way of reducing overall consumption. Most public health specialists agree that if a particular community is to reduce its total alcohol consumption significantly, most people within it will have to drink less than they do at present.

If we want to reduce the number of alcoholics in our Society, occasional and some regular but infrequent drinkers should become total abstainers. As Christians, we should be prepared to make sacrifices in the spirit of Christ if this will help others.

Biblical Teaching

We believe that a practice such as making or drinking wine, which is a right application of underlying biblical principles in one social situation, may not be ideal in another. For example, neither Jesus nor Paul directly attacked the institution of slavery. However, the practice of uncaring chattel slavery amongst Christians was effectively outlawed by Jesus' teaching to love others as oneself, and in Paul's instructions to Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother and to masters not to use threats (Ephesians 6:⁹).

In the situation of late eighteenth century England and early nineteenth century America, Christians rightly challenged the institution of slavery. There may be some parallels to the alcohol issue. In the first century Jesus and Paul drank wine; no one, therefore, should say that any such practice is in itself wrong. But, although there was in New Testament times some drunkenness, they were not faced with the avalanche of alcohol related problems facing our society today. Neither did they have alternatives to offer, like indigestion tablets for Timothy or non-alcoholic grape or apple juices for drinking with meals. On balance we believe that in our present society a different practice is the best application of the underlying biblical principles. An alcohol-free lifestyle is not, of course, the only option for Christians today, but we believe it to be the best one and on this basis advocate it. What, then, are the underlying biblical principles?

- **The body as the temple of the Holy Spirit**

In the first epistle to the Corinthians Paul writes, “Do you not know that you are the body of the Holy Spirit?” On the first occasion, Paul is clearly referring to the ‘body’ as the local church [1 Corinthians 3: ¹⁶]. On the second occasion, however, he is clearly referring to our individual bodies [1 Corinthians 6: ¹⁹]. The context is sexual immorality but the principle is unambiguously clear - since the temple belongs to God, the Christian is not independent [IVP New Bible Commentary]. Sexual immorality pollutes the temple but does alcohol? Most Christians would reject the use of all other addictive drugs except in

circumstances where they themselves cannot control the dose (e.g. medical use by doctors). These days most Christians reject tobacco as a result of changing social attitudes to the drug.

Although the Government implies that alcohol has no effect on the body below a certain level of consumption, this is not the case. Those who have a blood alcohol level below the driving limit (.08) are nine times more likely to have a road accident than those who have drunk no alcohol at all. According to the World Health Organization, alcohol is a proven cause of cancer, which may affect a wide range of bodily organs. Given the fact that a believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians are wise to avoid any addictive and destructive substance or practice.

- **The 'weaker brother'**

In Romans 14 and 15, Paul develops a theme also found in 1 Corinthians 8 frequently referred to as the 'weaker brother' argument. It seems to be developed in the context of food offered to idols and the appearance of compromise in relation to pagan deities. Paul is forthright in his teaching with little room for ambiguity or compromise. If **anything** we do is likely to cause a brother (and presumably, a sister) to stumble we are not to do it (Romans 14:²¹). Some commentators see significance in the specific inclusion of wine since almost the whole argument is built up on the foods people believe they can eat and this is the first time that wine is brought into the argument although verse 17 refers to 'drink'.

The question to be addressed, therefore, is to whom does the phrase 'weaker brother' apply? We can think of a number of 'weaker brothers' in the context of alcohol drinking. Although not relevant to the passage, children are clearly influenced by parental behaviour. There is a case for not exposing children to the presence of alcohol in the home. Those addicted to alcohol are very obviously 'weaker brothers' in a technical rather than a biblical sense. Alcoholism is a chronic relapsing condition partly due to the drug itself and partly due to the personality make up of the alcoholic. No one can predict who will become an alcoholic although some groups seem to be more at risk than others. **All** alcoholics began as moderate or even occasional drinkers. Recovered alcoholics know that they must not touch the drug again but they constantly face social situations which encourage them to relapse. Those who abstain in their presence are providing inestimable support which will help them on the tightrope they constantly walk. Christian households and church premises should be safe and secure, alcohol free refuges for the alcoholic recovering from our drinking culture.

Well into the twentieth century, Temperance reformers believed that alcohol users were morally defective. They argued that one single drink would automatically lead to a downward spiral from which alcohol addiction was the

only outcome. Few now accept this view. As with many other addictive drugs there are some people who seem to be able to control both their regular use and even their addiction. Nevertheless, alcohol drinking takes place within a set culture from which it is not easy to escape. All sorts of beliefs, myths and customs surround this drug. Not drinking until ‘the sun is below the yard arm’, for example, is an ingenious naval device to control overall consumption at least among those ultimately responsible for the safety of the vessel. Such sayings suggest that alcohol is regarded as a dangerous commodity to a ‘weak brother’. Strong individuals can resist the pressure to break their own control rules. Yet even they know the extreme pressures under which they are put by their peers to conform to group behaviour. Less strong individuals are clearly at risk of abusive behaviour whether this is binge drinking or excessive regular drinking.

Within the context of Paul’s words is there not a meaning which has little to do with alcohol per se? What Paul seems to be saying is that some weaker Christians depend on clear and unambiguous rules whereas their ‘stronger brethren’ are able to handle ambiguity and rely upon individual circumstances to make their own decisions. If this is a correct interpretation of the passage, it seems to place an onus on those who are unwilling to adopt the alcohol-free stance. They argue that the standard should be changed and seem to ignore or fail to see the fact that many current members are terrified that the standard will be changed. Being weak they do not know how they will cope in such a situation. So, says Paul, the strong in faith who have no difficulty with a moderate drinking stance (however defined) should willingly surrender their own position for their weaker brethren. He specifically does **NOT** require those who have a weak understanding of the liberty the Gospel can bring to ‘pull themselves together’.

The Case for Personal Choice of Alcohol-Free Lifestyle

Having reviewed the evidence of medical and social harm that alcohol causes and the biblical cases both for strictly limited use of wine and total abstinence from all forms of alcoholic drink we are now in a position to consider the reasons that individual Free Methodists give for their adoption of the alcohol-free model. Members of the Study Group were asked to explain why they took this position. Most of the reasons given by the author have already been covered in the earlier pages of this document and those of others may be a *reprise* to some of the themes that have been discussed. Repetition is willingly accepted although where two or more members advanced similar approaches, attempts have been made to integrate them into a coherent unity.

One point deserves emphasis although it may attract controversy. **Both** biblical approaches outlined in this paper require the individual to adopt rules. At first sight it may appear that the division is between those who adopt a legalistic abstinence stance and those who live in salvation freedom to make their own choices. Nothing could be further from the truth. The first decision the latter

must make is what to consume? As this document has forcibly argued, only wine enjoys any kind of biblical warrant. In many social situations that a Christian might encounter, however, the usual drink offered is a fortified wine which has a much higher alcohol content and which does not seem to have been used by Jesus or any of his followers. Next, a decision will have to be made as to when to drink. In our culture, drinking often takes place in its own right separate from any other activity (cf. the cocktail party or invitations ‘for drinks’). In biblical culture, however, drinking usually took place in the context of a not insubstantial meal. Indeed, if young Christians are determined to drink then ‘drink only with food’ is a very appropriate piece of advice to avoid potential harm. Finally, a decision is required on how much to drink. In many social situations the host will keep all the glasses constantly refilled so that it may be almost impossible even to guess how many complete glasses have been consumed.

Similarly, people visiting licensed premises must face up to a number of hazards. They may well be expected to ‘stand their round’ so it is difficult to resist drinks until that point has been negotiated. This, and more recent social customs, may commit people to drinking well beyond their own preferred levels. They will certainly be ridiculed if they accept alcohol from some of the friends but not from all members of the party who offer it. This makes it difficult to revert to a soft drink after perhaps one or two alcoholic ones. In the practical situation, while in no way diminishing the embarrassment all total abstainers have suffered at some time in social situations, it is infinitely easier to refuse the first drink than any subsequent one.

There are, therefore, several practical difficulties with drinking in moderation: -

1. Careful moderation has to be defined -

Careful moderation surely means:

- A moderation that avoids distilled spirits, fortified wines and strong drink on the ground that these were unknown in Biblical times.
- A moderation that only consumes wine with food on the ground that this was the common New Testament practice.
- A moderation that at all times never drinks more than the government’s safe limits for drinking and driving and never drinks and drives.
- A moderation that avoids the dangers of intoxication and drunkenness.

2. Careful moderation has to be monitored.

This is a real difficulty as the one person who has to monitor moderation is the one consuming the alcoholic drink. Alcohol is an anesthetic which puts the brain to sleep in stages - the first parts to be numbed are the pre-frontal lobes which govern conscience and judgment. So even the first drink reduces an individual’s ability to exercise good judgment and self-control.

The reasons why we advocate an alcohol-free lifestyle

1. Because we believe the role of alcohol in Society has changed since the time of Jesus Christ.

The alcoholic drinks available in Biblical times were generally weaker than those available today. The wine available in New Testament times would have had an alcohol content between 8% and 14%. As a strict Jew, Jesus would have diluted his wine by one quarter with water³. The amount of dilution seems to vary among Jews living in different cultures (op. cit.) It is unlikely that Jesus ever consumed wine containing more than a relatively minor alcohol content. Whereas, today it is usual in our society to drink undiluted wine and we have distilled spirits and fortified wines with even higher alcohol content.

Supplies of alcoholic drinks were more limited in biblical times than they are today. At Cana in Galilee the wine ran out [John 2: ³], today wine need never run out as off-license and supermarket shelves are stocked with alcoholic drinks from around the world. Many supermarkets are now open for long periods every day. In our Society we have an aggressive alcohol industry, which produces and promotes a vast array of alcoholic drinks.

There are accounts in scripture of people being drunk but these are the exception, whereas, in our society the problem is far more common. Alcohol is being consumed by younger and younger people and in ever increasing quantities. Drinking in pubs and bars is the most popular leisure activity among 15 to 29 year olds (Mintel Attitude Survey 2000). The statistics on pages 9-11 speak for themselves: The wide scale misuse of alcohol in our society means that Christians need to rethink their attitude to alcohol and take a more rigorous line.

2. Because we want to demonstrate support for those who have found alcohol so addictive that their only option is to adopt an alcohol-free lifestyle

We live in a society where many people struggle with an addiction to alcohol. For them the only safe option is totally to adopt an alcohol-free lifestyle. We want our homes and the churches to which we belong to be “safe places” for those who are struggling to be free from dependence on alcohol.

As those who believe we are called to live a holy life we feel it is entirely consistent that we, as members of the Free Methodist Church, are called to commit ourselves to be ‘free from activities and attitudes that defile the mind and harm the body.’ We therefore need to avoid any action, attitude or substance that could enslave us. We avoid these so that we can be free to serve God with all

³ Op. cit. (Drower, E.S. 1956 *Water into Wine* London John Murray (Publishers) Ltd. p.63)

of our hearts, mind and strength. The total abstainer need never fear the sin of drunkenness or addiction to alcohol.

3. Because we want to set a good example and would not want our consumption of alcohol to cause another person to stumble.

Jesus warned of the terrible consequences of doing anything which may cause a little one who believes in Him to sin [Matthew 18:^{6&7}].

The apostle Paul said, “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that would cause a brother to fall” [Romans 14: ²¹]. Paul also claimed “we ought to be careful that our freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak...that we do not sin against their conscience” [1 Corinthians 8: ^{9&12}].

The apostle Paul said that the Apostles tried to “put no stumbling block in anyone’s path so that our ministry will not be discredited” [2 Corinthians 6: ³].

We believe a Spirit filled Christian by abstaining from alcohol testifies that they do not need alcohol to help them escape, to relax or to increase excitement. We are called to be filled with the Holy Spirit rather than to be drunk with wine [Ephesians 5: ¹⁸].

4. Because we want to raise a prophetic voice against the ravages caused by the alcohol industry which promotes its product and spreads suffering around the world.

We recognize that any individual or group with a prophetic message will be in a minority. Nevertheless we want to raise an alarm and call the Christian community to think again about its acceptance of secular attitudes towards the consumption of alcohol. We believe it to be the duty of the Church to raise concern about any destructive influences in society and call its members to action and abstinence. See Acts 15: ²⁹ where the early Christians were asked to abstain from several activities for the sake of others.

5. Because alcohol is destructive to individuals, families and the community

In recent years the debate has switched back from the moral defectiveness of the individual or the perceived ‘illness’ of the alcoholic to the substance itself. Alcohol is a poisonous, habit forming narcotic drug. It affects body, mind and spirit and can harm each one even in quite small doses. Its effects on the family have already been outlined: they are broadly concerned either with violence or the misuse of financial resources. Its effect on Society has also been documented (pages 9-11). The economic drain resulting from sickness absence as well as home, occupational and road accidents is formidable. The deleterious results of alcohol consumption in the Board Room and the resultant poor decision-making can only be guessed at.

The Bible teaches that we are: - “to abstain from every form of evil “ [1 Thessalonians 5: ²²(RSV)] The amplified version translates these words as

“Abstain from evil, shrink from it and keep aloof from it, in whatever form or whatever kind it may be.” Although there is nothing intrinsically evil in alcohol, or in the moderate consumption of wine with meals as in the biblical practice, in our society today alcohol causes much evil, and we feel it is safest to abstain from any involvement with it.

6. Because of the tragedies of individuals whom we have known who have suffered as a result of their consumption of the drug.

Alcohol does not add holiness to life - it destroys it. How can we, committed as we are to the pursuit of a holy life worthy of our Lord, use a substance that we have seen destroy the lives of our friends, colleagues and acquaintances. We do not need to study the statistics about alcohol misuse although they present a damning indictment of the drug. We have actually seen the effects among individuals known to us. If by being an abstainer, one family can be spared the ravages of alcohol, one child spared abuse, one less wife battered, one more rape avoided, then our witness will not have been in vain.

7. Because we want to witness against the Bacchanalian culture of our present generation.

The present generation seems to be one continuing festival to Bacchus the Greek god of wine. Visit the center of any city on any Friday or Saturday night and you will see scores of young men and women making their way to the clubs and bars. Television cameras record them later in the evening staggering from one side of the street to the other. Interviews confirm that many go out at the weekend with the deliberate intention, not of drinking, but of getting drunk. The drinking on University campuses is taken for granted so much so that a group has begun to mount an experimental program on two campuses to show students that they are not obliged to put up with the consequences of the excessive drinking by their fellow students. Of course Christians do not drink like this but we want to show clearly and unambiguously that we reject any acquaintance with Bacchus or any part of his disgusting culture.

8. Because we do not want to encourage a drug culture.

Alcohol can be a gateway drug to other drugs. It can be difficult to be a moderate drinker and resist the social pressures to take ecstasy, marijuana or other drugs.

It has always been the addictive and destructive nature of alcohol which has caused Christians to take an alcohol-free lifestyle position.

Bishop Parsons writes *“If we are going to speak with any force or credibility about the ravages of alcohol, I believe we must do so without compromise.”*

F S Fitzsimmon, Tutor of Biblical languages and exegesis at Spurgeons College London writes, “to sum up then, it may be said that while 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, then for the weaker brother”. Romans 14:²¹. New Bible Dictionary p. 1332

It was the burden of involvement with alcoholic misery which in 1867 moved twenty-year-old Fred Charrington, just converted, to renounce his huge private income and millionaire future as heir to a brewery fortune. He was on his way one evening to teach a class of illiterate boys in a London East End slum. Passing a public house called “The Rising Sun” he saw a poor, raggedly dressed woman with two little children clutching on to her skirt, crying with hunger. The woman went to the pub door and called out for her husband. Suddenly, the man rushed out and battered the pathetic trio to the ground. As he looked on, appalled, Charrington’s eyes caught sight of his own family name emblazoned across the door of the pub. His mind responded immediately. “You have knocked your wife down,” he said to himself, “and with the same blow you have knocked me out of the brewery business.” For the remaining sixty-eight years of this life, Fred Charrington was probably the best-known temperance campaigner of the period. His youthful decision representing the only possible heart response to the commands of the New Testament. (Excerpt from “Should Christians Drink?” by Peter Masters p47 & 48.)

Conclusion

Those on the Study Group are united in their perception that Jesus drank wine. They are agreed that “the Kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” Romans 14:¹⁷ However, they are also united in the belief that it is proper for churches in particular cultures and societies to adopt guiding principles of conduct (based on biblical values) appropriate to the particular social context and cultures in which they work. These principles of conduct are not a means of holiness (which comes from the Spirit working within), but are a useful guide to lifestyle, especially for the developing Christian. Our studies have found nothing to suggest that the problem of alcohol in our society is any less than when the Free Methodist Church first introduced total abstinence into its Code of Conduct. Indeed the situation is deteriorating. What has changed is an increased tolerance by society of the problems that alcohol brings and a tendency for individuals to do what is right in their own eyes. In our society today there are massive problems of alcohol abuse, and our particular social conditions should make *all Christians* consider the advantages of an alcohol-free lifestyle as a personal stance and reaction. This is not to stand in criticism of any mature Christians who have considered the issue and remain moderate drinkers. But it is regretted that in many churches the

issues are seldom, if ever, raised, and no challenge is made to individuals to think through their own position prayerfully.

There are divergences among the Study Group as to how far commitment to the ideal of total abstinence should be seen as a requirement for membership of any church. Some members are content with the current position within the North American General Conference (of which we are part), which seems to imply that a member should recognize an alcohol-free lifestyle as a part of Christian maturity and holiness. Other members of the Study Group are uneasy at this implication which could be taken to reflect negatively on mature Christians who have not as yet have been led to this position. The Canadian General Conference appears to have overcome this difficulty by expressing total abstinence as a position they advocate. (See Appendix A below)

We appreciate the fact that the Free Methodist Church has throughout the generations called its members to practical, Christian holiness.

In 1910, Rev Benson H Roberts commented *“There was a marked line of separation between the church and the world in the early days of Methodism. Should this line be less distinct now? If so, why? Has Christ and His cause changed? Is self-denial any less pleasing? Is the world less proud, less selfish?”*

In 1985, Bishop Donald N Bastian wrote *“Following Jesus is not just spiritual; it touches how I eat, drink, speak and spend my time and money. Discipleship that doesn’t touch our daily lives costs nothing. It is ‘cheap grace’.”*

In 1995, the Study Commission on Doctrine, affirmed *“We expect all Free Methodists to support total abstinence as a legitimate and consistent position for Christians. As in the case of the action taken by our founders against slaveholding 135 years ago, our stand on the dangers of alcohol and alcoholism is a witness to the world that we identify our Christian faith with moral convictions and consistent conduct. We are proud to pass this heritage to our children and grandchildren.”*

We recognise, of course, that there are many other evangelical churches who link faith with holiness and distinctive lifestyle. Like us, they see that such lifestyles should not be legalistic, but should arise out of a vibrant relationship with God in seeking to love Him with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. Like us, they see that in certain situations personal sacrifices may be called for. In our view, however, the present dangers in our society of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems are so severe that all Christians should take them seriously as they seek God for guidance in their lives. It is our conviction that personal total abstinence is the best response that

can be made to such issues today, not out of legalism or pride, but in genuine compassion for our society and those in it.

Appendix A: Extracts from Free Methodist Church of Canada Handbook:

¶630 Christian Life in the Modern World

This section arises from the experience of Free Methodists as they have lived out Christ's command to holiness in the modern world. Therefore, it describes a Christian response to pressing issues in the contemporary world.

There is no claim made that this is a complete or final description of an appropriate Christian response to all of the important issues faced in the modern world, or that such a description could ever be written. Rather, the approach taken in the following paragraphs illustrates the ways in which a Christian must form a responsible and Biblically appropriate response to contemporary issues.

A member of The Free Methodist Church adopts the following description of Christian life in the modern world as an authoritative guide to living an authentic Christian life today. The church recognizes however that a Christian's conscience is not bound by this description as though it were a new law that is above the gospel itself. Rather, this vision of the Christian life is an expression of how we believe God's Word leads us to live a genuine Christian life today. We trust that the following description of genuine Christianity may be used by God to help Free Methodists form their consciences according to God's Word. We trust that the Holy Spirit's guidance will lead each member of The Free Methodist Church into a conviction about how he or she ought personally to grow into the likeness of Christ in every part of life.

The statements of principle set out below arise out of the direct, clear teaching of scripture and have as their authority not human tradition but God's Word [*statements of principle are indicated by italicized text*]. The application statements that follow each statement of principle arise from God's Word, but we do not claim that they represent in every case the direct, clear, unambiguous teaching of scripture. Rather, these paragraphs represent the historic understanding of Free Methodists concerning the implications of central Biblical principles to pressing issues in contemporary life. Therefore, the teaching of these paragraphs do not constrain us with the same authority as the principle statements, though they have the authority to instruct our consciences. We

believe that a life lived according to all of the following statements would be a life that is "worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Ephesians 4:1).

630 2.6 *Misuse of Substances*

As Christians we believe that life is full, abundant, and free in Jesus Christ (John 8:35; 10:10). Therefore, we abstain from whatever damages, destroys, or distorts His life in us.

Illicit drugs are prime offenders. Because various forms of narcotics cause untold damage to people and relationships and such drugs restrict personal development, damage the body, and reinforce an unrealistic view of life, we avoid their use.

Because Christ admonishes us to love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves, we advocate abstaining from the use of alcoholic beverages (Mark 12:30-31). The abuse of alcohol, a legalized drug, is damaging to individuals, families, and society. It is unpredictably addictive and its destructive effects cannot be fully measured. Its abuse leaves a trail of broken marriages, family violence, crime, industrial loss, ill health, injury, and death. As concerned Christians, we advocate abstinence for the sake of health, family, and neighbors. Moreover, we see the adverse social consequences as so pervasive that we seek by advocating abstinence to make a united social witness to the freedom Christ gives.

Because we believe Christians are to treat their bodies as sacred trusts, we advocate abstaining from the use of tobacco. It is a major cause of a variety of cancers and other diseases, as well as being an expensive and socially offensive addiction. We take seriously the words of Paul, the apostle, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (I Corinthians 6:19-20 NIV).

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