

On Alcohol Use

**Dr. Richard Land
Dr. Barrett Duke**

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Dr. Barrett Duke

Also with regard to alcohol, the editors refer the reader to the recent First-Person notes on Baptist Press authored by Dr. Daniel L. Akin (<http://www.baptistpress.com/bpnews.asp?ID=23576>) and Dr. Paige Patterson (<http://www.baptistpress.com/bpnews.asp?ID=23601>).

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The Center for Theological Research
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas
Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, Director

“On Alcohol Use”

Southern Baptists have been known historically as total abstainers. Not all Southern Baptists have adhered to this commitment, but if one were to examine the constitution of most Southern Baptist churches, certainly most of those constituted prior to 1960, one would probably find a clause in which the congregation pledged itself to refrain from the use and sale of alcoholic beverages.

While the Bible may be subject to various interpretations concerning alcohol consumption (as well as the nature of the beverage consumed), Southern Baptists’ understanding of the issue has been exceedingly unambiguous. In the Convention’s history, SBC messengers have adopted over forty resolutions on the issue prior to this year—as recently as 1991 and as early as 1886.

Southern Baptists meeting in session have called their brothers and sisters to live “an exemplary Christian lifestyle of abstinence from beverage alcohol and all other harmful drugs” (1984); to recognize alcohol as “America’s number one drug problem” (1982); to “reaffirm our historic position as opposing alcohol as a beverage” (1978); to view “personal abstinence” as the “Christian way” (1957); to express their “unceasing opposition to the manufacture, sale and use of alcoholic beverages” (1955); to realize alcohol is a “habit-forming and destructive poison” (1940) and the “chief source of vice, crime, poverty and degradation” (1936); and to “reassert our truceless and uncompromising hostility to the manufacture, sale, importation and transportation of alcoholic beverages” (1896).¹

Over the last two decades, the attitude of some Southern Baptists toward alcohol use has moderated, however. This is especially true among younger adult Southern Baptists. No doubt many factors have contributed to this shift. Greater social acceptance of drinking, very little preaching on the “evils of alcohol,” a more secularized church community, and a growing attitude of independence among church members have all contributed in various ways.

The greatest evidence of the recent shift in attitudes toward alcohol consumption occurred at the 2006 annual Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina. At that meeting, the Resolutions Committee brought a resolution that called on churches to reaffirm their historical attitude toward alcohol consumption. If this resolution had been presented twenty years earlier, it would have been met with yawns, with many present wondering why the Convention needed to spend time on an issue that was so settled among Southern Baptists. However, this meeting revealed a much different attitude. There were certainly no yawns. In fact, that resolution produced more discussion and dissent than any other resolution presented at the meeting. Some messengers were so convinced of their freedom to consume alcoholic beverages that they took to the floor of the convention and urged the body not to adopt the resolution. In the end, according to

¹Historic resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention are available online at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/AMResSearch.asp>.

press reports more than four-fifths approved the resolution, but a small, vocal group voted against it.

When one considers the high cost of alcohol abuse to individuals, families, and society, it is surprising that some Southern Baptists insist on their right to drink. Alcohol problems cost American society more than \$184 billion per year in health care, criminal justice, social services, property damage, and loss of productivity expenses. Alcohol is a factor in as many as 105,000 deaths annually in the United States and a primary contributor to a wide array of health problems and human suffering. These include various cancers, liver disease, alcoholism, brain disorders, motor vehicle crashes, violence, crime, spousal and child abuse, drownings, and suicides. Even those who are able to control their drinking should recognize that they are engaged in a behavior that is destroying millions of lives, and choose to abstain rather than encourage by their behavior someone to drink who will not be able to control his drinking.

In modern American society, the human toll taken by alcohol abuse is staggering. According to a recent *USA Today/HBO* poll, 20 percent of Americans indicated they “had an immediate relative who at some point had been addicted to alcohol or drugs.” The article, “In Tim Ryan's Family, He is the Addict,” in the July 20, 2006 issue of *USA Today* notes, “That translates into roughly 40 million American adults with a spouse, parent, sibling or child battling addiction.”

When you add the millions of children living with addicted parents, you are talking about a devastating problem that adversely impacts the lives of nearly half the people in our nation—and virtually all users of other drugs start with alcohol, that’s why it’s called the “gateway” drug. The *USA Today* article quotes Sis Wenger, executive director of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, as saying, “For every person who’s alcoholic or dependent on other drugs, there are at least four or five people hurt on a regular basis.”

Of course, one must be careful when speaking to the issue of alcohol consumption. After all, many medicines contain alcohol. One can find it in fairly high percentages in cough syrup, for example. Compared to beverage alcohol, some over-the-counter nighttime cold syrup is more than fifty proof. That’s a fairly high alcohol content, higher than beer and wine. As far as we know, no one would consider it sinful or inappropriate if someone drank these medications to help cope with the symptoms of a cold or flu.

What is of concern when it comes to alcohol consumption, however, is its recreational/social use. While about 60 percent of the United States population drinks alcohol recreationally/socially, the historic Southern Baptist attitude has been opposed to this use of alcohol. What the last Southern Baptist Convention meeting revealed, however, is that this is changing, at least among a vocal minority of church pastoral leadership. No one has a firm statistic on just how many Southern Baptists drink alcohol recreationally/socially, but most of those who have been paying attention know that some Southern Baptists drink alcoholic beverages at least occasionally. To date, this attitude has not flowed very far into the ranks of the pastoral staff. Most pastoral staff still do not drink alcoholic beverages.

Because alcohol is such a dangerous substance, and because attitudes toward alcohol use appear to be changing among some Southern Baptists, it is necessary to be reminded of the Scriptural teaching on the issue. Both the Old and New Testaments speak

of alcoholic beverages, and they use many words to refer to them. In the Old Testament, one finds at least eight words that refer to the juice of the grape and a couple words that refer to beverages with higher alcohol content, often translated as “strong drink” or “liquor.” Practically all of the uses of these words speak of alcoholic beverages in a negative context. However, it appears that the negative aspect is principally related to the debilitating effects on people, not on the alcoholic beverage in itself. Alcohol as a substance is not evil. For example, Psalm 104:14-15 speaks of wine, “which makes man’s heart glad,” as one of God’s provisions for man. Wine is often mentioned as one of the ingredients used in offerings to God (see Exod 29:40). Even sweet wine, which is thought by many to be mere grape juice, can debilitate (see Hosea 4:11), yet Joel 3:18, speaking of the day when God restores Judah, says “the mountains will drip with sweet wine.” The same can be said for the Hebrew word translated “strong drink.” While there does not appear to be any positive reference to people drinking “strong drink,” it was used in drink offerings to the Lord, which certainly suggests that it was not an “evil” substance (see Num 28:7, and Deut 14:26, where the word is certainly used in the context of purchasing offering items).

The New Testament has a more limited vocabulary to refer to alcoholic beverages. The principal Greek word (“oinos”), translated “wine,” is used more than thirty times. When used in its non-metaphorical sense, it appears to run the full gamut of meanings, from grape juice, usually qualified by the adjective “new,” to the fully fermented alcoholic beverage. While it is common knowledge that people drank beverages containing alcohol in the early days of the church, the New Testament is not nearly as accommodating of the practice. In fact, except for the handful of references in the Gospels that speak of wine, (Jesus’ lesson about new wine and wineskins, Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38; John the Baptist, Luke 1:15; 7:33; medicinal use rejected by Jesus, Mark 15:23; Luke 10:34; and the wedding feast at Cana, John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46), and the neutral and metaphorical references in Revelation (wine spared destruction, Rev 6:6; wine as a metaphor for wrath, Rev 14:8, 10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3; and as a commercial product, Rev 18:13), one encounters only negative statements about the non-medicinal use of alcoholic beverages. In Acts 2:13 the observers supposed that the apostles were full of “sweet wine” because of their behavior when the Holy Spirit had filled them. Except for one reference to its medicinal use (1 Tim 5:23), all of the remaining references, to the actual fermented juice of the grape are warnings or prohibitions to its use or abuse, (see Rom 14:21; Eph 5:18; 1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 2:3). In addition, the New Testament calls Christians to sobriety, which while not alluding solely to the issue of alcohol abuse certainly includes it (1 Thess 5:1-11), and to lifestyles contrary to those of the debauched culture (Luke 21:34-36; Rom 13:12-14; Gal 5:19-24; 1 Pet 4:1-6).

While the use by some biblical characters of alcoholic beverages is undeniable, it is important to note that the beverages these men and women consumed were not the kinds of alcoholic beverages people consume today. The alcohol content of beverages referred to in the Bible was considerably lower than many of today’s alcoholic beverages. Additionally, we must keep in mind that sanitary conditions were not what they are today. Alcohol provided an ideal way to maintain the potability of beverages. Without it, people would have suffered even more from common parasites and other health threatening ailments resulting from ingesting contaminated water (see 1 Tim 5:23).

Even so, one could certainly still overdo it when drinking these beverages, and unfortunately, some biblical characters did on occasion. It is important to note that when they did, the Bible seldom had anything positive to say about it. Indeed, their drunkenness usually resulted in inappropriate behavior, which was subsequently denounced by the biblical writer. Just consider the Bible's depictions and negative view of the drunken behavior of Noah (Gen 9:20-27), Lot (Gen 19:30-38), and Xerxes I (Esth 1:10-11).

When one wants to find a positive picture of alcohol in the Bible, one must look at it from a much different angle—the angle of abstinence. Those among Israel who chose to dedicate themselves in service to the Lord in a special way actually abstained from drinking alcohol as part of their commitment. These people were called Nazirites (Num 6:1-21), and they were cherished by the Lord for their commitment. While Samson's life was tragic in many ways, he was a Nazirite. He is the only judge whose birth was announced by the angel of the Lord, who instructed Manoah and his wife to raise Samson as a Nazirite (Judg 13:1-25). Those who coaxed Nazirites to break their vows by drinking wine were condemned by God (see Amos 2:11-12).

Of course, not everyone who was committed to serving the Lord was a Nazirite, and no doubt, some of these others drank beverages containing alcohol. As we have noted, on many occasions it would have been very difficult not to do so, simply because the means to maintaining a healthy level of hydration required drinking beverages that contained at least trace amounts of alcohol. It certainly appears that Jesus was not a Nazirite, and that there were times when the beverage placed before Him probably contained alcohol. Indeed, Jesus appears to draw attention to this when He distinguished Himself from John the Baptist. In Mathew 11:18-19, He said, "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard.'"

Before anyone decides to use Jesus as his excuse to drink alcohol, however, it is crucial to note that the term "drunkard" was used by His enemies in an attempt to discredit Him. He does not admit to ever being drunk in this passage. He does seem, however, to indicate that he did not totally abstain from beverages that had any alcohol content as well as engaging in other activities contrary to John's practices, like socializing with various groups of "unacceptable" people. Jesus was not engaged in drinking alcoholic beverages because He felt it was His right to do so, He was doing this to make a point—that the unbelieving just looked for excuses not to believe.

People often refer to Jesus' miracle at the wedding feast at Cana as evidence that he approved of alcohol consumption (John 2:1-11). We must note several important features, however. First, we cannot be positive that what Jesus created had alcoholic content. The headwaiter may have been commenting on how good the wine tasted not about its alcohol content. Second, John tells us that Jesus performed this miracle as a "sign" (John 2:11). He intended that those who witnessed this would see a spiritual significance in the miracle, not focus on the wine. In other words, He created the wine for another purpose, a much more important purpose than merely to provide the wedding guests with something to drink. Third, the text never says that Jesus drank any of this wine. Considering the Bible's very negative attitude toward drunkenness and Jesus' dedication to God, it is inconceivable to us that Jesus ever drank alcohol recreationally or that He was ever drunk.

It is obvious that one can find instances in the Bible when people drank alcoholic beverages. While most of these examples are negative, some clearly are not. Nevertheless, when one examines the full counsel of Scripture regarding alcohol use, there is little doubt that it warns against its use and unequivocally condemns its abuse. Some Bible passages warn against drinking any alcoholic beverages because of their debilitating effects (Prov 23:29-35). Others instruct against the use of alcohol by those in positions of authority (Prov 31:4-5). They require sobriety of church leadership (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:6), and drunkenness is always condemned (Isa. 5:11, 22; 28:7). In fact, there appears to be a clear movement in Scripture toward a rejection of alcohol use. We pointed out earlier that the Old Testament had more positive references to alcohol use than the New Testament. This could be evidence that the Bible's principles were gradually undermining the practice of alcohol consumption, much in the same way that biblical principles eventually undermined the practice of enslaving people.

With this said, the Bible does not condemn all uses of alcohol. It recognizes its medicinal value. Proverbs 31:6-7 instructs the king to "give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more." The Apostle Paul perpetuated the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes. He instructed Timothy to "use a little wine" for his stomach ailments (1 Tim 5:23). This apostolic advice to Timothy could well indicate that Timothy was a total abstainer and that Paul had to urge his reluctant son in the faith to consume wine with alcohol for health purposes.

In a time when medicines were very rare, alcohol was one of the few medicinal aids available to assist the human condition. Today we have many more effective means for dealing with various physical and mental afflictions, means that do not have the potential to cause the kinds of significant damage alcohol causes. These positive references to alcohol consumption for medical purposes tell us that the mere consumption of alcohol in itself is not a sin. If it were, then these passages would be instructing people to sin. What is clear in these passages, however, is that there is no hint that one can use alcohol for recreational/social purposes.

Of further interest is the way in which the actual beverage used in the Lord's Supper is referred to in the New Testament. Paul speaks of "the cup" whenever he refers to the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor 10:16, 21; 11:23-28). Even at the inauguration of this event, Jesus spoke of "the fruit of the vine" rather than using the term "wine" (see Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20). Scholars are in general agreement that the phrase referred to wine, and we are not claiming that wine was not used in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but we think it is significant that there is no direct reference in Scripture to an alcoholic substance in connection with it.

Those who cannot find chapter and verse to justify consuming alcohol still argue that their freedom in Christ enables them to imbibe. It is certainly true that Christians are no longer under the condemnation of the Law. They no longer must follow rules and regulations in order to please God. But the freedom that Christians enjoy is not the same as license. The Christian must weigh his freedom against his responsibility in order to determine the appropriateness of certain behaviors. When considered from this perspective, it seems very clear that there are overwhelming reasons for abstaining from the consumption of beverage alcohol. Three principal reasons for this self-restraint are witness to the lost, service to the saved, and the appropriate treatment of the body.

As a matter of witness, it is preferable that a Christian not do anything that would hinder his witness to others. While some have argued that they find greater acceptance among a certain subset of the population because they drink with them, this is not the case for the vast majority of people who need to be reached with the Gospel. In fact, many lost people have certain expectations of Christians, and one is that they do not drink. Many of the lost recognize this as a distinguishing feature between Christians who are serious about their faith and those outside of the faith. Furthermore, victims of alcohol-related crimes could be deeply offended by someone who is supposedly concerned about people's welfare engaging in an activity that has been so harmful to them.

This principle of witness is especially apt in today's culture. Alcohol abuse is taking a staggering toll on millions of people and their families. It is inconceivable that one's concept of Christian freedom could include the freedom to engage in any behavior that has become so devastating to millions of those in and outside of the church.

The Christian must also keep in mind how the example of his own lifestyle influences others. This can be understood as the servant principle. The Christian is a servant of all. He should consider how he best serves others by his behavior, not how he can live his own life without regard to others. The controlling principle here is that of the weaker brother. Paul counsels Christians to refrain from any activity, including eating and drinking, that may encourage another to engage in activity that will end up leading to feelings of guilt in the weaker brother (Rom 14:13-23). He instructs Christians to pursue those things that edify others (1 Cor 10:23; 14:26).

We disagree with those who say they can drink alcoholic beverages in the privacy of their own homes because they are not influencing anyone to follow their example. Parents, for example, must understand that their children will likely follow their example. It is a fact that the teenage children of parents who drink alcohol are more likely to experiment with alcohol than the teenage children of parents who abstain from alcohol consumption. It is just nearly impossible to engage in this activity unobserved by someone. We believe it would be tragic if someone were encouraged to engage in a behavior that destroyed their lives because of the example of someone they trusted.

In addition, the servant principle should lead those in leadership to abstain from alcohol use. In Proverbs 31:4-5 the king is counseled not to drink alcoholic beverages because it will cloud his judgment. It is also imperative that those responsible for leadership be available at all times for those in need. It would be a terrible disservice if a family had just experienced some tragic loss, and their pastor could not offer the spiritual counsel and support they needed because he had to sober up first.

The third principle applies to the appropriate treatment of the body. God created the human body. That in itself should be sufficient reason to abstain from alcohol use. But the Christian has another important reason for abstaining from alcohol. Paul taught that the Christian's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It houses God Himself (1 Cor 6:19-20). Consequently, whatever we do to our bodies affects directly the dwelling of God. Out of respect for God the Christian should do all he can to engage only in activity that honors and strengthens his body. His body and mind should be available to the indwelling Holy Spirit at any time and should be under the Spirit's control, not that of alcohol (Eph 5:18).

We understand that this argument can be made about many behaviors, overeating, for example. Of course, one cannot stop eating because someone might be encouraged to eat too much or to eat foods that are not healthy for them. People have to eat, but they don't have to drink alcohol. Alcohol consumption is purely a lifestyle choice. It is not a necessary part of one's life, like eating. Furthermore, the arguments made by some that they drink wine for their health is not supported by science. The health benefit comes from the grape, not the alcohol. All one must do to get this benefit is drink grape juice.

In conclusion, we offer five general principles that the Christian would do well to follow when he is making a decision about alcohol use or any other activity. First, Christians are not free to do anything they please. They belong to Christ and should make every effort to engage in behavior that honors His Lordship over their lives. Second, selfishness should be shunned. Selfishness is the root of all sin. It leads people to seek their own interests, even to the detriment of others. Third, sacrifice is a Christian virtue. Jesus provides the supreme example of this. He recognized the human need for forgiveness and willingly gave up His rightful place in heaven, took on human flesh, and sacrificed His life on the cross for the sake of others. Fourth, God's glory is the most important concern for Christians. With every activity, the Christian should ask whether or not God will be glorified. Finally, the Christian must remember that he will be judged for his every deed, both those that affect his own life and those that affect the lives of others. Every Christian should live to hear his Lord declare, "Well done, good and faithful servant," on the day of judgment.

APPENDIX A

Resolution 5. On Alcohol Use In America Southern Baptist Convention Meeting June 2006, Greensboro, NC

WHEREAS, Years of research confirm biblical warnings that alcohol use leads to physical, mental, and emotional damage (e.g., Proverbs 23:29-35); and

WHEREAS, Alcohol use has led to countless injuries and deaths on our nation's highways; and

WHEREAS, The breakup of families and homes can be directly and indirectly attributed to alcohol use by one or more members of a family; and

WHEREAS, The use of alcohol as a recreational beverage has been shown to lead individuals down a path of addiction to alcohol and toward the use of other kinds of drugs, both legal and illegal; and

WHEREAS, There are some religious leaders who are now advocating the consumption of alcoholic beverages based on a misinterpretation of the doctrine of "our freedom in Christ"; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, June 13-14, 2006, express our total opposition to the manufacturing, advertising, distributing, and consuming of alcoholic beverages; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we urge that no one be elected to serve as a trustee or member of any entity or committee of the Southern Baptist Convention that is a user of alcoholic beverages.

RESOLVED, That we urge Southern Baptists to take an active role in supporting legislation that is intended to curb alcohol use in our communities and nation; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we urge Southern Baptists to be actively involved in educating students and adults concerning the destructive nature of alcoholic beverages; and be it finally

RESOLVED, That we commend organizations and ministries that treat alcohol-related problems from a biblical perspective and promote abstinence and encourage local churches to begin and/or support such biblically-based ministries.



Dr. Richard Land

President

**Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission**

Dr. Barrett Duke

Vice President for Public Policy

**Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission**

