

Alcohol



TAPESTRY
CHURCH

Position Paper

Alcohol

The topic of alcohol in the life of the Christ-follower has become a hotly contested issue in the last century. Sincere, impassioned Christians exist on both sides of the divide. In this position paper, we will examine the Biblical passages within a **Historical Context** and give a brief review of **Original Language** implications. We will then give a **Biblical Survey** of alcohol in scripture and derive from that the **Tapestry Position**. As will be our practice with all of these papers, we will conclude with **Affirmations and Denials**.

Historical Context and Original Language

For hundreds of years, alcohol consumption wasn't a topic of conversation or debate. Early church history is simply devoid of any record of controversy on the issue. It really wasn't until the rise of Methodism in the 1800s that abstinence began to be preached, with the charge being led almost exclusively by Charles Wesley.

One reason why church doctrine has changed from the first century until now may well be that alcohol has changed.

In Biblical times wine was made by a natural fermentation process of grape juice and produced a drink that was a mild intoxicant. (Most researchers agree that it was between 3% to 9% alcohol.) By comparison, most generic table wine today starts at 9% and goes up from there. A cabernet has 9% to 12% alcohol content. When the Bible mentions "strong drink," most historians believe it's referring to a drink made from dates or a type of fermented vinegar that had an alcohol content in the low teens. Drinks like gin and vodka with alcohol contents of 40%, 50%, and higher simply didn't come into existence until the Middle Ages.

Wine was not considered a luxury drink in Biblical times. Among the commoners, there was no such thing as wine drinking as a hobby. Wine was the primary drink because water was typically impure. For that reason, wine was mixed with water so as to sanitize it (as well as to make the wine last longer). In the end, what most people were drinking – and what gets referred to most often in scripture – is a drink with an extremely low alcohol content (maybe 1 ½ % to 3%). It was still capable of intoxicating, and there were alcoholics even then, but wine simply wasn't as strong or viewed in nearly the same fashion as it is today. It was consumed by almost everyone – even children – at every meal and was the primary drink in most homes. Drinking undiluted wine would have been an extravagance for the very wealthy or for very special occasions, and, even then, it would have been mild by today's standards. So, it's important to realize that when the Bible offers encouragements or admonitions regarding wine, it was for the purpose of regulation, never with the intent of prohibition. Prohibition would have been virtually impossible. (Although there were some people like Timothy, John the Baptist, and Sampson who had taken a vow of abstinence as an act of consecration to the Lord. More about that later.)

There are three Hebrew words that are typically translated as “wine” in the Old Testament.

tiyrowsh -- This word is translated as "wine" in the KJV and "new wine" in some newer versions. It refers to the initial squeezing of juice from the grape and is *rarely* used in fermented wine. Its newness is confirmed by its application as part of the first-fruits dedicated to God (Deut. 14:23) and by its grouping with agricultural products as a victim of drought (Hag. 1). In an effort to avoid confusion, I will refer to this as “grape juice” for the remainder of this paper. Again, this should be understood to mean newly pressed grapes that have yet to ferment (i.e., grape juice).

yayin -- This word is translated as "wine" in most versions. In most contexts, we will see that it clearly refers to an alcoholic drink. For the sake of continuity for the remainder of this paper, I will use “wine” to describe *yayin*. The reader should understand this to mean fermented wine mixed with water.

shekar -- this word does not appear often but is translated in the KJV as "strong drink." The root of this word comes from a word meaning to be tipsy and is associated with a strong alcoholic beverage. It appears to have been a product of dates rather than grapes. I will use “strong drink” when referring to *shekar* for the rest of this discussion.

Biblical Survey

OLD TESTAMENT

GENESIS

There are over 200 verses that mention alcohol in some context, and we will not try to analyze them all. Instead, we will give an overview, making specific mention of passages that impact our doctrinal position and a few passages that are just interesting to note.

Gen. 9:21 And he drank of the wine, and was drunken, and he was uncovered within his tent.

Here and Gen. 9:24 are the first mentions of *yayin* in the Bible. It is used over 130 times in the Old Testament. There is no explicit moral from this use of wine in this scripture, though it seems clear that being drunk and naked was not a good thing.

Gen. 14:18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

This is the next place *yayin* is mentioned, and no commentary is offered either way. It is probably important to remember that this was not like offering a friend a glass of wine today. There was nothing else to offer. Coke and tea weren't options. He offered bread and wine because that is what you did. Again, the wine here is a fermented drink and certainly isn't condemned or promoted in this passage. It is just a fact in the narrative – he offered him bread and wine. And there's simply no doubt that this was alcoholic wine. Like “strong drink” or “unmixed wine,” grape juice would have been a highly specialized product since there was no way to preserve it to keep it from going sour or fermenting.

Gen. 19:32 Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve the seed of our father.

The next several mentions of wine appear in the context of Lot's daughters, making him intentionally drunk for their own purposes. The implicit commentary here is clearly against drunkenness, though not against wine in general. On an occasion like this, as on many special occasions, they may have offered him undiluted wine (no water). Consuming such wine would have been considered an extravagance, but Lot's daughters had a plan in mind.

Gen. 27:25, 28 And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and he brought him wine, and he drank...Therefore God gives thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine...

This passage was interesting because it uses both terms. The first "wine" here is *yayin*, but the second is not -- this word is *tiyrowsh*, which is likely non-alcoholic. This word is used for the next mention of wine ("new wine" in the NIV) in Gen. 27:37 as well. So, Jacob brings Isaac venison and wine (the alcoholic kind) and receives his father's blessing, which was that God would give him (Jacob – who he thought was Esau) the fatness of the earth and plenty of corn

and wine (grape juice). So, even though these are technically different words, there's really no need for distinction. The Bible often refers to "the fruit of the vine," with the understanding that wine/alcohol comes from grape juice. Having much wine was a sign of God's blessing, not because they wanted to promote the consumption of alcohol, but because a healthy vineyard meant that you and your family would have plenty to drink. Isaac's blessing could be interpreted as benignly as "may God give you all the food and drink that you need." It seems clear that although they use different words, they are both ultimately addressing alcoholic wine.

Gen. 49:10-11 has an interesting reference to *yayin*:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes:

Most scholars believe this references the tribe of Judah as being dyers of fabrics, and they used wine here to color tapestries. This doesn't really have any relevance. But it is interesting.

EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, and DEUTERONOMY

Over the next three books, there is an abundance of references to wine for use in a ceremonial or worship context. We will highlight a few verses to demonstrate that fermented wine was used in varying aspects of temple worship.

When fermented wine is used (*yayin*) it is as a drink offering and is poured out onto the ground.

It is interesting to note that in the performance of temple services, no wine was ever consumed.

Numbers 6:3 He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried.

Here we see that the priest was strictly prohibited from having wine (*yayin*) and strong drink (*shekar*) when he was ministering to the Lord. Violation of this was punishable by death. This is particularly interesting when you consider that other passages in Leviticus reserve "the best" wine for the Levites. The consistent thread with temple worship seems to be to the abolition of anything "unnatural." No leavened bread was to be consumed. No fermented wine was to be consumed. No mixed fibers were to be used in the construction of the priests' robes.

Deut. 14:26 And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household...

This scripture is notable because it appears to be an open endorsement of drinking alcohol for pleasure. Basically, it's a specific legal provision for people who must travel far distances to pay

their tithes. It says their tithes (livestock, grain, produce) can be converted to silver to make travel easier. Then, when they arrive, they can purchase whatever they want – including a strong drink – to consume. Note that this was not considered worship but rather a kind of celebration for folks who were travel-weary. Still, there's no mistaking that this is an open door for folks who fit this category.

Deut. 29:6 Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink: that ye might know that I am the LORD your God.

This passage is the Lord describing the wilderness wanderings. He says that they have eaten no bread and drunk no wine. Instead, they were sustained by manna that God sent, ravens that God sent, and water that God provided.

At this point in Scripture, it is as if God were saying, "At certain times and with certain restrictions, you are allowed to indulge but don't bring it near me." That may be an oversimplification, but one must wonder why God didn't miraculously provide them with wine in the wilderness.

Make note as well that these passages are really no help at all in making our determinations. As I've pointed out, it was a different time, a totally different culture, and they were governed by Old Testament law. Today, any of us could stumble up to God completely drunk and find His mercy and compassion. In fact, some of us have! What is important, though, is looking at all this and trying to divine how God feels about it. What is His heart?

Finally, it is interesting to note that there is no wine at Passover. That's right. Nothing. To be sure, it was there. They certainly would have had wine with their meal. However, the four Passover cups of wine were added through the years. In fact, all the other things you observe in a traditional Seder meal were added over the years. As we will see, Jesus certainly observed the traditional Seder in conformity to His culture, but those are not regulations given by God.

JOSHUA, JUDGES, and RUTH

Wine takes a back seat for a while through these books. There are a couple of references in Joshua to wine bottles being carried, but no reference to alcohol consumption.

Judges takes a little time to explain the Nazarite vow that Samson took, which prevented him from drinking wine or strong drink (it also forbids the touching of grapes altogether). Some scholars go out of their way to point out that the Nazarite vow is the "higher calling" and, as such, should be informative to those of us who want to walk in a higher calling ourselves. And while we don't think they'd suggest that we shouldn't touch grapes or refuse to cut our hair, they may not be completely without merit if our objective is to simply understand how God feels about drinking.

I and II SAMUEL, I and II KINGS, I and II CHRONICLES, EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

These books don't add much to the conversation. There are a handful of references to wine in each of them. In almost all of them, *tiyrowsh* is used when talking about "wine" as an agricultural product, and *yayin* is used in all the other references. But they really are virtually interchangeable since none of the passages suggest the consumption of anything but fermented wine.

In 1st Samuel, Eli accuses Hannah of being drunk with *yayin*, but she explains that she's really just very sorrowful. Wine will do that.

2nd Samuel 13 Absalom suggests getting Amnon drunk to be able to murder him.

In 2nd Samuel 16 someone brings bread and *yayin* to David and his men.

In 2nd Kings 18:32, *tiyrowsh* is mentioned as a jewel of the New Harvest.

Chronicles just re-quotes a lot of Samuel with a couple of additional references. I Chronicles mentions *yayin* as one of the provisions given to Solomon's workers, and I Chronicles 27:27 talks about a man with a *yayin* cellar. *Tiyrowsh* is mentioned several times in its usual context.

PSALMS and PROVERBS

The book of Psalms has several references to wine (both kinds) in ways that are quite similar to the rest of the Old Testament. There are really no surprises here and no controversial passages. There are several references to the destructive nature of intoxication, and abstemious are quick to point them out.

References to alcohol in the Proverbs are notable for a couple of different reasons.

First, there are a lot of them: second only to Deuteronomy in the Old Testament (many of the Deuteronomic references are repeated regulations regarding drink offerings and such.) The reason Proverbs has so much to say on this issue is two-fold.

- 1) Undiluted wine and "strong drink" were things rarely consumed by any but the wealthiest of people. As the richest man in the world, Solomon had LOTS of experience with drinking and drinkers.
- 2) As the wisest man who ever lived, he immediately saw the very struggle we're having today. He saw the potential danger and abuse, and he spoke directly to it.

Secondly, while we don't consider Proverbs to be a theological book, it is a book written by the inspiration of God by the wisest man who ever lived. The most significant things said about alcohol in the Old Testament are said in Proverbs. The following are some of the more pertinent verses.

Prov. 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.

People arguing against alcohol consumption use this as their “go-to” argument. People who are looking to defend their drinking respond defensively to this passage and are eager to point out that wine and drink here are only a problem if you get deceived by them. And with that, they dismiss the passage. And thus, neither side REALLY looks at the text to assess what it means.

It is clear throughout Proverbs that Solomon is not banning the use of wine or strong drink. He has every opportunity to say, “Don’t touch the stuff,” but he doesn’t. He just doesn’t. However, what he does say is intentional and important. Namely this: Alcohol has a HUGE propensity to deceive. It is dangerous. As you read this, tonight – all over the city where you live - there will be AA meetings. The folks populating those meetings will have one thing in common: none of them thought they would end up there. Every one of them thought they had a handle on it. Alcohol will do that to you. The Apostle Paul warns, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall” (I Cor. 10:12). And while you may elude the deception of “wine” or “strong drink,” those with whom you drink may not be able to. The deceived may be your child or your spouse, or your friend. The message is clear. If you’re going to indulge, be very, very careful – alcohol is inherently deceitful.

Prov. 21:17 He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich.

Here is another alarming passage that often gets ignored. But, Solomon’s words couldn’t be more clear: if you love wine, it will compromise your ability to prosper. It’s quite obvious that Solomon had serious concerns about the potential financial impact of alcohol.

Prov. 23:31-5 Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.

The reference to the wine being red in the cup has to do with the fact that this is undiluted. He’s saying, “Be careful when you’re looking into a cup of wine that isn’t common, everyday wine mixed with water.” The “moveth itself aright” are bubbles that come from fermentation. Again, his remarks here are addressed to the wine that is being consumed, especially for its alcohol. He is obviously describing someone who has over-indulged, and so – again – this passage often gets dismissed. But Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, compares wine to a serpent. Any person who chooses to use their freedom to drink should bear that in mind. It bites like a snake and stings like an adder.

ECCLESIASTES and SONG OF SOLOMON

There are three mentions here. In Ecclesiastes, they are very much like the Proverbial statements but nothing that would shift the conversation. He says that he gave himself to wine in his search for wisdom (2:3); he encourages the reader to go his way and eat bread and drink wine with a merry heart (9:7) and notes that wine makes the heart merry.

There are multiple references in Song of Solomon, but all of them are poetic.

ISAIAH and JEREMIAH

There are many wine references in Isaiah, including some favorites of the abstemious.

Is. 5:11-12 Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands.

Is. 5:22 Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink:

Is. 24:9 They shall not drink wine with a song; strong drink shall be bitter to them that drink it.

Is. 28:1, 7 Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine!... But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.

These passages all appear to be a condemnation of excessive drinking, but not of simply consuming alcohol. And certainly, there is nothing here that seems to condemn even the use of “strong drink” in moderation.

Jeremiah contains several references to wine and grape juice that offer nothing unique to the discussion. One chapter of interest is Jeremiah 35. God tells Jeremiah to go to the Rechabites and to offer them wine for their refreshment. The Rechabites refuse because of a vow made by their forefathers to God that they will, among other things, never touch wine. God then tells Jeremiah to prophesy to Israel about the Rechabites’ example of devotion. Here, as with the Nazarites, abstinence appears to be a mark of greater devotion and one that is honored by God.

Otherwise, there are the normal warnings against intoxication...

Lamentations through Malachi feature a handful of scattered references, but nothing unique.

NEW TESTAMENT

Wine references in the New Testament get far trickier because, with one exception, one Greek word is used for both fermented wine and for grape juice. That word is *oinos*, and it simply translates as “wine.”

It bears mentioning at this point that alcoholic wine was still commonplace as the main beverage for drinking, so it was viewed very differently from today. Likewise, grape juice was much harder to come by because they had no way of preventing the fermentation process. As a result, good grape juice was considered a delicacy and would have been served rarely and only on special occasions. The beverages were almost reversed in terms of their significance in society as compared with today.

There are two primary passages in the New Testament that tend to generate hot debate, and, like most hot debates, both sides have merit.

THE LORD’S SUPPER

The first is the Last Supper. First, note that the word “wine” is never used. Instead, Jesus uses the term “Fruit of the Vine,” which may be conspicuous. Wine enthusiasts will argue that Jesus would, of course, have been drinking alcoholic wine with dinner because that would have been the custom. Likewise, traditionally alcoholic wine was traditionally used during the Passover. Others will argue that if Jesus were drinking wine, he would have used that term specifically. Instead, he used a term that was much more commonly used for grape juice. Likewise, they argue that grape juice would have been the logical choice to use as a picture for the blood of the New Covenant since it would not have been subject to the “decay” or leavening process of fermentation. It would have been the most natural parallel to unleavened bread. (And some scholars believe that even the drinking of common wine was forbidden during the Feast of Unleavened Bread for this very reason.) The arguments really are 50/50. Most honest scholars shrug at this one. In the early church, grape juice was used exclusively in the observation of the Lord’s Supper, so maybe church tradition tips the balance in favor of grape juice, but it’s a close call either way. Many Messianic Rabbis say that to serve any fermented drink at Passover would be an affront to the blood of Christ, which is not subject to decay. While that argument makes the most sense symbolically and theologically, there are Orthodox Rabbis who feel differently on the matter.

THE WEDDING AT CANA

The second hot-button scenario is the wedding feast at Cana on John 2. And believe it or not, there are credible arguments on both sides of this one as well.

The story is that Jesus’ mother informs Him that the wine has run out, so He orders the servants to bring in vats of water, and he turns them into wine. This, according to some, is the Bible’s most ringing endorsement of alcohol. Not only was Jesus okay with it – and probably drinking Himself – He made more. In the end, the Governor was astonished because they’d saved the best wine for last. Case closed, they say.

The theological wrinkle comes with the term “Good Wine” (in the Greek *canos- oinos*). What had been created by Christ was different than what had been consumed previously. Some scholars believe that what Christ created was grape juice, and their arguments have merit. Again, you must remember that grape juice was a delicacy in those days. To have served grape juice at this wedding is not the same thing as if you’d served it at a wedding today. These scholars believe that “Good Wine” is a reference to filtered wine. That would be a wine that is filtered to remove any fermentation and create a richer, more flavorful drink, also making it possible to consume more. Secondly, these scholars argue that what happened was a creative miracle and, as such, he would have created something naturally occurring, like grape juice, rather than something fermented (already decaying).

The Bible says that the servants brought in six pots that could contain two to three firkins apiece. “Firkin” is a unit of measure that would have been equivalent to a “quarter barrel.” (A typical barrel could hold 32 gallons, so a “firkin” would be around eight gallons). If each pot could hold 3 “firkins,” then we could be looking at 24 gallons in each of the six pots. Jesus created something on the order of 120 – 144 gallons of wine (or the equivalent of 750 bottles). This was probably more than was necessary, but we must bear in mind that these wedding celebrations lasted for several days.

Some people find significance in the fact that Jesus was compelled to do this by His mother, to whom He was in submission. And, of course, there are entire theologies built on the notion of asking the Lord’s mother to compel Him to do things.

Here are the important factors in this passage.

First, Jesus was attending a wedding in a small, rural town when they ran out of wine. This was not like running out of wine at a wedding today. It was like running out of water. There was nothing to drink. Jesus wasn’t providing wine because He likes to party – and providing the best wine because He likes to party hard. He was, at the request of His mother, helping a friend. He wasn’t playing the bartender.

Secondly, if Jesus had a problem with wine, He could have simply purified the water. Instead, he provided wine, either undiluted table wine or filtered wine, but either way, it seems clear that He created an alcoholic drink for those in attendance. That Jesus both consumed and created wine on this occasion is a reasonable conclusion. This really is a shot in the heart of arguments from the abstemious. You have to really torque scripture to get around the obvious realities here.

Some scholars also see great significance in Mark 15:23, where Jesus refused the wine mixed with myrrh while He was on the cross. It may, however, have been a repudiation of any substance that would numb the experience of his crucifixion.

THE HIGHER CALL

It is interesting to note that throughout scripture, there have been men who were especially devoted to God, and that devotion was marked by, among other things, abstention from alcohol. Nazarites took this vow. Daniel, when seeking God, abstained from the King's wine. As mentioned before, priests ministering in the house of God were forbidden from drinking wine on the day of their service. And here in the New Testament, we are introduced to John the Baptist, whom the angel of the Lord forbade to touch wine. We see something similar in Timothy, who, most scholars agree, had taken a vow of abstinence and was suffering the ravages of drinking impure water.

1 Tim 5: ²³Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

The command here was not to have a glass of wine to settle his stomach. It was to stop drinking water by itself and instead mix in wine as an antiseptic. Still, it appears Timothy had adopted this "higher call" to abstain.

One might well ask, then, why Jesus didn't abstain since certainly, no one had a higher calling than He. The abstemious are quick to point out that we simply don't know for sure that Jesus did, in fact, drink wine. "Pro alcohol" people are quick to point out that Christ's critics accused Him of being a drunkard in Matthew 11 – a charge that would be hard to make if he never drank at all. It's a legitimate question but ultimately not very helpful because there was SO much about Christ's call that was unique to the Son of God. This is why "What Would Jesus Do?" can never work for New Testament believers. Jesus would do many things that we are not called to, including die for the sins of mankind. Still, the point remains that Jesus was sinless and probably, drank alcohol, so clearly, it cannot be classified as "sin."

THE DEFINITIVE SCRIPTURES

The rest of the New Testament scriptures fall along the same lines and for the same reasons. Drunkenness is condemned, while drinking, on the whole, is not. Again, wine drinking especially would have been impossible to eradicate. It would have been a logistical impossibility. The New Testament scriptures offer the same cautions regarding overuse as the Old Testament does over and over again. By a factor of more than five to one, the Bible scriptures that reference alcohol are cautionary, with very few passages that contain "positive" references. (Again, positive references probably were unnecessary because everyone was already drinking wine. There was no need to encourage it.) Still, the symbolism of Revelation, for instance, is very intriguing. In it, we find seven references to wine and all of them in a distinctly negative context. "The wine of His great wrath," "the wine of fornication," etc. Compare that to Biblical references of, say, marriage, where the references are categorically positive.

In our view, the first definitive passage in the New Testament is one that barely mentions wine at all. Wine isn't actually the subject of concern. It's meat. Meat that has been sacrificed to the idols.

Meat that had been butchered in pagan worship was sold in the market at a discount. Fiscally conservative Christians were buying this cheap meat to feed their families. But some people were understandably upset. How can you eat meat that has been offered to a false god? Isn't that blasphemy? The most popular passage on this topic is in 1st Corinthians 10. This passage, like the rest of scripture, has something in it for everyone! No matter what side of the argument you're on, you will agree with something Paul says here.

²³“Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. ²⁴Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

²⁵Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”

²⁷If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸But if anyone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake— ²⁹the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? ³⁰If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

³¹So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³²Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— ³³even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

So, Paul clearly advises the church to, “eat anything you want with a clear conscience,” but “if something you’re going to eat offends someone else’s conscience, then don’t eat it.” This is really good counsel for us on the topic in question because, like alcohol consumption today, they had options. They could have chosen to eat something else. But Paul seems to reinforce both the freedom of the believer and the need to narrow those freedoms for the sake of the gospel.

But this same issue gets addressed in another passage – one that I think is more definitive. Romans 14 is a great chapter to read in its entirety. It starts out by encouraging us to not judge one another on these issues. Whether you eat meat or not, don’t judge your brother. We’re each accountable to the Lord. Then he says this (and I will add my commentary in parenthesis):

¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵If your brother is distressed because of what you eat (**or what you drink**), you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating (**drinking**) destroy your brother for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. (**This is key – even though it may be “good” to you, can it be spoken of as evil?**) ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food (**drink**). All food (**drink**) is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat (**drink**) anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹**It is better (emphasis mine)** not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

Tapestry Position

The Tapestry position on alcohol is that its consumption is not prohibited by scripture.

It is also our position that those who choose to indulge should do so with great care.

For us, the three words that begin Romans 14:21 are the Bible's clearest commentary on alcohol and all similar issues: *it is better*. Are you free to drink? Yes. But there's something better. Are you free to smoke or chew tobacco? Yes. But there's something better. Are you free to smoke weed in places where it's legal? Yes. But there's something better. It is better not to.

If the minimum standard of conduct is what we are looking for, then anyone can drink right up to the point of drunkenness. If the only instruction we are looking for in scripture is what we are forbidden to do, then there is no compelling argument not to drink. But if we are looking for God's heart on the matter, then a different standard applies. Not just "what is permissible," but instead, "what is profitable"? Not "what will God allow", but "what does God want for my life"?

For those who have a healthy relationship with alcohol, this will all feel like much ado about nothing. To be sure, there are many people for whom alcohol has never been a problem, and its presence in their life adds value and pleasure. It is also true that there are many people whose lives, homes, and families have been devastated by the effects of alcohol and alcohol addiction. In these cases, the clear scriptural admonishment is to defer to the weaker brother.

For these reasons, it is the position of Tapestry that those who choose to include alcohol in their lives do so with **caution** and **discretion**.

CAUTION: The believer who chooses to indulge should be ever vigilant to monitor their intake, their patterns of consumption, and its evolving effects on them (spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, professionally, relationally, etc.). Alcohol is deceptive, and, in the end, it stings like a serpent.

DISCRETION: The believer who consumes should do so with great sensitivity, giving loving consideration to those who may be influenced by the presence of alcohol in their lives. We strongly encourage alcohol to be consumed either in private or in settings where a weaker brother or sister is in no danger of stumbling. Remember this fundamental principle of leadership: the things we do in moderation, those who follow us will do in excess. Parents would do well to adopt this perspective with respect to their children, as well.

Affirmations and Denials

We affirm that Christian liberty is objectively, consistently, and comprehensively taught in the New Testament.

We deny that Holy Scripture forbids the consumption of alcohol or categorizes the use of alcohol as “sinful.”

We affirm that the Bible, in both testaments, teaches explicitly and implicitly that drinking to the point of impairment is sinful. We further affirm the application of this principle to any mind-altering substance.

We deny that “Christian liberty” extends to areas or activities that the Bible specifically identifies as “sin.” Such an extension of Christian liberty is an abuse of grace.

We affirm the Biblical teaching that our actions can and do influence other believers, whether intentionally or not.

We deny that every alleged non-sinful behavior is or ought to be “fair game” for every believer.

We affirm the notion that all believers should individually examine themselves and the role that alcohol will play in their lives. If one’s conscience is clear, then they may partake without condemnation.

We deny that anyone, including Church leadership, has the power to deny anyone the freedom purchased for them by the blood of Christ. We believe that religious regulation is a poor substitute for the Holy Spirit.

We affirm that Christians can, as an act of conscience or specific obedience, surrender their liberty for the sake of their testimony or influence.

We deny that the surrender of Christian Liberty in this area for the sake of the Gospel constitutes “legalism.”

We affirm the Biblical teaching that those who choose to indulge in alcohol should do so with great caution and discretion.

We deny that alcohol is like any other food or drink. It is exceptional in its treatment in Scripture and, as such, should receive exceptional consideration.

We affirm that an individual’s standing with God is secured and sustained by the grace of God alone. Consuming alcohol does not diminish a person’s standing with God. Abstaining from alcohol does not enhance a person’s standing with God.

We deny that an individual’s disposition towards alcohol is in any way a barometer of their love for Jesus or their devotion to Him. The presence or absence of alcohol in a person’s life is a matter of individual conscience and conviction, and mature believers will understand and respect that. Immature believers may not understand that.