

The Case for Alcohol Abstinence
By
Daniel L. Akin

I readily confess to a personal bias when it comes to the issue of alcohol. My wife Charlotte grew up in the Georgia Baptist Children's Home because her parents were alcoholics. Her father died a lost alcoholic. Her mother, by God's grace, was saved on her death bed. Her body had been ravaged by the twin killers of alcohol and tobacco. Today her sister and brother are lost alcoholics as is most of the rest of her family. My sister Joy and her husband Kevin King adopted a daughter born with fetal alcohol syndrome. She began life with two strikes against her through no fault of her own. Today there are more than 40 million problem drinkers in America. Alcohol is the number one drug problem among teenagers. One in three American families suspects that one or more family members have a drinking problem. Misuse of alcohol costs our nation \$100 billion a year in quantifiable cost. Because of these experiences and many more, I have often said that even if I were not a Christian I would have nothing to do with alcohol. There is simply too much sorrow and heartache connected to it. Avoiding this devastating drug is simply the wise thing to do.

This year at our Convention we again passed a resolution calling for abstinence from alcohol. The resolution passed overwhelmingly, but it did generate significant debate both during and after the Convention. Some have accused those supporting the resolution of being pharisaical and legalistic, traditionalist and anti-biblical. It is said that we fail to understand Christian liberty and freedom, and that we even stand against Jesus. These are strong accusations from fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. However, are they correct? Are those like myself who believe abstinence to be the best lifestyle choice really guilty of these charges? Let me respond as graciously and kindly as I possibly can, explaining why I hold the position I do. I share my heart with no malice or ill will toward anyone, but from a desire to honor the Lord Jesus, and to protect others from the evils alcohol has visited on so many.

We should remember from a Baptist perspective that there are historical precedents for affirming abstinence. In 1886 Southern Baptists issued their first

resolution on alcohol. Since then there have been almost 60 resolutions that in a united voice have addressed the risk of alcohol and the wisdom of abstinence. For 120 years Southern Baptists have made clear their stand on this issue. Individual Baptists no doubt continue to take a drink as they had before 1886, but the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole has been crystal clear on where it stands for a long time. I am confident that our forefathers understood the issue of Christian liberty as they passed these resolutions. I am grateful for this tradition. I believe we should continue it.

There are moral reasons for affirming abstinence. John Piper teaches the wisdom of abstinence because alcohol can be a mind-altering drug, and it can be addictive. It does not help one in doing the will of God and can genuinely be a hindrance. Further, he notes “the carnage of alcohol abuse” and therefore chooses to boycott such a product. He then adds, “is it really so prudish, or narrow to renounce a highway killer, a home destroyer, and a business wrecker.” Some questions are in order and deserve an answer. Does alcohol make me a better person? Does alcohol draw me closer to God? Does alcohol help me run the race faithfully to the end (Heb. 12:1-2)?

Some respond by saying the issue is not abstinence but moderation. They draw an analogy to both eating and sex. There is however a significant difference. We must eat to live. We must engage in sex to procreate. Alcohol is not a necessity for life or good living.

I am in total agreement with my spiritual hero Adrian Rogers who said, “Moderation is not the cure for the liquor problem. Moderation is the cause of the liquor problem. Becoming an alcoholic does not begin with the last drink, it always begins with the first. Just leave it alone.” My friend James Merritt wisely says, “It is impossible to be bitten by a snake that you never play with.” Alcoholism cannot strike unless it is given the opportunity. That potential becomes real with the first drink that one takes.

There are biblical reasons for practicing abstinence. Let me quickly note several. 1) It is consistent with the principle of edification (1 Cor. 6:12). Alcohol does not build you up or make you better for Jesus. Avoiding it ensures you will not harm yourself with it. 2) It is consistent with the principle of refusing that which enslaves (1 Cor. 6:12). Alcohol is a drug that can impair the senses and has a potential addictive element. Like addictive pornography, it should be avoided at all cost. 3) It is consistent with the ethic

of love for believers and unbelievers alike (1 Cor. 8:13; 9:19-22; 10:32-33). Because I am an example to others, I will make certain no one ever walks the road of sorrow called alcoholism because they saw me take a drink and assumed, “if it is alright for Danny Akin, it is alright for me.” No, I will choose to set an uncompromising example of abstinence because I love them. 4) I will seek my joy and filling in the Spirit not in alcohol. I love the Phillips translation of Ephesians 5:18 which reads, “Don’t get your stimulus from wine (for there is always the danger of excessive drinking), but let the Spirit stimulate your souls.” Psalm 4:7-8 adds, “You [O Lord] have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” 5) It is true Jesus drank wine, and I am sure I would have had I lived in the first century. However, there is no evidence that he ever partook of “strong drink.” As Bob Stein has carefully documented, “The term “wine” or *oinos* in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water... To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine [a fairly common ancient ratio], one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses. In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind.” It should also be noted that children would have drank this diluted mixture of water and wine. It seems clear that there is no one-to-one correspondence with first century wine and twenty first century distilled liquor. Concerning the latter I believe the Lord Jesus would have no part.

Let me conclude with some practical considerations. Should those who practice abstinence look down on those who do not? The answer is an unqualified no. That is pride and therefore is sin. It is true that alcohol has contributed to many going to hell, but pride, no doubt, has done so in even greater numbers. A smug, prideful abstainer without Jesus is just as lost as the poor drunkard who is always in search of another drink. Those who believe in abstinence should be gracious and humble, kind and caring, loving and patient.

As a pastor or church leader, would I demand abstinence for church membership? No, I would not. Would I demand it for leadership? Absolutely! The principle of

Proverbs 31:4-5 is appropriately applied here, “It is not for Kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”

I agree with John MacArthur. Can I say it is always a sin to take a drink? No. Can I say it is almost always unwise? Yes, because it violates the biblical principles of wisdom and witness. One of America’s leading pastors is Andy Stanley. He wrote a book entitled *The Best Question Ever*. That question is this, “What is the wise thing for me to do?” I challenge anyone to show me the superior wisdom of drinking “in moderation,” as opposed to not drinking at all. This is not legalism but love. This is not being anti-biblical but pro-brother and sister. This is not working for evil but for good. Given the world in which we live I believe such a lifestyle honors the Lord Jesus. I believe it pleases Him. Without question it is the wise thing to do.