

A DEFENSE OF CHURCH STANDARDS
REGARDING THE USE OF
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

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Introduction

For some time now I have been convinced of the need for a brief booklet written in explanation and defense of the policy of our local church and our denomination regarding abstinence from alcoholic beverages. The following pages are a modest attempt at filling that need. The policy in question is one of a voluntary abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages by its members. I will have more to say about the “voluntary” nature of this requirement later. And while I will also elaborate upon this aspect of our requirement below, it is important to recognize that our policy does not demand that every member be fully persuaded in his own mind that to partake of alcoholic beverages in moderation is sinful, merely that he agree to abstain.

It was not until I had come to some maturity during college and seminary days and had become convinced of the Reformed Faith that I was introduced to the fact that not only were there many Christians who chose to exercise the liberty to partake of alcoholic beverages, but that there was a whole genre of literature devoted to the defense of the use of alcohol by Christians, and further that a significant subsection of that genre was devoted to a vigorous *rebuke* of any church that chose to invoke a standard against the use of alcohol. It is that part of the debate that I wish to address in these pages. That is, I do not intend to delve into some of the varied details of the debate about alcohol, except in moderation as necessary. My purpose is to address the propriety of a church’s having standards about the use of alcohol.

As I begin, I want to acknowledge that I am aware that this topic is a serious point of debate among Bible-believing Christians and that it has been for a long time. Many believers on both sides of the debate are persuaded that they contend for important aspects of the Christian faith. I do not challenge the sincerity of those on either side. In reality, however, opinion on this matter cannot be reduced to two simple positions. A vast spectrum of belief and practice presents itself on this vexing question. The opposing ends of this spectrum could seemingly be no further apart. Some abstainers believe they contend for a biblically mandated point of personal separation from the world on a matter of objective transgression. That is, they believe that the Bible condemns all use of alcoholic beverages and that to partake in any context is genuinely sinful. On the other end of the spectrum, some who partake of alcohol believe strongly that not only does the Bible *not* condemn alcoholic beverages, but that it actually commends and encourages their use in moderation, and they openly imbibe. Though they do not word the issue in this way, some taking this position actually seem to question the spiritual maturity of any believer who would harbor a conviction against drinking alcohol. Thus drinking almost becomes a necessary badge of theological knowledge and spiritual maturity. In the middle, others are found who are not quite so pro-alcohol as those just described, and who may not drink themselves, but who nonetheless believe that the Bible at least allows the practice if only one pursue it in moderation.

Having now ministered in our denomination for over two decades, I have been involved in discussions with those who disagree with our church's position on numerous occasions and in a variety of settings. I have seen colors throughout the spectrum. Many of these discussions have been amicable but with varied results. Some have come to see a wisdom in our policy and have entered into membership whether it involved a change in their previous practice or not. Others have failed to see any reason for our policy and have refused to come into membership even though for a season, or even perpetually, they continued to attend and support our church. This has been true of some who admitted to drinking alcohol and of others who have chosen not to drink themselves but have been persuaded that it is dangerous for the church to have such a policy and have as a matter of principle chosen not to join even though it would require no change in their own practice.

Other discussions have been less than amicable. Some have sought to change the church (which is more than a *local* task for Presbyterians) through proper and at times improper channels. Others have simply stirred up trouble for the church, which certainly does not add credibility to their profession of spiritual maturity. Illustrations could be multiplied from literature on the subject and from my pastoral experience to fill in the various points of the spectrum. But even given this broad body of opinion, all Christians must agree that the Bible forbids drunkenness in any form.

All this is to say that I am not unaware of what is being said within the church about this divisive issue. I can say with complete candor that I have personally wrestled with this question objectively, even though I do admittedly come from an abstaining background. I have read a fair amount within the literature on the subject from both perspectives--more from the perspective of those who disagree. I am vitally aware that my suggestions in this booklet will not satisfy everyone, particularly our critics. But nonetheless I wish to offer these few paragraphs to inquiring souls.

What this booklet is and what it is not

I must say a few words about what this booklet is and what it is not. This is not a serious study of the various words and contexts in which the Bible refers to "wine" and "strong drink," etc. There are studies available from both perspectives on these terms and their use in Scripture.¹ Neither is this a comparison of the "wines" of the Bible and modern alcoholic beverages, although I believe this is one of the most fruitful areas of thought for the serious inquirer.

This is not an attempt to argue that the Bible teaches a position of total abstinence from alcohol in any form. There is a tendency among some

1 Because sources from the other perspective seem more abundant currently and a root for much of our criticism (such as in the writings of Ken Gentry, Johannes G. Vos, et. al.), I offer a note for one study for the abstinence position: Louis F. DeBoer, *The Fruit of the Vine* (Saunderstown, RI: American Presbyterian Press, 2000).

of our critics to immediately transfer thoughts regarding an abstinence policy to an argument that alcohol is always sinful. I repeat, even given our denomination's position, the demand that one believe this assertion is not put forward as part of our practice of abstinence.

This booklet is merely a defense of the right of a church or denomination to embrace a policy of abstinence from alcoholic beverages for its members. So my perspective will be limited. I am responding to the charge that our church is wrong and to be shunned or even rebuked for asking members to abstain. It is not a defense of every church that maintains a policy of abstinence, nor is it an attempt to argue that all such policies or similar restrictions by others are enacted on gospel terms. It is merely offered to show that a church can and should maintain a policy of requiring abstinence from alcoholic beverages in our modern context while still carefully avoiding damage to the doctrine of Christian liberty and while zealously maintaining a gospel of free and sovereign grace.

I will also offer some thoughts in conclusion regarding anyone who would allow this single issue to keep them from coming into membership in a church.

A Syllogism to Consider

I do not want to be simplistic, but I do intend to be brief. There is a veritable wealth of literature on this topic from both perspectives, and I do not ask that anyone avoid that literature if they pursue it objectively, charitably, and from both sides. After much thought and many discussions of this matter over the years, I have reached a conclusion regarding those who oppose our church's policy. While attitudes vary greatly at times, and degrees of knowledge can be quite varied as well, the argument against a church that embraces a standard of abstinence from alcohol, I believe, can and must be reduced to the following syllogism:

Major Premise: *It is always wrong for a church to enact a standard regulating a matter of indifference.*

Minor Premise: *Partaking of modern alcoholic beverages in moderation is a matter of indifference.*

Conclusion: *It is wrong for a church to enact a standard regulating the moderate use of modern alcoholic beverages.*

I ask anyone who may question the policy of abstinence to pause and consider this syllogism carefully. I am not trying to caricature the other side by creating a straw man and refusing to consider the real meat of the argument. I believe that the syllogism I have suggested is an accurate, objective, and *necessary* summary of the case against having such a church standard. Assuming, then, that this does accurately state the argument against a church standard such as our own, let us examine the two premises of the syllogism.

Are standards always wrong?

It may seem at first glance that the major premise is solid. The Bible has much to say about matters of indifference and the charity with which believers should maintain relationships with those who may disagree on such matters. The “judging” and “despising” of Romans 14 that grow from such a lack of charity all too frequently manifest the fleshly thinking that can creep into the church.² It seems to follow that for a church to regulate activity on such a matter would directly violate the principle of Christian liberty and even sanction the position of the one in this chapter who “judges.” The church would therefore apparently enshrine the position of the *weaker* brother. Thus the institution that stands as the pillar and ground of the truth and as the instrument whereby young converts should be educated and strengthened in the faith takes its position as an institution that officially traps immature believers in their immaturity and perpetuates the ignorance of the faithful. Such is the argument of many who seek to rebuke our church policy.

Some critics have even put forward a caricatured syllogism of their own in framing their case against us:

- 1) Gluttony is sinful.
- 2) Gluttony is eating food to excess.
- 3) In order to avoid gluttony one should abstain from food.

I hope that reasonable Christians will realize that this supposed parallel really misrepresents the case. To permanently abstain from alcoholic beverages is not sinful. To permanently abstain from food is sinful. Also, there is no debate as to the indifferent nature of food. To assume the indifferent nature of modern alcoholic beverages and bring forward this comparison is to beg the question.

I do not deny that some churches and parachurch organizations *can* and *do* occupy an unbiblical position on a variety of issues. Recent decades of church history have seen abundant evidence of what we often call “bondage theology.” The theory is “keep them feeling guilty, and you’ll keep them out of trouble.” Seminars have arisen that seek to regulate even the minutiae of life--areas often so clearly within the realm of Christian liberty that the popular language of “Christian liberty” isn’t even used to describe them. Often these circles have made their pet peeves matters of separation, or at the very least a guide for distinguishing a two-tiered version of Christianity. This has paralyzed the growth of many a Christian and eclipsed the message of the fullness of Christ for many a soul. I could multiply examples of such manipulation of the Lord’s people. It is ironic really that some teachers of this kind of bad theology speak of their demands under the label of “principles” when it is not really

2 While I do not wish to pursue any detailed exegesis here, I would like to suggest that I believe both of the attitudes Paul condemns in this passage reflect a legal spirit, and not just the attitude of “judging.” The “despiser” has also allowed a man-centered frame of reference to dominate his thinking regarding what God requires. Guilt often motivates the despising, and guilt stems from a legal frame of mind.

principles at all that they are offering to the Lord's people to help guide them in their decisions, but rather it is *particulars* that they demand of the Lord's people in order to validate their Christianity and manipulate their lives. Such teaching usually produces either spiritual bondage or self-righteousness, depending on the spiritual condition or at times the psychological temperament of the individual. I'm happy to say that this has never been the theology or the practice of our denomination. Much to the contrary, I have been privileged to see multiplied numbers of souls set free from such bondage and given a fuller understanding of the gospel in our churches. I have seen self-righteousness constantly rebuked from our pulpits as well. This usually leads to far greater advances in genuine holiness and joy.

So, given the possibility of a church's transgressing the liberties of the gospel on matters of indifference, does it follow that it is *always* wrong for a church to regulate an indifferent activity? "Always" is an important word in the major premise. I think that the Scriptures give us a clear answer to that question in the negative. Scripture indicates that not only is it permissible for the church to regulate matters that in themselves are indifferent, but there are occasions when it is necessary.

In the Old Testament the Lord not only gave Israel the Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial Laws, but multiplied applications of these laws were made for the daily lives of the Lord's people. On the personal level some of these laws had reference to customs of dress, and to illustrate our point, some reached even to the shape of men's beards (Leviticus 19, etc.). While some of the laws God gave to Israel had a direct moral bearing, some of them apparently served no other function than to distinguish Israel from other people, particularly those who worshipped other gods. While there would appear to be nothing inherently moral or immoral about the particular shape, size, or design of a man's beard, certain features of how a man's beard looked were regulated so that the Lord's people would be distinguished from the world. Thus a matter indifferent in and of itself was regulated among the Lord's people.

Most of these OT restrictions have not specifically passed over to the New Testament Church, but the principle of not being confused with the world certainly still stands. While the fashion trends in today's rapid-paced multimedia world are amazingly short lived and would not appear in a modern church covenant or by-laws (nor perhaps should they), would not the elders of a church have cause for concern if, for instance, a young adult member of the congregation began showing up to services or elsewhere with attire directly associated with a particular gang, a worldly organization, or perhaps that of another religion or of the occult? Many who oppose our intervention with reference to alcohol would not shrink back from intervening with reference to dress on such occasions. While the application of such a standard might be unpublished and limited to a very few individuals, in these cases the principle is the same. The church is enforcing a regulation with reference to a matter in and of itself indifferent because the context is deemed to demand it.

I realize that the objection could immediately follow that it was *the Lord* who made such requirements of His people in the Old Testament Mosaic legislation, and therefore the requirements were by definition *not* extra-biblical or indifferent. They were clearly “scriptural.” If God said it, it was immediately part of what was demanded of His people. We on the other hand should not seek to take the place of God and impose similar standards today. True. But on such reasoning, a church would not be allowed today to raise the issues listed in the previous paragraph, or a hundred and one other applications of the principle of separation that the church constantly faces. The elders of the church would be handicapped from making *any* application from Scripture to the lives of the congregation that was not explicit in Scripture. This could involve a veritable host of issues.

One extreme example I have often used to illustrate this is the hypothetical case of a man in the congregation who frequented a topless bar or a strip club. Upon an investigation by the elders, he may respond that he was not guilty of lust and that he was only there to evangelize, or perhaps because they had better food than other restaurants in the area. While any reasonable Christian would balk at such a suggestion or hold a Session in rebuke for being satisfied with such an answer, on the technical level the grounds for disciplinary action are limited. One could argue that there is no explicit scriptural command against entering such an establishment. It is possible for a man to be exposed to nudity without lusting. Physicians, for example, must do so daily. What *scriptural* grounds do the elders have for not taking the man at his word? They really have only *contextual* grounds for taking action.

I realize that we are talking now about practices that would probably represent only a handful of cases or perhaps be deemed extreme in contrast to the question of alcohol that is far broader in its application, but the principle is the same if one accepts the possibility of categorizing a particular activity as worldly or unchristian in certain contexts.

In this example of the cut of the beard, and in similar cases elsewhere, the Lord put such restrictions upon His people immediately, that is, without the use of men. These were various inscripturated requirements which touched matters of indifference. These our opponents must allow. But as we shall see, in other cases the Lord allowed the leaders of His people to address certain needs of His church themselves as circumstances warranted.

Examples of this type occur in both testaments. For instance, the Lord had given regulations regarding particular feast days to His people. One particular day, the Day of Atonement, was also to be accompanied by fasting. This was the only fast that the Lord “scripturally” required of the nation. The nation was even rebuked at points in its history for having multiplied fasts which were not required (e.g. Isaiah 58: 3-7; Jeremiah 14:12; Zechariah 7 and 8—the obvious point of the rebukes being that the people pursued these fasts without the spiritual elements that should accompany fasting: solemnity, sorrow for sin, or burden for

their true needs). Additional fasts taken in a non-prescribed ritual and in self-righteousness were condemned. And yet we find that there were also occasions in which the leaders of the Lord's people proclaimed *extra*, non-inscripturated fasts in times of great need with the apparent blessing of God (i.e. Ezra 8: 21; Esther 4:16; Joel 1:14, 2:15). This would seem to contradict the major premise that it is *always* wrong for the church to interject itself or regulate a matter of indifference. The imposition of extra fasts was not wrong in itself. The context determined the propriety or impropriety of the requirement.

Other illustrations of the principle from the Old Testament could be given. My point in using these examples is to show that *it was possible for something to be morally indifferent and yet in certain contexts it was appropriate to have an ecclesiastical requirement affixed regulating its practice or cessation.*

In Acts 15 we find a New Testament example of this kind of regulation. This chapter records the Jerusalem Council and hence gives one of our fullest examples of the way the first-century church functioned. Many of our practices in the New Testament church trace their origin and foundation to this important chapter.³ The most pressing need for the apostles and elders to meet at this point in the book of Acts was the growing reality that in the New Testament church Jews and Gentiles were now for the first time going to live and function together in one ecclesiastical community. This was a big deal. While various other ceremonial questions would still surface in the New Testament era (Romans 14, Colossians 2, etc.), the question of circumcision proved particularly difficult in the new experience of the now multi-ethnic believing community. The Jerusalem Council met to address this question.

3 While this may reach beyond the scope of my booklet, I want to include some thoughts here that have arisen in my discussions over the years. Acts 15 provides one of the fullest examples of Presbyterian government in Scripture. The observation that the Apostles did not decide the question alone is basic to Presbyterianism's use of this chapter to help establish its form of church government. They met with the other elders. The phrase "apostles and elders" recurs throughout the record. This illustrates the fact that by this time normal New Testament church government was already taking place. Hence elders were now in a position to make judgments on particular cases that were brought to them. My point in adding the note here is to observe that some who have objected to my use of Acts 15 as an illustration of an ecclesiastical body making a ruling on a matter of indifference have done so by arguing that it was during the time that God was still *immediately* teaching His church through inspired Apostles, thus this regulation was not "extra-scriptural." Fine. One can argue this, but he must recognize that he is arguing from silence, and I believe in error. There is no record of the Lord's supernaturally giving the regulations reflected in the decisions of the council. But he also must recognize that he has lost one of the key passages of the New Testament where the functions of a presbytery are described. That is, he has given away perhaps the key passage defending Presbyterianism. The plurality of elders in the local congregation may be established clearly elsewhere. And I believe that the functions of the presbytery can be argued from other passages. But to argue against the above use of the passage on the grounds of its *not* reflecting normal ecclesiastical functions and God's use of men to mediate His government of the church (with all the solemn responsibilities that entails) is to remove one of the key grounds of Presbyterianism from this vital passage, and Presbyterians have been among the loudest critics of our church in allowing this type of authority to reside with church elders.

The decision of the council was that the requirement of circumcision was not to be forced upon Gentile converts. It would not be wrong, however, for Jews to continue to observe the practice, but its ceremonial and sacramental function had passed with the passing of the old dispensation and was not to be required of New Testament believers.

While this requirement and its whole bearing on the doctrine of justification were resolved at this point, the elders saw fit to address a letter to the churches noting this resolution of the question of circumcision, but the letter also contained these additional regulations:

that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled and from blood
(Acts 15: 20).

While the discussion surrounding these restrictions is extensive,⁴ the fact that food offered to idols was forbidden is clear, and is reflected in the various translations and commentaries. The issue for our purposes is that the Gentile converts were required to abstain from these practices because of the offense that they would cause to their Jewish brethren. That is, they were required to abstain from a practice that was in itself indifferent. J. A. Alexander in his highly respected commentary on Acts summarized it this way:

It is therefore commonly agreed that by *pollutions of idols* the Apostle means participation in something that had been connected with idolatrous worship, especially the flesh remaining after sacrifice, on which the heathen used to feast, and the residue of which was often sold in the market. Now since the eating of such food, as Paul expressly teaches (1 Cor. 10, 19-33), was not sinful in itself, and yet to be avoided out of tenderness to those who thought it so, the abstinence here recommended must be understood in the same manner; not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others, i.e. of the Jewish converts who still regarded such food as unlawful and an abomination to God.⁵

Let's follow the progression here. These restrictions were a concession to the conscience of others. They concerned at least some matters of indifference. And yet the nature of these requirements is clarified when in chapter 16 we find them described as the "*decrees* for to keep that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem" (vs. 4). These were not suggestions. They were regulations that the elders were requiring of the churches. That these requirements were in some cases temporary and touched a particular need during the birth pangs of the New

4 For instance there is the interesting question as to whether these restrictions were all moral and should be defined that way, or whether they included some mixture of ceremonial and moral observances, or as some would even argue whether they were all ceremonial.

5 (Banner of Truth: Carlisle, PA) vol. 2, p. 84.

Testament era seems apparent considering Paul’s treatment of the issue of meat offered to idols again later in Corinthians, as Alexander noted. But nonetheless decrees were issued.

We are left then with an historic example in the New Testament Church when the elders of the church made a decision that was binding on the church and yet had reference to a matter that was in itself a matter of indifference. In this case again, God was not dictating a requirement in a particular case that He led to be inscripturated as a part of His laws governing Israel, but rather God was allowing the leaders of the church to apply their wisdom to a particular need. God was here working mediately through church leaders.

Obviously the necessity of such legislation and the cases in which it should be applied would and should be matters of great debate and of the utmost scrutiny, particularly given our distance from the Apostolic age. The principle, however, remains that there are times in which it is not only permissible for church elders to address matters of indifference, but there are times when it is necessary.

Everything to this point has assumed that modern alcoholic beverages are a matter of indifference. Granting this assumption for the moment, we must conclude that the major premise of our syllogism cannot stand. It is *not* always wrong for a church to regulate a matter of indifference. It is not inherently wrong therefore for a church to institute a standard with reference to alcohol even if it is a matter of indifference. Such a regulation would be wrong if it were presented within a framework of legalism or on a basis of merit. (But this pitfall needs to be avoided with even with reference to matters that are *not* indifferent! It is sinful for someone to “obey” the objective commands of scripture in a legalistic or self-righteous spirit). But in a context where the gospel of grace is carefully guarded, such a standard may not be improper by definition. Individuals and institutions may disagree as to the *necessity* of such a standard that another institution deems necessary,⁶ but I do not believe that opponents of such a standard can argue biblically or consistently that such a standard is always wrong or that it represents a transgression of Christian liberty.

A church simply cannot be accused of legalism because it has an extra-biblical standard.⁷ Having said that, for a church to impose multiple standards or petty standards may not be legalistic in the technical sense, but it would certainly cross the line into sectarianism. That is why no church should seek to over regulate the lives of its people. No list of external

6 An important factor in the decision of such bodies will often be the culture and its frame of reference. This may particularly come into focus regarding wine and its place in the culture, for instance in Europe versus the United States.

7 An important point to consider here, since this objection most frequently arises in the Reformed camp, is that the great Reformation creeds themselves are extra-biblical. Some Reformed Christians would never think of taking someone into membership who did not subscribe to their confession. Are they not, then, transgressing their own standard of having no extra-biblical requirements? Are they saying that a person must be a Calvinist in order to be a Christian?

rules can ever be complete.⁸ And the attempt to frame such a list of rules is ultimately self-defeating, because no man-made list can completely define the sphere of Christian sanctified conduct in any context. No man made list can encompass all that it entails to love the Lord our God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The scriptures themselves do not attempt to provide such a comprehensive list. It is an inspired *summary* of this law of love that we find in the Ten Commandments, not a case law for every circumstance of daily life and thought. Besides, a carnal mind will always seek to find something that is not on the list. Any such list really undermines the responsibility of believers to check their own hearts and to police their own lives, because in the last analysis, our hearts are of such a nature that even things that are clearly not sinful in themselves and would never be on such a list, can nonetheless *become* sinful when a believer allows any thing or any activity to occupy an inappropriate place in his life. Such a list could also undermine the responsibility of the elders of the church to be engaged in teaching and leading their people toward mature Christian living. So a church must be on vigilant guard against such a tendency toward a sectarian practice. But none of these observations leads to the conclusion that for a church to enact a limited and purposeful standard on a matter of indifference is always wrong or denies that in some circumstances it may even be necessary. The major premise simply does not stand up under scrutiny.

Are extra-scriptural standards a matter to be taken lightly? Never. Are they to be multiplied at the whim of the pastor, or elders, or presbytery for minimal reasons? Never. Are they *always* wrong? No.

Are alcoholic beverages indifferent?

We must now look to the minor premise and address the assertion that modern alcoholic beverages are a matter of indifference. Those who affirm this premise often operate under the assumption that when the Bible refers to what may be translated as “wine,” it is always speaking of an alcoholic beverage. Again, this booklet will not attempt to fill out the word studies of all the terms involved in the debate, although this is a necessary and profitable study. Nor will our survey attempt to answer this question. The mere fact that there *is* a question about this assertion should cause any spiritually minded person to pause. If there is sufficient reason to doubt that “wine” or related words in the Bible are *always* alcoholic, this means that

8 I would like to add a note here about Christian institutions other than churches. While I would never advocate a church accepting “loose living” within its membership, it often proves necessary for institutions such as Christian schools, camps, or colleges, to regulate the activity of their clientele more directly than would a church. To ensure keeping a good testimony and to maintain consistency within such a community that may include hundreds or even thousands of diverse believers living at times in a very close environment often requires answering some questions of conscience for the individual while the individual remains a part of the larger institution. It is the institution’s testimony that is at stake and the regulation of a crowd necessitates greater discipline than the regulation of the individual.

the question of alcoholic beverages is not firmly established as belonging to the category of things that are indifferent. It could be that the very reason that “wine” is sometimes praised in the Bible and sometimes condemned is that the substance referred to by the broad terms is a different substance in different contexts. So, the abstinence side may argue that if it can be determined that our English Bibles occasionally or *ever* use the word “wine” or a similar term (which in our language and context implies alcohol) when the biblical context demands that we understand a non-alcoholic beverage or even a fruit,⁹ then the whole question enters a new dimension and does not become quite as simple as the moderation argument would imply.

To address this question I want to consider a point of biblical hermeneutics (interpretation). There are many occasions in which terms in the original languages may carry more than one meaning when translated. This is to say that terms in one language may at times be broader than terms used to translate them in another language. In such cases we must make greater use of the context in determining just how best to translate the original word rather than just using the same English word every time. A striking illustration of this is found in the Authorized Version’s translation of Psalm 16:10:

*But thou wilt not leave my soul in hell neither wilt thou
suffer thine holy one to see corruption.*

While this reflects an accurate translation of the text, two terms in the text can, and I believe should, be translated in another way—a way that radically changes the meaning in English. The term *nephesh*, translated “soul” in the verse, can just as rightly be translated “body.”¹⁰ It is a term that can also refer to the whole man, body and soul. Numerous passages could be cited to illustrate this. Also the term *sheol*, translated “hell” in the verse, can and should at times be translated “grave.” Thus when we see how the New Testament applies this Psalm to the resurrection of Christ in Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:31) we find that a slight but permissible and necessary alteration of our English translation would give a better sense of the Psalm. We should more properly translate the verse, “But thou wilt not leave my *body* in the *grave*, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption.” The two translations are equally accurate, given the breadth of the original terms, but the meanings reflected in the opposing translations are vastly different. Context must dictate the proper use of the original term.

Again, while this booklet will not attempt to flesh out the word studies in the “wine” family of words, or to take a position on the evidence, suffice it to say that there are serious exegetical studies that conclude that when the Bible speaks of the permissible use of “wine” it is not speaking about alcoholic beverages at all. (Some of the references in the above footnote and their parallels indicate clearly that frequently one of the

9 For instance the occasions when the substance called “wine” in our English Bible is pressed out from the grapes, or the word wine is actually used for the grapes themselves (cf. Deut. 11: 14; 12:17; 2 Chronicles 31:5-6; Isaiah 65: 8; Nehemiah 5:11; Jeremiah 31: 12; Joel 3: 18; Amos 9: 13;etc.).

10 In Leviticus 21:1, 11, and 22:4, for example, the word is used of a corpse, which in modern English we would describe as a body without a soul.

“wine” words is used simply to refer to grapes as part of the produce of the land.) The very fact that a significant segment of the church takes this position must be included in any informed decision on the use of alcohol.

I am not seeking to establish or to refute the assertion that the Bible permits believers to use “wine” only when it is non-alcoholic. I am only seeking to inform inquirers that such a conviction exists within the church and that it does not merely reside within an uninformed, radical-right fringe that cares more for its own tradition than a clear understanding of Scripture. The minor premise cannot be conceded without due consideration of this evidence.

There is another aspect of this minor premise, however, that must be addressed. Granting the previous observation and contention that there are non-alcoholic “wines” in the Bible, the question remains: Are the “wines” of the Bible that are *known* to be alcoholic comparable to modern alcoholic beverages? That is, when we consider those who drank beverages which we know were alcoholic in the ancient world, we should ask the question, what were they drinking? Again, there is a fertile field of historical and exegetical evidence that reaches beyond my scope at present. But I would have the reader consider that before the distillation of liquors and the fortification of wines, natural fermentation would have allowed beverages to reach only between 13 and 15 percent alcoholic content. This was as strong as any drink in the ancient world could be, and yet these beverages represent the *lowest* end of the spectrum for our modern alcoholic beverages. In ancient culture the normal dilution of wines prior to drinking would alter the beverages to such a low alcoholic content that in some cases they possibly would not come under the definition of an alcoholic beverage today. But even *undiluted* in the ancient world, that which according to the Bible “bites” like a serpent (Proverbs 23:32), in the modern comparison would have no bite at all.

Even if one holding to the moderation side of the argument is unconvinced of his need to abstain, I believe this point deserves much more consideration than it receives. A survey of the attitudes of the ancient world toward alcohol even among the heathen, coupled with a little thought on how those weak drinks compare to those of our society, should give any Christian concerned about his testimony a great deal to think about when he seeks to define his moderation.

There is simply no consensus among Bible scholars that the wines that the Bible allows for Christians are the same as modern alcoholic beverages. One may wish to take sides on the question, but that does not make the debate go away. One may admit that some approach the question with prejudice or bias, but that does not excuse a reactionary prejudice or bias from the opposite vantage point. And while there certainly are unscholarly and shallow approaches that demand abstinence without even attempting an exegesis of the evidence, many arguing for abstinence have done their homework and can claim support from Scripture. There are also many who argue in defense of drink that have done very little if any homework on the matter. They take what on the surface appears plausible,

and since that agrees with their desires, they pursue their unchallenged liberty with impunity.

The minor premise of our syllogism—“Modern alcoholic beverages are a matter of indifference”—is open to serious objection. This in itself jeopardizes the conclusion that it is wrong for a church to have a standard concerning alcohol, even if the major premise were allowed to stand—and that premise we have already found to be in error.

If I might be permitted a digression into the obvious, one of the first rules of logic in a syllogism is that if either premise fails to stand, the conclusion need not follow. In the case of our syllogism, *both* the major premise and the minor premise are open to either serious debate or open refutation. The conclusion that “it is wrong for a church to have a standard regulating the moderate use of alcohol” does not pass muster on the logical level, to say nothing of the spiritual level, which we will reserve for later.

Again, my purpose in this booklet is not to examine the evidence on either side, but to raise awareness that there are serious issues to consider and to defend the rights of a church to establish such a standard even if some may feel that it is extra-biblical. Even if it is extra-biblical, it is not wrong by definition unless it is accompanied by the very different error of heretical teaching regarding Justification and Sanctification. One still may not agree with the necessity or even the advisability of our church’s choice with reference to guarding our testimony and bringing believers of differing convictions together, but he should not persist in charging such a church with error. And yet this charge does persist, at times even with a vengeance.

A Thought Regarding Our Church’s View of Those Who Disagree

I want to address an important matter that does not always enter the discussion when those who criticize our church frame their rebuke. The rebuke of our denomination has come from many directions. As I have already noted, some who criticize us do so out of sheer carnality. I really don’t have much to offer in the face of that attack. Nothing anyone could say could convince someone who argued from that vantage point. But there are others who argue against our position of abstinence with a noble charge. To them I want to put an additional thought forward as we leave my little syllogism.

A frequent criticism of our policy follows this line of thought: We are, by enacting this standard, keeping true believers out of the church. We then refuse to recognize for membership in the visible church those whom Christ has already admitted into membership in the invisible church. The borders of our version of Christianity are narrower than the borders of true Christianity. This begins to become a serious charge.

But let me ask for some pause at this point. Individual churches and denominations practice such restrictions for membership all the time

and on a variety of issues. We call such divisions between true, believing churches *distinctives*. And there are varieties of distinctives. Baptist churches, for instance, refuse to admit anyone into membership who has not received the ordinance of baptism by immersion subsequent to his conversion. For a great number of believers, this requirement bars them from membership although they believe it to be a requirement that the Scripture does not demand. Are these churches wrong for following their conscience on this matter?

I realize how easy it is to place a policy regarding the mode and subjects of baptism into a completely different category from one regarding abstinence from alcohol, but is the distance really that great? There you have one church refusing to admit a genuine believer into membership because of a conviction that he does not share. There one church requires a true believer to find another church with different standards for membership because of a matter of interpretation. Granted, no one is suggesting that baptism is a matter of indifference. One has to submit to baptism in order to conform to the New Testament. But the Baptists make particular applications, extensions, or definitions of that requirement that in the minds of many the New Testament does not require.¹¹ The Baptist conviction on this matter has been so strong in church history that it has resulted in the formulation of a distinct denomination—a major boundary marker within the company of the redeemed. This is not to single out the Baptists unduly. Other distinctives in other denominations could illustrate the point equally well.

The point I wish to highlight here is that our church practices an open communion (as do many Baptists, I should add). We admit believing non-members to the table. We do not require that a believer conform to the standards of Free Presbyterianism in order for us to recognize him as a brother. I have shared many moments of joyful tears around the Lord's Table, as well as under the general preaching of the Word, with believers who are not members of our church. We may wish them to come into full communicant membership, but we do not require conformity to our distinctives on lesser matters before recognizing them as true brethren. We may hope to convince our disconnected brethren of the reasons for our stand on this and other issues that may divide us, but we do not make the borders of Free Presbyterianism to be the borders of genuine Christianity. We do not limit our fellowship or even our pulpits to our own denomination or to denominations that share our every conviction. This fact alone should remove any suggestions of a legal or self-righteous spirit with reference to our alcohol policy.

11 For those unfamiliar with the Free Presbyterian Church, I should share that our denominational policy with reference to baptism is one of great openness and charity. We fully allow members and ministers their conscience regarding the differing views of believers baptism vs. paedo-baptism. None, however, hold to any form of baptismal regeneration. We also allow believers their conscience regarding many of the controversial areas of the prophetic word.

Paul's Example of Surrendering True Liberties

I want to turn now to consider the example of the Apostle Paul in his personal practice and his recommended course of action with regard to matters of Christian liberty. While doctrine is not absent from these passages, they speak much regarding our attitudes and response to others.

On the topic of meat offered to idols mentioned above, the Apostle gives extended treatments of the principle of Christian liberty, and more to our point, he gives an example of how a believer should approach these issues. I want to include some longer quotations from these sections of Scripture and then some brief thoughts regarding their application to alcohol.

Romans 14: 14-21

*I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and the things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. **It is good neither to eat flesh nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.***

1 Corinthians 8:13

*But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither if we eat, are we the better; neither if we eat not are we the worse. But take heed lest this **liberty** of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak (vs. 8-9)... **Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.***

1 Corinthians 10:28-33

But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: Conscience I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience. For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks? Whether

therefore ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Obviously Paul dealt with the issue of Christian liberty at length. It is an important topic in the daily lives of God's people. While I will not attempt an exposition of these important passages, I want to make a few general observations.

Paul's personal conclusion regarding pursuing a practice that caused any of his brethren to stumble into sin was that he would never do it. It is hard to imagine a greater statement of emphasis than Paul's statements in Romans 14:21, or particularly in 1 Corinthians 8:13. He wanted it to be known that if any brother had a moral difficulty with an activity, even if it *was* a matter of liberty, he would never do it while the world stood. He didn't want any questions to surround his testimony, and perhaps even more to the point, he did not want to cause anyone to stumble.

Granted, Paul did *permit* the practice of partaking of meat offered to idols in these passages, but in doing this let us remember that he was permitting a practice that the elders had *previously restricted* (Acts 15), and he was permitting it only in certain circumstances. The context and all the other parties had to be considered. There were circumstances in which he said that it was not permissible to partake—and all this again presupposes that modern alcoholic beverages are a matter of Christian liberty to be kept on a par with meat offered to idols, a point that we have found many do not admit.

Should a modern Christian not be greatly moved by this noble and selfless example in the Apostle's own practice and recommendations?! Why would a spiritually minded person, especially given the great publicity that surrounds the alcohol question, choose to contradict the Apostle's example? It seems to portray the exact spirit of exerting one's rights that Paul so strenuously rebuked. And all this receives greater emphasis given the fact that it is not at all a settled question whether or not modern alcoholic beverages even fall into this category of the genuine liberties—liberties that Paul was bent on surrendering for the good of the church. How much more then should the New Testament's requirements (Acts 15) and the strong example of Paul (1 Corinthians 8) speak to us on a matter that does not find its place among those matters of genuine indifference!

A Word about Its Being “Voluntary”

In the midst of the discussions that surround our church's policy, the question of its voluntary nature inevitably surfaces. How can something that is *required* in order for someone to come into membership be in any way construed as “voluntary”?

The answer is simple. In the last analysis everything that a church requires for membership is voluntary. There is no *particular* divinely sanctioned ecclesiastical organization that a believer is required under God to join. If there were, a believer's conscience would be bound by that organization. But we believe, and one of the great battles of the Reformation reasserted, that the believer's conscience is to be bound only by the Word of God, not an institution claiming equal authority to speak for God as the Word does. A person therefore agrees voluntarily to come underneath the teaching and scriptural authority of the church whenever he applies for membership, whatever those requirements are. He does not *have* to become a member of that church to be a Christian. He volunteers to become a member of that church out of obedience to Scripture and for the good of himself and his family. He can and must, if he believes otherwise according to Scripture, volunteer to be a member of another church. He can volunteer to be a Baptist rather than a Presbyterian. He can volunteer to be an Arminian rather than a Calvinist. And in all his relations with such a church, he *and the church* must recognize their equal subordination to the Scriptures. Should a church be found, according to Scripture, to be in error or to be abusing its responsibilities or authority in the lives of God's people, the church member can and should volunteer to move his membership elsewhere.

But more to the point, our standard on this matter can be defined as voluntary from another perspective. We are not requiring anyone to make a statement one way or another regarding their own convictions concerning the Bible's teaching on alcohol. *We are not seeking to bind the conscience.* We are not questioning the conversion or spirituality of anyone who does not feel this standard to be necessary. We are simply asking our members to recognize that after due consideration, our presbytery has concluded that this course of action is the best way to guard our testimony on this matter and that anyone who comes into communicant membership should agree to submit their practice in this way. If they are persuaded that our church is the place the Lord would have them be under the means of grace and to pursue their corporate service of the Lord, then they should happily submit to this and the many other matters that church membership entails in any denomination, while their conscience remains bound by nothing but the Word of God.

A Christian does not volunteer to be submitted to the Scriptures. That comes as a part of the definition of Christianity. A Christian does volunteer for any corporate relationships among the Lord's people, however, on a great number of issues. Some of these take the form of corporate "requirements." The Free Presbyterian Church's position on alcohol is not unique among such "voluntary restrictions."

Some Pastoral Observations

While I am certain that my arguments to this point will not have convinced everyone, I hope that I have at least challenged the unjust charge

of legalism that is often leveled against our denomination and exposed it as being inappropriate. But I want to go further in this discussion and share some pastoral observations.

Even if one assumes the moderation position in the argument and allows church members to drink, the Scripture is clearly opposed to all manifestations of drunkenness. All parties then must ask the question: How should the elders of a church define drunkenness? In the United States different states have differing standards on the legal limit for blood alcohol. Which state is correct? (And, by the way, what should one say about the whole question of *the state* having rules about alcohol—say age restrictions—when some don't want the church to have any such rules?) How should the church define drunkenness? How does the Bible define drunkenness? What degree of intoxication crosses the line? These are interesting questions that the Bible leaves unanswered. Also, in what contexts would drunkenness be exposed or hidden? In the case of a church that allowed drinking in moderation, it is entirely possible that for the elders of that church to do their job in shepherding the flock, they would have to pursue a very serious and detailed accountability with reference to the drinking habits of their people. How many churches that allow drinking really accomplish this? How much drunkenness—be it slight or great, frequent or infrequent—actually goes unchecked in the church, whether in the restaurants, or on the streets, or in the home? I dare say such statistics might be sobering.

But a few more notable pastoral observations are in order. These observations I admit are in many cases anecdotal and blunt, but they represent my experience nonetheless, and so I ask the reader graciously to consider them.

More often than not, I have found that those who differ with our denomination regarding the alcohol policy normally have other significant differences with our church as well. While some have mentioned this policy as their only concern with our church and have genuinely shared our convictions on other matters, and their lives have paralleled our convictions regarding how an obedient and submissive Christian should live in our culture, in my experience these exceptions have been few. Those who challenge the standard regarding alcohol also commonly show a greater laxity with other issues of separation from the world, such as entertainment choices, dress, modesty in other matters, music (both secular and sacred), etc. Another common denominator I have noted among objectors to our policy has been a lesser degree of commitment regarding church attendance, especially at the prayer meeting and often the Sunday evening service. It is difficult for me as a minister, or as a mere observer, to believe that these commonalities are coincidental. Granted, as I have noted, there are true exceptions to these observations, and I am sure that our detractors could supply evidence of many others. But I fear that my general observations, though somewhat limited, are valid. These are not small matters.

On another front, many times people have visited our churches who have come out of other Presbyterian bodies due to their concern over the

direction of their former church on such issues as doctrinal laxity, spiritual declension, a low standard of preaching, lack of discipline, or just a general deadness. Many such visitors have been greatly blessed and refreshed by their exposure to our churches. Sometimes these folk have become critical of our alcohol policy, however, after their initial encouragement in coming to us. (This is perhaps due to the fact that some of the bodies from which they come have been responsible for literature that rebukes a policy like ours.) But such inquirers should ask themselves why our denomination has the spiritual climate that it does. Could there be a connection? There are many pieces to the puzzle; it is often a package deal. Perhaps the same concerns that have resulted in the high spiritual climate of our congregations and the concern for doctrinal purity and the high standard of preaching are also behind the careful decision of our presbytery regarding this vexing question of alcohol and the Christian in our society. Why would such inquirers to our denomination desire to move it any step closer to the climate of the church they have seen fit to abandon? This is a mystery, but a good dose of common sense might persuade an honest inquirer to consider that one cannot have it both ways. Perhaps there is in fact a good contextual reason for taking this stand today. Any reader who finds himself in this category should pause to consider the difference between idealism and realism. Alcohol is an epidemic problem in our society as a whole,¹² and sadly in the church as well. Concerned believers must look at the issue seriously, no matter what their views of moderation, alcoholic content, or matters indifferent. There is a testimony to keep.

That leads to another great practical and spiritual concern. We have been speaking primarily about the differing views that Christians have about alcoholic beverages. Let us stop for a minute and play the man. What does *the world* think about alcoholic beverages? I know that some will seek to argue at this point, but the world almost universally recognizes the dangers and associations that accompany alcoholic beverages. For example, did anyone think twice when they read an earlier reference to a “topless bar”? Probably not. The two things go so closely together that even in a booklet on this sensitive subject the applicability of such an institution may not have gained conscious attention until now. Institutions that focus on the sale and use of alcohol normally focus on other behavior that is undeniably ungodly. Other institutions that sell alcohol and are happy enough with the profit that such sales bring in but do not wish to wrestle with various types of sinful activity associated with drinking usually restrict the *use* of that alcohol on their premises. Ask some honest questions. What are the things that normally accompany drink in our society, even outside of the bars? What aspects of life do the advertisements for alcoholic beverages encourage? A Christian with any conscience about him whatsoever must normally hide himself from advertisements for alcohol today. Even the world recognizes

12 In a book arguing the case for abstinence, Peter Masters of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London (C. H. Spurgeon’s church) informs us that in the UK over half the amount spent on food in general is spent again on alcoholic beverages. Should Christians Drink? The Case for Total Abstinence (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1992), p.29. Other amazing statistics for the U.K. appear on pp. 33-34.

that drinking is a practice that accompanies and usually promotes other worldly activities. It is used as a tool to lower inhibitions. It is often used as a badge of worldly identity. I could list multiplied examples of believers who have been shocked and hindered in their own witness for Christ when they were identified with or accompanied by other believers who chose to drink. Some have found it difficult to determine the line between acceptable Christian behavior and worldliness when alcohol is used in the social recreations of professing Christians (again, often accompanied by other things questionable). This should give any Christian or church that is concerned about its testimony real cause to consider the *context* in which we wrestle with the question of modern alcoholic beverages. Context has always been a major factor in how the Lord would have His people view matters of indifference, and this still assumes the indifferent nature of alcohol. The world, perhaps not universally, but indeed largely, associates the use of alcohol with activities that are inappropriate for the Christian. Is it really wrong for the church to respond to this if it does so in a clear and careful way?

Some Concluding Thoughts

Earlier I stated that I intended to be brief in my treatment of this debate over alcohol. (Whether or not I have succeeded may be the matter of a debate of a different nature.) I have taken a most limited approach to a topic that almost begs for exhaustive study and cries unsuccessfully for resolution within the church. I want to attempt to keep my word and briefly offer some concluding thoughts. I offer them in the form of some questions to those inquiring about our church who find this standard objectionable or perhaps just new. If possible I want the reader to allow me to be lovingly blunt.

If you find yourself questioning our policy regarding abstinence, ask yourself, is the alcohol policy really your only reason for not joining our church, or is your objection to this policy only a spoken means of reducing some other less defensible differences with our church to a more defensible argument? Answer that honestly. On the other hand, if you are genuinely of a kindred spirit with our denomination regarding the great needs of the church today both doctrinally and practically, should you let this one voluntary restriction hold you back from joining a denomination that maintains such a position? Even if you are decidedly of the *informed* opinion that alcohol is a matter of indifference and further that it is wrong for the church to require abstinence—that is, you are entirely in agreement with my little syllogism and do not believe that challenges to the major or minor premises I have offered can be successful—is your disagreement over alcohol a *bigger* problem than the problems or sins that so many other churches and denominations are guilty of committing in our generation? Will you actually let your desire to drink alcohol or to allow others to drink alcohol cause you to compromise on matters of far greater spiritual

significance than this imagined breach of the doctrine of Christian liberty—matters such as ecclesiastical compromise, unbiblical affiliations, doctrinal laxity or even the admission of serious doctrinal error, spiritual impurity, worldly worship, etc.? If so, there is probably another list of questions that you should be asking yourself.

I realize that there are churches that do not share our alcohol policy that are not guilty of these things, but many are, and I have sadly watched many remove themselves from our churches, ostensibly *solely* for the alcohol policy, only to join themselves to churches that were in error or compromise on far more serious matters. What principle does this protect?!

We have a booklet on the book rack in our church written by a minister in another denomination. I suspect that this minister, or at least many others in his Reformed but Independent circles, would disagree with our policy regarding abstinence. The booklet to which I refer deals with the topic of the importance of the local church and of church membership. In it he gives some good advice on what to look for in a church. As he concludes, he asks his readers to consider that there is no such thing as a perfect church. He points out that the best of churches may even have degrees of inconsistency within them, but the importance of church membership in meeting the needs that we have as individuals and families, as well as the obligations in this regard that we find in the New Testament, compel us to bind ourselves to such a church, if it is a faithful and obedient church in the main areas he has enumerated. I am not suggesting that our policy is inconsistent but that one could just ignore that. I do not believe it to be inconsistent. But even if one deemed it to be, and if that inconsistency were the one notable exception to our perfection (Oh that that were the case!), given my knowledge of what is out there in the realm of churches today, I cannot see this issue even approaching the level of keeping someone out of membership in the Free Presbyterian Church.

Our policy is not indefensible, nor is it a simplistic attempt at manipulating God's people. It is an honest attempt by a committed presbytery at dealing with a difficult issue that must be considered from numerous directions in our contextual setting. It is not an enfeebled attempt to help our people avoid the sin of drunkenness by keeping themselves two steps away from that possibility by enforcing a Pharisaical standard. It is a thoughtful consideration of the informed opinions of differing brethren that seeks to allow those brethren to exist together in peace in a church that must maintain a testimony on a matter upon which even the world holds either serious questions or carnal associations. It is a happy parallel to the attitude and practice that the Apostle enjoined personally, and to the policies that were recommended and even enforced on occasion for all the Lord's people in the Old and New Testaments.

There is too much at stake today in the Kingdom of God to make this a reason for separation or complaint. But, if for this issue on its own merits, or for other reasons, one were persuaded not to join with us, this policy still does not supply a just cause for rebuking our denomination nor

especially of accusing it of the serious heresy of legalism. Such charges are entirely unwarranted. The leaders of each branch of Christ's church not only have the right to carefully examine and enact standards for the sake of testimony, but they have the solemn obligation to do so.