

Gateway church paper on alcohol

“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.”
Proverbs 23:29-32, written around 900BC.

Nothing has changed from Solomon’s time; the health, financial and relational cost of alcohol abuse is sobering;

- Alcohol is 10% of the UK burden of disease and death, making alcohol one of the three biggest lifestyle risk factors for disease and death in the UK, after smoking and obesity.
- Alcohol misuse costs England around £21bn per year in healthcare, crime and lost productivity costsⁱ.
- Alcohol features in 1 third of all UK divorce petitionsⁱⁱ.

When drunk, people tend to hurt themselves and others. In scripture we see alcohol abuse playing a role in Noah’s nakednessⁱⁱⁱ, Lots lewdness^{iv} and the Baptists’ beheading^v. This is why the Bible gives many warnings^{vi} against being drunk, most notably:

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit...”Ephesians 5:18

Drunkenness is not a compatible lifestyle choice with a follower of Jesus. God is no kill joy, but the giver of real joy that comes through the filling of the Spirit. A joy that may even at times appear to resemble the false joy of drunkenness;

“These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” Acts 2:15-17.

Aware of God’s heart on drunkenness it leaves the believer with one of 2 lifestyle choices:

1. Teetotalism

Complete abstinence from alcohol ensures complete protection from alcohol and any of its effects (unless Aunt Betty forgets to tell you the contents of a trifle!). It avoids the blurring of boundaries; “...have I had 3 or 4 drinks already? One more won’t hurt...” and makes a clear Psalm 4, verse 7, statement to the Lord and to the world; “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”

Under the old covenant abstinence is even commanded to certain people in scripture such as the Levite priests^{vii}, the Nazarites^{viii} and John the Baptist^{ix}. It also appears that Timothy has taken such a stance when Paul encourages him to “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” in 1 Timothy 5:23.

We must also bear in mind that many may take this stance for other convictions such as health concerns, awareness of addictive behaviour and mission to particular people groups.

2. Drinking in Moderation

Drinking alcohol without getting drunk on the other hand receives alcohol as a gift from God that it is^x, has Biblical permission^{xi}, and gives evidence to the world and to the Lord of His Spirit at work in us as we exercise self-control; “So you drink but don’t get drunk? How interesting, tell me more.”

Jesus took the drinking in moderation approach given that he miraculously made wine for a wedding party^{xii}, was accused of being a drunkard^{xiii} and at the last supper, as he commanded his disciples to drink from the cup, said; "I tell you I will not drink *again*^{xiv} of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:29.

Both the above stances are respected and affirmed at Gateway church. We want a culture where all are free to either drink in moderation or abstain completely without any feeling of shame or judgement. It's vital that we; "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3), by completely respecting each other's thought through convictions on these matters.

The serving of alcohol

As God grows us into more of an all-sorts church, there are more likely to be differing convictions on the consumption of alcohol. It could be argued from Romans 14:21: "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble", that we should ban alcohol at Gateway events so as not to cause offense to some.

Studying Romans 14 carefully, this verse cannot be used as a proof text to ban the serving of alcohol as:

- The context of this passage is to do with food and wine that had been offered to idols before consumption. Jewish Christians were avoiding these, much like Daniel in the Old Testament does^{xv}, because in their conscience they saw it as participating in pagan worship. The reference then is not just normal wine.

- The stumbling referenced in verse 21 is not referring to a moral offense, i.e. "It offends me that you drink" but a potential crossing of conscience, i.e. a Jewish Christian could eat or drink something served that they have been avoiding because of their conscience.

While it may not be wise for a believer to use his liberty and drink alcohol next to a recovering alcoholic, he should be completely free to exercise his liberty among other believers.

Although Romans 14 is about wine and food offered to idols, it does lay out some helpful principles and teaches us;

1. The importance of not judging one another.

"The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them." Verse 3.

2. Of a believers liberty:

"The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God." Verse 6.

3. A correct perspective on these kinds of matters:

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Verse 17.

4. To not let matters like this cause division:

"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God." Verse 22.

Fully convinced of the 2 lifestyle choices open to believers, as outlined above, we serve and

sometimes sell alcohol at Gateway events. In order to help those committed to teetotalism we always make any alcohol content clear and offer non-alcoholic alternatives.

We're aware this stance may be especially difficult to bear for some among us that have grown up in a domestic, church or national culture where teetotalism has been promoted as the only lifestyle choice, and ask for grace all around as we outwork this.

Serving alcohol at events enables us to limit amounts available, but as fairly new custodians to St Mark's we'll continue to keep alcohol use in the building, under review.

ⁱ <https://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/help-and-advice/statistics-on-alcohol/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ascert.biz/drug-and-alcohol-information/a-z-drugs/alcohol/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 9:20

^{iv} Genesis 19:33

^v Mark 6:14-29. It's not a big jump to suggest Herod's outlandish vow in verse 23 had something to do with him being intoxicated given he is hosting a banquet at his birthday.

^{vi} Galations (5:19-21) lists drunkenness as an act of the sinful nature, 1 Peter (4:3) lists drunkenness as something that people who follow Christ shouldn't do, Romans (13:13) says drunkenness is not decent behaviour

^{vii} Leviticus 10:9-11

^{viii} Numbers 6:3

^{ix} Luke 1:15

^x "God makes... wine that gladdens human hearts" Psalm 104:15

^{xi} "Spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice" Deuteronomy 14:26

^{xii} John 2:1-12

^{xiii} Matthew 11:19

^{xiv} Bold italics added.

^{xv} Daniel 1:8