

ANTHEM POSITION PAPER ON ALCOHOL

The elders at Anthem Hayden Church believe the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. Therefore, we hope to grow continually in our understanding of Scripture and its application to our lives. This brief position paper seeks to aid the body at Anthem Hayden in this task as it relates to the topic of alcohol.

For believers, scriptural standards of behavior must always take precedent over worldly standards. (Romans 12:2) However, it is often difficult for people, both in and outside the church, to discern the scriptural approach to alcohol as opposed to merely religious-sounding approaches. However, the distinction is an important one. Jesus routinely criticized the Pharisees for elaborating upon scriptural imperatives by creating man-made religious regulations, which we refer to as legalism. Since it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, let us not submit ourselves any longer to this yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1) We should make every effort to continue on the path of clear scriptural adherence and avoid falling into the ditch on either side: neither imposing cultural (man-made) standards as scriptural mandates, nor dismissing scriptural instruction in favor of cultural preferences. So, what does the Bible actually say regarding alcohol?

From Genesis to Revelation, alcohol is mentioned no less than two-hundred and fifty times in our scriptures. Alcohol (“wine” or “strong drink”) makes an appearance in forty-four of the sixty-six books in the Bible. It is referenced both literally and figuratively, mentioned both as a blessing and a curse, and it appears in prescribed worship practices and it is used as a symbol for evil. There are positive references to alcohol in our scriptures, as well as both neutral and negative references. For instance, the abundance of wine is used as an example of God’s blessing twenty-seven times. However, there are also seventeen clear warnings to abstain from the sin of drunkenness.

So where does this leave the believer in relation to the Bible’s implicit and explicit teachings regarding alcohol consumption? Some segments of the church consider the moderate use of alcohol to be completely acceptable while others consider any use of alcohol whatsoever to be sinful. The question presents itself: which position is scriptural, and which is man-made?

To begin, drunkenness is a serious issue and believers are not to make light of it. God groups drunkenness with sins like idolatry, witchcraft, and orgies! (Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:21, 1 Peter 4:3) It is listed among those issues that would warrant the offender’s expulsion from the church where there is no repentance and change. (1 Corinthians 5:11-13) We do not underestimate the powerful hold that alcoholism can have on a person. Anyone who is or has been an alcoholic or has been close to someone who is or has been one, knows what it is to be dominated by alcohol and its devastating effects. **We state clearly that the safest and wisest way for a believer with a history of alcohol dependence and/or abuse to proceed in their walk with God would be to abstain completely from all alcohol.** For those believers who genuinely have little temptation in this area, we should respect and encourage any individual

who comes to the conviction that they should not drink alcohol. Indeed, for some it is the only right choice to make.

While drunkenness is universally sinful from a scriptural basis, the Bible does not prohibit the consumption of alcohol in moderation. Many are surprised to discover that drinking alcohol in moderation is never explicitly forbidden in the scriptures, and in some instances, it is even encouraged or commanded. (Deuteronomy 14:26, Psalm 104:14-15, Ecclesiastes 9:7, John 2:1-11, 1 Timothy 5:23, etc.) While complete abstinence is the only right choice for many sincere believers, it remains a fact that categorical prohibition is not found in Scripture. Our concern is that, in enforcing that which we cannot substantiate from Scripture, (universal abstinence for believers) we are opening the door to an even more corrosive evil, that of legalism.

The way Jesus approached alcohol is an example for Christians to emulate. Jesus participated regularly in social events which involved alcohol. In fact, the first sign Jesus used "to manifest his glory" was to transform water into wine at a wedding reception in Cana. (John 2:1-11) The scriptures also clearly state that Jesus drank alcoholic beverages. Apparently, this practice, coupled with the company of "sinners" with whom Jesus interacted, led to his opponents unfairly accusing him of being a drunkard. Jesus' response in Luke 7:33-35 demonstrates that their accusations were without merit: "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children." We should not miss the obvious: Jesus frequented social events (such as parties) where alcohol was present; Jesus himself drank alcohol; and perhaps most importantly Jesus loved others who did as well. Furthermore, Jesus used wine in the Lord's Supper to signify the shedding of his blood, the blood of the new covenant. Jesus commands that his followers "drink of it, all of you..."(Matthew 26:27) Concluding the institution of the first Lord's Supper, Jesus promised his disciples that they would once again "drink of the vine" in his father's kingdom. (Some of the earliest Christians sinned by getting drunk while celebrating the Lord's Supper. In correcting this abuse, the Apostle Paul did not change the elements of the meal by removing the use of alcohol, but instead called worshipers to partake in a worthy way and to remember the significance of the meal. [1 Corinthians 11:21-22])

From these (and other) New Testament passages we can safely conclude that alcohol is not inherently evil, nor is its consumption prohibited. Jesus's confession of drinking wine (Luke 7:33-35, Matthew 11:18-19) clearly illustrates to all that it is permissible for believers to consume alcohol in moderation, with the obvious scriptural caveat that drunkenness is always sinful.

Some would consider our stance on alcohol to be freeing and liberating from the more rigid position of universal abstinence. However, it is important to point out that when Paul warns in Galatians 5:13 "... do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh..." it is because this can and does happen, resulting in slavery to habitual sin. May we never use our freedom in

Christ as an excuse to participate in sinful attitude or behaviors. (1 Corinthians 6:12, 1 Peter 2:16)

As followers of Jesus who share in the New Covenant of his blood, we are called to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24) Like Timothy, we are to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). This includes our approach to alcohol. Not only should our conduct be above reproach, but so should our speech. We should not speak, even in jest, in a way that improperly advocates alcohol, let alone drunkenness. Nor should our homes suggest that alcohol plays a dominant, or even significant role in our lives. We desire to exhibit clear passion for Jesus, not any lesser thing such as alcohol.

We must also carefully consider our conduct before our brothers and sisters of differing conviction and vulnerability in relation to alcohol. Let it never be that we flaunt our freedom, but rather let us be happy to exercise loving restraint for the sake of the Kingdom. While Paul's position in Romans 14:5, in dealing with what he would consider a "disputable matter," was that "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind," he goes on to give the direction in verse 13 to "stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way." Our unity in Christ should always supersede our personal freedoms.

Most important of all, we should zealously guard our witness as children of God. Jesus, the "friend of sinners and drunkards," demonstrates to us how to thrive in the midst of a fallen world without succumbing to its sinful behavior. May we never condemn the unbelieving world for continuing in their sin, but rather may we befriend and love them with the same intentionality and passion that Jesus demonstrated. Instead of sequestering ourselves away from the "sinners and drunkards" of this world, may we be as opportunistic as Jesus was to love others while unashamedly sharing the Good News with any who will listen... even if it is over a beer.

Please understand that our purpose is neither to impose unreasonable restrictions or "laws" on anyone, nor to advocate the drinking of alcohol. However, as those who care for you and who must give an account to God for you, we want to make as clear as possible what we consider to be a purely Biblical approach to a believer's approach to alcohol: the moderate and responsible use of alcohol to those who have the freedom to do so. Our prayer is that this will help you in your whole-hearted pursuit of Jesus.