

# Total Abstinence and Church Membership

by John Piper

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*John Piper argues for total abstinence from alcohol while opposing its requirement for church membership based on Biblical principles and personal conscience.*

**Scripture:** Leviticus 10:9, Proverbs 20:1, Isaiah 5:11, Romans 12:2, Romans 14:20, 1 Corinthians 6:12, Galatians 6:14, Ephesians 5:17-18, 1 Timothy 5:23

**Topics:** "Church Membership", "Total Abstinence"

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## Description

John Piper preaches on the topic of total abstinence from alcoholic drinks and its relation to church membership. He emphasizes that while total abstinence is the best approach towards alcohol, it should not be a requirement for church membership. Piper delves into the Biblical principles and personal convictions that guide his decision for total abstinence, highlighting the importance of conscience, the mind-altering effects of alcohol, its addictive nature, and the social statement it makes. He suggests amending the Church Covenant to include a pledge to abstain from harmful substances and practices without specifying them, allowing for differing convictions while promoting a holistic view of caring for one's body and others.

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## Transcript

October 4, 1981

TOTAL ABSTINENCE AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP There are two questions I want to discuss tonight. One is: Should Christians in America today abstain from the use of alcoholic drink as a beverage? The other is: Should such abstinence be a requirement for church membership? My answer to the first question is Yes and my answer to the second question is No. Total abstinence is the best way to treat alcohol today, but total abstinence should not be a requirement for membership in the local church. I'll try to show from Scripture why I have these convictions. My assumption is that we should desire to bring all our personal and church life into conformity to Scripture.

Article III of our church constitution says:

The membership of this Church shall consist of persons who confess faith on the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior, who give evidence of regeneration by a living consistent with their profession and with the views of faith, doctrine and practice of this Church, who have been baptized by immersion and who have been received into its membership according to the By-Laws of this church.

It says that members should give evidence of living consistent with "the practice of this church." The "practice" toward which the church agrees to aim is found in Article II, "Our Church Covenant."

1) Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

2) We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this Church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the Church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

3) We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment, to avoid all tattling, backbiting and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage; and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

4) We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

5) We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will, if possible, unite with a church where we can carry out the articles of this confession and the spirit of this covenant.

That is a beautiful, Biblical summary of what the church should expect all of its members to pursue. With the exception of one sentence, the requirements are Biblical and general in nature. For example, it says we will "strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge," but it does not say we will read a certain number of books or attend a certain number of classes. It says we will "contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry," but it does not make tithing a requirement (even though there is Biblical warrant for urging the tithe as a minimum). It says we will "educate our children in the Christian faith," but it does not prescribe a lesson plan or curriculum. It says we will contribute to "the relief of the poor," but it does not endorse any particular social program. In every case but one, we are called to general Biblical principles of attitude and behavior, while latitude is allowed for how the principles are applied in our particular case. Only one sentence departs from this pattern, namely, "We engage ... to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage." Here there is no Biblical principle with latitude for application. A definite action is singled out and it is forbidden. This means that every member of the church must, according to the constitution, be committed to total abstinence and that prospective members who are not teetotalers will be excluded from membership.

The sentence on abstinence in the Church Covenant seemed so out of keeping with the other parts that I did some research to see if it were part of the original. Here's what I found. For 75 years Bethlehem lived without a formal constitution. But in 1945, the church approved its first constitution which took effect January 1946. That document contains our present Church Covenant with everything exactly the same except that the words "to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage" are missing.

The present constitutional revision happened in 1965 and I presume that is when the sentence on total abstinence was inserted. I don't know how many times the Covenant has been read by the congregation in the last 16 years, but one person told me that he could not recall its being read anytime in the last eight years. Some of the deacons also recalled that when the vote on total abstinence was taken there was a split vote. That probably is why the Covenant has fallen into disuse. It prohibits behavior on which there is real difference of conscience among believers and therefore, it divides rather than unites the congregation. I would like to see the Covenant revived and to that end amended in keeping with its original spirit and Biblical breadth.

But before we talk about a specific amendment let's return to the first question: Should a Christian in America today abstain from alcoholic drink as a beverage? We will start by just getting an overview of the Biblical attitude toward alcoholic beverages and the problems associated with them. There is no reason to think that Jesus was a teetotaler since he made wine for a wedding in John 2 and said in Luke 7:33-34, "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, 'Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" The people in Jesus' day were doubly guilty because they took offense both at John's abstinence and Jesus' drinking. They slandered one as a demon and the other as a drunkard. In Psalm 104:15 wine is pictured as a gift from God to gladden man's heart, and in Deuteronomy 33:28 the hope of Israel is described as a bountiful land of corn and wine. And in Deuteronomy 14:26 God gave permission to enjoy wine at certain feasts.

But on the other side priests were prohibited from drinking wine or strong drink while serving the tent of God (Lev. 10:9). Part of the Nazarite vow was total abstinence (Num. 6:3). The Proverbs warn against the dangers of strong drink: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise"(20:1). "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of the 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. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. 'They struck me,' you will say, 'but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink" (23:29-35). "It is not for kings, O Lemuel it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted (31:4,5). The prophets also attacked the abuse of strong drink: "Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening till wine inflames them" (Is. 5:11). And in the New Testament Paul repeatedly denounces drunkenness as a work of the flesh (Eph. 5:18; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:20; 1 Thess. 5:7). And it appears that Timothy had committed himself to total abstinence for a while because Paul had to urge him, "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach" (1 Tim. 5:23).

The least we can infer from all this is that while drinking is not always viewed as wrong, its dangers and harmfulness were such as to call forth numerous warnings and in some cases (priestly service, Nazarite vow, Timothy's apostolic efforts) abstinence was seen as commendable. Drunkenness is always wrong.

The implication of this for our lives today is that we must look at the fundamental ethical principle of Scripture, take stock of our own personal and societal situation and decide whether total abstinence or moderate use is the best way to go. For myself and my family the way I have decided to go is total abstinence. I also believe, in general, that this is the best way for all believers in America today to go.

There are four basic reasons. As I describe them I will try to make their Biblical basis clear.

1. First, I choose not to drink because of my conscience.

I would feel uneasy and somewhat guilty if I were to purchase and use alcoholic beverages. The Biblical principle here is that we should not act against our conscience even if our conscience condemns us for actions that are morally neutral in themselves. Paul said in Romans 14:14, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean." Then in verses 22, 23 he says, "Happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (cf. also 1 Cor. 8:7,12). The main point of Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8 and 10:23ff. is that we should not tempt others to do what they feel qualms about doing; but that also means that we who have qualms about a thing should avoid it.

Now if there were some good reason, I could work to reeducate my conscience on this matter. But in view of what I know about alcohol I have no inclination to rid myself of my conscientious misgivings about the use of alcohol. Many young evangelicals need to have a far more positive attitude toward the sensitivities of conscience which many owe to their parents and church. It is a mark of great immaturity to be constantly kicking against the ways our parents taught us. I know I owe my conscientious misgivings about alcohol to my parents. We never drank and I am glad. I never felt the least slighted. On the contrary we were the happiest family I ever knew. Total abstinence paid off.

I might just add that I am also glad about some other so-called fundamentalist no-nos. My parents almost never went to movies and I almost never go to movies. The reason is very simple: there are almost no movies that don't ask me to be entertained by attitudes, motives, and actions which Jesus died to eradicate. My heart will not allow me to be entertained by worldliness. My parents never smoked and their way has proven best. Seminars on how to quit smoking would have been laughed to scorn as religious bigotry 25 year ago. Today it's a law in Minnesota that you can't blow smoke in my face in a restaurant. I just mention a few of these wonderful "hang-ups" to illustrate that young believers should be very slow to liberate themselves from the scruples of their parents. And in any case, one should never act against one's conscience. This is the first reason I am a teetotaler.

2. The second reason is that alcohol is a mind-altering drug.

In its effect upon the mind alcohol works most quickly as a depressant to eliminate restraints. The fine shades of moral restraint are among the first to become blurred. Further, split-second decisions and the quick neural reflexes leading to physical action become sluggish--as well as our judgment as to whether or not our critical faculties have been at all affected by our drinking" (Christianity Today, Sept. 18, 1981, p.13).

This inclines me toward total abstinence, first in relation to myself and then in relation to others. In relation to myself, what this says to me is that alcohol could hinder me in what I want most, namely to recognize and to do the will of God. The Bible says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"(Rom. 12:2). And in another place, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). The mature believer does not ask: How many enjoyable things can I do and still not transgress God's will?" But rather: Is there anything at all that I can do or stop doing which will refine my ability to recognize and do the will of God. In general, drinking alcoholic beverages does not increase one's sensitivity to the will of God. On the contrary, it weakens the

intensity of our desire to be holy as God is holy. Therefore, I feel no need whatsoever to make wine or beer or any other alcoholic beverage part of my diet. It contradicts and threatens what I value most.

In relation to others, this desensitizing effect of alcohol inclines me to total abstinence, first, because I don't want to encourage others to do what I reject for myself, and second, because the blunting of my judgment and the slowing of my reflexes could harm others both morally and physically. It is easy to see here that the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" demands that we not put our neighbors' integrity or health in jeopardy.

3. The third reason why I choose total abstinence is that alcohol is addictive.

I simply cannot see any reason why I should incorporate into my way of life a beverage which not only blurs the fine shades of moral restraints, but also could easily become habit-forming. I say with Paul, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything (1 Cor. 6:12). If someone laughs and says, "Why not prove you can hold your liquor. Why rule it out on the basis of a possible weakness?" my response is, "I've got nothing to prove. God forbid that I should boast in anything except the cross of Christ by which the world is crucified to me and I to the world (Gal. 6:14). I don't have any inclination to prove to anybody that I'm not weak. I have values in my life that are infinitely more important than proving to myself or to someone else that I can drink and not be addicted."

4. The fourth reason I choose total abstinence is to make a social statement.

Some people rank alcoholism as our second greatest health problem in America (others say 3rd or 4th). There are about 10 million alcoholics and 20 million persons who consume an immoderate amount of alcohol. About 70% use alcohol as a beverage. As a result, alcohol contributes to 205,000 deaths each year. Life expectancy of the alcoholic is reduced by at least a decade. One-half of all traffic fatalities are the direct result of the abuse of alcohol. It is directly connected to one-half the homicides and one-third of the suicides. It costs business alone 19 billion dollars a year. And now one out of every twelve marriages comes apart over drinking.

It is clear that millions and millions of people are stumbling over alcohol and ruining their lives, their families and their businesses. Christians ought to care about that and ought to want to say something and do something. What I choose to say is, "Stop drinking, America!" Or, since America is not listening to me, I say, "Stop drinking, Bethlehem!" And I choose to oppose the carnage of alcohol abuse by boycotting the product. If people can go on hunger strikes to make a political statement, and boycott Nestle's products to make a statement about child nutrition and third world exploitation; if people can go without lettuce for the sake of solidarity with Southern Californian farm workers, or swear off white bread and granulated sugar, is it really so prudish, or narrow to renounce a highway killer, a home destroyer, and a business wrecker. If we were ever hesitant to make a social statement about the tragic effect of alcohol abuse on our land for fear that we would be out of step with the times, we can put that hesitancy aside forever. Time magazine just carried a full-page ad about why one big corporation (ITT) is concerned with alcohol abuse. The danger and damage of alcohol is so great and so well-known that your insistence of an alternative drink at the office party will soon need no justification at all. Most businesses know there are so many dry alcoholics they must give non-alcoholic alternatives.

For these four reasons, then, I am a very happy teetotaler and I think you should be too. But that brings us to our second question: Should total abstinence be a requirement for church membership? My answer is, No. The reason is this: the New Testament allows for a difference of conviction and practice on this issue

in the church and therefore it is wrong not to allow for that same difference in the church today. Romans 14:20,21 puts wine-drinking in the category of eating meat and leaves the ethical judgment with the believer to grapple with whether his behavior will make the brother stumble.

The original framers of our Church Covenant were sensitive to the nature of Biblical ethics and their relation to church membership. They did not get so specific as to eliminate believers with Biblically warranted differences of conviction. But the persons who added the total abstinence clause in 1965 were also well-intentioned. They say rightly the rising harmfulness of alcohol. What I am urging church to do is amend the Church Covenant to preserve the wisdom in both of these groups of Christians.

To preserve the wisdom of the 1965 group we should include in our Covenant a pledge to abstain from harmful drugs, food, drink and practices. But to preserve the wisdom of the 1945 group we should not specify what drugs, foods, drinks or practices are intended. This allows the Biblical latitude of sincerely differing consciences, but also commits us to examine everything we eat and drink and do with a view to its harmful or loving effect on ourselves and others. No one will be able to say, "I do not drink, so I have done my duty." He must now examine why he does not drink and whether any other practices should be abandoned.

We recommend, therefore, that the words, "We engage ... to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage" be replaced by the words, "We engage ... to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink and practices which harm the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith."

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