

To drink or not to drink?

A reflection on teetotalism – Jonny Giddens

A preacher was once completing a sermon on teetotalism. With great expression he said, *'If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river.'* With even greater emphasis he said, *'and if I had all the wine in the world I'd throw it into the river.'* And then finally he said, *'and if I had all the whisky in the world I'd take it and throw it into the river.'* He sat down. The worship leader then stood very cautiously and announced with a smile, *"For our closing song, let us sing Hymn 347 'Shall we gather at the river?'"*

Imagine the confusion - do you listen to the preacher or the worship leader?! Do we listen to those Christian leaders who encourage us to drink or to those who encourage us to abstain? The question is: to drink or not to drink... that is the question!

When we look to the Bible for an answer we see very clearly that drunkenness is a sin, however drinking in moderation is not. Jesus was not opposed to the drinking of wine at Cana since he supplied it, and Paul told Timothy to *"stop drinking only water [abstaining], and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses."*

However as a family of Churches it's our belief that the nature of drink and its effects on society have changed so dramatically since biblical times that the case for teetotalism is a compelling one.

Nature of alcohol has changed

It's important to understand that the wine (the most common alcoholic drink of the NT) contained nowhere near the level of alcohol as is common today. Scientifically it was impossible to exceed 14% since distillation wasn't invented until around 1200AD. However most wine was no way near that strong since it developed an unpleasant vinegar taste as a result of the superfluous bacteria, which their technology couldn't remove. It is estimated that most Palestinian wine (which was drunk with food) was between 2% to 6% before being diluted with water, producing a drink which would typically have been between 0.5%-1.5%. Additionally, the supply of this low alcohol wine was very limited in comparison to the modern western world.

The effects of alcohol have changed

Alcohol misuse costs Britain £3.3 billion a year. However, in addition to the economic cost the social costs are far greater as these sobering statistics show:

- 50% of all road deaths are drink related
- 65% of suicide attempts are linked with excessive drinking
- There are approximately 2,350,000 alcoholics in Britain alone

- 21% of the UK population drink above the so called ‘safe limit’

Today alcohol abuse has reached epidemic proportions and what’s more, as the following graphs show, it’s getting worse.

Fig. 1
Alcohol related deaths

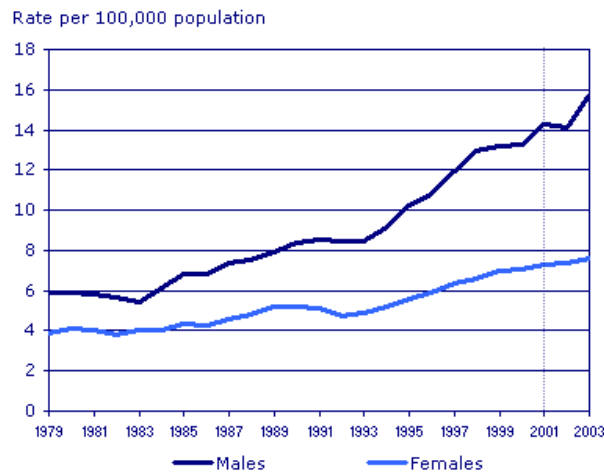
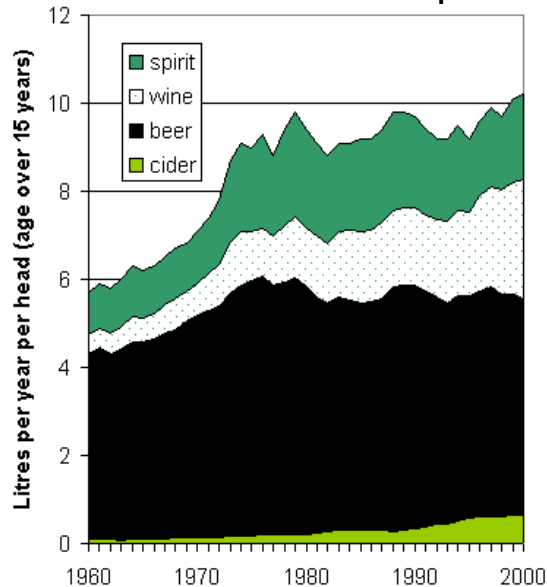


Fig. 2
Trends in UK alcohol consumption



It’s clear that the contemporary nature of drink and its effects on society are very different from New Testament times. **It is now more prevalent, significantly stronger and a cause of far greater social evil.**

So what?

As Christians we are to be ‘other people centered’ (Phil 2:3), to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:39). This basic ‘love principle’ is one of the fundamental motivations

behind teetotalism. It's out of concern and compassion for those who've come to be known as 'weaker brothers' (1 Cor 8; Rom 14, 15) that many Christians adopt this lifestyle. But who are the modern 'weaker brothers'?

In one of the chapters in which 'weaker brother theology' is expounded, Paul warns us that "*it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*" (Rom 14:22) The context of this verse is in reference to food sacrificed to idols, and Paul's basic argument is to abstain from eating such food if it causes other people to follow you and eat it against their conscience. Though the food was fine to eat, certain 'weaker brothers' felt that it was wrong. So Paul says for their sakes don't do it. In Matthew 18:6-7 Jesus warns of the judgment facing those who cause 'little ones' to fall into sin. In its strictest sense this applies to children, but it equally applies to causing anyone who is susceptible in this or any area to fall into sin as a result of our actions or words. Some modern weaker brothers include:

- Those whose conscience is weak and believe that drink is inherently evil.
- Alcoholics and those with a predisposition towards excessive drinking.
- The young and immature, whether socially or spiritually.

For the sake of these people, as Christians, we have a duty to prayerfully consider the case for teetotalism. By abstaining, the Christian enacts a prophetic warning against the abuse and danger of alcohol. Though drinking in moderation is biblically permissible we believe it's not as beneficial for highlighting the dangers of the drug, or for showing a hurting and drunk world that there is another way, a better Spirit (Psalm 63:3).

In addition, some other New Testament principles and motives for adopting a teetotal lifestyle include:

- Being a wise steward of money
- Avoiding ill health
- Increasing concentration
- Increasing receptivity and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit
- Avoiding drunkenness
- Freedom from living by rules

We believe the reasons for Christians to adopt a teetotal lifestyle in our culture are strong and compelling. **Just because an activity was acceptable or allowed in a biblical age doesn't necessarily mean that it is the best choice in all proceeding ages.** One example of this is slavery, which was permitted in biblical cultures but due to abuse and the changes in cultural attitudes has clearly become unacceptable for Christians in the Western world.

Sometimes for the Christian his public responsibility restrains him from the use of some of his private freedoms. Though we are free to drink in moderation, for the sake of our weaker brothers and the gospel, for which we do all things (1 Cor 9:23), we encourage our members to *consider* adopting a teetotal lifestyle.