

The Emerging Church and Ethical Choices: The Corinthian Matrix¹

By: Dr. Daniel L. Akin, President
 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
 Wake Forest, North Carolina

Ethical decision-making in the 21st century is confronted with new and diverse challenges. A radically biblical perspective is demanded. A genuinely Christian mindset is required. What is needed is what Don Carson calls a “world Christian.” What does he mean by that? Four things will stand out and be true of such men and women:

1. Their allegiance to Jesus Christ and his kingdom is self-consciously set above all national, cultural, linguistic, and racial allegiances.
2. Their commitment to the church, Jesus’ messianic community, is to the church everywhere, wherever the church is truly manifest, and not only to its manifestation on home turf.
3. They see themselves first and foremost as citizens of the heavenly kingdom and therefore consider all other citizenship a secondary matter.
4. As a result, they are single-minded and sacrificial when it comes to the paramount mandate to evangelize and make disciples.²

World Christians recognize that they are citizens of a different kind of nation, a different kind of kingdom, a different kind of community. And yet, they also recognize that they live in this world as well, a world that is not their home, but one in which they serve as a royal ambassadors fulfilling the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21). They are here as divine representatives to call men and women from this world kingdom into God’s glorious kingdom. This assignment calls for *wisdom* and *winsomeness*. It calls for *conviction* as well as *compassion*. It requires that we plant our feet in the *Scriptures* while keeping a watchful and discerning eye on the *culture*.

How can we live out this calling to be God’s people in God’s world? I want to provide for us a biblically based strategy for faithfully accomplishing this assignment, one that is transferable to any cultural context whether in North America or around the world. There are biblical principles that are true anywhere, anytime, and under any circumstances that will help us communicate and “live out” the gospel more clearly. A great place to discover this strategy is found in 1 Corinthians. Here was a church gone wild, a church in a titanic battle in terms of its moral and ethical decision-making. They were struggling, and struggling mightily, both inside and outside their community, and they had the awesome task of being the Church in a radically secular, immoral, non-Christian context. Maintaining a clear gospel witness was difficult and problematic. Therefore, Paul wrote this letter in order to instruct the Corinthians in how to live out a gospel-centered ethic. Within 1 Corinthians 6:12-13:13, he sets forth a number of universal, non-negotiable principles that would enable them to engage the culture with integrity while staying true to the gospel of Jesus Christ both in what they said and how they lived. I have

¹ Article taken with permission from Daniel L. Akin, “The Emerging Church and Ethical Choices: The Corinthian Matrix,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway, eds. (Nashville: Broadman, 2009).

² D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 117.

identified ten that speak not only to those who lived in the 1st century, but also those of us who are living in the 21st century as well. These principles, as Ed Stetzer says, will enable us to be biblically missional, which means “*doing mission* right where you are.”³

#1) **Will this action be helpful to me?**

“Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is helpful. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be brought under the control of anything. – 1 Cor. 6:12

“Everything is permissible,” but not everything is helpful. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up. – 1 Cor. 10:23

Certain actions are simply not helpful for believers. They accomplish little to nothing. To understand this principle, examine the following four statements. ““Everything is permissible for me”” (6:12; 10:23). ““Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods,” but God will do away with both of them” (6:13). ““Every sin a person can commit is outside the body”” (6:18). ““It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman”” (7:1). I believe these were all Corinth slogans. In other words, these statements were not things Paul was affirming. On the contrary, these were popular sayings that Paul was correcting because they were rooted in a misunderstanding of the implications of the gospel. The first three erred on the side of antinomianism; the last one erred on the side of legalism and asceticism. All were infected with a view of reality that was grounded in a Platonic-type of philosophy that saw matter as evil or, at best, inferior. Thus, some went to one extreme and said, “The body does not matter, so indulge.” Others said, “The body is bad, so I will punish it.”

Paul said there is a third and better way. The Lord is for the body (6:13) and He is going to raise it (6:14). In other words, the body is a wonderful gift from God, and it is a great thing when handled properly. So ask: Is a particular activity helpful, profitable, beneficial? Will a particular activity make me better in Christ and build me up? In other words, the question should not be, “Am I free to do it?” The question is, “Is it good for me to do this as a man or woman in Christ?”

#2) **Will this action potentially enslave me?**

“Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is helpful. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be brought under the control of anything. – 1 Cor. 6:12

Paul is confident that he is a slave to only one master. His name is Jesus. No one or no thing is to “be master” (*NIV*) over us other than Him. I will choose to live a radically Christ-centered life because I belong to Him. There is a danger in living “too close to the edge.” It can be the edge of antinomianism and libertarianism or legalism and asceticism. Either extreme is going to draw you away from Christ, and you will run the risk of being enslaved. Later, in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, Paul will point out that living near the edge of sin can even make one vulnerable to demonic attack and influence. There is little, if any, wisdom in hanging around out here.

³ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 19.

The boasts: “I have liberty in Christ” and “I am free under grace” becomes something of a moral rationalization that is more likely a personal idol erected for satisfying sensual pleasure. In the long run what you convince yourself will hurt no one will lead you yourself into a world of slavery and bondage to the cruelest taskmaster of all: yourself and your own carnal desires. True spiritual freedom is not the right to do what you want, it is the supernatural enablement of Christ to do what you ought and enjoy doing so! Gordon Fee says, “There is a kind of self-deception that inflated spirituality promotes, which suggests to oneself that he/she is acting with freedom and authority, but which in fact is an enslavement of the worst kind—to the very freedom one thinks one has.”⁴ Christians must consistently guard themselves against any action that will potentially enslave them.

3) **Will this action encourage my brother or sister in Christ?**

Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother to fall. – 1 Cor. 8:13

No one should seek his own good, but the good of the other person. – 1 Cor. 10:24

Give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks or the church of God... - 1 Cor. 10:32

Paul, for the sake of others, was willing to adjust his life that they might not be hurt or harmed. His brother or sister in Christ mattered more to him than his rights or liberties. This principle is grounded in the “mind of Christ” text of Phil. 2:3-5. For the sake of the body of Christ, your community of faith, “consider others as more important than yourselves.” Paul drives ethics to the gospel and to the cross. The gospel demands that the needs of others outweigh selfish desires. When it comes to wise decision making, a believer in Christ should always have an eye toward a potential weaker brother. As John McArthur says, “Right or wrong is not the issue, but offending someone is.”⁵

#4) **Will this action help or hinder my gospel witness?**

If others share this authority over you, don't we even more? However, we have not used this authority; instead we endure everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ. – 1 Cor. 9:12

For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law--though I myself am not under the law--to win those under the law. To those who are outside the law, like one outside the law--not being outside God's law, but under the law of Christ--to win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. Now I do all this because of the gospel, that I may become a partner in its benefits. – 1 Cor. 9:19-23

⁴ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 253.

⁵ John MacArthur, *Giving up to Gain* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace, 1982), 5.

Give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please all people in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. – 1 Cor. 10:32-33

This principle is so crucial Paul repeats it at least three different times. He makes it very clear that his ethics are missiologically and evangelistically motivated. He did not allow anything to hinder the gospel from going forth in the most effective way possible.

Some misunderstand Paul to mean that he is infinitely flexible. However, antinomianism has no place in Paul's theology, missional strategy, ethics or personal life. He would never say I am free to do anything that I want. He is "under Christ's law!" To say, "to the thief I became a thief to win the thief, to the drunkard, I became a drunkard to win the drunkard" is utter nonsense and a total misinterpretation of what Paul is saying. Paul is not infinitely flexible; he is not free from the law of Christ that places the souls of men and women at a premium. Again, the insights of D. A. Carson are helpful:

All of God's demand upon him [Paul] is mediated through Christ. Whatever God demands of him as a new-covenant believer, a Christian, binds him; he cannot step outside those constraints. There is a rigid limit to his flexibility as he seeks to win the lost from different cultural and religious groups: he must not do anything that is forbidden to the Christian, and he must do everything mandated of the Christian... Today that expression, "all things to all men," is often used as a form of derision. He (or she) has no backbone, we say; he is two-faced; he is "all things to all men." But Paul wears the label as a witness to his evangelistic commitment. Even so, he could not do this if he did not know who he was as a Christian. The person who lives by endless rules and who forms his or her self-identity by conforming to them simply cannot flex at all. By contrast, the person without roots, heritage, self-identity, and nonnegotiable values is not really flexing, but is simply being driven hither and yon by the vagaries of every whimsical opinion that passes by. Such people may "fit in," but they cannot win anyone. They hold to nothing stable or solid enough to win others to it!⁶

The bottom-line: nothing must hinder or obscure the gospel!

#5) Is this action consistent with my new life in Christ? I Cor. 6:9-11, 19

Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: no sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexuals, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, revilers, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom. Some of you were like this; but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. – 1 Cor. 6:9-11

⁶ Carson, 120-21.

Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own... – 1 Cor. 6:19

Sometimes in our desire to communicate the gospel clearly and without unnecessary baggage, we go too far and actually miscommunicate the message and send an uncertain sound. To gain a hearing from our “cultural despisers” we adjust our vocabulary, compromise purity and holiness, and thereby hide the glorious gospel that transforms and changes life. The gifted German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg in a *First Things* article entitled, “How to Think About Secularism” provides needed words of wisdom in this context:

The absolutely worst way to respond to the challenge of secularism is to adapt to secular standards in language, thought, and way of life. If members of a secularist society turn to religion at all, they do so because they are looking for something other than what that culture already provides. It is counter productive to offer them religion in a secular mode that is carefully trimmed in order not to offend their secular sensibilities.

Christians should not shy away from the fact that our lives are centered on the divine things. We offer a different way of making sense of reality and a different way of living, which go against the grain of what modern society offers as the norm. We also should not shy away from referring to the wrath of God against human sin even though most moderns ignore, disbelieve, or sweeten the pill with deceptions about God’s complaisance over sin.⁷

Tim Keller wisely informs us, “All of our personal problems and church problems come because we don’t come continually back to the gospel to work it out and live it out...Christians are enormously bold to tell the truth, but without a shred of superiority [remember 6:9-11!], because you are sinners saved by grace. The balance of boldness and utter humility, truth and love-is not somewhere in the middle between legalistic fundamentalism and relativistic liberalism. It is actually off the charts.”⁸ When considering how to live for Christ in the 21st century, our new life demands that we proclaim and live the message with great holiness, boldness, and humility.

#6) Will this action violate my conscience?

Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake, for the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. If one of the unbelievers invites you over and you want to go, eat everything that is set before you, without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This is food offered to an idol," do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who

⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “How to Think About Secularism,” *First Things* 64 (June/July 1996), 31.

⁸ Tim Keller, “Being the Church in Our Culture,” at <http://www.journeyon.net/media/being-the-church-in-our-culture.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2008).

told you, and for conscience' sake. I do not mean your own conscience, but the other person's. For why is my freedom judged by another person's conscience? – 1 Cor. 10:25-29

It is risky, even dangerous, to ignore the inner voice of conscience. It is God-given and under redemptive-reconstruction thru the Spirit and the Word. A well-informed, Scripture-saturated, Spirit-sensitive conscience will be an asset in warning us of things that are sinful, evil, and unwise.

Now, I do not think Paul would say, “Let your conscience be your guide,” as if conscience by itself is a sufficient umpire or arbitrator when it comes to good decision-making. Rather he would say, “Let your conscience *guided by Scripture* and *controlled by love* be your guide.” This will involve some tension in your lifestyle preferences, but it will also result in God conforming you more to the mind of Christ. We must get used to living with this tension. While most would love for every decision to be crystal clear, that is naïve and simplistic. Thus, Christians must know what is going on in their own cultural context. The internal voice of a believer’s conscience can be a great aid when guided by Scripture and controlled by the ethic of love.

#7) Will this action follow the pattern of the life of Jesus?

Be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ. – 1 Cor. 11:1

Recently I was listening to N.T. Wright lecture. As he raised the issue of Christian ethics he noted that a number of his British friends had poked fun at and dismissed the silly, shallow American phenomena of the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelet. However, he then went on to note that several of his children were now making their pilgrimage through the teenage years. Suddenly, he did not find WWJD to be a silly and shallow consideration at all. In fact, he rather hoped his children might adopt such an ethic in this post-modern, anything and everything goes culture of the West. Of course, it is essential to KWJD (Know What Jesus Did) if asking WWJD is going to be of any benefit. In other words, this gospel-centered, Christ-centered ethic requires an immersion into the Scriptures, and in particular the gospels. To live like Jesus you must know Jesus!

#8) Will this action show love to others?

If I speak the languages of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing. – 1 Cor. 13:1-3

“Love is the magnet that attracts others to Christ.”⁹ It is also the fulcrum that balances freedom and responsibility, theology and moral behavior. If our actions are not grounded in love, it does not matter how much we know. D. A. Carson is again helpful on this balancing act:

⁹ Chuck Swindoll, *1 Corinthians Bible Study Guide* (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1977), 16.

Strong Christians may be right on a theological issue, but unless they voluntarily abandon what is in fact their right they will do damage to the church and thus “sin against Christ” (8:12). To stand on your rights may thus involve you in sin after all—not the sin connected with your rights (there, after all, you are right!), but the sin of lovelessness, the sin of being unwilling to forgo your rights for the spiritual and eternal good of others.¹⁰

I like the insight of John MacArthur on this crucial point:

Now a Christian who is truly well-rounded, positive, and effective, thinks and acts in two ways: conceptually and relationally. He has the ability to understand concepts and communicate to people. He has knowledge plus love and this is the way it should be in the church. Our knowledge needs to be balanced with love. The great fear is that with all our knowledge we would not have love and would therefore wind up being nothing. We have to be conceptual and relational. I think that in the name of liberty some of modern-day Christianity has violated the conscience of weaker brothers and created division in the body. Variations in behavior are the major cause of division in the body, not variations in doctrine. These variations in behavior are not even necessary since we could restrict our liberty for the sake of the weaker brother and create unity. We must make sure that love is the response to knowledge.¹¹

#9) Will this action honor my body which belongs to God?

Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body. – 1 Cor. 6:19-20

In these verses Paul declares that we are not our own and have been bought with a price. Therefore, we should honor God in all we do with our bodies. Chuck Swindoll reminds us that our bodies are: 1) a physical extension of Christ, 2) a moral illustration of the Lord, and 3) a spiritual habitation of God.¹² John Piper says 6 things are true because Jesus bought your body: 1) God is for the body not against it. 2) The body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. 3) The body will be resurrected from the dead. 4) The body is not to be mastered by anything but Christ. 5) The body is not to be used for any immorality. 6) The body is to be used for the glory of God.

¹⁰ Carson, 125.

¹¹ MacArthur, 13.

¹² Swindoll, 12.

What is the result? “Use your body in ways that will show that God is more satisfying, more precious, more to be desired, more glorious than anything the body craves”¹³

#10) **Will this action glorify God?**

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory. – 1 Cor. 10:31

This climatic and over-arching principle has been called “the joyful duty of man.” It is right in its God-focus for He is the most beautiful and valuable person in the entire universe. It is right in its human perspective for it makes clear why we are here: to live for God’s glory. John Piper gets it right: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him!”¹⁴ No part of life is exempt from this principle. It is comprehensive and it is satisfying!

Putting all of this into Practice

When making ethical choices, world Christians will not wed their cultural and personal preferences to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They will vigorously keep them separate and distinct. They will not insist on their rights or their special interest that could cloud the beauty and purity of the gospel. How can a devoted Christ follower stand beneath the cross of their Savior and insist on their rights? To give up our rights for the spiritual and eternal blessing of others will be a joy and not a burden.

How will this influence the way we live as Christians? I believe the following theological matrix derived from the Corinthian correspondence can give us some guidelines to consider. Several years ago, when I served at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, my good friend Al Mohler and I often discussed how the church should worship. He helped me create the following paradigm that holds ramifications for how the church continues to live out the gospel in today’s cultural context.

A Theological Paradigm for Being the Body of Christ

– Bad Church (Christian)	+ Good Church (Christian)
+ Good Way	+ Good Way
– Bad Church (Christian)	+ Good Church (Christian)
– Bad Way	– Bad Way

¹³ John Piper, “You Were Bought with a Price,” at <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/19/817>YouWereBoughtwithaPrice/> (accessed January 18, 2008).

¹⁴ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 9.

Obviously, we want to be a good Christian in a good way. It is not difficult to discern a good Christian, because we have a perfect manual called the Bible. We can go to the counsel of the Old and New Testaments and discover God's idea for gospel ethics. Some things are non-negotiables. However, being a good Christian in a good way is not always as easy to discover. There are many gray areas. How can we discover the good way? I believe the ten principles found in the Corinthian correspondence, along with the following six guiding axioms can help us find the "good way."

Six Guiding Axioms for Finding the "Good Way"

- 1) Love will **regulate** liberty.
- 2) Love will **rein in** legalism.
- 3) That which **detracts** from the gospel will be avoided.
- 4) That which **distracts** from the gospel will be avoided.
- 5) Follow the **witness** principle.
- 6) Follow the **wisdom** principle.

Alcohol Abstinence: A Test Case

I readily confess to a personal bias when it comes to the issue of alcohol. My wife Charlotte grew up in the Georgia Baptist Children's Home because her parents were alcoholics. Her father died a lost alcoholic. Her mother, by God's grace, was saved on her death bed. Her body had been ravaged by the twin killers of alcohol and tobacco. Today her brother is a lost alcoholic as is most of the rest of her family. My sister Joy and her husband Kevin King adopted a daughter born with fetal alcohol syndrome. She began life with two strikes against her through no fault of her own. Today there are more than 40 million problem drinkers in America. Alcohol is the number one drug problem among teenagers. One in three American families suspects that one or more family members have a drinking problem. Misuse of alcohol costs our nation \$100 billion a year in quantifiable cost. Because of these experiences and many more, I have often said that even if I were not a Christian I would still have nothing to do with alcohol. There is simply too much sorrow and heartache connected to it. Avoiding this devastating drug is simply the wise thing to do.

In my own denomination, several years back Southern Baptists again passed a resolution calling for abstinence from alcohol. The resolution passed overwhelmingly, but it did generate significant debate both during and after the Convention meeting. Some have accused those supporting the resolution of being pharisaical and legalistic, traditionalists and anti-biblical. It is said that we fail to understand Christian liberty and freedom, and that we even stand against Jesus. These are strong accusations from fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. However, are they correct? Are those like myself who believe abstinence to be the best lifestyle choice really guilty of these charges? Let me respond as graciously and kindly as I possibly can, explaining

why I hold the position I do. I share my heart with no malice or ill will toward anyone, but from a desire to honor the Lord Jesus, and to protect others from the evils alcohol has visited on so many.

We should remember from a Baptist perspective that there are historical precedents for affirming abstinence. In 1886 Southern Baptists issued their first resolution on alcohol. Since then there have been almost 60 resolutions that in a united voice have addressed the risk of alcohol and the wisdom of abstinence. For 120 years Southern Baptists have made clear their stand on this issue. Individual Baptists no doubt continue to take a drink as they had before 1886, but the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole has been consistent in its stands as it pertains to beverage alcohol. I am confident that our forefathers understood the issue of Christian liberty as they passed these resolutions. I am grateful for this tradition. I believe we should continue it.

There are moral reasons for affirming abstinence. John Piper teaches the wisdom of abstinence because alcohol can be a mind-altering drug, and it can be addictive. It does not help one in doing the will of God and can genuinely be a hindrance. Further, he notes “the carnage of alcohol abuse,” and therefore he personally chooses to boycott such a product. He then adds, “is it really so prudish, or narrow to renounce a highway killer, a home destroyer, and a business wrecker?”¹⁵ Some questions are in order and deserve an answer. Does alcohol make me a better person? Does alcohol draw me closer to God? Does alcohol help me run the race faithfully to the end (Heb. 12:1-2)?

Some respond by saying the issue is not abstinence but moderation. They draw an analogy to both eating and sex. There is however a significant difference. We must eat to live. We must engage in sex to procreate. Alcohol is not a necessity for life or good living.

I am in total agreement with my spiritual hero Adrian Rogers who said, “Moderation is not the cure for the liquor problem. Moderation is the cause of the liquor problem. Becoming an alcoholic does not begin with the last drink, it always begins with the first. Just leave it alone.” My friend James Merritt wisely says, “It is impossible to be bitten by a snake that you never play with.” Alcoholism cannot strike unless it is given the opportunity. That potential becomes real with the first drink that one takes.

There are biblical reasons for practicing abstinence. Let me quickly note several that draw on our study in this chapter. 1) It is consistent with the principle of edification (1 Cor. 6:12). Alcohol does not build you up or make you better for Jesus. Avoiding it ensures you will not harm yourself with it. 2) It is consistent with the principle of refusing that which enslaves (1 Cor. 6:12). Alcohol is a drug that can impair the senses and has a potential addictive element. Like addictive pornography, it should be avoided at all cost. 3) It is consistent with the ethic of love for believers and unbelievers alike (1 Cor. 8:13; 9:19-22; 10:32-33). Because I am an example to others, I will make certain no one ever walks the road of sorrow called alcoholism because they saw me take a drink and assumed, “if it is alright for Danny Akin, it is alright for

¹⁵ John Piper, “Total Abstinence and Church Membership,” at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/313_Total_Abstinence_and_Church_Membership/ (accessed January 21, 2008).

me.” No, I will choose to set an uncompromising example of abstinence because I love them. 4) I will seek my joy and filling in the Spirit not in alcohol. I love the *Phillips Translation* of Ephesians 5:18 which reads, “Don’t get your stimulus from wine (for there is always the danger of excessive drinking), but let the Spirit stimulate your souls.” Psalm 4:7-8 adds, “You [O Lord] have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” 5) It is true Jesus drank wine, and I am sure I would have had I lived in the first century. However, there is no evidence that he ever partook of “strong drink.” As Bob Stein has carefully documented, “The term “wine” or *oinos* in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water... To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine [a fairly common ancient ratio], one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses. In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind.”¹⁶ It should also be noted that children would have drunk this diluted mixture of water and wine. It seems clear that there is no one-to-one correspondence with first century wine and twenty first century distilled liquor. Concerning the latter I believe the Lord Jesus would have no part.

Let me conclude with some practical considerations. Should those who practice abstinence look down on those who do not? The answer is an unqualified no. That is pride and therefore is sin. It is true that alcohol has contributed to many going to hell, but pride, no doubt, has done so in even greater numbers. A smug, prideful abstainer without Jesus is just as lost as the poor drunkard who is always in search of another drink. Those who believe in abstinence should be gracious and humble, kind and caring, loving and patient.

As a pastor or church leader, would I demand abstinence for church membership? No, I would not. Would I demand it for leadership? Absolutely! The principle of Proverbs 31:4-5 is appropriately applied here, “It is not for Kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”

I agree with John MacArthur. Can I say it is always a sin to take a drink? No. Can I say it is almost always unwise? Yes, because it violates the biblical principles of wisdom and witness. One of America’s leading pastors is Andy Stanley. He wrote a book entitled *The Best Question Ever*. That question is this, “What is the wise thing for me to do?” I challenge anyone to show me the superior wisdom of drinking “in moderation,” as opposed to not drinking at all. This is not legalism but love. This is not being anti-biblical but pro-brother and sister. This is not working for evil but for good. Given the world in which we live, I believe such a lifestyle honors the Lord Jesus. I believe it pleases Him. It is the wise thing to do.

¹⁶ Bob Stein, “Wine Drinking in New Testament Times,” *Christianity Today* 19 (June 20, 1975), 10-11.