

Methodist attitudes to alcohol

Summary

1. The question has been raised in the Methodist Council and in a recent Memorial to the Conference: should the Methodist Church permit the consumption of alcohol on church premises? The Methodist Conference debated the issue in 1999 and commended discussion of this paper throughout the Church. Those minor changes which have been made are underlined.

2. Methodist attitudes to alcohol have changed significantly in recent decades from a widespread commitment to abstinence, to one in which moderate, responsible drinking is more common. This movement was indicated in the 1987 Conference Report *Through a Glass Darkly*, and was reflected in its recommendations. Practices vary within the British Churches; the relaxation of our rules would move us more towards that of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and many of our European Methodist neighbours.

3. Drinking habits in Britain have become both more harmful and more responsible in recent years. More people drink more; more people drink responsibly; more people abuse alcohol. A change in our rules would signal encouragement to those who wish to foster the practice of responsible drinking, although it might to a lesser degree be portrayed as an indifference to the hazards of alcohol abuse. It must also be borne in mind that much medical opinion has also moved in favour of moderate alcohol consumption, advocating the consumption of a glass or two of red wine a day.

4. With these considerations in mind, a discussion is invited within the Church as to whether our practice should be changed. If such a decision were taken, our Standing Orders would be amended accordingly, and some elements of the recommendations for Church practice approved by Conference in 1987 might be added. Any such change might leave Church Councils free to make their own decisions about the consumption of alcohol on Church premises. It seems widely agreed that Communion wine should not be alcoholic, though that judgment can usefully be tested in the discussion in the Church which is proposed.

Introduction

5. The question of the consumption of alcohol on Methodist premises has recently been raised in the Methodist Council, and by a Memorial to the Conference *and in the Conference debate in 1999*. The 1987 Report *Through a Glass Darkly* outlined the then Methodist position on alcohol issues, and this paper draws substantially on that important work. It registered the importance of Scripture and the Methodist tradition, and proposed guidelines for Methodist practice and public policy. Its findings are updated in what follows. Some comparison is made with the practice in other British Churches. Brief comparison is also made with the levels of alcohol consumption in other European countries, and the harm that arises from it. *Finally, there is a brief discussion as to whether a fundamental Christian principle is at stake.*

The Bible

6. Attitudes to alcohol in Scripture are varied. The material was summarised in the 1987 Report as follows.

7. Biblical writers recognise the dual attributes of alcohol, its capacity both to give pleasure and cause harm. The Scriptures include both condemnations of drunkenness and affirmations of alcohol as a good gift from God.

8. *Isaiah 5:11* contains a clear warning against the misuse of alcohol: 'Ah, you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine. . . ' Hosea remarks on the harmful effects of intoxication: 'Wine and new wine take away the understanding' (*Hosea 4:11*). Paul writes to the Christians at Ephesus:

'Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (*Ephesians 5:15-20*)

9. For the Psalmist (*104:15*) wine is given by God 'to gladden the human heart'. When the fortunes of Israel are restored by God, 'they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine' (*Amos 9:14*). Jesus and his disciples drank wine; and Paul writes to Timothy: 'No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments' (*1 Tim. 5:23*).

10. Wine is used metaphorically in both the Old and the New Testaments to describe what is desirable and what is undesirable.

11. This double attitude to wine is eloquently summarised in a passage from the Apocrypha:

'Do not try to prove your strength by wine-drinking, for wine has destroyed many. As the furnace tests the work of the smith, so wine tests hearts when the insolent quarrel. Wine is very life to human beings if taken in moderation. What is life to one who is without wine? It has been created to make people happy. Wine drunk at the proper time and in moderation is rejoicing of heart and gladness of soul. Wine drunk to excess leads to bitterness of spirit, to quarrels and stumbling. Drunkenness increases the anger of a fool to his own hurt, reducing his strength and adding wounds.' (*Ecclesiasticus 31:25-30*)

12. Examples of abstinence from alcohol are also to be found in the Bible. Priests should not drink alcohol during their period of service (*Ezekiel 44:21*). Nazarites were not permitted to drink it during the period of their vow, but were free to do so when their term of dedication was complete (*Numbers 6:20*). The Rechabites refused to drink it because it was the product of a settled agricultural way of life, rather than the nomadic way of life which they chose to follow (*Jeremiah 35:6*). John the Baptist abstained from its use (*Luke 7:33-34*).

Biblical religion has both world-affirming and world-denying elements. In the Old Testament there are exhortations to fasting. Jesus did not hold a dualistic view that material things are evil (*Mark 7:15ff*); yet he exhorted his followers to self-denial (*Mark 8:34*). He condemned ostentatious fasting (*Luke 18:12*), but seems to have taken it for granted that his disciples would fast after his earthly life (*Mark 2:18-20*); and indeed he himself fasted (*Matt. 4:2*). Similarly, Paul was opposed to prohibitions of the use of material things (*Col. 2:20-22*) yet advocated a rigid discipline in physical things (*1 Cor. 7:27*). Fasting does not mean merely abstaining from what is good. Its purpose is not always explicit. Often it is an outward sign of repentance (*Joel 2:12*), but it is also linked with intercessory prayer (e.g. *2 Samuel 12:16*), as being in itself a means of grace.

13. In *Romans 14:21*, Paul addresses the important question of a Christian's duty towards weaker members of the community:

'It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.'

This phrase enunciates an important principle: that Christians have a duty to consider what effects their conduct may have on others.

The Historical Context

14. The Methodist Church is closely associated in many people's minds with the temperance movement, and rightly so. Yet the Methodist attitude to drink, to the opposed claims of moderation and total abstinence, is a complex one. The historical context was described in the 1987 Report as follows.

15. Whilst the Wesleyan Methodist Church was among the last of the denominations to endorse the principle of total abstinence, the Primitive Methodist Church was recommending temperance societies as early as 1832; and when in 1841 the Wesleyan Conference resolved that no unfermented wine should be used in Holy Communion anywhere in the Connexion, the Primitive Conference resolved exactly the opposite. The 1841 Wesleyan Conference also resolved that no Wesleyan Chapel should be lent for meetings of temperance societies and that no preacher should go into another circuit to advocate teetotalism without the consent of the Superintendent of that Circuit. The resolutions of the Conference were not universally accepted within Wesleyan Methodism, and some Cornish Wesleyan teetotallers formed a sect of their own.

16. Up to 1853, the main emphasis of the temperance movement was on personal abstinence. From 1853 onwards, it shifted to legislative controls; and it was during this second phase that the churches became more involved.

17. In 1874, the Wesleyan Conference appointed a Temperance Committee 'to promote legislation for the more effective control of the liquor traffic; for the reduction in the number of public houses, for the closing of such houses on the Lord's Day, and in general for the suppression of intemperance'. The Conference also set up Bands of Hope as a counter-influence to the custom of drinking; and in 1879 it recommended that special reference be made to temperance in all its churches on Sunday, 14 December.

18. It has been suggested that Wesleyan involvement in the temperance movement was allied to a strong sabbatarianism and it is interesting to note that whilst Wesleyans comprised only 7 per cent of the names on an 1866 list of teetotal ministers, they comprised 48 per cent of the signatories on petitions in 1863 for Sunday closing (the Congregationalists were second highest with 10 per cent).

19. The Primitive Methodists who had made such a contribution to the early temperance movement continued their activity. They too founded Bands of Hope and established a Temperance Sunday. The Methodist New Connexion, which had spent its early years wrestling with organisational problems, directed the main thrust of its involvement to promoting legislation for the control and suppression of the sale of alcoholic drinks.

20. Teetotalism was popular amongst Bible Christians, although in 1854 the Conference came down heavily against the practice of allowing only teetotalers to preach; there were later moves at district level to exclude licensees from holding office within the church but no resolution of the Conference was ever passed on this issue.

21. When the various branches of Methodism came together in 1932, the united Conference passed a regulation requiring a Superintendent Minister who nominated a candidate for the ministry to answer the question, 'Is he a total abstainer?' The question remained in standing orders until the mid-1960s when it was replaced by a question asking whether the candidate had read the Conference declarations on social questions.

22. There were Conference declarations on alcohol in 1933, 1948 and 1951. The Conference of 1951 made a strong appeal 'to practise total abstinence from alcoholic beverages, not as a burdensome duty, but as a privilege of Christian service'. This probably represented the peak of official support for abstinence in the Methodist Church, and after this time such support declined rapidly. *That point is made quite conclusively in George Thompson Brake's excellent short work on Methodism and drink, pages 72-74.*

23. In 1974, the 1951 Conference Declaration on Total Abstinence and Temperance Reform was replaced by a Declaration on the Non-medical Use of Drugs which recognised the 'sincerity and integrity of those who take differing views on whether they should drink or abstain'. In 1977, the use of alcohol on domestic occasions in private homes on Methodist property was permitted. *It was through this decision that the Methodist Church affirmed in principle the validity of those differing views.*

24. Surveys into Methodist ministers' attitudes to alcoholic drink, conducted by the Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation, have revealed a declining proportion of total abstainers since 1962. In 1962, 64.6 per cent declared themselves to be total abstainers. By 1972, this proportion had declined to 42.1 per cent and by 1982, to 36.8 per cent. The proportion of declared non-abstainers rose from 9.9 per cent in 1962 to 29.3 per cent in 1972 and 42.9 per cent in 1982. (The response rate was 75 per cent in 1962, 69 per cent in 1972, and nearly 80 per cent in 1982.)

25. Underlying this change in attitude was a belief for many that total abstinence created a barrier between Christians and the very people with whom they should be building bridges. Some of the older

ministers appeared to have been abstainers because of the stance of the church and now felt that the norm of many of their congregation was moderate use of alcohol; so where there had once been pressure for the ministry to take a total abstinence stand, pressure was now towards moderate use of alcohol.

26. A Division of Social Responsibility survey into attitudes and usage among laypeople, conducted in 1982, indicated that a substantial majority of Methodists occasionally drink alcohol; that the frequency of their use is, on average, somewhat below the national norm; and that there is still a significant minority who drink no alcohol at all. Those who responded to the survey claimed that their attitudes to and use of alcohol had not changed significantly over time. There is some indication from the survey that attitudes to alcohol vary according to age: those in the older age groups are more likely to be opposed and to abstain from its use.

The Current Position

27. Since 1987, Methodist attitudes and practice in relation to alcohol appear to have changed in line with that established trend. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the question of abstinence is no longer one which arises in any strong form, either in training or in the societies. Many more issues concern our people, to a far greater degree. They are concerned about social justice, domestically and internationally. Social justice and abstinence are no longer seen as linked as once they were. That change in Methodist sensibility dates back to the end of the First World War. The Temperance Movement achieved its highest peak during those war years, but an immediate decline then set in. It is also the case that the Standing Orders prohibiting consumption of alcohol on Methodist premises date back only to 1941. Again, a decision was taken under rather special wartime circumstances; as indicated above, that height of concern again declined rapidly in peacetime.

28. Our rules have been further relaxed due to the widespread establishment of Sharing Agreements and Local Ecumenical Partnerships. The communities created in these ways may be predominantly Methodist, but they are not governed by Standing Orders.

29. The Methodist Youth Conference has debated the issue on two occasions, and a wide variety of views was expressed. On both occasions the Youth Conference has resisted any change to our rules. It is of great importance that this variety of views should be given prominence in the debate that now lies before the Church.

30. The changes which informed the 1987 Report *Through a Glass Darkly* have since accelerated. The recommendations of that Report in regard to Methodist practice were as follows:

That all Methodists

- **consider seriously the claims of total abstinence;**
- **make a personal commitment either to total abstinence or to responsible drinking;**

- **give support wherever possible and by appropriate means to those who suffer directly or indirectly from alcohol misuse;**
- **unite to support pressure on government and public opinion for a programme designed to control consumption and reduce harm.**
- **That Methodists recognise the importance of example and education in family life and,**
- **where they practise total abstinence take special care to avoid authoritarian attitudes which may be counter-productive; and**
- **where they practise responsible drinking take special care to demonstrate that this also involves self-control.**
- **That the Methodist Church actively engage in the promotion of responsible attitudes to alcohol and in the support (whether directly or indirectly) of those suffering the harmful consequences of their own alcohol misuse, or that of others.**
- **That the promotion of responsible attitudes to alcohol be identified within the Standing Orders of the Methodist Church.**

Drink and other British Churches

31. The Church of England, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales are among those churches which require communion wine to be alcoholic, and which permit the consumption of alcohol on church premises. Many Roman Catholic premises have full licences.

32. The Church of Scotland recommends that communion wine should be non-alcoholic, and that alcohol consumption should be moderate. It also discourages the consumption of alcohol on church premises.

33. The United Reformed Church requires communion wine to be non-alcoholic, but permits local congregations to decide whether alcohol may be consumed on church premises.

34. The Baptist Union of Great Britain leaves decisions about consumption of alcohol to local congregations. Baptist churches can therefore be found in which communion wine is alcoholic, and alcohol is served on church premises. The general experience is one of prohibition, however.

35. The Society of Friends forbids the consumption of alcohol on its premises.

36. Where churches permit the sale of alcohol on their premises, it is usual for them to apply for an occasional licence which permits the sale of alcohol under quite stringent conditions; or a table licence, which enables members to bring their own alcoholic drinks.

Drink in British Society

37. General levels of alcohol consumption have increased steadily in recent years, and now approach continental European levels. But the overall picture is quite complex, *as shown in the figures given by Britain's leading advocacy and care group, Alcohol Concern*. Consumption levels have risen by 50 per cent since 1965. Beer consumption has declined sharply, the consumption of spirits has remained roughly the same, and the consumption of wine has more than doubled.

38. The wider European experience is also complex; *again, figures are provided by Alcohol Concern*. French and Italian levels have fallen dramatically, but they are still much higher than those in the UK, Sweden and Ireland. It is significant that these countries, with lower levels of consumption, also suffer the highest incidence of alcohol problems. France, however, does remain a special case. Levels of consumption have declined, but still remain high by UK standards. But levels of alcohol-induced illness and death are much higher than those experienced in Italy.

39. These figures suggest that the question is not how much is drunk, but how, and why. Where drinking is frequent and moderate, and accompanied by food, a relatively civilised drink culture exists. Where drink is taken infrequently and immoderately, with a view to getting drunk quickly, then a barbaric drink culture has developed, even though overall levels of consumption may be low.

40. The potentially harmful effect of regular large amounts of alcohol has been recognised for a very long time. However, it must now be acknowledged that a growing body of medical research shows the beneficial effect of light or moderate drinking. A consensus of medical opinion now suggests that one or two glasses of wine a day reduces the incidence of coronary heart disease and increases life expectancy; *but these suggestions are not conclusive and should not be seen to count heavily against a conscientious commitment to abstinence*.

41. The European message is fairly consistent. Where there is a tradition of binge drinking, social sanction keeps overall levels low, but does little to address the problem of alcohol abuse. Where drinking is accompanied by food, or practised in a family context, a more civilised pattern of consumption is evident. Alcohol is a dangerous substance, easily abused; but the pattern that has developed substantially in British society, and among the Methodist people, is one which practises responsible attitudes to alcohol.

Conclusion

42. The pattern of alcohol consumption among Methodists has clearly changed, and it must be decided whether that change should be reflected in our rules concerning the consumption of alcohol on Methodist premises. Any such amendments might permit Methodists to drink responsibly on Methodist premises. They would emphasise a continuing concern with issues of alcohol abuse. They would probably maintain the prohibition of alcoholic wine at Holy Communion. They might incorporate the constructive recommendations for Methodist practice drawn up in the 1987 Report, as laid out above.

43. *It seems reasonable to conclude, however, that no fundamental breach of principle would be involved in a change in our rules of the sort envisaged. The nature of the principle at stake has always been in dispute within the Methodist Church — for non-abstainers vigorously insist that their stance is an equally*

principled one. Sometimes the Church moves in the direction of abstinence, as it did in 1941 with the prohibition of alcohol on church premises. Sometimes it moves in the direction of responsible drinking, as it did in 1977 when alcohol was permitted on private Methodist premises. This is a matter over which the temperate exercise of prudence might be advised; other questions should, perhaps, engage our full-blooded passions.

44. It is recommended that this paper be discussed widely in the Methodist Church, and that the question should be debated at the Methodist Conference in 2000.

The specific questions to be discussed are:

(1) Should Methodist Standing Orders be amended to permit the consumption of alcohol on Methodist premises?

(2) Should the amended Standing Orders include constructive directions on the question of alcohol as suggest in the 1987 Report (see above, paragraph 30)?

(3) Should Church Councils be permitted to decide whether alcohol may be consumed on Methodist premises?

(4) Should the prohibition be retained on the use of alcoholic wine in the celebration of Holy Communion?

Resolution

The Conference commends the discussion paper *Methodist Attitudes to Alcohol*; encourages widespread discussion throughout the Connexion; requests that responses and suggestions arising from the discussions be sent to the Revd David Deeks no later than 1 March 2000 and directs the Methodist Council to prepare a debate for the Conference in 2000.

The Conference adopted the resolution.

Address for responses: The Rev David Deeks, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5JR

Appendix

The relevant Standing Orders are as follows:

014 Gambling and other activities

(3) Activities relating to intoxicants and forbidden on Methodist premises by Standing Order 922 shall not take place elsewhere in the name of the Church.

922 Intoxicants

(1) Subject to clause (3) below the supply, sale or use of intoxicants on Methodist premises is not permitted in any circumstances, nor may Methodist premises be used in such a way as to advertise or promote, whether directly or by means of sponsored events, the sale or use of intoxicants.

(2) In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper the wine used shall be non-alcoholic.

(3) Clause (1) shall not preclude the use of alcoholic drinks on domestic occasions in private homes, nor the lawful supply, sale or use of such drinks in other residential premises with the consent of the Trustees and subject to such conditions as they may prescribe.

Closure of Chapels

(3) When offering any chapel or former chapel for sale, lease or other disposition the trustees shall have regard to any authority from the Methodist Council under paragraph 20(2) of the Model Trusts and shall, if so authorised by the council under the said paragraph, take all possible steps, by the exaction of suitable covenants and otherwise as they may be advised, to secure that the premises shall not be used for the manufacture, distribution, sale or supply of intoxicating liquors, nor for any purpose in connection with the organisation or practice of gambling in any of its forms, nor as a public dance-hall, nor (subject to the proviso to paragraph 23[2] of the Model Trusts) for such religious purposes as may be specified in any such authority, nor for any trade for gain on Sundays.

References

- Alcohol Concern: *Sensible Drinking Limits*, 1996; *International Consumption Statistics*, 1998; *UK Consumption of Alcohol, 1965-1996 — Statistics*, 1998
- Andrew Barr, *Drink*, Banton 1995
- George Thompson Brake, *Drink: Ups and Downs of Methodist Attitudes to Temperance*, Oliphants 1974
- Gwylmor Prys Williams and George Thompson Brake, *Drink in Great Britain 1900-1979*, Edsall 1980
- Gwylmor Prys Williams and George Thompson Brake, *The English Public-House in Transition*, Edsall 1982