

W. SPEAR

Dear Elder,

**An Open Letter on
Alcohol and Abstinence**

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Synod Temperance Committee
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A Synopsis for Busy Men

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❖ Dear Elder, An Open Letter on Alcohol and Abstinence ❖

I love our church. I love belonging to the Body of Christ and my deep desire is to see the Reformed Presbyterian denomination become what God wants it to be. I am excited about the actual and potential growth we are seeing in his church.

also love the Word of God. No matter how many Bible studies, sermons, classes, or seminars we host, we will never exhaust the practical value we find there. New combinations of passages or new experiences we are going through reveal fresh insights into God's mind and will for His people. Principles that speak directly to the needs of today's church and world are available to the diligent seeker.

have counted it an extraordinary blessing throughout my life to be able to love both this church and God's Word consistently. The truth I find in Scripture is being preached from our pulpits, and the emphases of the denomination get right to the heart of God's revealed desires for us. Communion is not a Reformed Presbyterian word! This denomination is not one that teach that wheat and chaff must and should exist together in a particular congregation. Where there is sin, it must be rooted out...the sooner the better. The Bride of Christ must strive for purity in life and worship. It was not until so much babble when I vowed as a member "to submit in the Lord to the teaching and government of this church as being based upon the scriptures and described in substance in the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America."

I often wondered what it would be like to be a person in another denomination, perhaps aware of discrepancies between church doctrine and Scriptural injunctions. At what point would it become necessary to break from that denomination to search for one more faithful to God's Word? How many inconsistencies would it take before an honest growing believer would feel compelled to leave ship elsewhere? I thanked God that these considerations were just theoretical for me.

I wait...just as gratefulness to God starts to turn the corner toward denominational pride, I see the Devil prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour! **Satan does not want a church like ours to thrive.** He is in his best interest to destroy our zeal for the work of God, or to lead us into the pit of worldly anonymity. And his preference is to do it quietly over a long period of time. He would rather not hit us with sudden disaster, for that would wake us up to his schemes. On the contrary, he would rather lull us to sleep. Thirty years down the road some may awaken to find that the

ticularly in regard to worship, but thankfully we had the support of many fellow believers in our stand against alcohol. Drinking or not drinking is not an appropriate test of true faith in Christ (as some groups would like us to think), but enough people—believers and non-believers—think alcohol should be anathema for Christians that we must consider our testimony before we grant ourselves a new “freedom” (or curse). **Why do so many in the world think alcohol should be off limits for professing Christians? Because they know what drinking is for!** It is for breaking down one's inhibitions or for trying to forget one's troubles, inconsistent behaviors for a person who claims to be under the control of a divine authority.

Let me create a “perfect world” scenario. Adam and Eve never sinned, so they never died. God still walks in the Garden with them and their descendants. History goes on, and now it is 1992. We are alive, in perfect communion with God, nature, and all mankind. Does alcohol as a beverage exist? **The effects of alcohol on major organs and systems of the human body are well known, and all are negative. In many studies, the harmful effects begin prior to that nebulous line called “drunkenness.”** “Alcohol, even in small amounts, causes irreparable damage to brain cells...some die and others are altered. It slows the rhythm of brain waves, and in time it will block memory function and dull senses...It has been linked to cancer of the stomach and intestines...Functioning liver cells die from alcoholic poisoning ...Alcohol weakens the body's defenses against infection (exactly what AIDS does)...alcohol has been linked to birth defects in babies,” [**Beer and Wine. The Bible's Counsel.** William Shea, *Signs of the Times* - November, 1988, Pacific Coast Publishing Association, Nampa, ID].

I do not suppose the Bible would have been written in a perfect world. The Bible's function is to reveal God's will and Jesus Christ; in a perfect world, we know God's will, and there is no need for a sacrifice of atonement. But I do think science would have progressed as far or farther than it has come in our imperfect world, so these deadly effects of alcohol on the body would be known. Alcohol as a beverage, with all of its negative side-effects which tend toward the death of a body, would never have been manufactured!

So what place can it have in the lives of God's children who are called to separate from the wicked world in which we live? But we have much more than fallible science. We have the Bible, written to show us how to live in a fallen world. Ephesians 5:8-18, “...you were once in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose

them...Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. **Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.**”

Section 26 of the **R.P. Testimony** declares that, “it is altogether wise and proper that Christians refrain from the use, sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages.” Using my very average brain, I can derive from logic that **not to refrain** is altogether foolish and improper. **Refrain, like abstain, is an all or nothing word.** I cannot “refrain a little”; I cannot be a better refrainer than another refrainer. There are no degrees of refraining or abstaining. I refrain 100% or I do not refrain at all. If I use, sell, or manufacture alcoholic beverages once, I am not refraining, and this church would seem to teach that I am foolish. Not foolish-silly, like my baby girl who runs in circles until she falls down. Foolish like those who say in their hearts, “Surely there is no God, especially a God who would dare tell me how to live.”

According to the **Testimony** and my logic, then, I am wise and proper as regards beverage alcohol if I abstain, or I am foolish and improper if I do not. The **Testimony** at this point applies to all Christians. May not a church like ours, made up of Christians, require its elders and deacons to vow to live wisely and properly? What kind of church would permit improper fools to preach from the pulpits? Not this one, praise Jesus. Read our **Testimony!**

To behave foolishly is not an option for those who claim Christ. The passage I quoted from Ephesians 5 calls us to live...as wise. The entire Book of Proverbs was written to show God's children how to live wisely. Pages concerning Proverbs should be well worn in the Bibles of all Christians. **What does Solomon (a man who often neglected his own commands) have to say out the use of alcohol?**

Proverbs 20:1—“Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” To intentionally choose to be unwise is to choose the path of destruction. What is a mocker? One who ridicules God and defiantly rejects His law. One who is proud and arrogant, full of insults, red, and strife [Psalm 1:1 ; Proverbs 1:22 ; 21:24 ; 29:8]. This is how inspired Scripture speaks of wine!

Proverbs 23:29-35—“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Who sees who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper...” If we

must not even gaze upon wine, how may we expect to consume it?! Dr. R. Nolds states that the ancient languages with which Scripture was written had no word for "alcohol" or "alcoholic," so Solomon chose the word "red" to describe a characteristic result of drinking this alcoholic wine (bloodshot-eyes, red nose).

Proverbs 31:4,5—"It is not for kings, O Lemuel—not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights." The rulers in the church are its elders, and young men are to aspire to be elders...so they too must avoid drinking wine and craving beer. If you do not think this negative requirement for rulers applies to you, dear elder, consider Solomon's description of the work this abstaining ruler is to do. A ruler must remember the law, and give the oppressed what is rightfully theirs. **Anyone in a position where it is important to remember God's law and to care for the oppressed must strongly consider God's direction to kings and rulers regarding abstinence from wine and beer.** In the New Testament church those charged with remembering and administering the law are the elders and those who care for the oppressed are the deacons.

Exactly what was this stuff Solomon seems to be prohibiting? Was it the unfermented juice of grapes? No, for wine was praised in many Bible passages as a mark of God's blessing (wine in Scripture can mean either fermented or unfermented grape juice; context must determine the meaning). As further evidence, unfermented grape juice does not produce these **fruits of sin: mocking, brawling, strife, complaints, bruises, bloodshot eyes, strange sights, confusion, forgetfulness, and deprivation of others' rights.** What does produce this Rogues' Gallery of vices? Fermented grape juice! You may argue, "No, intemperate use of fermented grape juice..." but that is not what Solomon wrote. "Wine is a mocker. Do not gaze at wine. It is not for kings to drink wine."

Furthermore, the juice so clearly forbidden by Solomon could not have contained more than 14% alcohol. The strongest concentration of alcohol that fermentation can produce is about 14%. When that level is reached, the process of fermentation stops. The Chinese were probably the first to distill liquor from wine. They heated their rice wine, driving off the alcohol first. By collecting this alcohol separately, they were able to make spirits with alcoholic concentrations as high as 93%. This process, known as distillation, was brought to Europe around the 10th century A.D. [**Addiction: Its Causes, Problems, and Treatments**]. So whether or not you accept that alcoholic beverages were forbidden by Solomon, the debate pertains only to

wine with 14% alcohol. **What would Solomon have to say about most of the drinks sold in bars and liquor stores today, containing between 40 and 50% alcohol?!**

Why was Solomon so concerned about the drinking of this beverage? He could see by wise observation and divine inspiration what science has discovered in our day about the short-term effects of drinking alcohol. Alcohol is a drug, and like other drugs it has certain effects on the mind and body. The blood carries alcohol to every part of the body, including the brain, where alcohol has its greatest impact. **Alcohol acts to weaken the part of the brain that controls behavior.** Those who have two-and-a-half drinks within an hour find that it impairs judgement [**Addiction: Its Causes, Problems, and Treatments**]. **This process of losing control over one's reasoning and behavior starts with drink number one.** Of course, at that early stage it may not be noticeable, but the process has begun. **Can a Christian sinlessly give up even 1% of his reasoning ability for personal pleasure?** Ephesians 6:18 tells us to be alert, in conjunction with putting on the full armor of God for spiritual warfare. I Thessalonians 5:6 and I Peter 5:8 command us to be alert and self-controlled, for, "your enemy the Devil prowls around looking for someone to devour."

I fully know that there is not a single verse in the Bible which reads, "Thou shalt not drink alcohol." Neither is there a single verse that states, "Thou shalt not drink Liquid Crystal Drano," nor, "Thou shalt not drive thy car off a cliff," but I feel I know the mind of Christ on those behaviors! If the Bible was a complete list of every forbidden activity, it would not only be 100-feet thick, but it could never have a final page. New "advances" in culture and technology bring new sets of rights and wrongs which members of previous generations could never have anticipated (did designer drugs or crack cocaine exist in the time of Christ?). **But the Bible never claims to be an encyclopedia of sinful behavior. Rather, it focuses on the right sort of behavior for the Christian (the Two Great Commandments, for example), and principles with which we may discern godly or wicked behavior in particular circumstances.**

I believe Proverbs 23:31 forbids beverage alcohol to those pursuing wisdom. And I believe that Proverbs 31:4-5 prohibits Christian leaders from consuming alcohol. However, many believers are either unaware of these verses, or they evidently deny the conclusions I have drawn from them. **Therefore, we need also to examine the Scriptural principles which apply to this question: to drink or not to drink?**

drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."

As I see it, there was one way eating meat could have caused Paul's brothers to fall. Andy, feeling that meat-eating was forbidden (because it had previously been offered to a pagan idol) would be encouraged to eat it anyway by observing the actions of his brother Zed. Andy is in sin ("The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith...everything that does not come from faith is sin"), and Zed is in sin ("...it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble").

The same reasoning applies to the beverage use of alcohol, but there is also another way the "responsible" drinking believer may become a stumbling block. In the first scenario, each meat-eating believer has the opportunity to repent and to quickly be restored on the road toward sanctification. Alcohol is not like meat! Perhaps Andy is avoiding alcohol because he has had problems with it in the past or does not wish to gamble to find if he is one of the "safe 90%." Brother Zed, confident that he "knows when to say when" sees no problem with drinking. Now if by drinking, Zed encourages Andy to drink, both are in sin, just as in the meat-eating scenario. But Andy may also sin by falling into drunkenness that night, or he may discover to his horror that he is an alcoholic, addicted to this poison. Are repentance and forgiveness available to both brothers? Certainly, but now Andy has a huge problem with which to deal. Recovery from alcoholism is an expensive, all-consuming, never-ending struggle in which many never find victory, save death in Christ.

This scenario is not so outlandish. Many R.P. churches, in their new zeal to reach out to a hurting world, have enfolded people from harsh backgrounds. Most churches now have broken families, recovering drug addicts (including alcoholics), and people from abusive home lives. If we don't have these people, we should consider again why God has called us together to be a Body. Thankfully, in Columbus we are reaching out. We have at least two recovering alcoholics in our midst (I say "recovering," not "recovered" because one never really "recovers" from alcoholism: one drink and the person is right back into the deepest part of the struggle). How would these two feel if the Synod and the sessions of the RPCNA "popped the cork" for elders and deacons? I pray my question will remain hypothetical for years to come!

Alcohol in North America is manufactured and sold by huge corporations in business for profit. Their goal is to sell as much alcohol as possible. Their quiet pleas for us to "drink responsibly" are drowned out by their barrage of intoxicating words and images during every televised sporting

event. A beer commercial "philosophy of life" would lead us to believe that success starts with a bottle, and life simply cannot get any better than that! We shake our heads in disgusted dismay at their shameless deceit, but **every person who buys a bottle from them is a collaborator.** Christian elder, that is an **unequal yoke**, and that is forbidden [II Corinthians 6]!

What about vows already taken? Ordination, Installation, and Licensure Query #8: "That you may perform faithfully all the duties of the office to which you have been called, do you...promise...to abstain from alcoholic beverages and habit forming narcotics...?" Every elder and deacon in this church said "yes" (I think). There have been monumental efforts at several synods to remove the abstinence clause from Vow #8. **How strange and how dubious...joining a club by making a promise, then changing the rules once inside to avoid keeping the promise!**

How does one get out of a vow? Scripture tells us repeatedly to pay our vows and keep our promises, even to our own hurt. Of course, one may repent of a vow, if the vow is sinful. But what a step! To call sinful what Solomon commanded the wise to do! How the mighty have fallen! What if the vow gets dropped in 1994? Are pre-'94 ordained officers still bound, or may they repent? Might we have pre-'94 repenters, pre-'94 refuse-to-repenters, post-'94 free-to-drinkers, and post-'94 privately-bound-non-drinkers?!

I have heard that the portion of Query #8 quoted above is being called an unbiblical vow. An unbiblical vow...what a concept! Please show me from the Bible where **any one** of the nine ordination vows is required. Show me where an elder is commanded to take vows at all. **To call a vow "unbiblical" because it is not printed in a Pauline epistle is to deny that God can and does speak to us through principles.** Chapter 1, Section 6, of the **Westminster Confession of Faith**, while upholding the supremacy of Scripture, acknowledges, "that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed," (emphasis mine). I have endeavored to show over many pages why abstinence from alcoholic beverages, especially for exemplary elders, is based on prudent biblical principles.

Nobody has ever said that vowing to abide by Query #8 is mandatory for salvation. Nor is taking Vow #4 (otherwise all man-made hymn singers are bound for hell). Nor is taking Vow #5 (otherwise all non-Presbyterians are bound for hell). Nevertheless, generations of RPCNA elders have felt

strongly enough about worship, church polity, and the testimony of sober behavior that they have seen fit to require these vows from the leaders.

Lest we get lost in the interesting details of vows, church government, and the intricacies of Greek and Hebrew semantics, let us not forget the poisonous subject at hand. Do you really believe that 10% of all people who drink alcohol once go on to become alcoholics or problem drinkers? I do. Are we presuming on God's mercy to think that our elders and deacons can beat these established odds, or do we want each presbytery to have several elders serving as living illustrations of how to recover (or not)?! **DO NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST!**

Some in the "Drop Vow #8" camp feel that our elders would have a greater testimony against alcohol by having to choose individually not to drink, rather than by being compelled by some external regulation. But did not the individual elder choose this testimony when he took Vow #8 upon his ordination? What stronger testimony could one want than a united stand of all our leaders against the use of alcohol? [I'll answer that question...a united stand of all our leaders **AND ALL OUR MEMBERS!** Yes, I am an old fashioned child of the '60's]. The greater-testimony-by-individual-choice idea seems to be a noble concept, but it is totally lacking the crucial accountability factor.

I will close my long letter with some thoughts on this subject that I penned in a more impassioned moment this year. Some of the points are a review of ones I have tried to make, some only apply to me, and all are part of my feeble effort to serve God and convince you not to be misled by Satan's devices.

Drinking is sin for John McFarland because...

- ❖ I believe it is sin. For me to drink, therefore, is sin. Romans 14:23 "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith...everything that does not come from faith is sin." Drinking represents total rebellion against all I have been taught to believe and do.
- ❖ I am under Ordination Vow #8 as a deacon and as a licentiate. If I drink, therefore, I break a vow made to God in the presence of representatives from the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery of the RPCNA.
- ❖ I am under a personal vow not to drink.

- ❖ I would be in violation of Proverbs 23:31, for I find it impossible to drink that which Scripture forbids the eye to behold.
- ❖ I would become a stumbling block to my daughters, who are not permitted to drink in the State of Indiana until the age of 21 years. I would be a stumbling block to my youth Bible study, to my wife's family, and to several "ex"-alcoholics in my congregation.
- ❖ I aspire to be a ruler in this denomination. Proverbs 31 tells rulers not to drink wine or crave beer because that behavior would hinder their work.
- ❖ one drink ever so slightly abuses this temple of the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ drinking mild poison is a slow form of suicide.
- ❖ it is a necessary step down the path toward, and flirtation with, the damnable sin of drunkenness. I do not know any drinkers who have avoided drunkenness.
- ❖ I would be testing God. I may discover too late that I am part of the 10% who cannot stop drinking short of sin.
- ❖ this denomination has declared that the practice of total abstinence is altogether wise and proper. Not to abstain, therefore, is to live in foolishness and impropriety. Both are sin.
- ❖ unless I run my own brewery, winery, or distillery, drinking in this culture necessitates buying from one of the companies in business to sell as much alcohol as possible. Their shameless advertising campaigns link alcohol with sexual prowess, athletics, success, joy, and power. The Christian who is unequally yoked with these Satanic corporations through economic support will share responsibility for the lives they help to ruin.

Sincerely in service to King Jesus,

John M. McFarland, Chairman
1993 Synod Temperance Committee