

The UB Alcohol Debates

For the past 30 years, United Brethren have given considerable time to our stand on alcohol. In 1849, we took a “total abstinence” stand, which said no members could consume alcohol in any amount. In 2005, we removed that prohibition for lay members. However, we continued requiring abstinence of United Brethren ministers. This is an issue which will come before the 2019 US National Conference.

Within evangelicalism, there have been three primary views:

- 1. Prohibitionist.** Christians should universally avoid alcohol as unfit for human consumption.
- 2. Abstentionist.** Although Scripture does not expressly forbid drinking alcohol, it is best that people abstain.
- 3. Moderationist.** Scripture condemns drunkenness, but permits Christians to drink in moderation.

Prohibitionists, abstentionists, and moderationists have all been able to marshal Scripture verses and principles to support their view, whether we talking about alcohol as it relates to all Christians, or only as it relates to ministers. The question has always come down to this: since Scripture seems to leave room for varying views, what will we decide is the view for United Brethren laypersons and ministers? What will be our corporate response?

Back to the Beginning

In 1793, a United Brethren preacher named John Neidig built the first UB church building in Oberlin, Pa. According to historian A.W. Drury, records showed that 5-6 gallons of whiskey were provided to the workmen.

Drinking alcohol was common among Germans. The 1800 conference, during which our denomination officially organized, met at the home of Peter Kemp, whose family operated a still. Members brought grain to be distilled into alcohol, and barrels of whiskey were reportedly stored in the basement. But we turned against alcohol quickly. In 1807, Bishop William Otterbein wrote a letter to a friend admonishing him to stop drinking. “You must either decide to go to hell or give up drinking. There is no other way....You must give it up entirely.”

A preliminary Discipline in 1814 said, “Every member shall abstain from strong drink and use it only on necessity as medicine.” For some reason, that prohibition didn’t make the cut when a Discipline was officially adopted in 1815. However, the subject reappeared in 1821. A resolution (not a Discipline statement) prohibited members from operating a distillery, and instructed preachers to “labor against the evils of intemperance.”

To that point, only one other ecclesiastical group had taken action against alcohol—a Unitarian group, in 1811, which had little influence beyond New England.

The Temperance Movement

In 1826, five years after we took a stand, the American Temperance Society formed and other evangelical denominations entered the fray. We, wrote UB historian John Lawrence with mixed metaphors, “were among the pioneers in the temperance movement, and have always fought in the advanced columns.”

From its very first issue in 1834, *The Religious Telescope*, our denominational paper, railed against alcohol. As a denomination, we got solidly behind the Temperance movement, and the *Telescope* ran stories about campaigns to shut down the alcohol trade, along with the testimonies of United Brethren people who had escaped from a life of drunkenness.

In 1833, we forbid ministers to make or sell alcohol, and in 1841 we applied the same prohibition to laypersons. The 1849 General Conference then required that all UB members (ministers and laypersons) abstain from making, selling, and drinking alcohol. Back then, we referred to beverage alcohol as “ardent spirits.”

The distilling, vending, and use of ardent spirits as a beverage, shall be, and is hereby forbidden throughout our society; and should any preacher, exhorter, leader, or layman be engaged in distilling, vending, or using ardent spirits as a beverage, he shall be accountable to the class, or the quarterly or annual conference to which he belongs. If the offending brother be an exhorter, leader, or layman, it shall be the duty of the preacher in charge to admonish him in meekness. If he be a preacher, it shall be the duty of the presiding officer of a quarterly or annual conference to admonish him to desist from his unholy employment, or habit. And if all friendly admonitions fail, such offending person or persons shall no longer be considered members of our church, but shall be expelled from the same; provided, however, that this rule shall not be so construed as to prevent druggists and others from vending or using it for medicinal or mechanical purposes.

We had now arrived at the “total abstinence” position first advanced in 1814. The 1849 statement established alcohol as a “test of membership,” as we called it. If you drank alcohol, you failed the test and couldn’t be a UB member. And thus, total abstinence became the Law of the United Brethren Land for the next 156 years.

Into the 20th Century

In the years ahead, we plugged a few holes—requiring that communion juice be “unfermented wine,” and forbidding members to give alcohol away, like as a Christmas present. But from 1901-1969, our Alcohol statement remained the same.

The 1969 and 1973 General Conferences rewrote the Alcohol statement, but didn’t really change the content. It be-

came part of a broader “Temperance” statement which also included paragraphs about tobacco, narcotics, hallucinogenic drugs, gambling, and pornography. The alcohol portion said:

The church believes that scientific evidence and human experience confirm the spiritual teaching that alcoholic beverages are useless and injurious. The manufacturing and vending of alcoholic liquors are contrary to the best interests of personal and social morality, economy, and welfare. Therefore, all members are to exercise abstinence in the usage of alcoholic beverages in any form.

The United Brethren Church prohibits its members from consuming any alcoholic beverages, except as a medical prescription. They are also enjoined from being involved as a direct investor, manager, or owner (full or partial) of businesses which engage in the manufacture or sale of alcoholic beverages. Neither should a member lease or rent his property to those who would use it for the manufacture, storage, or sale of these harmful beverages.

Pushback Against Total Abstinence

There were rumbles of discontent. It wasn't that people wanted to drink alcohol, but that they didn't want to go beyond the Bible's call for moderation. A common statement was, “I don't drink alcohol and don't desire to drink. I just want the church's stand to be biblical.” They considered it wrong to exclude from membership people who used alcohol in moderation. Often mentioned was the apocryphal example of somebody who took a sip of wine once a year at a family gathering; that person, technically, couldn't be a UB member. Was it possible that some good Christians who drank in moderation were affiliating elsewhere after learning about our restrictive stand – that if they made this local UB church their home, they would be excluded from membership?

On the other side were those who cited various biblical principles to justify the abstinence stand. They argued that it was appropriate for the church to take a corporate stand against societal evils, even if it required exceeding (without contradicting) what the Bible said on the subject.

1993 and 1997 General Conferences

The subject came up, first, in the 1993 General Conference. A task force appointed during the previous quadrennium recommended removing the abstention requirement. We would teach and encourage abstinence and condemn drunkenness, but not exclude from membership persons who practiced moderation. From the floor, an additional paragraph was added which would retain the abstention requirement for certain leaders – ordained clergy, pastoral staff, local board members, the lay leader, deacons and deaconesses, and lay delegates. But after lengthy discussion, delegates killed the proposal and referred the issue to another study committee.

The Alcohol Study Task force included people from all sides of the issue, and they were very thorough. The report acknowledged that mature Christians could reach different conclusions from the Bible. They saw many reasons for Christians to abstain from using alcohol – liver damage, addiction, alcohol-related accidents, effects on family life, and more. But they agreed that abstinence shouldn't be a membership requirement.

The delegates adopted their proposed language, which said that members “are to abstain from the use of beverage alcohol of any kind.” However, it was ambiguous, with both sides claiming victory. The Task Force felt that their wording removed the abstinence prohibition, as if saying, “Members, ideally, are supposed to abstain. That's what we'd really like them to do.” But most people read it as saying, “Members are required to abstain,” and stuck to the total abstention standard.

The language wasn't clear, and it became obvious that the issue would return.

Fast-forward to 2005. That year, the delegates approved a statement which, like the tobacco and gambling statements, clearly only urged – not required – abstention. The key sentence said, “Therefore, we urge all of our members to avoid using alcoholic beverages.” Total abstention, finally and unquestionably, was no longer a requirement of membership.

Opening the Stand for Ministers

In 2005, we began only “urging” abstention of laypersons. But the Discipline still prohibited ministers from using alcohol and tobacco. Some people felt it was wrong to hold ministers to a higher standard than other members, at least in these areas. So in 2015, a proposal was presented to remove this sentence from ¶203.

Ministers are not permitted to use tobacco, beverage alcohol, and illicit drugs, or to engage in any immoral conduct, and their marriage relationships must be in harmony with the teachings of Scripture as defined in the Discipline.

However, the clock ran out. Quitting time was scheduled for 4:30, and with only a few minutes left, we hadn't gotten to this proposal, which was expected to take a while. The proposal was tabled. The consensus was, “This can wait until 2017.”

The same proposal was submitted prior to the 2017 US National Conference, during which we celebrated our 250th anniversary. But with the docket filled with proposals from the Task Force on Human Sexuality, and with historical tours scheduled all afternoon, the proposal was once again put off. This did give the broader church more time to fully examine and discuss the issue, and the Pastoral Ministry Leadership Team and the cluster groups gave special attention to it during 2018.

The upcoming US National Conference will determine our corporate position on July 18, 2019. The proposal is the same one first advanced in 2015 – to delete the second sentence of ¶203.