

The Free Methodist Church on the Use of Alcohol

A Position Paper of the Free Methodist Church – USA

For most of our history, and certainly our lifetime, the Free Methodist Church has had an approach to membership that focused upon standards as markers of qualification for belonging fully to the church. We required clear biblical norms — repentance, faith, new life in Christ, and baptism. Then we added other norms that we identified as critical to a holy life. Among these was abstinence from alcohol. Unwittingly, even if often motivated out of pure intent, the Free Methodist Church became focused on its boundary markers in ways that were unhealthy, unbiblical, and at times unholy. The more extreme legalisms that once characterized some sections of the church illustrate this well.

In 1995 the Free Methodist Church adopted recommendations from the Study Commission on Doctrine to reorient membership in the church. We embraced the clearly biblical entry requirements of repentance, faith, new life, and baptism, as before, but then affirmed that church membership could not be viewed rightly as an endpoint or even a midpoint in our discipleship and sanctification, and of itself the fact of membership could not serve as a “sign” of maturity or holiness. Rather, we declared that membership in the church rightly came at the very beginning of our life in Christ and itself must become a powerful resource of the Holy Spirit in forming us as holy people.

Accordingly, we welcome all who come to faith in Christ and commit to our vision of the holy life. We rewrote our membership covenant and reorganized our lifestyle teaching in *The Book of Discipline* in order to name the biblical principles by which we commit to live and to affirm a covenant with God and one another to become a holy people who live like Jesus and participate in the mission of Jesus in the world.

Thus, we no longer require prospective members to be entirely free from addictions with which they struggle *before* becoming members of the church. We require a commitment to be free from all that defiles, enslaves, and destroys their persons or hinders them from realizing their full potential in the life that Jesus calls them to live. And we declare our trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to make people holy, and to guide them into patterns of living that are good and wholesome. We trust the Holy Spirit to transform the believer’s life into the image of Jesus.

Therefore, with respect to alcohol, we recognize the biblically named sin of drunkenness and reject it in obedience to God’s Word. We recognize the special vulnerabilities that some have who are addicted to alcohol, some of whom are in recovery or moving in that direction. This recognition leads us to make our community gatherings, facilities, and activities alcohol free, so as not to cause people with vulnerabilities to struggle or fall.

We also recognize and respect our own history and community wisdom that has found total abstinence from alcohol to be the safest guard against the pervasive devastation of alcohol abuse in our U.S. culture. Although we will not *legislate* a life free from alcohol, we *will* make our best case for the appropriateness of abstaining from alcohol on the basis on Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Then, we will call upon all our members and adherents to consider abstention as a matter of personal conviction. Finally, in this matter as well, we will trust the Holy Spirit to guide earnest Free Methodists to a life that reflects the person of Christ and participates in His ongoing mission.

Our aim is to develop a membership in whose *culture* persons are formed into holy people by the Holy Spirit internally, set free *from* all that enslaves or causes harm to themselves and others, and set free *for* full participation in the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Within such a culture, where the Scriptures themselves do not offer clear commands and prohibitions, we anticipate that we may have differing convictions on some particulars among our members. In such cases, we expect mutual respect and accountability, per the teachings of Romans 14-15 (Specifically, that when convictions in the Body are at issue “weaker” and “stronger” parties must not disdain or disrespect one another, since the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, Romans 14:17).

Leaders in the church must embody the highest commitments to the Scriptures, constitution and membership covenant of the Free Methodist Church. They must encourage our members to seek freedom *from* what enslaves or harms, and freedom *for* whatever missional engagement the Lord assigns them. They will encourage the wisdom of abstinence as a valid and responsible expression of earnest discipleship and holy living and will work to create a congregational culture where mutual respect and accountability govern relationships between members whose convictions differ.

Summary Points for Our Leaders:

Our *Book of Discipline* outlines the membership covenant, to which all Free Methodists commit (leaders as well as others). Among other things, the covenant commits us to “*be free from activities and attitudes that defile the mind and harm the body or promote the same*” (Paragraph 158). In our section on the Christian journey, we elaborate on this freedom, speaking to several particulars, namely self-discipline, entertainment, misuse of substances, pornography, and sexual intimacy (Paragraphs 3211-3215).

We affirm that these particulars are not an exhaustive list; they are not the only areas in which commitment to the covenant principle of freedom should find expression. We also affirm that the areas we do address are not all the same. In some of them, such as matters of sexual intimacy, we simply articulate and accept the clear teaching of the Scriptures, while in other areas, such as forms of entertainment and the consumption of food, we are urging a careful application of the Scripture’s teachings. In the case of alcohol, we seek to do both — that is, to accept the clear teaching of the Scriptures on the abuse of alcohol and to urge careful application of the Scriptures in the light of our tradition, reason and common believing experience on the more general issue of abstention from alcohol. In all of these areas, where the Scriptures are clear we expect Free Methodists to agree and embrace their guidance. Likewise, where the Scriptures are not clear, or of a single mind, we expect Free Methodists to consider how best to respond to the full range and variety of Scripture’s teaching in cooperation with the Spirit of God at work within them.

On the one hand, we will not legislate the particulars in any of the areas that lack clear and specific guidance in the Scriptures, including alcohol. On the other hand, we will respect the community wisdom of the Free Methodist Church that has concluded that the safest guard against the abuse of alcohol is to abstain totally from its use. We will clearly and confidently articulate the rationale for this position and trust our people to respond to God's Spirit as the Spirit works to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ.

We are committed to seek the *via media* (the middle way) between the extremes of legalism and license. We embrace the way of responsible grace that does not seek transformation through external constraints and controls but through the renewing and shaping work of the Holy Spirit from the inside out.

We encourage openness and transparency between members and leaders (pastoral and lay) in a local church about the use and abuse of alcohol. And we expect openness and transparency between elders and their Superintendent, Ministerial Education and Guidance Board, and Bishop.

We will commit to a culture within our churches where members focus on the central principles, and for love of Jesus and passion for his mission will shape their lives for maximum participation in the Kingdom of God.

We acknowledge that in seeking the *via media* some will feel uncertainty and ambiguity. Still, we believe that this reflects the guidance of the Scriptures and also comports well with reliance upon the internal transformation of the Holy Spirit in the human heart and the community's role in supporting the formation of people into the image of Christ.

This paper was authored by Bishops Emeriti Matthew Thomas, David Kendall and David Roller and authorized by the Board of Bishops April, 2022.