

The Alcohol Debates

In 1793, a United Brethren preacher named John Neidig built, in Oberlin, Pa., the very first UB church building. According to historian A. W. Drury, records showed that 5-6 gallons of whiskey were provided to the workmen. The anti-alcohol Drury, writing in the 1920s, applauded that we had since moved "beyond the advice given by Paul to Timothy concerning wine." Drury, it seems, took issue with the Apostle Paul.

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.

As a denomination, we have legislated on alcohol consumption and related issues practically since Day One. Here's a run-down of our evolving stand.

1815 General Conference

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.

1821 General Conference

This was a banner year for social action, as we took stands against both alcohol and slavery. A resolution 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.

In 1826, five years after we took our stand, the American Temperance Society formed and other evangelical denominations entered the fray. The United Brethren denomination got solidly behind the Temperance movement. We, wrote historian John Lawrence, "were among the pioneers in the temperance movement, and have always fought in the advanced columns."

1833 and 1841 General Conference

The 1833 General Conference forbid ministers to make or sell alcohol. Then the 1841 General Conference required that all UB members — ministers and laypersons — abstain from drinking alcohol.

The statement established alcohol as a "test of membership," as we called it. If you drank alcohol, even one drop, 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 164 years.

Here's the 1841 statement. Back then, we called alcohol "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.

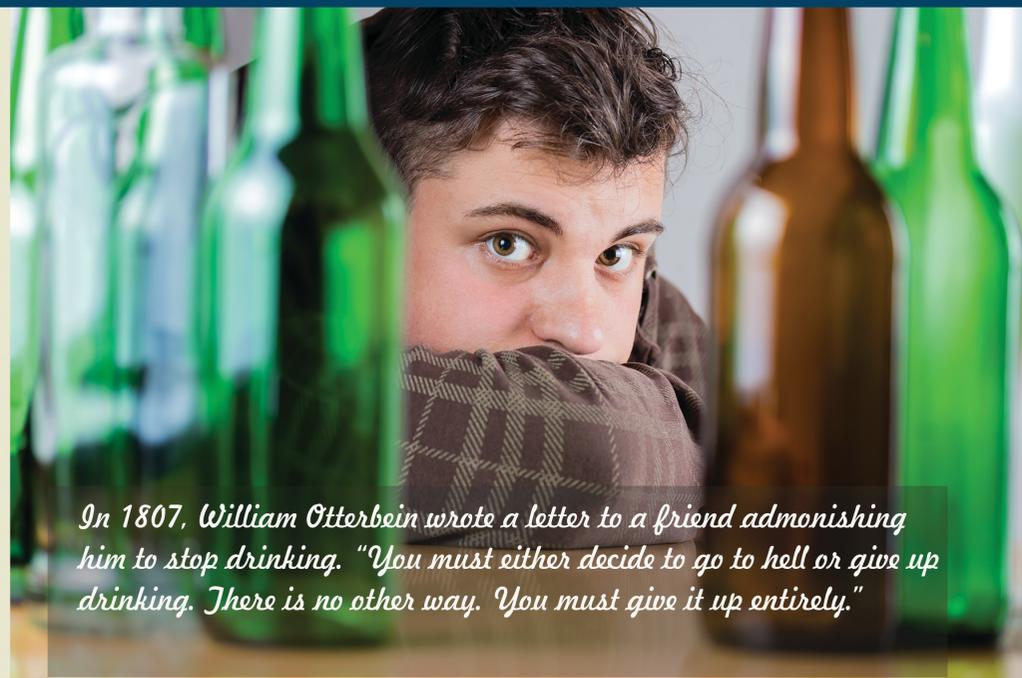
Further Tweaking

1873. We changed "ardent spirits" to "intoxicating drinks."

1881. The Discipline instructed lay leaders to provide the elements for the Lord's Supper, but apparently some were providing elements which were, shall we say, too *biblical*. So General Conference said, "We earnestly recommend the use of unfermented wine," which in 1953 we began calling "grape juice." Just to avoid any confusion.

1901. We plugged one last loophole. In addition to all of the other prohibitions, we said UB members couldn't even give alcohol away, like as a Christmas present.

During the debate in 1997, someone offered a refreshingly honest sentence to add to our stand on total abstinence. "This position is based on our concern for public testimony, our understanding of human weakness, and our opposition to alcohol's destruction, not on a conviction that Scripture teaches abstinence.. Alas, it was voted down.



In 1807, 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."

On to the Present

The 1969 and 1973 General Conferences rewrote the alcohol statement, but didn't really change the content. The key line called for total abstinence: "The United Brethren Church prohibits its members from consuming any alcoholic beverages, except as a medical prescription."

In the 1990s, we began moving toward relaxing the prohibition. Many ministers argued that the Bible didn't forbid drinking alcohol, but called for moderation. They considered it wrong to exclude from membership people who used alcohol in moderation (biblically). 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.

A proposal in 1993 spoke strongly against alcohol, but removed the prohibition. However, bishop-elect Ray Seilhamer said we were already going through a lot of change, and suggested putting the issue off for four years. Done.

A task force studied the issue, and brought a new proposal in 1997. Their intent was to remove alcohol as a test of membership, but continue requiring ministers to abstain. The key sentence in their proposal said, "Members of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ are to abstain from the use of beverage alcohol of any kind."

But it was ambiguous. Some interpreted "are to abstain" to mean, "Members are required to abstain." Others interpreted it as, "'Members, ideally, are supposed to abstain. That's what we'd really like them to do."

Things simmered for another eight years. Finally, in 2005, we passed a very straightforward proposal which said: "We urge all of our members to avoid using alcoholic beverages." Like we urged people not to use tobacco.

"Moderation" now replaced "total abstinence" as the law of UB Land. Today, only ministers are required to totally abstain from drinking alcohol.

Current Statement as of 2017

The use of alcoholic beverages is often personally injurious to their users and is often at the core of significant family and social problems. The use of alcoholic beverages is often found to be contrary to the best interest of personal and social morality, economy, and welfare. Holy Scripture teaches us to exercise good stewardship of our bodies. Scripture also admonishes us to avoid abusive indulgence of alcoholic beverages (Prov. 20:1; 23:29-35).

The Church of the United Brethren in Christ believes, and experience demonstrates, that the abuse of alcoholic beverages is harmful to our physical bodies and is a detriment to the best stewardship and witness of our lives. Therefore, we urge all of our members to avoid using alcoholic beverages. We also urge our leaders to teach as well as counsel about the hazards of abusing alcoholic beverages and that deliverance is possible through the ministry of the Spirit.

