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Christians and Alcohol

Defining the Relationship

Christians have had a decidedly love-hate relationship with alcohol. The infamous “drink” has been regarded by Christians at various times with awe, horror, religious devotion, fear, obsession, prohibition, addiction, and temperance. It has been one of the most divisive issues within modern American evangelicalism, creating rifts within churches, within families, within Christian institutions. As Mark Noll has noted,

Some evangelicals have made opinions on liquor more important for fellowship and cooperation than attitudes toward the person of Christ or the nature of salvation. This is particularly unfortunate since the Bible speaks clearly about Christ and salvation, but not about the question of total abstinence.¹

How did alcohol become the subject of such an emotionally charged cultural debate? Have Christians always been so divided about it? (Short answer: no.) Is it significant that followers

of Christ were the first people to invent sophisticated wine- and beer-making techniques (in medieval monasteries) but also the people who led the charge to make alcohol illegal in America?

"A Religious Awe of Beer"

Alcohol hasn't always been seen as a "secular" thing. For ancient Sumerians in the Fertile Crescent, it was elevated to religious heights—a miraculous gift from the gods. The Sumerians had a "religious awe of beer" to the point that they only concocted beer in temples and composed beer-themed poems to the gods, such as "The Hymn to Ninkasi," the Sumerian goddess of beer.² Later civilizations also associated these mysterious fermented beverages with the gods—Osiris in the Egyptian dynastic period and Bacchus in classical Greece, for example. In Jewish culture wine was viewed as a blessing of God and a sign of his covenantal abundance, as we saw in the last chapter. And in early Christian culture it was approached with a similar reverence.

In his *Pedagogia*—perhaps the earliest Christian ethic of alcohol consumption—St. Clement of Alexandria discusses the Christian's obligation to drink wine as part of the Eucharist while also being careful to avoid drunkenness. Clement urged believers to not drink in a worldly manner, to excess and intoxication, but to model Christ, who drank wine moderately:

In what manner do you think the Lord drank when He became man for our sakes? As shamelessly as we? Was it not with decorum and propriety? Was it not deliberately? For rest assured, He Himself also partook of wine; for He, too, was man. And He blessed the wine, saying, *Take, drink: this is my blood*—the blood of the vine. . . . And that he who drinks ought to observe moderation, He clearly showed by what He taught at feasts. For He did not teach affected by wine. And

that it was wine which was the thing blessed, He showed again, when He said to His disciples, *I will not drink of the fruit of this vine, till I drink it with you in the kingdom of my Father.*³

Indeed, for early Christians, drunkenness was the problem, not alcohol itself. Beer and wine were welcomed by early Christians and "taken as a matter of course."⁴ They were good things in moderation.

In the medieval period, as Christians spread the gospel throughout pagan lands, beer played a positive role. As St. Patrick introduced the gospel to the wild pagan land of Ireland, he "captured many an Irish tribal chieftain with his tasty beer before he won the man for God."⁵ In the Holy Roman Empire, beer lover Charlemagne promoted improvements in brewing at monasteries throughout the empire, gradually making the church the primary wholesaler of beer in society. Monasteries brewed beer in part as a social service, because it was safer than water and contained less alcohol than some other liquors. Beer was so ubiquitous and so relatively clean that some children in the medieval period were baptized not with holy water but with beer.⁶

Alcohol went hand-in-hand with monastic life in the medieval period (and in many cases still does to this day). Because an ample supply of wine was always necessary in monasteries (for daily Eucharist), monks led the way in cultivating wine wherever the climate permitted. Since their primary focus was to remember their Savior, the monks valued *quality* wine and were the first vintners to apply science to winemaking, in efforts to perfect the finished product and make it worthy of its sacred purpose. The Cistercians, led by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, were the first to experiment with quality in the Burgundy region of France,⁷ and the Cistercian monasteries along the Rhine were also the first to discover the ideal conditions for harvesting the Riesling grape.⁸ So the

A Timeline of Christians and Alcohol

AD 27–28: Jesus performs his first miracle: turning 120–180 gallons of water into wine at a wedding banquet in Cana (see John 2:1–11).

AD 30–31: Jesus says of wine, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20).

Second Century: St. Clement of Alexandria publishes *Pedagogia*, which included the first scholarly treatment of the subject of Christians and alcohol.

Fifth Century: St. Brigid of Ireland reportedly changes her dirty bathwater into beer so that visiting clerics would have something to drink.

Twelfth Century: Benedictine nun Hildegard von Bingen discovers hops in beer.

1620: Ship carrying John Winthrop to Massachusetts Bay Colony also carries more than 10,000 gallons of wine and three times as much beer as water.

1670: Hard cider is a staple at ministerial ordinations in apple-rich New England.

1673: Increase Mather publishes *Wo to Drunkards*, in

which he says, "Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan; the wine is from God, but the Drunkard is from the Devil."

1736: The ill effects of gin in England lead Anglican clergyman Thomas Wilson to publish *Distilled Spirituous Liquors the Bane of the Nation*.

1759: Arthur Guinness opens his brewery in Dublin; he eventually uses money from its success to fund Christian charities, hospitals, and Sunday school programs.

1770s–80s: Spanish Catholics plant first vineyards in California at missions up and down the coast.

1805: America's first temperance sermon, "The Fatal Effects of Ardent Spirits," is delivered by Rev. Ebenezer Porter in Washington, CT.

1826: Revivalist pastor Lyman Beecher publishes *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasion, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance*, condemning liquor for "the

moral ruin it works in the soul."

1840: The Washingtonian Movement, one of America's first anti-alcohol organizations, is formed.

1869: Methodist pastor Thomas Welch invents a method of pasteurizing grape juice so that it isn't fermented. He persuades local churches to adopt this nonalcoholic "wine" for communion services, calling it "Dr. Welch's Unfermented Wine."

1873–74: "Mother" Eliza Thompson—a devout Methodist—leads "crusade" of women protesting American drinking establishments.

1874: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is formed.

1893: Ohio pastor Howard Hyde Russell establishes the Anti-Saloon League, a nationwide pressure group aimed at ridding the country of alcohol.

1899: Carrie Nation attacks saloons with hatchets and sledgehammers and becomes an icon of the female-led temperance movement.

January 17, 1920: Eighteenth Amendment goes into effect in America; Billy Sunday

holds symbolic funeral service for "John Barleycorn."

1933: Twenty-first Amendment ends Prohibition.

1933–1949: "The Inklings" convenes Christian luminaries including C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams at the Eagle and Child pub in Oxford for beer-aided literary discussions.

1935: Christians "Bill W." and "Dr. Bob" found Alcoholics Anonymous.

1980: Televangelist Jack Van Impe publishes *Alcohol: The Beloved Enemy*.

2000s: First "bar churches" begin popping up.

2003: Wheaton College changes rules to allow faculty, staff, and graduate students to drink alcohol in private, when not around undergrads.

2009: Bestselling author Stephen Mansfield publishes *The Search for God and Guinness: A Biography of the Beer That Changed the World*.

August 9, 2011: In a blog post, evangelical pastor/author John MacArthur chastises the "Young, Restless, and Reformed" community for their reckless approach to alcohol.

next time you enjoy a good Burgundy or Riesling, toast to your medieval Christian forebears who pioneered the science of winemaking for the sake of their Lord.

Modern brewing of beer also can trace its origins to the monks. In the areas of Europe where it was difficult to grow grapevines, monasteries brewed beer—focusing, as with wine, on *quality*. Some brews today—such as Weiherstephan (founded in AD 1040) and Leffe (AD 1240)—originated in medieval monasteries. Nuns also joined in the beer-making business. Hildegard von Bingen was a brewer and is sometimes credited with the discovery that hops added preservative qualities to ale.⁹

The brewing techniques perfected by Christian monastics eventually spread to the secular world, and by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries consumption of alcoholic beverages was ubiquitous throughout western Europe. In England, ale was consumed at every meal—even with breakfast. It was easy to access and safer than water, which “had an evil and wholly justified reputation . . . of being a carrier of diseases.”¹⁰ Soon public drinking houses became popular and taverns and ale-houses introduced social drinking and the “bar scene” to the world. This drew the ire of some churches, though, which saw the increasing popularity of taverns as competition. English Christians were going to pubs instead of mass and were opting for taverns over the drinking parties the church itself organized.¹¹ Still, even as preachers spoke out against pubs and drunkenness, “they did not dare attack drinking per se, which . . . was an essential part of life in medieval England.”¹²

The Reformation and the New World

Though today’s Protestant evangelical teetotalers owe much of their theology to the heroes of the Reformation, they would

likely disagree with the Reformers’ views on alcohol. Martin Luther, for example, was an unabashed fan of drinking, particularly good German beer. His hometown of Wittenberg was a brewing center, and he spent much time in the taverns there, studying, mentoring students, even teaching classes. His wife, Catherine, was a skilled brewer.

“We ought to give thanks to God for providing us with food and drink,” said Luther, who celebrated moderate drinking even while advising against drunkenness. “You should be moderate and sober; this means that we should not be drunken, though we may be exhilarated. . . . The mind will tolerate a certain degree of elevation, but this must be moderate, not indecent.”¹³

Luther viewed drink as a gift from God—something with the potential to be misused, but also something that could be used to honor the Creator. He once said, “Do not suppose that abuses are eliminated by destroying the object which is abused. Men can go wrong with wine and women. Shall we then prohibit and abolish women?”¹⁴

John Calvin felt similarly about alcohol, writing in his *Institutes*, “We are nowhere forbidden to laugh, or to be satisfied with food . . . or to be delighted with music, or to drink wine.”¹⁵ Calvin also noted, “It is lawful to use wine not only in cases of necessity, but also thereby to make us merry,”¹⁶ and insisted in other writings that God created things like alcohol for our benefit and not for our harm.

Luther and Calvin’s belief that alcohol was a gift from God to be celebrated in moderation reflect the larger Reformed view that all aspects of creation are redeemable and can speak to the glory of God (think Abraham Kuyper’s “every square inch” idea). These ideas filtered down through subsequent generations. Post-Reformation Christians such as George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards, for example, were known to enjoy rum and hard cider, respectively.¹⁷

The Puritan Pilgrims in the New World were also largely friendly to alcohol. The *Mayflower* and other ships to the Massachusetts Bay Colony were stocked with ample wine and beer. In 1630, the *Arabella* brought Puritans to New England with at least 10,000 gallons of beer in tow.¹⁸ It was for enjoyment but also for health. Beer was safer to drink than water and thought to have medicinal value essential for survival in the New World. Beer was such a necessary staple for the Pilgrims that a brewery was actually the first permanent building constructed in Plymouth.

Among colonial Christians, "no one felt any tension between Christianity and the moderate use of alcohol," notes Mark Noll. Rather, most believers in America before 1800 "regarded the moderate use of alcoholic beverages, particularly beer and wine, as a privileged blessing from a gracious God."¹⁹ But that attitude shifted dramatically in the centuries that followed.

Temperance and Prohibition

Temperance movements first gained momentum in America in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, when pastors started tying alcohol abstinence to personal holiness and began preaching against even the moderate use of liquor. Revivalist pastor Lyman Beecher, for example, published *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance*, noting that "there is no prudent use of ardent spirits, but when it is used as a medicine."²⁰

By the 1840s, temperance groups such as the Washingtonian Temperance Society debuted, followed later by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). These organizations aimed to rid the nation of "the devastator" (as Abraham Lincoln called liquor) that had ravaged families in both cities and small

frontier towns, where saloons and roadside taverns became increasingly popular leisure-time destinations.

Christians led the fight for temperance—particularly Protestant women such as "Mother" Eliza Thompson, who organized a female-led "crusade" against saloons from Ohio to New England in 1874; Mary Hanchett Hunt, who successfully campaigned to get compulsory "scientific" temperance education in the nation's public schools; and perhaps most famously Carrie Nation, who adopted her own "personal doctrine of direct action against alcohol" by violently attacking saloons: smashing kegs of whiskey with a sledgehammer and setting them on fire, shattering bottles and decanters with an iron bar, and battering bar counters with a brass spittoon. Nation was a self-described "bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what he doesn't like," and indeed, she had a bite to match her bark.²¹

These passionate women were backed in their efforts by evangelical luminaries such as "Fundamentalist Pope" William Jennings Bryan and ballplayer-turned-preacher Billy Sunday, perhaps the nation's most colorful anti-alcohol expositor. Giving as many as 250 speeches a year in the late 1910s, Sunday spoke to huge crowds about the righteous cause of passing an amendment to outlaw alcohol. Daniel Okrent writes:

To Sunday, liquor was "God's worst enemy" and "hell's best friend," and he considered those who profited from the alcohol trade earthly Satans. "I will fight them till hell freezes over," he told a rally at the University of Michigan, where he persuaded a thousand students to join the campaign for a statewide Prohibition law. "Then I'll buy a pair of skates and fight 'em on the ice."²²

On January 17, 1920, Sunday and the broad coalition of anti-alcohol crusaders got their decades-long wish: the

The John MacArthur Controversy

In August 2011, John MacArthur ignited a bit of a firestorm online—particularly in the “Young, Restless, and Reformed” (YRR) corner of the blogosphere—when he wrote a blog post entitled “Beer, Bohemianism, and True Christian Liberty,” which criticized the somewhat libertine drinking habits of the YRR community. MacArthur didn’t mince words, slapping the wrists of YRR Christians for making their passion for drinking “a prominent badge of identity” and admonishing pastors for the “puerile and irresponsible” action of encouraging the recreational use of intoxicants. “It is wrong-headed, carnal, and immature to imagine that bad-boy behavior makes good missional strategy,” wrote MacArthur. “The image of beer-drinking Bohemianism does nothing to advance the cause of Christ’s kingdom.”²³

Predictably, MacArthur’s missive was met with an avalanche of rebuttals, such as a lengthy blog post by Joel McDurmon—author of *What Would Jesus Drink?*—who describes MacArthur as a “wailing imam of the dry jihad” and, in contrast to the YRR, part of the Old, Glum, and Stubborn (“Ogs”) contingent of incredulous prohibitionists “trying to give their stump speech without a stump.” McDurmon responds to MacArthur by agreeing that the issue is about self-control and maturity but arguing that maturity “is the ability to use the gifts God has given us and even prescribes in places *without* abusing them.” He continues,

Anyone who runs from this standard is not interested in maturity at all. They are interested in keeping Christians childish under the guise of safety. Prohibitionists have always forbidden maturity under the guise of purity. It is legalism, and thus, idolatry.²⁴

Somewhat more nuanced responses prevailed on the *Christ and Pop Culture* blog, where Alan Noble took issue with MacArthur’s post for downplaying community in the conversation of Christian liberty (see Rom. 14) and attempting “to find a *universal* standard where there can only be *situational* standards,” while Canadian pastor Brad Williams defended MacArthur’s post as a valuable corrective and “challenge for us to grow up and quit acting silly about alcohol.”²⁵

prohibition of alcohol went into effect, following the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment the year prior. To celebrate the occasion, Sunday held a revival meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, in which he announced the death of liquor and the beginning of a new age:

“The reign of tears is over,” Sunday proclaimed. “The slums will soon be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and corncribs. Men will walk upright now, women will smile, and the children will laugh. Hell will be forever for rent.”²⁶

Of course, things didn’t quite turn out that way. Prohibition—in effect for fourteen years before being repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment—had a slew of unintended consequences. It proved a boon to organized crime, for example, launching the era of the Capone-style bootlegger/gangster. It made partying edgier, secret, and thereby more “cool” (think speakeasies and *Gatsby*), glamorizing vice in the age of jazz and flappers. It “encouraged criminality and institutionalized hypocrisy” and “fostered a culture of bribery, blackmail, and official corruption.”²⁷ Hardly the golden age Billy Sunday envisioned in 1920.

Christians and Alcohol Today

Following Prohibition, most evangelicals still opposed the drinking of alcohol but eased up on their attempts to combat it via prohibitory legislation. In the latter half of the twentieth century, American evangelicals still decried alcohol, particularly in efforts to protect the youth. They supported causes like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and took on the media for romanticizing alcohol in movies, pop music, television,

and commercials. Evangelical colleges still remained resolutely “dry” (most do to this day), and many denominations still required pastors and elders to completely abstain from alcohol. In the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, however, alcohol became overshadowed by issues like abortion and homosexuality. It wasn’t the rallying cry for fundamentalist ethics that it once was.

Fast-forward to the 2010s. Alcohol is not nearly the scourge it once was among many evangelicals. Many churches now hold services in bars or sponsor outings to go wine or beer tasting. “Theology on Tap”-style gatherings and “bar churches” aren’t hard to find. Graduates of evangelical colleges are making an impact in the craft brewing world: my friend Tyler (a Biola University graduate) works in sales at LA’s Golden Road Brewery; another friend, Scott (a Calvin College graduate), started the up-and-coming Greenbush Brewing Co. in Sawyer, MI. A group of friends who graduated from Taylor University launched ThePerfectlyHappyMan.com, where they offer reviews of craft beer. I could name at least a dozen Christian friends of mine who have taken up home brewing.

More and more Christians, particularly of a younger age, are exhibiting not just a taste for alcohol but a deep love for it as a gift from God. The pendulum has decidedly swung away from legalism on the question of alcohol, but is it going too far? Have younger believers become too reckless and libertine in their approach to alcohol? Certainly some older Christians think so (see sidebar “The John MacArthur Controversy”), and I myself have cringed at times when witnessing the carelessness some of my peers have adopted in this area. I’ve been to parties where everyone present is a Christian, but you wouldn’t know it: people doing shots, playing beer pong, chugging beer, getting drunk, vomiting, smoking, and so on. Is this appropriate Christian behavior? Certainly not, as any perusal of Scripture will affirm.

7 Churches That Have Met in Bars

Church	Bar	Location
Kyrie	Mambo’s	Fort Worth, TX
Celebration Church	Drunk Monkey Tavern	Tulsa, OK
The Pub Church	The Dugout	Boston, MA
North Brooklyn Vineyard	Trash Bar	Brooklyn, NY
Revolution NYC	Pete’s Candy Star	Brooklyn, NY
Country Rock Church	Pub Lounge	Sidney, OH
Evergreen Community	Lucky Lab Brew	Portland, OR

Alcohol is a potentially dangerous thing, not to be approached lightly—especially by Christians who are called to “behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness” (Rom. 13:13). Certainly there are ways to enjoy alcohol as Christians in an edifying, God-honoring way (we’ll explore that in the next chapter), but there are also ample ways we can go wrong in our consumption of it. Alcohol has been viewed as anathema for many Christians for very good reasons, and part of learning to approach it maturely is recognizing and respecting these concerns.

Common Christian Critiques of Alcohol

Some opponents of alcohol believe the Bible forbids Christians from consuming it in all circumstances. In *Alcohol: The Beloved Enemy*, for example, Jack Van Impe claims that “the Bible forbids the use of wine as we know it today. All wine? Every drop.”²⁸

But many other Christians, recognizing the “real and

genuine problem in proving that abstinence is a biblical principle,"²⁹ base their critiques of alcohol on other things—namely, the personal and societal ills caused by intoxicating beverages. The following is a brief overview of some of the frequently voiced, and certainly valid, arguments Christians make against drinking.

Drinking Damages Our Witness

A common reasoning for why Christians should avoid alcohol is that it can tarnish our witness. It's a worldly activity—unwholesome bars and taverns, sloshy tipsiness, vices of all kinds—that Christians should not associate with. Drinking even in moderation can lead us down a path of humiliation and recklessness, compromising our attempts to be salt and light. St. Clement puts it colorfully in his *Pedagogia*:

But the miserable wretches who expel temperance from conviviality, think excess in drinking to be the happiest life; and their life is nothing but revel, debauchery, baths, excess, urinals, idleness, drink. You may see some of them, half-drunk, staggering . . . vomiting drink on one another in the name of good fellowship; and others, full of the effects of their debauch, dirty, pale in the face, livid, and still above yesterday's bout pouring another bout to last till next morning. It is well, my friends, it is well to make our acquaintance with this picture at the greatest possible distance from it, and to frame ourselves to what is better, dreading lest we also become a like spectacle and laughing-stock to others.³⁰

It may not always be as ugly as what Clement depicts here, but the point is well taken: associating ourselves with the excesses of alcohol can be a bad thing for our witness.

Drinking Destroys Families

Anyone who has ever had a friend or family member who's an alcoholic knows this truth all too well. Drinking can wreak havoc on families: drunken and abusive fathers; mothers who can't give up the drink, even in pregnancy; the "drunk uncle" who makes everyone uncomfortable at Christmas dinner; and so on. For many people, destruction is what alcohol breeds. Brokenness. How many families and relationships have suffered throughout history because of alcohol abuse? The women who led the charge against liquor in the days of Prohibition were motivated in part by the deleterious effects it had on their husbands. And who can blame them? Alcohol has the potential to be a ruiner of families, and to flippantly ignore or downplay this fact is unwise.

Drinking Kills

It's hard to argue with the statistics. Worldwide, 2.5 million people die every year because of alcohol-related causes, accounting for nearly 4 percent of total deaths worldwide—more than AIDS, tuberculosis, or violence.³¹ Though light to moderate drinking can have beneficial health impacts (e.g., reduced risk of heart disease), heavy drinking can cause all sorts of deadly problems, including cirrhosis of the liver, high blood pressure, epilepsy, liver and breast cancer, poisonings, traffic accidents, and violence. It must be remembered that the chemical at the center of alcohol is ethanol, which is a powerful depressant that affects the central nervous system. In small doses it can simply generate a sense of euphoria or diminish inhibitions, but in large doses it can slow brain activity, impair motor function, and cause slurred speech, drowsiness, and alcohol poisoning. And it's addictive. For many Christians, all of this is enough to say, "We shouldn't even flirt with something proven to be so dangerous."

Drinking Impairs Judgment

Because the ethanol in alcoholic beverages affects the brain, it can often lead us to do or say things our inhibitions would normally prevent. We make poor choices “under the influence.” Drunk texting. Forgetting important obligations. Violence. Saying things that we’ll regret later. Letting one’s libido take over instead of using one’s brain. The ramifications of reduced inhibitions can be disastrous. Even in the second century, Clement knew how ugly it could get:

By an immoderate quantity of wine the tongue is impeded; the lips are relaxed; the eyes roll wildly, the sight, as it were, swimming through the quantity of moisture; and compelled to deceive, they think that everything is revolving round them.³²

As much fun as alcohol can be as a social lubricant, it can swiftly turn into a cringeworthy catalyst for all manner of awkward behavior. For some Christians, the way that alcohol causes one to “lose control” is enough to cause them to avoid it altogether. In a sermon titled “Why I Don’t Drink,” one pastor, Daniel Walker, said he avoided drinking in part because he wants to be in control of himself. “For myself it is hard enough to lead the good life, without deliberately doing something that makes it harder,” he notes.³³ The point is well taken.

Even Moderate Drinking Perpetuates the Problem

But all of those critiques apply only to heavy or intemperate drinking, one might argue. Isn’t moderate drinking okay? Some Christians would say no; moderate drinking only supports the alcohol industry. It can make life difficult for those struggling with alcoholism, and it can create the illusion that one is “in control” even while steadily becoming a heavier drinker. “Moderation is only a device for the success of evil

affiliated with drinking,” Everett Palmer argues. “The only scientific and certain method for preventing the incidence of alcoholism, traffic casualties related to drinking, and other related evils is the practice of abstinence.”³⁴ Some Christians abstain because they want to be a part of the answer, not the problem, and in their view any drip of alcohol they consume only perpetuates the problem.

To Drink or Not to Drink?

Certainly there are plenty of good reasons why abstinence from alcohol is a sensible option, even if “because the Bible says so” isn’t one of them. Like the other areas of culture we’ve explored in this book, alcohol is one of those “gray areas” we are given liberty to assess in our own minds, with the help of the Holy Spirit. One person may decide abstinence is the best option for them while another opts to enjoy alcohol in moderation. Each side needs to bear with the other in patient love and understanding. “To drink or not to drink?” is not a question for which there is a universal answer. It’s a question we must each examine and wrestle with individually and in our community contexts.

For those who do opt to partake, one thing is certain: they must do so carefully. For the Christian, there is much to lose if alcohol is consumed recklessly but much to gain if it is consumed properly. What does that look like—“proper” Christian drinking? We’ll take on that question in the next chapter.

Interlude

Drinking as Communion

For thousands of years, alcohol has been present in the liturgical practice of drinking the “fruit of the vine” (wine) as part of communion. But there is another sense in which alcohol can create communion, connecting humans and facilitating fellowship in a manner that almost seems sacred.

In his 2011 Grantland.com piece “On Whiskey and Grease,”¹ Wright Thompson beautifully captures the way that alcohol—in this case, bourbon—can create an ineffable aura of connection between humans, as something that can accompany and symbolize what Stephen Mansfield calls “the liturgies of men in concourse with one another.”²

Thompson narrates an evening of front porch drinking in Alabama, in which a group of men pass around a bottle of Jim Beam that belonged to one of the men’s grandfathers, a former church deacon named Herschel Joe York. Herschel’s grandson Joe discovered the hidden bottle of his grandfather’s bourbon one day when cleaning his grandmother’s house following her death.

“Joe took it home and, every year or so, passes it around. It’s a communion,” writes Thompson. “When he does it tonight, everyone gets quiet. We are laying flowers in our minds.”

Thompson goes on to describe the way that as the bottle is passed around the old wooden porch, each of the half dozen men is reminded of some unique memory of their own. “What a wonderful gift, this bottle. It takes everyone to a different place.”

As each man holds the bottle and takes a drink, he raises a toast to something meaningful, celebrating the blessing and communion offered by this “heirloom” bottle connecting grandson to grandfather and friend to friend. Thompson’s story concludes with a description of the scene after the bottle is empty:

The stories continue, and the music plays on, until, finally, the porch is empty. The air is cool and the streets of the town are empty now. We all go back to our homes, but we don’t leave empty. We take Herschel Joe York with us, a deacon who hid a bottle of Jim Beam in his closet, a man who raised a son who raised a son.³

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The Godly Enjoyment of Alcohol

One of the points frequently raised by “drinking is okay” Christians in America is the fact that in many other parts of the world (Europe, for example), drinking alcohol is in no way a faux pas within the church. American evangelicalism is unique in its fear and avoidance of alcohol, they say. And there is some truth in this.

But let’s be real here. Whether they like it or not, American Christians live within a culture in which alcohol *is* viewed in a particular way and where certain habits of consumption prevail. Ours is a culture of college binge drinking, keggers, underage drinking as rebellion, and Bud Light commercials. As we saw in the last chapter, it’s a culture with a specific historical relationship with alcohol, in which drinking has been seen more often as a scourge than as an art. Things may be shifting (the “artisan” cocktail and craft beer booms are changing the way Americans look at alcohol, to be sure), but we cannot ignore our historical baggage. As we’ll see in this chapter, alcohol is culturally and sociologically complex;

the consuming of it must be considered in a context much broader than just one's individual opinions.

Throughout recorded history, alcohol has never existed without the accompanying problem of drunkenness. For many people, the ever-present threat that alcohol poses—to become an addiction, a stumbling block, an escape—is enough to warrant complete abstinence. And that's okay. But for others, these threats simply underscore that consuming alcohol is something that must be done with great care.

For Christians who choose to drink, this is especially true. As representatives of Christ we must be mindful that *how we live* matters for mission, that as Christopher Wright notes, "there is an unavoidable ethical dimension to the mission of God's people."¹

How do our drinking habits fit into the kingdom ethics to which we are called? Are we drinking in a manner that brings glory to Christ, or one that defames his name? Is our drinking a selfish thing—primarily about what it does for us—or is it about the way it helps us connect with and minister to others? These and other considerations are, I believe, crucial in our understanding of what it means to "drink Christianly." In this chapter I'll highlight five principles to elaborate on the notion that, yes, even consuming alcohol can be done to the glory of God.

Don't Drink Alone

For each of the activities of cultural consumption discussed in this book, the case could be made that consuming it in community is better than consuming it alone. For alcohol, it's *especially* true. Drinking alcohol alone, though okay in small doses, can lead to problems: it can become an "escape" in the same way that chowing down on a tub of ice cream

alone in one's apartment can be; it can become a private addiction or unhealthy method of de-stressing.

On the contrary, drinking alcohol in community can be incredibly edifying. In the same way that food facilitates fellowship and the table binds people together like little else in life, so too can alcohol be a powerful blessing in the bonding rituals of humanity. From Old Testament Israel and the disciples in the Upper Room to holiday dinners, wedding receptions, and celebratory toasts in today's world, alcohol has long served as a centerpiece in the glad gatherings of mankind.

In my life, some of the most profound moments of connection and deepest occasions of feeling *known* have occurred over fermented beverages: discussing the mysteries of God's grace over pints under the stars in Oxford; gathering at a pub with friends to laugh and share stories together long into the night; toasting to my best friend on the night before his wedding; sipping wine at an oceanside restaurant with the girl I love. These moments can be transcendent.

As Stephen Mansfield describes in *The Search for God and Guinness*, alcohol can help reveal the deeper layers and complexity of a person to us—even our own fathers:

There was something about those moments alone with his newspaper and beer that seemed to me a liturgy, a mystery of manhood my father had mastered and that I hoped I would one day understand. . . . Somehow I knew early on that the presence of beer changes human interaction, that it gentles the soul and brings about a less guarded state. My father was a different man when he drank a beer and not because he consumed very much of it—he never did—but rather because the beer seemed to give him permission to relax, to stand down and find a human connection to those nearby.²

To approach alcohol properly as Christians, we must place a high premium on community—knowing that in gathering together to celebrate and relax with a drink or two, we are participating in a long and biblical tradition of reveling in the blessings of God.

Good wine and beer can be a wonderful way to bring people together. Reformation Brewery in Canton, Georgia, a Christian beer-brewing enterprise affiliated with Isaac's Keep church, celebrates the tradition of Martin Luther, who invited students "to have conversations about theology, life, and culture while sharing a pint of his wife Katy's home-brewed ale." Reformation Brewery fosters conversation and community in downtown Canton around "good beer," in hopes of creating an atmosphere "where you can sit at a table with a businessman, a laborer, artist, or even a politician or preacher to have a conversation and enjoy each other's company."³ The brewery operates under the conviction that "if there is anything in our culture that could use the redeeming influence of the gospel, it is beer."⁴

For Scott Sullivan, a Calvin College graduate who owns the Greenbush Brewing Company in Sawyer, Michigan, the goal of brewing is less ministry minded but no less community oriented. At the Greenbush taproom, Sullivan's pastors are regulars and thousands of people stop in every week to socialize while enjoying beers like the Traktor ("a kitschy kream ale") or Red Bud ("copper wheat ale with a mind of its own"). "I don't know how you can get a much bigger platform than I have," notes Sullivan.

We are the community gathering place, in the sense that a public house is the place to gather in England or Ireland, so conversations and debates go on all day and people trade ideas and we have a daily opportunity to show what it is to be a Christian in the world. I'll often have a pastor sitting next to an atheist talking about all sorts of things, which isn't

something that can happen in a conventional church setting. How can you beat that?⁵

Consider the Community You're In

Community should also be considered in the context of Christian liberty: our decision to drink or not to drink may depend on those who are around us. As discussed in earlier chapters, Christian liberty is a biblical principle set forth in passages such as Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:14–33. Christians are not all at the same level of spiritual maturity, and the "weaker" and "stronger" brethren must bear with one another in Christian love.

In the context of drinking, for example, a believer who has no problem consuming alcohol temperately should nevertheless avoid becoming a stumbling block to the weaker believer who might struggle with intemperance (see Rom. 14:13–21). As Paul says, "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall" (v. 21).

Some Christian drinkers don't take this verse as seriously as they ought. As Kevin DeYoung notes, "Christians that recognize the good gift of wine or beer need to grow up at times. . . . They should not talk about beer like it's the coolest thing since Sufjan Stevens. Christian liberty is no reason for social life and conversation to revolve around the conspicuous consumption of alcohol."⁶

For pastor Alan Frow, a South African expatriate now serving as pastor of Southlands Church in Brea, California, the question of alcohol consumption for the Christian is contingent on their community. For him, it's less a question of individual conscience as much as the question, "Does it help or hurt the gospel?"

When Frow pastored a church in Johannesburg, for example, he abstained from drinking and required all of his leadership team to as well. Why? Because that particular church contained a large number of people who struggled with alcoholism—a large number of “weaker brothers” who “didn’t generally drink socially,” but drank “to fall down, to numb the pain.”

But since coming to pastor Southlands, Frow no longer makes teetotalism a requirement of his staff because the issue is not a stumbling block for the congregation. If anything, Frow thinks *not drinking* can sometimes be a bigger impediment to reaching the community he’s been called to minister to at Southlands.

Frow tells the story of a time when he and his wife invited the parents of one of their daughter’s schoolmates to come to church on Easter, with dinner following. The man coming to dinner happened to be French and was a sommelier at an upscale restaurant in Los Angeles. Frow and his wife weren’t drinking at the time but knew the man would likely bring over wine—probably very good, expensive wine—for the dinner. Anticipating that, Frow and his wife decided they would drink, because to refuse their guest’s wine would be to show no interest in his chief passion in life. It would be a disaster for their Christian witness. Sure enough, the man brought a \$300 bottle of wine to dinner.

“We’ve done a lot of ministry in France, and honestly, not drinking wine is bad for the gospel in that country,” said Frow, who has led Alpha outreach courses from homes in which wine is present. “It makes a difference. It’s like common currency,” he says. “I think it’s become a key part of our gospel witness.”

Still, Frow is careful to be sensitive to anyone who might be struggling with alcohol, and he makes a point to communicate

that people in his congregation have the freedom *not to drink* as well.

Tom Smillie, a Christian beermaker and review writer for The PerfectlyHappyMan.com, also believes that the context of one’s community is crucial. When he was in college at Taylor University, Smillie honored the community pledge not to drink because, he says, “I had signed a covenant before God, my school, and my fellow peers.” After college he developed a passionate interest in beer and began brewing it himself, which became a source of tension when some of his Christian co-workers openly expressed their belief that alcohol was inappropriate for believers.

The Godly Enjoyment of Tobacco?

Another gray area of cultural consumption is tobacco. Can Christians feel okay about smoking? As with alcohol, opinions about this are all over the map. Some of my evangelical Christian friends wouldn’t and haven’t ever smoked anything. Others are chain smokers. As with drinking, some of them smoke for the wrong reasons—as a “Look at me! I’m defying your tidy categories for ‘Christian’ behavior!” form of self-conscious rebellion. Others smoke cigars on special occasions or pipes when in the company of a certain group of friends (especially literary-minded friends or seminary students).

Is smoking in all cases a bad thing? Certainly not. As with alcohol, it can be fine in moderation, in community, and when done with a palate of discriminating appreciation rather than with a need to get a nicotine fix. But as with alcohol, tobacco can also be hazardous to one’s health and addictive; it shouldn’t be trifled with. Nor should Christians smoke mostly because they want to project a certain image (rebel, cool, fashionable, Don Draper). Tobacco, like alcohol, becomes a damaging thing to our Christian witness when consumed cavalierly, primarily as status marker, or to unhealthy excess.

"I don't want to broadcast my drinking (as controlled and educational as it may be) for fear of being judged or hindering a fellow Christian's walk," notes Smillie. "But at the same time I want to be real, honest, and open with people."

When it comes to our Christian witness and the perceptions of nonbelievers, Smillie thinks it's important that they see examples of Christians drinking responsibly and respecting others, rather than only the "no" Christians who abstain. For Smillie, his love of good beer has allowed him to build relationships and speak into the lives of nonbelievers. "I've had the opportunity to brew alongside the brewmaster, get to know the servers and ask how they are doing, pray for customers, give a Bible to an employee that was leaving the restaurant, and I've been invited to parties," he says. "Beer is communal and appeals to the common man. Interestingly, the gospel message is too."⁸

Drink in Moderation

This one goes without saying, though we all know that "moderation" is much easier said than done. As Christians, however, it's something we must strive toward in our consumption. Just as excessive eating (gluttony) is an unseemly vice forbidden for Christians in the Bible, so too is excessive drinking (drunkenness).

What's the solution? Total abstinence? Maybe, though that wouldn't work with food. Eating is an activity that is potentially hazardous to our health, but we *must* eat for survival. And many people do eat in moderation, so clearly it's possible to consume something potentially addictive in this manner. Likewise with alcohol: it can become addictive and dangerous in excess, but many people throughout history have consumed it in moderation. It's possible.

One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5 is self-control (v. 23). The "acts of the flesh" include drunkenness (v. 21), but when we have the Spirit of God within us we have an Advocate who helps us resist those fleshly desires. If you "walk by the Spirit," you "will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (v. 16). This is an encouragement that moderate consumption is possible, especially with the help of the Holy Spirit. We are given the gift of self-control from God, so why not use it to properly, moderately enjoy the bounty of his creation?

Drinking in moderation is hard, but it can be a great witness to the world—a manifestation of the work of the Spirit in our lives. If we can consistently enjoy alcohol without drinking it to excess, we also communicate something about the way we view alcohol: that its goodness lies not in its ability to get us drunk but rather in the pleasure of savoring it moderately.

When asked in a video interview if he agreed with Christians who say that "drinking is okay because Jesus drank wine," John Piper responded, "Drinking *can* be okay," but he cautioned that there are also times when drinking is not okay: drinking to drunkenness or drinking with people struggling with addiction, for example.

"People that are cavalier about this thing called alcohol," notes Piper, "make no sense to me. . . . Of course you can't defend, in any absolute way, teetotalism from the Bible. It's clear that wine is a blessing in the Bible."

Even so, Piper has chosen to be a teetotaler, not because he thinks alcohol is evil or forbidden but for other reasons: "It's a context in which I live. It's my children and my grandchildren. It's my addictive personality."⁹

For many people, teetotalism from alcohol does make the most sense. But for those who can handle it, drinking in moderation can be a good thing.

Don't Use Alcohol, Enjoy It

Whenever one *uses* alcohol, things can get messy: using it to make oneself feel better, using it to drown away one's sorrows, using it to mischievously reduce one's inhibitions or the inhibitions of others. When we use it this way we diminish it to nothing more than a tool in service of disordered desires. We lose sight of the fact that alcohol can be as complex and aesthetically rich as a painting or ballet. Just because it's been enjoyed by the masses—in taverns, at ballparks, at keggers—as a decidedly “low” form of culture does not mean this is how it must always be consumed.

“Beer is an art like anything else,” remarks Scott Sullivan, whose path to opening Greenbush Brewing Company in 2010 began with his interest in craft beer “as an antidote to the mass market beer world.” Sullivan came to brewing by way of making his own bread, sausage, and cheese, which taught him how to work with yeast and formulate recipes. For him, beer-making is as much an art as is making music. It's his medium.

If we think of alcohol as an art, then, we should not approach it in this “user” mindset. To repeat the quote of C. S. Lewis from the introduction, when we *use* a piece of art (or alcohol) rather than *receive* it, it “merely facilitates, brightens, relieves, or palliates our life” but “does not add to it.”¹⁰

A better way to approach alcohol, I would suggest, is to *receive* it as a blessing from God. Think about it less in terms of what it *does* for you and more in terms of how your enjoyment of it brings glory to God. As Mansfield notes,

Beer is not simply a means of drunkenness nor is it merely a lubricant to grease the skids to sin. Beer, well respected and rightly consumed, can be a gift of God. It is one of his mysteries, which it was his delight to conceal and the glory of kings to search out. And men enjoy it to mark their days

9 Tips for Developing a Discerning Palate

How can we improve our taste experience of alcohol and better savor the delights of God's created world? Here are a few brief suggestions:

- Expand your horizons. Don't stick to the drink you *know* you'll like.
- Find a craft brewery that offers a large array of styles and start sampling them.
- Learn to slow down and savor a good drink. A glass of scotch can (and should) last you a good hour if you sip it slowly (preferably while discussing theology or philosophy).
- Read about alcohol on the internet. Do research. Read beer and wine reviews. Become educated.
- Try everything, but don't *love* everything. Find your favorites and don't feel obligated to like the cool or trendy drinks.
- Learn to describe the taste of a drink and why you do or don't like it. This may make you sound pretentious at times, but it will enhance your experience! Maybe even take notes.
- Build your palate sensibly. With beer, for example, don't start with IPAs (intense and bitter). Begin, perhaps, with a quality lager (smooth and easy). Your appreciation for a range of flavors will be a gradual thing.
- Host your own “tastings” in which you share a variety of personally curated types of drinks: wine, beer, bourbon, scotch, and so on. Plan dinners for friends with wine or beer pairings. “Grade” drinks together and compare notes.
- Drink local and support the little guys!

and celebrate their moments and stand with their brothers in the face of what life brings.¹¹

Love It More for the Taste Than for the Buzz

As a corollary to the “receive, don't use” approach to alcohol is this advice: love it for how it tastes more than for how it

makes you feel. This isn't to say that the "buzz" of alcohol is always a bad thing—it is surely one of its manifold blessings, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. But when the buzz is the main reason we drink alcohol, it becomes far easier to abuse it. Plus, it turns the activity of drinking into a me-centered activity of "what this drink does to me" rather than "how this drink communicates beauty." This is why people who drink primarily for the buzz—college kids, partiers, "bros," soccer hooligans, and so on—don't mind drinking swill like Coors, Bud Light, Heineken, and Shock Top. It's not about the taste for them. If it's a cold beverage and gives them a buzz, it's enough.

This isn't how alcohol ought to be consumed. And Christians, of all people, should recognize how this "Who cares how it tastes?" approach misses out on a richer appreciation of a well-made beverage.

Over the years I've learned to approach alcohol in a more taste-oriented manner, in the same nuanced way I might approach a piece of art in a gallery. A few of my experiences in the last year might illustrate what I mean:

- At Beachwood BBQ's Sourfest (Seal Beach, CA), I joined a community of beer lovers to taste rare sour ales and hear from the brewers themselves. I particularly enjoyed the "Duck Duck Guava," a tart beer with pineapple and guava, brewed only once (30 gallons total). The preciousness of such a small batch only heightens the experience of truly "craft" beers such as this.
- At a Kindling's Hearth retreat at a Swiss chalet in the Cascades near Seattle, I joined a group of Christians in a blind tasting of wines from the cellar of the host. Hearing the host describe the wines, which were all award-winning reds, and seeing his joy in pouring each of our glasses and then asking us to describe the taste ("nutty,"

"sweet," "hints of blackberry") was a joyous experience of how the beauty of wine can bring people together.

- Outside of Altea, Spain—a tiny city on the Mediterranean coast—I went wine tasting with some dear friends at Enrique Mendoza winery. For no charge, we were poured about seven generous tastings each. Pepe Mendoza, the second-generation winemaker who runs the place, spoke of each wine with the passion and detail of an artist describing his work. "We are artisans; not industry," he said in broken English as he described a wine called Estrecho, which comes from a local grape called monastrell and tastes faintly of rosemary and pine.
- At Bluestem restaurant in Kansas City, my wife, Kira, and I splurged on a five-course wine-pairing dinner, in which a very nice (and knowledgeable) sommelier handpicked wines for each food either of us ate. The way that each wine was perfectly paired to complement the flavors of the food blew our minds. We both had smiles on our faces the entire meal. It was exquisite.

In each of these cases, the beauty of the experience of drinking was not only that it brought upon me a pleasant, relaxing buzz (which, to be sure, it did). It was also the quality of the drink itself, the nuances of flavor, the details of the grape's local origin, the passion that went into the brewing process. So much wonder can be discovered and enjoyed in the very *tasting* of alcohol: the slow, considered *sipping* of it. It's a shame so many people gulp down their drinks without taking the time to truly appreciate them. When it comes to alcohol, many people are "far too easily pleased," as Lewis might say.

That was the case for Taylor Birkey, a graduate of Taylor University who worked in construction after college and regularly had Buds and other mass market beers with his

co-workers at the end of the day. He didn't especially love the taste of beer then—it was just the thing to do. But one day that all changed. On January 1, 2010, he opened a bottle of Three Floyds Dreadnaught IPA.

"All my preconceptions went right out the window," he said. "I was so amazed that a beer could be crafted to smell so much like grapefruit and taste refreshingly bright and bitter and subtly sweet, all in one sip."¹²

Indeed, the fact that beer can be *crafted* to smell and taste in such a way should be a revelation for Christians. Praise be to God that he created things like hops, barley, grapes, grapefruit, and the process of fermentation; and that he created humans with the creative capacity to figure out brewing, distillation, vinification, and all the complexities therein; and finally, that he created us—the drinkers—with taste buds to enjoy it all and faculties to be relaxed by its smooth pleasures.

Conclusion: Drinking as an Act of Worship?

For much of the history of the church, alcohol has literally been consumed as a part of Christian worship in the form of communion wine. But can drinking alcohol socially, for enjoyment, also be worshipful? I think so. Luther and Calvin would say so. Jonathan Edwards too. And of course Jesus himself seemed to value the added layers of joy good wine brought to a wedding banquet.

Let's be very clear: alcohol is not something to be worshiped. It must never be an end unto itself, but rather a blessed glimpse—a sign pointing back to the Creator God who created all things and pronounced them "very good" (Gen. 1:31). It shouldn't be about us as much as it is about God and what he invites us to experience in, through, and on account of his grace.

This goes for all of our consumption. Our world sees "consuming" as an individual-oriented, pleasure-gratifying activity of hedonism. I'd like to suggest that Christians should think counterculturally about what it means to be a consumer: that it's not primarily about what I get but about what God gives; that it's not a solitary transaction as much as an activity of communion both with our fellow creatures and with our Divine Creator. It's a way for us to dignify the goodness of a creation God created to bring glory to himself.

If we're willing to do the work, to truly engage the difficult questions of the "gray areas," we can rehabilitate the meaning of "consumer." This has been the project of this book, and in the following concluding chapter I hope to provide a summarizing plan for how this "rehabilitation" can proceed and why it matters for our mission in this world.