

Wise Decision-Making in a Wicked World  
(God's Guidelines for the "Gray Areas" of Life)

Part 7: The Use of Beverage Alcohol as a Test Case: Part A

Ethical and moral decision-making presents a great challenge for devoted followers of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context. In 1 Corinthians Paul provides helpful guidelines for navigating what could be called "the gray areas" of the Christian life.

These biblical principles are true anywhere, anytime and under any circumstances. They are extremely helpful in leading us to be wise decision-makers as we live out a gospel-centered ethic.

In recent years debate has arisen among Bible-believing evangelicals concerning the use of beverage alcohol. Feelings and emotions run high on this issue. Most have strong convictions. I am no exception. Much of this debate has a generational bent to it, with younger believers arguing for the acceptability of drinking a beer or glass of wine and frequenting the bars, while older believers (I am 51 to locate myself chronologically) more likely frown on any use of alcohol other than medicinally and the idea of going to the bars for a drink is unthinkable. I am also aware that some see the debate as geographical (believers in the North favor moderation vs those in the South who champion abstinence) and others denominational (Baptist types vs. Presbyterian/Episcopal types for example). I don't think you will struggle concerning who believes what! Before I apply our "Guidelines" let me make some general observations on which I believe most can agree.

1. Drunkenness is always sinful and wrong. No question. No debate.
2. To take a pledge or sign a covenant to abstain from the use of alcohol and then use alcohol is sin. In fact it is a very serious sin because this is not a matter of judgment but

integrity. A number of Bible college and seminary students have sinned at this point and need to repent.

3. The Bible speaks both positively and negatively to the drinking of wine. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence to the liquor, wine and beer industries of our day, and this should not be papered over.
4. Jesus made and drank wine.
5. The Corinthians used intoxicating wine when observing the Lord's Supper, got drunk, and got judged big time!
6. It is not biblically defensible with chapter and verse to say it is always sin to drink a beverage that contains alcohol.
7. Bible-believing Christians who are neither antinomians or legalist disagree on this issue. It would be helpful if we represent each other fairly and treat each other with grace and respect.

Now, having made these comments let's apply God's Guidelines for the Gray Areas of Life and see where it takes us.

- 1) Will this action be helpful to me? (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23)

It is difficult to see how beverage alcohol makes us better or builds us up. It is not difficult to see how it can harm or tear us down. Now to be fair, if it is done in moderation it is probably something of a neutral act with no personal consequences. However, alcohol is a mind-altering drug and it can easily become addictive. It does not help one in doing the will of God does it? If so how? My friend John Piper is helpful here and his words should be carefully weighed. He asks, "Does alcohol make me a

better person? Does it draw me closer to God? Does it help me run the race more faithfully to the end?" These are good questions to consider.

2) Will this action potentially enslave me? (1 Corinthians 6:12)

This is the one question that a number of my brothers who advocate "drinking in moderation" tend to overlook or ignore. And yet, it may be the most crucial question in this whole debate. Can alcohol enslave you? The unequivocal answer is yes. Is it potentially addictive? Absolutely. In fact that is the goal of the multi-billion dollar alcohol industry! Get you when you are young and keep you until you die. Anyone who doubts this should look at how the alcohol advertising industry does its thing. After all, slogans through the years do not hide their intentions: "This Bud's for you!" "Get that rocky mountain high!" "You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can!" Now the response again of some is just drink in moderation. Don't get drunk. Don't get intoxicated. Don't become physically or mentally impaired. But, and here is another crucial question: where is that line? One beer will have an effect. The same is true with a glass of wine with any significant alcohol content. How can you/would you know if you have crossed that line? Further, the millions who have crossed that line and been plunged into despair, destruction and even death is too numerous to count. Once more listen to the wisdom of John Piper, "is it really so prudish, or narrow to renounce a highway killer, a home destroyer, and a business wrecker?" No, I am in total agreement with my spiritual hero Adrian Rogers who said, "Moderation is not the cure for the liquor problem. Moderation is the cause of the liquor problem. Becoming an alcoholic does not begin with the last drink, it always begins with the first. Just leave it alone." My friend James Merritt wisely says, "It is impossible to be bitten by a snake that you never play

with.” Alcoholism cannot strike unless it is given the opportunity. That potential becomes real with the first drink that one takes.

Now, let me close this first installment of our test case with a personal word. I readily confess a bias when it comes to the issue of alcohol. My wife Charlotte grew up in the Georgia Baptist Children’s Home because her parents were alcoholics. She seldom if ever saw her parents during those years. Her father died a lost alcoholic never telling her he loved her and not attending our wedding. Her mother would slap Charlotte around when she was a little girl before she went into the Children’s Home. But, and by God’s grace, she was saved on her death bed. Her body had been ravaged by the twin killers of alcohol and tobacco. Today her sister and brother are lost alcoholics as is most of the rest of her family. I could spend hours detailing broken promises, verbal and physical abuse, heartache and tragedy, including murder, that occurred in her family. My sister Joy and her husband Kevin King adopted a daughter born with fetal alcohol syndrome. She began life with two strikes against her through no fault of her own. Today there are more than 40 million problem drinkers in America. Alcohol is the number one drug problem among teenagers. One in three American families suspects that one or more family members have a drinking problem. Misuse of alcohol costs our nation \$100 billion a year in quantifiable cost. When we look at this issue, these realities cannot be ignored or minimized. To do so is simply irresponsible. The 21<sup>st</sup> century context is significantly different than that of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Because of these experiences and many more, I have often said that even if I were not a Christian I would have nothing to do with alcohol. There is simply too much sorrow and heartache connected to it. Avoiding this

potentially addictive, enslaving and devastating drug is simply the wise thing to do. (To be continued)