

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

Part 8: The Use of Beverage Alcohol as a Test Case: Part B

Ethical and moral decision-making presents a great challenge for devoted followers of Jesus in the 21st 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.

3) Will this action encourage my brother or sister in Christ? 1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:24, 32

A prospective student once told me that he went to the bars and drank with his friends to prove you could be a Christian and be cool. I responded by saying if you have to go to the bars and drink to prove you are cool, then you are not cool. Further, I shared with him that the example he was setting for others could some day come back to haunt him. I was speaking of his children.

We are all an example to someone. To our children we are probably heroes. Perhaps you believe you are capable of drinking in moderation a glass of wine to the glory of God. Your children: can you be confident that they will be able to do the same? Is it worth the risk? One thing is certain. If you share the wisdom of avoiding the appearance and place of temptation, you will never have to worry about them walking the tragic road of alcoholism because they saw you do it, thought it must be ok, but unfortunately lacked self-control.

I have tried hard to see how supporting the alcohol industry and socially drinking helps anyone. To be completely honest, I just don't see it.

4) Will this help or hinder my gospel witness? 1 Corinthians 9:12, 19-13; 10:32-33

I can conceive of a scenario where sharing the gospel over a beer or glass of wine might not be a problem, at least in certain context. On the other hand I do not see how it helps or enhances one's witness, and it may actually be a stumblingblock. Wisdom again says why run the risk? You have no reason to think it will hinder your witness if you abstain. There is a risk, however, if you don't.

5) Is this action consistent with my life in Christ? 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 19

This principle settles the issue of drunkenness, intoxication and impairment. My joy and fulfillment is now totally and completely in Christ through the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). I do not need an intoxicating, mind altering substance of any sort as a new creation in Christ. If I need a high I will find it in Jesus.

6) Will this action violate my conscience? 1 Corinthians 10:25-29

For some the answer is yes. For others the answer is no. This principle will assist us in addressing this issue, but in and of itself it is not decisive.

7) Will this action follow the pattern of the life of Jesus? 1 Corinthians 11:1

This is the place where those advocating moderation seek to make their strongest case. Jesus drank wine and so we can drink wine. Jesus drank wine and if you advocate abstinence you are saying Jesus was wrong. This is a compelling argument, at least on the surface. However, if one digs a little deeper I believe you will discover a flaw in the argument. You see there is no one-to-one correspondence between the time of Jesus and our own.

As I noted in the previous article it is true Jesus drank wine, and I am sure I would have had I lived in the first century. However, there is no evidence at all that he ever partook of “strong drink.” In other words Jesus, like others deeply devoted to God, would have drunk wine with a very low alcohol content. It would more than likely have required an extremely large amount to become intoxicated. As Bob Stein has carefully documented, and I have yet to read a refutation of his argument, “The term “wine” or *oinos* in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water.... To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine [a fairly common ancient ratio], one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses. In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind.” (Bob Stein, “Wine Drinking in New Testament Times,” *Christianity Today* 19, June 20, 1975, 10-11.) It should also be noted that children would have drunk this diluted mixture of water and wine, and it is impossible to imagine godly parents giving their children a drink that could get them drunk. And, given their smaller body size, they would have become intoxicated on less wine than their adult parents. It again seems clear that there is no one-to-one correspondence with first century wine and twenty first century distilled intoxication liquor. Concerning the latter I believe the Lord Jesus would have no part.

8) Will this action show love to others?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The loving thing is always to esteem others better than yourself, it is to look out for their interest, not just your own. “Liberty in Christ regulated by love” for Him and

others is the ethic that guides the man or woman in Christ. Is it more loving to insist on my freedom or to sacrifice for another? Because I love you and would never want to lead you astray by my example, I will chose to say no to that which can enslave, intoxicate and addict. It's just the loving thing to do.

9) Will this action honor my body which belongs to God? 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

This is actually a debatable principle with wine or a beer. There is no debate with respect to hard liquor. However, I know of no benefit allegedly gained from a beer or glass of wine that cannot be obtained by some other non-intoxicating means. Why not just drink a glass of grape juice and avoid any risk of addiction?

10) Will this action glorify God? 1 Corinthians 10:31

This principle is the most important in my judgment, but it is not conclusive. I have met some Christians who with sincerity and conviction say I can drink a glass of wine, a good gift from God, for His glory. I, on the other hand, cannot. However, keep in mind that glorifying also entails our previous nine guidelines. That truth will certainly influence our grasp and understanding of all that is involved in glorifying God.

I should note that some who advocate moderation draw an analogy to eating and sex. They correctly point out that gluttony and sexual immorality are sin, but not the act of eating or sexual intercourse. I would want to make several observations in this context. First, gluttony and overeating is sinful and dishonors the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is something I was guilty of, God convicted me, and I lost 30 pounds. I stay in constant battle in this area. Second, many who would line up with me on alcohol run (but not very fast due to their weight!) from addressing gluttony. Third,

some have alleged that Southern Baptist are hypocritical in passing resolutions on alcohol but not gluttony. I agree. So next year in Louisville someone needs to submit such a resolution. It will have my full support. Fourth, we have to eat to live and we have to engage in sex to propagate the race. Drinking alcohol is not necessary for either life or good living. The fact is it may hamper or end both. Fifth, I know of no one who's been arrested for DWF (Driving While Fat). The supposed analogy breaks down at a significant point: the point of potential intoxication.

In conclusion, I agree with John MacArthur. Can I say it is always a sin to take a drink? No. Can I say it is almost always unwise? Yes. One of America's leading pastors is Andy Stanley. He wrote a book entitled *The Best Question Ever*. That question is this, "What is the wise thing for me to do?" In my judgment, abstaining from beverage alcohol is the wise thing to do. This is not legalism but love. This is not being anti-biblical but pro-brother and sister. This is not working for evil but for good. Given the world in which we live, I believe such a lifestyle honors the Lord Jesus. I believe it pleases Him. It is simply the wise thing to do.