

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church's Attitude To Alcohol

An historical document. A paper prepared by Rev's Rodman and Morgan for the EPC presbytery.

Sad news recently emerged from a study conducted by Michael Norman of Melbourne, to the National Youth Council of Australia. In his study, more than 1,200 young people from all over Australia, teenagers between the ages of 12 and 20 were interviewed in three hour sessions to find out how they spend their time, what they care about, and what they would like to see done in Australia to improve life for young people.

Some of the findings from this study are shocking. I refer to the data on the use of alcohol among these children. When they were asked how they spend their leisure time, a very high proportion of them answered they "get drunk." Among those between the ages of 18 and 20, 50% stated that they "often" get drunk as a way of passing free time. For ages 15 and 17, the figure is about the same - 50% - with another 6% stating that "they wish they could".

However, the most heartrending of all, among children between the ages of 12 and 14, nearly 25% of them "sometimes" or "often" get drunk, while about 10% more wish they could.

In short, among our children between the ages of 12 - 20, between quarter and half of them get drunk frequently as a way of passing the time, while another 10% or so think it would be fun to do so. Research over the past two decades in the United Kingdom and the United States, proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that alcohol is the most destructive drug human beings habitually use. It has been proved that alcohol is as addictive as heroin although the addictive process usually takes longer - and it is more destructive to the brain and the body. Evidence proves that alcohol is more damaging to the personality than barbiturates and amphetamines. In fact, the conclusions of research is that alcohol is the number one killer of the 20th century. Some of the fruits of its abuse are mentioned in an article in the Examiner (dated 9/11/1975) and they are as follow:

"Occupancy of one in five hospital beds; one in five battered children; two in five divorces; about half the serious crimes in the community; half the deaths from road accidents; an average shortened life span of 10 - 12 years for alcoholics, and an estimated cost to the Australian community of \$1,000 million per year."

Now, the question that we must ask ourselves, as members of the true visible church, is what is our policy concerning this drug that not only damns men's souls but has its awful toll in the death, disabilities, loss of work, broken homes and broken bodies on the highway?

In protesting against this drug, the Scripture does not give us a warrant to say that drink is wrong in itself, because not only does the Scripture teach that evil is not in matter and therefore alcohol is not evil in itself, but also it is evident from scripture that the wine or "rhinos" spoken of in the Scripture is the fermented juice of the grape. Paul writing to the Church at Ephesus says, "be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess: but be filled, with the Spirit," Eph. 5: 18. The apostle does not forbid the use of intoxicating wine, but the abuse of it. It is excess to be completely under the influence of wine. This is drunkenness which is forbidden by God as a work of the flesh, Gal. 5:21. Peter also exhorts his readers that they should "no longer live the rest of time in the flesh to the lusts of men," and one of those lusts mentioned is the "excess wine", 1 Peter 4:2,3. If the wine was not intoxicating, there would be no mention of having excess of wine. Scripture does not forbid excess water because it is not intoxicating. Hence when Paul writes to Timothy he tells him to "take a little wine for (his) stomach's sake and (his) often infirmities," 1 Tim. 5:23.

Writing to Titus the apostle said that the aged women should not be given to much wine, Titus 2:3. Whilst the lawful use of wine is mentioned in several passages of Scripture such as Judges 9:13, 19:19, Prov. 31:6, Ecc. 10:19, however the abuse of alcohol is condemned in both the Old Testament and the New.

Whilst wine is not evil in itself and the abuse of wine is strictly forbidden, there is also another factor that must be taken into consideration and that is the giving of offence. Since alcohol is now recognised as the number one drug in our country, it is only natural that some non-Christians and professing Christians look upon those who partake of this social evil as those who are not Christians or worldly. We cannot deny that this is the position of some of those who hold Arminian tenets. Since our chief end is to glorify God, we must look at what the Scripture says about giving offence.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he told the Christians to abstain from things indifferent on account of our neighbour when the partaking of those things gave offence. He says, "if any of them that believe not bid you to a feast and ye be disposed to go, whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that showed it, and for conscience - conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other". 1 Cor. 10:28-29. The apostle then asks two very important questions - the first is why should his liberty be questioned on account of another man's conscience; and secondly if he partakes of a meal with thankfulness, then why should he be denounced for something for which he gave thanks? The apostle supplies the answers in a single

statement and that - he does not live for his liberty, but for the glory of God. He then exhorts the Christian not to cause anyone to stumble by the use of their liberty. We should not allow things indifferent to give an offence to the Jews, Gentiles or the church of God. We are exhorted to follow his example in not seeking our own good, but the good of others that they might be saved. We can not deny that the apostle taught that we are to surrender our liberty about things indifferent because our chief end is the glory of God. So when he writes on the subject to the Christians at Rome, he is most explicit concerning things indifferent when he says: "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended or is made weak", Romans 14:21.

Where things indifferent create a division in the body of Christ, we have a precedent in Scripture where such things were forbidden, Acts 15:28,29. However, where things have not reached this proportion, we are to recognise the great Protestant principle that what is not commanded by God, we are under no obligation to keep. This great principle is to protect us from the bondage of mere human authority or the traditions of men.

To prohibit people from doing things indifferent in themselves, would be as bad as forcing people to conform to that which God has commanded. Nevertheless, if offence is given by the drinking of alcohol, it would be in order for the Presbytery to direct the sessions that our members should not drink in public, or in such a manner that would give offence to others.

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