

Christians and the Alcohol Problem

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A deep concern for social issues is basic to all Christianity. The reasoning is simple. The Christian church is concerned about persons, with the individual. Society is just so many individuals, living together, interdependently. When a condition in that society inflicts harm on an individual or individuals living in that society, it becomes a social issue and at the same time a concern of the Christian church. To minister to people, Christians must concern themselves with social issues.

Also, the Christian church is a revolutionary movement, constantly seeking to change society. Basic in the Christian faith is the concept that lives can be changed, and that as individuals find God, they will shape their lives, and thus society, into His pattern. The Christian can never be content with the status quo, for himself or for those around him. Instead, the true mission of his church is a mandate, sending him out to share the good news and by so doing to bring the world in which he lives ever closer to the Christian ideal.

In recent history, Christians have faced many social issues head on. Slavery, child labor, the seven-day week, racketeering, to name a few. In many areas the church's efforts have been successful, helping to build a social order in which men could live more successfully as Christ taught they should live.

Great problems still remain unsolved; war, hunger, housing, race. Not the least of these is the alcohol problem. Here is a contemporary issue which Christians must face if they are to be true to their faith. And it is an issue which is concrete, real and present. It can be dealt with first hand, faced on the basis of fact, not theory, for it touches the lives of nearly every American in one way or another. It destroys the lives of millions.

It is hardly necessary to enter into listing of facts to demonstrate the size and scope of the alcohol problem in modern society. Newspaper headlines daily testify to the effect this social custom has on individuals and families. But one or two items which are not often printed in the papers should be noted.

First, the problem is growing at an alarming rate. Figures compiled by the noted World Health Organization scientist Dr.

E. M. Jellinek show that in ten years the number of alcoholics in the United States has increased by nearly fifty percent, a proportion far above the population growth for the same period. There are now approximately 4,000,000 alcoholics and an additional 3,000,000 problem drinkers in the U. S., numbering more than the total population of ten Western states.

Alcoholism has become 100 times more prevalent than polio, five times more prevalent than cancer and three times more prevalent than tuberculosis, according to case statistics from the American Cancer Society, the National Tuberculosis Association and the U. S. Public Health Service.

But far more widespread than the problem of alcoholism are the other by-products involving "drinking" not "drunken" individuals. The National Safety Council reports, very conservatively, that one out of four fatal highway accidents is caused by a drinking driver or pedestrian. In many states the percentage is much higher. Safety officials are unanimous in asserting that the majority of these accidents are caused not by drunken drivers, but by persons just "under the influence" enough to miscalculate their reaction time, or to think they are driving more carefully than they really are. This means that in an average year (1953 for instance) more than 7,500 persons are killed on the highways because somebody had been drinking, not drunk.

Alcohol has become a major factor in crime. According to FBI statistics, 59.2 percent of all arrests made in 1954 were for the alcohol-related offenses of drunkenness, driving while intoxicated, disorderly conduct and liquor law violations. At the same time, alcoholic beverages are recognized as a major factor in divorce and juvenile delinquency.

When one problem in the social order reaches these proportions and touches this many persons, Christians cannot overlook it. The alcohol problem has become a major social issue in contemporary America.

As it evolves today, the alcohol problem is also a personal issue. It must be admitted realistically that there is little chance for a national legislative movement to deal with the problem at this time. Nor will such a movement ever succeed until the general public realizes the need for more widespread legal controls. The problem must be met, therefore, in local and personal situations, as the Christian witnesses to what he believes in his daily life in the com-

munity of persons who surround him. Here he reflects the mission of the church as he portrays the gospel through his personal attitudes, witnessing to a more positive and constructive way of life.

As a Christian, his own attitude toward beverage alcohol must be clear. He must ask himself some pointed questions and find firm answers.

First, as a Christian I believe in the dignity of man. If a practice makes man less than he might be, degrades personality rather than enriches it, should I not question that practice for myself?

Second, as a Christian I am constantly seeking to know better my Father and His will for my life. If a practice, by dulling my senses even slightly, makes me less able to communicate with my God, is it of value? Does a cocktail make it easier for me to pray?

Third, as a Christian I believe in the brotherhood of man. If a practice erects barriers between men, is it not open to question? More important, if by my example I cause another person to accept a practice that materially harms him, or cuts between him and the highest realization of himself, am I not responsible because I set the example?

There are other questions which might be asked, but these strike directly at the heart of both the problem and its relationship to the Christian faith. Answers are not easy, but the questions must be asked again and again if Christians are to face the problem realistically.

It is the position of the denomination this writer serves that there can be only one answer to the question above: total abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages, with a constructive, positive sharing of that conviction, which is based on scientific fact, logic and reasonable educational techniques.

If the Christian adopts such an answer to these questions and makes it a part of his life, he will find himself in situations where his faith forces him to take a stand. The answer will influence his personal habits, the advice he gives others, the contribution he makes in community forums, the way he votes, his choice of associates. The example he sets *will* have its influence.

It is in this way that the Christian church works most effectively in the world—as it witnesses through the lives of its followers to a new and better way for all men. Christians can change society, as they participate in it, exercising their citizenship right in terms of their Christian responsibilities.