

Coronavirus, Alcohol, and the Church

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The novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 will be remembered historically for the societal adjustments it has produced on a world-wide scale. Business models have changed, dining out has changed, we shop differently, we consume media differently, and we have even developed an extended vocabulary. Words and phrases like “social distancing,” “flattening the curve,” and “self-isolation” have taken on new meaning. Another term, one that carries a great deal of weight, is “essential business.”

This expression produces much debate, and understandably so. Thousands of people suddenly find themselves without work with one swipe of a Governor’s pen because their business is not deemed essential. Additionally, many are puzzled at the seemingly subjective nature of determining the essentiality of a business. Why are big box stores like Wal-Mart and Home Depot considered essential while small privately owned businesses that sell the same products are not? A related, but far more important question is why are liquor stores deemed essential? What does it say about society that a local hardware store cannot open but a store that specializes in the Devil’s brew can? What reasons are given? How should the church react? These questions are all worthy of our consideration.

Alcohol as an Essential Business

The term “essential business” varies from state to state but generally it refers to any business or service that society cannot function without. Grocery stores, hospitals, and Public Services would all be included, for example. That begs the question, why would alcohol fit the definition of something without which society could not function?

The answer is that alcohol is such a deeply rooted cultural component that making it unavailable is considered anathema by many. Philosopher Peg O’Connor summarizes the American view well:

Liquor is essential because many people believe it is essential to them. This is a peek into the American psyche. Simply put, the United States is a country steeped in alcohol; our culture is saturated. Not only do we have a right to drink, we tell ourselves in all sorts of ways we deserve to drink. We work hard, so we deserve a drink. We’ve had a bad day, so we deserve a drink to take the edge off. We’ve finally turned 21, so we deserve to drink. Times are tough or times are totally great, we deserve to drink. We’re scared, we deserve to drink. Rites of passages (birth, graduation, marriage, anniversaries, birthdays, retirement) are all occasions deserving of alcoholic beverages. We drink alcohol to amplify feelings or to regulate them. Liquor comes to feel essential because we live in a culture that treats it as such. We treat it as such.¹

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/philosophy-stirred-not-shaken/202003/why-are-liquor-stores-considered-essential-businesses>

American culture insists on alcohol, but it does so to its own demise. The truth is that the exaltation of alcohol has created a physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual crisis. Consider the fact that nearly 15 million people suffer with, what the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism calls, Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), and taking alcohol away from alcoholics overnight can be problematic and potentially deadly for the addict and those around him. A Newsweek article from April 1, 2020 suggested “officials and advocates believe these stores [liquor stores CW] are an essential component of the broader healthcare system.” New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy included liquor stores in his list of essential business. In commenting on that action, the governor relayed the story “of a woman who was on her knees profusely thanking me for keeping the liquor stores open as it relates to just the whole addiction front.” George F. Koob, director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism said, “each year there are roughly 250,000 emergency department visits and 850 deaths related to alcohol withdrawal.” He further stated “Abruptly limiting access to alcohol could lead to an increase in withdrawal among people with severe alcohol use disorder and add to the burden on the healthcare system.” He went on to suggest that the fact that many people turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism in a time of duress should be considered as well.²

There are at least two major points to glean from this information, neither of which are good. First, Americans have “added sin to sin” (Isa. 30:1) by creating a health dilemma related to alcohol. As has already been pointed out, swiftly taking away all alcohol from alcoholics would likely lead to terrible consequences. All sorts of medical issues arise from withdrawal and other complications related to alcoholics being unable to feed their addiction. Additionally, the lives of friends and family members would be put in danger because of the uncontrolled rage that would surely follow many alcoholics not being able to access their drug. This is the dilemma. We have allowed sin in the form of alcohol to occupy such a prominent role in society that taking it away would produce an entirely different set of difficult problems. Second, the tragic reality of our time is that thousands of people have no idea how to cope with the issues of life without alcohol. Wine, not God, is the source of strength and hope for too many. A Market Watch article noted that online alcohol sales increased 243% in the early portions of the pandemic.³ The reason for the increase is that people believe they need alcohol either because they just cannot live without it or because they feel they cannot cope without it. Both are tragic.

The Church and Alcohol

The Church is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and it is our responsibility to spread the light of truth in the world and confront sin and error in whatever form it may be found. Consequently, society’s alcohol plague should trigger a response, but what should it be?

First, we must recognize the serious nature of the problem. Alcohol is devastating to all who fall under its curse. The Bible is clear on this matter. Alcohol “enslaves the heart” (Hos. 4:11). It produces poverty (Pro. 23:21), shame and embarrassment (Pro. 20:1), and will cost one his soul (1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:21). Solomon asked,

² Information found in <https://www.newsweek.com/marijuana-alcohol-covid-19-essential-businesses-1495600>

³ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/us-alcohol-sales-spike-during-coronavirus-outbreak-2020-04-01>

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, those who go in search of mixed wine (Pro. 23:29-30).

The world glamorizes alcohol to try and hide its filth, but the reality is much more like what my family witnessed at a fast-food restaurant the day before Thanksgiving. As we were eating, a woman just a few feet away fell to the floor. Several rushed over to help her. At first, we thought she had suffered a stroke. She could not speak, she could not get up, and her facial expression never changed. But her young teenage son, with great embarrassment, told us she was drunk. The shame increased a short time later when she tried to kiss the man who was helping her to the car and could not stop telling him how much she loved him. How tragic that a young boy is forced to drive and watch over his own mother because her drunkenness renders her incapable of functioning. But this is just one small incident among thousands. Throughout our world people are dying physically and spiritually because of alcohol. Marriages are torn apart. Children are neglected and abused. Individuals destroy their minds and bodies because of their addiction. There is nothing good or glamorous about alcohol at all. It is a toxic and destructive tool which the Devil uses with great success. God commands, “Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly” (Pro. 23:31). Paul said, “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation...” (Eph. 5:18). Christians cannot be fooled into viewing alcohol nonchalantly, as if it is no big deal. We must see alcohol as the evil that it is.

Second, Christians must stop arguing in favor of “social drinking.” Some within the body of Christ would agree with the previous point, but then say, “The Bible only condemns being drunk, not having a little wine on a special occasion.” The social drinking push by many is counterproductive and unbiblical for a number of reasons.

- First, consider the utter hypocrisy of the argument. How can a person stand completely opposed to drunkenness and all the carnage it produces, then support the alcohol even if it is on a “smaller” scale? Like it or not “social drinking” is still drinking, and it is still participation in the same industry and culture that destroys people. How could you say anything about the dangers of alcohol when you engage in it yourself? Such is hypocritical and also self-defeating. You cannot claim to be walking in the light (1 John 1:7) and argue for the inclusion of darkness.
- Second, why would a Christian want to drink alcohol at all? What is the motivation? The danger of alcohol is clear and yet some Christians still argue in favor of it. Why? Actions proceed from the heart (Mark 7:14-15) and so there must be some driving force behind a Christian who argues in this fashion. Is it a desire to be like the world? Is it a refusal to “condemn” friends or loved ones? Is it just that you *want* to drink socially and so you refuse to believe there could be anything wrong with it (if so, you still miss the point)? Things done with sinful motives are indeed sinful (Jas. 4:1-6).
- Third, some social drinking arguments manifest a backwards view of Bible authority. Someone may respond, “I don’t see anything wrong with it, and you’re being too judgmental.” Okay, but do you see anything *right* with it? Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...” Can you point to a passage of scripture that authorizes drinking to any degree? Likely someone would say “Yes! First Timothy 5:23,” but that passage has no bearing here. Paul’s instructions to Timothy were in regard to medicinal needs and our discussion is about recreational

drinking. No one who uses 1 Timothy 5:23 in favor of social drinking uses the passage correctly. You cannot transform a medicine passage into a sin passage. Additionally, Romans 14:23 teaches an important principle. In the context of judgment matters Paul said “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.” The principle is this—if I cannot say with certainty that God would be pleased with something, I have no business doing it. Our approach should be positive in regard to authority. Meaning, I should ask “Is this right?” and “Will God be pleased?” instead of saying “I just do not see anything wrong with it.”

- Fourth, social drinking ignores the Bible’s command for sobriety and abstinence. First Peter 1:13 says, “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” “Sobriety” in ancient usage meant not only literal abstinence from drink but also behaving as a non-intoxicated person should, hence with dignified self-control.”⁴ The word indicates being completely free from intoxicants or anything else that would blur judgment and compromise our self-control. It is impossible to do that while drinking alcohol to any degree. Further, Ephesians 5:18 commands, “And do not be drunk with wine in which is dissipation...” The point of the passage is to not even begin the process of being drunk. Paul said, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). Who could argue that social drinking is not making provision for the flesh? We are to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16). We are called to come out of the world (2 Cor. 7:1) and be different (1 Pet. 2:9). It is impossible to fulfill those divine obligations while at the same time condoning or participating in something which God condemns.

Third, the church must take an offensive approach toward the problem of alcohol. The Bible teaches us to expose the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11). We should attack the problem head-on instead of waiting for it to come to us. Here are some suggestions.

- First, we must be sure to preach and teach what the Bible says about alcohol and its dangers. The job of a preacher is to proclaim the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). This includes the Bible’s teaching on alcohol. The church must hear God’s instruction on this important matter, regularly. Preachers should be able to explain the pertinent passages clearly. We should be able to deal with the word “wine” in scripture and explain how it is used in its various contexts. Preachers should be able to present the Bible’s case against social drinking clearly so that hearers may understand and be able to reason through the issue clearly and biblically themselves. We must not have congregations of God’s people where mystery and ignorance abound concerning drinking.
- Second, in conjunction with the first point, we must be sure to teach our children clearly and comprehensively what the Bible says on the subject. The instruction of children is primarily the parent’s responsibility—not the church’s (Eph. 6:4). This implies that parents must learn God’s Word for themselves first (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). Parents, look for teachable opportunities. If you are sitting at a restaurant and the table next to you is filled with rowdy drunks, take the opportunity to remind your children what God says about what

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 1 Pe 1:13.

they are seeing. Use family devotional time to read passages like Proverbs 23:29-32. Make passages like Ephesians 5:18 memory verses and be sure your children understand what they mean and how they apply. Above all, do not treat alcohol as a subject full of question marks and non-consequence. Teach your children to see alcohol the way God does.

- Third, the church must work to provide support for individuals who are struggling emotionally and in other areas. Many people turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. They often feel as if they have nowhere else to go. People are hurting and we have the one thing that can bring comfort—the gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s Word is all sufficient (2 Tim. 3:16) and gives us all we need (2 Pet. 1:3), even for our mental health (cf. Phil. 4:8; 2 Cor. 3:5; Mark 7:20-21; Pro. 4:23; 23:7; etc.). We should be mindful of those who are struggling and seek to help them. We should educate ourselves in ways to provide comfort and counsel. Perhaps by providing the emotional support that so many need, some plunges into alcoholism could be avoided.
- Fourth, we should do what we can to help those who are currently struggling with addiction to alcohol and other drugs. Alcohol use is currently on the rise. An already gargantuan problem is growing larger. More and more in our evangelistic efforts we come into contact with those who are struggling with addiction and we must be equipped to help them. One way to do this is to support works like the *Home of Recovery and Restoration* (www.homeofrecovery.org). This is a work done by faithful members of the church in Winnsboro, Texas which seeks to help men overcome addiction. The problem with so many addiction recovery programs is that they are emotionally based and lack the proper substance to sustain a person after the emotion is gone. Therefore, the goal of the *Home of Recovery* is to provide substantial instruction from God’s Word which will stand as a solid permanent foundation. Overall, congregations of the church should place more emphasis in learning about addiction and how the Bible addresses it.

Conclusion

Alcohol is not a new problem, but one that COVID-19 has highlighted substantially. In fact, this pandemic has given attention to the fact that alcoholism and drug addiction is itself a pandemic in our country and in our world. The church cannot and must not side on the sidelines while such a fire rages. As the army of God (Eph. 6:10-20) it is incumbent upon us to wage war against this evil. We cannot do so by taking a blasé approach toward it, by trying to argue that some alcohol consumption is okay, or by neglecting to teach and preach God’s decrees on the matter. We must arm ourselves with the proper attitude and with a commitment to learning more about addiction, how to help those who struggle with it, and proclaiming to the world the truth about alcohol. May God help us to this end.