

Should Christians Throw Back Beers and Sip Wine?

True freedom in Christ allows for personal freedoms, but most freedoms are intended to work within a framework of social responsibility (see Gal. 5:13). Food and beverage, for example, are good, but we are warned against extremes, such as gluttony and drunkenness. Most anyone who has lived with these abuses understands why.

The person who consumes alcohol walks a very fine line between freedom and sin, responsibility and carelessness, liberty and abuse—over-indulgence can even disqualify a person from leadership (see 1 Tim. 3). This discussion is not about a glass of wine or beer now and then; it's about abuse. Damage done to families and individuals demands a closer look. Here are samples of the correspondences that I have received:

"I won't watch my kids be physically abused anymore. My husband's alcohol consumption is killing our family." Others write, "Leaders in my church don't recognize that they are hurting people by abusing alcohol." One man wrote, "My wife has co-workers and parishioners fooled, but she is destroying our family from the inside out."

These are families and churches in crisis ... all because liberty crossed the line.

Alcohol is a dangerous liberty. I learned this lesson the hard way, even as a Christian involved in ministry. I could have a beer or two on special occasions, but because of my past problem with alcohol as a young adult, the addiction was always ready to take hold of me again. It took an embarrassing situation for me to realize that my supposed "liberty" was really an opportunity to awaken a dormant addiction. I apologized to those I affected. I also told my wife and a few

trusted friends that I could no longer exercise this liberty; it was too easy to digress beyond the boundaries of responsibility. God used this situation to reveal my blind spots. God may use this article to speak to you as well, but we must be humble and teachable.

The demands of life often tempt us to seek gratification in alcohol and other things. We must be on high alert. The enemy uses “opportune times” to draw us away from God (see Luke 4:13). The line is so thin that it is often hard to determine when we cross over. Personally, I believe that abstinence should be practiced by most Christians, especially if they drink often and in excess (these can be signs of alcoholism). And this is especially true of leadership. The list of men and women who have lost a great deal because of alcohol is proof enough that liberty has limits.

Jesus said that “wisdom is justified by all her children” (see Luke 7:35). Does this liberty result in contentions, hurt feelings, negative comments and questions about your drinking? Is it dividing friendships or causing unnecessary problems? This speaks for itself and can also be early warning signs of alcoholism.

Alcohol abuse has created a sad commentary on the spiritual condition of the church. We often flaunt liberty and laugh in the face of God’s grace. We use the opportunity to post our favorite beer brands on Facebook and feature our favorite wines, all under the guise of “exercising liberty.” Be careful ... Romans 14 has warnings in this area. Ironically, many use Romans 14 to support alcohol use, when the opposite is true: “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine, nor do anything whereby your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (vs. 21).

Those who promote abstinence and avoid alcohol are often not “weak in faith” (Rom. 14:1); they are solid, mature believers who have genuine concern. Those who are “weak in faith” are

often those who abuse this liberty. It is the selfless motivation of love that keeps us from stumbling others. If love is not the motivation, then a form of legalism may arise.

We all make mistakes, and a “holier than you” attitude is not the right approach. My intent is not to argue, but to help those crossing the line. If this article upsets, that’s usually an indication that change needs to take place. Consider the following:

- If you continue to exercise this liberty, keep it private. A few years ago, I attended a conference where pastors were encouraged to meet at a pub after the general sessions. A few of these pastors could exercise their liberty, but why publicly? I wondered how many people at the conference stumbled because of it.
- Social media influences on a broad scale. In Jesus’ day, society was much more isolated—no Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc. We have no idea how many people are affected by social media. We can foster temptation by the things we post.
- Don’t play with fire and walk into the enemy’s camp. Liberties can easily become habits, and habits form addictions. God does not want us to be enslaved to anything. It is important that we take an account of our lives and see if this area has a hold on us.
- Be honest. How much do you drink? Is it really one beer or a glass of wine now and then, or is it throughout the week and in large amounts? Is it a large goblet that holds $\frac{3}{4}$ a bottle of wine and do you fill it twice? Ale beer, for example, often has two or three times more alcohol than normal beer. Those having two ale beers may have the equivalent of six regular beers.
- Do you make excuses in order to exceed moderation and plan activities around alcohol? Do others comment on your drinking? Do you often argue and try to justify your position? Paul said that even though we have

freedom, not everything is good for us. We should not become a slave to anything (see 1 Cor. 6:12).

1 Peter 2:16 reminds us that many use liberty to hide sin: "A cloak for vice." If these points raise concerns, I encourage you to say: "Lord, I've been wrong ... remove my carnality, crush my pride, draw me closer to You. I repent of my sin and turn completely and unconditionally to you."

In our freedom, we can become a liability to ourselves, others and the message of the gospel. It's often not "if" alcohol consumption causes damage but "when" it causes it. "See then that you walk carefully, not as fools, but as wise men" (Eph. 5:15).

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Shane Idleman is the founder and lead pastor of Westside Christian Fellowship in Lancaster, California, just north of Los Angeles. He just released his seventh book, *Desperate for More of God*. Shane's sermons, articles, books and radio program can all be found at .