

Christian Leaders, Please Don't Publicly Celebrate Your Liberty to Drink

I do not write this article to throw stones. I write it to save lives.

That's why I make this heartfelt (and anguished) plea: If you are a pastor or ministry leader and you believe that, according to the Bible, you have the liberty to drink alcohol (without drunkenness), please don't turn that liberty into a public boast, as in, "Look at how free I am!"

You can enjoy that freedom before God, with moderation and discipline. But please don't bash those who practice total abstinence. And please don't use your liberty as a club against legalism. Or as a proof of your spiritual maturity. Or as a demonstration of the gospel of grace.

You will destroy many lives in the process, not to mention possibly endanger your own soul.

To be clear, although I have practiced total abstinence since I came to faith in 1971, I do not believe that God requires all believers to do this. The Bible, including the New Testament, warns against drunkenness and lack of moderation, not against drinking alcoholic beverages in general.

And even if it can be argued that wine and other drinks were not as fermented in Bible days as they are today, that argument is largely irrelevant, since drunkenness was still an issue then (see, for example, Prov. 20:1) and leaders were called to be temperate in their use of alcohol (see, for example, 1 Tim. 3:3).

I have also worked closely with Christian leaders in countries

like Italy and England, even staying in their homes. For many of them, having a glass of wine with dinner is as natural as an American having a cup of coffee with breakfast.

Never once did I see any of these leaders drinking to excess (not even close), nor was it ever an issue we needed to discuss.

At the same time, I have worked closely with Christian leaders in countries like India, where it would be unthinkable for a Christian to drink alcohol, let alone a Christian leader.

So, I recognize that, in different cultures, biblical principles of personal liberty can be worked out differently.

My issue here has to do with an attitude found more in America than elsewhere, one in which Christian leaders talk openly about their drinking habits or their favorite alcoholic beverage, to the delight of their followers. "We here are free! We are not into legalism! We will not be tied up by religion!"

That is where things get dangerous.

A few years back, I watched what happened to an online group of Christians formed for this very purpose. They were no longer bound by legalism when it came to drinking, and they formed a group to share their newfound freedom.

Not surprisingly, within months, they went from talking about their favorite wines and beers to talking about their favorite hard liquors. And you can be sure more than a few of them were starting to find themselves drawn to more and more drinking, either habitually or to drunkenness.

But of course. This kind of thinking heads in one direction only.

Here in America, all this can become especially dangerous. That's because drinking wine with a meal is far more of a

lifestyle in Italy than it is in America, where much of our drinking leads to excess, including drunkenness. And in almost every one of our churches, there are former alcoholics walking a fine line to stay sober.

That's why having "Beer and Bible Study" events is such a bad idea. You might well attract some people who otherwise wouldn't attend a Bible study. But you will also be destroying the lives of others, for whom this is the path back to addictive drinking.

That's why, in another, related context, Paul warned, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself [speaking of foods]. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:13-17, NIV).

Time and again (including this week), I have heard stories of Christians who were set free from alcoholism, realizing that it was crucial for them to abstain for life. Yet they fell back into addiction after seeing another Christian have a glass of beer or wine when they had dinner together.

I have known of others who fell back after seeing liquor in the home of another believer.

Hey, if it's OK for them to have a drink, why not me? they thought. Maybe I'm being too strict with myself.

And that one drink plunged them back into destructive

addiction.

This brings us back to the words of Paul: “Do not by your eating [or, drinking!] destroy someone for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15b).

This really is very serious business.

One pastor told me about how he used to be so bound by legalism until he met other believers who knew how to drink and have a good time. He was liberated!

Today, he is no longer in ministry, and some of his colleagues have dropped out of ministry as well.

This is very sad, but it is not surprising.

Again, the issue is not whether the Bible calls all believers to abstain totally from alcohol. The issue is when leaders boast that they are free to drink, implying that if others were really free, they would drink as well.

The issue is when leaders think that having alcohol is something to celebrate, or worse still, they make drinking into a sign of spiritual maturity.

The issue is when drinking becomes a major part of a leader’s life or a church’s culture.

This is of the flesh and of the world, and it will produce fleshly, worldly results.

So, if you’re not tempted to get drunk, if drinking in moderation has been a part of your life for years, without excess and if you’re convinced the Bible gives you that liberty, then do what Paul said: “whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (Rom. 14:22a).

Enjoy your liberty, but in private, remembering these words as well: “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food [or

alcohol]. ... It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall" (Rom. 14:20-21).

Getting this right will literally be a matter of life or death for many. I urge you: please choose life. {eoa}

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