



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“I am a young Christian and on occasions when I have attended some function or other I have been handed a glass of sherry or something similar to drink. I know some people frown if you accept, but isn't it impolite to refuse, and would an occasional drink like that do any harm anyway? I would be interested in your comments.”

I think this sort of situation has troubled many Christians on many occasions and I feel a great deal of sympathy with our questioner. How many times have we been placed in similar situations? How many times have we responded to the invitation to take an alcoholic drink? More importantly, how many others may we have influenced to do the same; others who may be weaker than we ourselves are, and who consequently may have embarked on a journey which they have not the strength to control? These are important questions we have to ask ourselves before we pass judgement on others, because the answers to these questions will determine to a great extent our Christian witness in the world.

I see a great danger in stressing one part of a scripture without an adequate explanation as to why it is being stressed. There are two scriptures I can think of which may have left a wrong impression in some Christians' minds. In all the gospels we find Jesus saying to his disciples, “Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats” (Mark 7:18, 19). The other scripture is in the form of advice given by Paul to Timothy, “Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities” (1 Tim. 5:23). If one talks with a man of the world about alcoholic drink almost invariably he will say, “Well, doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible that you are allowed to drink wine”? Unfortunately, some Christians react like this also. So, then, we need to learn some facts about the consumption of alcohol and maybe this will help us to see the situation a little more clearly.

The Size of the Problem

In the latest annual report published recently by the National Council on Alcoholism, the Director, Mr. Derek Rutherford said, “There is clear evidence that if consumption of alcohol continues to rise we will be soon in the grip of an endemic disorder of frightening magnitude”. This statement is supported by some alarming

statistics. Over the last twenty years the number of alcoholics in England and Wales has trebled from 200,000 to 600,000. Over the same period the number of offences involving drunkenness has risen by 80%, and the annual per capita consumption of alcohol has increased by the same amount. Mr. Reg Prentice, Minister of State for Employment, in a recent statement said that absenteeism caused by excessive drinking could account for between 8.8 million and 14.8 million days off work sick each year in England and Wales. The cost to industry is estimated between £100 million and £350 million a year.

The Church of Christ in Albert St., Wigan, is situated in a built-up area. We used to get cans which had contained soft drinks thrown over our walls by children of school age; today, the cans thrown over have contained beer and lager, but they are still consumed by children of school age. After lunch breaks, children have been found in some schools hopelessly drunk, having been sold alcoholic drinks by none-too-discerning proprietors of off-licenses.

What makes the Problem?

We live in an age in which escapism seems to be the order of the day. Voices have been raised which cry, "Let the individual have personal freedom to express himself in the way he wants to"; to put the same into modern phraseology 'let him do his own thing'. But freedom is a very elusive concept. Does freedom mean have no rules, no restrictions, no concern for anyone else, just do what you want to do? It seems to me that such individual freedom will result in collective chaos.

Another alarming feature of our modern society is the way in which many parents have abrogated responsibility for their children. About this time every year, we in our organisation at work have occasion to interview many school-leavers for jobs. We ask them if they have talked over with their parents what they ought to do career-wise, and in far too many cases we get the answer, "Oh, my parents just leave me to decide what I want to do". Now if this is true in the important area of choosing a career, how true it must be in other areas of conduct also.

The Lord teaches us that the greatest freedom comes from the greatest self-control. How can a person who cannot control his own indulgences claim that he is free? He becomes a slave to that in which he indulges himself. Isn't this the case with the drinker, the smoker, the gross over-eater? It's high time that some of this so-called 'personal freedom' was given up so that there might be a greater contribution to the common good, or has this grand biblical teaching been lost not only to the world, but also to the Church.

Do You Know?

Considering the fact that the drinking of alcoholic beverages is engaged in by the vast majority of people, there is a good deal of ignorance about it. It is a fact that the strength of a drink depends upon the amount of pure alcohol in it. What comes as a surprise is that there is roughly the same amount of alcohol in one half pint of beer as there is in one single whisky or brandy, one glass of sherry or one glass of table wine; what varies in each case is the size of the glass in which the different drinks are served.

It is also a fact that a raised blood alcohol level impairs the performance of an individual. Everyone now knows that a person must not be in charge of a moving motor vehicle if on test he is found to have a blood alcohol level in excess of 80 mgms. What many people fail to understand is that according to medical opinion the liver is only able to 'burn up' alcohol slowly at the rate of 15 mgms per hour, which is about equivalent to one drink per hour. Therefore, a person who consumes

ten drinks at night will still have a raised blood alcohol level when he wakes up next morning; it follows, then, that his performance would still be impaired. This raises the extremely important question of how many people there are who suffer from paired performance when they drive cars, buses, attend dangerous machinery, etc., on the morning 'after the night before'.

That first drink

There are some who think, without any evidence I might add, that some people are born to be alcoholics, or that some are "allergic" to alcohol. Whatever the validity of these arguments may be there is one thing which is crystal clear; addiction to alcohol stems from progressive stages along the route, and can be traced in most cases to the first drink. It is true to say that there are many who never pass the first stage; these are the ones who take the occasional drink probably on social occasions. They consider themselves not to be at risk, but this is a false assumption. The person who only takes the occasional drink finds that the alcohol goes to his head very quickly because he just isn't used to it; in that state he is potentially dangerous.

The more serious aspect, of course, is the insidious way in which alcohol addiction can develop. The person who takes that first drink always thinks that he is going to 'get off the bus' before the terminal stage; unhappily, this is not true in most cases, and many drinkers find themselves addicted before they realised the danger. The only safe way is to refrain from taking the first drink. Oh, people may scoff and call you a social misfit, but that is infinitely better than being a social outcast.

What Does God Say?

To the Christian the teaching of the Bible is quite specific, "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: Therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:19,20). When Jesus spoke about defilement of a man he was referring to the physical body of man as distinct from the spiritual man. In the Corinthian passage Paul is referring to the new spiritual man which is housed in the physical frame. In this new state the Holy Spirit is the Divine Guest, if we can use the phrase, and He is working to subdue the sinful flesh so that the complete man can be used to the glory of God.

We also recall in this context how summarily Jesus dealt with the Jews who were defiling the Temple in Jerusalem. The christian has no reason to think that he would be dealt with any more lightly if he defiled the habitation of the Holy Spirit. I see the operation of the Holy Spirit in the individual's Christian life as a catalyst, influencing that life to such a degree that the propensity to sin is diminished day by day, and the very idea of defilement becomes abhorrent. As the hymn-writer puts it,

Make this poor self grow less and less,

Be Thou my life and aim,

Oh, make me daily by Thy grace,

More meet to bear Thy name.

Conclusion

I have tried to set out as objectively as I can what my considerations would be relative to the question. The Christian, I believe, should abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages. I think we should move away from the thought "what would God allow", and move over to the positive application of His Will. In so doing, I believe we shall open for ourselves new horizons, and experience a fuller and more complete life. Incidentally, I believe the wine that Timothy would drink would be unfermented and purely medicinal. (All questions please to Alf Marsden, 377 Billinge Road, Highfield, Wigan, Lancs.)