

The high costs of prohibition theology

Part 1

Enhancer of life

The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance ***Romans 2:4***

by Jim KOCH

God is love. The drama of Holy Scripture depicts God as the consummate lover who desires intimate community with those who voluntarily love and enjoy him. God even woos rebellious sinner to change their minds about him and about life with lavish gifts and entreaties of love !

Fermented beverages are a chosen vehicle by which God nourishes his people and reveals his loving, communal nature. Matthew Henry, an esteemed commentarian of Holy Scripture, made this observation in his consideration of our text: “ low and mean thoughts of the divine goodness are at the bottom of a great deal of sin.”

Prohibition thinking is characterized by low and mean thoughts toward these appointed beverages. Believers and churches who entertain such thoughts eventually eliminate fermented beverages from their tables, fellowships and, finally, even communion. It is this whole phenomenon, along with its justification, that is termed prohibition theology-a concept unknown to early Christians.

Is it possible that this nineteenth century divestiture of Christian living has helped obscure God and contributed to twentieth century erosion in family life, church and society ? I believe that it has.

Costs and benefits must always be paralled. The Samach viewpoint focuses on how these natural beverages are interwoven throughout the biblical narrative. The reader is encouraged to calculate the costs of their exclusion in society.

In these three discourses on prohibition theology, fermented beverages are considered as *enhancers* of life. I will address various aspects of fermented beverages in relationship to community and to good health.

Throughout these three brief essays, the reader is urged to keep in mind that any good thing can be used irresponsibly. Everything in life can be used detrimentally. the Samach theology urges people to recognize what God Himself applauded in drink. I urge you to consider whether more harm than good results when something beneficial to life-rather than its abuse-is denigrated or criminalized.

Christians believe that divine truth is communicated through temporal means. how else could finite man even comprehend infinite God ? For instance, wine and human relationships are frequently intertwined by God to convey specifics messages. Emmanuel (God with us) used this form of communication when he said, “I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser.” (John 15:1) It’s hard to deny this symbolism. To understand what Jesus is saying, we must understand the grape grower and the vintner and their contributions to mankind.

The vine is unique in the food realm. The fruit of the vine-wine- not only nourishes and refreshes but also makes one glad or contented. It is said that “a meal without wine is like a day without sunshine.” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said wine is the “noblest cordial in nature.” That’s far from the current defamation of one government agent who said “alcohol is the dirtiest drug we have.” The sweet psalmist of

Israel, King David, noted that as bread is God's gift to strengthen our hearts, so wine is God's gift to make them glad (Psalm 104:15). No other food has such ability to cheer as fermented beverages.

"Corn" (cereal flours for bread) and "wine" are featured often in the Bible as fundamental staples of human life and as provisions of divine bestowment. (Genesis 27:28 & Numbers 18:12-two of numerous passages.) It is not apart from divine wisdom that bread and wine were selected by the Messiah to remind us of God's great plan of salvation and of our place in the kingdom of God.

Not only were bread and wine standards in the diet of Biblical people, but *banquets* and *fermented beverages* are inseparable throughout the Bible. It may come as a surprise to many that *Yayin* the common Hebrew word for "wine," is also translated "banquet." See The Song of Solomon. Chapter 2, verse 4 of this erotic canticle reads. "He brought me to banqueting (Yayin-or wine) house, and his banner over me was love." Fermented beverages and feasting, then, are integral, one-in-the-same: indeed, they are synonymous in biblical usage.

Lovers have long known the aphrodisiacal qualities of these beverages. This association pleases God as well as couples. After all, it was God who designed sex, instituted marriage, granted fine wine for the wedding at Cana and blessed intimacy saying "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4)

Popular singer Pat Boone actually sang Scripture when he crooned "kisses sweeter than wine" (Song of Solomon 1:2, 4:6, 7:9). Since wine is the ultimate Biblical symbol of pleasure, what could be more appropriate than a fermented beverage to describe the ecstasies of love-making ?

Even our expression "honeymoon" refers to the time honored practice of giving newlyweds special time together. To assure the most pleasant consummation of wedding vows, couples were given a month (from moon to moon) of vacation and mead (honey wine) to bind them securely-relationally, sexually and spiritually. Hence, "Honeymoon."

The poet, Omar Khayyam, puts it this way: "A book of verses underneath the bough, a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou beside me singing in the wilderness. Ah, wilderness were paradise enow."

Who can deny that life is often a vexing wilderness ? Life inevitably has its disappointments, heartaches and difficulties. Prohibition theology despises the beverage of gladness and would leave us less complete without these divine refreshments which foretaste Paradise. Shall we continue to reject and deny the goodness of the heavenly suitor ?

Part II

Enhancer of Community

And they drank and were merry with him
Genesis 43:34

The Lord spoke to us most often in parables-finding lessons and wisdom in the most commonplace of human activities. In this essay I will use everyday habits to illustrate a munificent role for responsible drinking.

Social commentators point increasingly to the family unit as the communicator of enduring values and social stability. The family is under stress as never before in recorded history. Divorce in America is rampant. Promiscuity is the order of the day. In a recent hearing on the Clinton Health Plan, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York raised the reality that 30 percent of all American births are to unmarried women. In Detroit, the figure is 71 percent, in Washington, D.C. 66 percent and in New York 42 percent. What *family* will these youngsters ever know.

Sociologists, law enforcement officials and counselors who are observing the exploding crime scene, particularly but not exclusively in our big cities, and the escalating social dysfunctions among the young are now pointing to the disintegrating family along with diminishing influence in the schools and other community institutions which once provided structure, nurture, shared values and identity.

Respected radio preacher, Chuck Swindoll, credits the extraordinary impact of the early church upon culture as its emphasis upon the family. He notes that historians point to the believers' agape-eucharist feasts -shared meals- as the Christian practice most admired by the Roman conquerors. Through these communion experiences, the outside world came to admire the love, unity and caring that was the trademark of early Christian community.

The pagans were amazed that these followers of Jesus created no artificial distinctions among themselves. Whether at table or in worship (and it was all one experience), the master and the servant, the poor and the affluent; whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, these believers related to each other in mutual respect, honor and interest. Daily they would drink their wine and eat their bread in common, remembering openly the risen Christ and His instructions for the good life. Even persecution could not destroy the Christian bond. The people had focus, the church flourished and much of the world today still celebrates this rich legacy of community.

Sixteen hundred years later, persecuted Christians settled an unfamiliar land that became known as the United States of America. These displaced believers knew the importance of community-mundane as well as sacred. Community served to fulfill their human demands as well as their physical defense in often inhospitable climes.

These expressions of solidarity and community are what we recall fondly today about our forebears. Raising a barn, for example, was simply impossible to do solo. Quiltings were a wonderful way to network and stay connected for women who were separated from social intercourse in their often distant farm homes. Sunday worship and community dinners were seldom missed. Survival and conviviality produced the warmly supportive circle. Even today it is the fool who climbs a mountain alone. Working together, humans are invincible in the animal world. The Bible fosters human progress because it demands community.

When we celebrate our greatest national holiday-Thanksgiving-we tend to downplay the presence of kegs of beer, fresh wines and abundance of grain and fruit spirits on the founder's tables. Pioneer families enjoyed daily rations of these beverages, as did students, soldiers and civic leaders. Even the churches-not excluding Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists- included generous supplies of fermented beverages in remuneration contracts for their ministers. Drinking had a positive-as well as negative-role in early America.

Not only do fermented beverages contribute to the diet and health, but they provide a calming restoration of the human spirit. They actively contribute to the sense of community. Probably the most significant physiological contribution of ethanol in fermented beverages is the loosening of the tongue. Conversation is the essence of community.

Fermented beverages aid human communication. For millennia, they have been known as "the oil of conversation" and "the social lubricant." The Bible refers to fermented beverages when it describes wine's ability to loose the tongue and awaken lips that are asleep. (Song of Solomon 7:9)

Self-control, responsible behavior and discipline are the ordering elements in human collegiality, but when Gods people prohibit what He has anointed and blessed in the false promise of maintaining that order, they lead their people into tragic error. our dynamic life forces are akin to the boilers which produce the energies of modern industrial life. Without monitoring, discipline and control, the powerful boilers can explode releasing destructive energies causing great harm to life and property.

Fermented beverages are nature's own pressure gauges, providing momentary relief and help to stem base expressions of human weakness. But, uncontrolled, they can be vastly destructive.

Prohibition creates vacuums and uncertainties about the control of drinking that contribute to the problems of abuse. Phony and manipulative interpretations of God's word can lead to phony and manipulative control standards.

Prohibition theology is a gun with its barrel pointing back at the gunner. Since churches began forbidding "this good creature of God," divorce and the family breakdown has evolved even among dedicated Christians. It's time for churches and families to revalue these beverages of human community.

Part III

Enhancer of Health

***Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses
I Timothy 5: 23***

Besides making water safer to drink, fermented beverages are the most ancient of medicines. We remember that Louis Pasteur, the father of modern microbiology and its medicinal discoveries, acclaimed wine as the "most healthful and hygienic of beverages." Recall also how Apostle Paul instituted his apprentice Timothy to drink for health.

There has never been a superior antiseptic. What did the good Samaritan pour into the victim's wounds ? Had wine been grape juice, as some Christian prohibitionists argue (Henry M. Morris, Charles Wesley Ewing, Stephen M. Reynolds, Jack Van Impe, et. al.) , the injured man would have been tormented by insects and infection.

One of the many healthful arguments for incorporating fermented beverages in a balanced diet is their ability to alleviate stress. Stress, according to science and medical practice is the most debilitating and lethal enemy of human life. In fast lane America, stress kills more citizens than all other causes combined, including wars and drunken driving. Over one million victims are taken annually through coronary heart

disease, strokes and heart attacks. It is a shocking revelation that the teetotalling Bible belt is also known in medical circles as Stroke Alley.

Researchers affirm the biblical wisdom that “a little wine for thine stomach’s sake” applies to modern American. The moderate, regular intake of fermented beverages-combined with a balanced lifestyle- is still the best means to survive stress and to enjoy a full, healthy life.

Cause and effect must be carefully measured when considering whether to drink. Drinks are not for everyone. Even the ancients knew that one man’s food is another’s poison. There are some few among us with peanut allergy who can die from anaphylactic shock from eating what most of us use as a staple. Fermented beverages, as wonderful as they are for most, are not for some. They cannot *so/ve* problems, but denying their contributions can create problems.

Jesus and John the Baptist present perfect models of behavior for dealing with the subject of drinking. One drank. The other did not. Jesus had nothing but warm regards for John who had opted for abstinence from birth. Likewise, John expressed no problem with Jesus or others drinking in his presence. Nor did Peter, Paul or any other disciple. Timothy was given to excessive self-denial. That is why his mentor Paul told him, in the modern vernacular, to “chill out.”

From my years of studying the reference to drinking in the scriptures, my message is this. Fermented beverages are gifts of God. They are given to us to use responsibly. Few things happen so spontaneously and naturally as fermentation. To impose on these gifts an evil connotation-demon rum or sin- is not only blasphemous, but an abnegation that compounds human misery. Because of Adam, humans manifest tendencies to sinfulness, abuse, and perversion. However, these baser instincts in mankind provide no justification to impugn or to deny His rich gifts simply because they can be ill used.