



THE MYTH OF RESPONSIBLE DRINKING

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The popularity of consuming alcoholic beverages stands as a barrier to meaningful discussion on alcohol for those who are convinced that they are responsible drinkers. Perhaps there is a rare case of a person who may be open-minded enough to entertain briefly an introspective evaluation of the topic. It

seems like this would be particularly possible when that person is a Christian and has heard knowingly kind gospel preachers and faithful Bible teachers issue biblical cautions relative to what has become acceptable behavior, but efforts to persuade to the contrary may have become tiring and even offensive to the person convinced he or she is a responsible drinker.

Obviously, for a person who is not a drinker to write about “the myth of responsible drinking” places him into a category of not knowing what he is talking about for the one who sincerely believes he or she is a responsible drinker. However, because an experienced Bible student has not participated in the sins enumerated in Holy Writ, that person is not disqualified from dutifully taking a stand against wrongdoing. While empathy on the subject of responsible drinking may not be possible for one who does not drink, empathy on the subject of sin and wrongdoing is a foundational truth, “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rm. 3:23). The fact remains, the one with authority to speak on this and any other topic relative to “the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10), is the Lord Jesus Christ, and he has once and for all communicated his will within the pages of the New Testament (Mt. 28:18; Jude 1:3). Truly, this is interdependent with the passage that announces, “I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation” (Psa. 119:99).

The task then is not to prove drunkenness is a sin; one verse from the New Testament clearly will establish that fact. While there are many, one will suffice: “Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph.5:18). It is assumed the person who considers himself or herself to be a responsible drinker knows drunkenness is wrong and sinful. That person is convinced that while knowingly sailing close to the shoals when any alcohol is consumed in any quantity, crossing the line into drunkenness is avoided perhaps by long experience sensing the approach of that state of mind and knowing how to avoid it by stopping drinking short of becoming drunk. In order to enter upon common ground with the open minded person willing to entertain the discussion, this may serve as an acceptable definition of “responsible drinking.” This perspective being granted, regarding irresponsible, unsociable alcoholism both the teetotaler and the responsible drinker would stand in complete agreement. The state of mind both the teetotaler and the responsible drinker desire to avoid at all costs is drunkenness.

However, the plot thickens as the theme “the myth of responsible drinking” is examined. The mindset of a responsible drinker assumably has been fairly set. The rub comes in defining the word “myth.” A myth, as defined in the dictionary, is “an unfounded or false notion . . . a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence.” Still onboard? Why is the position of a responsible drinker a myth? An advantage in this discussion is that it is built around the idea that a responsible drinker is among those being addressed. One who might say, “I can handle my alcohol—I drink responsibly in moderation.” Therefore, a responsible drinker is one who must be responsible. A responsible person is informed and accountable for his or her thoughts and actions. Here are some facts to be considered by the responsible person. These facts are

as commonly accepted as is the popular practice of consuming alcoholic beverages.

Blood Alcohol Levels and Effects

0.02% - 0.05%: Light buzz, relaxation, lowered alertness.

0.05% - 0.07%: Impaired judgment, lowered inhibition, slowed reaction times.

0.08%: Legally intoxicated in most states; clear signs of impairment.

0.10% - 0.15%: Significant impairment, slurred speech, staggering, vomiting.

0.16% - 0.30%: Severe intoxication, loss of consciousness, blackouts, serious physical danger.

0.31% - 0.40%+: Life-threatening; high risk of coma or death from alcohol poisoning (Duke University).

The Argument

If it is conceded that the realm of drinking for a responsible drinker is in the lowest level of blood alcohol content, and the “light buzz, relaxation, and lowered alertness” is the degree beyond which he is unwilling to go, then we should work with that. Likely, everyone who is driving on the interstate highways today has experienced justifiable concern when driving beside an 18-wheeler. There are many stories of being run off the road or injured by one. Did you know that we have in this country an authority known as the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Association (FMCSA)? It is an agency of the United States Department of Transportation that was created in 2000 to reduce accidents and injuries from large trucks and buses. As a talking point, the federal standard of intoxication from beverage alcohol for those drivers is .04 percent (Brooks). (Other variables affecting this discussion that will not be considered here are body weight, gender, tolerance, and food consumption; depending on these variables, intoxication can occur at even lower levels than being discussed.) While .04 percent is within the lowest range of blood alcohol content (BAC) charted, yet the lowest level is considered to produce “light buzz, relaxation, and lowered alertness,” and the federal standard for intoxication is .04 percent. As shown above, the legal standard for most states for drunk driving in a car is .08 percent, but by looking at the federal standard for large truck and bus drivers, a responsible person rightly can conclude a danger of drunkenness does exist below that level.

A second example is to think of an airline pilot and his or her use of alcohol. Generally, a pilot faces termination for

having a BAC of .04 percent or greater. In 2023, eight pilots tested had a BAC of .04 percent or greater. Admittedly, this is a rarity, but it does constitute a real danger in the skies should these pilots take to the air with possibly hundreds of passengers under their charge and innocent souls on the ground below them. A study found that over a 16-year period (1990-2006), 13 alcohol-related incidents involving 17 pilots were reported (Li). Remember this .04 percent BAC level is on the lowest rung of the chart, and it is the realm where a responsible drinker thinks that he or she is not drunk. A person claiming to be a responsible drinker is at this level and feels comfortable that he or she is not drunk. It is important to note that most carriers, whether commercial cartage carriers and trucking companies or the airlines, have a zero tolerance for employee use of alcoholic beverages.

Bear with a third example to establish the parameters of the argument for discussion: doctors. While underreporting doctors’ alcohol use is common, 14 percent of doctors have an alcohol use disorder—in common terms, “a drinking problem.” That percentage mirrors the general population (Ross). The dire need for their services and the length and depth of their education results in perhaps a greater effort from the medical community for their rehabilitation than is found among truck drivers and airline pilots. If a zero tolerance for alcohol use should be in place for anyone, should it not be among those who literally hold the life of their patients in their hands?

The discussion of the trucking industry, the airline industry, and the medical field unequivocally shows to a responsible person the legitimate concern of drinking even the smallest amount of beverage alcohol. Now, the argument: If the highest degree of caution against drunkenness rightly is demanded of those discussed, then how much more determined should a Christian, whose eternal destiny based on his or her decisions and actions relative to his and her Christian life and influence, be to commit to a life of absolute sobriety?

“I Do Not See the Harm in It”

Due to the stern dedication to the consumption of alcoholic beverages many have, it appears that an additional line of reasoning must be employed to demonstrate “the myth of responsible drinking.” Just because one says “I do not see the harm in it” does not mean there is no harm in it.

For example, a few days ago, a two-year-old boy in our area picked up his father’s handgun from the nightstand and discharged a bullet across his head. The father was not charged as the incident was determined to be accidental. (The boy has recovered.) Until the firing pin struck the primer in the bullet, no one saw the harm in it. Do you think that father

will ever be that careless again? Do you think he might purchase one of those trigger locks and stow the now unloaded handgun securely away from his child? The father owned up to the neglect of his responsibility being the precipitating cause of his son's injury. As far as can be known, the father wisely never made the argument, "I did not see the harm in it." Just because a person may not see the harm in something does not mean there is no harm in it.

Can the harm of "the myth of responsible drinking" be seen in the fact that God does not allow a drinker of any kind to be in the leadership of his church? Pertinent verses here in regard to the eldership are 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7, where the applicable phrase is "not given to wine." The definition of "not given to wine" is offered by James Strong from the Greek words *me paroinos*; in both verses, the Greek word is an adjective in the accusative masculine singular form *me paroinon*. Strong says it means not "staying near wine, i.e. tippling" (Blue Letter Bible). "Tippling" means "does not drink alcohol." Also, consider the pertinent verse 1 Timothy 3:8 regarding the deacons: "Not given to much wine." Here the key word is *prosecho*, a verb meaning not "to be given or addicted to." A responsible person will see the way to avoid this condition by looking just up the page under the root meaning of the word *prosecho* and seeing the negative, because of the word *me* in the sentence, "to bring to, bring near," or do not bring to or bring near wine (Blue Letter Bible). Admittedly, most who favor the drink prefer the meaning "not a drunkard," which is a definition given *me paroinos*, because it softens the blow of their practice since they also do not wish to support drunkenness. In the context, certainly one whose drunkenness gives rise to brawling could never lead the people of God. However, there is a reason James Strong included the word "tippling" (meaning "one who does not drink alcohol"), and it was not just a personal preference. The concept reflected in the lexicons of "one given to too much wine," and that practice leading to brawling, has its background from the ancient papyrus archives with a man named Artemidorus who sought aid for his problem from Zeno by admitting, "I sinned and was drunken in the night, in that I maltreated the brethren." Moulton and Milligan say, "This prepares us for the wider meaning 'assault with drunken violence'" (Moulton & Milligan, 496). James Strong says the word under consideration when connected with brawling points to "a secondary sense, 'quarrelsome over wine'" (Blue Letter Bible; cf. also: Thayer, 490).

What may correctly and fairly be concluded from this in-depth look at these verses about the leadership of the Lord's church? Clearly, a man addicted to the use of wine is eliminated from consideration as either an elder or a deacon. Left untouched by those who argue those in leadership in the church may drink some quantity of alcoholic beverage is the lexicographical definitions within the discussion that he "does not drink alcohol" and is not brought near wine—much less drink it. Before any convincing of the drinking position can be sustained, those definitions would have to somehow be excised out of the historically solid lexicographical evidence.

Conclusion

Since the leadership leads the congregation by divine directive from the word of God and by personal examples to the membership, no one within the congregation who drinks alcohol—in any quantity—may do so without the expectation of being corrected. A person who drinks alcohol in any quantity may have an extensive repertoire of excuses for his or her practice, but he or she cannot responsibly offer them to a discerning brotherhood. Therefore, can a person be a "responsible drinker"? No, not in a million years.

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