

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Beer, Bohemianism, and True Christian Liberty

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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by John MacArthur

If everything you know about Christian living came from blogs and websites in the young-and-restless district of the Reformed community, you might have the impression that beer is the principal symbol of Christian liberty.

For some who self-identify as "Young, Restless, and Reformed," it seems beer is a more popular topic for study and discussion than the doctrine of predestination. They devote whole websites to the celebration of brewed beverages. They earnestly assure one another "that most good theological discussion has historically been done in pubs and drinking places." They therefore love to meet for "open dialog on faith and culture" wherever beer is served—or better yet, right at the brewery. The connoisseurs among them serve their own brands and even offer lessons in how to make home brew.

It's clear that beer-loving passion is a prominent badge of identity for many in the YRR movement. Apparently beer is also an essential element in the missional strategy. Mixing booze with ministry is often touted as a *necessary* means of penetrating western youth culture, and conversely, abstinence is deemed a "sin" to be repented of.

After all, in a culture where *cool* is everything, what could be a better lubricant for one's testimony than a frosty pint?

Of course, beer is by no means the only token of cultural savvy frequently associated with young-and-restless religion. All kinds of activities deemed vices by mothers everywhere have been adopted as badges of Calvinist identity and thus "redeemed": tobacco, tattoos, gambling, mixed martial arts, profane language, and lots of explicit talk about sex.

Cast a disapproving eye at any of those activities, and you are likely to be swarmed by restless reformers denouncing legalism and wanting to debate whether it's a "sin" to drink wine or smoke a cigar. But without even raising the question of whether this or that specific activity is acceptable, indifferent, or out-and-out evil, we surely ought to be able to say that controlled substances and other symbols of secular society's seamy side are *not* what the church of Jesus Christ ought to wish to be known for. In fact, until fairly recently, no credible believer in the entire church age would ever have suggested that so many features evoking the ambiance of a pool hall or a casino could also be

suitable insignia for the people of God.

It is puerile and irresponsible for any pastor to encourage the recreational use of intoxicants—especially in church-sponsored activities. The ravages of alcoholism and drug abuse in our culture are too well known, and no symbol of sin's bondage is more seductive or more oppressive than booze. I have ministered to hundreds of people over the years who have been delivered from alcohol addiction. Many of them wage a daily battle with fleshly desires made a thousand times more potent because of that addiction. The last thing I would ever want to do is be the cause of stumbling for one of them.

Besides, deliberately cultivating an appetite for beer or a reputation for loving liquor is not merely bad missional strategy and a bad testimony; it is fraught with deadly spiritual dangers. The damage is clearly evident in places where the strategy has been touted. Darrin Patrick, who helped pioneer "Theology at the Bottleworks," acknowledges the gravity of the problem:

As I coach and mentor church planters and pastors, I am shocked at the number of them who are either addicted or headed toward addiction to alcohol. Increasingly, the same is true with prescription drugs. One pastor I know could not relax without several beers after work and could not sleep without the aid of a sleeping pill. [*Church Planter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 51]

In biblical times, wine was necessary for health reasons. The risk of amoebae and parasites in drinking water could be significantly reduced or eliminated by mixing the water with a little wine (1 Timothy 5:23). The result was a greatly diluted wine that had virtually no potential for making anyone drunk. Purified tap water and refrigeration make even that use of wine unnecessary today.

Contrary to the current mythology, abstinence is no sin—least of all for someone devoted to ministry (Leviticus 10:9; Proverbs 31:4; Luke 1:15). It *is*, of course, a sin to give one's mind over to the influence of alcohol or to bedeck one's reputation with deliberate symbols of debauchery. As a matter of fact, drunkenness and debauchery are the very antithesis of Spirit-filled sanctification (Ephesians 5:18)—and men who indulge in them are not qualified to be spiritual leaders.

Yes, I realize Jesus Himself was referred to *by His enemies* as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). But He was none of the things that expression implied—nor did He seek such a reputation.

He was indeed "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" in the sense that He specialized in lifting them up out of the miry clay and setting their feet on a rock. But He did not adopt or encourage their lifestyle. He did not embrace their values or employ expletives borrowed from their vocabulary in order to win their admiration or gain membership in their fraternity. He confronted their wickedness and rebuked their sins as boldly as He preached against the errors of the Pharisees (Matthew 18:7-

9).

Note, too, that He ate and drank with *Pharisees* (Luke 7:36) as readily as He ate and drank with *publicans*. The only significant difference was that the typical tax collector was more inclined to confess his own desperate need for divine forgiveness than the average self-righteous Pharisee (Mark 2:16-17; Luke 18:1-14).

But there is no suggestion in Scripture that Jesus purposely assumed the look and lifestyle of a publican in order to gain acceptance in a godless subculture. He didn't.

This tendency to emblazon oneself with symbols of carnal indulgence as if they were valid badges of spiritual identity is one of the more troubling aspects of the YRR movement's trademark restlessness. It is wrong-headed, carnal, and immature to imagine that bad-boy behavior makes good missional strategy. The image of beer-drinking Bohemianism does nothing to advance the cause of Christ's kingdom.

Slapping the label “incarnational” on strategies such as this doesn't alter their true nature. They have more in common with Lot, who pitched his tent toward Sodom, than with Jesus, who is “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26).

Real Christian liberty is not about flouting taboos and offending conventional notions of propriety. The liberty in which we stand begins with full indemnity from the law's threats and condemnation—meaning we are at peace with God (Romans 5:1; 8:1). Christian liberty also removes the restrictions of the law's ceremonial commandments (Colossians 2:16-17)—freeing us from asceticism, superstition, sensuality, and “human precepts and teachings” (vv. 18-23).

But sober-minded self-control and maturity are virtues commanded and commended *by Scripture*; these are not manmade rules or legalistic standards. As a matter of fact, one of the main qualifications for both deacons and elders in the church is that they cannot be given to much wine. In other words, they are to be known for their *sobriety*, not for their consumption of beer.

It should not take a doctor of divinity to notice that Scripture consistently celebrates virtues such as self-control, sober-mindedness, purity of heart, the restraint of our fleshly lusts, and similar fruits of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in our lives. Surely these are what we ought hold in highest esteem, model in our daily lives, and honor on our websites, rather than trying so hard to impress the world with unfettered indulgence in the very things that hold so many unbelievers in bondage.

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