

## Drugs, Drink and Christian teaching

### Why consider the 'Christian' perspective?

*"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* (John 10:10)

Christianity is a faith which should and does get involved with social issues. The "Live Life to the Full" Church Leaders' pack sets out the action that could be taken to place the issues of drinking, smoking and using illegal drugs within the context of a local church. The implications for Christians are many. Consider this list:-

- It's not just about binge drinking
- Alcohol and other substances provide a quick fix – seen as more fun than Christianity
- They promote focusing on self and friendship groups – rather than the needs of others and/or a relationship with God
- The mind-altering properties of alcohol offer feelings of pleasure and (emotional) pain reduction which limit access for the Holy Spirit's influence
- Perception is as important (if not more important) than reality
- Some Christians view an alcohol-free option negatively. This might be due to church history where there has been division caused by the alcohol issue – or thinking that drinking helps you be 'one of the lads (or ladettes)' and therefore relate better to non-Christians – or believing that abstaining from alcohol encroaches on their freedom in Christ
- Recent cultural change has seen more drinking and drug taking at the same time as people have been deserting faith or not coming to faith
- Being in the world but not of the world? Where might alcohol use fit in with this?
- Alcohol is one of a cocktail of socially used drugs – some are legally available (with restrictions) and some are not
- No Biblical instruction to abstain (or to drink either – apart from wine, but no info of alcohol content there.)
- Plenty of Biblical imperatives for personal sacrifice for the benefit of others, keeping fit for God's service and role modelling/peer influence
- What does history tell us about the success and failure of alcohol-free lifestyle approaches and what about moderate drinking approaches?

These are only a few opening thoughts. Drug use, just like life, is complex. Today there is a need for:

- Increased understanding
- Effective prevention
- Clarity of personal example
- Help for those in trouble
- Action by the 'Church'

## Biblical Basis for Effective Prevention

Be well informed	Accurate knowledge dispels myths and misinformation. 1 Peter 1:13; Luke 1:3; Deuteronomy 19:18; Daniel 1:4
Communicate effectively	Start from where the audience is and speak in terms that are familiar to them. Proverbs 12:15; Matthew 18:15-16; Acts 17:16-34; James 1:19-26
Promote positive examples	The example of others (parents and other adults) is a key factor as is the influence of peer groups. Micah 6:8; John 13:15; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 1:16; 4:12
Personal fitness	Keeping fit and healthy is important. Proverbs 3:1-10; Daniel 1; Romans 12:1-2

### What is 'substance misuse'?

Most people understand it as an activity, which results in harm from the use of drugs. 'Substances' include illegal drugs such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine as well as legally available drugs such as alcohol, nicotine and solvents.

'Misuse' implies that safe 'use' might be possible. In reality, all 'use' is an exercise in risk-taking with many different factors determining the degree of risk. For example, to drink a glass of wine and drive is a greater risk than staying at home after drinking. Some drugs have a completely different area of use, like solvents used as sprays, lighter gas or fuel and alcohol used for cleaning wounds etc.

Substance 'use' in this article refers to consumption in a social setting (i.e. non-medical). It ranges from experimentation to regular use and may end up with dependency and even death. Most people do not become dependent, although some do suffer harm related to their own substance use or that of others.

### Where do we start?

The Bible is an obvious place to start when looking for guidance, so is the traditional response of Christians through the ages and the way in which the Holy Spirit inspires people today.

### Counselling and care

Jesus taught that we should love other people as ourselves (Mark 12:30).

He showed us that we need to care for people:

- He gave us the example of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).
- Jesus healed people such as the demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1-20), Jairus' daughter and a sick woman (Mark 5:21-42).
- He fed people (Mark 6:30-44).
- He taught us to care for each other by giving to the needy (Matthew 6:3).
- He cared for young children (Mark 10:13-16).

Jesus dealt with people holistically – body, mind and spirit. Substance use affects the whole being of an individual and will also touch those around them.

### Prevention

Prevention is always better than cure and there is much biblical precedent to commend it:

- Humankind has a responsibility to care for God's world – which includes you, me and everyone else. Keeping fit and healthy is an important part in achieving this (Genesis 1:26 & Romans 12:1).
- Our bodies are described as 'the temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).
- It is important to be clear minded and self-controlled (1 Peter 4:7).

There is no doubt that alcohol and other drugs affect mind, body and spirit. Christianity clearly teaches the need to be as fit and healthy as possible for God's service.

But prevention is not just a personal responsibility. Our actions affect others:

- We need to avoid actions which may cause others to 'fall down' even if we might be all right ourselves (1 Corinthians 8:13).
- Personal example is as important as personal fitness and plays a key part in helping others avoid harm.

## **What does the Bible say about using drugs?**

There are over 600 references to drink in the Bible but none to other drugs.

Generally the Bible teaches that Christians should obey the law although, as legal codes differ from country to country, this cannot provide an absolute answer.

Two general principles can be identified which will help us judge whether we should use or condone the use of drugs: Caring for ourselves and caring for others.

### **Caring for ourselves**

How will a substance affect our bodies? Will it cut us off from God? Christians are encouraged to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Is this consistent with using any drug that affects the mind? At Pentecost (Acts 2) the disciples were completely filled with the Holy Spirit and in control.

Substances affect the mind in different ways – slowing it down, speeding it up or distorting it. Drugs may alter mood but the experience will be a short-lived illusion, however good it may feel at the time.

In the end, the strongest influence on our personal behaviour can only be ourselves. We decide how to care for our own body, mind and spirit.

### **Caring for others**

Christian teaching is also clear about the important role of personal example. Even though Jesus has set us free (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1, where Paul writes "*so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*" (v31), he qualifies this by saying, "*Do not cause anyone to stumble.... For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved.*" (v32)). It is a clear Biblical principle that what we are influences others. And the responsibility of choosing what we do remains ours.

### **Practical problems**

How do we advise parents who have a teenage son or daughter smoking cannabis socially? How can we help people practically?

Do you think the Church has been effective in this area? With God's help, Christians in this country can make a difference. History shows that social change for the better has often been linked to a religious movement.

Whether in prevention or care, there is much that each of us can contribute, often without doing more than considering our personal actions, prayer and gifts.

Every church needs to take an interest in drugs because their use causes human suffering and distracts people from the Good News about Jesus.

## Alcohol & Christians

Drinking alcohol seems to be one of those issues which is and will continue to be controversial. Six hundred or more biblical references and Christian tradition have not yet provided a clear answer. Please view these brief comments as an introduction to get you thinking and test out your attitudes against the general principles set out previously in this summary.

There is no eleventh commandment saying 'Thou shalt not drink alcohol'. However, there are strong statements about not getting drunk (Proverbs 20:1; Proverbs 23:29-35; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4). In Proverbs 31:1-9, a king is advised to stay away from drink if he wants to make wise decisions.

There are examples about the use of alcohol in the Bible. Jesus wine and dined with sinners (Matthew 11:19); Paul advised Timothy to drink a little wine (1 Timothy 5:23); Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1-11); and Psalm 104:15 mentions 'wine gladdens the heart of man'.

BUT, to accept the latter references as a licence to drink without thinking of the consequences is to act without exercising responsibility, either for self or others.

For example:

- (i) The Jewish culture was strict about its use of alcohol. Drunkenness was condemned. Jesus made up to 160 gallons of wine at Cana, but would He have done anything to intoxicate or bring harm to anyone?
- (ii) Drinking and riding a donkey is less dangerous than drinking and driving today! Strong drinks (fortified wines and spirits) and alcohol advertising did not exist. Sanitation by our standards was non-existent and there is no doubt that Paul was offering Timothy sound medical advice.
- (iii) There is a real issue about example. The International Blue Cross Federation is a Christian organisation with member societies in 40 countries. Blue Cross members adopt an alcohol-free lifestyle. Their personal 'sacrifice' encourages alcoholics to stay 'dry' and helps young people be confident about choosing an alcohol-free option.

The bottom line is that this is not a simple issue although it can be simplified into two basic questions – **'What would Jesus do today?'** and **'What would He want me to do.'**