WHY WE DRINK

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I chose to attend a seminary with a no-drinking policy. I’ve been at the seminary for three weeks now, and I still haven’t actually heard or read a very good rationale for why the policy is in place, though I could probably guess and get pretty close. To be honest, abiding by that policy has been a more difficult process than I anticipated. I’ve had to explore some of the reasons why. I wonder whether some of the things I found inside myself ring true with the rest of my millennial brothers and sisters, specifically those in the Church. For right or wrong, these are my off-the-cuff, largely undeveloped thoughts. I’d love to hear yours.

Maybe this is why we drink:

**We drink because it’s fun.**

This is the most obvious motivator. I don’t think it warrants extensive discussion.

**We drink because we can.**

Like the Corinthians, we boisterously declare, “All things are lawful for me!” This argument really only holds water for the over-21 crowd. We millennials often confuse freedom and autonomy. If we’re “allowed” to do something, most of us will try it at least once. Sometimes once turns into twice, and twice turns into a habit. Sometimes that habit turns into an addiction. And sometimes addiction doesn’t look like we think it does.

**We drink because someone told us we can’t.**

We millennials seek fulfillment through self-expression, so if you tell us we can’t do something, you’re encroaching on our ability to express ourselves and therefore our ability to feel like a complete person. For this reason, most millennials will take directives as suggestions.

For those of us in the Church, the choice to drink often seems like an overreaction to legalistic environments in which consumption of alcohol—responsible or otherwise—is dogmatically condemned. I attended a denominational university in which this was the case, and in which drinking was not only allowed, but was encouraged, and celebrated. Looking back on those years with fresh eyes, it’s no wonder that the Religion students were notorious for our hypocritical abuse of alcohol. What we celebrate, we invite.

**We drink because our leaders drink.**

It’s always been true: What leaders do in moderation, followers do in excess. The Bible is very clear: Leaders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of their followers. Those who lead and teach will be held to a higher standard of accountability. Howard Hendricks used to say, “You can teach what you know, but you can only reproduce who you are.” Many of us drink because the people we look up to do, or did, and they modeled it for us. I spent my 21st birthday at a pub with a pastor who would put away three or four beers when we went out. That behavior was reproduced in me. I would venture to guess I’m not alone in that experience.

**We drink because we want to feel like grown-ups.**

Millennials have a word for having to act responsibly – to pay bills, to study, to clean the house, to be productive, to perform well at work. We call it “adulting.” The fact that we have a word for it is evidence that it’s not yet become our default mode of operation. You see, most of us are still children. But when we want to feel like adults, we participate in those kinds of activities that only adults can participate in. Like drinking.

We feel mature when we go out and get a drink with our friends. We feel sophisticated. We feel superior to the folks who are still in college binge-drinking mode when we can go out, have two responsible drinks, and safely drive ourselves home.

This is especially true for men. We don’t drink just anything. We drink beer—craft beer. Not college party beer (unless it’s the only thing available, in which case we’ll make an exception). And we don’t drink just any liquor at the bar. We drink *whiskey* (As Ron Swanson put it, “Clear alcohols are for rich women on diets”). We only touch red wine if it’s on the table next to a ribeye. There’s a sort of macho-masculinity culture that’s crept into evangelicalism. Young evangelical men want to feel strong and sophisticated. So we indulge in the “finer things” – brown alcohols, cigars, beards, the writings of puritan theologians. The combined influence of Acts 29 culture and *Mad Men* is all over us.

**We drink because we don’t know how to connect with people otherwise.**

I’ve always struggled with making friends. I just tend to keep to myself in environments where I don’t know anyone. So when I moved to Dallas to attend Dallas Seminary and was having to force myself to meet guys, I found myself saying, “We should hang out this week and grab a bee-, um, lunch.” This happened several times.

Why is it that my default choice for connecting with people involves alcohol? Part of it is the influence of the aforementioned pastor. Part of it is the influence of my college environment. Part of it is the culture of masculinity that I find myself in. And part of it is the fact that I *like* to drink. Regardless of the cause, I’m not comfortable with the outcome.

To be honest, I think maybe young evangelicals have a drinking problem. I mentioned 1 Corinthians 6:12 earlier. In that chapter, Paul is addressing sexual behavior, but the principle he outlines there applies to Christian conduct in general: What’s allowable isn’t always healthy. It’s possible to be mastered by alcohol without being an alcoholic. And it wasn’t until I was asked to yield my right to drink that I realized just how tightly I was holding onto it. My hunch is that I’m not the only one with a strong grip.

WHERE’S THE LINE?

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This is a follow-up post to clarify some thoughts I offered yesterday on the issue of evangelical millennials (EMs) and some of the motivations we have to drink. I got a lot of positive feedback on [yesterday’s post](https://tolander.wordpress.com/2014/09/08/why-we-drink/), and I’m glad it was helpful or clarifying for some folks. I didn’t actually intend for yesterday’s post to be a prescriptive post regarding what is and isn’t an appropriate way to consume alcohol. In fact, I didn’t even mention drunkenness, but a lot of folks who read it assumed that I was talking about drunkenness because I talked about being “mastered” by alcohol. In truth I wanted to explore why EMs choose to drink at all, not why we’re prone to alcohol abuse (though in my experience, we are, and we’d all do well to stop pretending that we aren’t).

I did say in some tweets yesterday that I think our understanding of what’s appropriate is flawed or distorted, so I wanted to take an opportunity to speak to that.

In my experience, most EMs (and Christians in general) use drunkenness as the standard by which to measure the appropriateness of their alcohol consumption. This comes from Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 5 to not get drunk, but to be filled with the Spirit. In my opinion, Paul’s intention in referring to drunkenness there has more to do with wanting an illustration for what being filled with the Spirit is like and slightly less about providing a prescription for appropriate behavior in regards to drinking, but the Bible is clear that drunkenness is inappropriate for Christians. In fact, it’s more than inappropriate: It’s sinful. That said, I don’t think that drunkenness is the hard-and-fast line of appropriate behavior for all people in all places. In fact, when it’s employed as the lone mark of assessment, I think drunkenness is actually a faulty metric for at least two reasons: 1) For some, drinking alcohol at all is unhealthy, and good metrics apply to everyone, and 2) Drunkenness is a subjective term. Everyone has a different definition, from “over the legal limit” to “blacked out.”

Here’s what I suggest as an alternative:

In yesterday’s post I referenced 1 Corinthians 6:12, in which Paul corrects the Corinthians’ misconceptions about freedom and autonomy: “’I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but I will not be mastered by anything.”

In context, Paul is talking about sexual behavior. But don’t you think the principle extends to other areas of life? You bet it does.

Here’s my point: Not everyone who is mastered by alcohol is an alcoholic. Mastery and clinical addiction are similar, but not congruent. Not everyone who has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol gets drunk every time they drink. We know from Jesus’ interaction with the rich young ruler in Luke 18 that morally neutral things can become spiritually harmful to us when we refuse to hold them with an open hand. I experienced this recently, when I was asked by the seminary I attend to commit to abide by their no-drinking policy. Though I’m not “addicted” to alcohol, I found it difficult to commit 100% to not drinking while I’m in seminary. I thought, “I just won’t drink while school is in session,” or “I just won’t keep alcohol at my house.” If I’m not an alcoholic, then why was my first impulse to try and make exceptions to the rule? Maybe I was in the process of being mastered—not in an obvious way, but in a very subtle way. And we all know that our Enemy is the king of subtlety.

So if the first question we have to ask in assessing our relationship with alcohol is “Am I getting drunk?” then the second question we have to ask is, “Even if I’m not getting drunk or if I’m not addicted, am I being mastered?” The difference is subtle, but significant. Getting drunk has to do with the external appropriateness of your relationship with alcohol. Being mastered has to do with the internal appropriateness of your relationship with alcohol. It’s the higher standard. Not getting drunk is what people with self-control do, regardless of whether they know Christ at all. Refusing to be mastered by alcohol is what holy people do because they know they’ve been mastered by Christ.

I got the question yesterday over Twitter: What about enjoying alcohol for the taste?

This is the camp that I would have put myself in before starting seminary. I love a good craft beer as much as the next guy. The (512) IPA is nothing short of heavenly. And I love good whiskey. Show me two fingers of Maker’s and a good book, and I’ll show you a great evening. I won’t make a case that drinking is sinful. I don’t think it is. I think it’s morally neutral, but, like other morally neutral things—money, food, TV, our iPhones, fantasy football—it has the potential to master us. So caution and accountability are necessary and appropriate. After all, we’ve all probably had at least one experience with a person who said, “I drink because I like the taste,” but was either in denial about their drinking habits or was deliberately being dishonest with themselves and others about what was really going on.

Charles Spurgeon said, “Go not one step in a way in which it would be wrong to go two.” For anyone who can’t make up their mind about whether their relationship with alcohol is healthy, this may be a good diagnostic.

I don’t know if I’ll continue to abstain from drinking after I graduate from seminary. But I’m confident that I’ll be glad I did, if only for a few years, because I will have learned to hold my right to drink with an open hand. In the area of alcohol I’m forfeiting my right to total autonomy in favor of freedom. You see, freedom isn’t getting to make all your own decisions. Freedom is not regretting any of them.

After some of the feedback I got last night, I feel as though I need to state the obvious: Your life will not be worse if you choose to be totally abstinent in regards to alcohol. You will not be miss out on anything. You will not be unfulfilled. You will not have less fun. We EMs have forgotten this. We’ve all got a terminal case of FOMO, and we let it dictate our every action. That’s risky business when it comes to why and how we drink.