

THE BLIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

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I Cor. 8:9-13

In his fine book "Customs And Cultures" Eugene A. Nida, the famous missionary anthropologist, tells of a missionary who was traveling in Northern Ecuador. In the course of his journeyings he came upon a village engaged in riotous drinking. All of the natives were drunk. Many were staggering about in disorganized dancing. A few had fallen into the muddy gutters along the dirty streets unable to move.

One of the tavern keepers, who was more sober than the rest, explained that all this celebrating was in honor of John the Baptist. The missionary pointed out that of all the ways to honor John the Baptist this was *not* the way since John the Baptist was under a special vow not to drink.

The tavern keeper replied,

"Ah, but we drink to the saints of pleasure".

Then he reeled off a long list of saints names and concluded with the blasphemous exclamation,

"All our saints are drunkards and so are we!"

In relating the incident, Dr. Edwin T. Dahlberg makes the astute observation that

"when a nation comes to the point where it sanctifies its drinking habits behind a facade of religion, and all of its saints become drunkards, it has reached a sorry state indeed."

Well, we can thank God America not gone quite that far. But this Christmas season, she will come dangerously close. In the name of the Christ child, and in honor of His birth, America will engage in a round of social drinking which has become almost a cult with a socially accepted ritual of toasts

followed by the “proper” cocktail or alcoholic beverage for that particular occasion or hour, and a program of entertainment which has almost taken on the form of worship.

In the name of Christ, gallons of liquor will be given as gifts and, on the eve of His birthday, gallons more will be consumed in that annual ritual known as the office party. Thank God many of our corporations have come to their senses and have put their foot down against this “Blight before Christmas”. In response to a recent survey, conducted by Chicago’s Dartnell Corporation, many company leaders responded with such statements as, “We wouldn’t have one of those brawls in our place of business,” or, “Let them get drunk on their own time.”

Some large corporations said they were trying to capture the real meaning of Christmas and have organized great company-wide celebrations for all employees and their families. Typical of this more Christ-like celebration about which I know personally is the one put on by Heinz 57 Varieties of Tracy, California. Along with Santa Claus, clowns, music and gifts for the small fry, there was the presentation of the Christmas story followed by a sermon, preached two years ago by our own Dr. Curtis Nims.

Unfortunately, that kind of Christian Christmas celebration is a pathetic minority and, according to the Dartnell Survey as reported in bold, black headlines in the Chicago Daily News,

**“OFFICE YULE PARTIES ARE HERE TO STAY. MORE SHINDIGS
THAN EVER ARE PLANNED, SURVEY SHOWS.”**

The article goes on to say,

“Despite the waves of criticism, the popularity of the Christmas Party is on the increase...while last year only 55% of the companies interviewed had office parties, this year 62% of them reported parties are scheduled.”

Unlike the pathetic minority already mentioned, the majority of these Christmas parties, presumably held in honor of the birth of Jesus Christ, will feature free-flowing liquor and a pattern of behavior which will more closely resemble the pagan antics of Sodom and Gomorrah than the

awesome worship of the shepherds and wise men on that silent night when our Savior was born in Bethlehem so long ago.

Well, what should the Christian's attitude be towards this "Bright Before Christmas"? As Baptists we believe in the freedom of the individual conscience and we thank God that even in so important an issue as this, no one, not even the minister, can tell us what to do. We are free to act on the basis of our own deep personal convictions. The thing we must remember, however, is that freedom of conscience demands a responsibility of being enlightened. The price of our individual freedom as Baptists is eternal vigilance. A never-ending search for truth. A constant seeking out of the facts as they relate to the great issues affecting our lives.

And so, the purpose of this message this morning—as we think about the individual Christian's attitude toward alcohol, the greatest social problem facing America today—is to present to you the facts. The cold, hard, unglamorous facts as they really are. Upon the basis of those facts, the decision up to you.

As we begin, let us remember that when we talk about the drinking of alcoholic beverages we are not only talking about whiskey and gin, but also dinner wine, and 3.2 beer. The scientific facts, clearly understood and widely published, show that "from a physiological point of view, intoxication results from the intake of alcohol, regardless of the type of beverage in which that alcohol is contained."

Secondly, let us remember this is no mere straw man we are attacking this morning. This is no ghost of a problem conjured up in the mind of some prissy prude. According to the United States Department of Commerce, while adult Americans drank 19½ gallons of alcoholic beverage per capita for the year 1935, by the year 1955, the rate of consumption had increased to 33 gallons per individual. And, for this five billion—that's right, I said five billion, five hundred forty million gallons of alcoholic beverages, Americans spent nearly twice as much as they did on all of their public and private schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning put together!

The result in terms of broken homes, shattered lives, highway tragedies, reduced pay checks, and all-around social anxiety is beyond comprehension.

A ten year study in Cleveland, Ohio, for instance, shows that alcohol was a factor in 50% of all automobile fatalities. More startling still, this study revealed that “the largest number of killers at the wheel were not the alcoholics or heavy drinkers, but they belonged to the group of so-called ‘moderate’ drinkers. It was the men of distinction who became men of extinction”.

According to Judge Matthew W. Hill of the Supreme Court of the State of Washington, no one really knows how many times the charges of “reckless or negligent driving” have been used to cover up actual cases of driving under the influence of intoxicants.

Well, the name of the offense can be changed, but the results cannot.

Is there anyone here this morning who hasn’t heard the tale about the man who was told by his doctor that he was suffering from acute alcoholism. The man said, “Doc, I can’t tell my wife I am suffering from alcoholism. Isn’t there one of those big medical terms that I can give her?”

The doctor said, “As far as I’m concerned, there is no other term for it but alcoholism.”

As the man left the doctor’s office he passed a music store and in the window his eye caught the word “syncopation”. That word seemed to strike a responsive chord somewhere. When he got home he told his wife the doctor had said he was suffering from acute syncopation. That was all right until she looked up the word in the dictionary and read: “Syncopation - an irregular and erratic movement from bar to bar.”

Well, as I have said, you can change the name but you cannot change the effect.

And what *is* the effect of alcohol in American life? Records show that bootlegging is far greater now than during the period of prohibition. Florida State Crime Commission records show there never was a year under prohibition when as many bootleggers were arrested as have been arrested

each year since the Repeal.

The records in our own city are just as bad. Figures show that 80% of the city's crime is committed under the influence of alcohol. One Chicago judge has stated that 75% of all divorces in his jurisdiction result from alcohol.

The Rockefeller Foundation reports that one out of every five patients in our mental hospitals today is an alcoholic. And according to Bruce Ashby, formerly of the Department of Justice, "over twenty-eight million working days, not hours—days!—twenty-eight million working *days* are lost each year because of drinking."

No, this is no ghost of a problem which some minister locked in an ivory tower has conjured up. Statistics now report there are 14,589,000 acute alcoholics in the United States, of whom more than 700,000 are women, and the number of alcoholics is increasing at the rate of one quarter million per year.

Don't think for a moment the problem of alcohol is just on Skid Row, or that it only involves the few unfortunates who are "allergic to alcohol". We are just playing the ostrich when we think alcohol only captures people with personality disorders. Right here in Morgan Park and Beverly Hills, not over a month ago, your Pastor was in one of the most beautiful homes of this fashionable neighborhood counseling with as fine a person as you'll ever meet. Wonderful education and personality who is, nonetheless, an alcoholic. How did it start? Through social drinking! As Edwin T. Dahlberg points out,

"You cannot see these people fallen down, helpless by a living room lamp and unable to get up; their children crying, frightened and embarrassed; their homes mortgaged because of drink bills and loss of employment...you cannot see those things, as a minister does, without knowing the problem of America is not just alcoholism, but alcohol...period."

In the United States today there are more victims of alcohol than of the diseases of cancer, tuberculosis and polio put together. But even that is not the real issue, for Dr. Dahlberg goes on to say that more is at stake here than

mental health,
or holiday accidents,
or loathsome social behavior,
or the problem of absenteeism in industry.

What is at stake here is nothing less than the soul of America and the eternal salvation of each individual. For the Apostle Paul put it bluntly,

“Drunkards shall not inherit the Kingdom of God” (I Corinthians 6:10).

That does not mean they will go to hell. The Kingdom of God is the will of God done here on earth, as it is being done in Heaven. And it's simply impossible to be in the will of God, and be drunk at the same time!

The records show there are 67,000,000 people in the United States who drink. 14,000,000 of these are alcoholics, or approximately one out of fifteen, and yet we seem to have a peculiar mental block on the issue of alcohol. Even though we recognize the disastrous effects it has on at least one out of every fifteen who use it, we twiddle our thumbs...close our eyes...sit back and do nothing for fear of stepping on someone's toes. How tragic!

Judge Hill, who spoke at the Seattle Convention, illustrated this amazing attitude in a most graphic way. Let me apply it locally. Suppose we had 67 boys in our scout troop. We don't have that many, but let's pretend we do and let's say that our scout master announced that next Saturday they were going to explore some caves and rocky territory which would present an intriguing and challenging experience; and that, while there were some dangerous snakes in the territory through which they would pass, experience indicated that only one out of every fifteen who went through there would be bitten and that, while on the law of averages, the chances were that at least four of our boys would be bitten, he would not deny the other sixty three boys the

privilege and thrill of the experience.

You know as well as I that before next Saturday arrived the parents of those 67 children would be on that scoutmaster's neck inquiring as to just what kind of an idiot he was and what he meant by taking that kind of gamble with their children.

Yet, that is exactly the same kind of gamble you take every time you introduce your boy or girl to the use of intoxicants at home by your example. There is no means of determining whether your child is one of the fourteen who can handle it, or if he or she is one who can't. There are no scientific tests which can prove a given person is not a potential alcoholic.

So certainly the first place we must begin to fight this insidious evil is in our homes.

The Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency recently made this tremendous observation:

“We often criticize our churches for failing to instill moral values in our children, but we forget that we send our youngsters to Sunday School for one hour a week to learn about honesty and clean living and then permit them to spend six days and twenty-three hours a week in a society that, too often, puts more emphasis on getting ahead than how you got there.

“The truth is that we tend to be a nation that preaches one set of moral standards to our children but uphold another set of standards as perfectly all right for adults. Cocktails and high balls are considered indispensable to almost every adult social gathering, particularly among the well-to-do. Yet we are shocked by disclosure of wide spread drinking of intoxicants among imitative teenagers.”

A little over a year ago I picked up a copy of the Beverly Review and read in the teenage column of a group of our high school kids who were going to have a cocktail party prior to their dance. I immediately called Kermit Long, who was then at Trinity Methodist Church, and he was as alarmed as I. We tried to find out whether this was true. Fortunately, it proved to be a typographical error and the youngsters were going to have a “coke-tail” party.

Well, there is a tremendous difference between a coke-tail party and a cocktail party. Or is there?

You see, those imitative teenagers were trying to come as close to the behavior of their adult parents as possible. And while they were not knowingly allowed to use alcoholic beverages, they were trying to achieve the apparent sophistication of their parents by using a play on words.

Well, as I said, we are Baptists and we can do with our children as we please. But let us not forget that teaching our children the Christian graces is much more important than educating them in the social graces. Our real aim in life is not to raise youngsters who “can hold their liquor”, but to raise children who know the real meaning of love, joy, peace, self-control and self-sacrifice.

Remember also that alcoholism is both a physiological and psychological problem. Not only is it impossible for you to know whether or not your child is one of the one-in-fifteen who is physiologically allergic to alcohol, but it is also impossible for you to know whether or not your child will ever develop psychological needs which he or she feels must be satisfied with alcohol. Your kids may see you take an occasional drink to let yourself down after the rigors of a particularly hard day’s work, and begin by doing the same. But the trouble with the problem drinker is that sooner or later all business days become hard days. All problems become insurmountable without the aid of “a quick one.” And no one in all of God’s green earth can tell who will develop those psychological needs for alcohol.

As a matter of fact, Alcoholics Anonymous can give witness to thousands upon thousands of people who drank socially for years until one day a given set of circumstances arose which seemed more than they could bear. They began trying to escape from life through the neck of a

bottle. Every alcoholic was once a social drinker. For you see, this is a subtle poison whose effect is not necessarily apparent with the first, the hundredth, or the one thousandth drink.

Surely in the light of these physiological and psychological facts we must combat this vicious evil in our homes.

And then through legislation we can begin to move toward the limitation, restriction and ultimate abolition of liquor advertising.

Bishop Oxnam tells the story of his four-year-old granddaughter who, at a party given by one of her young friends, was asked

“What’ll you have, my dear?”

The Bishop’s little granddaughter replied,

“Pabst Blue Ribbon”.

The child didn’t know what Pabst Blue Ribbon was, but she knew the answer to the question,

“What’ll you have?”

If you will watch your newspapers and magazines in the next few weeks you will find them saturated with Christmas whiskey advertisements. Last year in a single issue of one popular magazine there were twenty full pages of advertising to promote the purchase and holiday consumption of liquor.

I think it’s high time we had a lobby that speaks for the majority. For while there are some 67,000,000 Americans who drink to some degree—a little or a lot—there are 100,000,000 Americans who don’t drink at all. That majority has a perfect right to be incensed and to resent vehemently having its children subjected to the most insidious kind of advertising which glamorizes America’s number one social evil and America’s number four health problem.

If alcoholism is a disease to which one out of every fifteen people is susceptible—and it is—there

is something viciously evil about advertising the cause of that disease to the tune of almost \$130,000,000 a year. You see,

“The crux of the whole problem lies in a liquor and brewing monopoly with a sales and advertising program which multiplies drinkers faster than we can cure them.”

In his stirring address, Don't Collide With Science, Judge Hill refers to an old rule-of-thumb test which used to be applied to borderline mental cases. The individual whose sanity was questioned was placed before a tub of water with water running into the tub from a faucet and was given a tin dipper and told to empty the tub. If he turned off the faucet and proceeded to use the dipper to empty the tub, it didn't prove a thing. If, however, he dipped and dipped and never turned off the faucet, it was pretty good proof he was missing some of his marbles.

The force of the analogy is obvious, for while we must take care of the problem represented by 4,500,000 acute alcoholics who have been robbed—robbed of their names, their health, their jobs, their money, their self-respect—while we must be concerned about them, we must also be concerned with the faucet!

While we are not able to turn the faucet off for someone else, we can turn it off for ourselves. So, finally, we must attack this problem of liquor in our own lives as individuals.

Even though you may “think” you derive some temporary benefit or enjoyment from an occasional drink, for the sake of those multitudes of people who cannot take liquor and leave it alone, you will willingly forego that small pleasure. Instead of aligning yourself with the forces which would destroy them, you will put yourself on the side of the forces which would save them.

Furthermore, you can express your conviction by refusing to give liquor as a Christmas gift. Should you receive a gift of alcoholic beverages, you will not try to be a “good Joe” by giving it

to one of your hard drinking friends. You will actually do him much more good if you pour it down the drain.

And, when your particular office party is being planned, you can suggest that Christmas is, after all, a Christian holy day honoring the birth of Christ and any celebration should fit the occasion. You might even refer to the new organization, "Christ-like Office Parties, Inc.", which was started in Florida by a group of office workers who rebelled at the traditional party with its free-flowing liquor.

Because the vast majority of people who drink socially do so, not because they want to, but because they feel they have to, you can help by not subjecting your guests to the weight of social pressure and refuse to serve liquor in your homes. Oh, to be sure, you may lose a few of your heavy drinking friends, but the vast majority of your associates will then be able to look forward to visits in your home, knowing they will not be subjected to the pressure to drink alcohol when they do not want to drink it.

Actually, the majority of people are just as happy with ginger ale, punch, or coffee and cake. The glamour of the cocktail party with its "loud talk, flushed faces, and injudicious conversation" has begun to fade.

One of our fine members, whose position with his company requires him to do a tremendous amount of entertaining customers, told me not too many months ago how he has finally come to the position where he informs his customers he will be happy to take them out to dinner and to the finest show in Chicago, but that he, by personal conviction, cannot take them to places where liquor will flow freely. The interesting thing is that instead of losing customers, he has gained them! The vast majority of those people he is asked to entertain heave a great big sigh of relief when they discover they will not be subjected to an evening of making the rounds.

Across the street from our former home in California lives one of the most successful salesmen I have ever met. He has a beautiful home, a cadillac automobile, and a fabulous income. Prior to his conversion he would tend bar at the office Christmas party because he didn't particularly care to drink himself. But following his conversion he stopped doing that because he felt it was a hindrance to his Christian testimony. When the time came for the office party, he would politely excuse himself. Later on when his customers would visit his fabulous home for the accustomed Christmas drink, he would invite them in graciously, give them a little gift, and say, "Gentlemen, I don't drink and have no liquor in my home, but come on in and have a cup of coffee on me." Again and again and again those people with whom he did business would pat him on the back and say, "Good for you, Glenn Jones, I wish I had guts enough to do it myself."

Well, to put it bluntly, it does take guts. It takes real moral fibre to resist the trend of social pressure which is sweeping across America today. Great living always comes at a great price. But the man or woman who pays that price will be richly rewarded. Not only with real inner personal satisfaction, not only by gaining the admiration of his associates, but also with a smile from God.

"God wants a man - honest and true and brave.
A man who hates the wrong and loves the right;
A man who scorns all compromise with sin,
Who for the truth courageously will fight.

"God wants a man of action and of faith,
Whose life is something more than creed and talk;
Who lives each day as though it were his last,
And proves his creed by a consistent walk."

God Wants a Man!