

Alcohol Use and Abuse Is on the Rise

The Wired Word for the Week of August 1, 2021

In the News

Alcohol has been linked with 740,000 new cancer cases around the world in 2020, according to research recently reported in *U.S. News*. This represented 4% of all newly diagnosed cases last year. "All drinking involves risk," said Jürgen Rehm, a senior scientist at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Canada. "And with alcohol-related cancers, all levels of consumption are associated with some risk." Harriet Rungay of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, located in France, added that "there is evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic has increased rates of drinking in some countries."

Debates over alcohol have been raging in the United States for hundreds of years. In fact, the issue predates the founding of our country, going all the way back to the arrival of settlers on the Mayflower. Beer was a main hydration source on the Mayflower, and, according to *The Atlantic*, the crew of the ship feared that the Pilgrims were going through their supply too quickly as they sailed toward the Hudson River. Panicking at the thought of running out of beer before they got home, the sailors threatened mutiny and unloaded the Pilgrims earlier than expected at Plymouth Rock. You could say that a beer shortage caused the founding of the Plymouth Colony in 1620.

The Puritan leader of the Pilgrims, William Bradford, complained about the lack of beer in his diary that winter. Living conditions were terrible, and barely half of the group survived until spring. But soon they were making their own beer, and also importing wine and liquor. A couple of generations later, Puritans such as Cotton Mather warned that a "flood of RUM" could "overwhelm all good Order among us."

George Washington distributed alcohol in his first campaign for elected office in 1758, giving 144 gallons to voters as he sought votes for a seat in Virginia's House of Burgesses. He made alcohol available to his troops during the Revolutionary War, and later became a successful whiskey distiller. But he also acknowledged that drinking could be a problem, saying that it caused "the ruin of half the workmen in this country."

Alcohol use has been a divisive issue throughout American history, and at times we have been a country of heavy drinkers. By 1830, the average American adult was drinking nine gallons of spirits each year, about three times the amount we drink today. Alcohol abuse became a huge societal issue, one that was eventually addressed (less successfully than hoped) by Prohibition. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution banned the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933.

The Prohibition movement was led largely by Protestant Christians who were concerned about alcoholism and family violence, problems that we still face today. And although the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed in 1933, many Americans still abstain from alcohol: About a third of U.S. adults choose not to drink, a higher proportion than in many other Western countries. Debates continue about how best to control dysfunctional drinking, and many people are concerned that alcohol consumption has risen steadily since the start of the millennium, after a long decline through the 1980s and 1990s.

Look around, and it seems that alcohol is everywhere. In the 20th century, you might have been able to buy a bottle of wine at a grocery store. But in the 21st, some supermarkets have wine bars, beer on tap and the opportunity to "shop 'n' sip" in the store. Many movie theaters now have pubs, some coffee shops serve alcohol, and neighborhood book clubs are more accurately described as "wine clubs." The frequency of drinking rose during the pandemic, along with the sales of hard liquor. As of February 2021, nearly 25 percent of Americans said that they drank more during the pandemic as a way of coping with stress.

Reports on the benefits and dangers of alcohol tend to vary widely. Stories on wine carrying health benefits have been followed by recent reports that alcohol might give you cancer. From 1999 to 2017, the number of alcohol-related deaths in the United States doubled to more than 70,000 a year, making alcohol one of the leading drivers of the decline in American life expectancy.

According to *The New York Times* this month, roughly 17 million Americans grapple with alcoholism, defined by the National Institutes of Health as "a medical condition characterized by an impaired ability

to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational or health consequences." And although it is a common disorder, most people do not receive treatment for it, even after they have disclosed their drinking problem to their health-care provider.

Fortunately, there is hope. Many people control heavy drinking on their own, or through self-help programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous or SMART Recovery. Others find that they can improve their mental health and quality of life by finding a way to lower their alcohol intake without quitting it entirely. "People believe that abstinence is the only way -- and in fact it's not the only way," said Katie Witkiewitz, the director of the Addictive Behaviors and Quantitative Research Lab at the University of New Mexico. "We find robust improvements in health and functioning when people reduce their drinking, even if they're not reducing to abstinence."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Alcohol Tied to 740,000 Cancer Cases Worldwide in 2020. U.S. News](#)

[America Has a Drinking Problem. The Atlantic](#)

[Alcohol Abuse Is on the Rise, but Doctors Too Often Fail to Treat It. The New York Times](#)

Applying the News Story

Alcohol use and abuse impacts every congregation, so it should not be ignored. Use this lesson to find ways to address the issue in your church's ministry and mission.

The Big Questions

1. What are the taboos that surround alcohol in the life of your congregation? How can you overcome reluctance to talk about alcohol use and abuse?
2. If you drink alcohol, how do you control your drinking? If you abstain, what supports you in this commitment?
3. The isolation of the pandemic was a factor in many people increasing their drinking. What can the Christian community do to bring people together and reverse this trend?
4. Where do you see benefits to drinking alcohol, if any? What are the greatest dangers, in your opinion?
5. What does the Bible say about alcohol use? Where, when, and how should alcohol issues be addressed in church: in sermons, Sunday school, small group meetings? Be specific.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 23:20-21

Do not be among winebibbers, or among gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags. (No context needed.)

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings aimed at helping people to live a good life. The writer warns against excess in the drinking of wine and eating of meat, because he knows that such overindulgence leads to drowsiness, loss of motivation, inactivity, and eventually, financial difficulty. Although the writer doesn't specify all the consequences of overindulgence, today we have evidence that overconsumption of alcohol and rich foods contributes to poor health. In ancient times and today, alcohol abuse causes problems for individuals, families and communities.

Questions: Where do you draw the line between moderation and excess in drinking and eating? How do you limit your own consumption, if at all? Why is this important to you?

Ecclesiastes 9:7

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. (For context, read [Ecclesiastes 9:7-10](#).)

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses issues of life and death in a philosophical manner, seeing that life is full of riddles and the ways of God are often hard to see. Aware that everyone will die, the writer encourages us to take life as it comes, and to enjoy our time on earth by eating bread, drinking wine, and

enjoying "life with the wife [or husband] whom you love, all the days of your vain life" (v. 9). At the same time, Ecclesiastes counsels wisdom, which the writer sees as far superior to folly.

Questions: How do you exercise wisdom in your own decisions about alcohol use? If you approve of the use of alcohol, how do you connect it to a good and happy life?

John 2:10

[The chief steward said to the bridegroom] "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." (For context, read [John 2:1-11](#).)

The first miracle of Jesus in the gospel of John is the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. A crisis occurs when the wine runs out, threatening to end the joyful wedding feast. But Jesus instructs the stewards at the feast to fill six large stone jars with water, which he then turns into wine. The chief steward is shocked by the quality of the wine, which is usually served before "the guests have become drunk." Clearly, drinking alcohol was a common practice in the time of Jesus, and he performed a miracle so that the drinking could continue.

Questions: How do you understand the attitude of Jesus toward alcohol? What motivated him to perform the miracle at Cana? What limits do you think he would put on drinking, if any?

Ephesians 5:18

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit. (No context needed.)

The apostle Paul did not object to the drinking of wine. In fact, he recommended that his younger colleague Timothy "take a little wine" for the sake of his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). But he strongly objected to drunkenness, and linked it to excessive indulgence in bodily pleasures. Instead of drinking to excess, he encouraged the Ephesians to be "filled with the Spirit."

Questions: What motivates people to drink to excess, in your opinion? What healthier pursuits can lead to the euphoria that some find in drinking? How can the church provide such experiences?