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Can Role Models Drink?

Abstract

"If moderate consumption is not just okay, but good, yet we are scandalized if we see our role models engaging in it, what model is left for our young people coming of age?"

Posting about the appropriate use of alcohol from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/can-role-models-drink/>

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Comments

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Can Role Models Drink?

 [inallthings.org/can-role-models-drink/](https://allthings.org/can-role-models-drink/)

Donald Roth

Growing up, I virtually never saw my parents drink alcohol. My father didn't care for the taste or potential effect, and my mother wanted me to have an example who proved that drinking wasn't some innate part of adulthood. She wanted to show me that alcohol wasn't a rite of passage and that it wasn't an essential part of all social gatherings. I have a lot of respect for my parents' choices in those respects; although, I confess, I've taken a largely different path. I enjoy a beer or a glass of scotch on a varying basis, somewhere between once and several times a week. I say this is a confession because, as a college professor at a Christian college, and, particularly in the very "Christian" county where I live, I feel like this is something akin to coming out of a closet. It lightly scandalizes some people that we have a liquor cabinet visibly displayed in our kitchen, and I've never taken a poll to figure it out, but I would imagine I'm in the minority of faculty at my institution in that I have had a beer (not on campus) with students in the past. In fact, I even checked through the Faculty Handbook before adding that last detail because I wasn't totally sure if that was allowed or not. To my perception, while I have not run into many people who are personally prohibitionists, the legacy of that movement still casts a long shadow over our social norms, if not our moral code, and I wonder if that should remain the case.

To be clear, I'm not really trying to argue the moral case for whether it's permissible to drink or not. There are certainly Christian brothers and sisters who believe the practice is sinful, but many influential voices in those circles don't even hold to total abstinence as a moral requirement.¹ Instead, many of these more modern voices would compare drinking to playing with fire, saying that inebriation is unquestionably sinful and arguing that "[a]ll things are lawful, but not all things are helpful."²) If I had to guess, I believe this would be the ethic that motivates the social norms that I find odd. The approach seems to be that we wouldn't want to see role models like pastors, teachers, or parents drink, because that might normalize the practice and lead some people into sin. To me, this approach both rests on a shaky assumption and leaves a critical question unasked.

A Shaky Assumption: Drinking is Playing with Fire

There are two problems with this assumption: first, it focuses on the negative aspects of drinking to the exclusion of any benefits; second, it takes a bright line approach to things like inebriation that I'm not sure are warranted. As to the first point, it's not just that we're permitted to drink as an accommodation to our sinful desires, then told to keep it in check; there are positive health and social benefits specifically tied to the moderate consumption of alcohol. There is relatively strong evidence that moderate consumption of alcohol reduces risk of heart disease by 25-40%,³ and there is other evidence linking moderate consumption to reduced risks for everything from [Alzheimer's to Type II Diabetes](#). While we are all familiar with the [risks](#) of self-medication in alcohol abuse, research supports the idea that moderate drinking provides a range of mental health benefits as well, such as stress reduction, social integration, and long-term cognitive function. Finally, mild inebriation has been found to [improve creative problem solving](#) along with other creative tasks.⁴ While drinking can certainly be a vice, alcohol also possesses properties that it's fair to say are an affirmative blessing for God's people.

There is a second assumption at play in social norms favoring seeming abstinence, and this one is a bit more pernicious. This assumption takes verses like [Ephesians 5:18](#) ("And do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery") and makes them proof texts for the idea that any degree of inebriation is clearly sinful. Since that threshold varies both from person to person and for individuals based on when they last ate or how hydrated they are, the best wisdom is just to avoid drink altogether. However, this makes something that happens by degrees into an on/off switch.⁵ It makes sense that drinking until you black out would be excess, but the Biblical indications of a clear line aren't so obvious. Christ's first recorded miracle in John's Gospel is to provide wine for wedding guests

who had imbibed enough that their palates had become less discerning.⁶ The Psalmist praises God in Psalm 104:15 for giving “[wine to gladden the heart of man](#).” Neither of these descriptions jive with being stone sober. While I do enjoy a good red wine, “gladdening the heart” isn’t just about the taste of the drink.⁷ None of this is to endorse regular drunkenness, but I believe the “playing with fire” approach draws its lines entirely too neatly.⁸

An Unasked Question: What Role Should We Model?

Ultimately, this is the question I find most personally concerning. If moderate consumption is not just okay, but good, yet we are scandalized if we see our role models engaging in it, what model is left for our young people coming of age? There’s no question that binge drinking is a huge problem at the college level. It’s not just a college problem, either: almost [one in five](#) adult Americans struggles with binge or heavy drinking. At the same time, parental modeling has a [huge impact](#) on children’s future practices. Since young adults in college are often living away from their parents, isn’t it equally important that at least some of their role models in that environment help them form healthy drinking habits? Again, I’m not saying everyone should drink, but the social norm that discourages particularly those who we look up to from doing so seems to be abandoning a key avenue for positive influence.

At the end, perhaps you’re not convinced. Perhaps you raise the very legitimate question of whether all of the vaunted benefits I mentioned are more correlative than causal. Perhaps people experience these positive outcomes because moderate drinkers are likely to practice more self-control in other areas of their lives, but isn’t that all the more reason why we should be helping to model self-control? That is, while abstinence is a way to protect a moral boundary, moderation is about active self-regulation. While the former may be necessary or wise for some, we should enthusiastically embrace the latter. Christian discernment isn’t ultimately about making rules for ourselves that make holiness easier,⁹ it’s about the hard and humbling work of daily denying ourselves to follow Him.

Footnotes

1. For instance, while he does not drink personally, John Piper [does not consider](#) drinking immoral. Even while affirming the Southern Baptist Convention’s policy of total abstinence, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler also [agrees](#) that his denomination’s position is not biblically mandated. [↔](#)
2. [1 Corinthians 10:23a](#) (ESV [↔](#))
3. This is not to say that the benefit is not balanced with some risks, but, according to [Harvard’s School of Public Health](#), the benefit appears to be specifically linked to alcohol consumption. [↔](#)
4. It’s important to note that this is mild inebriation (just below the legal limit), not being blackout drunk. [↔](#)
5. Even the article I cited from [Harvard’s School of Public Health](#) points out that moderation is hardly a universally agreed-upon designation. [↔](#)
6. See [John 2](#). [↔](#)
7. In fact, a [clickbait article](#) making the rounds recently features a photographer who takes pictures before and after his subjects drink successive glasses of wine, and you can visibly see people’s personalities come out and often perk up as the photos progress. [↔](#)
8. As I argued in [my article earlier this week](#) (I must really want to threaten my job security), easy answers and neat lines can be serious problems. [↔](#)

9. After all, that didn't work out particularly well for either the Pharisees or Adam and Eve in the Garden. ↩