



Statement on Use of Intoxicants Damascus Community Church

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.
Genesis 1:31*

*Through him all things were made;
without him nothing was made that has been made.
John 1:3*

Substances that impact the human body in various ways, from providing pain relief to fighting disease, were created by God. It is an unfortunate reality that such substances may be misused, just as a screwdriver may be misused as a pry bar or as a weapon to harm. Even more unfortunate are the consequences of such misuse, in any case. If we were in a world where everything was used according to the Creator's purpose and design, there would be no discussion here. But since the advent of sin and the indwelling sin nature, some principles, if not outright rules, are needed to guide us in the use of substances that are harmful when misused. These rules and principles should certainly be derived from Scripture, and the serious disciple of Jesus will obey the rules, carefully and prayerfully applying biblical principles as they consider the use of any substances.

We are addressing here specifically intoxicants. That is, substances with the potential to intoxicate, defined by Webster's Dictionary as "to excite or stupefy by alcohol or a narcotic esp. to the point where physical and mental control is markedly diminished." Subjectivity enters consideration immediately—what is "markedly diminished"? We know that judgment and responsiveness are impaired to different degrees, by different substances, in different ways, in different human bodies. So biblical injunctions against "drunkenness" involve discerning what exactly that means, knowing that what it takes to get to that state will vary with both individuals and the substance(s) involved. The uncertainty involved in the reality of a progressive stupefied condition should itself lead one to caution as they consider use of intoxicating substances.

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In considering the use of intoxicants, it is our position that the disciple of Jesus should seriously apply at least the following laws and principles:

1) Obedience to authorities, Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 6:5-8.

The most obvious application of the command to obey authorities relates to government authorities in our “jurisdiction” (city, county, state, federal), from Romans 13:1-7. Most intoxicants are regulated if not outright forbidden by governing authorities because of the negative consequences associated with their use. It is the general rule of Scripture and Christian living that the follower of Christ will obey governing authorities, as they are established by God for the common good of society (Romans 13:1-7). Again, it is the general principle that the only biblically endorsed exception to this is in cases where the law of man conflicts with the revealed will of God, such as in Acts 4:18-20.

At the time of this writing, the federal law of the United States and the state law in places like Oregon are in conflict when it comes to the use of marijuana (hereafter “pot”), one popular intoxicant. The believer in the U.S. falls under the jurisdiction of federal law as well as state law. Therefore, where use of pot is prohibited by either, if not both, the believer is obliged to walk in obedience and refrain from its use.

Where substances are not prohibited but are controlled, such as through prescriptions or age requirements, it is only right that the believer live in conformity to those regulations. As with other matters of law (for instance, motor vehicle restrictions), the believer may have opinions that differ from the “law of the land.” This does not excuse the serious disciple from living in obedience to that law, conscientiously conforming to the Scriptures in passages such as Romans 13.

Beyond governmental authorities, individuals may come under other authorities by association, through employment or voluntary relationships with groups or organizations, where submission is required or promised. In such cases, based on the principle for slaves obeying masters (Ephesians 6:5-8), and the responsibility believers have under the Lord to remain faithful to their word (Matthew 5:33-37), the serious disciple will willingly submit to those authorities. If the employer or organization has a prohibition or rule regarding intoxicant use, it is the responsibility of the believer to live faithfully in compliance with such regulation or policy.

2) The influence of your practices on others, Luke 17:1-2.

Jesus warns that “stumbling blocks” (σκανδαλα) will come. These are things that cause or give occasion to sin, and his point is that in this world they are bound to be a part of our experience. It is what he says next that should give pause to any disciple sensitive to this concern— “...but woe to that person through whom they come.” That is, being the one to place a “stumbling block” before another invites personal disaster so dire it would be better to be drowned! (Luke 17:2)

We should ask then, how might one person become the one through whom a cause or occasion for sin would come? An obvious way is through a teaching by false prophets (such as Balaam) who “introduce destructive heresies” leading many to “follow

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their shameful ways” (2 Peter 2:1-22). The close link between false teaching and “shameful ways” or unrighteous living is underscored in many places, and leads Paul to warn Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). What Paul knows and everyone should be aware of is that people are watching, learning and following not merely formal teaching, but the example we set.

The implication when it comes to the use of intoxicants should first be personal—what example will I choose to set, knowing that others will do as I do? Certainly, in a culture where drug use, from alcohol to methamphetamines, has become ruinous spiritually and physically, and the primary cause of death among the young, it should give pause to those who endorse such use to any degree. Setting others on that path, consciously or inadvertently by example, without knowing where it will lead them, might be placing a stumbling block. Of course, this could be applied to many of our life choices—watch your life closely, Paul would advise, for this reason!

Beyond the personal application, it may be considered wise for a mission-oriented ministry focused on spiritual outcomes to establish certain behavioral guidelines for those who are enlisted in that work. When spiritual outcomes (i.e. discipleship) are the purpose for existence, the organization could choose to establish rules that would preclude potential stumbling-block situations. The obvious danger is to think that the point is the behavioral outcome alone—which results in a legalistic approach to acceptance with God. Instead the true motive of providing a high moral standard in a desire to avoid causing others to sin would need to be clearly understood. For this approach to be successful, participants themselves must agree with this purpose and voluntarily and gladly embrace the standard, or the result will be dissension and probably the interpretation that the organization is in fact promoting legalism.

3) Prohibition of intoxication, Ephesians 5:15-18.

The straightforward command is that one not get “drunk with wine” (Ephesians 5:18). The idea of the word is to drink freely to the point of impaired judgment. In Luke 12:45 it is one of the actions of the servant who is unfaithful and irresponsible. In John 2:10 the implication is that it results in lowered discernment, so the custom was that after a point wine of lower quality would be served to drinking guests because they would not know the difference—their senses and judgment dulled. Drunkenness, says Paul, leads to “debauchery”, which is reckless and immoral living. It is commonly known that inhibitions which would normally enable one to say no to unsafe or immoral choices dissipate with the use of alcohol or other intoxicants. The Proverbs speak of the woes and sorrow of one who takes this path (Proverbs 23:29-35 and others).

It should seem somewhat problematic to establish a clear line that distinguishes “drunk,” more so with some intoxicants than others. The concentration of alcohol in the bloodstream offers some measure, but the amount of impairment at a certain blood-alcohol level varies with individuals, and even for an individual depending on other physical circumstances. For this reason, some occupations require more stringent rules—airline pilots, for example, are not to have consumed any alcohol prior to flying.

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Drug testing is used in many occupations to preclude impairment that would endanger others or be detrimental to job performance.

The Proverbs speak of this kind of “rule” in 31:4-5. “It is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer” because with impaired judgment they might fail their responsibilities toward the law and those who are oppressed. A broad application of this principle would indicate there are certain positions of responsibility where the wise person would refrain completely from intoxicants, so they remain ready and capable, at all times, as far as it is in their control.

It should be noted, perhaps emphasized, that the prohibition comes with an alternative: “Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” This filling of the Spirit, leading to the experience of rejoicing and thankful hearts (Ephesians 5:19-20), as well as the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, and so on (Galatians 5:22-23) is at least a viable, and is suggested to be a satisfying, alternative to intoxicants.

4) Freedom in Christ, Galatians 5:13.

Paul makes the strongest case for our freedom in Christ in the book of Galatians, and the meaning of that freedom becomes evident in Galatians 3:1-5. It is freedom from trying to obtain justification (righteousness that would make us acceptable to God) by keeping the Old Testament law through human effort. Rather, righteousness is credited through faith (Galatians 3:6-9). As a result of this freedom, followers of Jesus may develop various practices with regard to matters of the law, and are to accept one another without judgment when they differ on “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1-12). And Paul is adamant that believers not establish or maintain laws that are presented as requirements for justification, which amounts to a perversion of the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

In the similar context of Romans 14 the matter of placing a “stumbling block” comes up again and he declares that while we should not pass judgment, we should practice deference to our fellow believer and be purposeful about not putting “any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (Romans 14:13). This is because we determine to “serve one another in love” with our freedom in Christ, rather than indulging the sinful nature (Galatians 5:13). It is in a similar passage Paul urges: “*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine...*” (Ephesians 5:15-18).

Our freedom in Christ means neither our acceptance with God, nor our justification, is dependent on legal or behavioral standards. It is telling, however, that in the contexts where this freedom is recognized, other principles related to choices are emphasized—love, wisdom, and walking in step with the Spirit. In Romans 6:1-4 Paul notes with intensity that grace leads us to a higher standard because we have a new life to live in Christ. Rather than license to sin or indulge the flesh, freedom is coupled with the responsibility and desire to live for Christ and glorify God in all things.

5) Cultural context, Galatians 5:1-4; Acts 16:1-5.

The nature of use or abuse of an intoxicant in a given culture, or the perspective of that culture on such use, should be a factor in determining whether use would, by example, be a “stumbling block” to others. It also will probably impact our ability to have a positive testimony as a follower of Jesus by bringing glory to him. The actual nature (for instance, alcohol content) of available intoxicants also varies in different settings. Therefore, sensitivity to cultural differences, both actual and in perception, is required by the believer’s call to love others and conscientiously live for Christ.

The reasoning, therefore, that the use of intoxicants in one culture (e.g. the culture of Israel in Jesus’ day) is an endorsement for their use in another is simplistic and uncertain. The implications of all the various factors that establish the meaning and significance of intoxicant use in any culture must be thoughtfully and prayerfully considered by the serious disciple of Jesus in making a personal decision about use.

While a direct application related to the use of intoxicants is not clear in Scripture, Acts 16:1-5 affirms this in principle. Paul, as noted above, makes a strong case that keeping of the Old Testament law is not necessary for justification, which is by faith. One of the specific issues he must address was the requirement of circumcision, and in no uncertain terms he states (in more than one place) that keeping the rite does not matter in relationship to salvation (Romans 2:25-29; 1 Corinthians 7:17-20; etc.). Nevertheless, when he takes Timothy with him to serve in a Jewish cultural context, he has him circumcised—not for the sake of justification/salvation, but to avoid having his uncircumcision be a stumbling block to the Jews. It is the implications of the action in the cultural context that lead Paul and Timothy to make this decision or choice. In a similar way, the implications of using intoxicants in a given culture need to be a factor in the decision or choice to partake or abstain.

6) Care of the body, 2 Corinthians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23.

Our physical bodies are one of the resources God has given us to steward. In fact, we have no other “house” to occupy as we serve Jesus—it is the “earthly tent” we live in (2 Corinthians 5:1). It will be replaced by “an eternal house” in heaven, but for now it is only reasonable that we concern ourselves with the care and maintenance of this dwelling. With the advance of science there is both more information and more misinformation published regarding the impact of substances on our physical and mental functioning.

The reality of our situation, and the desire we have to steward the body well in the service of Jesus, should lead the serious disciple to carefully evaluate information available documenting the impacts of various drugs (including alcohol) on the body and mind. Again, though we have freedom and these choices may not have eternal significance, Jesus articulated the “master’s happiness” at the faithful steward who managed well what had been entrusted to him (Matthew 25:14-30). Desiring to please the Lord will certainly lead the disciple to give due consideration to the potential negative or positive impact of various substances on the body, including intoxicants.

In thinking about the principle of stewarding the body well, the risks inherent in the use of any intoxicating substances must be weighed. This will include but go

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beyond the direct impact of the drug on the body. The potential “side effects” that may be harmful are published on legal medications and drugs, and all drugs carry such known and other unknown risks. As an example of risks beyond side effects, alcohol use is a factor in the majority of serious automobile accidents, leading to injury and death. When promoting the possible benefits or validity of intoxicant use, all such risks need to be given due consideration.

7) Recommended use, Proverbs 31:6-7; 1 Timothy 5:23.

Perhaps in keeping with the idea that God has created intoxicants and is purposeful in creation, the Scripture affirms two potentially beneficial uses.

The first is found in the Proverbs, 31:6-7, the alleviation of suffering. “Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.” In other words, there are situations where it is reasonable to utilize intoxicants for the relief of suffering. In the modern world this is often applied when, through medical professionals, substances are utilized in a controlled and monitored way to alleviate pain and suffering by those experiencing the debilitation of disease or suffering associated with old age. Such is considered both acceptable and we would even say humane. The application would be that it is a biblically endorsed practice to give the suffering and dying something to comfort them in their distress.

The second is medicinal use. 1 Timothy 5:23, often quoted by those who want to endorse the use of alcohol, has a specific reference to the medicinal benefit of wine for whatever it was Timothy was physically struggling with. As a contemporary example, there are studies that indicate some such benefit for wine (an intoxicant), and the chemicals in pot have been asserted to help alleviate epileptic seizures. In fact, other health benefits for either may be found, which means it may be appropriate and recommended that they be used like other drugs for their positive benefit to the ailing body. Like any drug created by God, uses may yet be discovered that lead to recommended use for specific purposes, while not necessarily providing endorsement for general or “recreational” use.

8) Glorify God in all things, 1 Corinthians 10:31.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Scripture is specific here about the very mundane matters of our life—eating and drinking—that even in these we should seek to glorify God. This follows a section in which our freedom is again emphasized, but noting that what we freely participate in should be thoughtfully constrained by asking questions about the wisdom of such participation. Is it beneficial? Is it constructive? Is it good for others? (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). The implication is that if the answer is “no” to any of these, one should refrain from whatever it is that was under consideration.

All of this is again tied to our love for God and love for others. We want to glorify God because we love him, and think sensitively about others and how our actions

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impact them because we love them for Jesus' sake. The end in view is salvation for many (1 Corinthians 10:32-33), which may be enabled or possibly hindered by some activity or action of mine. So, even if I am free, and even if whatever thing might in some way be "good" for me, there are times I will voluntarily limit the use of my freedom because "I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:33).

God lays upon every disciple the responsibility for his or her actions, made in full consideration of these many principles (and the "whole counsel of God") and their various implications. We as believers will stand before God, who will hold us accountable for our actions (1 Corinthians 3:10-17; 4:3-5). In that, the emphasis seems to be primarily on how our lives impact others, not how a particular matter affects us personally. We truly are free **from** law as a means to justification, a means to be considered righteous before God. But we are free and called **to** love God and others, with the motive of glorifying God and loving others to the extent that, hopefully, they will come to faith.

Why we choose what we choose (the motives of our heart) will be exposed (1 Corinthians 4:5) because that is what has guided our decisions, and that is what matters to God. Why do we insist on using our right to partake? Why do we choose to refrain? One may be exhibiting the reality of selfish or impure motives with either decision, and so be in the wrong—as God would know and, hopefully, the disciple himself would come to know.

*My son, pay attention to what I say;
Listen closely to my words.
Do not let them out of your sight,
Keep them within your heart;
For they are life to those who find them
And health to a man's whole body.
Above all else, guard your heart,
For it is the wellspring of life.*

--Proverbs 4:20-23

Summary points

1. The disciple of Jesus is under biblical command to obey those who are in authority over them. When any legitimate authority in the believer's life has established rules or regulations regarding the use of intoxicants, the disciple is obligated to follow them.
2. Our lives influence others by example and by instruction. Leading others astray is such a serious offence the disciple must consider whether any practice, including the decision to use intoxicants, might become a "stumbling block" to a fellow believer. Any such practice is to be avoided out of love and concern for others.

3. While intoxicants are not prohibited in Scripture, drunkenness is. “Drunk” is a relative term describing a condition of impaired judgment and self-control. Moderate use of intoxicants may not result in what some would describe as “drunk”, but it is recognized that any use involves some impairment. In certain positions where judgment is essential and impacts the lives of others, servants of the Lord (and often individuals performing certain job functions) are called to refrain entirely.

4. Freedom in Christ means we are not under obligation to satisfy the justice of God through the practice of the Old Testament law. Instead, we are to use our freedom to serve one another in love, not to indulge the flesh. This will again include the concern that we not influence others in a spiritually hurtful way by our practice of freedom.

5. The nature of available intoxicants, and both the practice and perception of use, varies from culture to culture. Any use of intoxicants needs to be considered in the context of the surrounding culture, again especially as it relates to our priority concern of representing Christ well and reaching others with the gospel.

6. Our physical bodies are a gift from God, our only habitation in this life, and should be cared for so we are able to serve Christ well. The serious disciple should study available information about the negative effects and risks of any intoxicant before use, and make decisions representing good stewardship of their body.

7. Two uses for alcohol as an intoxicant (and by extension this might be applied to other intoxicants) are noted in Scripture. First is the relief of suffering, the second is medicinal. Like any drug created by God, uses may yet be discovered that lead to recommended use for specific purposes, while not necessarily providing endorsement for general or “recreational” use.

8. Disciples are to glorify God in all things, including whatever we might eat or drink. Any consideration of intoxicant use must include this high calling. The believer remains responsible to God for their actions, and our motives in choosing to partake or abstain from use of intoxicants will one day be exposed. Accountability for our decisions and the motives that drive them is to God.