

I have noticed that Methodists often appear to be more negative about alcohol than most other denominations. Is this true and if so why?

First of all thanks for the question. You are not the only one to have written in on this issue. Many Christians of other denominations, including many evangelicals, view opposition to alcohol as a distinctly Methodist trait. It is certainly true that in the past Methodist ministers have had to give an undertaking that they did not use alcohol and this prohibition still extends to ministers before they are ordained. It is also a rule that no alcoholic drinks should be served on Methodist premises. In the present day and age all this probably sounds narrow and legalistic but that would be to misunderstand where Methodists are coming from and what lies behind such thinking.

When we go to the Bible we see statements referring to wine which “makes glad the heart of man” (Psalm 104:15) and which Paul recommends in small quantities to Timothy “for your stomach’s sake and your frequent ailments” (1 Timothy 5:23). We read of how Jesus’ first miracle was to turn hundreds of litres of water into wine at a wedding feast. Alongside this we learn that “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1). In the books of Timothy and Titus we read that church leaders should not be “given to drunkenness”. Instead of being filled with wine “which leads to debauchery” Paul tells the Ephesians to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

No prizes then for seeing that the Bible does not present us with any hard and fast view on alcohol. It certainly does not provide a clear case for teetotalism. What is absolutely clear however is that the misuse of alcohol is wrong and drunkenness is strongly condemned. When someone is under the influence they have lost control of their thinking, their judgment and even their body. This is incompatible with a life surrendered to the lordship and control of Jesus Christ.

Methodism has always had a strong social conscience. It began in the eighteenth century against a backdrop of deprivation and crippling poverty. In “Gin Lane” a very famous contemporary painting by William Hogarth depicting the misery caused by alcohol the sign reads “*Drunk for Penny, Dead Drunk for Twopence, Clean Straw for Nothing*”. Drink was the curse of the poor. They drank to escape their misery and the more they drank the more they became addicted and the more miserable their condition became. To proclaim the Gospel to such people was to show them that God could lift them out of that sort of bondage and give them something much higher and better for which to live. For many, turning to Christ meant forever turning away from drink. It is worth knowing that William Booth who founded the Salvation Army in the east end of London. was originally a Methodist minister.

Hopefully this helps you understand why Methodists traditionally have been very wary in their approach to the consumption of alcohol. They do not set out to be negative and judgemental but they have always been involved in caring for the casualties of the trade. If you talk to any of our city missions today you will get plenty of evidence that alcohol still does blight the lives of many in terms of sickness, addiction, domestic violence, poverty and crime. It is surely a valid argument for a Christian to say that they would prefer to avoid something that has so many harmful effects on individuals and on society

In choosing not to drink at all many Methodists are trying to make a positive statement. They want to show that a full and happy life can be lived without the social lubricant of alcohol. In a society where the pressure to drink is everywhere they want to be in solidarity with those who struggle with addiction and for whom even a single drink is one too many. Viewed in this way abstinence is a positive lifestyle choice which implies no criticism of others.

Of course it can be argued that most Methodists are no longer living in places where they are daily encountering the harmful effects of alcohol. As they have become more affluent many have changed their stance on what may be termed social drinking. For many people a glass of wine with a meal or the occasional beer has become part of life. They drink in strict moderation and see no biblical reason why they should not do so.

John Wesley (who, incidentally, opposed spirits but not wine or ale) always distinguished between doctrine and opinion – between things that really counted and things that were of secondary importance. This issue falls squarely in the second category. It must never divide us. Those who drink in moderation must do so with an eye to how their actions and witness are regarded by others, both Christians and unbelievers. Those who abstain must continue to examine their hearts for any tendency to legalism or judgement on others.

So, are Methodists negative about alcohol? The answer is some are and some aren't! Some exercise the freedom to be counter cultural and live without it and some feel free to use it responsibly without causing harm or offence to others. It's a bit like when St Paul was dealing with what he considered to be secondary issues in Romans ch 14. He wrote "*Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.*" Surely we all need to bear this in mind and give each other room. We have a gospel message to proclaim that the world needs now more than ever. We must learn to spend our energies on that which really matters.

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