My Beers and My Bro's

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I remember not so long ago how drinking beer was for men with big bellies watching rugby, and wine was for the la-dee-da folks up town. Now we have artsy men with tight jeans and twirly moustaches sipping craft beers at trendy joints popping up everywhere! With an ever-changing drinking culture all around us, maybe it's time to take a fresh look at how kingdom culture should look as well. What does the Bible have to say about drinking? Scripture seems more often to speak about how much we drink rather than whether we can or should drink alcohol as Christians (Proverbs 23:20, 1 Timothy 3:8, Ephesians 5:18). In the early church, we find that alcohol was quite regularly taken by Christians without too much noise made about it. In fact, we are even told that 'The Son of Man came eating and drinking' (Mathew 11:19) If Jesus drank, then I think we can safely say that it is ok for us to do so as well, but are there times when it is not OK for a Christian to drink?

When is Drinking Not Ok for a Christian?

Unfortunately this is the question that many Christians neglect. Having settled in their minds that their drinking is not a sin, many Christians neglect to think about how their drinking may affect others! Paul speaks quite a bit in different contexts about how to make use of our freedoms as believers in a way that is also loving toward others.

Causing Others to Sin

One example of this was in Corinth. The contention was that some of the meat in Corinth was offered to idols in their pagan worship, and afterwards sold on the meat market, so some Christians did not feel the liberty in the Spirit to eat any meat sold at the market. Others, like Paul, felt that it was fine to eat meat, unless it was made obvious that a particular portion of meat had been offered to idols. How does this relate to our topic? Well, some Christian's believe that, although the Scriptures allow for believers to drink alcohol, they do not personally feel free to do so. This could be because they strongly associate drinking with their life before Christ, when they did many things of which they are now ashamed. Even as a Christian, they may still feel the pull of alcohol, and so they would rather steer well clear of the temptation by not drinking at all. For them it is a matter of conscience. So how did Paul resolve the situation where some Christians felt that eating meat would be sinful and others did not? Well, Paul says, 'Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak… Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.' (1 Corinthians 8:8-9, 12-13) His point is that, if by doing something which he feels "free" to do causes his brother with a "weaker" conscience to join him in doing, then he (Paul) has actually sinned against Christ. To apply this attitude to our topic, if I drink alcohol and it causes my "weaker" brother to join me in drinking, then I have actually sinned against Christ! Which is why Paul says in Romans, 'It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.' (Romans 14:21)

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A Blameless Life

There is something else in Scripture which we need to consider as well. When we are sharing the gospel with others we should 'do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.' (1 Peter 3:15,16) Part of our witness to unbelievers is the evidence that we give of a transformed life. This is our life-witness. To live 'above reproach' means to live in such a way that slanderous accusations don't stick, because they are completely baseless. Regarding drinking, it may be that you drink very moderately, but in certain contexts, you may make yourself vulnerable to the accusation that you are a careless drinker and so you can tarnish your witness of Christ. Maybe an example is best to illustrate this. When I finished my last year of school, all the students arranged to meet at Blue Peter to celebrate. Most of the students were drinking quite heavily, because it was a celebration and they wanted to feel festive. I only had a light beer, but nevertheless, we were all laughing and joking and, later in the afternoon, one of the

students saw how cheerful I was, saw the beer on the table in front of me and said, 'You look like you've had a couple?' I'm pretty sure many other people would have assumed the same about me, and my heart just sank! In their minds, many had probably framed me as a "party-animal" and I could no longer be a confident witness of Christ. We've already learned from Paul that it is not hypocritical to surrender certain "freedoms" that we have in Christ out of concern for others. In fact, that is what true love often looks like! We may feel righteous before God because we drink in moderation, but if unbelievers (who are not counting your drinks) think of you as someone who is just as lost in sin as they are, then your witness about a Saviour who transforms lives will be wasted on them.

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Merrymaker

For some people, a party is not a party without alcohol – it is their merrymaker. We are told not to be drunk on wine but rather to be filled with the Holy Spirit, who is the genuine joy-bringer. If unbelievers come to our parties and see us drinking alcohol, I would forgive them for assuming that we are drinking for the same reason that they do! I was once at a birthday party where only a small contingent of unbelieving friends was drinking. Towards the end of the evening they were drunk, but we, the non-drinking Christians, were having way more fun and laughter. What a powerful demonstration of the Spirit's life! Living as sons of light is so much more than keeping all the rules so that one day I can go to heaven. It's about loving others the way that Jesus does. In the life of a healthy Christian, alcohol can be enjoyed as one of God's many blessings. In the hands of a person who does not have the life of the Holy Spirit, alcohol can be a destructive force – breaking marriages, separating families, eroding moral judgment that leads to debauched living. It's a very weak substitute in a life devoid of meaning that reinforces harmful cycles of denial. It's easy to forget that alcoholic drinks are far more than just another flavoured drink. This does not mean that drinking alcohol is necessarily an unloving thing to do, but it should help to guide our decisions about where and when we do it. So the next time you're about to post a pic on Facebook of you and your bro's knocking back a few cold ones, take time to consider whether it's a loving thing to do.