

Is There A Biblical Case For Abstinence?



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Foreword

This paper presents a biblical case for Hope for Addiction UK's promotion of total abstinence among recovering addicts. We believe that abstinence offers a wise, loving, clear and positively godly response to past dependency, while also offering valuable help to unbelievers who may also see the wisdom of scriptural guidance.

The paper primarily addresses substance addiction but acknowledges that many of the principles discussed apply to other addictive behaviours (though the application of abstinence may require some further nuance in those cases). We should further note that this paper does not delve into the complex issue of medication, which may be required in some cases for individuals under the guidance of a medical practitioner.

Hope for Addiction UK's approach is to support individuals on a case-by-case basis, helping them understand how abstinence applies to their situation, and advising that any cessation of prescribed medication should be done under careful medical supervision. This approach also extends to those who may require alcohol detox, given the risks associated with abruptly stopping drinking.

This paper distinguishes substance addiction from periodic misuse of alcohol or drugs that lack the features of dependency and as such, is not addressing those who, though misusing substances from time to time, have shown a clear capacity to stop using drink or drugs. Hope for Addiction UK recognises that addiction, properly defined, involves an inability to control substance use, often leading to physical and psychological dependency. Therefore, we advocate total abstinence as the simplest and safest way to extricate oneself from such an entrenched and destructive lifestyle. ^[1] We believe that the Word of God provides the wisdom, strength and motivation to achieve this.

Introduction

It is abundantly clear from Scripture that citizens should comply with the laws of the land and honour their government (Rom 13:1-7). As a result, it should go without saying that no Christian should be using, let alone be dependent upon, illegal drugs. Alcohol is another matter, as it is a legal drug readily available over the counter.

The Bible presents alcohol with a degree of ambivalence, speaking of it as a gift from God (Deut 14:26) yet also decrying its dangers (Prov 23:20, Eph 5:18). Notwithstanding this, nowhere in the Bible is there a direct command for an addict (or anyone else for that matter) to remain abstinent from all substances. Due to the absence of such a cast iron Bible verse, it is unsurprising that some church leaders can feel cautious about promoting abstinence to Christians in recovery. The understandable fear is that this may go beyond the bounds of Scripture, and lead to a legalistic approach which imposes man-made rules on someone else's conscience.

This outlook is one we sympathise with, and yet our conviction remains that addicts are best served by a policy of total abstinence. We believe it offers the wisest route to resisting temptation, a way to express love to those devastated by past actions, and that it can be a positive and powerful expression of the fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life (Eph 5:18, Gal 5:22-23).

We Believe that Abstinence is the Wisest Way to Live

First of all, not everything in the Christian life is a straightforward matter of obedience or disobedience. In both Testaments, wisdom is a significant category (Prov 1:7, Mat 7:21). This wisdom sometimes equates with morality itself (Ecc 7:17, Eph 5:15-16), but in other cases it is clearly sub-moral and involves us discerning the most sensible path under the fear of the Lord (Prov 13:10, Col 4:5-6, Phil 1:10). Wayne Grudem defines this aspect of wisdom as *"choosing the best goals and the best means to achieve those goals."*

In light of this, when it comes to a recovering addict, the optimal question is *not* "does the Bible permit substance use"? The better question is "what is the wisest way for a recovering addict to pursue life in all its fullness?" (John 10:10) In our view, the compelling answer is abstinence.

Think of a pastoral situation where a man has committed adultery and has caused devastation in his marriage because of his choices. What would be the wisest pastoral conversation to have with him? Would it be best to discuss "what kind of relationship he can have with the women he has erred with"? or would the far better discussion be, "how can he stay well clear of adultery"?

The answer seems self-evident. Now, while it could be observed that there is a distinction between adultery, and moderate drinking, we believe that the logic of this example should be applied

to those who have devastated their lives with substances. [2]

To be unclear on such wisdom, will arguably make an already difficult struggle *more difficult* for the addict. It is already difficult to choose the path that leads to life, not death. Wisdom and folly both vie for the addict's attention. An obsession with substances often drowns out the voice of wisdom, which results in taking unnecessary risks ("this time it will be different") or deceived thinking ("it was never that bad in the first place"). This is part of the bewildering nature of sin (Heb 3:13). We should not add to that possible self-deception, by suggesting that an addict can *wisely* pursue recovery while still imbibing substances.

One final point to be made about wisdom is that not choosing the discerning path, even if not a sin in the first instance, can *subsequently lead* to sin itself (Ps 1:1-3). This brings us on to our next argument for abstinence.

We Believe that Abstinence Best Enables the Pursuit of Righteousness

Second, while abstinence does not equal righteousness, living without wisdom will often lead us into sin. A matter of wisdom can quickly *become* a matter of righteousness, in this case when a casual approach to substances results in sinful relapse into addiction. When we consider Biblical teaching, we can see a close connection (and parallel) between sin and addiction.

Sin and addiction have an idolatrous core. At its core, addiction has the nature of sinful idolatry. Given that the addict

relies upon a substance, the addict depends upon a created gift rather than the Creator for their 'salvation'. This idol promises blessing but quickly becomes a burden, weighing heavily on the back of the one who worships it (Isa 46:1). For those who once worshipped at the altar of substances, these 'gods' have clearly failed to deliver on their promises!

Sin and addiction have an enslaving effect. From the very beginning, God warned Cain bluntly: "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Gen 4:7). Cain failed to heed that warning, leading to the tragic murder of Abel. Could there be a starker reminder of the consequences of unmastered sin? In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul builds on this, depicting sin as almost having 'a life of its own.' Sin seizes every opportunity to produce a defiant response to God's laws (Rom 7:8). Even when we know better, sin tempts us to go against our better judgements (Rom 7:19-23). Anyone who has struggled with addiction has discovered it to be this sort of slave master. An addiction must be overthrown and mastered; it is not something to be trifled with.

Sin and addiction have a killing effect and must be dealt with ruthlessly. The Apostle James warns believers to not be "dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." This will in turn lead to sin, which down the line will lead to "death" (Jam 1:14-15). Because of the seriousness of this, the Christian's goal should not be to 'manage' sin, but to 'flee' (1 Cor 10:14; 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22) and to put sin to death completely (Col 3:5-6; Romans 8:13). This is quite in

line with Jesus who called upon disciples to “gouge out” and “cut off” whatever causes them to sin (Mat 5:29-30). To quote John Owen, our approach is to: “be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”

Abstinence may not be required by some Christians to live righteous lives, but for recovering addicts, it is the safest, wisest and most ruthless way to deal with an idolatrous heart in an area that has enslaved them. When an addict has struggled with sinful habits for a long period of time, these habits will be difficult to kill. A more focussed and ruthless effort is therefore required.

Yet we must add that this putting sin to death, and running from it, is also accompanied by something positive. A *“heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake and walk in obedience to Christ”* (Wayne Grudem) is always the goal at Hope for Addiction UK. It is *obedience*, not abstinence, that is the goal for the believer. Repentance involves replacing the old life with a new and better life in Christ, replacing drunkenness with the filling of the Spirit, exchanging an out-of-control life for self-control. A lifestyle of repentance is marked by putting off old ways and putting on new ones (Eph 4:22), pursuing righteousness, faith, love, and peace. True heart change for the addict isn’t about managing the issue but about bearing the fruit of the Spirit in their life. This is the testimony of some who, in their case could theoretically use substances safely, but no longer want to. Their choice of a substance-free life becomes one of the most fruitful displays of God’s work in their lives. As Thomas

Chalmers put it, they have experienced “the expulsive power of a new affection”.

We Believe that Abstinence is the Most Loving Way to Live

Third, after years, perhaps decades under the control of substances, the addict has caused harm not only to themselves but also to others. Abstinence becomes a clear expression of our commitment to love the Lord with all we have and to *love our neighbours* as ourselves. Jesus’ two greatest commandments shift the focus away from us to others, compelling us to live in a way that prioritises their well-being. Where life was once consumed by the selfish pursuit of substances, now addicts embrace repentance and a renewed commitment to love those around them (especially those they have harmed).

Even if an addict could control their alcohol intake, wouldn’t the taste be tainted by the memory of the havoc it once wreaked on others’ lives? Could the enjoyment of a single glass be worth the anxiety it may cause, as others fear a return to old patterns? Scripture is compelling in its guidance on how we should consider others and the impact our choices have on them. The Bible focuses less on our rights and more on what is beneficial to others—on what loving and serving others looks like. The Bible encourages those who are ‘strong’ to be considerate of those who are ‘weak.’ So, even if you feel confident that your faith allows you to drink without consequence, consider those who have been affected by your substance abuse in the past, or fellow addicts who struggle to stay sober, or even wider society in

general. What may be permissible for you may not be beneficial for others, as “no one should seek their good, but the good of others” (1 Cor 10:24). Paul’s point is that it should not require a command to abstain, because the law of love makes it obvious.

Paul further in Galatians 5:13 instructs the Christian to use their newfound freedom to serve one another for, ‘you, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.’ The call to go above and beyond by remaining abstinent may seem excessive in its approach, but it evidences to others that desire to “make amends” and demonstrates a life that is now markedly different, as it puts others’ concerns first.

We Believe that Abstinence is the Most Realistic Way to Live

Finally, an ongoing debate within Christian circles is to *what extent has the future kingdom of God broken into the present?* To put it another way, with respect to addiction, how much change should we see on this side of heaven? Can a believer expect very little change, or should they expect their struggle to be vanquished forever?

When it comes to a matter like addiction, there are obviously two extremes. With an *under-realised eschatology*, the danger is that we will expect too little of the power of the Spirit to change the physiology, psychology and constitution of a converted sinner – imagining that dramatic change isn’t possible. For some, the evidence of the Holy Spirit working

is an embracing of abstinence, while for others, it provides necessary protection against the weakness of the flesh.

The opposite danger, of course, is having an *over-realised* mindset. Here there is far too naïve a view of the ongoing weakness and frailty of the believer, who possesses the Spirit, but also battles the remaining ‘flesh.’ Our perspective at Hope for Addiction UK is that those who dismiss the importance of abstinence in cases of dependency are in danger of an over-realised theology, that will ultimately lead many people into relapse and harm. As 1 Corinthians 10:12 warns, “if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”

John Owen once again offers a grounded and circumspect perspective on this very point. He writes, “a proneness to some sins may doubtless lie in the natural temper and disposition of men.” Each of us has a unique temperament and inclinations that makes certain sins harder to resist. However, by realistically acknowledging these tendencies, we can address our weaknesses with greater effort and discipline. As we live in the tension of the ‘now, and not yet,’ it is crucial to remember that, while we are ‘in Christ,’ we must still ‘strike a blow’ to the flesh and make it our slave (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Conclusion

Therefore, for the above reasons, we advocate that total abstinence is the best way for a recovering addict to pursue life. Since this is a matter of wisdom, we would ask the question - why would anyone want to carry an idol in their back

pocket for a “rainy day”? Although some may manage moderate drinking, the real question is whether the risk and effort are worth it. Instead of asking, “How much can I drink without disobeying God’s commandment not to get drunk?” the better question is, “what must I do in order to fulfil my obedience to Christ?”

We further believe that ignoring the obvious wisdom of abstinence will lead many addicts to transgress God’s righteous commands. This in turn will be an expression of self-love, rather than love for one’s neighbour. We conclude that for an addict whose life has been marked by chaos and destruction, abstaining from all substances is the wisest, safest, and most loving path to embracing a fuller and better life in Christ. Sobriety itself does not equate to salvation, but it may display ‘the things that accompany salvation.’

End Notes

¹ The question may arise whether this approach should be applied when alcohol is not the primary drug of dependency. Research indicates an increased risk associated with drinking alcohol while in recovery from illicit drug use, with studies showing that “drinking alcohol is associated with greater use of the primary drug and a higher likelihood of relapse into the primary drug use disorder.” While we acknowledge that there are exceptions to this general rule, they are rare. Therefore, we consider alcohol a mind-altering drug like any other, and for the addict, consuming it should be treated as a calculated risk. (Recovery Research Institute, Boston, MA 02114).

² Interestingly, *Alcoholic’s Anonymous* also take a similar approach of common grace wisdom. In their book *Living Sober* they state: “If we do not take the first drink, we never get drunk. Therefore, instead of planning never to get drunk, or trying to limit the number of drinks or the amount of alcohol, we have learned to concentrate on avoiding only one drink: the first one.”

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