

“Batter Up”
2 Peter 1:19-21
09.26.21

I. Introduction

One of my seminary professors has become somewhat famous in the world of biblical studies for one of the stories he tells from his early days as a pastor. He writes:

I had a phone call over twenty years ago from a parishioner from one of my four N.C. Methodist Churches in the middle of the state. He wanted to know if it was o.k. to breed dogs, 'cause his fellow carpenter had told him that it said somewhere in the KJV that God's people shouldn't do that. I told him I would look up all the references to dog in the Bible and get to the bottom of this. There was nothing of any relevance in the NT, but then I came across this peculiar translation of an OT verse—"Thou shalt not breed with the dogs." I called my church member up and told him, "I've got good news and bad news for you." He asked for the good news first. I said, "Well you can breed as many of those furry four-footed creatures as you like, nothing in the Bible against it." He then asked what the bad news was. "Well," I said, "there is this verse that calls foreign women 'dogs' and warns the Israelites not to breed with them." There was a pregnant silence on the other end of the line, and finally Mr. Smith said, "Well, I am feeling much relieved, my wife Betty Sue is just from down the road in Chatham county!"

One of my professor's famous lines was, "A text without a context becomes a pretext to say whatever you want it to say." In other words, when you take a verse out of context, you can use it to make any claim you want if you try hard enough. Unfortunately, some Christians do this often to support ideas such as: women should not cut their hair or wear make-up; or certain musical instruments should not be played in worship; or we should not baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but only in the name of Jesus.

While we might think of these as "secondary issues," there are more pressing issues that impact some of us directly. Like, what does the Bible say about divorce and remarriage? Or what does the Bible say about mental illness? What does the Bible say about sexual orientation? And perhaps most importantly, how is it that Christians can use the same book and reach such different conclusions on the same subject?

Interestingly, some Christians claim that they do not "interpret the Bible." Instead, they simply "read it" because "it is clear," and it "speaks for itself." However, regardless of whether we realize it or not, we interpret Scripture every time we read it. The question is whether it is a good interpretation or a poor interpretation.

II. Digging Deeper

It is a little difficult to deny that interpretation is a part of the process when Scripture explicitly talks about it. In 2 Timothy, Paul encourages his young protégé, saying, **“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth”** (2Ti 2:15 NASB). The verb that is translated here as “accurately handling” is used elsewhere to describe someone who cuts through rough stone with skill and precision. In other words, Paul indicates that studying Scripture is difficult work that requires intentional effort and growth on our part.

Similarly, in our Scripture lesson today, Peter warns the earliest Christians not to interpret Scripture in isolation. In other words, Holy Scripture is a communal text that is meant to be read and studied together and if my personal interpretation is considerably different than the rest of the community, then I probably need to revisit the subject.

We do best when we approach Scripture with a greater awareness of our biases and assumptions, as well as when we work with a tried-and-true method for studying the Bible. As United Methodists, we inherit our method of interpretation from John Wesley, the father of Methodism.

Within the last century, scholars have studied the writings of John Wesley and developed a fancy term that they call the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” In essence, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral simply captures the idea that John Wesley intentionally read Scripture through the lens of tradition, reason, and experience.

My favorite analogy of how the Wesleyan Quadrilateral works is a baseball diamond. You have home plate, first, second, and third bases. In this analogy, home plate represents Scripture. It is where we begin, and it is also where we want to end. But before we can return home, we must pass through tradition, reason, and experience.

Another popular analogy is a three-legged milk stool. Scripture is the seat and tradition, reason, and experience are like the three legs. Sometimes these analogies tempt us to ask, “which is more important?” But when we do that we miss the point. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are not in competition with one another. They work together. They stand or fall together.

Today I would like to do a test run to illustrate how the Wesleyan Quadrilateral can help us understand and apply Scripture today. I know that I am addressing a diverse group of people who will have a wide range of opinions on this subject, but I don’t think it is too controversial. I want to explore the following question, “What does the Bible say about the consumption of alcohol?”

A. Scripture

If we turn to the Bible, we can find both positive and negative images of alcohol. In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul tells Timothy, **“No longer drink water *exclusively*, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments”** (1Ti 5:23 NASB).

We also remember that at the wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine. Those who hold a view of complete abstinence have argued that when the Bible talks about wine it is talking about a much more diluted form or something closer to grape juice, but there is no grounding for such a conclusion. In fact, the point of Jesus’ first miracle is that he was able to turn water into a fermented substance instantly—something that usually required a process.

There are also some passages that speak about alcohol negatively. Proverbs 20:1 says, **“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise”** (Pro 20:1 NRSV). In Ephesians Paul says, **“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit...”** (Eph 5:18 NRSV).

When we survey the entire Bible, there are passages that indicate that drinking hard liquor is a bad idea, and that drunkenness is sinful and will likely lead us into making other poor choices; but there are no passages that forbid drinking in moderation. Still, for many Christians, consuming alcohol is sometimes considered a taboo activity. Since the Bible does not give us definitive answers on this subject, how can tradition, reason, and experience help illuminate our understanding and the choices we make.

B. Tradition

Tradition is when we look at the last 2,000 years and consider different precedents set by the historic Church. What did the church say about a particular subject in the second, fourth, and ninth centuries?

When we look at the issue of temperance, it actually began with human sexuality. For centuries, the Church was uncomfortable with human sexuality in general. Some leaders even questioned whether it was right or wrong for husbands and wives to enjoy sex.

However, the conversation about temperance shifted to alcohol around the seventeenth century, for very good reasons. Alcoholism had become an epidemic in the western world. In England, members of the Parliament would show up for legislative sessions completely intoxicated. And alcoholism was not just a problem for adults; young children were getting hooked on the substance at an early age.

We know this problem existed during the life and ministry of John Wesley. There are legends that sometimes when he went to minister at the mines he would have to fight before he could preach.

In North America alcoholism became a real problem for Native Americans. Due to the various crises they faced, and the losses they experienced, they used alcohol as a way self-medicate. Therefore, a temperance movement began in America to eradicate the problem. Up to this point in church history, alcohol consumption did not seem to be a hot button issue in Christianity and there is plenty of evidence that Christians used alcohol in responsible ways.

C. Reason

Tradition is first base and now we make our way to second base, which is reason. Reason is simply the gift of logic and the ability to use critical thinking.

Some medical studies indicate that drinking alcohol has some health benefits. For instance, a glass of wine a day can help lower cholesterol and is good for your heart.

On the other hand, we know that there are also health risks when it comes to drinking alcohol. It kills your brain cells, and if drinking becomes an unhealthy habit it can do damage to our organs.

There is also scientific evidence that alcoholism can be a hereditary trait. If you have someone in your family line who struggled with alcohol, it is wise to abstain from it completely.

Reason also helps us determine whether we are developing a dependency issue. When folks come to me because they think they might have a problem, I always ask, "Could you stop today if you wanted to?" If they say, "No," I suggest getting professional help.

D. Experience

Experience is also a collective component. Some of us grew up in teetotaler environments, while others may have grown up in homes where alcohol was abused. We need to listen to one another and be sensitive to each other's experiences. We will only grow if we are willing to learn from others.

E. Scripture (Again)

Finally, we round third and return home to Scripture. Once again, there are no passages that explicitly forbid drinking in moderation, but there are some passages that speak about Christian liberty.

In his letters to the Romans and Corinthians,¹ Paul addresses a group of Christians that have lived their entire lives in a pagan culture. Until their conversion to the Christian faith, they likely went to pagan temples where they offered a piece of meat as a sacrifice to a particular deity. Then, they would take what was left of their sacrifice back to their home and eat it for dinner.

According to Paul, there were some Christians who were conflicted by this practice. Their friend or relative might bring a piece of meat home that they had offered to a pagan deity and serve it as a meal. Should they eat it or not? Would they be indirectly practicing idolatry? Paul says that if it causes someone to stumble in their faith, they should abstain.

On the other hand, the same scenario might not phase a more mature Christian. In their mind, the pagan deity isn't even real—they can rationalize that it ultimately doesn't matter, and they can eat the meat with a clean conscience. However, Paul goes on to say that Christians who feel the liberty to eat meat should be conscious of their brothers and sisters who do not. In other words, even if it does not cause them to stumble personally, their practice could still cause someone else to stumble in their faith.

This reminds me of the Welch brothers. Believe it or not, they were Methodists who wanted to provide a non-alcoholic option for communion. They did not want anyone who struggled with alcohol to forsake communion because they were afraid of lapsing into old habits. Therefore, they created Welch's Grape Juice as an alternative, and the rest is history.

Maybe you do not feel comfortable having a drink of alcohol. You probably shouldn't drink. Maybe you are comfortable drinking responsibly. In your conscience you have the freedom to do so. But perhaps there are circumstances when you shouldn't because it could cause someone else to stumble.

So, the answer to the question of whether it is okay for a Christian to consume alcohol is: yes, no, maybe sometimes, and maybe other times it is a bad idea. Scripture does not always give us black and white answers to every question. Instead, Scripture is intended to give us the wisdom and discernment to make wise choices that are compassionate and glorify God.

I would hope none of us would exercise our Christian liberty around someone who is struggling with substance abuse. I hope that none of us would drink in excess and harm our body which is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. I hope that none of us would ever have a drink and get behind a wheel. I hope that we would all be wise enough not to exercise our Christian liberty to the point that we impose our freedom upon someone who wishes to abstain.

¹ Romans chapter 14 and 1 Corinthians chapter 8.

III. Conclusion

Along with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, we rely upon the Holy Spirit as we grow and study together, discerning what God is calling us to do and not to do. Sometimes the temptation is to look for simple, easy answers, when it is really as much about the journey as it is the destination. Instead of giving us simplistic propositions to live by, Scripture helps draw us deeper into the story of God so that we might mature as disciples, and maybe we will get to the point that instead of asking if something is right or wrong, we will start asking, “Will this help me grow in my love of God and my neighbor?” and “Will this glorify God?”

In fact, as Paul summarizes his discussion of Christian liberty and the Christian conscience, he says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1Co 10:31 NRSV).

Reference Tools

Green, Joel. *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. 2011. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Johnson, L. T. *Scripture and Discernment*. 1996. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your favorite dessert? (Yes, you can only pick one. If you pick more than one it will be reported to the dessert fairy and you be penalized)
2. Can you think of a time when you changed your heart or mind about a certain matter after studying Scripture, participating in a Bible Study, or engaging in conversation with other Christians? If so, would you be willing to share your experience with the group?
3. What issue or topic would you like to study at greater length looking at it through the lens of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience? How has this week’s message impacted your understanding of Christian liberty?
4. What is your typical discernment process when it comes to making important decisions? Do you allow Scripture to inform your choices? Do you talk with other Christians and listen to their wisdom, guidance, and experience?

5. How have you grown lately in your spiritual journey?

6. How can we pray for you?