

Study 9: Alcohol in the workplace

Key idea:

Alcohol is a good gift from God, but it must not be abused. To avoid problems with alcohol, we need to think ahead, be prepared and be consistent.

1. How would you describe the drinking culture at your work? Are there office parties or work drinks? Is drinking after work a regular activity? Do any of your workmates regularly get drunk? Do you come under pressure to drink more than you want?
2. Have you ever felt pressured to drink at some event that is work related? How did you handle that?
3. What does the Bible say about alcohol? [See notes below.]
4. How realistic is it to say, 'no', to alcohol at work, or only drink in moderation? [Take care with this. Some people find it easy to say 'no' while others find it very hard. We are not meeting to judge each other, but to help each other.]
5. What tactics have you developed to avoid excessive drinking? [See notes below for suggestions.]
6. If we are called to be 'in this world, but not of it' (John 17), can we avoid all work related social events?
7. Have you had to deal with drunken work colleagues, or alcohol affected amorous attention? How should we deal with people in these situations?
8. Have you ever 'self medicated' with alcohol? Have you got over this?
9. How should we deal with drugs at work, or invitations to join in sleazy activities?
10. How can we change bad alcohol cultures at work? [Consider some of the tactics below. See the comments on common grace and workplace safety.]
11. What will help you in the future? [Think ahead, be prepared and be consistent. Seek help from God (in prayer) and from Christian friends.]

Pray for each other, and give an opportunity for general (or even specific) repentance.

End of Study

Study Notes: Some further reflections

Introduction

Alcohol and work is a big subject. It spans both the use of alcohol in work related situations and 'self-medication' with alcohol to deal with the pressures of work. The main focus of these notes will be on the former, but some things will be said on the latter.

Many Christians work in jobs where alcohol is part of the culture. The purpose of these notes is to explore some of the practical problems workers face and suggest ways to deal with them. Abstinence is an option. It takes determination or practice to say, 'no', and many Christians find that the best course. Others would like to drink, but only in moderation. So the focus of this paper will be on people who enjoy alcohol in moderation and want to engage socially with their workmates in a way consistent with the Gospel, and not damage their ability to work well or succeed at work.

I will look at the context of alcohol at work, then look at what the Bible says specifically about alcohol, and then consider some implications of that and some strategies for dealing with often met situations.

Alcohol and the work context

The first thing to recognise is that each work place is different, and the role that alcohol consumption plays in each workplace is different. The next thing to recognise is that our appreciation and tolerance for alcohol varies greatly, and changes over time. So, as usual in things to do with humans, one size does not fit all. Some people enjoy an occasional social drink with their colleagues, some would rather avoid them. Some work in hard-drinking or hard-partying environments where there is a great deal of pressure to join in to fit in. For others, alcohol is absent or not a problem.

Before discussing some advice for managing the pressure to drink alcohol at work I will make a few things very clear:

1. Alcohol is addictive and Christians become alcoholics. The very first thing you must do is ensure you do not become dependent, either socially or physically, on alcohol. If in doubt, seek advice. Most people working in this area suggest at least 2 alcohol free days a week, and occasional longer periods with no alcohol (e.g give it up for Lent, or do 'Dry July'). Ask yourself how you feel without alcohol? Do you still enjoy dinners, social occasions etc with no alcohol? How hard is it to say, 'no'? How do you feel when you are the designated driver? If you find it the least bit hard to not drink, you have an issue that needs to be dealt with. If in doubt, cut alcohol out altogether, or seek professional help. (The implications for this at work are discussed below.)
2. If you become too talkative or silly or uninhibited when you drink alcohol, don't drink at work or with workmates. If alcohol makes you violent, angry, sullen or otherwise anti-social, cut back or don't drink alcohol at all. It is better to not drink than make a fool of yourself or bring dishonour to God. You will work better, and succeed at work to a greater extent, with no alcohol than not managing your alcohol consumption well.

The Challenges

The challenges of alcohol in the workplace vary greatly:

1. In many organisations the owners or senior managers will see alcohol assisted social activities as having a role to play in morale and cohesion. There will be celebrations for successes, farewells, Christmas parties, annual dinners, and regular office drinks. Some organisations appear to come up with an endless array of excuses to party.
2. Some workplaces have more informal, and often more difficult, drinking cultures. Some workers invite others to join them for a drink most days of the week. While it is not expected you will be available every night, can you always say, 'no'? And when you do say, 'yes', will they want to catch up for all the times you say 'no', or otherwise test you out?
3. Although entertaining clients has changed greatly over the last 30 years, some clients still like to be 'wined and dined', and you may be expected

to play a role in this. This can be awkward if either your boss or your clients like to drink and party more than you. Do you go along with excessive alcohol consumption to win the deal, keep the client, or keep your boss happy?

4. You may feel comfortable joining workmates for dinner or 'a quiet drink', but what happens when the pressure comes to 'kick-on'?
5. You may feel you have to stick around, drinking later than you would like, to make sure you are not talked about behind your back.
6. You may feel you have to drink to keep your job. A common perception is that for someone who has worked so hard to get a particular job (years of study, interviews, etc), fitting in with the drinking culture is a price that needs to be paid to keep the job, or keep open the prospect of promotion. This is particularly the case if there are no comparable jobs or there are simply no other job. Some workplaces do little to discourage the perception that drinking is just part of the job.

One of the hardest things in starting work is to translate your training into effective work. You have been taught how to do something. Now you have to persuade people to pay you to do that. This means you need to win their confidence and respect. You will generally find this works best if these people come to like you, whether these people are people higher up in your organisation, clients, customers or other people whose support you need. There may be an expectation in your job that socialising with these people will build the personal relationships that will complement their appreciation of your work. I have seen young professionals, people in sales, bank officers, managers etc praised for client development activities that may include lunches, dinners and going to bars. So you may feel pressure to do likewise. You don't want to be seen to be a killjoy or one-dimensional. But you may find the entertainment activities of your competitors praised because they always seem to end up drunk or having a great party.

The Bible

On the surface it may appear the Bible sends mixed messages about alcohol. It is both a good gift of God (e.g. Genesis 27:28; Judges 9:13; Proverbs 3:10; Isaiah 25:6; John 2) and something that makes fools of us (Genesis 9:21 and 33; Proverbs 20:1 and 21:17). It is associated with good health (1 Timothy 5:23) and debauchery or dissolution (Proverbs 4:17 and 31:16; Isaiah 5:11; Hosea 4:11; Acts 2:13; Ephesians 5:18).

The Bible is clear that drunkards will not inherit the Kingdom of God. First Corinthians 6:9-10 says, 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortionists will inherit the kingdom of God.' Romans 13:13 has another warning about drunkenness: 'Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.'

Not only should we not drink so much we get drunk, we should not drink to get drunk. Both are an abuse of God-given good things. We should remain in control of ourselves. So drunkenness is clearly sinful, but alcohol in moderation is permissible, and can be associated with appropriate hospitality and enjoying God's goodness towards us.

Paul's teaching on not tempting weaker brothers should inform our approach to drinking in all situations, including work (Romans 14:1-4 and 15:1 and I Corinthians 8:9-13). The 'weaker brother' approach has a number of good applications, but can be overdone. Good applications include not encouraging people with drinking problems to drink, not drinking if it compromises safety or productivity, and not drinking if it offends someone. For example, many African churches associate any alcohol consumption with drunkenness and sin. They say either, 'no pastor should drink' or 'no Christian should drink'. If I worked with these churches I would not drink alcohol when with them. But I do not think this 'no stumbling block' or 'weaker brother' argument justifies universal prohibition. I am happy to have grape juice ('pre-fermented wine') at the Lord's Supper in case anyone who comes to the table has a drinking problem. I do not think this needs to be expanded to every situation.

Some may feel that God has not sent us into the world (John 17:15) to cut ourselves off from a significant part of our culture. Jesus' prayer was that we be in the world but protected from the evil one. The 'evil one' is not alcohol itself, but the temptation to abuse it and allow ourselves to be deceived. So even though we may choose not to drink, we should not cut ourselves off totally from social activities associated with work. Jesus clearly drank alcohol with his friends and work-mates (the implication is there in John 2 and clearly there in the institution of the Lord's supper: Matthew 26:27-29; 1 Corinthians 11:25). I would never say, 'Jesus drank alcohol, so should we'. However, we need not see alcohol consumption as limited to the days of the early church.

Common Grace

We need to be careful to not turn alcohol at work into a 'them and us' debate between Christians and non-Christians. Concern over the misuse of alcohol is not limited to Christians. We should expect this common concern because all humans are made in the image of God and therefore have the potential to recognise the difference between good and bad. This is one aspect of the grace of God that we have in common with all humans. Therefore, we should not feel isolated by concerns about the appropriate use of alcohol in work related situations. We can expect understanding and support from some non-Christians. We don't need to turn it into a specifically Christian issue, as the physical, mental and relational good of others are issues that shape and motivate a range of people. So, look wide for support for responsible drinking (or abstinence). For example, if there is a difficult drinking culture at your workplace, you may find support in your human resources or risk management departments.

Work place safety

There is a fair bit written on the responsibility of workplaces to have safe practices with alcohol at work related events. I won't go into these here, because for all the laws and company policies, you will still find many employers throwing unlimited amounts of alcohol at staff at business functions. You will also find employees flouting these policies. You work in the real world of non-compliance, so that is what I will discuss.

Abstinence

It seems to me that simply saying, 'no thanks, I don't drink alcohol', is far more acceptable in many work places (and social settings) than it was even ten years ago. I have heard many reasons for why people don't drink, and rarely have I heard the reason questioned. These include, 'I don't like the taste', 'I don't like the effect', 'I am allergic to/can't metabolise alcohol', and 'I'm not drinking this month/year etc'. I have also heard, 'I don't drink because I used to have a drinking problem' and 'I don't drink during the week'. The response I have often heard is 'good for you'. But it pays to pitch it right. If you simply want your decision to be accepted or respected, be positive but not judgemental.⁸⁷ Some 'workmates' are keen to pick on perceived weaknesses, so be careful to not give the impression that you are unsure or hesitant about your desire to not drink. There is no need to be defensive.

But whatever you say, it's better to be both honest and consistent. Don't say you don't like the taste if your Facebook page shows you spending weekends wine tastings.

If you find yourself at a workplace that has a difficult drinking or partying culture, and you would simply prefer to not drink, adopt a 'thanks, but I don't drink alcohol' approach. This might mean that you don't stay as late as some, or you don't 'kick on'. That's OK. Just stick to your guns. Don't act superior to those who drink. Don't despise drink. Even in the booze filled 1980s I had a number of colleagues who simply did not drink any or much alcohol, and they succeeded in their work.

The idea that your willingness to drink or party will affect your progress or the way you are perceived at work is massively overstated. In fact, I have never heard of anyone miss out on a promotion because they didn't drink! Not once in over 30 years! I have heard people miss out on promotions because of the perception that their excessive alcohol consumption impaired their work. So

⁸⁷ Of course, you may want to have a different conversation with a workmate who appears to have a drinking problem. My point is, unless you think alcohol in work situations is always a 'work of the devil', you will not help yourself by implying or saying that is your view.

my view is that the 'pressure to drink' is more apparent than real. If you do your job well, your company will generally want to keep you and push you to use your gifts and aptitudes as much as you can. Companies generally cannot afford to lose good, hard workers.

I think the pressure we feel can be largely self-imposed. However, this does not help with the situation when you like a few drinks, but want to pull out of situations where workmates or clients want to drink excessively. I will look at this below.

You can be different persons

Before getting to that, I should say that we can have different personae. We often say we value consistency in ourselves and in other people. However, we can afford to be different in some respects in different contexts. When I give a presentation to the board of a bank I adopt a different attitude than when I host a BBQ for old friends. A senior executive may be 'Mr/Ms Smith' in some situations, 'Robert/Susan' on others and 'Bob/ Sue' on others. So the fact that you may enjoy a beer or glass of wine with friends, but choose not to drink alcohol in any work situations is OK. Just be consistent with those boundaries. It may be best to just have two modes, e.g. I may drink at home or in non-work situations, but I never drink at work functions.

Think it through and think ahead

Be clear about what you do. Once my legal practice was well established, and I had enough work to do, my 'client entertainment' fell away. Frankly, I was too busy to be taking clients to lunch, shows, sport etc. Some clients complained that I did not show enough hospitality (or flatter them enough with my attention and entertainment budget). I would then make an effort to take them to lunch or dinner. However, I always made it clear that I thought it should be the quality of my work that kept them as a client, rather than anything else. My point is that, if you want to take this approach, you have to be clear about it and make sure the quality of your work justifies this approach. My experience was that being responsive, returning calls promptly, keeping deadlines, keeping to fee quotes, and admitting (rather than covering

up) mistakes, were far more effective at winning and keeping clients, and meeting the expectations of my partners, than always being out drinking with clients.

Tactics to avoid heavy drinking

For those who want to drink, but not get dragged into drinking too much or for too long, here are a few tips:

1. Set a limit and keep to it. Limits may include both the number of drinks you have in a day, and the number of days in week that you drink. I can't suggest a limit that works for you. It may be one drink. It may be four. It may be more. Drinking more than 5 times a week is criticised by many health professionals. However, the daily limits you set will depend on how alcohol affects you and considerations that are personal to you. I once heard a pastor say you should not drink such that you could not drive legally (i.e. keep your blood alcohol below 0.05%). But that may be too much for some while others can drink more with no adverse effect in their behaviour. There are a number of definitions of 'binge drinking', including 5 standard drinks for men or 4 for women, or a blood alcohol level above 0.08%. There are at least two issues at play here. The first is that too much alcohol has negative health effects. The second is that alcohol affects our behaviour. Whatever limit you set, you want to set it at a level that avoids health and behavioural problems, and the way you think about yourself.
2. The second tip is to be prepared to leave early. If your colleagues start getting into the groove to keep drinking beyond a level you feel comfortable with, just leave. In crowded bars, or big work functions, you may simply be able to slip away. The people you are with may assume you are talking to other people, but if you are questioned later about your unexpected departure, you can say you had had enough and you didn't want to end their evening. In smaller groups you may need to explain your decision to leave. Being tired, having a busy day tomorrow, expected problems with transport home, are among the many reasons that can be given. But be truthful, e.g. if you don't have to work tomorrow, don't give that as an excuse. A confident, 'thanks, it's been a good evening, but I've had enough. See you later,' is fine in many situations.

3. Mix your drinks. Every drink you have does not have to be alcoholic. Have water or a soft drink. Try not to get into 'rounds' or 'shouts', but if you do, get yourself a soft drink when it's your shout.
4. Drink slowly. Miss a round.
5. Have a big glass of water before you start, so you are not drinking to quench a thirst.
6. Unless you set yourself a low limit of one or two drinks, learn your limits. It's best to do this with friends, just in case you have 'one or two drinks' too many. Don't try and work out your limit at a work party. If you are happy and coherent with 3 drinks but not four, don't drink beyond three.
7. Anticipate people encouraging you forcefully to keep drinking and have a strategy to deal with it. It's best to avoid these conversations, but sometimes you can't, so be prepared. It's best to put a positive spin on it. So, 'I don't want to get as drunk as you', or 'this is boring', or 'can't you have fun without getting legless drunk?' are not as effective as 'its been a good evening, but I've had enough'. Try to engineer it so your antagonist is forced into thinking they would spoil your night by pushing you further. But some people are just obnoxious, so be prepared to be firm, or just get up and leave with a cheerful, 'thanks, have a good evening'.

The 'hard cases'

For all my advocacy of abstinence and moderation, there do appear to be some workplaces where heavy or 'binge' drinking are deeply ingrained. They often involve workplaces which pride themselves on working hard, long hours, under a lot of pressure. Alcohol can be seen as a release or a reward. While we want Christians to be in practically all legal workplaces (see study 7), there may come a time when you simply want to resign. Be prepared to resign. Better to leave than get sucked into alcohol abuse or feeling forever under pressure for not drinking.

'Self-medication'

Work for many people is hard and unrelenting. It may be very stressful, either through boredom, the lack of satisfaction, or the large responsibility you carry.

Some people live in a state of fear all their working lives (see study 6). You are never in total control. You are never sure what might happen, and you are constantly aware that bad things may happen.

I do not accept that these pressures can always be avoided, redirected or accommodated. Nor do I think that walking away is always the best answer. You may be very good at a job that needs to be done, and high pressure is just part of the job. We learn to live with these pressures, and prayer and church membership are the two best ways to deal with them. But some of us try to address these problems by drinking alcohol, and this can lead to alcohol dependence. It may start with a beer, or a glass of wine or a scotch at the end of the day, but it may lead to more. You may say you like it, or need it to 'relax'. It's hard to distinguish between 'likes' and 'needs'. However, it is clear that 'one to relax' both hides the underlying problem and may lead to many more than one. The prophet Jeremiah has some words of warning for us: 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' (Jeremiah 17:9) Having a drink because you enjoy it is one thing. Drinking to deal with stress is quite another thing. Self-medication is inherently deceitful.

I have a few practical suggestions on how to steer clear of deceitfulness. First, ensure you have at least 2 alcohol free days a week. This can be hard when you are travelling and there are constant social engagements, but stick to it. Second, don't hide your drinking. Some people say, 'don't ever drink alone'. That is harder for single people or a person whose spouse does not drink. I have known a number of couples who comply with this 'no drinking alone' by mutually self medicating to excess. However, if you find yourself hiding your drinking, having a quick drink before going out, 'pre-loading', having a quiet drink while you do the washing up, dropping into the pub on the way home for an undisclosed drink, or forever trying to line up social occasions so you can drink with others, you know you have an issue that needs to be dealt with.

Sleaze

The consumption of alcohol at work functions can be associated with sleaze. This can take the form of invitations to 'kick-on' to sleazy bars, strip clubs, brothels etc. Or it can take the form of reputable companies organising functions where nudity, eroticism and homo-eroticism are cloaked in the image of being 'fun' or 'artistic'. In my limited experience, lawyers and bankers who kicked-on to sleazy places, developed reputations which blocked promotion. In relation to sleazy functions organised at work, I simply stopped going to our Christmas parties because I thought, and said, they were tasteless and offensive to me. You may 'want to be seen' to be doing the right thing by attending work functions. However, if they are not to your taste, I suggest you don't go, or leave early.

'Let's go to the casino'

Christians take different views on gambling. Many reject it totally because it causes so much damage and implies greed and the idolatry of money. Whatever your view on gambling, work out beforehand your attitude to going to a casino. I once went to a casino with some law partners as part of a 'getting to know you' evening. I enjoyed their company, but regret going to the casino. I never went again. I suggest you don't. (Besides anything else, they are really miserable places).

Drugs

I have not discussed the place of illegal drugs in work and client development activities. This is partly because I have no direct experience of this, and partly because I take it that Christians should simply not take or encourage the use of any illegal or damaging substances. So, 'just say no'. If that makes working there too unpleasant, seek advice and be prepared to leave. While we want Christians in all lawful workplaces, there are limits.

Conclusion

For some, alcohol at work is no issue at all. For others it arises occasionally, but is easily dealt with. For others it's a regular problem to be in this world but not of it. Some end up with serious drinking problems. My prayer is that we all

honour God in the way we interact with people at work and do not abuse his gifts.