

Discussion Paper - Alcohol

“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable?” (1 Cor 6:12). Why individual Christians may drink but it is not good to profit from investment in the alcohol industry.

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Summary Position

Alcohol, while permissible, has significant negative impact on the community in general. Therefore Christian Super will avoid in its investments any company that derives more than 5% of its revenue from alcohol production or distribution.

The Fund will further attempt to enhance its screening capabilities so that companies that are involved in responsible marketing of alcohol will not be excluded.

1. Introduction

As part of Christian Super's Ethical Investment Process we have decided to examine and explain some of the reasons behind our various policies in relation to particular investments or non-investments.

One of our guidelines is an absolute exclusion on investment in any company that derives 5% or more of its income from alcohol production, promotion and sales. This

has provoked healthy, robust, respectful debate amongst the Ethics Committee as we seek 'what seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us.'¹ In order to broaden this discernment process and as a matter of transparency and accountability for our ethical investment strategy we want to bring members in on our reasons for coming to this conclusion.

A recent paper on Alcohol contained a succinct statement that fits the discussion at our Ethics Committee Meetings:

The prime ethical objection to investing in the Brewery and spirit manufacturing industries [etc] is the social damage caused by alcohol abuse, such as motoring and home accidents, hooliganism, crime and violence, broken bones and ill-health ... However, there are some who disagree with a ban ... believing the concern should be linked to alcohol abuse, rather than the actual product. Alcohol is not necessarily unacceptable within the Church of England [or other churches] and it forms part of many church occasions. With this in mind, the label of hypocrisy has been ascribed by some to this exclusion.²

If I'm at liberty to drink as an informed, mature, individual Christian able to evaluate the pluses and minuses of alcohol use and abuse seen in Scripture and society, surely I'm at liberty to invest in the alcohol industry which produces this neutral product with potential for good and evil?

I will not rehearse all the arguments from the Church of England paper or the Salvation Army and other surveys of the Australian situation regarding alcohol, but I will try to summarise key points in line with our Ethical Investment Framework and with the above question in mind. Nor will I go into all the arguments of the ages over whether it is biblically acceptable for Christians to drink alcohol in moderation. I will largely assume the broad Christian consensus that it is³. However, it is clear from Scripture that drunkenness is condemned⁴.

Let's look at the issue against the background of our threefold biblical ethical framework:⁵

- Commands, Principles or Deontological (Duty) ethics
- Character, Persons or Virtue ethics
- Consequences, Purposes or Teleological (End or Goal) ethics

"If I'm at liberty to drink as an informed, mature, individual Christian... surely I'm at liberty to invest in the alcohol industry which produces this neutral product?"

¹ Acts 15:28

² *Alcohol C₂H₅OH – An Inappropriate Investment for the Church of England*, The Church of England Ethical Advisory Group. Available at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ethical/policystatements/policyalcohol.pdf>

³ see the Church of England paper for arguments in support and Norman L. Geisler, 'A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan-Mar 1982, 46-56 for arguments against

⁴ Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3

⁵ See "Mind the Moral Gap" and Christian Super's Ethical Investment Framework

2. Commands and Principles

In our discussions in relation to ethical investment there has sometimes been confusion where we have decided to exclude investment in something like alcohol which Scripture doesn't explicitly condemn for individual use. However, behind biblical negative commands lie positive principles about right relationships with God, humanity and the earth. One of the key principles driving our investment decisions is 'stewardship of life and health'. Derived from this is a criterion not to invest in anything religiously idolatrous in relation to God or seriously addictive in relation to our selves or others. Isaiah 5:11-14 associates intoxication with injustice and idolatry.

“Behind biblical negative commands lie positive principles about right relationships with God, humanity and the earth.”

While Scripture sees wine as something positive through which Noah brings blessing and comfort from the cursing of the earth⁶ after the flood, by planting a vineyard. However, his drunkenness led to sexual sin and shame and family and racial division, as it often does today.⁷

Both the OT and NT recognise the positive and negative sides of alcohol like all created things. Psalm 104:15 tells us that 'wine gladdens the heart' - alcohol is a great social lubricant, but is also

associated with abuse and violence - 'wine is a mocker and beer a brawler.'⁸ Yet wine is consecrated by Christ as a sign of God's glory at the wedding in Cana⁹ and the marriage feast of the Lamb.¹⁰ And Isaiah 25:6 sees wine in the new heavens and new earth.

3. Character and Persons

Under character (both individual and institutional) we placed the relational principle of parity or equality of power. We have tried to avoid investments where the young, old or workers are exploited. The alcohol situation fits this category. A partial parallel to the alcohol situation is the controversy over eating idol meat left over from the temple sacrifices at Corinth. The strong, knowledgeable and wealthy are used to eating meat and seeing it as neutral. The poor however, can only afford to eat meat as leftovers in a religious or idolatrous context. It still has power over their sensitive consciences. Compare the person from an alcoholic family.

Now Paul doesn't ban meat eating altogether, as he largely agrees with the strong that there's nothing wrong with it in itself – God created it. Individuals are at liberty to eat, and drink. But we live in social, institutional and religious/idolatrous contexts and so Paul says 'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.'

¹¹ Neither we, nor anyone else should be mastered by anything except Christ, whether it's meat or drink. In Romans 14 he makes it clear that the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of right relationships is greater than eating or drinking.

“We have a serious problem ... with the 'idolatry' of alcohol and addiction to it. And the weak and vulnerable are those most susceptible”

For Paul we need to be aware of our weaker brothers and sisters tempted to fall away from the faith and Christian lifestyle by idols and addictions in the shadow of the institutional context of the idol temple. But he does not ban eating meat or drinking. That would be to fall into the Galatian heresy of legalism where weaker brother becomes Big Brother. Nevertheless, the evidence from England and Australia is damning. We have a serious problem in Anglo-Saxon countries with the 'idolatry' of alcohol and addiction to it. And the weak and vulnerable are those most susceptible – those with a genetic or environmental (familial) propensity to alcoholism, those third of all 14-24 year olds in Australia who regularly binge drink, even more girls than guys. And 80-85% of all alcohol

⁶ As he was named in Genesis 5:29

⁷ Genesis 9:20-29

⁸ Proverbs 20:1

⁹ John 2:1-11

¹⁰ Revelation 21

¹¹ See 1 Corinthians 6-8

consumption by this group is in a high-risk context for acute or short-term harm. Christian Super's connection to Christian schools should give us pause when we read these statistics. And we should stand up for the weak and vulnerable (as distinct from the mature and informed who are able to exercise self-control and moderation) against their targeting by many (not all) corporate paedophiles in the alcohol and advertising industries coming up with new youth oriented products such as Alco pops, passion pop, alcoholic milkshakes etc.

4. Consequences and Purposes

Consequences can be measured in various ways: materially or financially, morally, relationally, emotionally. Materially, the Church of England noted that not investing in alcohol worked out roughly equal with two years when the alcohol industry did better than the general index and two when it did worse. In broader economic terms the UK Government estimates a 20 billion pound p.a. cost to the economy from alcohol in terms of sickness, loss of life, violence. In Europe they estimate the cost at 1-3% of GDP. But the economic gains in employment, taxes etc marginally outweigh the costs. There is always a risk of some financial loss in excluding investment in alcohol – it is a growth industry. But it's a risk we should be willing to take for the sake of the ultimate consequences in people's lives and relationships, with God and each other.

There is some evidence of positive health effects from low to moderate alcohol consumption of red wine for the heart, though questions have recently been raised about this. Other studies claim moderate imbibing helps reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and improves our brain functioning! However, the general effects of immoderate alcohol consumption in our society far outweigh these debatable positive effects. A study of Australian Alcohol Indicators¹² counted a net loss of 2685 lives p.a. at an average of 18.1 years of life lost per person. A third of road deaths are alcohol related. The mental health implications of the over-use of alcohol, a depressant, commonly known as self-medication, in a society where depression will soon be the number one illness, are also enormous.

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5. Conclusion

To return to the question of individual liberty and institutional investment, the decision to invest in the alcohol industry is a different decision to that of an individual Christian exercising their liberty or permission to drink. In the light of the evidence above, if we were to invest in the alcohol industry all claims to be an ethical fund by commonly accepted standards in the industry would be cancelled. The

“Alcohol companies have a built in interest in promoting, not just producing, drink. They contribute to and profit from a significant social problem with tragic consequences.”

ban on alcohol investment is simply bottom line in ethical investment. While some have argued that we could adopt a best of sector approach- investing in the most socially responsible alcohol producers (low-alcohol with good education practices, etc) it is very time intensive and costly to make such judgments. At this stage, to be good stewards of Christian Super's funds we make decisions on a broad industry basis.

Overall, as the Church of England report says it chooses not to invest in alcohol because:

1. Alcohol companies have a built-in interest in promoting, not just producing drink;
2. They contribute to and profit from a significant social problem with tragic consequences;
3. It may create offence to Christian abstainers who are exercising a legitimate Christian option.

The alcohol industry is incredibly powerful and in cahoots with the equally destructive gambling industry. Addictions and idolatries tend to come in pairs. It is a powerful political lobby intent on

¹² Chikritizhi et al

increasing hours and its reach into the most vulnerable in our community, the young, the poor, and increasingly women.

Increasing pressure by alcohol companies and advertisers on society and governments shows that it is therefore not hypocritical for the Church and Christian Super to regard abstinence or moderate drinking as matters for personal conviction and conscience while simultaneously refraining from profiting or making money from alcohol. This is a witness to the powerful presence of structural evil. We cannot go out of the world, but we can and should refuse to profit from the evils that come from the abuse of God's good gift of alcohol. To profit from it and then proclaim its evil to society and government would be the grossest hypocrisy and destroy any prophetic witness we might have.

All things are lawful, but not all things are 'profitable' relationally or literally and materially for us to invest in an idolatrous and addictive institutional context. There are many things to invest in that would profit the Kingdom more than the alcohol industry.

Document History

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