



MARIJUANA, SOBRIETY, AND CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

The recreational use of marijuana is a subject that most Western churches have largely been able to avoid wrestling with for primarily one key reason--it has been illegal. But given Oregon's (among other states') recent decision to legalize, it is time for some closer biblical reflection. It is our conviction that the Bible is sufficiently clear that the recreational use of marijuana violates God's consistent commands to reject intoxication, maintain sobriety, and to honor God in our bodies. The following paper outlines the biblical, theological reasons for these convictions.

ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA

Marijuana is not mentioned specifically anywhere in the Bible. Though occasionally drug use is probably discussed (and condemned) in relation to cultic spiritual practices like sorcery (see Ex. 22:18; 2 Chron. 33:6; Dan. 2:2, Gal. 5:20; Rev. 21:8, discussed below), recreational drug use as we think of it today isn't directly addressed. Alcohol use, however, is. The Bible's consistent approach to intoxication by alcohol is our best place to start in trying to understand intoxication by other substances, including marijuana, by way of analogy.

THE CALL TO SOBRIETY AND THE REJECTION OF INTOXICATION

Throughout the scope of the Bible, there is a consistently nuanced approach to alcohol use. Wine is described as a gift from God (Gen. 27:28) given for enjoyment (Ps. 104:14-15), an aid in celebration (Jn. 2:1-11), and sometimes for medicinal purposes (Prov. 31:6; 1 Tim. 5:23). Even still, the Bible warns against the sinfulness of the abuse of alcohol. The biblical authors frequently speak against drunkenness (Gen. 9:20-22; Prov. 20:1; Hos. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 1 Peter 4:3) and addiction (Isa. 5:11; 1 Tim. 3:8).

The negative command to avoid drunkenness/intoxication is often joined with a positive command to pursue self-control, spiritual integrity, and a sense of purposeful watchfulness in light of the coming return of Jesus. Note the contrast in Ephesians 5:18-21. There, the loss of control associated with drunkenness is contrasted with the spiritual discipline that come with the filling of the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 is a key passage about sober, intentional watchfulness in waiting for Jesus's return ("So let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."). Matthew chapter 24 shares this concern, highlighted in verses 48 through 50. Drunkenness/intoxication is sin because God has declared it to be, but the primary logic behind this declaration seems to be because it hinders the believer from being able to love God and love people in all the ways the great commandment entails. The same logic should apply to marijuana and any other substance that has a substantial effect on the believer's mind and body.

THE BODY AS TEMPLE

Another piece of this discussion that should not be ignored is the Apostle Paul's discussion of the body in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. The capstone in his argument against the misuse of our bodies (specifically talking about the misuse of sex in this context) is this: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Though many studies have been conducted, our collective understanding of the health risks (or medicinal benefits) of marijuana use is still in its infancy. Even still, there is strong evidence that marijuana impairs cognitive function, increases the risk of developing schizophrenia (and other mental disorders), and is correlated to increased suicidal ideation, among other consequences¹. The more we learn about the negative health consequences of recreational marijuana use, the stronger we ought to reject it out of our desire to "glorify God in our bodies."

"KESHEPH" AND "PHARMAKEIA"

Another aspect of this subject worth looking into is the Biblical concept of "sorcery." There are a few Biblical words that relate to this concept, but the primary ones of concern are the Hebrew "kesheph" (כֶּשֶׁף) and the Greek "pharmakeia" (φάρμακεία)². The root meaning of "kesheph" is probably "to cut" and is likely associated with cutting herbs for spells. The root meaning of

¹ In 2017 the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine created a committee to comprehensively review the current literature on marijuana's health effects. The report can be downloaded here:

<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24625/the-health-effects-of-cannabis-and-cannabinoids-the-current-state>

² See the entries in the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology (edited by VanGemeren), the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (edited by Brown), and The New Bible Dictionary, 3rd Edition (edited by Marshall, Millard, Packer, Wiseman) for thorough discussions.

“pharmakeia” is connected to potions and drugs. Therefore, “sorcery” in the Bible probably refers often to the pagan use of drugs, potions, and poisons to facilitate spiritual experiences. In the Bible, legitimate spiritual experiences are to be tied to covenant relationship with the one true God, and “sorcery” is universally (and strongly!) condemned throughout redemptive history (see Ex. 22:18; Deut. 18:10; Mal. 3:5; Gal. 5:20; Revelation 21:8). Marijuana, in particular, has been used in pagan spiritual practices for at least 3500 years³. This has led many believers to suspect a link between much modern recreational drug use and the potential for demonic spiritual experiences.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

In light of the above biblical evidence, it seems unambiguously clear that the recreational use of marijuana should be rejected by the Christian as sinful and contrary to the commands to maintain sober-mindedness and to glorify God with the physical body, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. Intoxication or “getting high” ought to be rejected, whatever the substance in question. Below are two more specific questions of application that bear discussing.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MEDICAL USE?

The appropriateness of the medical use of marijuana for the Christian has a more nuanced answer. First, we should consider several present cultural considerations. History has shown that much of the push for the legalization of medical marijuana in the US has acted primarily as a first step toward normalizing recreational usage⁴. There is also an entire gray market industry built around prescribers illegitimately prescribing medical marijuana for questionable ailments. American culture is becoming increasingly and dangerously over-medicated (249 million opioid prescriptions alone were written in 2013, with over 40 deaths per day from prescription opioid overdoses⁵). We also do well to remember that legitimately obtained drugs can be (and very often are) sinfully abused. However, as researchers and medical professionals discover legitimate uses for medical marijuana⁶, Christians are under no obligation to reject their careful usage under the supervision of trusted medical professionals in accordance with their biblical convictions and conscience.

BUT WHAT ABOUT OTHER SUBSTANCES THAT HAVE BEEN NORMALIZED?

The entire discussion above should encourage us to apply the same grid to other powerful psychoactive substances we encounter. Take the above-mentioned opioids, for example. We do well to recognize, at the same time, the legitimacy of their legal usage under close medical supervision in particular cases, the serious risks and possibility of abuse even in legitimately prescribed cases, and the sinfulness and utter destructiveness of their abuse. The Christian should reject the illegal usage or abuse of any substance, and closely consider the necessity of and their own motivations for using prescribed psychoactive substances. All of this is that we might continue to honor God in sobriety.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

10 Things You Should Know About Marijuana and the Christian article by Sam Storms – A short, very good biblical discussion. [<http://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/10-things-you-should-know-about-marijuana-and-the-christian>]

Can I Smoke Pot? book by Tom Breeden and Mark L. Ward, Jr. – A great introduction to the conversation, looking at the marijuana question as it relates to a Christian understanding of creation, government, medicine, and alcohol. About 100 pages.

³ See David Courtwright’s 2002 book *Forces of Habit*, p. 39

⁴ See the article by Stebbins, Frohlich, and Sauter in USA Today titled “The Next 11 States to Legalize Marijuana,” which briefly recounts the fact that the four states (Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington plus the District of Columbia) that have legalized recreational marijuana legalized medical usage first.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/08/18/24-7-wall-st-marijuana/31834875/>

⁵ See the CDCs 2013 guideline sheet: https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/guidelines_at-a-glance-a.pdf

⁶ Joe Carter at the Gospel Coalition summarized the findings of the 2016 comprehensive review (see footnote 1) this way: “There is substantial or conclusive scientific evidence for only three medical benefits of cannabis or cannabinoids: treating chronic pain in adults; treatment of chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, and nausea after chemotherapy; and improving symptoms of multiple sclerosis.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-the-health-effects-of-marijuana>