

Abstract

American Methodists and Alcohol: A Study in the Social Creation of a "Sin"

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Neither the British Methodists nor the first generations of American Methodists had any opposition to the consumption of beer, wine, ale, or hard cider. Wesley and his followers did adopt rules for their societies which prohibited the consumption of distilled or "spirituous" liquor. Despite that prohibition, the rule was often violated.

Early Methodist itinerant preachers such as Peter Cartwright, James Finley, and Robert Boyd reported that preachers and parishioners alike drank "drams." No one regarded it as bad unless one became drunk, but by the 1820s that attitude was changing. Robert Byrd was apprehensive about the medical use of alcohol, and some, such as John Scarlett, refused to take brandy when prescribed by a physician who raised the possibility that he might die if he did not follow the recommended treatment. Scarlett would rather die than take a small dose of brandy.

The definition of sin is essential to understanding the Methodist position on the subject of alcohol. The Methodists rejected the definition of the Westminster Confession that maintained it was any "want of conformity" to God's will, and

contended that to incur culpability an act had to be a "willful violation of a known law of God." In order to convince Methodists that moderate drinking of alcohol was a "sin, properly so-called," it was necessary to connect it inseparably with the evil consequences of drunkenness.

That was accomplished within two generations from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. The extremely high consumption of alcohol by the second quarter of the nineteenth century led many to believe that moderate drinking was only one step in the downward path to a drunkard's grave, and for to take that step was a "willful violation of God's law" because it led inevitably to behavior which was specifically forbidden in Scripture.

By 1850, a generation had grown up as life-long teetotallers without ever having worked through the logical process by which drinking was made a sin, and without any sense of the ambiguities of the matter -- it was unquestionably a "sin -- which was by definition a "willful" act. The belief that excessive drinking was simply a willful act delayed the recognition of the fact that alcoholism is something other than a volitional act, and a medical more than a moral problem.