

Spiritual Implications Of Drug Abuse And Its Treatment

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It is clear that when the Commission on Higher Education resolved to sponsor a workshop on drug abuse it did not intend to undertake a merely theoretical discussion. It acknowledged that “the problem of drug abuse, largely unknown a generation ago, has intruded on the student life at our worker training schools, area Lutheran high schools, and even Lutheran elementary schools.” It recognized that “there is a need for accurate and helpful information if this challenge to Christian faith and life is to be handled in a constructive, Gospel-centered way by those who have been called to raise up the next generation of pastors, teachers, and laymen in our Wisconsin Synod.” It engaged resource persons and distributed assignments in a way which assumes that drug abuse is a medical and social as well as a spiritual problem; that drug abuse affects not only individuals but also families, schools, church, and society.

It seems to me that everyone present must have had more recent and more extensive experience with drug abuse than I have had. More than nine years have passed since my campus ministry days and there is no point in trying to swap “war stories” with you today. You are the “insiders,” not I. For that reason, and because part of the special calling of deans (with their assistants) and presidents, principals and counselors is to deal in an evangelical way with the transgressions of young people, let us assume that much of what follows is a reminder of what you already know and practice rather than stunning new information and radical new approaches.

Let us organize our thoughts along these lines: *drug abuse is a spiritual problem with spiritual causes and implications, challenging us to use our spiritual resources to provide spiritual care and to undertake educational measures, which are spiritual.* The emphasis of this thesis on what is spiritual does not discount the medical, psychological, or social implications of drug abuse. It simply recognizes what our first responsibility as ministers of the Gospel is, and focuses on the competence we possess as ministers of Christ with the resources that are ours in the Word of God.

Drugs defined

A drug is “a biologically active substance used in the treatment of illness or for recreational pleasure.” All drugs are natural or synthetic chemical compounds which when ingested, injected, or inhaled will affect the body and/or the brain in some way to some degree. Drugs that enjoy more or less ready acceptance in “our”(in the narrow sense) culture include aspirin, caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol. The last mentioned is one of the most potent of mind-altering drugs. All of these are subject to abuse and some people would insist that any use is already abuse.

Drug abuse defined

In the practical situations that occasionally or frequently confront us in our schools, a quite broad definition of drug abuse seems useful. I assume that in our schools we are rarely (if ever) faced with alcoholism, addiction (chemical dependency), or overdose. We might more frequently meet with psychological dependency or habituation. But in the broader sense, drug abuse is the use of a drug by the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong quantities for the wrong purpose: harmful use. It is the unprescribed use of a controlled substance, underage use, use which affects driving capability and performance, illegal purchase: unlawful use. It is using

alcohol on campus or smoking as a “prep:” prohibited use. It seems to me that most of the incidents of drug abuse in our schools would fall somewhere within these broader definitions.

Causes of drug abuse

The causes of drug abuse among students in our schools are all ultimately traceable to the Old Adam—the sinful nature—which still resides in baptized, believing Christians. The positive influence of the Gospel, the indwelling Christ the loving care and interest of dorm staffs are counteracted by the residual sinful nature which does not want to live in obedient reliance on the promises of God or accept direction from God’s representatives. The mature apostle to the Gentiles describes the struggle of the New Man and the Old in Romans 7: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: when I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death (7:18-24)?” Paul is describing himself. Paul is describing every Christian. Paul is describing the young Christians who are being prepared for pastoral or teaching or lay ministry in Christ’s church.

Adolescence is a turbulent time, a time of physical changes which affect moods, a time when one foot is in childhood and the other in adulthood, when people who still-need fathers and mothers are away from home. How does the Old Adam want to deal with such turbulence, with academic failure, social frustrations, athletic ineptitude, anxiety and disappointment? One way is through the blurring, the forgetfulness, the escape which alcohol or marijuana or other drugs can provide for a brief time. How to cope with boredom, purposelessness, loneliness? Seek the excitement of forbidden fruit, the novel sensation of a “high,” the shared experience of a pot party or an alcoholic binge. Is the world imperfect? Create a new one. Is adolescence a drag? Do something “grown up.” Do you feel left out? Here is a way to gain acceptance. Isn’t anyone paying attention? Here is how you can get important people to notice you. Are you sick of rules? This is how you can assert your independence.

We are told that those most likely to abuse drugs are those least able to cope with drugs: the biologically and psychologically unstable—the losers. But it happens to leaders in the student body, too, and to potential leaders in the church.

Paul’s answer to the struggle with the assertive and rebellious Old Adam was God’s rescue through Christ Jesus our Lord (Ro 7:25). One of the devil’s answers to the struggles of life is the harmful or unlawful or prohibited use of drugs. Drug abuse is a spiritual problem, with spiritual causes.

Spiritual implications of drug abuse

That wine is a gift of God, serving man’s good in a legitimate way, is evident from our Lord’s miracle at the wedding of Cana (Jn 2:1-11), from the fact that he used it when he instituted the Supper of his Body and Blood for us Christians to eat and to drink, from Paul’s counsel to Timothy regarding the use of a little wine (1 Ti 5:23). That other chemical substances which affect mind and body are also His gift for our blessing is implicit in his approval of everything that he had made (Ge 1:31). That many of these chemical substances have been used

beneficially in medicine and psychiatry, and that the usefulness of others remains to be discovered, is self-evident. That these gifts of God are frequently abused provides the negative motivation for our gathering at this workshop.

The holy writers of Old and New Testaments demonstrate familiarity with the abuse of alcohol, some of the reasons why it is abused, the effects on body and mind, and the soul-destroying potential of such abuse. While the abuse of other drugs does not seem to be discussed in Scripture (we are reserving a discussion of *pharmakeia* and related words for a bit later), what the Bible says about intoxication with alcohol can be applied to intoxication with other drugs without strained exegesis.

It is striking to find extended descriptions and condemnations of alcohol abuse in just that prophet who proclaims so much Evangel, Isaiah.

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning
to run after their drinks,
who stay up late at night
till they are inflamed with wine.
They have harps and lyres at their banquets,
tambourines and flutes and wine,
but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD,
no respect for the work of his hands.
Therefore my people will go into exile
for lack of understanding;
Their men of rank will die of hunger
and their masses will be parched with thirst.
Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit;
into it will descend their nobles and vassals
with all their brawlers and revelers....
...Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine
and champions at mixing drinks....” (Is 5:11-14.22)

“And (Ephraim’s drunkards) also stagger from wine
and reel from beer;
Priests and prophets stagger from beer
and are befuddled with wine;
they reel from beer,

they stagger when seeing visions,
they stumble when rendering decisions.” (Is 28:7)

“Israel’s watchmen are blind,
they all lack knowledge.....
‘Come,’ each one cries, ‘let me get wine!
Let us drink our fill of beer!
And tomorrow will be like today,
or even far better.’” (Is 56:10.12)

Our Savior warns against drunkenness, lest the Day of His Coming close on His followers like a trap instead of the dawning of deliverance (Lk 21:34). The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived...: drunkards...will (not) inherit the kingdom of God (1 Co 6-9.10).” He wrote to the Galatians: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious...: drunkenness.... I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5: 19-21).”

The abuse of any chemical substance which in its abuse harms body or mind, or which may adversely affect unborn generations is self-evidently sinful. There are drugs that have (even in their prescribed use) inflicted genetic or prenatal damage. While the witnesses do not agree as to the long-term effects of marijuana use, for instance, it is certainly not a responsible Christian act to trifle with what may prove to be a genetic timebomb. The effects, short-and long-term, of alcohol abuse are described quite vividly in Proverbs 20:1 and 23: 29-35.

*“Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler;
Whoever is led astray by them is not wise.”*
*“Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.
Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
When it sparkles in the cup,
When it goes down smoothly!
In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.
Your eyes will see strange sights
and your mind will imagine confusing things.
You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,*

lying on top of the rigging.

'They hit me,' you will say, 'but I'm not hurt!

They beat me, but I don't feel it!

When will I wake up

so I can find another drink ?””

The prophet Hosea complains of “...the old wine and new, which take away the understanding of my people (Hos 4:11.12).”

I recall an address by Dr. Joseph Benforado of University Hospitals in Madison, some ten years ago. He said that if he were ill he would hope that his physician had not recently used alcohol or marijuana, because the physician would not be at his best. He hoped that the pharmacist who filled the prescription would not have recently used alcohol or marijuana, because the pharmacist would not be as alert as he ought to be. In the event of his death from that illness (or that prescription?) he hoped that the mortician would not have recently used alcohol or marijuana, because the mortician could not be capable of his best work.

Drug abuse is a sin against God because it endangers or harms the mind and body that God created, which Christ redeemed, which the Holy Spirit has set apart for service to God. But the Christian, including the Christian student, must also realize that he or she is acting in a loveless way toward family, school, church, and community when the consequences of drug abuse work themselves out.

This is frequently the case when the abuser is involved in an unlawful use and is arrested. The unlawfulness of certain drug use (certain substances, certain persons, certain places, certain circumstances) ought by itself be reason enough to avoid that use, Whether or not laws are reasonably enacted, intelligently administered, and fairly enforced, for the Christian they are the Law of God because they have been enacted by God's representatives. Such laws do not require a denial of Christ or the violation of God's commandments. They do not prohibit the sharing of the Gospel. Therefore the Christian cannot choose to disregard or disobey them with the challenge, “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Perhaps, since the use of LSD seems to be resurgent, we ought to say something specific about psychedelic drugs. More particularly, something should be said about seeking God or God's will or God's truth in revelations, visions, or experiences or through means other than His Word. That is practicing superstition. The word “pharmacy” in our language derives from the Greek *pharmakeia*. That word and its derivatives are translated in the IV with “magic arts (Gal 5:20; Rev 21:8; 22:15)” or “magic spell (Rev 18:23).” In LXX, the one who “engages in witchcraft (Dt 18:10)” is a *pharmakos*. We are told of Judah's last, pitifully weak, king that Manasseh “practiced witchcraft,” *epharmakeueto* (2 Ch 33:6). The point to be noted here is that the practice of superstition frequently did involve, as it now frequently involves, the use of drugs. We are told, for example, that the tripod of the Oracle at Delphi was actually placed over a cleft in the rock from which issued a natural gas (nitrous oxide?), which induced the state of trance in which the oracle uttered her ambiguous pronouncements. Is it too conjectural or speculative to see a connection between the modern superstitious use of LSD, peyote and certain mushrooms and the ancient *pharmakeia*? Paul included *pharmakeia* with drunkenness and other obvious acts of the sinful nature concerning which he warned: “...Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21).”

Spiritual resources for spiritual care

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently (Gal 6:1).” In dealing with the drug abuser we are surely interested in more than a “clean” school. We must want more than to solve be rid of - a problem. We certainly want more than conformity to the school’s standards of conduct. We fervently desire that those in our care be restored to spiritual health.

While all the faculty and all students have some responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those who are caught in a sin, it is the special responsibility of presidents and deans (with their assistants), principals and counselors to gently restore those who have fallen. They are charged in a particular way with the care of souls, with discipline (discipling), with rehabilitation of young Christians who fall into manifest sin.

These men and women are equipped and qualified for this difficult and rewarding task by the Lord who called them to this special ministry. They are experienced in the evangelical care of souls. They have the marvelous resource of God’s Word to draw upon. They have inherited and learned that special Lutheran understanding of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

How much shall the essayist say here? How much should be reviewed? The young person who has been caught by a sin is a baptized child of God. The assumption must always be that he or she is a fellow believer, receptive to the Word of God. Christians frequently do unchristian things, but we do not then conclude that they have ceased to be Christians. What they have done is unacceptable, but that does not mean that we reject them. We do not say, “Anyone who does such a thing is not a Christian.” We say rather: “That is not a Christian thing to do.” Or we ask, “Was that a Christian thing to do?” We do not ask, “How could you?” We might ask, “How did it happen that you fell into this sin?” We do not condone the sin, but neither do we consign the sinner to destruction. We do not look down our noses, but we do not peek through our fingers either.

Where there is no evident awareness of guilt, the Law of God is invoked to awaken guilt. Where the student seems to be unaware of the spiritual implications of his or her act, the Law of God is cited to make him or her aware. Where the student seems reluctant to accept responsibility for his or her own acts, the Law of God can teach that person to acknowledge: “I have sinned.” The Law of God as we understand it in this context can obviously mean more than specific commands quoted verbatim. It means any Word of God or application of his Word that can be utilized to show the sinner his or her sin. This is not pleasurable work, but it is necessary work. To know where to begin and how much to say and when to quit is an art taught by the Holy Spirit.

The application of the Law is not an end in itself. It is preparatory to absolution, to the word of assurance “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Co 5:19);” that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro 5:8).” The Gospel declares that God has absolved the entire world of all sin, and it assures individual sinners that they are included in the “whoever” and the “world” of John 3:16. The Gospel is not conditioned on remorse, restitution, reformation, or even faith. Rather, the unconditioned Gospel creates faith in God’s forgiveness: “...Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Ro. 10:17).” The Gospel is offered without any ifs, ands, or

but. This is necessary work, too, and we ought to find our highest pleasure in it. It is our reason for being.

It seems to me that spiritual care in case of drug abuse should also include helping a student discover the underlying cause of the abuse, and directing that student to the instruction and encouragement which is available in God's Word. It ought to include praying for (perhaps with) the student. It ought to mean helping him or her find or rediscover a place in the company of fellow believers, "so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (2 Co 2:7)." It ought to mean every encouragement and help to lead the sanctified life as a fruit of repentance.

Perhaps it has been presumptuous of me to tell a group of school administrators and student counselors what spiritual care is. Perhaps the review is good; perhaps you can tell me and one another what else is or ought to be done.

What of the student who must be suspended or expelled? What advice can or should the school's contact with the parents and home pastor offer to them? How much information should be shared? The answers would seem to depend on the student's best interests and his or her continuing need for spiritual care.

Since most drug problems encountered in our schools would come under the heading of "experimentation" rather than chronic abuse, it may not often be necessary to call on other professionals for help. But we ought to realize our own limitations and recognize that chronic drug abuse will require the help of professional drug counselors to deal with the medical, psychological and social aspects of the problem. Lest our spiritual approach be subverted or undone by people who do not share our spiritual presuppositions, it would seem wise to consult with our own agencies for recommendations as to who can offer the help needed and offer it in a way that truly helps the whole person to become whole again.

Educational measures which are spiritual

Drug abuse does not affect only the individual who is guilty of drug abuse. It must have some effect on the whole community as well. Whatever steps are taken in discipline—probation, suspension, expulsion—are motivated and determined not only by concern for the individual's spiritual welfare. They are also motivated and determined by concern for the spiritual tone and climate of the school. The giving of offense, the subversion of discipline, the contagion of negative attitudes and actions would seem to enter into the shaping of policies and procedures in the matter of drug abuse. I recall that Inspector Pless and Dean Tacke and President Kowalke announced expulsions in a way that contributed to the spiritual edification of all who had ears to hear.

Sin was called by its proper name, the forgiveness of sins was proclaimed, forgiveness on our part was enjoined, and we were exhorted to pray for the offender. Those were sad and sobering occasions. They were also occasions on which spiritual educational measures were being taken.

What should our schools be doing about drug abuse? First of all, we should keep on doing what we do and keep trying to do it better. We preach the Gospel, teach God's Word, educate in the light of God's Word, train workers who will communicate God's Word. The certainties and assurances and challenges of the Happy Message of Christ crucified for our offenses and raised again because we are justified create spiritual life. They bring the joy and peace and comfort which drugs can only counterfeit.

Let us rejoice in the Lord always, letting our students see in us and hear from us the freedom and openness and excitement which Christ and His service have brought to our lives without the help of chemical agents. We can be examples of moderation in everything, including the legitimate use of drugs people who “keep training” for the Gospel’s sake. We should nurture the sense of community in our schools, help the least attractive and least promising feel that they belong, inculcate in the natural leaders the sense of being the “brother’s keeper.” In doing these things we will do much to remove many of the underlying causes of drug abuse.

We can provide sober and factual and scientific information on all drugs—not only those which are spectacular or notorious or scary. We should inform students regarding the school’s policies on use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. We can try to convince them of the rightness and wisdom of those policies and enforce the policies in a spirit of loving concern, firmly, and consistently.

More importantly, we can relate drug education and policy to the life of the Christian in the world, not merely to life on the campus. We want to operate with more than restrictions and prohibitions in high school, so that students can handle the relative freedom of college life and the minimal supervision of seminary life and the life of self-discipline which is the public ministry and the Christian life itself. Let us follow ourselves and inculcate in our students the spiritual instruction of Paul in Ephesians 5:15-20: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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