

Trouble brewing: Animated by the Spirit rather than by spirits

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

As an heir of the Methodist tee-totaling commitment, I grew up with a clear sense that alcohol is dangerous and to be avoided. I heard stories of John Wesley's critique of drunkenness in 18th-century England, of how Welch's grape juice was introduced by a Methodist layman as an alternative to wine for communion, and of the links between drunkenness and other sinful behavior. My father regularly invoked Frances Willard, the Methodist laywoman who was a leader of the temperance movement, as one of his heroines. I even avoided "butter rum" LifeSavers: the flavoring, I was told, might lead me down a path of ruinous temptation.

So it was perhaps not coincidental that I was intrigued by what I had been missing. Shortly after my father's untimely death from heart disease, when there were reports of how good red wine is for the heart, I found a healthy justification for drinking wine. I also had a good reason to overcome my embarrassment about what seemed to me an excessively legalistic approach to Christian living. While I knew that drunkenness was destructive, what could be wrong with a drink now and then?

While I still would defend a moderate approach to alcohol use, events this spring returned me to my older Methodist sensibilities and revived my wariness of alcohol. In the first instance, a newspaper story about spring break in Florida focused on college-age women who get drunk in order to justify the sexual experimentation they want to try but will not risk when sober.

Shortly after I read this story, events involving the Duke lacrosse team case began to surface. A set of circumstances and themes turned the case into a national story: race, class, gender, sexual assault and violence, college athletics and its role in higher education, town-gown relationships, and the politics of a district attorney running for reelection. Several months later, many of the details of that March night remain shrouded in conflicting accusations and explanations, precluding clear judgment about the central accusations of rape and sexual assault.

One of the few indisputable facts is that there was a significant amount of underage drinking at the party—unsurprising news given the prevalence of alcohol on most

college campuses. As the stories began to unfold, however, I realized that the issue wasn't just—or even primarily—underage drinking. The real problem wasn't whether the players were 19 or 22; the real problem was the abuse of alcohol and the destructiveness that ensued—regardless of whether it consisted only of boorish behavior and nasty verbal comments (in one rendition of the night in question), or whether it resulted in a horrifying gang rape (according to another account).

It is not easy to raise the issue of alcohol in relation to the party scene on college campuses, or its role in countless other business and social gatherings, because it touches close to home for so many. It turns out that the line between moderate use and abuse is much tougher to draw than we think. Recently my wife and I were saddened to be asked to help two families that were being torn apart by the consequences of excessive drinking.

I began to read more about the consequences of alcohol abuse. I had been reasonably aware of the links between drunkenness and destructive behavior, but I vastly underestimated this force, as well as the strength of existing data. Excessive use of alcohol increases the likelihood of sexual assault exponentially, especially on college campuses. The economic costs of lost productivity due to alcohol abuse have been calculated to be in the billions of dollars. For the overwhelming majority of people in prison, there is a direct connection between their crimes and alcohol or drug abuse.

I could feel Wesley's prophetic critique welling up in me, even as I also knew the risks of sounding like a prudish, moralistic Christian—or at the very least a killjoy. Yet I am also convinced that it will not suffice to simply urge abstinence or initiate a "just say no" campaign for undergraduates and other Americans for whom alcohol use is pervasive in most social gatherings. What alternatives are there?

The fifth chapter of Ephesians offers us a clue. To be sure, the prophetic critique is there: "Do not be drunk with wine, for that is debauchery." Immediately following, however, is a constructive suggestion: "Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:18b-20).

The writer suggests that we all want to be lifted out of ourselves, beyond ourselves. Drunkenness does this in ways that diminish and destroy; becoming faithfully

intoxicated with the Holy Spirit draws people together into life-giving praise.

In the light of Ephesians, I recall that the 18th-century Methodist movement at its best was not primarily a moralistic critique of alcohol abuse or any other forms of sinfulness, but rather networks of Christian disciples inviting people to become intoxicated with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps a small change in the weekend parties we choose to attend could make a huge difference—and an important, faithful witness. We can offer such a witness to young and old, blue-collar and well educated, when we risk participating in worship and parties that are animated by the Spirit rather than by spirits.