

Waking to Legalization: A brief theology of dope

Let's just say that the persistent haze hanging over my hometown of Prince George, BC wasn't only from the pulp mills. Yet something changed this past month when we Canadians awoke to a new notoriety as the most populous country in the world to decriminalize cannabis for recreational use. The true north, strong(er) with weed?

The rapid climb of marijuana into social acceptability has caused a certain degree of anxiety among some: "Oh no! Our society is going to *pot!*" Instead of a kneejerk pulling away (as from a flame), let's collectively exhale and talk openly about this cultural moment. Perhaps the Spirit has something more for us to hear.

False Asceticism

History bears witness to human brilliance(?), ingenuity(?), stupidity(?) in drawing out the mood-altering properties of plants created by our good God: from grapes and barley (4th millennium BC?) to the coca leaf (3000 BC?), tobacco (1000 BC), cannabis (500 BC?) and coffee beans (1400 AD).

According to the Psalmist, God isn't opposed to our enjoying what he has made, including "wine to gladden the human heart" (Ps. 104:15). Even stern old Paul, countering those who think that "no" should be the default Christian response to anything fun, declares:

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.
(1 Tim. 3:4-5)

Paul's words should free us from a fear-based religion that measures spiritual progress by what it rejects, and, in the process, defames our good Creator.

Not mastered

However, as we swerve away from the ditch of false asceticism, we must also hear Paul's words to the Corinthian Christians (written in the context of warning against sexual indulgence, but applicable to any potentially addicting habit):

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. (1 Cor. 6:12)

Paul is clear that the "Christian freedom" card can never be used to justify an unqualified "yes" to activities or substances that may get in the way of our primary "yes" to Jesus as Lord of our lives.

Yet I think our theology of dope remains incomplete if we stop here. We risk missing a more pervasive haze in the Canadian air.

Disneyland and Coffee

Disneyland markets itself as "the happiest place on earth." And we've all bought the t-shirt.

The Disney philosophy follows us into our daily drive-thru line-ups. For what is a cup of coffee but Disney-in-a-cup? How often do you and I turn to this culturally acceptable (and fully legal) mood-altering substance, hoping that the wondrous, aromatic, magical black liquid might make the organ in our head “the happiest brain on earth?”

The underlying imperative of our culture is this: “If I have the means to remove pain of any sort, I *ought* to do so.”* We have come to believe that we *ought* to “dope” ourselves against pain and suffering whenever it occurs or threatens to occur (which, in life, is most of the time). From cappuccinos to casinos to crack, we live in a “doped” society.

Wake up!

The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to Christians who knew something about pain and suffering. To them, he writes:

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Peter’s words arrive on the heels of his encouragement to be humble (v. 6). It takes humility to admit that I can’t manage (or medicate away) my own anxieties. And the truth is my “dope” does not care for me. The God who is love does.

If Peter can encourage these suffering first century brothers and sisters to cast *all* their anxiety on Christ, what might he say to us? In Jesus,

We are made to live free from anxiety.

Peter goes on:

*Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith,
(1 Peter 5:8-9)*

We tend to associate watchfulness with anxiety (think of listening for sounds outside your tent). But our anxieties have already been displaced onto God’s shoulders. We need not fear; Jesus has won.

Yet, we’d be foolish and naïve to pretend that evil does not continue to wreak destruction in our communities, our churches, our marriages, our own souls. And so, as followers of Christ,

We are called to a calm alertness.

Everything around us works to put us to sleep, calling us to numb our minds with substances or activities (Netflix? snack food? video games? pornography? etc.). Jesus invites us to live alert to reality, “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). When we resist the call to dope ourselves, we resist our enemy.

[And] you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all

* Please don’t hear me saying that we should not avail ourselves, when ill or dying, of analgesics. They are a gift of God in alleviating suffering and improving quality of life for those most in need.

grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

(1 Peter 5:9-11)

Though temporary (“for a little while”), our broken world overflows with pain and suffering. My human brothers and sisters across the street, or across the world, are hurting. If I claim to follow Jesus, who shared in our suffering, I can’t help but do the same.

We are invited to enter humbly into the world’s (temporary) suffering.

To sit in solidarity with the poor, to welcome the refugee, to advocate for justice—in these ways we resist our “doping” culture. Such choices may not be comfortable or pain-free. But at least we’re living awake, seeking a different kind of “high”:

*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God,
so that he may exalt you in due time. (1 Peter 5:6)*

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In this cultural moment, there remains much we could (and should) discuss about the legalization of cannabis in Canada.

For now, I’m feeling the need to get honest about the many ways I “dope” myself. And then to step out into the grace of God, free from anxiety, calmly alert, in the company of the suffering.

Rod Schellenberg serves as lead pastor at Hepburn MB Church, Hepburn SK. This article is based on a sermon preached and discussed in Hepburn in May 2018.