

Confessions of a Sipping Saint

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Being free in Christ means being free not to drink.

With the writing of this article I'm making a vow to God that I will not drink any more alcoholic beverages.

It seems odd, really odd, to see these words on paper. I grew up in a home where alcohol was as taboo as kiddie porn. To my knowledge neither of my parents ever touched a drop of alcohol.

My older brother, Clay, rose to the rank of major general in the U.S. Army the hard way—refusing to drink at the officers' club. He remains one of the few generals in U.S. military history to successfully battle the pressure to drink socially.

My entire childhood life was surrounded by this framework of opposition to alcoholic beverage. I remember the afternoon I discovered that the little bottle opener, which my mother kept in the kitchen drawer and had used for many years, had "Schlitz Beer" embossed in the metal. I showed it to my mother and she instantly threw it down the garbage chute. "I will not tolerate even the shadow of sin in this house," she said.

In junior high school I was influenced by an eighth-grade science teacher, Mrs. Gibbs, who spent half the year teaching us about the dangers of alcohol. She taught us how alcohol kills brain cells—which can never be replaced. She introduced us to cirrhosis of the liver. She taught us what drinking does to the reflexes. Good athletes and good drivers never put alcohol in their system. Drinking wasn't just a moral question, Mrs. Gibbs said, it was biological suicide. I decided only stupid people drank alcohol.

Many of my high school friends—and

this was back in the late '40s—drank. I watched them drink until they vomited. I watched the boys deliberately get the girls drunk, knowing their shallow morality would disappear under the influence of alcohol and they could then use them as sexual objects. I looked on and decided I did not want to be part of that kind of life. I never even tasted what they were drinking. It was stupid.

Even though I attended a Baptist university, and alcohol was never allowed on campus, many of my fraternity brothers got drunk every weekend. I spent a lot of time helping them up the stairs, sometimes cleaning up their vomit. There was always alcohol found at the fraternity dances. But by then my abstinence was not so much a moral decision as it was a way of life. I never so much as tasted beer, wine or whiskey.

Not only was abstinence drilled into me by righteous parents, but I grew up under a teetotaling pulpit as well. In fact, the (then) Southern Baptist church covenant—which we often read responsively in the worship services—carried the phrase "[I covenant to] abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage." Gradually, as the Southern Baptist Convention grew more liberal, that phrase was omitted from the church covenant, as was the every-fifth-Sunday Sunday school lesson on "temperance"—which was really on "abstinence." The legalistic restraints were coming down.

As I grew older and started thinking for myself, intellectual honesty made me realize I could not justify teetotaling as a biblical principle. The Bible called for a life of temperance, not abstinence. If I lived consistent with biblical principles

I was allowed to drink, it seemed, but only with moderation. Despite what the Baptists—and my mother—had taught me, Jesus not only drank wine, but He turned water into wine.

Even so, I chose not to drink. My reasons varied. To drink, even a glass of wine, would have put my career as a Baptist pastor in jeopardy. It wasn't worth it to buck the system. I had enough charges against me without adding that one.

Then there was the problem with my wife. Answering to a board of deacons would be nothing compared to answering to Jackie whose motto was "Lips that touch wine shall never touch mine." Besides, she promised to go straight to my mother if I ever took a drink.

Besides these cowardly reasons for not drinking, there were other, more personal constraints.

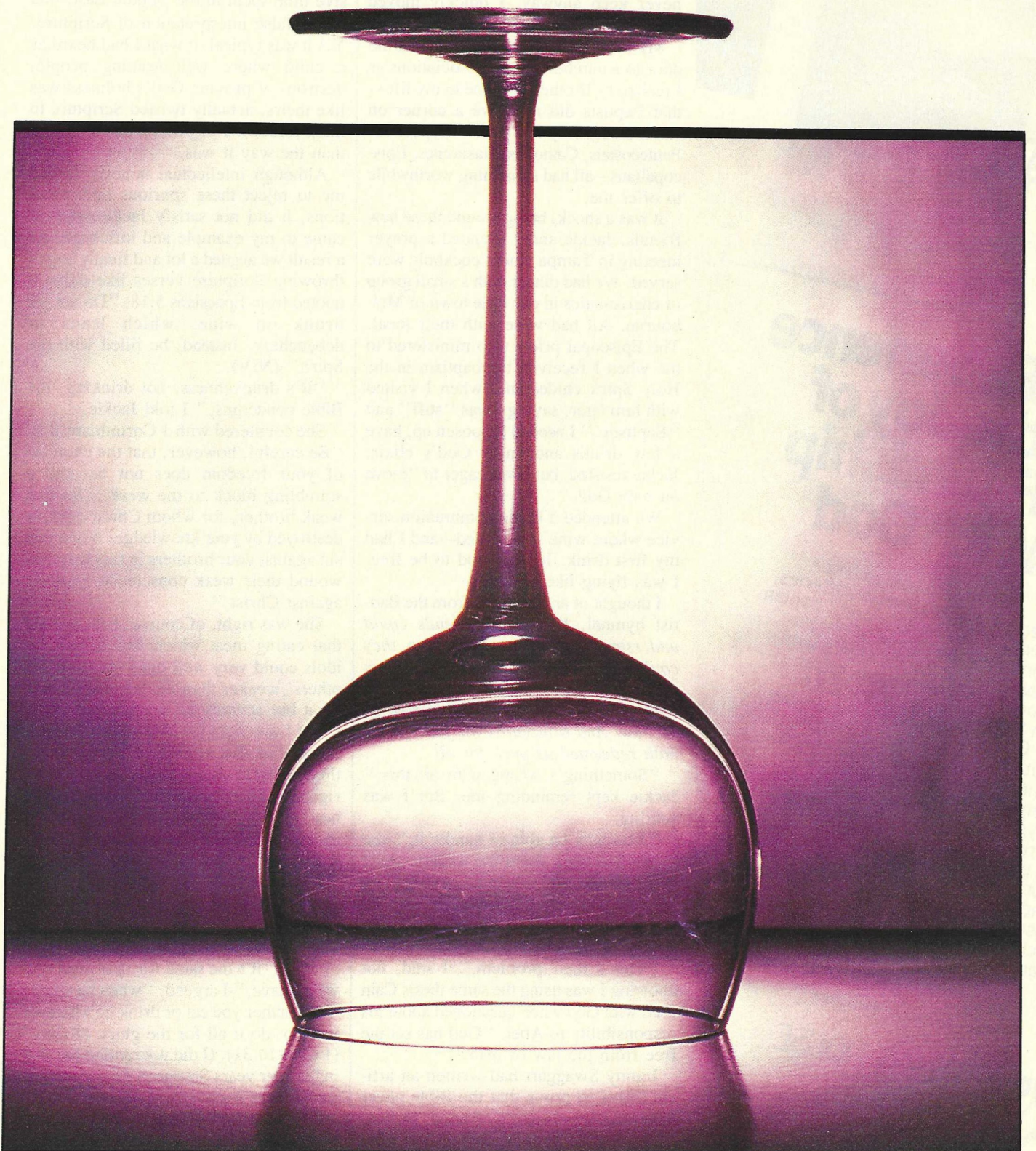
- Deep down inside I felt the beverage alcohol industry was evil. I didn't want to support it.

- I did not want my influence to cause others to start, or continue, drinking.

- Finally, I had a deep, inner fear that with my compulsive (addictive) personality—which at one time showed itself in my overeating and penchant for sexual immorality—that if I ever started drinking I would probably go underground with it and become an alcoholic. ("No one ever takes a first drink intending to become an alcoholic," Jackie kept saying.) So I abstained.

Then, in 1968, I had an experience with the Holy Spirit. Everything about me changed. He literally set me free.

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- Free from my emotional bondage. I could laugh, cry, shout, praise—all without fear of what others thought.

- Free to interpret the Scripture the way the Holy Spirit directed me, rather than the way others directed me.

- Free from what Paul called “the law of sin and death.” No longer did I have to struggle with keeping a law I could never keep anyway. I quickly moved from Exodus to Galatians.

My new walk in the Spirit opened the door to a number of new associations as I realized—for the first time in my life—that Baptists did not have a corner on truth. I suddenly had a new respect for Pentecostals, Catholics, Nazarenes, Episcopalians—all had something worthwhile to offer me.

It was a shock, being around these new friends. Jackie and I attended a prayer meeting in Tampa where cocktails were served. We had dinner with a small group of charismatics in our little town of Melbourne. All had wine with their meal. The Episcopal priest who ministered to me when I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit chided me, when I visited with him later, saying I was “stiff” and “Baptistic.” I needed to loosen up, have a few drinks and enjoy God’s elixir. Jackie resisted, but I was eager to “move on with God.”

We attended a home communion service where wine was served—and I had my first drink. It was good to be free. I was flying like an eagle.

I thought of an old hymn from the Baptist hymnal. *If only my friends could understand what they were singing, they could be free also*, I thought. *Free from the law/ O happy condition/ Jesus hath blest/ And there is remission/ Cursed by the law/ And bruised by the fall/ Grace hath redeemed us once for all.*

“Something’s wrong with all this,” Jackie kept reminding me. But I was soaring.

“You may be able to handle it,” she said, “but what about the weaker ones? What about those whose body chemistry will turn them into alcoholics? When they see you drinking it gives them permission to drink too.”

“That’s their problem,” I said, not knowing I was using the same thesis Cain used with God when questioned about his responsibility to Abel. “God has set me free from the law of man.”

Jimmy Swaggart had written an article trying to prove that the Bible never condoned the drinking of wine. In fact, he went so far as to say that the Passover

wine Jesus drank was really grape juice. He based this on his contention that the Jews were commanded to remove all mold and ferment from the house prior to Passover. Wine was caused by fermentation, therefore the Passover wine was really grape juice.

I knew, from my knowledge of the Bible and archaeology, and from extensive time spent in the Middle East, this was a false interpretation of Scripture. Yet it was typical of what I had heard as a child where well-meaning people, desirous of proving God’s holiness was like theirs, actually twisted Scripture to make it read the way they wanted—rather than the way it was.

Although intellectual honesty forced me to reject these spurious interpretations, it did not satisfy Jackie when it came to my example and influence. As a result we argued a lot and finally began throwing Scripture verses like darts. I quoted from Ephesians 5:18: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (NIV).

“It’s drunkenness, not drinking, the Bible condemns,” I told Jackie.

She countered with 1 Corinthians 8:9: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.... So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”

She was right, of course. Paul argued that eating meat which was offered to idols could very well open the door for others, weaker than he, not only to eat meat but actually to worship the idols.

But I was right too. I used Paul’s argument, from that same letter to the Corinthian church, that apostles have certain rights that others may not have. “Am I not free?” Paul asked. “Am I not an apostle?... Don’t we have the right to food and drink?” (1 Cor. 9:1,4).

I reminded Jackie of Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher and evangelist, who, when asked why he smoked a cigar, said he did it to the glory of God. “It’s the same freedom Paul said we all have,” I argued, “when he wrote: ‘So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God’” (1 Cor. 10:31). (I did not remind her that in his later years Spurgeon gave up smoking because it was setting a bad example.)

“Read on,” Jackie protested. “In the next verse he says, ‘Do not cause anyone

to stumble' " (1 Cor. 10:32).

We were getting nowhere. Finally Jackie said, "You'll have to hear God for yourself. If you want to drink, I can't stop you. But I'll not have it in my house."

But we did have it in the house. I began picking up little bottles of Amaretto di Saronno on the airlines, and bringing them home for an occasional nightcap. And I developed a real taste for Baileys Irish Cream which I mixed with my coffee. Neither had a high alcohol content and I argued that the alcohol in the Baileys quickly dissipated when I poured it into my hot coffee—which was probably true.

I learned the difference between dry and sweet wines and was eventually able to read a wine list at a restaurant. On the airplane, especially the long flights when I was able to cash in a free mileage certificate for a first-class seat, I enjoyed sipping a "mimosa"—a mixture of orange juice and champagne. When the wine coolers—mixtures of wine and fruit juices—became popular I quickly added these to my list of things I sometimes ordered when I went out to eat with drinking friends. I never did drink hard liquor, but enjoyed the *social suaveness* that goes with a glass of wine by candlelight at a darkened table in a romantic restaurant.

Yet I never was "spiritually comfortable" with my new freedom. Nor was I comfortable with some of the other charismatics who were enjoying the same liberties. Frank, for instance, was a former fundamentalist pastor. Like me he had never had a drink until he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. He quickly developed a taste for beer and began drinking cocktails.

A brilliant intellectual and traveling teacher, he also served as an elder and preaching pastor in our church. In the fall of that year I took him with our staff pastors on an overnight retreat. We were using the retreat lodge at Dunklin Memorial Camp—Mickey Evans' alcohol and drug rehabilitation center, located near Okeechobee, Florida—about 100 miles away. The final evening Mickey—a former Baptist preacher who founded and directed the camp, whose father had died of acute alcoholism—invited us out to dinner at a fish camp on Lake Okeechobee. He brought several of his men who had just completed "the program."

We met at the fish camp and sat down to order—fried catfish and hush puppies. As the waiter left our table Frank spoke up. "These fundies won't like it," he

laughed, "but bring me a beer."

He was right. I didn't like it, nor did Mickey—especially in front of three men who had just finished a 12-week alcohol rehabilitation program.

When I confronted him after dinner he was arrogant and defensive. "I don't mind if you drink privately," I told him, "but you're not walking in freedom, you're flaunting it."

"If Jesus were here He'd probably spend His weekends in a local bar," he argued.

"You're right," I conceded. "But Jesus would not be there for the reason you'd be there. He would be there to lead men into the kingdom of God."

Things got worse. After a sermon in which he chided our people—some of them reformed alcoholics—for not drinking, saying they were bound in legalism, I felt he had gone too far. I told him he could not speak from our pulpit again. He immediately left town, angry and accusing me of being a legalist.

"But I'm not a legalist," I told my wife. "I drink an occasional glass of wine."

"Are you doing it to prove to yourself you're free?" she asked. "If so you are just like Frank—only you're hypocritical. At least he did his drinking in front of everybody."

She was right. My drinking was hypocritical. Yet the reason I did not drink in public (except with those select few who drank with me) was I did not want to influence "the lambs" in the kingdom to do as I was doing.

I thought of how much I admired my old friend John Sherrill. After a lifetime of "Anglican" drinking, John, one of the world's great Christian writers, realized that liquor had demonic powers. He renounced it as a way of life. Now when he attends a party and liquor is served—even if it's only spiked punch at a wedding reception—he says, "No, thank you. I'm an alcoholic."

I've never believed John was an alcoholic. But he was headed in that direction. And he discovered that saying, "I'm an alcoholic" usually puts a stop to people who pester you with "Oh, come on, one drink won't hurt you."

Why did I admire John—and detest Frank?

Did it have anything to do with my own hypocrisy—and a covered conviction that drinking, for me, was wrong.

A close friend in the medical field, a member of our home group, said to us, "I have an addictive personality and should stop drinking. I want you to hold

me accountable." But when we started doing that, he grew angry at us. For this, and other associated reasons, he not only left the group, he left the church. He so increased his drinking it scared me.

"I can handle it," he said defensively. It was the same attitude and words I've heard from countless alcoholics.

Last year I wrote a book with Congressman Bill Nelson on the American space program. A longtime friend and member of our church, Bill was chairman of the House Subcommittee on Science and Space Applications. He had trained and traveled as an astronaut on America's last successful shuttle mission into outer space prior to the Challenger disaster. During the time of research I traveled with him to Houston to the Johnson Space Center to go through some of the astronaut training procedures. One night Bill hosted a dinner so I could meet his fellow astronauts. I was deeply impressed when Bill asked for ginger ale rather than wine. Later that night, as we got ready for bed in the hotel room we were sharing, I asked him about it.

"The last time we were together you had a drink. Why not tonight?"

Bill then went into detail, telling me of

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the strong conviction he had developed as he was training for his flight into space. He realized as a Congressman, and as an astronaut, he influenced a number of people. Therefore, not only as part of his training, but as part of his life-style from that time on, he would not drink any more alcoholic beverages.

It made a strong impression on me.

The list of grievances against alcohol increased. New Year's Day I received a phone call from some close friends, members of our church and neighbors. Their 21-year-old son had just been found dead. He had gone to a party the night before and gotten drunk. Another boy, also drunk, let him spend the night with

him. They slept in the same waterbed. During the night my young friend vomited in the bed. Too drunk to turn over, he drowned in his own vomit. I conducted the funeral, attended by several hundred young people. I used the time to warn them of the dangers of alcohol. That night, over a glass of wine, I lamented the tragic loss of this young life.

Then a series of events drove me to make my own decision.

It began one morning when I picked up the newspaper. On the front page was a picture of 25-year-old Bruce Kimball, one of the world's top divers and a silver medal winner in the 1984 Olympics. He was a shoo-in to win a gold medal in Seoul. But in one tragic moment, all that had been snatched from him.

The article began: "Olympic diver Bruce Kimball told police he had been drinking before losing control of a sports car and crashing into a group of teenagers, killing two and badly injuring six others.

"Shortly before 11 p.m., police said, Kimball lost control of his 1984 Mazda RX-7 as he drove down a dead-end road at close to 90 miles per hour and ran

through a crowd of 30 to 40 teenagers gathered at a popular roadside meeting place called 'The Spot.' He admitted to having just drunk four beers.

"One witness told the newspaper Kimball climbed out of his car after it skidded to a halt and asked if everyone was all right. When he saw the bodies scattered about, he reportedly fell to his knees, pounded his fist on the pavement and moaned, 'Why me, God, why me?'"

I sat at my breakfast table and cried. What a tragic waste. Children killed. Others maimed for life. A world-class athlete destroyed forever. All because of alcohol.

I turned the page. A headline screamed, "Alcohol Linked to Three Deaths."

The grim story followed: "Three people were killed instantly when the car they were riding in was struck head-on by a pickup truck on Route 75 in Gainesville. The driver of the truck, 22, was under the influence of alcohol...."

Twenty-two years old.

I thought of that young man in Kentucky who, after a night of drinking, got in his pickup and headed the wrong way on the interstate. His head-on collision with a school bus filled with Assemblies of God children and adults means he is being charged with 27 counts of murder.

The following Saturday night—in fact, it was 2:48 a.m.—my phone rang. Jackie answered. It was Jerry, my son-in-law, the husband of my baby daughter. He was in jail. Sandy was in jail. The young couple with them were in jail. "Where's the baby?" I heard Jackie scream.

They had gone out the night before, their first outing since the baby—then 6 weeks old and nursing—had been born. They left little Logan with Jerry's parents, promising to be back by 11 p.m. They wound up at the Hilton Hotel on the beach—a swanky night spot. Coming out of the lounge Jerry saw several deputy sheriffs standing nearby. His tongue loosened and his good sense impaired by two beers, he decided to do something funny. He "oinked" like a pig as he walked by. The next thing he knew he had been clobbered with a night stick and was lying on the pavement in handcuffs.

When Sandy, who had not been drinking, screamed out, they grabbed her hair, slapped her in cuffs, and threw her into the back of a patrol car. The same thing happened to the other couple.

It was a nightmare. They refused to let Sandy call for her baby, who was nursing. Jerry's dad spent all night arrang-

ing bail money and getting them out of jail. Fortunately the baby slept through the night—his first time ever.

What followed was worse. Jerry was charged with three felonies and Sandy, a misdemeanor. Before it was settled we had to hire lawyers and make several court appearances. All because of two beers.

The young couple learned a valuable lesson.

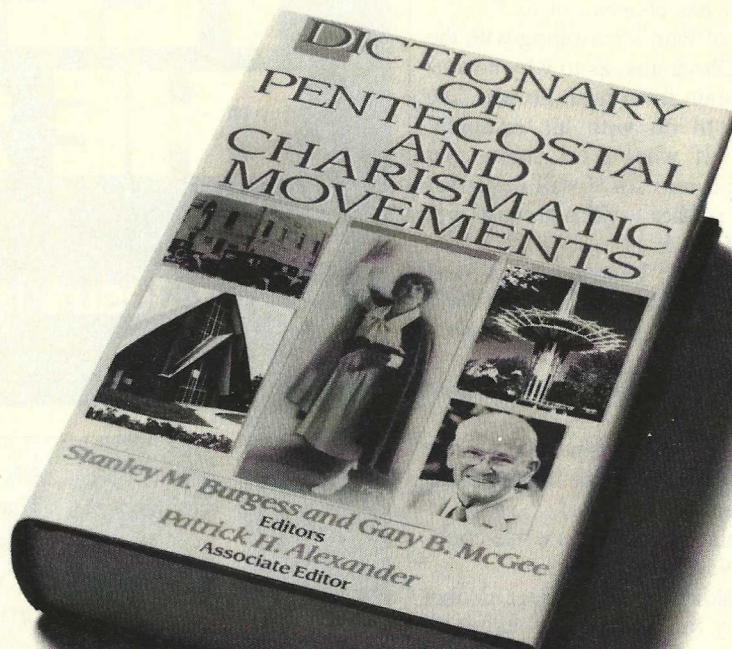
The following week I rose early one morning and went down to my study. I

had been fasting for almost two weeks but it had not crossed my mind that God might be saying anything to me about my occasional drinking. I turned on the word processor to write my Last Word column. Instead, I typed the first sentence in this article.

I sat for a long time looking at those green letters on the black screen. I knew God had written them through me. I went back upstairs and asked Jackie to come down and talk.

"This is my decision," I told her. "I

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am not setting up a standard for anyone else, but I can no longer support something which causes so much grief and pain. I believe the Bible gives me the freedom to drink. But I also have the freedom to choose not to drink. That is now my choice."

Jackie just squeezed my arm—and cried. "I'm proud of you."

This is simply one man's stand. As the ancient Nazarites took a vow to refrain from alcohol, so I am taking a similar vow. It is my way of saying I will no longer be a hypocrite.

"Why are you doing it?" Jackie asked.

"For others," I said. "For my children, and for their children. For the members of my church. For anyone who reads my stuff or hears me speak. I want them to know that there is one man who is free to drink and has chosen not to."

The heart of Paul's reasoning with the Corinthian Christians, as to why he was going to abstain from meat he was free to eat, had to do with his example. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13).

Later he wrote: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Cor. 9:19).

- Does this mean I will not drink communion wine? No.

- Does this mean if I am overseas and the only thing fit to drink is wine, that I will abstain. No.

- Does this mean we'll not use cooking wine? No.

I am not taking on the beverage alcohol industry, any more than I am taking on any other big industry. I am not going to become a crusader against alcohol. I am not going to reject my friends who still drink.

What this decision does mean is when I am in a restaurant I will turn my empty wine glass over in the presence of all. If someone asks why (and I hope they will), I will tell them. It means I will not tolerate liquor in my home. It means I want my children and my friends to know I have taken a quiet, yet firm, stand. I do not drink.

It means I am returning to the position of my mother, my brother, my wife and Mrs. Gibbs, my science teacher. But I am not doing it for legalistic reasons. I am abstaining as a matter of conscience—as a matter of choice.

I still believe Jesus created and drank wine. Would He drink if He lived in to-

day's corrupt society? I do not know. The more pertinent question is: Does He want *me* to drink in today's corrupt society? The answer is no. Paul said, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too" (1 Cor. 10:21). I choose not to drink from the "cup of demons."

I hope, by taking this stand, others will do the same. ■

Jamie Buckingham is editor at large for *Charisma* magazine and editor of *Ministries Today* magazine.

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