

## WINE, WOMEN, AND SONG OF THE SPIRIT

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 2:1-17

In the 1800s, the United States had a drinking problem. Americans—mostly men—were consuming far too much alcohol. In 1830, at its worst, it is estimated that the average American adult imbibed 7 gallons of alcohol a year. That's not 7 gallons of beer or wine, that's 7 gallons of ethanol. Beer is about 5% ethanol. You would have to drink 140 gallons of beer to take in 7 gallons of ethanol. I did the math and it works out to be 4 cans of beer every day. But remember, that is on average. Today, the amount that Americans drink has dropped to a third of what they drank in 1830. Today, we consume 2.3 gallons per person per year. However, 30% of Americans don't touch alcohol at all.<sup>1</sup>

Even by the early 1800s, Americans recognized the danger of society's excessive consumption of alcohol. Out of this concern grew the Temperance Movement. The Temperance Movement peaked in 1919 with the ratification of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of alcohol for consumption. Arriving at Prohibition sounds simple, but the reality is far more complex.

The ratification of the 18th Amendment was part of a much broader effort to strengthen American community. At the time, American society was structured on the framework of the family. The social contract of the day stipulated that men would work and earn a wage to financially support their family. The women would keep the household and raise 'virtuous' children. The problem was that too many men were spending their wages in bars and saloons leaving their families without enough money for rent, food, and clothing. The women demanded that men uphold their end of the contract.

But, beyond just wives not being happy with their husbands' drinking, the wider society viewed alcohol as a moral threat to the country's foundation. Today, we have the notion that the temperance advocates were all puritanical Bible-thumpers hell-bent on opposing anything fun in life. That's not accurate. Religion did have a voice in the Temperance Movement, but alcohol was viewed as a public health issue.<sup>2</sup> It impacted worker absenteeism and workplace safety. Drinking at work certainly didn't mix well with heavy machinery.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://apnews.com/f1f81ade0748410aaeb6eeab7a772bf7>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/01/todays-the-100th-anniversary-of-prohibition-heres-a-distillation-of-3-myths-about-the-temperance-movement/>

Public safety was not the only issue. Alcohol was also linked to political corruption. The 18th Amendment was one of a package of four anti-corruption amendments added to the Constitution between 1913 and 1920.

The first of these—the 16th Amendment—introduced a federal income tax. Prior to that, the federal government had been funded by sales tax. Do you want to guess which industry generated up to 30% of the nation's sales tax? Alcohol. Alcohol was a massive industry and a powerful political force. However, they knew they could not reduce the nation's alcohol consumption without supplying the government with an alternative stream of revenue. Hence, the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment—  
income tax.

The passage of the 16th Amendment is closely related to the passage of the 17th Amendment the same year. The 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment changed the method of selecting U.S. senators. Prior to 1913, U.S. senators were chosen by their state legislatures. The 17th Amendment called for senators to be chosen by popular vote—a vote of the people.

So, what is the connection here? At the time, local politics were often run by political machines. These machines were funded by the alcohol industry. The political bosses often operated out of bars and saloons. It did not help that saloons also often doubled as polling places. This setup provided the alcohol industry, or the “liquor trust” as it was known, with tremendous power and influence. Through the saloons, the wealthy alcohol industry wielded influence over voters and the elected officials, including legislators. It was not difficult for the alcohol industry to select their own U.S. senators. The 17th Amendment was an anti-corruption measure designed to remove the selection of senators from the clutches of the powerful liquor trust.

Even with these two new amendments, alcohol remained a scourge on society and needed to be tamed. Temperance Movements sought to accomplish that through such organizations as the Anti-Saloon League, the Cadets of Temperance, the American Temperance Union, and, of all things, the KKK.

However, given all these efforts at social reform, what portion of the population was denied a voice? Women. Women had no vote and little power to reshape the political landscape.

Securing the right of women to vote was the goal of the Suffrage Movement. One of the most powerful figures in this movement was Alice Paul. She was one of the organizers of a parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in March, 1913. This parade called for a constitutional amendment for women. Eight-thousand women participated in the parade with nine bands, four mounted brigades, 20 floats, and

more.<sup>3</sup> In 1917, Alice Paul organized a peaceful picket of the White House that would last for eighteen months. She was arrested for this. In jail she went on a hunger strike. She was removed to a mental asylum to be force-fed.<sup>4</sup>

The Temperance Movement and the Suffrage Movement realized early on that their goals were interrelated. The two sides learned to coordinate their efforts. They developed a powerful voice. In 1912, the president of the National Retail Liquor Dealer's Association declared to the industry, "Gentlemen, we need fear the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the ballot in the hands of women; therefore, gentlemen fight women's suffrage."<sup>5</sup>

In 1919, Prohibition was ratified with the 18th Amendment. Prohibition was put forward first because it was believed to be easier to pass than Women's Suffrage. Yes, Americans thought it would be easier to give up alcohol than to allow women to vote. One-hundred years ago this summer, in August 1920, thanks to the Great State of Tennessee, the 19th Amendment became law. It is important to point out that Suffrage was not granted as a reward to the women for their support of Prohibition, but an acknowledgement that the women's vote would be needed in the future to maintain the social improvements and anti-corruption progress that had been made so far.

As we see in our scripture reading for today, those early Americans were not the only ones with a drinking problem. The followers of Jesus had a drinking problem as well. At least, that is what they were accused of. As we read a moment ago, the followers of Jesus were gathered in Jerusalem. Luke has already told us that they numbered about 120 people—men and women. They were telling the crowds about Jesus. But some people scoffed at them and dismissed them saying, *They are filled with new wine*—that they were drunk. But, as we will see, they were not drunk but were filled with a different spirit—a spirit of change, a spirit of new life, a new reality.

The Book of Acts begins with the image of Jesus ascending into heaven. Before he leaves them, Jesus tells his followers, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8). Jesus then ascends into heaven—the last time the disciples will see him. The group returns to Jerusalem to wait as Jesus commanded.

They wait, and on the day of Pentecost, they are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem when something happens. Pentecost<sup>6</sup> was a Jewish festival. It celebrated God's giving the Law to Moses. On Pentecost, as the followers are gathered, in the house there is a great and terrible noise. It sounded like a violent, rushing wind. It

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/03/100-years-ago-the-1913-womens-suffrage-parade/100465/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/alice-paul>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.readitforward.com/authors/liberated-spirits-hugh-ambrose/>

<sup>6</sup> Also known as the Festival of Weeks.

wasn't a wind, but that was the noise it made. And then wisps of light appear, looking like flames of fire, moving through the room, and settling on each person in the room. And as these flames settled—just as Jesus warned—each person is filled with the Holy Spirit. Then each of them begins to speak in a different language. The Spirit is at work.

Because it is Pentecost, Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims and worshipers who have traveled to the holy city from points across the known world. Here, we find that wonderful list of cultures and nationalities: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, and so on. It's like the roll call at the United Nations. All the world is present.

Because of the racket and commotion of this theophany, these pilgrims are drawn to the house where the followers of Jesus are gathered. Those who were in the house have now spilled out into the street among the curious crowd.

The pilgrims are amazed to hear these Galileans speak in different languages, languages they understand. Jesus' followers are preaching and telling those in the crowd about *God's deeds of power*.

Not everyone is impressed. Some accuse the disciples of being drunk on *new wine*. There is a reason for this. As those coming from other countries would know, in some religions, believers used wine to "enhance" their prophetic abilities. I think we can all figure that one out.

Confronted by this baseless accusation, Peter steps forward. He assures the crowd that these people are not drunk on cheap wine. They are filled with the Holy Spirit. He quotes the Old Testament book of Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. *Sons and daughters shall prophesy. Young men shall see visions, and old men shall dream dreams*. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter goes on to preach the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all people. The crowd responds to Peter asking what they can do. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. They do as Peter instructs and we are told that 3000 people are baptized that day. The Christian Movement takes shape. The believers share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. They embrace a new reality. The church comes to life.

The Holy Spirit is powerful. It moves through us, connecting us to each other and to God. It inspires us and pushes us; it guides and directs us in the ways of living with God. The Holy Spirit is God with us. We should embrace it. It is a new way of being. It is a new life.

In the Pentecost story, Peter makes it clear that his people have not been drinking. But I argue that they were indeed filled with new wine. Do you remember the parable that Jesus told about new wine? (Luke 5) New wine must only be put into new wineskins. The followers of Jesus—including all of us—are new wineskins. The Holy Spirit is the new wine poured into us. This new wine fills all believers with the gift to be witnesses of God's great deeds of power and to sing the song of the Spirit into the world. Let us sing!