The Christian and Tobacco

by Jerry Johnson

If the use of tobacco is proper for Christians, it can be defended by Scripture and reason. If improper, we need to know it. Do the principles of God’s Word condemn or condone it? Is it an inordinate craving, a lust of the flesh, or not? If so, is it an appetite that is excusable? What does it do to our bodies? Excepting that it is legal, does its use differ materially from the abuse of other drugs, such as marijuana? How does it affect our Christian influence?

The Industry

The tobacco industry has spent over half a century and billions of dollars attempting to convince us that smoking and other uses of tobacco are directly linked with the beautiful and enjoyable things in life. Handsome young men, pretty girls, and sparkling mountain lakes are consistently a part of tobacco advertising. Smokers are portrayed as active, attractive, and sophisticated. Men are left with the distinct impression that it is the manly thing to do; with young women, it is "chick."...it is life at its very best.

What has the industry accomplished with such approaches? Much! Almost a million teenagers take up smoking every year. (And the percentage of girls among them now exceeds the boys.) One third of all adult Americans smoke. Per capita consumption of cigarettes in the United States is some 4100 cigarettes per year for those over 18 years. Upwards of 30 billion dollars are spent on cigarettes alone each year. Even though these statistics are not representative of Christians, they are nonetheless illustrative. Concern is warranted.

The use of tobacco can be both an addiction and a habit. Since it is indeed difficult for one to give up a pleasure once experienced, we must acknowledge the importance of influencing fellow Christians to never begin using tobacco, being especially considerate of our youth. On the other hand, addiction, health, influence, and other factors underscore the urgent necessity of influencing current users to quit.
Tobacco and Health

The Surgeon General's report of 1979 informs us that smoking is the single largest preventable cause of death in America today. This has been documented by extensive research over a period of many years. Within the past 15 years, the use of tobacco—mainly cigarettes—has been universally condemned by authoritative medical groups and governmental medical officers. The introduction of the HEW report titled Smoking and Health states that its material "demolishes the claims made by cigarette manufacturers and...others...that the scientific evidence was sketchy; that no link between smoking and cancer was 'proven.'...Today there can be no doubt that smoking is truly slow-motion suicide."

(The attempts of major tobacco companies to discount the very positive and very conclusive evidence against the use of their product is expected. Many billions of dollars are at stake. But facts are stubborn things. Study after study produces the same conclusive findings.)

It is difficult to know how strongly to emphasize the health aspect in a work of this sort. We are convinced, however, that every Christian should be concerned with properly caring for this "tabernacle" which we inhabit (2 Cor. 5: 1). It seems unreasonable to require diligence in the proper stewardship of material blessings God provides, yet disclaim any responsibility for caring for our bodily health (which body He also provides). A few documented health related facts are in order.

A pack-a-day smoker pours a cup of tar into his lungs each year. Smoking increases the overall risk of disease tenfold. Smokers are sick in bed an estimated 88 million more days each year than nonsmokers. Smoking related disorders are estimated to cause some 350,000 premature deaths every year. A 30-year-old male who smokes 15 cigarettes per day may expect to die five and one-half years earlier than if he had not smoked. A 25-year-old who smokes two packs a day can look forward to being buried as much as eight and one-half years prematurely.

Smoking is the cause of about 30 percent of all cancer. It is responsible for some 75 percent of lung cancer cases, and will soon make lung cancer the number one cancer killer of American women. The use of tobacco, including cigars, pipes, and "smokeless" tobacco, is a significant factor in the development of oral cancer, and cancer of the pharynx, larynx, and esophagus. At these sites, the cancer death rates of pipe and cigar...
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smokers are approximately equal to those of cigarette smokers. Chewing and dipping irritate the soft tissue of the inside of the lip and cheek, causing leukoplakia, a wrinkling and thickening of the tissue. This is brought about by irritation from direct contact with the tobacco juice, which contains many cancer producing substances. About 6 percent of leukoplakia patients develop oral cancer. A recent study of snuff users showed a 400 percent increase in mouth cancer, and a 50-fold increase in cancer of the cheek and gums, as compared with nonusers.

Smoking is a major cause of heart disease, with smokers having an approximate two-fold greater risk of dying from heart attacks. Smokers die of strokes three times as often as nonsmokers. Smoking is specifically related to 80 percent of emphysema cases, and 75 percent of all cases of chronic bronchitis.

The expectant mother who smokes, increases the risk of miscarriage, and raises the baby’s risk of complications at delivery. The cigarette smoking mother has nearly twice the risk of delivering a stillborn child as does the nonsmoker. Babies reared in a smokers environment have a much higher incidence of lung disease than those among nonsmokers.

Tobacco Addiction

Tobacco contains a colorless, bitter liquid called nicotine (C10H14N2). World Book Encyclopedia terms this substance "exceedingly poisonous" (so much so that it is the active ingredient in many insecticide sprays). It is, by proper definition, a poisonous drug. There is enough nicotine in only three cigarettes to KILL a human if injected into a vein in a single dose. This liquid is the addictive agent in tobacco. Yes, that’s right—addictive. Whether absorbed from the lungs or through the mucosa of the Mouth, or injected from a needle directly into the bloodstream, nicotine is a habit producing drug! This drug is absorbed almost instantly from the lungs, but just as positively through the oral mucosa from pipes, cigars, and chewing tobacco. Current behavioral research indicates that the use of tobacco can be both an addiction and a habit. One researcher noted, if it were not for the nicotine in tobacco, people would be little more inclined to use it than they are to blow bubbles or light sparklers.

Once it is learned that nicotine is a drug, the Christian faces the question of how it can be right to be addicted to one drug (as the nicotine in tobacco), yet sinful to be addicted to another (as alcohol or heroin). That certain drugs are illegal is only part of the reason why they are wrong. Suppose they are legalized; what then? When Paul said "I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12), he introduced a principle applicable to anything which could
grow to control an individual. Paul spoke of mastery over self in these words: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor. 9:27). The New King James version renders it: "But I discipline my body." Most tobacco users will at sometime admit they have no control over their addiction. In fact, this problem is so fundamental among tobacco users, 61 percent of all smokers have tried unsuccessfully to quit at least once, and nine out of ten smokers say they want to quit, yet continue doing the very thing they don’t want to do. A noted surgeon described patients so addicted, that following surgery for cancer of the larynx or lung, they would continue to smoke through a tracheostomy (an incision in the trachea to aid breathing in an emergency). Where is the Christian who can honestly say that an addiction to the poisonous drug nicotine is not an offence to God?

Christian Influence

Webster defines influence as a power. We believe that. Paul advises "Only let your conversation (manner of life) be that which becometh the gospel of Christ." (Phil. 1:27). It is axiomatic that when one professing pure Christianity lights up a cigarette, he puts out his light of good Christian influence, at least this is so with many of the world, and with most Christians among us. We are encouraged that only an extreme few in the church today use tobacco in any form. When I was but a boy, the brethren would gather on the church steps to smoke before and after services like so many crows on a rail fence. Many other congregations were the same. But brethren have grown. Today, I am not sure I could name two dozen brethren among us who use tobacco. I say, brethren have grown.

Christian parents are extremely conscious of the proper training of their children—or at least they should be (Prov. 22:6, Eph. 6:4). Here again, tobacco is obviously foreign to the Christian lifestyle. When Christian parents use tobacco, they teach their children several detrimental things: (1) "This is a proper thing to do"; (2) "Ignore Christian influence, and the feelings and wishes of others (nonsmokers)"; (3) "It is permissible to be addicted to some drugs"; (4) "You need not take care of your health"; (5) "Ignore medical advice.";

Since there is no innate need for tobacco, we conclude its use to be, almost if not entirely, a learned behavior. It is a response to direct and indirect social pressures and influences, certainly including the influences of home. We are told there are two major factors influencing our youth to use tobacco; (1) a parent who uses tobacco, and (2) peer pressure. We can only partially control peer pressure through demands or suggestive selection of whom our children companion with. But we have total control of parental influence in using tobacco. We can leave it alone. The home level of Christian influence cannot be stressed overmuch.
Bible Principles

"Thou shalt not use tobacco" cannot be found in the Book. But the qualities of self-mastery and personal temperance set forth in scripture, are not consistent with willfully being a slave to anything–tobacco, alcohol, hard drugs, or anything else. We cannot read "Thou shalt not smoke marijuana, gamble, drink socially, etc." but the honest seeker realizes that principle passages (as 1 Thess. 5:22, Rom. 13:14), and the pure Christian image projected generally in God's Word, forbid indulgence.

The use of tobacco is a prime example of worldly influence over the Christian. Does not honesty compel the user to agree that the habit identifies one with the world rather than the church? The habit is so clearly unchristian, one cannot conceive of the Lord or one of the apostles using it in any form.

There are a number of very telling questions related to the use of tobacco, which, if answered candidly, build a tremendous case against it.

1. Can you thank God for your use of it? ("In everything give thanks," 1 Thess. 5:18; "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," Eph. 5:20.)

2. Is the habit clean and pure, harmless to your Christian image? ("Only let your conversation (manner of life) be as it becometh the gospel of Christ," Phil. 1:27; the church is to be a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish, Eph. 5:27.)

3. Does tobacco compliment the lives of holy people, separated from all the works of worldliness? ("Abstain from all appearance of evil," 1 Thess. 5:22.)
4. Would our Lord have used it? ("For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harm-less, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens," Heb. 7:26.)

5. Can you ask God to provide it? ("And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us," 1 John 5:14.)

6. Does it glorify God? ("Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God," 1 Cor. 10:31.)

7. Can you do as you wish, counting your conduct as no one else’s business? ("It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak," Rom. 14:21; "For even Christ pleased not himself, but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me," Rom. 15:3.)

It is this writer’s conviction that the Holy Scriptures condemn the abuse of our health as well as the abuse of our Christian image. It is quite obvious that the tobacco user:

Cripples his individual Christian influence.

Condemned—Phil. 1:27, Prov. 22:1

Hinders the influence of the church Condemned—Eph. 5:27

3. Would not advise his children to follow his example.
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4. Harms his health.

Condemned–Eph. 6:4, Prov. 22:6

5. As a habit and an addiction, is enslaved to tobacco.

Condemned–1 Cor. 6:19-20

6. Stands self-convicted in advice to others not to use it.

Condemned–Rom. 6:16

7. Engages in a practice highly questionable.

Condemned–Rom. 2:21,22

8. Tramples on the rights of others.

Condemned–1 Cor. 10:32,33

9. Lays a stumbling block before others, especially youth.
There are many other considerations why a Christian should not use tobacco, but there is not a single valid reason justifying its use.

Conclusion

In January of 1964, Mr. Hugh J. Mooney, 44, learned he had cancer of the throat. He had smoked most of his life. Radiation treatments were not effective. In August of the same year, doctors told Mr. Mooney he would have to undergo surgery. The night before the operation, knowing he would never speak again, he tried to tell his wife how much he loved her and the children. The next morning on the way to the operating room Mr. Mooney said he remembered praying and repeating the name "Jesus," over and over. "It seemed somehow right that this should be my last spoken word," he wrote. Somehow, he observed, after smoking approximately 19,000 packs of cigarettes, he had turned out a bit different from those handsome, healthy fellows the cigarette commercials feature. (The ads will picture the truth only when some agency does a cigarette commercial featuring a patient, like Mr. Mooney, who has lost his throat to cancer, or whose jaw, or lips, or chin has been cut away. Tobacco does that, you know.)

From another viewpoint, bro. Woodard Clouse, many years ago, had worked diligently to influence his neighbors to attend services (they were Adventists). After a considerable time, they consented to attend a gospel meeting. On their return home together after the services, to the dismay of brother and sister Clouse, the couple re