

Responsible Decisions

The Concept
The Teaching
The Moral Behavior

An interview with the Rev. Dr. David A. Works, D.D.
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By
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JES: How did the concept of Responsible Decisions begin?

DAW: In 1955, interfaith community leaders gathered in New Hampshire to talk about pastoral care of alcoholics and their families in the communities in which they lived, worked, worshiped and played. This was the beginning of the annual North Conway Institute assemblies.

In those early days Episcopal Bishop Charles Francis Hall of New Hampshire reminded us that the time had come to move beyond alcoholism to other aspects of drinking. He said that in addition to discussing problems connected with immoderate or wrong use, we needed to talk about the correct or moderate use of beverage alcohol. Such guidance, he thought, would be especially helpful to young people.

JES: What did he mean when he said "beyond alcoholism"?

DAW: Two aspects about alcohol had dominated the American attitude toward alcohol use; alcoholism and drunkenness. Everybody was against immoderate or wrong use which resulted in drunken behavior and eventually alcoholism. But there was little agreement about what constitutes moderate, responsible use of beverage alcohol. Here the deep divisions in the churches and in American society as a whole were all too apparent. But like it or not people, young and old, make decisions about drinking alcohol every day. Guidance was needed.

The policy statements developed at the annual North Conway Institute Assemblies recognized the wide range of attitudes toward drinking which exist in our society. While obviously immoderate drinking is wrong, those people who use beverage alcohol should do so in a responsible way — responsible to God, to their family, their neighbors, themselves — in their commitment as Christians or Jews. Out of this came the concept of responsible decisions.

JES: How do you understand the areas covered in the responsible decisions concept?

DAW: There are two basic responsible decisions. One is not to use, which has been called "responsible abstinence," and the second is "responsible use."

If you abstain, you must do so in such a way that you do not cut off your relationship to God.

That is basic. You love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.

I have had about 45 years of personal responsible abstinence in every area except one. I drink a small amount of wine at the Lord's table in the service of Holy Communion.

I have no objection whatsoever to the moderate use of beverage alcohol to further relaxation and social relationships provided that the users include me as an abstainer in social events, too.

JES: What is the basis for making responsible decisions?

DAW: Morality is the key issue in making responsible decisions. In the church, we think, it must be based on three things: Scripture, tradition or history, and reason. As to the morality of using alcohol, the prevailing tradition of the church has been that there is a right use which is responsible use. A Roman Catholic moral theologian, the late Fr. John C. Ford, SJ, a dear friend who was for many years a devoted member of the North Conway team, stressed the virtue of sobriety. By this he meant that you do not do anything drinking, eating, exercise, sex, chasing money immoderately.

JES: But some say that alcohol is an evil poison. What is your view?

DAW: Beverage alcohol is a good gift of God. In the first chapter of Genesis, you read that God looked on everything he had made, which includes beverage alcohol, and saw that it was very good. Our Lord used alcohol, not only sacramentally at the Last Supper, but socially at the wedding at Cana. Apparently the disciples used beverage alcohol in a responsible way. It is a mistake to say that the chemical alcohol is evil.

Drinking becomes wrong, in the tradition of the church, when it is gluttonous and leads to drunkenness and alcoholism, which separate us from God.

JES: How do you define alcoholism?

DAW: Alcoholism is characterized by uncontrolled drinking and by behavior harmful to oneself and other people. The three key words are: people, control, behavior.

Alcoholism is generally considered to be a disease. People who know the subject and those of us who are deeply steeped in theology and biblical thought regard it as a moral issue as well as a medical and emotional one.

JES: How do you distinguish between alcoholism and immoderate or excessive drinking?

DAW: Alcoholism is a progressive disease; you go from step to step. Drunkenness is the forerunner of alcoholism. A person on the way to becoming an alcoholic usually begins to use beverage alcohol immoderately, drinking to a point of drunkenness.

In the old days people were embarrassed to talk about alcoholism. But Alcoholics Anonymous

helped to get it out of the closet, and shame was no longer part of recovery. By the late 40s and early 50s, many recovering alcoholics were willing to talk about their experiences. People like me, who had been through alcoholism and had come out the other side, began preaching in churches, which began to open their parish houses to AA meetings.

People today are very understanding when someone says, "I don't drink; I'm an alcoholic." This was not true 45 years ago.

JES: From your extensive experience, can you give us some historical perspective on the ways American society has tried to cope with alcohol problems? What about the Prohibition movement, for example?

DAW: The movement got started in the 19th century with the opening of the west, which was accompanied by the heavy use of distilled spirits and the increase of serious alcohol problems. The abstinence movement was also gaining strength in Virginia under the leadership of prominent laymen in the Episcopal Church. When the Civil War came along, characterized by drunkenness and alcoholism on both sides, this lay-led Virginia movement died because Prohibition came to be seen as an invention of the evil Yankees.

The period from 1870 to 1895 saw the development of organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Protestant churches began to say that alcohol problems should be attacked by legislation. The basic approach was to make alcohol illegal.

The financial leaders of our nation were largely responsible for funding the movement to prohibit at the federal level the manufacture, sale and distribution of beverage alcohol. They made the snowballs, so to speak, and the churches picked them up and threw them.

Believing that problems with alcoholism and excessive drinking led to accidents and low productivity, leading industrialists in the 1890s sought ways to make their work force more productive and to increase profits. Although they liked their own glass of wine or drink of spirits at their private clubs, they did not want their workers to drink. The blue-collar workers bitterly resented this class discrimination.

From about 1895 to 1915 Prohibitionists worked to dry up the country state by state. By the time of the First World War the movement was seen as part of the war effort. In 1919, by a very slim margin, the nation voted for Prohibition.

But by the mid-twenties many church people began to realize that Prohibition was a mistake. The rise of gangs in places like Chicago and other major cities, the bootlegging from Canada and overseas, the huge surge in illegal production, the breakdown of law and order, were all embarrassing and disruptive.

In 1933 our nation was bankrupt, in the depths of the Depression; our alcohol policy was bankrupt, too. People decided it would be better to sell beverage alcohol legally and use the tax money it brought in to help us pay the national debt and attack problems of the Depression. On

December 5, 1933, we repealed Prohibition, removing control of the sale or non-sale of beverage alcohol from the Federal Government and turning it over to the states.

JES: After the repeal of Prohibition, what happened?

DAW: A new movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, came out of the Christian Church in the mid-thirties. In the early forties the scientific approach gained strength at the Yale Center for Alcohol Studies. We as a nation were beginning to do something about alcoholism.

After the end of World War II we began to make real progress, but we also had a whole new range of related matters to deal with, such as drunk driving. Waiting in the wings were moral issues and questions of behavior surrounding the social use of beverage alcohol.

JES: What goes into making responsible decisions? What are the factors involved?

DAW: To begin with, people should know some very simple facts about alcohol and the human body's reaction to it. The first thing even a small amount of alcohol does is to hit the front part of your brain, where judgments are made, the kind of judgments you need to make when you drive. Do I pass that car or don't I? Do I take a chance on this intersection? People also need to realize that vision is impaired after only a few drinks — it is like putting blinders on a horse. When you're drinking and driving you don't see that kid on a bicycle; you don't see that you're driving over the center line.

A bottle of beer is equivalent to a shot of whiskey, so if a 150-pound man takes four of either in a row he has enough alcohol in his blood to make him legally drunk in most states. His movement becomes clumsy, his speech impaired. With an additional three or four quick ones under his belt, he becomes an emotionally explosive drunk.

To make responsible decisions you have to know the effect alcohol has not only on your coordination, judgment and vision, but on your emotions. It does have effects, and very quickly, depending on the size of the person.

You have to remember that there is a lot more to drinking than the chemical alcohol. Family background and religious tradition are important. Years ago I got a group of fathers of 17-year-olds together to talk about our kids. One, a Congregationalist hospital administrator, was horrified that his son was drinking beer. On the other hand, an Italian lawyer thought there was nothing wrong with his kids' drinking wine; in fact, he hoped they would do it with him. Here are two entirely different family backgrounds and cultural attitudes.

JES: What is moderation in your view and what is not?

DAW: People need to think and talk about what constitutes appropriate behavior. There is nothing wrong with having wine with dinner or a drink before dinner if you like the taste and enjoy a comfortable sense of relaxation and well-being. That kind of regular use would be called moderate by anyone who believes that drinking is permissible at all.

Some friends of ours who usually have a drink before dinner say grace as soon as cocktails are served instead of waiting to say it at the table. This puts alcohol in its proper place as one of God's gifts for which we give thanks. Saying grace before imbibing leads to moderate, appropriate use, and is a good model.

Gluttony is not involved in moderate use; there is no exaggerated indulgence of the senses in the pleasure of eating and drinking. The important thing is not to drink in any way which results in unacceptable behavior; beverage alcohol is a very powerful adversary when incorrectly used.

JES: What are some of the other factors to consider?

DAW: In determining how much you can drink, you need to ask questions like: Are you an adult child of an alcoholic? Do people in your family drink too much? What is the family's attitude towards drinking? What kind of safeguards do you have if you get into trouble? What do you do about transportation? Even moderate drinking can change one's life style.

JES: Can you define moderate use a little more precisely? How much can you drink and still be drinking moderately and responsibly?

DAW: It is impossible to give a precise amount for 240 million people with all different kinds of backgrounds. Moderate or responsible use has to be worked out by talking about it with each other and gaining knowledge from the excellent material now available. There are many variables such as body weight, gender, drinking experience or the lack of it. Key questions are: What is the meaning of beverage alcohol in your life? How important is it to you?

JES: Does that also mean that what is moderate on one occasion might be irresponsible on another?

DAW: Yes, indeed. Think of driving an automobile or operating any other kind of machinery. I know people who won't use a chain saw after they've had one beer, because even a small amount of beverage alcohol can have a definite effect.

JES: What does that say about riding with somebody who has been drinking?

DAW: Don't do it. When our daughter went away to college we told her that if her date was drunk she should phone us or check into a hotel. It just isn't worth spending six months in a hospital because you don't make that phone call. Parents should make it clear that their children can always call them for a ride home without any questions asked.

JES: So no responsible decision is once-for-all?

DAW: Exactly. People must continue to make the right decision. A decision you made at 17 you might find unsuitable at 27. When you're 27 you may have responsibilities you did not have at 17; your whole economic picture, your family relationships will have changed. If you take a responsible approach, you might perhaps reduce or eliminate drinking for economic reasons. But

if you do not think it through, you may find yourself drinking more heavily in order to stand the pressure of life. At different times alcohol means different things to people.

JES: From the extent of alcohol problems in this country, it looks as if making responsible decisions is not easy. What factors make this process difficult?

DAW: In the first place, it is difficult to get young people to accept the concept of responsible decisions. Why not get drunk? they ask. What difference does it make? Peer pressure is often involved.

JES: Peer pressure is an external force. Can you think of any internal forces that might make it hard to decide responsibly about drinking?

DAW: Many young people feel lonely when they go away from home. They use alcohol to strengthen their ego, to meet other people confidently, to feel better about themselves. In AA you often hear statements like: When I drank I lost my inhibitions; I could talk to people; I could dance; I felt good.

JES: As Dorothy Parker said, "Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker."

DAW: Many young people are socially shy, but after a couple of belts they get over it in a hurry. When alcohol has this much meaning and importance in their lives it is hard to sell the idea of moderate use.

You also need to examine your family patterns, things that do not necessarily have to do with alcohol.

JES: What is involved in a responsible decision to abstain? If it is not completely negative, what are some positive reasons for abstaining?

DAW: One woman I know stopped social drinking many years ago because her husband got into trouble with beverage alcohol. She enjoys a glass of wine and likes a little whiskey once in a while. But she reasoned that she had married him for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, and that one way she could show her love to God and to her husband was by abstaining. Hers is a deeply held religious conviction.

Others may want to set a good example. It is not a question of saying: Don't do it. It's a question of being a role model by showing that you can have a good time without alcohol.

A man I once knew used to buy a six-pack every night. He stopped drinking because he wanted to buy a home in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He figured his beer cost \$50 a week, more than \$2,500 a year, and that he would rather put the money into the house. He stopped drinking for economic reasons.

Finally, some of us think that abstaining is right for us. I feel like Martin Luther King, who used

to say, "Free at last!" I am free from beverage alcohol, and I have a sense of having the monkey off my back. For me, the responsible decision is to abstain.

JES: How do you recommend an alcohol-free way of life?

DAW: As you know, we run an alcohol-free home. Toward the end of our daughter's junior year in high school we asked her to invite six or eight of her closest friends to come to the house for a dinner party. We prepared a delicious meal and used the best silver and china. But we served nothing alcoholic because that's just the way we live. Her friends were impressed by being treated as honored guests at our house; they were used to being sent down to the recreation room with hamburgers and a six-pack of coke or beer.

People must be able to see that it is possible to live well in our society without being a drinker. At the same time - and this is not easy - you have to avoid being hypocritical. Clergy, especially, should avoid going on flaming anti-alcohol crusades that alienate the people who need their help the most. I remember that the minister in the strong Scotch-Irish Presbyterian church in which I grew up used to preach regularly about the evils of booze. Consequently, when I got into trouble in my late teens, I did not seek help from my church because I figured I would be rejected.

JES: How can you teach young people the skills they need to make decisions about drinking?

DAW: Young people learn these skills best by talking with others such as their parents, their teachers and their clergy. They should learn that decisions are best made in consultation with other people. Families should work on this together. Books and pamphlets can also be helpful.

For decisions to be truly responsible, it is important that no bureaucrat in the church world or in the government tell us what kind of personal decision we can make about the use or non-use of beverage alcohol. But that does not mean that you should make this decision all by yourself. It's the sort of thing that ought to be worked out in families. I think it is like reproductive issues: individual decisions should be made in consultation with other people, if at all possible.

JES: How do families help their members to make responsible decisions?

DAW: You need to have open, free discussion in the family. This is almost impossible if you are completely against drinking under all circumstances. Some families cannot handle this; they refuse to have any discussion at all because someone in the family has an alcohol problem.

Good information is extremely important. For heaven's sake, go to the library or the local church and get some basic, fundamental information. Think of the years of effort you have put into getting a 17 year-old kid to be a junior in high school. In 30 seconds he can kill himself on the highway because he has drunk too much.

JES: Does the responsible decisions concept apply in planning social events?

DAW: Indeed it does. People have to learn how to handle the needs of those who do not drink or have decided to stop drinking. If you're going to serve liquor, at least have some food there, and have some attractive alternatives for people who don't drink.

JES: How can the church assist individuals in making right decisions?

DAW: It is important to do things like make good material available in your tract racks and libraries and observe Alcohol Awareness Sunday. Years ago in North Conway we got the local paper to run an notice about AA meetings every week. One woman told me that for five years she had looked every day to see whether the AA group was still meeting because she knew that sooner or later she was going to need it.

JES: So it's a long term process.

DAW: Pastoral care for young people is also important. Whenever I am asked to speak to a bunch of kids in high school, I try to get the local pastor to go with me. I talk to him or her ahead of time to find out if they know about available resources. I explain to the kids that this person with me is the one to talk to if you have a problem at home. It won't cost you anything, and you certainly are not going to get into trouble with your father for going to see the local preacher.

JES: How can the community help?

DAW: The community has several functions. Communities can demand and provide for stricter enforcement of laws about the sale of beverage alcohol to minors. They should make sure that adequate funding is earmarked first for good treatment facilities for those in trouble and for good alcohol education materials and prevention programs.

Behavior typical of the excessive, problem drinker, the alcoholic in his or her late 30s, is becoming increasingly common in people ten years younger. Our communities have to say clearly to these young people: "Here's where you're heading — for blackouts, trouble at school, in your job and at home, drunk driving accidents and convictions. Let's do something about your excessive drinking before you go over the line and become an alcoholic and mess up your life."

We also need to do first-class research, not only in treatment but also in education, and we must disseminate the information we have. We can ask the members of our legislature, our senators, what kind of research is being done on drunk driving, on drugs, on alcohol, and how we can get it into the right hands. Doctors and lawyers need to be kept up to date about material on the effect of beverage alcohol upon human behavior.

We need to ask our seminaries how they are preparing their students in pastoral care to help parishioners, because you can be sure one of the problems they will run into is substance abuse.

JES: What is most helpful to a person trying to make a responsible decision in a real life situation?

DAW: Well, first you have to come to grips with who you are and where you are.

JES: What do you mean?

DAW: Sooner or later everybody has to figure out why they were born and had a chance at this adventure called life. You don't have to do it in the big words of philosophy, but each one of us, consciously or unconsciously, puts together some understanding about the purpose of life and how we are trying to live it.

If you are a Christian, you get your clues from the Bible and the tradition and the older folks you respect when you are growing up. The Christian view is that we were given this life to live in love and harmony with God's creation and all that is in it, with other people and with ourselves. By such behavior we are being responsive to God's will for us.

JES: How does all this help in a particular decision?

DAW: It can help because no single decision is made in a vacuum. Every decision made today builds the path and plan for your life in the future. So have a plan for your life in the stage you are in at the present time. Know your deepest beliefs, your convictions and values you want to live by. Know what kind of person you are now and who you want to become. Know what goals you are working toward and what you want to accomplish in this part of your life. There is a time for work and a time for play. But don't let over-work or destructive play ruin your life's path and plan.

So when you are headed into an occasion where drinking is part of the scene, have a mini-plan for that situation. If you are abstaining from alcohol, practice what you are going to say and how you can ask for and get a soft drink. Nowadays, in most cases, it is no big deal not to drink alcohol.

If you do decide to drink alcohol, set your limit before you start. Know how little you are going to consume. Practice avoiding the pressures of anyone who tries to get you to have more than you have decided. Some person may want you to lose your power of good judgment. Don't let that happen. Be firm. Be strong. In the long run that toughness will gain respect for you as a person with integrity. If you can only be a part of the crowd by engaging in destructive behavior, destructive to your body, your mind and your life plan, then check out. You don't need that kind of crowd. Stick to your mini-plan for each occasion. Decide according to your plan, not impulse or pressure. Remember: less is better than more. If in doubt, don't drink.

JES: This sounds difficult to do alone.

DAW: It is difficult, but it can be done. It has been done. It is a lot easier if as part of your life plan you seek out friends who share your values and convictions. They will back you up in your responsible decisions about alcohol. A really good friend will be there for you and support you in your goals.

Each time you stick by your plan and your deepest convictions, you will gain in personal strength. Your decisions will be guided by God's will and you will go from strength to strength in responsibility to God, your neighbors and yourself.

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The North Conway Institute (NCI) is an interfaith, ecumenical, interdisciplinary nonprofit organization that works with religious and secular groups in addressing problems of alcohol and drug abuse. An outgrowth of the Yale University School of Alcohol Studies, NCI was founded in 1951 in North Conway, NH, by The Rev. David A. Works and a group of concerned clergy and lay persons.

Its major goals are to promote education for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse; to improve care and rehabilitation of alcoholics; to further personal, responsible decision making about the use/non-use of alcohol beverages; and to develop a better climate for discussion, research, and action on all aspects of alcohol problems.

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