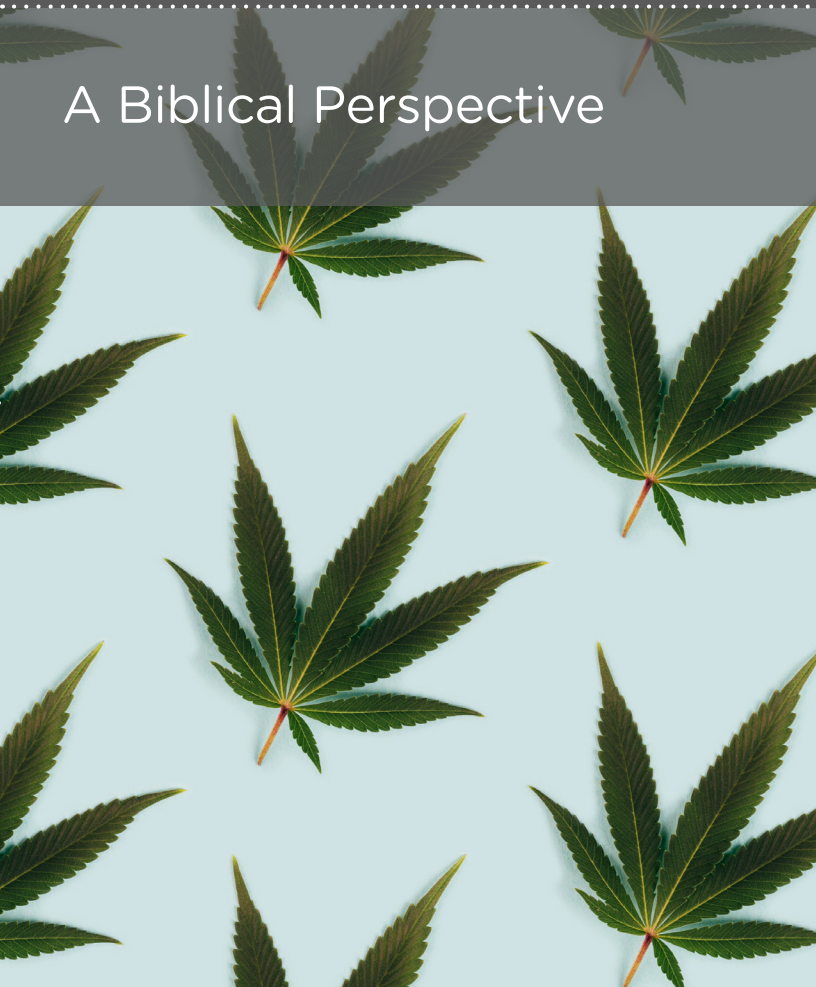


Recreational Drug Use

A Biblical Perspective



Craig K. Svensson

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Robert attended a Bible study for the homeless and formerly homeless in our community for several weeks. During the discussion time one night, he asserted that it was perfectly acceptable for a Christian to use marijuana and other drugs to get high. “After all,” he said, “the Bible does not condemn the use of wine which is an intoxicating substance. What’s different about using pot?” Is Robert’s comparison of pot and wine consumption reasonable?

TJ is a sophomore in college who recently came to faith in Christ. Among his long-standing friends, it is common to dress up in costumes and go bar hopping in the early morning hours before a home football game. They all leave the experience inebriated and head to the stadium shortly before game time. Their intoxicated state fuels the raucous nature of the student section in the stands. TJ is concerned about how participating in this Saturday morning ritual impacts his walk with and testimony for Christ. Is there truth from Scripture to guide TJ in thinking through this question?

These two case studies raise an important question: Is it acceptable for Christians to use drugs for recreational purposes—taking drugs with the goal of becoming intoxicated? A changing legal landscape and shifting public opinion have increasingly made recreational drug use acceptable in Western societies. There are also a growing number of groups who profess to be Christian that advocate in favor of recreational drug use, especially marijuana.¹

Does the Bible give us guidance for thinking about this issue? The objective of this minibook is to help Christians develop a biblical perspective on recreational drug use. What *does* God's Word say about controlled substances? What underlying motivations/heart issues lie behind drug use, and what biblical principles apply? Finally, what are the legal implications of recreational drug use, and how should that inform a Christian's approach to the topic?

What is Recreational Drug Use?

Recreational drug use is defined as the nonmedical use of psychoactive substances for the purpose of creating an altered state of consciousness (either to create pleasurable experiences or to escape unpleasantness). This would include the ingestion of street drugs such as marijuana, heroin, LSD, hallucinogenic mushrooms, or methamphetamine. The consumption of alcohol for the purpose of achieving a state of intoxication is also a form of recreational drug use, as is the inhalation of volatile substances such as glue or spray paint. It also describes the abuse of prescription drugs, such as drugs used to treat anxiety or pain, with the goal of achieving a state of intoxication. Thus, what constitutes recreational drug use is determined by the *intent* of the use of a psychoactive drug rather than the legal status of the substance.

The relevance of this issue is demonstrated by recent trends in drug use in the US. Marijuana and psychedelic use among young adults (ages 19–30)

reached the highest levels ever recorded in 2021.² The National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics estimates that half of all Americans aged twelve or over have used illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime.³ Nearly 50 million Americans have used marijuana over the last twelve months. The growing movement toward decriminalizing recreational drug use is evidence that attitudes toward such use has shifted substantially in recent years. These trends make a compelling case for a clear biblical understanding of recreational drug use.

What Does Scripture Say about Recreational Drug Use?

Despite unfounded assertions by some people to the contrary, the only direct discussion in Scripture concerning mind-altering substances is related to alcohol. Thus, biblical instructions and warnings about alcohol use provide the clearest guide for developing a biblical response to whether taking any substance for the purpose of intoxication is acceptable.

Biblical warnings against intoxication

Scripture repeatedly warns against becoming drunk with wine. The basis for these warnings is twofold: (1) it contradicts the call to live by wisdom, and (2) it impairs the ability to be led by the Spirit.

It contradicts the call to live by wisdom. The early chapters of Proverbs and many other passages in the Old and New Testament commend a life lived by

wisdom. We are to “walk in wisdom” (Colossians 4:5). If we lack wisdom, we are to seek it from God (James 1:5). To be intoxicated with wine contradicts this call. As Proverbs reminds us, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1).

This reasoning is why kings and others in positions of authority must refrain from becoming intoxicated.

It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to take strong drink,
lest they drink and forget what has been decreed
and pervert the rights of all the
afflicted. (Proverbs 31:4–5)

To judge rightly requires right thinking, something that is impaired by alcohol. Thus, it should be avoided, especially by those whom others depend upon. Indeed, this passage suggests abstinence may be the wisest choice for such leaders. The failure to judge wisely because of drunkenness is one reason the Lord condemned the leaders of Israel in the day of Isaiah:

Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!
(Isaiah 5:22–23)