

From the Editor: JAFE375

WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO AS AMERICA GOES TO POT?

by Elliot Miller

This article first appeared in the From the Editor column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 37, number 05 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

I will admit it. Ever since I became a Christian in 1970, there have been times when it felt as though America's moral decline was inevitable. Countering trends such as the Jesus movement, the pro-life movement, and values-based social and political movements may slow down this decline for a time, but they do not reverse it. Eventually, the descent into hedonistic oblivion regains momentum and captures new ground.

The downward spiral has been painfully predictable. The indiscriminate availability of birth control pills in the 1960s paved the way for the sexual revolution, which in turn created popular support for the legalization of abortion in 1973. The ever-increasing legalization of gambling in the USA has demonstrably resulted in an epidemic of societal problems.¹ The rapid social acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate equal rights issue has led to the increasing legalization of same-sex marriage. And the legalization in some states of the medical use of marijuana has set the stage for legalization of the recreational use of marijuana in the same states, two of which (Washington and Colorado) already have taken the plunge.

What should Christians do as America metaphorically and now even literally "goes to pot"? In addition to bringing the gospel to all people, Christians are called to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14). As I pointed out in my book *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Baker, 1989), a primary use of salt in biblical times was to retard the decay of meat. Even if American and Western moral decline is inevitable, it would still be the Christians' duty to slow that process down through redemptive cultural and political involvement, in order to leave succeeding generations with a healthier environment in which to grow up. As I noted above, previous Christian and values movements slowed down the cultural decline, even if they did not succeed at reversing it. But it should also be stressed that *only God knows if such decline is inevitable*. The most unlikely nations have been known to repent (see the book of Jonah!), and America has a history of profound repentances and revivals (e.g., the two Great Awakenings).

Of all the moral issues confronting Christians at the present, perhaps none is more pressing than getting out the vote on November 4 in the states of Florida, Alaska, and Oregon as well as in the U.S. territory of Guam, Washington, DC, and fourteen Michigan cities. Floridians and Guamanians will vote on whether to legalize medical marijuana while all the other ballot initiatives pertain to legalizing the recreational use of pot. Public polling shows majority support for all of these initiatives, but not overwhelmingly so in every case. For example, in Florida as of late September, support has dwindled to 53 percent, and 60 percent is required for passage. If enough Christians turn out on Election Day, it could make a difference in at least some of these states.

Why should Christians oppose legalizing marijuana? Medical marijuana is, of course, the more challenging ethical issue. I watched both of Sanjay Gupta's CNN specials on medical marijuana and brushed away tears as I followed the stories of toddlers Charlotte Figi and Vivian Wilson, whose little bodies were being ravaged by daily, even hourly, grand mal seizures that only medical marijuana seemed able to arrest.

Fortunately, as Gupta himself notes, for sufferers of "everything from chronic pain to lupus, to Crohn's disease, and epilepsy" there is a marijuana strain low in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC—the psychoactive agent in marijuana) and high in cannabidiol (CBD—the chief therapeutic agent in marijuana) now available in Colorado and being made available elsewhere. Already legal in Florida and other states, this variety of medical marijuana, named Charlotte's Web (for Charlotte Figi), is not smoked and does not make one high, and thus is perfectly suitable for small children and any other person with a valid medical need for CBD.

So if the need here is medical, why would we not simply use Charlotte's Web or develop further strains of marijuana similar to it that can be properly prescribed and dosed for a patient's need and do not need to be self-medicated by the patient in the form of rolled and lit reefers, inhaled and held in the lungs until the telltale buzz is achieved? Even if we grant that certain conditions, such as multiple sclerosis and the nausea resulting from chemotherapy and AIDS, require greater concentrations of THC for effective treatment, why can't delivery systems such as pills or syringes be devised that allow the dosage to be measured precisely by medical professions? Why encourage patients instead to participate in reefer culture through regular visits to marijuana dispensaries to purchase "weed" and the paraphernalia necessary to smoke it, and to subject their lungs to carcinogens? For a more detailed and authoritative critique of the case for medical marijuana, please see this issue's cover feature by Dr. Richard Poupard.

I have never doubted that medical marijuana advocates who insist on the need for patients to consume the drug in the same manner as recreational users do have a larger, nonmedical agenda. They aim to establish marijuana as a growth industry in given cities and states and to break down political and social resistance to its legalized, recreational use. With the legalization of recreational marijuana use in Colorado and Washington, this strategy has been fully documented.² It also clearly can be discerned by perusing the website of Marijuana Policy Project, the main activist group working to legalize marijuana.³

But isn't marijuana less harmful and addictive than alcohol and virtually all other drugs used recreationally? Aren't potheads typically peaceful people who stay out of trouble? Isn't marijuana a mild psychedelic (mind-manifesting) drug that can enhance creativity and open the mind to spiritual perspectives? As a former pothead myself, I *concur*: pot is less harmful than other recreational drugs, including alcohol, and does have effects that some would consider beneficial. Yet I am strongly opposed to its legalization. Why?

I first should clarify that I am not saying that marijuana possession should be treated in the same manner as possession of heroin, cocaine, or other hard drugs. I support the idea of treating possession of small amounts as a misdemeanor with a small fine for a first offense and increasingly larger fines for repeated offences, rather than incarceration. On the other hand, possession for the purpose of sale should be classed as a felony and involve jail time.

The argument that marijuana is less harmful than alcohol and therefore it is a double standard for marijuana sale and use to be illegal while alcohol sale and use is not does not fly for at least two reasons. First, alcohol, though certainly subject to abuse, need not be used for the express purpose of intoxication. Many people enjoy the taste of wine or beer with a meal and will normally limit themselves to one glass per meal so as not to become inebriated. On the other hand, people generally do not smoke marijuana because they enjoy its pungent aroma or the feeling of setting their lungs on fire while inhaling its potent smoke! This is a distinction with a difference that needs to be factored in to any discussion of legalization.

Second, the fact that the genie is out of the bottle with alcohol and any talk of criminalizing its use is unrealistic does not lead to the conclusion that we should let the genie out of the bottle with marijuana as well. We already have enough people getting high in America because of the easy access to alcohol, with many of these driving under the influence and/or dissipating their lives—emotional cripples who escape from their problems in an alcoholic haze instead of growing as human beings. Do we want to see the number of such people increase significantly by providing easy access to marijuana as well? How many stoned people can one society stand before reaching a tipping point that affects productivity, health costs, and public safety?

I remember as an eighteen-year-old taking my dad's Lincoln Continental for a spin with my friends while we passed a joint (marijuana cigarette) around the car. I got so stoned that the futuristic (for 1970) controls on the car made me think I was driving a spaceship. Only later did I realize I'd been driving the wrong way down a one-way street. Thank God that the only consequence of this particular instance of oblivion in motion was a few shocked people. Yes, a responsible person would not have driven under the influence, but a certain percentage of any population—especially the young—is going to behave irresponsibly. When marijuana is made easily accessible, the number of incidents like this surely will increase. (As if to underscore the point, the local news just reported that a twenty-one-year-old female, driving with marijuana, a smoked pipe, and other pot paraphernalia in her car, knocked a sixteen-year-old bicyclist over a Vero Beach, Florida, bridge to his death.⁴)

The libertarians among us will protest that there should be no victimless crimes. They maintain that the role of government should be to protect the rights of each citizen to life, liberty, and property, but not to legislate morality. While I too value the rights of life, liberty, and property, I find the libertarian belief that less government is always better government to be naively optimistic, as if people will naturally do the right thing when left alone.

Law has didactic value in a civilized society. When government brands a specific activity as illegal, it is sending a message to its citizens that the behavior is socially taboo. A government's statutes on behaviors, ranging from prostitution to abortion to gambling to recreational drug use, help frame the moral universe its citizens inhabit.

For example, not too many decades ago, most Americans had to leave their state and visit "Sin City" to gamble. Now that all states besides Utah and Hawaii permit gambling at least in one form and often in many, people are much less likely to consider gambling a vice. In fact, with twenty states actually facilitating and encouraging gambling through state-run lotteries, people often view their gambling as a *public service*, since the money *allegedly*⁵ increases funding for public schools or supports some other worthy cause. Likewise, once the recreational use of marijuana is legalized, then the compunction many would experience when they enter the shadowy world of an illegal activity will be gone. Marijuana legalization undoubtedly will result not only in significantly greater marijuana use but also in one more searing of the collective American conscience.

Let's say that despite our best turnout at our local polling places on November 4, recreational or medical marijuana becomes legal in our city or state. Or, let's say that one day cannabis is removed from Schedule 1 of the Controlled Substance Act and its possession is no longer a federal crime. What should Christians do?

Christianity Today (CT) has addressed this topic in an article titled "You're Free to Toke Up. But Don't."⁶ *CT* is to be commended for advising, "Don't," but they treated this issue as if it belonged among the doubtful things discussed in Romans 14. In other words, since Scripture is silent on the matter and the practice is becoming legal, only a legalist would tell you it's a sin to smoke dope, but it is not an edifying practice, and so wisdom dictates that you abstain.

Is Scripture really silent on the matter? I'm not a legalist, but I won't hesitate to tell you that Christians should not partake in cannabis. Perhaps a snippet of my personal testimony will help you understand my deep conviction on this issue.

I have detailed elsewhere my search for truth,⁷ which first led me through a study of philosophy that dead-ended, and then led me in desperation to experiment with psychedelic drugs, which resulted in my conversion to Eastern philosophy. The same account also details how the risen Jesus Christ dramatically intervened not once, but twice in my circumstances, in ways I could not deny, to bring His gospel to me.

As my published testimony details fully, the one sore point between the Lord and me during this period was my use of drugs, particularly marijuana. On the occasion of my first encounter with Christ, the couple in Laguna Beach, California, who led me through the sinner's prayer referred me to Calvary Chapel, at that time just a

little church in Santa Ana that was bursting at the seams with young converts from the drug culture. Seeking to determine my boundaries, I asked the most pertinent question: "Does anybody at Calvary smoke marijuana?" They should have answered, "Even if someone does, you shouldn't!" Instead they soft-pedaled it, with one asking the other, "Doesn't [so-and-so] smoke grass?" From that answer, I gathered something akin to what people might gather from the CT article: "It's not the most accepted practice, but you can get away with it." So after that first encounter with the gospel, my spiritual odyssey continued with a Bible in one hand and a joint in the other.

My ongoing use of marijuana ensured that much of my pursuit of God would be conducted in altered states of consciousness, during which I experienced intense psychic phenomena and received teachings from an Inner Voice I assumed to be God's. My desire to reconcile my use of marijuana with my acceptance of Jesus led me to embrace a New Age/esoteric interpretation of Christianity in which Jesus was an Ascended Master, and we all could become Christs, just like him. My Inner Voice told me that the one thing that stood in the way of my achieving "Christ consciousness" was that I had not yet surrendered possession of my entire being to him. I began to do so, but it was at that point that the biblical Christ intervened in my experience again, making it clear that if I was to follow Him, it would be according to the Bible alone and without the use of psychedelic drugs. I finally surrendered to this living Christ and the occult phenomena that had now become a regular part of my life, even when not on drugs, disappeared. It was replaced by a genuine personal relationship with God, made possible through faith in the biblical Jesus and actualized by the indwelling Holy Spirit. But I still had unanswered questions that weighed heavily on my mind.

Even though I've always been an independent thinker and intellectually confident, on a more personal level, I have struggled since adolescence with negative, self-sabotaging thoughts that seemed to take on a life of their own. One of the desirable effects of marijuana had been that it disrupted habitual thought patterns and usually allowed me to rise above the negativity (although occasionally the exact opposite would happen). When I stopped smoking grass, the negative thoughts returned with a vengeance and were now directly opposing my ability to live the Christian life fruitfully. Although this sounds like the Devil, and the Devil likely played a role in getting this problem started, these were clearly my own run-away thoughts, operating at a level that was hard for me to get a grip on. It was primarily an issue of self-control, not spiritual warfare per se. I prayed about it often to no avail, and I knew that an occasional marijuana cigarette would likely take care of it. On top of this, I still didn't understand exactly what had been wrong with my marijuana use, since it had seemingly made me a better, more spiritually minded person.

One night at the Shiloh house in Ashland, Oregon, where I began my life as a Christian disciple, while everyone else was downstairs, I went into a prayer closet and prayed: "Lord, you know I've given up [psychedelic] drugs and I will never use them again, but please help me understand what is wrong with them." I rose up from prayer, went downstairs, and sat on a couch next to Tom,⁸ the guy whom the Lord had used to straighten me out about drugs, and his fiancée, Liz,⁸ just in time to hear them mention

drugs. “What was that you were saying?” I asked. “I was just telling Tom,” Liz replied, “that I’m writing my sister a letter, because although she accepted the Lord at the same time the rest of us did, she has gone back to smoking grass. I’m writing to warn her that drugs open your mind to a spiritual realm, but that realm is not of God, and it gives you a false peace and a false light so that you think you’re on the road to God, when actually you’re on the road to hell.”

This answered prayer completely satisfied me. I came to understand the subtlety of Satan, who “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14 NASB). It was the beginning of spiritual discernment for me, which would lead me into a lifetime of discernment ministry.

Indeed, decades of research have led me to the conclusion that trancelike states of consciousness, whether produced by drugs, meditation, yoga, chanting, ecstatic dancing, or other methods, are the breeding ground for all spiritual experience outside of the biblical God and Christ. This is why it is necessary for mediums to achieve a trance state before they can make contact with the spirit world. Practitioners of divination and magic also typically induce an altered state in order to make contact with familiar spirits that help them perform their crafts. And the degree of trance needed for mediumship, divination, and magic is generally lighter than the degree of trance achieved through smoking marijuana, so when the Bible condemns these occult practices (Deut. 18:9–14), we can rightly assume it would condemn any other practice that would open our minds to greater demonic influence.

Furthermore, when the New Testament condemns sorcery, the Greek word is *pharmakeia*, from which we get our English word *pharmacy*. The practice referred to using drugs to open the mind to spirits for the purpose of enlisting their aid in casting spells. This does not properly apply to *all* drugs but to drugs that facilitate visionary states; that is, *psychedelic* or *hallucinogenic* drugs. Does anyone want to argue that it is OK to open one’s mind to the spirit world as long as one does not intend to practice occult arts? Think about what spirit world it is you’d be opening up to, and I think it will be clear that these passages apply to the use of such drugs for *any* purpose.

Because we are fallen, evil spirits already have access to our minds. If we disrupt our thought processes and create a passive or void state, they will be happy to rush in and fill that void with their lies. *This is the kind of mental state that marijuana naturally induces.*

The Christian contemplating the use of medical marijuana (high in THC) has to ask himself or herself, “Is physical health more important than spiritual health? Is there a time when taking spiritual risks is justified?” Medical marijuana offers Satan a strategic way to get a stronger foothold not only in the culture but also in the church.

God’s ways often are not the easiest, but they are always the best. Marijuana provided me with an easy way to deal with my negative thoughts, but at the cost of a depersonalization process that was making me less than what God had created me to be (since it was the displacement of my ego or sense of identity that enabled me to slip out of the hold of unwanted thoughts). After struggling for years with this, but hanging in there with the Lord, one day I prayed, “Lord, please show me how to bring my

thoughts under subjection to me so that I can better bring my life under subjection to you." That prayer must have pleased God, because within a few days He spoke into my mind personalized words that equipped me to "bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

God was faithful, as He ever is! He first allowed me to develop the critical spiritual fruit of patience (Gal. 5:22; cf. Luke 21:19; Rom. 5:3–5; Heb. 6:12), and then He gave me an answer to my struggles that brought me more fully into His image, rather than allowing me to diminish it through hallucinogenic drugs. May you be encouraged by my story to remain obedient to God and trust Him for His answers to your prayers, which He will provide in due time. —*Elliot Miller*

NOTES

- 1 See, e.g., "Harms of Legalized Gambling," Illinois Family Institute, http://illinoisfamily.org/110files/uploads/2013/05/IFI_HarmsofLegalizedGambling.pdf.
- 2 See, e.g., "The Great Pot Experiment," *The Economist*, July 12, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21606851-legalising-drug-harder-it-looksgreat-pot-experiment>; "Budding Recreational Pot Industry Sparks Innovation and Investment," PBS News Hour, June 16, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/buddingrecreational-pot-industry-sparks-innovation-investment/>.
- 3 <http://www.mpp.org/>.
- 4 http://www.cbs12.com/news/top-stories/stories/vid_19402.shtml.
- 5 In many states, lottery revenues do *not* increase funding for public schools as originally advertised. See, e.g., "Florida Lottery Facts – Where Does the Money Go?" [<http://www.palmbeachschools.org/budget/Documents/LotteryFY09.pdf>]. See also Elizabeth Hulette, "Virginians Duped about Lottery Funding, Educators Say," *The Virginian Pilot*, November 26, 2011, <http://hamptonroads.com/2011/11/virginians-dupedabout-lottery-funding-educators-say>.
- 6 Andy Crouch, "You're Free to Toke Up. But Don't," *Christianity Today*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march/chance-to-grow.html>.
- 7 Elliot Miller, "From New Age 'Christ' to Born-Again Christian," *Christian Research Journal* 11, 1 (1988): <http://www.equip.org/articles/from-new-age-christ-to-born-againchristian/>.
- 8 Name changed.