

The Federal Council of Churches

Testimony before the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate (1926)

The support of national prohibition by the Federal Council of the Churches rests upon four fundamental considerations.

First. The belief that in dealing with gigantic social evils like disease or crime, individual liberty must be controlled in the interest of the public welfare.

Second. The belief that the liquor traffic is beyond question such an evil.

Third. The conviction that no plan less thoroughgoing than prohibition is sufficient to eradicate the evils of the liquor traffic.

Fourth. The evidence of history that other methods of attempting to control the traffic have failed and that prohibition, despite inadequacies of enforcement, is succeeding better than any other program.

Limitation upon individual freedom in matters affecting society is the price that any people must pay for the progress of its civilization. Personal liberty can not rightly be claimed for practices which militate against the welfare of others or the interests of the community as a whole.

It is especially contrary to democratic ideals and to enlightened public policy to permit any citizen to make profit from a business which is detrimental to his neighbor. This is readily recognized by all as sound policy in regard to the trade in narcotics. It is equally true of the liquor traffic. To insure social protection against a trade whose avowed purpose was to get people to consume the maximum possible amount of alcoholic liquor is the foundation on which our national policy of prohibition rests.

The policy of prohibition was not adopted hastily nor was it foisted upon the country by a puritanical minority. It was first voted in most of the States separately and then nationally, because the people had become convinced that the liquor traffic was a social evil of such magnitude that it had to be destroyed. The eighteenth amendment was made a part of the Constitution by the regular methods which the founders of the Republic devised with a view to making the amendment to the Constitution difficult rather than easy. Yet this amendment was adopted more promptly than any other change in the Constitution ever proposed.

The reasons which led to prohibition not only remain to-day but have been reinforced by the experience of other nations. The social peril of alcoholism is becoming a growing concern to statesmen throughout the world. If serious evils have sprung up since prohibition, they are far less than the evils which arose from the liquor traffic prior to the amendment. The liquor traffic with the accompanying saloon was allied with political corruption, crime, gambling, and prostitution. It meant the wreckage of men and the degradation of families, which social workers and ministers saw constantly in their daily work. It produced needless inefficiency in industry. Moreover, the tendency in the United States, as has been the case in Europe, was toward an increasing consumption of the stronger liquors with consequent intensifying of social hazards. Methods of control short of prohibition, such as taxation, regulations, and the governmentally controlled systems of some of the Canadian Provinces, Norway, and Sweden, have all proved inadequate to cope with the evil.

The proposal to modify the Volstead Act so as to permit the sale of wines and beer presents insuperable objections. It would make enforcement more difficult. It would inevitably mean the return either of the saloon or something equally undesirable. Bootlegging in stronger liquors would become more menacing because it would tend to operate through the places where the milder intoxicants were sold. Moreover, there is no evidence to justify the contention that to permit wine and beer would reduce the consumption of ardent spirits. The teaching of experience is to the contrary.

The one path of advance is for all good citizens personally to observe the law and to support the great enterprise, born of the idealism of the people, of completely ridding the Nation of as demoralizing a business as the liquor traffic has always proved itself to be. Least of all should our prohibition law be changed in response to the cry of those who by their own disrespect for the law are preventing it from receiving a fair trial or who, because of their special interest in the return of the liquor traffic, are artificially stimulating an agitation for changing our present law. The call of the hour is for such a thoroughgoing work of moral persuasion and legal enforcement as will give the policy of prohibition an adequate opportunity to demonstrate its full value to the Nation and to the world.

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The following is taken from K. Austin Kerr, ed., *The Politics of Moral Behavior: Prohibition and Drug Abuse* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1973)