

## Why Prohibition?



**In his 1918 book *Why Prohibition!* dry activist Charles Stelzle argued against the contention that Prohibition was a bad idea because it would impinge on personal liberty. Stelzle was a social gospel minister who was interested in promoting organized labor. To him, as to many supporters of Prohibition, community well-being took priority over personal liberty. To most Wets, however, concerns about personal liberty were preeminent. This exemplifies the clash between a traditional, community-based viewpoint and a modern, individualistic value system. Excerpted from Charles Stelzle, *Why Prohibition!* New York: George H. Doran Co., 1918, pp. 71-77, 80-81, 89.**

The doctrine of "personal liberty" as applied to the use of liquor has been over-worked by the liquor men. As a matter of fact, there is no such thing as an absolute individual right to do any particular thing, or to eat or drink any particular thing, or to enjoy the association of one's own family, or even to live, if that thing is in conflict with "the law of public necessity." . . .

It is quite apparent that as civilisation advances society or the state will lay heavier obligations upon all individuals composing the state, even to the point of the sacrifice of one's most precious "personal liberty." For it is only thus that society itself can serve all individuals, giving each a larger measure of life and happiness.

As far as possible every reasonable measure is taken to prevent men from committing crime, and when they disobey the very reasonable laws which are framed for the safeguarding of men as a whole, they are punished by both God and society.

There was a time when men honestly believed that they had a right to own slaves-because they thought it was purely a question of property rights but to-day we know it is also a moral question.

There was a time when men honestly believed that all they needed to do to get a wife was to take a club and hit the woman of their choice on the head and drag her home, but to-day well, women have something to say about it, too.

There was a time when men honestly believed that they had an absolute right to do with their children as they pleased, but to-day they recognise the fact that children have rights of their own.

Slaves, women, children-these have come to their own because a new conception of rights and duties has dawned upon men. They discovered that there is a more fundamental question than property rights that duty is a bigger word than rights.

And so the weaker members of society are to-day being given a better chance.

But we still hark back to the property rights period and the question of personal liberty

when we discuss the saloon and the liquor business. We forget that the biggest thing in this discussion is duty and sacrifice-for the sake of the weaker members of society-and we should be ready to give up our rights when the well-being of mankind as a whole is concerned.

"Prohibition is based upon the idea that you can take away one man's liberty because of another man's act. The Drys want to run society on the principle of an insane asylum. Is that sound? They find a sick man and they want to compel everybody to take medicine. They find a man with a crutch and they try to compel every man to carry a crutch all his life," recently said one of the chief exponents of the liquor business.

He's wrong. The "Drys" do not want to run society on the principle of an insane asylum; they are so dead set against insane asylums that they don't want anybody to go there-particularly on account of the influence of liquor; and they don't want to compel everybody to take medicine-they want to eliminate the cause of disease so that nobody will have to take medicine. They don't want to compel every man to carry a crutch all his life-they want to abolish the evil which compels men to walk on crutches.

When a man joins a labour union he forfeits his personal liberty for the common interest of the workingmen of his class.

The labour union takes care of the weakest man the one who is least able to defend himself, brings him into the organisation and then stands by him to the limit. It does the same thing for women and children who cannot fight their own battles. The fight for prohibition is based upon much the same principle-its chief object is to take care of the weakest members of society.

If every man may do as he pleases about the liquor business, then by the same token he may do as he pleases about the labour business. What, then, is the use of insisting that a boss must unionize his shop if every man may do as he pleases? What's the sense of compelling him to run his plant upon an eight hour basis? Why should we declare with fervour that he must pay the union scale of wages?

But labour men are right when they stand together to secure justice. They must insist upon the bosses giving their fellows a square deal in industry, even though it may mean a sacrifice for the great body of workers.

You can't do as you please in the industrial world -there are too many interests to be conserved. No more dare you do as you please with regard to the liquor business. Your personal liberty is the last thing to be considered. The first consideration is the well-being of the majority.

When the manufacture of liquor makes life more burdensome to all the people, and when it creates social and economic problems which threaten to destroy the finest things in human life; when it destroys men's bodies and souls and becomes a menace to society, then we have a right to destroy the liquor traffic-even though it may cause some inconvenience to a comparatively few people who insist upon exercising their personal liberty.

We accept this principle in every other relationship in life-why not accept it with regard to the liquor business?

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