

22-4 | Evangelist Condemns the Curse of Alcohol

BILLY SUNDAY, *Get on the Water Wagon* (1915)

Evangelist Billy Sunday joined a long line of antialcohol reformers each time he delivered his famous "booze sermon," a version of which he published as "Get on the Water Wagon" in 1915, but preached hundreds of times leading up to prohibition in 1920. A nondenominational

William Ashley Sunday, *Get on the Water Wagon* (Sturgis, MI: The Journal Publishing Company, 1915), 3–29.

fundamentalist preacher, Sunday had a dynamic voice, pulpit choreography, and socially conservative message that resonated with those who despaired of the liberal drift of the era.

I am the sworn, eternal, uncompromising enemy of the Liquor Traffic. I ask no quarter and I give none. I have drawn the sword in defense of God, home, wife, children and native land, and I will never sheathe it until the undertaker pumps me full of embalming fluid[.] . . .

The saloon is the sum of all villainies. It is worse than war, worse than pestilence, worse than famine. It is the crime of crimes. It is the mother of sins. It is the appalling source of misery, pauperism, and crime. It is the source of three-fourths of all the crime, thus it is the source of three-fourths of all the taxation necessary to prosecute the criminals and care for them after they are in prison. To license such an incarnate fiend of hell is one of the blackest spots on the American Government.

"Why anti-saloon?" asks someone. "Why not anti-grocery store, anti-dry goods, anti-furniture, anti-bakery, anti-butcher shop, anti-boot and shoe store, anti-coal yard? Why single out this one business and attack that?"

"Anti-Saloon." Who is against it? The church is against it, the school is against it, the home is against it, the scientific world is against it, the military world is against it, the business world is against it, the railroads are against it, and every world-wide interest on earth, except the underworld, the criminal world, the immoral world and the world of crime. All cry "away with the saloon. Down with these licensed distributing centers of crime, misery and drunkenness!" . . .

Who foots the bills? The landlord who loses his rent, the baker, butcher, grocer, coal man, dry goods merchant, whose goods the drunkard needs for himself and family, but cannot buy—the charitable people, who pity the children of drunkards, and go down in their pockets to keep them from starving—the tax payers, who are taxed to support the jails, penitentiaries, hospitals, almshouses, reformatories that this cursed business keeps filled.

Who makes the money? The brewers, distillers, saloon-keepers, who are privileged to fill the land with poverty, wretchedness, madness, crime, disease, damnation, and death, authorized by the sovereign right of the people, who vote for this infamous business.

For every \$800.00 spent in producing useful and necessary commodities, the working man receives \$143.50 in wages. For every \$800.00 spent in producing booze, the working man receives \$9.85 in wages.

The saloon comes as near being a rat hole for the working man to dump his wages in as any thing I know of.

To know what the devil will do, find out what the saloon is doing.

The man who votes for the saloon, helps the devil get his boy. The man who doesn't believe in a hell, has never seen a drunkard's home. The devil and the saloon-keeper are always pulling on the same rope. . . .

The saloon is usually found in partnership with the foes of good government. It supports the boodle alderman, corrupt law maker, the political boss and machine. It only asks to be let alone in its law nullifying, vice and crime producing work. I have never known of a movement for good government that was not

opposed by the saloon. If you believe in better civic conditions, if you believe in a greater and better city, if you believe in men going home sober, if you believe in men going to heaven instead of hell, then down with the saloon.

The liquor interests are still fat—sleek—smug and powerful with many city, state, and national governments at their feet; and they are reaching out with their slimy hands to choke, throttle and assassinate the character of those whom it cannot debauch, and who dare attack their hellish business. But their doom is sealed. If the people are fit for self government, if the people are fit for liberty, the wrath of an outraged public will never be quenched until the putrid corpse of the saloon is hanging from the gibbet of shame; praise God from whom all blessings flow. . . .

I tell you, gentlemen, the American home is the dearest heritage of the people, for the people, and by the people, and when a man can go from home in the morning with the kisses of wife and children on his lips, and come back at night with an empty dinner bucket to a happy home, that man is a better man, whether white or black. Whatever takes away the comforts of home—whatever degrades that man or woman—whatever invades the sanctity of the home, is the deadliest foe to the home, to church, to state and school, and the saloon is the deadliest foe to the home, the church and the state, on top of God Almighty's dirt. And if all the combined forces of Hell should assemble in conclave, and with them all the men on earth that hate and despise God, and purity, and virtue—if all the scum of the earth could mingle with the denizens of Hell to try to think of the deadliest institution to home, to church and state, I tell you, sir, the combined hellish intelligence could not conceive of or bring forth an institution that could touch the hem of the garment of the open licensed saloon to damn the home and manhood, and womanhood and business and every other good thing on God's earth. . . .

I tell you it [the saloon] strikes in the night. It fights under cover of darkness and assassinates the characters that it cannot damn, and it lies about you. It attacks defenseless womanhood and childhood. The saloon is a coward. It is a thief, it is not an ordinary court defender that steals your money, but it robs you of manhood and leaves you in rags and takes away your friends, and it robs your family. It impoverishes your children and it brings insanity and suicide. It will take the shirt off your back and it will steal the coffin from a dead child and yank the last crust of bread out of the hand of the starving child; it will take the last bucket of coal out of your cellar, and the last cent out of your pocket, and will send you home bleary-eyed and staggering to your wife and children. It will steal the milk from the breast of the mother and leave her with nothing with which to feed her infant. It will take the virtue from your daughter. It is the dirtiest, most low-down, damnable business that ever crawled out of the pit of Hell. It is a sneak, and a thief and a coward.

It is an infidel. It has no faith in God; has no religion. It would close every church in the land. It would hang its beer signs on the abandoned altars. It would close every public school. It respects the thief and it esteems the blasphemer. It fills the prisons and the penitentiaries. It despises Heaven, hates love, scorns virtue. It tempts the passions. Its music is the song of a siren. Its sermons are a

collection of lewd, vile stories. It wraps a mantle about the hope of this world and that to come. Its tables are full of the vilest literature. It is the moral clearing house for rot, and damnation, and poverty, and insanity, and it wrecks homes and blights lives today.

The saloon is a liar. It promises good cheer and sends sorrow. It promises health and causes disease. It promises prosperity and sends adversity. It promises happiness and sends misery. Yes, it sends the husband home with a lie on his lips to his wife; and the boy home with a lie on his lips to his mother; and it causes the employee to lie to his employer. It degrades. It is God's worst enemy and the devil's best friend. Seventy-five per cent of impurity comes from the grog-shop. It spares neither youth nor old age. It is waiting with a dirty blanket for the baby to crawl into this world. It lies in wait for the unborn.

It cocks the highwayman's pistol. It puts the rope in the hands of the mob. It is the anarchist of the world and its dirty red flag is dyed with the blood of women and children, and it sent the bullet through the body of Lincoln; it nerved the arm that sent the bullet through Garfield and William McKinley. Yes, it is a murderer. Every plot that was ever hatched against our flag and every anarchist plot against the government and law, was born and bred, and crawled out of the grog-shop to damn this country.

I tell you that the curse of God Almighty is on the saloon. Legislatures are legislating against it. Decent society is barring it out. The fraternal brotherhoods are knocking it out. The Masons and the Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias, and the A. O. U. W., are closing their doors to the whiskey sellers. They don't want you wriggling your carcass in their lodges. Yes, sir, I tell you, the curse of God is on it. It is on the down grade. It is headed for Hell, and by the grace of God, I am going to give it push, with a whoop, for all I know how. . . .

I want every man to say: "God, you can count on me to protect my wife, my home, my mother and my children and the manhood of America."

By the mercy of God, which has given to you the unshaken and unshakable confidence of her you love, I beseech you make a fight for the women who wait tonight until the saloons spew out their husbands and their sons, and send them home maudlin, brutish, devilish, vomiting, stinking, blear-eyed, bloated-faced drunkards.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Analyze Sunday's sermon to identify the specific arguments he makes against alcohol. What are the individual and social effects of alcohol consumption that he targets?
2. How might a historian use this source to illustrate the intersection of several themes important to the history of the 1920s, including fundamentalism, prohibition, and social conservatism? How does Sunday's sermon reflect these overlapping topics?