

AA (ALCOHOL AND ADVERTISING)

If you are fortunate to have a grapevine in your section or on your porch you will know the delight it can bring every summer. The leaves from the vine provide a welcome relief from the heat and glare of the summer sun, while later in the season clusters of grapes provide good eating and drinking (if the birds don't eat them all first!) The simple pleasure brought by even one grapevine full of fruit can help us to understand a significant biblical image, where communities enjoying the fruits of the vine often represent a society of great richness, places of peace and well-being.¹

In contrast to this vision of 'shalom' are the images we are confronted with on weekend news bulletins. Lights, sirens and shattered cars, stories of assaults and arrests. Nor are these (no pun intended) sobering stories of the impact of drink-driving and drunken criminal behaviour confined merely to major metropolitan areas. In rural areas local newspapers will also report on crimes perpetrated in the community – destruction of property, physical and sexual assaults, drunk driving, domestic violence and so on – with the common factor often being the citation of alcohol as a contributor. It is not uncommon to find in crime and court reports *all* the listed offences and incidents for the week having a connection to the over-consumption of alcohol. A heavy weight of statistics paints a disturbing picture of the impact that alcohol has in our society.

Alcohol & Crime

The strong association between alcohol consumption and criminal behaviour is one that is borne out in crime statistics. In the year of 2007-08, 31 per cent of crime was committed by those who had consumed alcohol prior to the event. And of those using alcohol at the time of their arrest, 72 per cent considered that their use of alcohol had contributed to 'some' or 'all' of their offending. Of particular concern is the relationship between alcohol and violent crime.

¹ This imagery of God's people, Israel-Judah, as a vineyard and of a society of peace and wholeness, a place of 'shalom', is particularly evident in the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah speaks of God's people as a vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7) and makes clear that the 'wellbeing' of this vineyard is dependent upon justice being upheld. It is the failure to uphold justice, the oppression of the poor and marginalised, where the rich and powerful mix their drinks and glory in orgies while ignoring the plight of those who suffer, which the prophets declare will ultimately lead to the Lord's judgment. Interestingly, in such judgment both Israel and surrounding nations drink the cup of the Lord's wrath 'drinking, staggering and vomiting' (Hab. 2:16, Jer. 25:27) as like grapes they are crushed in a winepress (Isa. 25:4-13, 28:1-8, 63:1-6; Jer. 25:15-38, 48:28-33; Lam. 1:15; Joel 1:1-20, Hab. 2:15-17). This same imagery of God's people as an unfaithful vineyard is picked up by Jesus in parables (Matt. 21:28-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19), while the seer John builds on the apocalyptic imagery of judgment (Rev. 14:19).

Alcohol and Violence

The last decade has seen an increasing concern expressed at the levels of violent crime within New Zealand society. Such alarm has seen the emergence of lobby groups such as the 'Sensible Sentencing Trust' who advocate the instituting of harsher penalties for offenders who commit violent crime. But even the Sensible Sentencing Trust recognises 'that harsher penalties alone are not the complete answer'.² While the evidence on whether stiffer sentences reduce violent crime is unclear, the strong correlation between alcohol consumption and acts of violent crime is irrefutable. The 2001 New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims found 30 per cent of victims of partner violence believed their partner's violent actions were affected by alcohol or drugs. The Police National Alcohol Assessment in April 2009 showed at least one third of all recorded violent offences in 2007-08 – including family violence incidents – were committed when the offender had consumed alcohol prior to committing the offence. In serious offences such as homicides, or incidents where police had to use force, approximately half of alleged offenders or victims were affected by alcohol. In general, it is estimated that alcohol is a factor in approximately 20,000 of the violent offences which police process each year. And of course, this does not factor in the alcohol-fuelled violent offences that do not come to the attention of the police or other authorities.

Drunk-Driving

Likewise, alcohol is a major contributing factor to another of our ongoing social 'angsts' – road-related trauma. For the three year period, 2005-2007, alcohol was a contributing factor in 26 per cent of fatal crashes. In 2007 alone, the New Zealand Crash Analysis System found that driver consumption of alcohol or drugs was a factor in 117 fatal traffic crashes, 402 serious injury crashes and 1,182 minor injury crashes. These incidents left 128 dead, 550 serious injuries and 1,777 minor injuries. The social costs for these traffic related injury crashes was estimated at an astonishing \$838 million.

Alcohol and Sexual Violence

Clear figures for rape and sexual violence are difficult to gather, but the statistics that do exist paint a disturbing association between alcohol consumption and sexual violence. The New Zealand National Survey of Crime 2001 reported that 46 per cent of victims of sexual violence thought the offender was affected by alcohol or drugs. In a National Alcohol Survey in 2000, 10 per cent of females and 3 per cent of males

² <http://www.safe-nz.org.nz/>

reported having been sexually harassed during the previous year by someone who had been drinking alcohol. In another survey, one in four women report not being able to remember what they did while drinking. Obviously such memory loss and general loss of control makes women much more vulnerable to sexual assault.

Alcohol and Health

The negative impact of alcohol consumption is not confined to criminal behaviour. As well as the thousands each year injured in alcohol-related road trauma, there are thousands more who are hospitalised for gross intoxication and alcohol poisoning and for a range of injuries sustained due to alcohol consumption. It has been estimated that 22 per cent of all injuries treated in hospital, and the consequent Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) costs, are linked to the consumption of alcohol. A recent study by Auckland University on falls in the 25-60 age group found that 45.8 per cent of participants in the study had consumed alcohol in the twenty-four hours prior to the fall. According to ACC, research has shown that if you have three standard drinks – three small glasses of wine – over six hours you are twelve times more likely to be injured in a fall. In 2008 alone, 19,000 people were seriously or moderately injured over the Christmas holidays!

Even ignoring the immediate health effects of alcohol – such as road trauma, injuries caused by violence and falls, alcohol poisoning, gross intoxication – the long-term consequences of alcohol consumption are alarming. The World Health Organisation recently classified alcohol as ‘carcinogenic to humans’, placing it in the same hazard category as asbestos, formaldehyde and tobacco. Over sixty types of diseases and health conditions – including mental health disorders, chronic health problems in the central nervous, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems – can be either attributed to alcohol use or are exacerbated by alcohol use. Again this is borne out in New Zealand’s health statistics. Ignoring other deaths linked to alcohol consumption (i.e. drunk driving violent assaults and accidents) between 2000 and 2004 it is estimated that 163 deaths annually could be attributed to wholly alcohol-related diseases. Over half of these deaths were caused by cirrhosis of the liver or chronic heart disease. Of serious concern is the fact that rates for such death are disproportionate – with Māori rates being two times higher than that of non-Māori.

The social and economic costs of alcohol

Ultimately alcohol consumption has a profound detrimental impact on families, communities and economies. All of us have neighbours, live in communities and visit or are employed in workplaces, and are therefore not immune to the damage that alcohol wreaks on individuals and relationships. Even those not immediately

impacted by the damaging effects of alcohol are inevitably impacted by the harmful social costs associated with this legal drug. As the criminal justice, corrections, police, ACC and health system are all funded by taxes, all of us, in some way or another, end up contributing financially to the mitigation of the consequences of alcohol consumption. A study commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Accident Compensation Corporation concluded that harmful alcohol use in 2005/06 had cost New Zealand an estimated \$4,437 million of diverted resources and lost welfare – a sum approximately equivalent to the GDP of New Zealand’s agricultural industry!

Of course, while such statistics can point to the enormous emotional, social and economic costs that stem from our continuing fascination with having a ‘wee tippie’, there are others which make the case that, all thing considering, our relationship with the bottle is slowly improving. The Hospitality Association of New Zealand (HANZ) notes that while the number of places to buy alcohol has more than doubled in the past twenty years the level of consumption has remained unchanged. Current alcohol consumption in New Zealand stands at 9.5 litres of pure alcohol per capita, a little less than the 9.7 litres we drank 30 years ago, in 1978.³ Likewise, drawing on Ministry of Transport data from 2008 they argue that road deaths and casualties from alcohol related accidents have more than halved in the past 20 years.

While noting that statistics can always be used to ‘prove anything’, what can we say about our current situation? Is New Zealand’s relationship with alcohol, as some suggest getting worse, or is it remaining the same? To modify a well-known phrase: ‘is the glass empty or still over-full’?

Liberalisation, Normalisation and the Binge-Drinking Culture

Such has been the recent level of public concern about the issue of alcohol consumption that in 2009 the Law Commission was asked to undertake a systematic review of New Zealand’s liquor laws. The review was timely, coming twenty years since the Sales of Liquor Act 1989 and a decade since the Sale of Liquor Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1998 – both pieces of legislation which have led to significant changes in behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. The Law Commission’s report, *Alcohol in Our Lives*, written by Sir Geoffrey Palmer and released in April 2010, concluded ‘that harmful drinking has become a source of serious social problems in New Zealand today.’ While recognising the difficulties of comparisons between different periods of history, it could be argued that the last

³ Consumption has ranged wildly over the past four decades; 7 litres per capita in 1968, 9.7 in 1978, 8.9 in 1988, 7.3 in 1998, and 9.5 in 2008. See: <<http://www.hanz.org.nz/~downloads/alcohol%20use%20in%20new%20zealand%20%20realities%20and%20myths%20updated.pdf>>

two decades has seen a significant change in our general attitude as a society towards alcohol. While as a country we have always had something of a propensity for the drink, there are perhaps three observations that need to be made with regard to our contemporary situation.

Firstly, *what we are drinking is changing.* While according to the country's Beer, Wine and Spirits Council beer consumption has fallen by 10.8 per cent in the past decade (down to 313.2 million litres last year), consumption of wine and RTD (Ready To Drink) alcoholic beverages has risen strongly. In particular, consumption of RTD drinks has nearly doubled over the last five years to 10.51 million litres last year.⁴ Generally, there appears to be a gradual shift towards drinks with higher alcohol content (5-12%).

Secondly, *how we're drinking is changing.* During the last two decades the liberalisation of the alcohol market (more outlets and increased advertising) has inevitably led to the normalising of alcohol. Alcohol is not merely something consumed at hotels, taverns or home, or reserved merely for special occasions, but has become common place. We now drink alcohol in cafes, at gatherings such as music festivals, sporting events, workplace social events, outdoor public displays, in sports clubs or other voluntary clubs and meetings, on planes, at the cinema and even, on occasions, on marae and in churches. Family milestones and celebrations – weddings, funerals, birthdays, anniversaries, graduation, homecomings and departures – in fact all significant occasions seem to be associated with alcohol. However, while drinking is now seen as an 'ordinary', every-day activity, the rush on alcohol at supermarkets on the eve of public holidays is also a striking illustration of the way in which alcohol is also still seen as an essential necessity – a social lubricant of sorts – for 'holidays' and festive occasions.

It could be argued that the normalisation of alcohol is a positive thing, removing restrictive taboos and puritanical restraints. Without such outdated behavioural restraints, the population can now more responsibly engage with alcohol. But is this really the case? Could it be that, having lost some of its mystique, the liberalisation and normalisation of alcohol has actually led rather to a more destructive relationship with the bottle?

Data collection of alcohol consumption is always problematic, but a number of sources make it clear that it is not a minority of New Zealanders who drink heavily.

⁴ See: <<http://www.ap-foodtechnology.com/Formulation/NZ-number-two-brewer-moves-into-RTD-beverages>>

A Ministry of Health Alcohol Survey in 2004 found that 81 per cent of New Zealanders between the ages of 12 and 65 had consumed alcohol in the previous twelve-month period. Of these, 24.7 per cent consumed large amounts of alcohol on a typical drinking occasion; 14.7 per cent drank large amounts at least once a week; and 9.5 per cent said they drank to get drunk at least once a week.

That the findings of this survey were not an anomaly is confirmed by its consistency with other studies and surveys. The 2003 nationwide survey on alcohol commissioned by the Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council (ALAC) found that 80 per cent of its 1,157 adult respondees were drinkers. Of these, 29 per cent only drank a few times a year (typically women and people over 50), but 23 per cent stated they drank at least once a week and regarded their alcohol consumption on these occasions as of a binge-drinking nature. Likewise, ALAC's draft National annual Attitudes Survey in November 2008 found that 25 per cent of adult New Zealanders identified themselves as 'binge-drinkers'. In the 2006/07 New Zealand Portrait of Health Survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, 21 per cent of adult drinkers had a potentially hazardous drinking pattern – which amounts to 17.7 per cent of New Zealand's adult population!

The Hospitality Association New Zealand (HANZ) takes issue with the Public Health officials, arguing that it is a myth that New Zealanders are 'binge drinkers'. In contrast to the official definition in which any more than six standard drinks is considered bingeing (6 cans of 4% beer or 0.72 of a bottle of 14% alcohol), HANZ suggests that ordinary New Zealanders regard 'binge drinking' as meaning 'more than 14 standard drinks'.⁵

Statistics from surveys conducted by ALAC and the Ministry of Health suggest that there has been a growing development and acceptance of a *binge-drinking culture*. *People drink to get drunk. This is not seen as socially unacceptable, but as normal.* An illustration of the way in which excessive drinking has been normalised can, ironically, be seen in the portrayal of drinking in drink-driving campaigns which have appeared on New Zealand television screens since the mid 1990s. Whether showing the catastrophic effects of drink-driving or portraying responsible sober drivers driving their mates home, the implied message in the adverts is that it is 'normal' to drink until one is drunk. While pushing the message 'If you drink and drive, you're a bloody idiot', no mention is made of the other effects that alcohol has on individual health, relationships, work and so on. It was not until March 2005

⁵:<<http://www.hanz.org.nz/~downloads/alcohol%20use%20in%20new%20zealand%20%20realities%20and%20myths%20updated.pdf>>

that a series of print and television advertisements – *‘It’s not the drinking; it’s how we’re drinking’* – was launched by ALAC, designed to help change New Zealand’s risky excessive-drinking culture.

Thirdly, *who is drinking is changing.* Current protestations from politicians that only a minority of New Zealanders have a drinking problem are belied by the data. While the term ‘alcoholic’ for many conjures up images of dishevelled, unkempt hobos on city streets drinking from bottles in paper bags, the reality is quite different. Under-age teenagers at a pre-ball party, University students in their flats, mates having a few at the local footy club, urban professionals in up-market clubs and eating establishments, the wealthy on their super-yachts or exclusive homes – harmful drinking affects all strata of society, regardless of gender, ethnicity or income bracket. And nor, importantly, is the Church immune from this problem.

But while the impact of our drinking culture is felt across society, there are certain sectors of society that are at higher risk. Particular concern has been expressed at the culture of drinking among young people, which many believe has been exacerbated by the legislation passed in 1999 which lowered the drinking age from 20 to 18. In the decade since this change, statistics seem to indicate that, not only has the age of drinking lowered, the quantities being drunk by young people have escalated. The 2004 Ministry of Health alcohol use survey revealed that young people between the ages of 18-24 consumed a higher proportion of alcohol than any other age group, with 50 per cent of this age group reporting that they drank excessively on a typical drinking occasion.

More disturbingly, young people of 12-17 years – under the legal age of drinking – have the second highest consumption rate of alcohol. A range of surveys show that close to 60 per cent of current secondary students (aged 12-17) currently drink, with 33-40 per cent stating that they consume large amounts of alcohol on any given drinking occasion. The series of recent deaths of school students – including those from a prestigious private school – have once again brought this issue to public attention.

The other significant change during the last decade has been the uptake of excessive drinking amongst young women. In 2001, women had the unenviable honour of surpassing men for the numbers being admitted to hospital with serious alcohol poisoning. This figure continues to grow, with 60 per cent of alcohol poisoning admissions to emergency departments in 2004 being women. Statistics for

the 12-17 age-group also suggest that adolescent women again are more prone to excessive drinking behaviour than their male counterparts. A 2007 Youth Survey revealed that a substantial number of students reported problems that arose from this excessive drinking (unsafe sex 14%, unwanted sex 7%, injuries 22%).

What are the causes of this binge-drinking culture?

While any attempt to explain drinking-culture in New Zealand would be multi-faceted and complex, there are, arguably, specific components that have contributed to the current binge-drinking culture.

Firstly, alcohol is now cheaper in New Zealand. A recent study published in the New Zealand Medical Journal in 2010, confirmed that a drop in alcohol prices and the corresponding increase in the average hourly wage during the last decade meant it now only took 17 minutes of labour to be able to purchase four standard drinks – compared to 21 minutes in 1999. Likewise, heavily discounted alcohol means that a 250ml glass of wine or beer is now cheaper than bottled water!⁶

Secondly, alcohol is now readily available. Since the Sale of Liquor Act in 1989 the number of liquor outlets has increased from around 6000 outlets to 14,197 today. One no longer has to enter a pub or a bottle store, but can purchase alcohol from supermarkets, at cafes and at the movies. In particular, suburbs with a demographic more likely to drink – student neighbourhoods near universities, for example – liquor stores are ubiquitous, located on almost every corner.

All of this raises a number of questions: What is the balance between individual rights and the role of government to protect the greater health and well-being of its society? Why are recreational drugs such as cannabis, marijuana and recently, party-pills, criminalised, but alcohol is not – particularly since, if it were introduced now, it would be categorized as a Class II drug! Should there be a reduction in the number of outlets that sell alcohol, and the hours during which it can be purchased? Should the drinking age be returned to 20, or possibly, as chief science adviser to the Prime Minister, Sir Peter Gluckman, has suggested, to 21? And what of Christians – what should the response of the Church be to this social problem of ‘harmful drinking’?

The Church’s Response – Advertising and Alternative Visions

We began our discussion by reflecting on the biblical vision of shalom – a society of peace and stability in which life is lived to the fullest and enjoyed.

⁶ Debbie Porteous, ‘Alcohol Cheaper than water: study’, *Otago Daily Times*, 16 October 2010, 3.

The book of Isaiah paints such a picture:

Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...

(Isa. 65:20-21, NIV)

In contrast to this vision of shalom are the images of broken and battered lives that stem from the abuse of alcohol within society. So, why is change so slow in coming about? Could the slowness to respond stem from the inability for an alternative vision to be seen and heard above the vision offered to us on television screens, and billboards? Could it be that, central to dealing with the drinking problem in our society, is grappling with the role that advertising plays in shaping our attitudes and actions?

In its 'Alcohol in our Lives' discussion paper, the Law Commission pre-empted any feedback on marketing and advertising policies, stating that: 'There are many at this stage who favour a total ban on liquor advertising. At this stage we do not favour this approach.' Instead, the Law Commission proposed a continuation of the 'existing system of self-regulation administered by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).'

But what is the connection between alcohol and advertising? The fact that New Zealand's overall level of alcohol consumption per capita is now at the same levels as in 1981 when television advertising for alcohol retail outlets commenced, is evidence, the industry maintains, that advertising does not lead to an increase in alcohol consumption. But what are we to make of the argument of the alcohol industry: that advertising does not stimulate the buying of alcohol but rather simply provides information to assist consumer choice? Why would the alcohol industry spend \$75 million per year –that's \$205,000 per day – on advertising its wares unless this played a role in creating and perpetuating an ongoing drinking culture?⁷ In the case of smoking, the banning of tobacco advertising under the

⁷ The Hospitality Industry of New Zealand (HANZ), in its defence of alcohol advertising, notes that brand advertising of alcohol on television is limited until after 8.30pm, with a maximum of six minutes per hour. HANZ therefore suggests that 'the average New Zealand adult would see no more than six minutes of alcohol advertising each night': see: <<http://www.hanz.org.nz/~downloads/alcohol%20use%20in%20new%20zealand%20%20realities%20and%20myths%20updated.pdf>> But do only adults watch television after 8.30pm? Drawing upon other research, Group Against Alcohol Advertising (GALA) found that 5-17 year olds in New Zealand see

Smoke-free Amendment Act 1990 and subsequent legislation appears to have been a significant factor in the declining smoking rate. Why have we taken such actions with smoking, but not for alcohol? Should the Church be more active in lobbying for a change to alcohol advertising legislation?

Far from being merely a provider of information, is not advertising fundamentally about offering a narrative? Earlier this year, DB Breweries was ordered to withdraw television and online ads from its current campaign which featured Arnold Nordmeyer's infamous 1958 'Black Budget' and the company's DB Export Beer. Responding to complaints over the inaccurate and distorted history presented within the advertisements, Nick Worthington, the executive creative director of Colenso BBDO, the agency that made the advertisement, stated: 'I don't think a beer brand wants to be the guardians of history, we want to tell great stories.'⁸ Is it not the case that advertising ultimately is concerned with telling us a story which explains why we need the particular advertised item to make our life meaningful? In the case of alcohol, this narrative, and the social vision it entails, surround us – displayed in magazines and newspapers, on television, cinema and computer screens and strategically-placed public billboards. Undoubtedly clever and humorous, the power of these advertisements is evident in the way in which they have become part of our cultural vocabulary – think of the Tui 'Yeah Right' billboards. But what is the deeper message communicated by these alcohol advertisements?

Alcohol Adverts: An Analysis

In 'Tui River', one of the Tui television advertisements, three panting men make their way into the Tui brewery staffed only by 'gorgeous women'. Ignoring the scantily clad females, the men break into the inner sanctum of the brewery and stare at the phallic-like bottle of beer to the soundtrack of 'oohhh... feel the love'. In another advertisement from the same series, 'Brucetta', the male characters dress as women to attempt to avoid detection inside the female-only brewery. Surrendering to "temptation" and drinking from the bottles on the conveyer belt, one worker is dismissed, while his colleague – 'Brucetta' – hides from the female supervisor in the communal shower room surrounded by showering female

on average 400-500 alcohol adverts per year. This means that by the time adolescents have reached the legal age to drink (18) they have already been exposed to 5000 minutes of alcohol advertising.

See: <http://www.gala.org.nz/fact_sheet_gala.pdf>.

⁸ See: NZPA, "DB Ordered to pull 'Black Budget' beer ads," *New Zealand Herald*, 11 February 2011. <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10705669> (13 June 2011).

employees. *How should we respond to such advertisements in which women and beer are reduced to mere objects to be ogled at and consumed by men?*

In a Coruba rum television advertisement, the reggae singer at the local beach bar sings 'I'm a wanderer' while flirting with the various women who surround him, before 'Sandra', his powerful looking wife/partner in a tight mini-skirt, arrives and tells him: 'Your dinner is on the table'. The advert again contains the essential ingredients for a successful advert: beautiful women, sexual inferences (in this case, the woman playing a strong domineering role) and alcohol, and again conveys a specific vision of the male-female relationships. The advert ends with the slogan: 'Not to be taken seriously'. But is it possible to *not* take such a vision seriously if one lives next door to a house where fathers are often absent from home attending parties, leaving women to look after children and the household without them? In another Coruba rum advertisement – 'Green Flash' (2010) – the green flash created as the sun sets over the ocean becomes a mystical experience – with party goers chanting 'Coruba' as the voice-over informs us that: 'As the sun sets, Coruba calls'. Might there be a connection between the fact that twenty per cent of New Zealanders drink excessively and their exposure to the message that consuming alcohol will not only relieve them from their daily struggles but also provide them with a mystical-spiritual experience?

Indeed, while much of the current alcohol debate is centred around (a) whether New Zealand has a drinking problem, and (b) what should be done to mitigate this problem, what is missing from the discussion is arguably the more probing and critical question: *Why do we have a drinking problem?* And alongside this, *what is the appropriate role for drink in our society?* Is alcohol consumption simply symptomatic of a deeper issue? Could it be that the consumption of alcohol for many is simply a cheap anaesthetic to numb the pain of the other struggles they daily confront? A survey of more than 3,000 people undertaken by Aaron Thompson at the University of Otago gave some enlightening responses to the question, 'What are the real reasons we get drunk?' Close to a third of the respondents (1103) said the real reason they got drunk was to escape their problems, while the most common reason given (by 1153 respondents) was because it was fun or cool.⁹

A Christian response?

An awareness of the role that images play in shaping our imagination, and thus our societal vision, is not one that is foreign to the church. In his book *Colossians*

⁹ Debbie Porteous, "Drinking fun, cool, students say," *Otago Daily Times*, 13 May 2010, 2.

Remixed, Brian Walsh notes the way in which the Roman Empire was saturated with images of the Roman emperor.¹⁰ He suggests that the apostle Paul uses poetry in his letter to the Church in Colossae ‘with the goal of providing alternative images for a subversive imagination’.¹¹ But what images fund the imagination of the church? Are we captive to the images of advertising or do other sources shape the church’s imagination? How might the fact that the church drinks from a common cup around a shared meal shape our imagination and provide us with an alternative social vision? What could it potentially mean for our lives to be ‘poured out as drink offerings’ of sacrifice and service (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6)?

Asking how effective the church is in communicating an alternative vision of society requires us to reflect on how alcohol is viewed and treated in our own congregations. Does our treatment of alcohol model an alternative vision of men, women, relationship and fun? While historically many denominations have had very ‘conservative’ attitudes towards alcohol,¹² the changing attitudes towards alcohol within society are mirrored by similar changes within the church. While formerly some sections of the church seemed to believe strongly in **SPEIGHTS - Some People Enjoy It, God Hates The Stuff** - there is now every likelihood that both individual Christians and Christian gatherings will enjoy a drink. In general, the church in New Zealand has become, it seems, more relaxed about the use and consumption of alcohol. Should this change in attitude be seen as a positive or a negative? Arguably, an end to the tee-totalling, puritanical stereotyping of Christians is a good thing. After all, throughout human cultures and within the biblical narrative, wine appears as a culinary pleasure to be enjoyed by communities, and of course, Jesus himself, earns something of a reputation as a party-goer.

Perhaps the critical question here is what has been the primary reason for this changing attitude and behaviour within the church? Has the church’s new posture

¹⁰ ‘Images of the emperor,’ Walsh argues, ‘were as ubiquitous in the first century as corporate logos are in the twenty-first century.’ Brian Walsh, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.83.

¹¹ Walsh, *Colossians Remixed*, p.84.

¹² The question of the role of alcohol in New Zealand society is of course not new – the issue was a hot topic a century ago. As well as succeeding in gaining the vote for women (1893), The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) campaigned vigorously for the control of alcohol, which they saw as the cause of many of the social and economic ills experienced by women and children. Church leaders – particularly Methodist and Presbyterian ministers – were highly involved in the New Zealand Alliance, a national organisation that brought together the many local temperance groups to protest against licensing laws and distribute educational material. By 1911, as a result of lobbying by the temperance movement, a national poll on prohibition was held for the first time. From then until 1989, when the poll was abolished, at every general election the country had the opportunity to vote for the prohibition of alcohol. While coming close on at least two occasions, prohibition was never introduced and over time the prohibition vote declined.

towards alcohol stemmed from some serious theological and social reflection on the role of alcohol, or is it more the case that the church, like flotsam in a strong current, has simply accommodated to the cultural norm? Is there a clear distinction between the way that Christians and those who are not Christians treat alcohol, or, as in the case, with seven-day trading, do individual Christians (and the church) now simply act like everybody else? And, if this latter is the case, has the church lost its prophetic voice?

Should the church launch a new temperance movement or is the modelling of ‘drinking in moderation’ the way to proceed?¹³ If the issue is not alcohol *per se*, but rather the excessive, harmful drinking of alcohol, how may the church offer and enact an alternative vision of the place and role of alcohol in society? Various Christian organisations, denominations, and individuals are among the 9,000 that have made submissions to the Select Committee currently considering the Alcohol Reform Bill. But is lobbying for legislative change the only response the church can make? In what other ways may the Church enact a response to the ‘drinking problem’?

Faith, Rehabilitation and Community Building

In the ‘Alcohol in our Lives’ report, under the theme of ‘Problem Limitation’, concern was raised ‘at the lack of policies, facilities and programmes for the assessment and treatment of people with alcohol problems.’ Currently only 12.7 per cent of alcohol taxes are spent on addiction services and in increasingly tight economic times the money spent on rehabilitation facilities is very unlikely to rise. The last ten years has seen ten residential alcohol and drug treatment centres close. Does the State have a responsibility to fund such rehabilitation facilities? And, if the State does not fund such rehabilitation services appropriately, what is the church’s response?

Arguably faith communities – with their belief in a higher power – are the ideal context to provide rehabilitation (12-step) programs. Eighty per cent of prisoners in New Zealand have a long history of alcohol abuse, yet of our 8,500 prisoners (the highest number in NZ history) very few have access to rehabilitation programs.¹⁴

¹³ Important to note here is the fact that the phrase ‘in all things moderation’ is not, as often mistakenly believed, a Scriptural reference, but rather an extrapolation of Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean as presented in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, this ethic works around finding the middle ground, between excess and deficiency.

¹⁴ There are currently only 500 rehabilitation beds available in the NZ prison system and only prisoners serving sentences of a year or more are eligible for funded prison treatment (two-thirds of inmates are serving sentences of less than a year).

Many churches and Christian organisation are already intensively involved in rehabilitation programs – a notable example being the long-running Salvation Army Bridge programme.¹⁵ But if, as the statistics suggest, 17 per cent of New Zealanders suffer from problem drinking then there is a huge need for further services. What if the church – whether receiving funding from the State or not – committed itself to running more rehabilitation programs and facilities?

The church's capacity to enact an alternative vision for the place of alcohol in communities is well illustrated by the story of St Mary's, the Anglican Church in the Heathcote-Mt Pleasant parish. Like many suburbs in Christchurch the Heathcote valley was severely damaged by the September 2010 and February 2011 earthquakes which destroyed the valley 'local' (Valley Inn Tavern) and most of the other community meeting facilities. While some Christians may have welcomed the demise of the local drinking outlet, the local Anglican minister, Mary Giles, recognised that, at their best, pubs have a significant role in a community – providing a common space for people to meet, unwind and share experiences. And of course, such community socialising and support was especially needed in the wake of the earthquakes. And so, St Mary's Church Hall has become a BYO pub and the 'community hangout' on Friday and Saturday nights. Mary Giles notes the irony of the church hall becoming the replacement pub but believes 'it's not about the booze, it's definitely a very family-friendly place.' Such a response could be seen as extraordinary, or simply the church responding to a crisis. But what if the *church were* to open its doors and provide a venue for communities in which alcohol is consumed in a family-friendly environment? Is the accusation of Jesus one that is true of us? Are we gluttons, and drunkards, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34)? If not, why not?

¹⁵ The Bridge programme has its origin in a residential clinic set up in Wellington in 1959 by Salvation Army officers Colonel (Dr) A. Bramwell Cook and Captain Robert McCallum. Drawing upon their experience gained through the Wellington Bridge, a nationwide Bridge Programme was developed and officially recognised under the Alcoholism and Drug Addiction Act 1966.