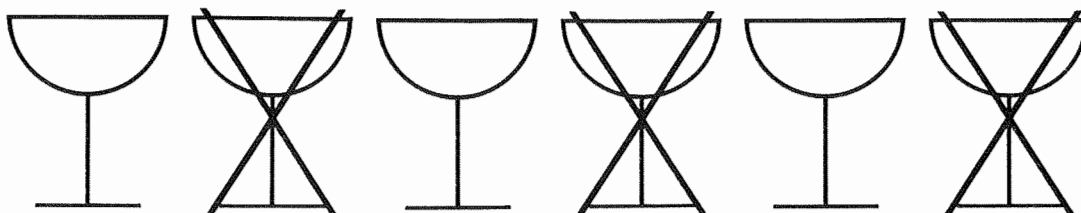


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# To drink or not to drink?

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David Jackman



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It certainly is an important question and I am glad to offer some thoughts about this whole area. This is because:

1. Alcoholism is becoming a social problem reaching almost epidemic proportions in Britain today, yet no-one sets out to become an alcoholic.
2. As our society becomes increasingly non-Christian, there are growing pressures on us all to conform to the norms of life around us. We need to be aware of these and to have our positions clearly thought out and prayed through.
3. The question of alcohol may stand as representative of other issues, which are not black or white, in biblical terms, but about which we have to decide what we are going to do in practice. As such, what follows may serve as a pattern method for tackling other 'grey' areas in Christian life and discipleship.

## 'What does the Bible say?'

This must always be our first and foundational question. But we need to face squarely the danger of extracting from the Bible a particular text or texts which support the position we desire and twisting everything else to fit that. For example, 'Let your moderation be known to all men' (Phil. 4:5, AV) is frequently

assumed to give support to drinking in moderation. The NIV translation, which is much more accurate, knocks this on the head, as does the context of the whole. It is about attitudes of behaviour to one another in relationships that Paul is concerned. 'Moderation in all things' isn't a biblical concept at all. What would that do to our teaching about theft or lying or sexual immorality, if it were?! On the other hand well-meaning Christians have constructed whole barricades of biblical texts to defend abuses such as slavery or racism, forgetting that a text out of context will be merely a pretext. The Bible is not a collection of proof texts, but is to be regarded as a whole since it has one divine author.

When we survey the whole Bible, we find that most of the evidence is from the Old Testament, in which there are two main strands of teaching, centred around three terms usually translated 'wine', 'strong drink' and 'new wine'. There are several passages which see wine as one of God's good gifts, and so a *blessing* from His hand (Ps. 104:15, Joel 3:18, Am. 9:13). God is the giver of corn and wine to Israel (Ho. 2:8) and deprivation is a sign of His judgment (Dt. 28:39). Numbers 15 provides for wine to be a drink offering to the Lord, so it can be a symbol of prosperity, fruitfulness and joy.

But the other strand of Old Testament teaching emphasises the *curse*, as the Scripture is always conscious of the dangers of alcohol.

and condemns its abuses. To love wine is to pave a path to poverty (Pr. 21:17). Among kings it leads to perversion of justice (Pr. 31:5). Among priests and prophets it leads to error, an inability to serve God acceptably and so to spiritual decline (Is. 28:7-8). In social life within the community, it leads to greed, complacency, self-indulgence and disregard for the poor and oppressed (Am. 6:6). It is a major cause of transgression (Hab. 2:5) as recent statistics connecting crime with drinking amply illustrate.

Noah's shame (Gen. 9), Nabal's folly (1 Sam. 25), Amnon's death (2 Sam. 13) and Belshazzar's blasphemy (Dan. 5) are all attributed to the effects of drinking wine. Perhaps the most vivid warning of all is the teaching in Proverbs 23:29-35 which ought to be studied. What is a picture of blessing can also be used as a picture of judgment. A cup of wine is used as a symbol of God's wrath (Ps. 75:8) and of His fury, His righteous anger against sin (Jer. 25:15).

So we find these two strands interwoven in the Old Testament, not in contradiction, but in recognition that any of God's gifts can be spoiled and abused. The same is true of our physical strength, our natural gifts, of money, of sex. Because something is a part of God's created order does not imply that it can be used without controlling structures or discipline, nor does it imply that it *must* be used. The Bible recognizes that abstinence can well be the most God-honouring course, as with the Nazarite vow (Nu. 6:3), in priestly service (Lev. 10:9) or in the case of the Rechabites (Jer. 35). It is what we do with God's resources that matters. Man is given the immense privilege and responsibility of being God's vice-regent in the world, and we are accountable to God for our stewardship of all that He has given us.

When we come to the New Testament, there are fewer references, but they are very clear. The Christian is never to be drunk (Eph. 5:18; Rom. 13:13-14 — verses which convicted Augustine and drove him to Christ). The fruit of the Spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:23). A man who is abiding in Christ is not concerned to be providing fulfilment for the appetites of the body—he has something better to live for. 'Excess of wine' (1 Pet. 4:3) is a pagan characteristic, associated with idolatry and consequent immorality. The believer knows that his body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and as such he will want to keep it clean and pure (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Thus to be a lover of wine is a disqualification from office in the church (1 Tim. 3:8) and a denial of holiness in a Christian woman (Tit. 2:3). Yet, on the positive side, the Lord Jesus turns water into

wine as His first miracle (John 2). He institutes the remembrance of His death in the Last Supper by drinking wine, and clearly He and the disciples drank wine. Timothy is advised to use wine medicinally (1 Tim. 5:23) which I cannot imagine meant that it was to be applied externally!

## So what conclusions are we to reach?

Scripture shows us both sides of the picture and counsels a wise and disciplined attitude towards the use of alcohol. But it doesn't just leave us there. For there are also *general principles* which are given to guide us in the use of any and all of God's gifts, and which are especially crucial in these 'grey' areas of behaviour.

There are three questions we can ask. In 1 Corinthians, Paul deals on two separate occasions with the argument that freedom in Christ means that anything is lawful and so Christian behaviour is a matter of doing what you like. Instead of asking 'What's wrong with it?', Christians have much more penetrating questions to put:

- (1) **Is it helpful?** (1 Cor. 6:12, 1 Cor. 10:23), i.e. Does this help me to be a better disciple of the Lord Jesus and help others to see Him in me?
- (2) **Does it tend to enslave?** (1 Cor. 6:12), i.e. Is there anything in this which would tend to take me over, to dominate and control me so that I lose my true liberty in Christ because something else is lord?
- (3) **Does it build up?** (1 Cor. 10:23), i.e. Does it strengthen my own Christian life and help my friends to grow more like the Lord Jesus?

These are questions we must ask about every area of our behaviour, and not least about social drinking, frequenting public houses, and so on. The advertising media saturate our minds with the impression that it is adult to drink. 'With-it' people all do it and you're a weak fish if you don't join in. They are powerful constraints, and not only on young people. But Christians are not allowing the world to squeeze them into its mould; they are called to be transformers since Christ is transforming them (Rom. 12:1-2). We must not be afraid of taking a firm stand for the Lord if we find the honest answers to our three questions indicate the need for it.

Consideration for the 'weaker brother' is another biblical principle to follow. As Chris-

tians we belong to one another because we belong to Christ. What one member does has its effect upon the whole body. We all have influence, for which we are responsible to God. This lies behind Paul's statement in Romans 14:21, 'it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.' Someone may be perfectly able to control his own drinking in moderation, but if another Christian, particularly a younger Christian, sees his brother indulging, will he not rightly deduce that drinking is all right for him too? And he may not have the same ability to control what can become a binding habit. It is a principle of practical love for one another that our public responsibility curtails our private liberty. In many situations we elect to use our freedom to deny our rights, so that our fellow Christians are not caused to stumble and fall. Paul could hardly be more explicit than in 1 Corinthians 8:13, where he writes, 'If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.'

These are some of the factors involved in a biblical approach to the whole issue and so we have not touched on arguments for the medical standpoint or social welfare. We shall doubtless come to different conclusions on this matter, as individual believers, and we must respect one

another's judgment. What we must ensure is that our position is arrived at prayerfully and grounded in Scripture, not just assumed or drifted into. There may well be occasions on which some would feel greater offence would be given by not drinking than by participating, and we must always be sure that we are not just being offensive. In a large church, in matters of this sort there will always be a spectrum of opinion, but our differences of view must be held Christianly which means in love, with respect and without judgment. Let the Scriptures have the final word, in Romans 14:

'Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls' (v.4) . . . 'Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (v.5) . . . 'Each of us will give an account of himself to God' (v.12) . . . 'Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification' (v.19) . . . 'Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves' (v.22).

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Readers may be interested in the following recommendation contained in the Report of the Special Committee of the Royal College of Psychiatrists:

'Education on alcoholism directed to the general public should:

- (a) Attempt continuously to provide the knowledge needed to inform public debate so that acceptance may be won for the need for a broad range of preventive measures. The fact that alcohol is a drug should be made widely known, the meaning and implications of dependence, the nature and extent of disabilities, the dangers of harm done to others, and the causes of harmful drinking. In particular, the relationship between national per capita consumption and the extent of the country's drinking problems should be brought to public attention.
- (b) Inform the community that the

use of alcohol in the attempt to relieve unpleasant feelings when people are apprehensive, dejected, depressed, lonely, or bored, carries considerable risks.

- (c) Encourage public disapproval of intoxication, and foster the attitudes that it is bad manners to get drunk (rather than that it is bad manners to comment on drunkenness).
- (d) Give clear information as to what constitutes safe or dangerous levels of drinking. We would suggest that an intake of four pints of beer a day, four doubles of spirits, or one standard-sized bottle of wine constitute reasonable guidelines for the upper limit of drinking. It is unwise to make a habit of drinking even at these levels, and anyone driving a vehicle should not drink at all before driving.'

'Alcohol and Alcoholism (Report of a Special Committee of the Royal College of Psychiatrists). Tavistock Publications, London (1979).

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# Licensed to kill? A personal view

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Michael Flowers

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My work as an Accident surgeon involves my dealing much of the time with alcohol-related injury. A recent study showed that a third of industrial hand injuries were due to alcohol-induced carelessness; it is a factor in 25% of all road traffic accidents, and in 50% of fatal accidents in the USA. The increasing violence on the football terrace, misery in the home, blood and guts in the accident unit, all bespeak an insidiously spreading malaise that, it seems, has yet to call forth from the church the firm response which recognizes the danger and prescribes the antidote, and administers it without hesitancy or equivocation. A profound problem confronts a society which has proved it is powerless to handle it. Surely the Christian community, God's alternative society, has something to say?

## Is there a Christian perspective?

I am risking taking a firm position on this. As the mother whale said to the baby whale, 'They can only shoot you when you are spouting.' Too many of us hesitate to be dogmatic in this area, and the arguments are all so familiar. My own personal view has been inevitably coloured by a nonconformist upbringing and by brief excursions into forbidden territory as a teenager. I settled for a teetotal position long ago as the only logical conclusion for myself as a Christian, and until I had to go through it all again these past few years with my teenage children I had thought it all to be cut and dried. I have tried to look at things again through their eyes; I have unpacked and rummaged through my own convictions again, and it seems more important than ever to have something to say and for it to make biblical sense. Let me rehearse, therefore, some of the points we go over with our own young people.

Although the scriptures recognize the dangers of over-indulgence in alcohol (Pr. 20:1; 23:30ff.) they also inform us that it has medicinal properties that enable it to be commended (1 Tim. 5:23). We find any debate that rests simply on scriptures that include the word 'wine' to be frustrating and meaningless. We look in vain in the Bible for specific proof texts that we can happily apply to this question today—but the same is of course true about crossing the road. We need therefore to be concerned with the principles which the Scriptures lay down which we can take and apply to any area of our lives including problems never even thought of at the time of writing. Here we are not disappointed. What are the guidelines, then?

The sort of questions the young people ask are these—should I ever take alcohol? If not, why not, and if so, how much and how often, and with whom? Again, is alcohol harmful? Does it induce dependence? Am I born with a predisposition that dooms me to alcoholism? And the sort of question that I have then to ask is, what should I be teaching and showing the young folk at church, or the students in the CU?

## Three main principles

Our teaching tends to boil down to three principles. First, am I open to any demand that Christ should make upon me? Second, am I prepared to be a responsible example for others? Third, am I a responsible steward?

1. Am I prepared to please Christ above all else? Such should my aim indeed be (2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10). So many problems can be resolved if we, and the youngsters whom we teach, are prepared to allow the revolution that Christ brings to touch every part of our life.

We tend to drag into our Christian living all kinds of non-Christian principles which we assume are all right because 'everyone is doing it'. To run counter to the general drift is never popular or easy. One of the reasons for the difficulties so many believers get themselves into is because of an unwillingness to recognize that God has called them out of an evil and adulterous generation to form an alternative society of men and women who look at every aspect of their new life, whether it be sex, ambition, money, time, or indeed alcohol, through new eyes. So instead of having to conform, and instead of an embarrassed 'well, no, actually I'm teetotal', the Christian is able with positive joy to show how good it is not to have to go with the crowd. He can now be a non-conformist, not because of rules, or habit, but because of the voluntary choice of a better way! If such a principle applies, then, and we are open to God, there seems no reason to doubt that the Holy Spirit will teach us, if we are ready to be taught.

2. My commitment involves setting an example (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). The principle of the stumbling block is precisely worked out for us by Paul in his teaching on meat offered in idol worship (1 Cor. 8). It seems to me that the alcohol question is one where this teaching has an exact application. Added to which, the horrifying words of Jesus about the responsibility we carry as his disciples (Mt. 18:6), serve as a terrible warning to us.

3. If I know that alcohol is harmful to me, then the principle laid down by Paul as to the importance of respecting our bodies appears to apply (1 Cor. 6:19,20).

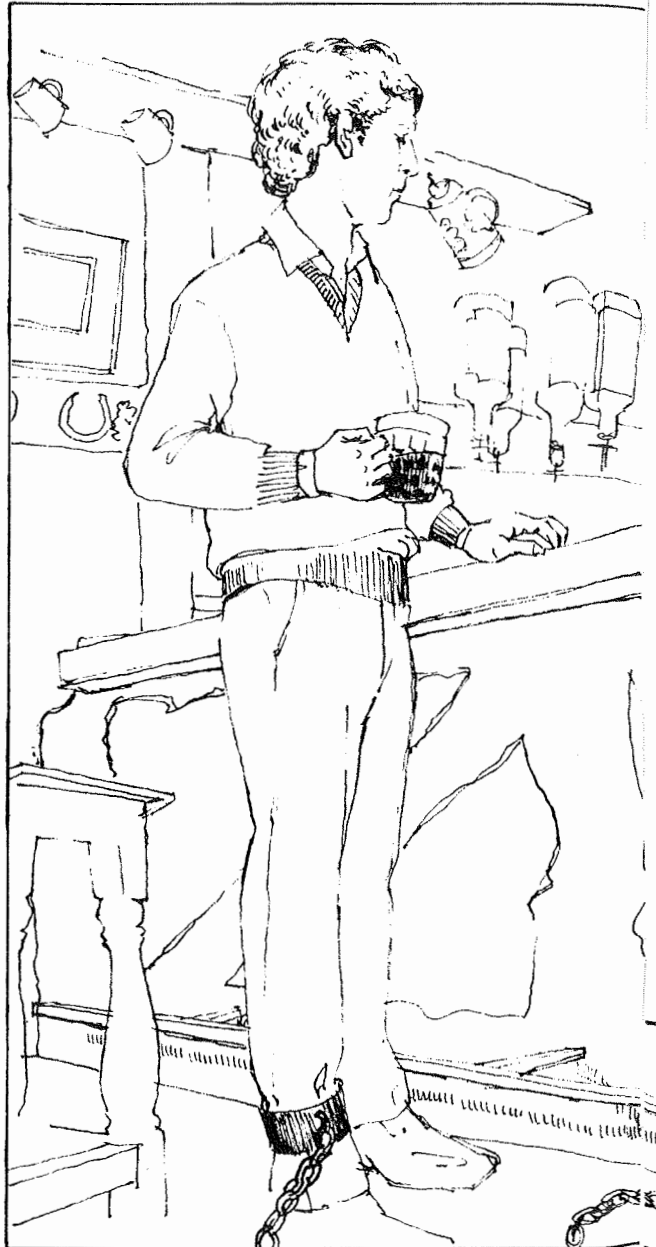
The young Christian has to face persuasive and, on the face of it, plausible blandishments not only from society, but from other Christians. He has to learn how absurd is the dictum 'moderation in all things'. Yet at the same time he has to develop a warm acceptance of all others who do not share his view; he must avoid sterile and acrimonious debate. He needs to see that he can make his convictions, instead of a negative and censorious withdrawal from the scene, a freedom which can become the springboard for compassionate service and true evangelism.

## Is there a medical perspective?

Alcohol is a dangerous drug. Its nature and its effects have been widely studied and are commanding an increasing exposure in the medical as well as the Christian press.

In 1978 for example, in the Index Medicus,

which carries details of all medical publications, over 1,000 papers on alcohol were catalogued. One periodical alone, the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, was 2,000 pages in length the same year. During the same period the *British Medical Journal* featured six leading articles on the subject. Sometimes, naturally, the material is rather abstruse. You may well not find yourself greatly excited by 'The increasing aggressiveness and lower brain serotonin levels in the offspring of mice given alcohol during gestation,' nor even by 'The biochemical correlates of ethanol-induced flushing in Orientals'; but you cannot fail to be impressed by the statistics. The average consumption of



alcohol has doubled in the last thirty years, this excluding home-brewing. There are believed to be 300,000 alcoholics in Britain; 100,000 arrests for drunkenness are processed by the courts each year, and alcohol-related road accidents cost our society £100 million annually.

From a medical point of view there seem to be three questions that stand out.

### Is alcohol harmful ?

This question needs to be answered in terms of both the immediate and long-term effects on the body systems.

Alcohol is absorbed rapidly and reaches a peak in the blood stream in between 30 and 60 minutes. It has a direct depressant effect (contrary to much aggressive advertising) on the central nervous system, and impairment of perception, vigilance, judgment, and psychomotor skills follow. The liver is able to cater for small amounts easily, and the harmful effects of such doses are therefore those that result from the loss of self-management. This may be embarrassment from altered behaviour, or injury resulting from vehicular mishap. Many studies of driving skills under various dosages of alcohol, and some epidemiological surveys of traffic accidents, provide clear dose-effect relationships. No driver can afford to take on board any alcohol at all. The same is true for a girl out with her boy friend. But, in a society where alcohol is used as a lubricant in parties, weddings, relaxing with friends, or in clinching a business deal, many other dangers exist.

With continued intake of alcohol measurable effects are produced. A wealth of epidemiological evidence links diseases of the liver and pancreas and heart to excessive alcohol consumption. One such study concludes that a daily intake of 20 grams, equivalent to just over one pint of beer, in women and 60 grams in men is associated with an increased prevalence of cirrhosis compared with the normal population. Less well-known is the association of both acute and chronic pancreatitis with heavy, consumption, and occasionally a disease affecting the heart muscle. Conflicting evidence exists about the effect on blood pressure and many other alleged and disastrous conse-

quences remain unverified. The average intake necessary to cause organ damage is becoming clearer, and is the subject of continuing study, but the nature of individual susceptibility is still imperfectly understood.

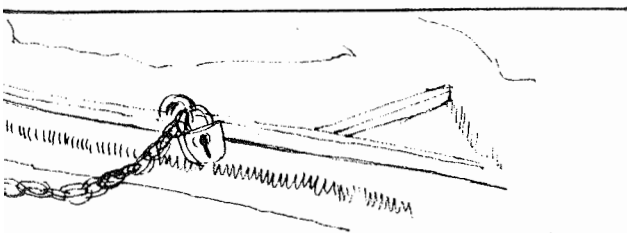
No mention has been made here of the catastrophic effects on marriages, families and personalities, or of the whole gamut of socio-economic disasters that accumulate in the wake of alcohol dependence. These are the subject of other papers, and are familiar talking points.

### Are some people predisposed to alcoholism ?

This danger is often quoted in Christian teaching. A certain proportion of the population, some say as much as 10 per cent, possess the predisposition to become alcohol-dependent. This is used to reinforce the argument of the stumbling-block. However the hard evidence is far from simple to accumulate.

Present views can be summarized this way. All authorities agree that the cause is multi-factorial. The basic personality, the early home environment and the adult occupation are all factors. None would rule out altogether some inherited tendency, but the importance of this factor is disputed. There are therefore the two opposing concepts, as to whether an alcoholic is 'born' or 'made'. In addition to this there are conflicts on whether alcohol-dependence is just a non-specific aberrant form of behaviour, a mental illness, or a specific pathological process.

Certain statements appear allowable from the immense amount of work on both humans and animals in various countries. One is that people who drink heavily will develop a syndrome of clinical dependence. Another is that the reasons why such people drink heavily are compound. There may be a *genetic predisposition*. This does not mean necessarily a built-in defect in the body-system. The evidence suggests that a genetically determined appetite for alcohol is possible, but much of this work has been done with animals and its applicability to humans is therefore debatable. Inheritance may much more obviously determine basic personality, and it may be this that accounts for correlations in studies of identical twins and of families. Firm conclusions are made difficult by the impossibility of comparing various studies, when even such a fundamental question as 'what is alcoholism?' is defined very differently. It is important to us as Christians to know how much blame can be laid at the door of our inherited make-up, as it will to some extent determine the optimism with which we can approach the problem of





rehabilitation. A strong argument against a built-in defect in the system is that a return to normal drinking has been proved to be possible. As everyone knows, however, this is a policy not encouraged or advised by anyone working in the field, and I only mention it as evidence.

There may be an *environmental factor*. The weight of evidence comes down heavily on this as being more important than genetic factors in forming personality, and also in inculcating norms of drinking behaviour. There seems to be no clear indication that the alcoholic is metabolically or genetically different from the normal drinker.

### **Is alcoholism a disease?**

Argument in this area is made difficult due to the arbitrary nature of the term disease. There is an understandable reluctance to be committed to a dogmatic view. But, as can be expected, those who hold that abnormal drinking is caused by a pathological process will call it a disease. It is, however, vital to be circumspect in this, as the social consequence of calling it a disease is to pin our hopes on some form of therapy, and to forget that what we are dealing with is a complex tangle of factors. For these the only possible treatment is a multi-disciplinary approach including wise counselling, steadfast support and sensible medical advice, allied to a spark of self motivation. Such therapy is best obtained from a highly committed group of people who can between them offer all that is required. At foundation level, of course, is the conviction among Christians who work in this field that only in Christ can a new 'heredity' be found, and that nothing in the past need spoil the future. For our God can do anything.

### **What are we to do about it?**

We have a major problem on our hands. Perhaps the Christian community needs to be more incisive in its attitude. The permissiveness of our generation allows fewer restrictions rather than more. Prohibition is not on. The law can do no more than punish. The social services can do no more than provide opportunities for refuge and help. The doctor can sometimes advise, counsel and prescribe. What more can we do?

First, we can be concerned, and let that concern manifest itself in the way we influence those who look to us for a lead. Society has never been so well informed. The concentration of alcohol in the blood produced by a certain quantity of sherry, the relative potency of various beverages, the physical effects of the

breakdown products of alcohol, are well publicized. The statistics of road accidents reported by the police, the photograph of yet another victim, the news of yet another marriage breakdown, are our daily diet. Yet despite this, the trend is an unremittingly increasing intake of alcohol, especially among the young. Particular concern focusses on the Christian youth scene. We find with some dismay that the changing pattern of social discipline is reflected in the Christian Union at college and university, and in the church youth group. Where previously it had been absent, alcohol is now a regular feature, and an accepted part of social activity. There is considerable confusion amongst believers as to the correct attitude to take, and because it runs counter to norms in society in general few are bold enough to take a firm line without being obscurantist. Alcohol dependence is not an infrequent problem encountered within the church community. We need to be ready to execute a prophetic role, to be both loving and strong, to demonstrate to a society that has turned its back on God that there is another Way.

We must therefore teach much more openly on these matters within the church. We must also be prepared to open ourselves to the possibility that God is calling out more workers into this field to counsel, to educate and to encourage. Whole fellowships are sometimes involved, and there are some remarkable and entirely selfless examples of this.

In addition to teaching and service, are there none who can rise from among us and crusade for legislation that would help? We are aware of course that there are huge vested interests that will oppose any such move. To choose an example from another country, it is a well recognized fact that attempts to get laws limiting the price and availability of liquor in some parts of Australia have no chance of success because the funds for political campaigning come from breweries. The politicians are compromised. But there are many steps that could be taken, such as to increase the prices, limit availability, enforce existing legislation, and even to weaken the potency of beverages. All these would go some way towards ameliorating the consequences of the present trend. We need to support those who labour in this field for the glory of God, and for the rescuing of our society.

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