

Views from the Pews – What’s in a name?

God has blessed our wine industry many times over, but, no matter how good our best sparkling whites get, we are still not allowed to call them ‘Champagne’. That is because there is a wide network of international agreements which protect rights to the names of foods and agricultural products associated with a place or country. The word ‘Kiwifruit’ is an example.

What then of words such as ‘Christian’, ‘Church’, or even ‘Bishop’?

These words have probably been co-opted for centuries but, just now, the word ‘Christian’ has acquired political overtones in parts of the USA. While it is important not to generalize, there are folks who would call themselves such who assert two apparently contradictory rights – the right of an unborn child to life after birth, and the right to carry a firearm designed for the sole purpose of killing human beings. In New Zealand, there is a Church with a self-proclaimed ‘Bishop’ which to some has some of the attributes of a gang, and to others, some of the attributes of a political party. And in the South Island we have an institution which resembles a ghetto, from which women flee at their peril, while the (male) leaders loudly assert that theirs is a Christian community.

Does this matter?

It does if what advertising executives call ‘brand dilution’ is taking place. This is important because churches no longer have a monopoly on Sunday activities – we have to compete with supermarkets, shopping malls, and sport. So if we are asking a friend to come to ‘Church’ with us to find out a bit about ‘Christianity’ we need to be aware of what ‘brand awareness’ is present in our friend’s mind. What do these three words actually mean? What control (if any) is exercised over their use? Can anyone set up what they call a ‘Church’, and is there (and should there be) an overarching framework of rules governing the use of what are to us very specific words with meanings that are usually beyond debate? We cannot oppose the establishment of new church communities – after all, that is what St Paul did. But there is a danger that words can be co-opted to enable some institutions to camouflage themselves. And we too need to be very clear about what ‘Anglican’ means or doesn’t mean.

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