



THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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THE FAILED RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION BILL¹

So what happened last week?

Five dissident Coalition members crossed the floor to vote with Labor against the Government to remove the section 38(3) exemptions for faith-based schools from the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) – one of the two most important protections for religious schools in Federal law.

The SDA exemptions give religious schools the freedom to apply the ethical standard of their religious adherence when it comes to employing staff and enrolling students where it involves a person's gender identity and sexual orientation.

At the same time, Labor and the dissident Liberals cornered the Morrison Government. They made removal of the exemptions for religious schools the absolute condition for supporting the Government's Religious Discrimination Bill.

Cornered, the Government appears to have to put both the Religious Discrimination Bill and the amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act "on ice". It is highly unlikely that these bills will be debated in the two remaining Senate sitting days before a federal election is called.

The five dissident Liberals MPS who joined with Labor were Bridget Archer, Trent Zimmerman, Fiona Martin, Katie Allen and Dave Sharma.

To understand how this defeat of the Morrison Government unfolded, it is important to grasp that the terms "sexual orientation" (straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual) and fluid "gender identity" (transgender) are simultaneously:

- separate issues, for example, trans boys who identify as girls demand access to girls' sports, toilets, showers and change rooms – gay boys don't;
- but the two issues are ideologically welded together by the LGBT lobby and those pursuing greater sexual freedom, such that if "sexual orientation" (gay, lesbian, bisexual) has protected-attribute status in discrimination law, "gender identity" (transgender) must be protected also.

It is not clear whether the Prime Minister understands either these distinctions, or how they are ideologically welded together, given the timeline of events since 2017.

THE TIMELINE OF EVENTS:

2017, the Marriage Act is changed: Because of concerns that the transgender/same-sex marriage legislation could lead to discrimination against ministers of religion and people of faith on account of their religious beliefs, the Government promised legislation to protect religious

freedoms.

2018 Wentworth by-election: During the campaign, Scott Morrison said, "Our Government does not support expulsion of students from religious non-state schools on the basis of their sexuality"; strongly implying that he was referring to gay students. Morrison's claim was a straw man as most schools treat a student's sexual orientation as a personal matter and as a pastoral-care issue. They don't expel students for being gay.

2019: Scott Morrison promised that a change in the exemptions for faith-based schools would not be considered until after the Religious Discrimination Bill was dealt with by Federal Parliament and until the exemptions were reviewed by the Australian Law Reform Commission. This report was put off until the end of 2022.

November 23, 2021: The Religious Discrimination Bill was introduced into Federal Parliament.

December 1, 2021: Scott Morrison sent a letter to Labor Leader Anthony Albanese saying that to assist with the passing of the RDA, "where I stated there is no place in our education system for any form of discrimination against a student on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity, the Government will move an amendment to remove the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act ...", by which he appears to mean that he will remove all of section 38(3) of the Sex Discrimination Act covering both sexual orientation and gender identity. That would remove all protections for the freedom of religious schools to employ and enrol people according to their beliefs. Morrison's undertaking in this letter appears to renege on his 2019 promise to religious leaders that he would not touch the exemptions until the Law Reform Commission's report, due late in 2022.

February 3, 2022: The Prime Minister reacted to Citipointe Christian College's contract issued to parents on sexual morality, saying he would stare down many in his party room to amend the Sex Discrimination Act by adding a clause that says religious schools cannot expel gay students.

There was an immediate outcry from Labor and the five Liberal dissidents. They said Morrison's amendment would not prevent the expulsion of transgender students and did not remove section 38(3) from the Sex Discrimination Act, as Morrison had promised to do in his December 1 letter to Albanese.

February 10: After an all-night debate in the House of Representatives, at around 5am, with support from dissident Liberals, Labor passed both an amendment to repeal all exemptions for religious schools (and most religious institutions) from the Sex Discrimination Act and also the Religious Discrimination Bill.

Immediately, both bills were sent to the Senate, but, as the Government lacks the numbers in the Upper House, it

¹ This article is an edited version of what has been recently reported by *The Australian Family Association*

is unlikely that either bill will be debated before the coming federal election.

INTERPRETING THE MESS

It appears possible that Morrison, like many Australians, had not grasped the distinctions between sexual orientation and gender identity, and how, although these are two separate issues, they are ideologically inseparable. He has used interchangeably the terms “sexuality”, “sexual orientation”, “gender identity” and combinations of these.

Without the SDA exemptions:

- schools would be forced to accept students and staff regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, even if students, teachers or parents actively campaigned against the school’s religious beliefs;

- a school would have very limited capacity to protect the sex-based rights of biological female students should a male student who identifies as female insist on accessing female toilets, showers, change rooms and sports.

This “freedom”, or protection, for religious schools can hardly offend or cause damage to others, as nobody is forced to enrol or work at a school if their beliefs are in conflict with the school’s ethos, any more than a person should be offended if they join a political party whose beliefs and policies they fundamentally disagree with.

It is utterly hypocritical for Labor, the Greens and dissident Liberals to support exemptions for political parties from discrimination law so parties can discriminate in employment and membership against those who don’t hold the political beliefs of their party, but force religious schools to employ and enrol people who are opposed to the religious beliefs of the school.

The Greens would be the first to howl loudly at people holding conservative Liberal values becoming members of the Greens and campaigning to dump their policies on climate change and to support exemptions for religious schools in discrimination law.

In a pluralist society, the Religious Discrimination Bill and the exemptions in the Sex Discrimination Act respect a diversity of beliefs. Respect for all beliefs is true diversity, the foundation stone of a tolerant democracy.

In defiance of pluralism, tolerance and true diversity, LGBT activist organisations, the Greens, Labor and dissident Liberals have made it clear that they will no longer tolerate religious schools holding any moral beliefs on sex, marriage and family other than their own.

This ideological commitment transcends party lines to the point where political ideologues will vote on this issue regardless of the hypocrisy involved and regardless of the damage it causes their party.

Christian Schools Australia director of Public Policy, Mark Spencer, commented: “These amendments undermine the ability of schools of any faith to provide

teaching on sexuality and gender in accordance with their beliefs. It goes to the very heart of religious teaching, a fundamental human right.”

In the end, it is likely that Labor and dissident Liberals would have moved to remove exemptions for religious schools regardless of Morrison’s confused statements on this matter.

This political operation to hack away at religious freedoms in Australia is a warning of the immanent threats to cherished freedoms of belief, religion and speech from what political elites now regard as the overriding human right – the right to sexual freedom.

WHERE TO NEXT?

On Sunday February 13, after the previous week’s tumult, Scott Morrison told a Maronite Church in Sydney that he would rather drop the Religious Discrimination Bill than to have it watered down.

In the end, it is far better to keep the exemptions in the Sex Discrimination Act and not have a Religious Discrimination Act.

Should the Morrison Government be re-elected, and should the numbers change in the Senate, there is a chance that the Bill could be recommitted and passed without the removal of the exemptions in the Sex Discrimination Act.

At the same time as this religious-freedom debate was underway in Parliament, Senator Claire Chandler introduced a bill to protect women’s sport from male athletes identifying as female outcompeting women.

Her bill proposes to rewrite the definition of “man” and “woman” into the Sex Discrimination Act, following the removal of these definitions in 2013. After all, how can there be a “sex” discrimination act without a definition of the male and female sexes?

Chandler’s bill may not be debated until after the federal election, but if passed, it may be just as effective, if not more effective, for protecting freedom of belief about the nature of human sexuality than a religious discrimination act.

Written by AFA research officer Patrick J Byrne

MISPLACED FEAR

When was the last time you heard a sermon on the wrath of God? It has probably been a while.

Gone are the fire and brimstone preachers who left burn marks on your soul with the vivid descriptions of God’s anger against sin and His punishment for those who do not repent. In fact, we do not hear much from pulpits that may cause us to fear God. But that does not mean we do not have fear preached to us.

Today the fear that is focused on is the fear of those waiting to take away our rights or ruin our environment or impinge upon the freedom of people to define their gender or restrict our liberty to do what is right in our own eyes.

We do not fear consequences so much as today we fear those who may say “no” to our desires. We do not fear God so much as we fear the narrow-minded types who still believe in objective truth, clear moral distinctions, and Biblical narratives.

Our fears are misplaced. We are not fearing the wrath of God that which should be feared, and we are fearing things restraint of that which should be marked as sin and resisted. It is a strange world around us. Perhaps once we spoke a similar language (though never the same), but today the Church and the world speak unintelligibly to each other. The world has long ago decided that sin is a bad word and that the desires and behaviours once defined as sin are good. The Church (at least the orthodox voice, anyway) is addressing the world in categories that the world has taken over and redefined so that communication is rendered difficult if not impossible.

Liberal and progressive churches have confused the matter for the world by rejecting the Bible as myth and legend and by casting aside the old notions of sin, death, and God’s wrath. The Gospel has become less and less about Christ and Him crucified and more and more about a benign deity who can do little more than encourage us to be true to ourselves and to cast aside restraint and indulge ourselves in all our whims. So the only Christianity the world hears is this accommodating version of Christianity in which the Gospel becomes a mere principle of vague love designed to satisfy the self. What was once the authentic voice of Christianity has become hate speech not to be tolerated in the public square, and a good enough reason to deprive some churches (and their schools) of any benefits accorded religious institutions before the law.

It is Babel all over again. In the midst of the cacophony of voices claiming to be true, to speak for God, and to reflect the Scriptures, people think they have an idea of what Christianity is, but what they think is the fake image created by those who have chosen the moment over history and the faint echo of relevance over faithfulness. In the confusion, what remains is that God is a God of wrath, that this wrath must be satisfied, or you, the sinner before a righteous God, will suffer the full force of this wrath. This is the necessity of Jesus and the shape of hope for those who know what to fear and why. But to those who deny the wrath of God, there is no need for a Jesus except as a coach to cheer on those who do whatever they want and call it good.

Those who go to bed at night fearing that abortion will one day be made illegal or that transgender whims will be restrained or that climate change will swallow up the earth or children will overpopulate the world, have misplaced fears. The sinful self has repeated the devil’s lies so often that they now believe only the lies. What we ought to fear is the wrath of God and what we ought to rejoice in is Him

who has satisfied that wrath, paid the price of our redemption, and suffered in our place the punishment for all of sin. Daily repentance hears anew the voice of the Law and the grace of the Gospel - it does not mature past that recitation of sin and death and forgiveness and life.

We are teaching our children to fear the wrong things. It is no wonder that those who were not raised in the faith now scratch their heads and wonder what on earth the Church is talking about.

THE MEANING OF THE HUMAN HEART, ROMANCE, AND VALENTINE’S DAY

Valentine’s Day as celebrated and observed in many places around the world ever since Medieval times is associated with romantic love and especially with the pairing of a man and a woman, eventually within marriage. The day was officially known as the Feast Day of St. Valentine, a saint, it is claimed by the Roman Catholic Church, who was a martyr in the third century. Ever since the Medieval period, this particular feast day has been transformed into a festival of romantic love.

Now before going further we should also note that it has been transformed in modern Australia into one of the most lucrative opportunities for a holiday (some places were charging \$150.00 for a bunch of roses!). A consideration of the transformation of Valentine’s Day also allows us to understand the transformation of romantic love in marriage over many centuries. Going back to the Medieval period the clear ethos, the standard was romantic love that would lead to marriage but that marriage was often arranged by families, not so much by the man and the woman who would eventually wed.

The Medieval and ancient world of course knew an ethos of romance but it was only as they saw the dawn of the renaissance that there emerged in western societies the idea of companion at marriage, the man and the woman arranging their own marriage on their own romantic terms. Yet as we now see, marriage has been transformed again and again, harmed greatly by the moral transformation that came with divorce, harmed greatly of course by the redefinition that we’ve experienced in marriage just over the last few years legalising same sex marriage.

Looking at Valentine’s Day also reminds us of the central symbol of Valentine’s Day which is a heart. I mention this as we’re thinking about the heart shaped emblem often associated with Valentine’s and with romantic love. Where in the world does that shape come from? It turns out it really doesn’t come so much from the shape of the human heart, that is the beating heart anatomically vital within our chest. It refers instead to a symbol of romantic love that is believed to have appeared in the sixth century BC which is the image of the Sophium plant which was understood to

be either a reproductive assist or perhaps even an aphrodisiac.

In a recent book entitled *The Amorous Heart*, Marilyn Yalom looks at the history of the heart as symbol throughout western civilisation. One of the things that she notes is the fact that it wasn't even commonly assumed that the heart had the major responsibility for blood circulation until that was officially recognised in year 1628 when the English physician, William Harvey, first accounted in a scientific way for the circulation of the blood with the heart as its pump.

Now as is noted in the book, it's almost certain that ancient peoples understood the heart's role but not in such an explicitly scientific or mechanical way. This leads to a huge question. Why then do we speak so naturally about the heart as the seat of the individual, the seat of emotions, and the seat of love and moral judgment? We should note that this is not only something that we see in Medieval Europe, but also something that we find explicitly within Scripture.

The Scriptures repeatedly, in both the Old and the New Testaments, refers to the heart as the centre of who we are. In the book of Job, Job wonders if his heart is walking differently than it should. Furthermore, we have the reminder in Scripture also coming from the Old Testament, that the heart is deceitfully wicked. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9).

The biblical understanding of the heart is rooted to the totality of biblical theology, a totality that points to the fact that the heart is indeed the seat of the emotions. We speak naturally about the heart, speaking not of the heart that beats within our chest as an organ of circulation, but rather of the heart is that which reveals the interiority of who we are, the true self, our emotions, our moral conditions.

The Bible says that we are to hide God's Word in our heart that we would not sin against Him. That of course does not refer to the organ of circulation, it refers to the innermost self, the true self. Christians of course have every reason to celebrate romantic love and even more reason to celebrate the reality of marriage, the union of a man and a woman, for a covenant vow of a lifetime. We have even more reason to celebrate that, understanding both love and marriage as God's gifts and understanding marriage as the context, the expression of romantic love, certainly its goal.

It's also important for us to recognise that the Christian knowledge of the heart and the Christian understanding of love, they don't exactly make for exciting greeting cards that are likely to get a lot of cultural approval on Valentine's Day. It's virtually impossible to imagine a commercially successfully Valentine's Day card that would have as its message, "*The heart is desperately wicked, who can understand it?*"

The Bible has a lot more to say about the heart of course and the Bible is very clear in affirming the gift of romance, and love, and marriage. But don't expect biblical realism in greeting cards - that's not what they're about.

FROM THE PASTOR

The Christmas Season is behind us now, and we have quickly come to the Time of Easter, with Lent beginning on Ash Wednesday.

The Time of Easter invites us into the story of Jesus' sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus gives proof that our salvation has been completed and that our hope of eternal life with God is secure.

The Sundays during the Lenten season are not "of Lent" but "in Lent." The observances of Lent are concrete reminders of the greater solemnity of this season, yet we still emphasise the Gospel of Christ as central even to this penitential season.

We shall be holding mid-week Vespers services across the congregations on the Downs. For this year, I am planning on preaching about the journey of Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt. These sermons will be readily available on the website for those who cannot make our mid-week services. Printed copies will also be available each following Sunday at church.

I continue with monthly Zoom calls with the pastors of the ULMA in the USA. The two students studying at Walther Seminary continue to do well. They had a break for a few weeks as both came down with covid, but they are over that, and I believe will soon begin preparing their own sermons and leading their congregations in worship. It is still hoped that they will complete their vicarage in Australia, but this will all depend on how easy or difficult it will be for them to come here under the cloud of covid. Hopefully, in the near future, there will be further easing for international travellers. All this will be worked out later, but for now, please pray that these two young men will continue to grow in their knowledge and love for Jesus and His children.

Although we have only been using our revised service schedule for short time, it is pleasing to see so many stay for our after-service Bible studies.

Most of our congregations by now have held their annual meetings, and I want to thank all those who have worked tirelessly to keep our congregations functioning. This couldn't happen without these efforts. May the Lord continue to guide and serve us throughout the year!

Pastor

LATEST AELC WEBSITE STATISTICS

The following are the latest figures from the AELC website: The number of average daily visitors for the December/January period was 9590. 83% of the visits are to download or watch the service recording.