

Should Christians be Allowed Freedom of Speech?

Benedict XVI summarised the Church’s essential life thus: it worships God, it evangelises, it serves the poor. In the beginning, it did this counter-culturally, in a pagan world, before it became the bedrock of Western civilisation. Now the West no longer believes in Christianity, and has become pagan again. So the Church is once more doing these things counter-culturally. This is an opportunity not a threat. There are real dangers, though, and Christians must suffer. They’re no longer welcome in the public forum, best avoided anyway until the present madness subsides.

In a fundamental sense, the question of whether Christians should be allowed freedom of speech is moot. First, because Christians should be thinking about their responsibilities to Christ rather than their rights as citizens of the polis. Second, because the only freedom Christians have, ultimately, is in Christ. Third, because their great commission is to make Christ known to all nations and baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Fourth, because they should be preaching Christ faithfully to the nations, rather than compromising the Gospel by trying to syncretise it with the zeitgeist.

Inevitably, we come to Israel Folau, who posted paraphrases of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and Galatians 5:19–21 on social media, thus detonating the homosexuality tripwire Douglas Murray describes in *The Madness of Crowds* (2019). In his letters, Paul warns that the unrighteous—those who gratify the desires of the flesh rather than walk in the spirit—won’t inherit the kingdom of heaven. This of course is anathema to a pagan culture that has turned the desires of the flesh into a spiritual principle, has elevated homosexuality to a public virtue, no longer distinguishes between biological males and biological females, and believes sex and gender are functionally independent.

Most of the public agonising was over Folau using the word *hell*—a metaphor emblematic of not inheriting the kingdom of heaven—although Paul

never uses the metaphor. A face-palming Christian asked me whether Folau should have framed his posts in a more diplomatic way, to which I replied: “Is Scripture diplomatic? Was Jesus diplomatic? Do we still believe in a God who judges?” Another question arises here. Who is allowed to preach the Gospel, the laity who may or may not be well versed in the scriptures, or the clergy as trained spokespersons? Strictly speaking, the risen Christ gave the great commission to the apostles, which is also a moot point, since the contemporary successors of the apostles were silent at the precise moment they should have spoken with apostolic authority. Folau caused a scandal because the Gospel is scandalous. The whole Folau saga highlights that fact. This is Izzy’s greatest achievement.

What disturbed me most, apart from the hierarchy refusing to rise to the occasion, letting Folau cop the heat for proclaiming the Gospel, was the woman who infiltrated Folau’s church—like some investigative journalist—so she could judge its orthodoxy and declare it to be unrepresentative of mainstream Christianity. According to Martyn Iles, managing director of the Australian Christian Lobby, the great outcome of the Folau saga is that *the Gospel was proclaimed*.

In December 2019, Folau and Rugby Australia issued a joint statement and apologies, which stated that no harm had been intended by either party and announced that a confidential settlement had been reached. That same month, the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales accepted a complaint from a prominent gay-rights campaigner alleging that Folau had engaged in “homosexuality vilification”. These bread-and-circuses pantomimes will go on, forever, until the electorate smells a rat, or the audience gets bored. The David-and-Goliath spectacle of Folau versus Rugby Australia is quite different from the possible fallout of Folau versus a prominent gay-rights campaigner. A lot will depend on how the complaint

is managed for public consumption and choreographed for the media. Don't think we haven't seen all this before and can't read between the lines.

Did Folau vilify homosexuality, an unstable socially-constructed identity originating in a noun coined in the late nineteenth century? By every account, Izzy loves the sinner and hates the sin. That defence, central to Christian belief, is no longer acceptable in a post-Christian Australia where sin—particularly sexual sin—no longer exists. Here we must consider those ex-Labor seats in Western Sydney, which voted *No* in 2017, and the political need to reconcile them, or at least be seen to.

Stuart Lindsay's piece in the December *Quadrant*, "The Misguided Faith in Legislated Religious Freedoms", argues that—based on his experience as a retired Federal Circuit Court Judge—in reality the legislation will protect no one:

It will allow exactly the same processes to be invoked against you if the complainant says that, instead of being offended he or she was *harassed* or *vilified*, or that the words used about them were likely to incite *hatred*. I have learned from my time in court that very often those who resort to the human-rights complex to seek relief from their experience of the world have a very low toleration of what they perceive to be disapproval; they will have little difficulty in transforming an offensive psychological experience into one where they are convinced they suffered vilification.

Each of us knows what happens if our foot so much as grazes the homosexuality tripwire: we'll be called bigoted, homophobic and transphobic, just for starters.

Douglas Murray speaks of a shift in the human rights fights of our time, moving from being a product of a system to being the foundation of a new system. To demonstrate virtue, you must be seen to be an LGBT+ ally and stress how ardently you desire to bring down the patriarchy. This creates a problem for those auditioning for the oppression olympics, as public avowals of loyalty must be made to the human rights complex, even if there's no need for them.

What if people aren't oppressed? As only the most extreme claims get heard—the exceptions

rather than the rule—there's a tendency to believe in worst-case scenarios. Murray thinks this allows us to avoid important discussions about what happens to most people most of the time. What if the supposedly oppressed are in fact privileged? For example: "studies have shown that gay men and lesbian women consistently earn more on average than their heterosexual counterparts". While there are many reasons for this, it's maddening to be asked to see oppression where it doesn't exist. This is one of the negatives of portraying life as a zero-sum game "between different groups vying for oppressed status". It "robs us of time and energy for the conversations and thinking that we need to do".

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Any conversation about whether Christians should be allowed freedom of speech must acknowledge a few fundamental facts.

When Paul went among the Corinthians he confessed: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." A few verses earlier he said:

Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

That's a perfect summary of the Kerygma, the Gospel, the Good News.

If the metaphor of hell is uncomfortable, our understanding of hell shapes our view of the Gospel, God's holiness, and our depravity. If we don't accept the reality of hell, or our depravity, we can't understand the glory of the Gospel. Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He talked about it more than heaven. In Luke 16, he describes a great chasm over which "none may cross from there to us". In Matthew 25, he foresees a time when people will be separated into two groups, one entering into his presence, the other banished to "eternal fire".

As Hebrews 10:39 puts it: "But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." Should Israel Folau be punished for telling the truth?

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