

Living for Jesus in the ‘new Australia’

Last year’s ‘YES’ vote and the subsequent passing of legislation allowing same-sex couples to marry in Australia, will have raised all sorts of questions for each of us.

Has our society now completely shifted away from ‘Christian values’ and does this even matter? Is religious freedom under threat? What will the consequences be for our children?

Given the plebiscite made Christians seem like haters, should we avoid speaking out on moral issues and just focus on evangelism?

Now that our gay friends and family members can marry, what do we do when they invite us to their wedding?

How do we keep making our churches welcoming for all people, same-sex attracted or otherwise, while still faithfully teaching God’s good design for sex and marriage?

In the face of these kind of complex questions it’s easy to be overwhelmed or fearful about the future as a Christian in our nation. But instead, we surely want our response to be first shaped by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and how the Scriptures teach us to live faithfully for Him in this world.

A helpful starting point is the book of 1 Peter, a letter written to 1st century believers under pressure from surrounding cultures that were hostile to Christian belief, dominated by alternative worldviews and ethical norms (including the realm of sexuality). Into that situation, the Apostle encourages them (and us) about how the gospel has re-shaped our **identity** and **calling**:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 1:9-12)

1. How the gospel re-shapes our identity

How incredible to think that whatever our past, whatever our failures to live God’s way, however unloved we may have felt from other people, if the Lord Jesus has given us new birth into a living hope (1:3), we belong to God. By grace, we have become: *“...a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession”* (2:9).

This is our secure identity in Christ. And it means whatever ‘new Australia’ we might find ourselves living in, even if life becomes more challenging as a Christian here, there’s no need to react with fear. For our God remains on the throne and as his dearly loved people, we live in the confidence of his declaration that, trusting in Christ, “[we] will never be put to shame” (2:6).

Grasping how the gospel re-shapes our identity will also help us approach our fellow unbelieving Australians with humility and grace, rather than pride and antagonism. For however morally corrupt or depraved our society becomes, we must remember that's what we all once were. We speak into our world not as morally superior 'do-gooders', but as those who've been called "out of darkness and into his wonderful light" (2:10); those who deserved God's rejection but have received his compassionate acceptance.

The gospel declares that in Christ we have a new identity that has nothing to do with being better than others and everything to do with the mercy of God! And it's that gospel-shaped identity which motivates our thankful allegiance to Christ above culture, and provides the foundation for a humble stance of love, instead of fear, towards the world.

2. How the gospel re-shapes our life calling

So how then does God call us to live out our new identity as his people?

Well Peter says that God's intention in making us his special possession is: "*...that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light*" (2:9).

Further on, Peter urges us not to fear persecution (3:14), "*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...*" (1 Peter 3:15)

On this basis, the introduction of same-sex marriage or any departure from Christian ethics in wider society shouldn't cause us to hide away. Instead our trust in Jesus as Lord gives us boldness to live our Christian lives before a watching world, "among the pagans" (2:12), being ready to answer questions and explain the story of hope that underlies our apparently unusual behaviour. Providing we don't adopt a defensive mentality, the fact our nation might become increasingly secular, should only provide new evangelistic opportunities as we engage openly and graciously with our neighbours, and find them curious about what we believe.

Another part of that new calling we have as God's "holy nation", is to live distinctively, according to His wise commands, as "foreigners and exiles" in the world (2:12). We should actually expect that our values and decisions will be so different from the people around us that it might almost seem as if we're from another planet!

Negatively, living in holiness will require us to abstain from the sinful desires which "war against your soul" (2:11). Of course this means continuing to avoid all kinds of sexual immorality, but equally greed, jealousy, drunkenness, gossip and anything else that is out of step with our new identity as God's holy people.

However more than just being called to abstain, we are also urged positively by the Apostle to "live such good lives among the pagans", that they might one day praise God as well! For a range of reasons, many of our fellow Australians don't have a particularly high opinion of Christians at present. It might even be said they "accuse you of doing wrong" (2:12)!

The way we counter that perception isn't to fight back, but to ensure our lives are characterised by the good deeds that flow from the gospel. Some Peter mentions, which seem particularly relevant in our present context include: suffering without retaliation (2:19-25), submitting to civil authorities (3:13), prayer (4:7; 5:6-7), compassion (3:8), love and hospitality (4:8-9), humility (5:6), and loving marriages between godly husbands and wives (3:1-7).

In any society, there will always be issues where a Christian point of view is out of step with the wider community. But at a time in Australia where that cultural dissonance feels particularly strong around marriage and sexuality, we pray that God might help his church to faithfully live out our holy calling in these ways; that somehow, in His mercy, God might use our witness to lead many to Jesus.

So how do we live faithfully for Jesus in the 'new Australia'? Whilst there may be many new issues to be worked through, our response to any future challenges must continue to be grounded in the unchanging gospel of our Lord Jesus and how it shapes our identity and calling as his servants in this world.

Here's a prayer you might like to pray for the church and our nation at this time.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for who you've made us to be through the gospel of our Lord Jesus. That by his death and resurrection, we share in a new identity as your chosen people and special possession; those who've been called out of darkness and into your wonderful light.

At a time where many of us feel under pressure and fearful for our future as Christians in Australia, help us to take hold of this new identity and allow it to shape our response to what happens around us. Confident in who we are before you by grace, enable us approach our neighbours with an attitude of love and humility, rather than hostility.

We pray for the church, that in response to your astounding love in Christ, we might be faithful in living out our calling to be a holy people, abstaining from worldly immorality of every kind, while at the same time practising good deeds in the pattern of our Saviour so as to adorn His gospel.

We pray especially during this season of increased tension with our wider community around issues of sexuality and marriage, that you would provide many opportunities for us to share the story of hope we've found in the gospel. Have mercy on our nation, pour out your Spirit, so that many more Australians come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen