

## Law Reform and the John Calvin Schools

The Albany John Calvin School celebrated its 60th anniversary last year. As a school community we are truly thankful for the opportunities we have been blessed to receive over these past six decades. Year after year we have sought to educate our covenant children for a life of love and service to God and their neighbour. Our church community in Albany is truly grateful for the freedoms and opportunities the Lord has given us to operate our own schools.

Surprisingly perhaps, we are not the only people who value these freedoms and opportunities; the majority of the Australian population also support these freedoms and rights. According to a recent Compass poll, the vast majority of Australians, from all political persuasions, still support the right of religious schools to employ teachers and other staff who support the clearly stated values and beliefs of the school community. What's more, the vast majority of Australians also support the right of parents to choose a school that reflects their strongly held values and beliefs.

Despite this, there are increasing pressures on members of parliament to change existing laws that protect Christian places of learning like our John Calvin Schools. For example, pressure is being applied to enact laws that would result in religious schools no longer being able to select staff according to their religious convictions. Anti-religious activists, with views and opinions not held by the majority of the population, are intent on attacking not only Christianity, but also Christian schools.

So why do these anti-religious activists seem to be making ground? Perhaps the reason is connected to the increasing momentum of the woke movement. Other than Christians, not many are willing to share their concerns about the direction our society is heading. Therefore, as a consequence, both Christians and Christian schools are in the firing line. Due to their opposition to the woke ideology, they are seen as intolerant and bigoted. Due to their opposition to this movement, Christians are viewed as a voice that needs to be silenced.

However, we should not be surprised that Christians are being targeted. Consider what we read, for example, in

2 Timothy 3:12, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution".

There are a range of approaches that those who are opposed to Christian schooling are using in their quest to gain ground. Among these approaches is their endeavour to dismantle the existing safeguards that enable faith-based educational institutions to uphold their principles. A noteworthy instance is the endeavour to eliminate the provisions allowing Christian schools to exercise discretion in matters such as the recruitment of staff who align with their religious beliefs.

Our previous Prime Minister wanted to ensure Christian schools would continue to have the capacity to implement measures such as the preferential hiring of Christian staff. But, as you may recall, the then Prime Minister's Religious Discrimination Bill did not get very far. Following the failed progress of that bill, the current ALP government promised to introduce their own bill. However, before presenting their version of a bill to parliament, they wanted advice on the effectiveness of the existing protections.

Thus, the government mandated the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) to prepare a report. In order to be effective in this process, the ALRC firstly produced a Consultation Paper. To ensure a thorough analysis, the ALRC sought feedback through a survey on the Consultation Paper. Currently, the ALRC is reviewing the survey responses, with the aim of submitting their report to the Federal Attorney General due prior to the end of 2023. While formally acknowledging the importance of religious freedoms and parental rights, the ALRC Consultation Paper, in effect, simultaneously recommends the removal of existing protections currently afforded to schools like ours. For example, Christian schools could lose their ability to exclusively employ staff who share the school's religious values and beliefs, and consequently their ability to maintain their distinctive Christian School culture and ethos.

Although the Consultation Paper emphasises diversity, equity and inclusion, the problem lies in the fact that the recommendations, instead of supporting these things by safeguarding the freedoms of our schools, actually promotes a compulsory uniformity which would

threaten the very existence of faith-based educational institutions.

Christian schools in Western Australia currently find themselves confronting similar pressures at the State government level. The existing exemptions granted under the “Equal Opportunity Act 1984” permit schools, like ours, to specify that the staff they employ hold certain religious convictions. In 2007, the Equal Opportunity Commission of Western Australia (EOC) conducted a comprehensive review of the aforementioned Act. At that point very few of the EOC recommendations were acted upon. Subsequent attempts to amend the Act since 2007 have also proven unsuccessful.

However, there appears to be a potential shift on the horizon. In 2021, the Attorney General of Western Australia entrusted the Law Reform Commission of Western Australia (LRCWA) with the task of determining the necessity of amending the Act. The LRCWA have recommended a host of changes. The current State government, though yet to deal with the LRCWA report in parliament, has stated that changes are inevitable. Furthermore, the State government possesses sufficient numbers to enact these changes.

In light of all this, we may ponder God’s divine plan and wonder how He will direct these matters. However, it is important to remember the wisdom found in Proverbs 21:1: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes”. Although we do not know God’s intentions, we can find solace in the blessed assurance that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). This unwavering truth is a profound source of comfort and reassurance regardless of the eventual outcome.

However, knowing that God is in control, does not negate the need for us to be active, also in the political realm. We should seek to communicate our concerns to politicians at both the State and Federal levels.

We should actively express our concerns to our elected representatives, and we must continue to see if there are additional measures we ought to take to fulfill our responsibilities in these matters.

But we need not be anxious; we should not allow anxiety to consume us in the face of our changing times, the growing anti-Christian push, the uncertain future of our schools, and the pervasive influence of the woke movement. We must also be active in prayer, letting our concerns be made known to God:

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6).

It is worth reflecting on King Hezekiah’s reaction to the letter he received from the King of Assyria (2 Kings 19). The threat faced by Judah was real, yet Hezekiah’s response was to pray. He fervently implored, “O LORD our God, I pray, save us from his hand...” (2 Kings 19a). Notice also that Hezekiah’s plea did not stem from self-interest but from a desire for the glorification of God’s name throughout all the kingdoms of the earth (2 Kings 19b).

Is it God’s plan that the freedoms and protections we currently enjoy will continue? Perhaps. Or perhaps not. However, when we ask God to direct the decisions of our parliamentarians, our prayers should be motivated by the desire to see our LORD God’s name glorified. Additionally, we can find comfort in the knowledge that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28).

God is in control, and He has the future of our schools in the palm of His hand; what he sovereignly dictates will be for our good and, most importantly, for His glory. Praise God!

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