

**The Gospel, Religious Freedom & the Ruddock Report:
Highlights from the recent GiST Event
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We live in a society where our freedom as Christians to publicly live out our faith feels increasingly under pressure. Whether it's in the office, at our place of study, or amongst unbelieving friends and family, we're living in a cultural moment where it not only feels weird and out of place to speak of Jesus, but we worry that it may even provoke outright hostility.

Of course, it's nothing new for Christians to find themselves out of favour, or even hated, and we need to remember that whatever we might be going through is minimal compared with the intense suffering of brothers and sisters around the world in the persecuted church. Nevertheless, it's appropriate to acknowledge the rapidly changing landscape for religious freedom here in Australia so that we might be well informed and prayerful about the challenges and opportunities it presents for us as Christians.

It was this background that prompted our PCQ Gospel in Society Today (**GiST**) team to invite Michael Kellahan (Executive Director, Freedom for Faith) to speak in Brisbane on Thursday 15th November on the topic: "The Gospel, Religious Freedom and the Ruddock Report". The event was held in partnership with City Bible Forum and Freedom for Faith, a Christian legal think tank that exists to see religious freedom promoted and protected in Australia. Approximately 50 people attended, coming from Presbyterian churches and a range of other Christian denominations and organisations.

We opened the night with a reading from Acts 4:1-31, where right from the beginning of Christianity, Peter and John found themselves under pressure from authorities who sought to restrict their religious freedom. However, empowered by the Holy Spirit and trusting in their sovereign Lord, these early evangelists continue to speak boldly about Jesus, whatever the consequences. They understand that their allegiance to the risen Christ must always be higher than what they owe the state, and they refuse to allow fear to silence them.

While our situation is quite different to what Peter and John faced, Michael helpfully encouraged us to see them as a model for our response to any pressures we face in living as Christians in 21st century secular Australia. Trusting in God, we need not be fearful, we must continue speaking about the hope we find in Jesus, and we should devote ourselves to prayer as our commitment to Christ is increasingly put to the test.

With those key foundations in place we moved onto considering the current legal framework for religious freedom. Exactly one year prior to our event, the results of the same-sex marriage plebiscite were announced and the Federal Parliament subsequently legislated to introduce same-sex unions. In response to concerns about the impact marriage law changes may have on Australians with faith, the government established a broad-reaching enquiry led by former Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, "to examine whether Australian law adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion". Over 16,000 submissions were received, including one from the GiST team, outlining our gospel framework and endorsing the lengthy submission from Freedom for Faith. The final report

from the Ruddock enquiry was finalised some months ago, but unfortunately neither its contents nor the government response had been released by the time of our event.

Nevertheless, Michael spoke of how the enquiry and subsequent discussions with politicians regarding public policy have provided Christians with a unique opportunity to shape the future landscape of religious freedom in this country. As the report is released and religious freedom is part of the public conversation, we were urged to advocate for a society in which people are free to live out their religious convictions, side by side with others who may disagree, without interference from government.

In speaking with unbelievers, and even our local political representatives about these issues, it's important that we're aware of the two major perspectives on religious freedom that were represented in submissions to the Ruddock Enquiry:

Firstly, those who believe religious freedom is not under threat because they understand faith mainly in terms of privately held beliefs about God and the ability to gather with other like-minded people for worship services. Our current laws are adequate to protect these freedoms, and many suggested that religious groups actually enjoy too many concessions at the moment. Some were prepared to concede freedom to ministers of religion and churches not to conduct same-sex weddings. But otherwise there should be "no exemptions to equality", since those who adopted this view of religious freedom saw any attempts to further expand legal protections as nothing more than a cover for bigotry. Michael noted that despite the impression we might get from media coverage, this group was smaller than expected.

Secondly, those who understand faith as having broad-reaching implications for a believer's life saw that religious freedom should extend beyond personal beliefs and the ability to gather for corporate worship. It must be lived out publicly, in community with others. On that measure, the current laws are inadequate in protecting the rights of religious Australians to meaningfully contribute towards society on the basis of their religious convictions, especially as they face increasing pressure to exclude their beliefs from the public sphere. On marriage and a range of other issues, there were specific concerns raised about free speech, parents' rights, charities, workplaces and the independence of religious schools from the state in determining their beliefs, policies and practices.

Christians who see that following Jesus requires an all-of-life commitment would understand their faith in this second way. We participate in the wider community and seek the common good in obedience to Jesus' command to love our neighbour. There is a rich history of our positive contribution to Western society on that basis, which must not be forgotten. Consequently, Freedom for Faith has advocated for religious freedom to be protected as a positive legislative right, instead of the current exemptions-based approach, which gives the impression we want special treatment to practice discrimination and avoid playing by the same rules as everyone else.

In contending for this kind of additional protection, Michael reminded us to listen well to those with whom we disagree, and particularly their genuine concern for equality and justice for all. We ourselves show a commitment to these values when we are just as willing

to speak up for the religious freedom of people from other faiths with whom we disagree, as we are for our own. To do this demonstrates we are driven by a pursuit of the common good, rather than simply self-interest, because we genuinely believe a free society to live out one's faith is the best outcome for our nation.

So, we should make the most of the opportunity afforded by the Ruddock enquiry to be involved in shaping the religious freedom landscape which will exist here for years to come. However, that experience of the early Apostles teaches us that our faith in Jesus is in no way dependent on the level of protection granted by the government for religious freedom. For our ongoing witness to be effective, we must not allow ourselves to be crippled by fear, and instead continue to live and speak boldly for Jesus, no matter the consequences.

A real highlight of the evening was praying together for our nation, giving thanks for the relative freedoms we've enjoyed for so long here in Australia, and praying we would remain steadfast in our commitment to Christ, whatever the future holds.

Another great encouragement was an interview with Matt Duncan from Moorooka Presbyterian Church. Matt spoke about some of the challenges and yet wonderful gospel opportunities he's experienced in seeking to live and speak as a disciple of Jesus in today's corporate workplace.

Overall, this was an informative and uplifting event where above all else, we were reminded that trust in our sovereign Lord Jesus, rather than fear, is the best Christian response to any current and future developments concerning religious freedom.

"But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." 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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Peter 3:14-16)