

The logo for 'AP' is rendered in large, bold, white letters on a red background. The background of the entire page features a photograph of palm trees against a sunset sky, with a diamond-shaped orange sign that says 'END' in black letters.

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The Secularisation of Worship and the End of Spiritual Independence

By David Robertson

There is a significant court case going on in Scotland just now, and it has important implications for the Presbyterian and other churches in Australia. 27 Scottish church leaders have taken the government to court over the lengthy church closures imposed upon them because of Covid. They argue that the closures are disproportionate, criminalise corporate worship, are a breach of human rights law, and harmful to the people who attend their congregations. Lord Baird has granted a judicial review on the 11th and 12th of March after the Scottish government refused to listen to the church leaders.

Not all Christian leaders agree with the approach of the 27 ministers – the Church of Scotland for example has dissociated itself from the court action and says it was ‘comfortable’ with the government actions. But leaving aside the arguments for or against the action it is the response of the Scottish government which should give us all cause for concern.

The Scottish Government has declared that the state has a right to ‘regulate the secular activities of Churches...for the purposes of protecting public health’, and that “churches are obliged to comply with secular law. “Why is that concerning? Because of what the government is defining as ‘secular’. They are stating that the gathering of the Lord’s people in public worship for prayer, preaching, praising God and administration of the sacraments is a ‘secular’ activity. This is a radical change – one that has not been seen in the West since the 17th Century.

The subordinate doctrinal standard of the Presbyterian churches throughout the world is the Westminster Confession. In Ch. 23, *Of the Civil Magistrate* it sets out the relationship between Church and State. One aspect of this is what has come to be called ‘spiritual independence’. “Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments.” But the Scottish government is now declaring that these activities are ‘secular’ activities – subject to their jurisdiction. The principle of spiritual independence is under severe threat.

Meanwhile in Victoria, as diligent readers of AP will know all too

well, the government has decided that they can tell the Church who we can pray for and what we can say. Dominic Steele has an excellent discussion on this weeks *The Pastor’s Heart* with Neil Foster (Professor of Law), Heath Easton (Presbyterian minister) and AP’s very own Peter Barnes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Y_mGdWdSQ But it’s not just in Victoria. In NSW the government tells me that I can sing unmasked in sports stadiums to my heart’s content, but in a state which has not seen any community transmission for over a month, we are banned from singing the Lord’s praise in church.

In Western liberal democracies ‘secular’ just simply meant that there was a separation between Church and State. In that sense most Christians in Australia today would be ‘secular’. However, in the latter half of the 20th Century the more militant atheists managed to get their understanding of ‘secular’ to be the norm. They understand secular as being ‘without God’. So whilst they were in theory happy for you to believe what you want – they insisted that all religious belief should be kept out of public life – not just government but also education, healthcare, the media, the arts and business. In other words, they were happy for the Church to be the equivalent of a knitting club – it’s fine when you do it, as long as you don’t ‘disturb the horses’ ; that is affect anyone else.

But like the leech that never has enough, the devil never stops. He knows no rest. We are now moving onto a stage where the Government is God. We have gone from separation of Church and State, where they are ‘good neighbours and good friends’; to the complete side-lining of the Church; we are now moving on from that to a situation where the State is now replacing the Church. It is telling us what to believe, when to meet and what we can say.

In Scotland the government are also proposing a ‘Hate Crime’ bill which is in effect a new Blasphemy Bill, which is so far reaching that you could be prosecuted for things you say in your own home to your own family. If you read Romans 1 to your

family and your child reports what is said in school the next day – you could be prosecuted for ‘hate speech’.

The secular State only works as democracy if there is freedom of speech, freedom of thought, a free press, equality before the law and freedom of religion. When the State limits these, using a compliant media, a political judiciary and Big Tech, we are heading towards an authoritarian anti-democratic State. This is important for all citizens in Australia – but especially for the Church. There are those in the Church who, because they don’t believe in Christ as the Head of the Church, are quite happy to act as the secular prophets for the new State morality. But those

of us who know our Lord, know our Bibles and know our history, know where this road is going. We are called to be prophetic, to wake up and strengthen what remains, and to plead with the Lord for our political leaders that ‘we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.’ (1 Timothy 2:2).

David Robertson is a Scottish Presbyterian minister who came to Australia in 2019 to direct Third Space – an evangelistic project designed to help churches in outreach and evangelism in today’s culture.