

Introduction and background

As we start this evening I would like to read the first four verses from 1 Timothy Chapter 2.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

As we are bid by the Apostle Paul, let us pray.

“We thank you Heavenly Father for the freedoms that we have in this country. We pray for our Queen and Government. May you grant them wisdom so that they may act according to your laws in order that there may be freedom for the Gospel and so that we may live peaceful lives in all godliness and holiness. We thank you for those who worked and

fought for those freedoms down the centuries. We pray that you will be with us this evening. May you help us stand for what is right and witness to the truth. In Jesus' name. Amen”

The issue

The Government wants to create an incitement to religious hatred offence for England and Wales. This will harm religious liberty and the freedom to preach the Gospel.

The Government's proposed law is contained in the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. The Bill has passed through the Commons. It now goes to the House of Lords where the Government is expected to face much more opposition to its proposals. [The Bill is set to be debated for the first time on 11 October]¹. There is a good prospect of the Lords rejecting the proposal. If that happens, the Bill will be sent back to the Commons. Later on this evening we will look at what we can do to stop this offence.

¹ For the latest information on the Bill's progress, contact The Christian Institute.

The Government proposals have attracted widespread criticism. Many journalists, actors, comedians, religious groups and secular groups oppose the plans.

Of course, Christians must oppose hatred. Hating people is wrong. Jesus was clear that we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We oppose hatred. But in our politically correct age the legal definition of hatred is likely to be far removed from the proper Christian definition.

It is not hating a person to tell them that they need a Saviour. It is loving them. It is not hating someone to say that what they believe is wrong. People were insulted when Jesus told them they were wrong. If people thought that Jesus was insulting then, I would suggest that they will think us insulting now.

Jesus was also clear that we must preach the Gospel. We are commanded to do so, and in doing so people can disagree with us. If they disagreed with Jesus Christ, then they will disagree with us. Jesus was the most holy and loving person who has ever walked on this earth. If at times they found his words insulting, then we can be sure that people will find our words insulting too.

On this issue many secular groups and gay rights groups are as worried about the proposals as Christians are. You see the reason why people are worried is that no one knows who could be prosecuted for the new offence.

But it is not just prosecutions that cause concern. The effect of the law will be much wider than that. Weather forecasters try to predict the future with varying degrees of success. These days forecasters don't just tell you the temperature, they tell you the 'windchill factor'. In other words, it feels colder because of the effect of the wind blowing. And that is precisely what will happen with the law. Fear of breaking this law will have a chilling effect on free speech. When things ought to be said people will keep quiet. The Government is very optimistic about the temperature, but in reality it will be very cold indeed.

As Christians, we are instructed to pray for the governing authorities that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Paul says, this is good and pleases God our Saviour who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4). In other words, we are to pray for freedom to live the Christian life and to proclaim the gospel.

When religious liberty is threatened, Gospel liberty is also in danger. It becomes more difficult to proclaim the gospel and more difficult for Christians to live out godly lives that witness to the Gospel. Jesus himself warns his followers not to lose their saltiness, lest they become useless and trampled on by men (Matthew 5:13). Jesus wants us not to be ashamed but rather to put our light on its stand. Christians should therefore be concerned greatly about any laws or policies that limit our religious liberty.