

Thought for the Day 17th June - John Reed

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Paul here talks about being “All things to all people” for the sake of the gospel (verse 22). I’m not sure he ever became a bartender for the sake of the gospel. But that’s what pastor Daniel Cattaneo, of the Comunidad Redentor (Redeemer Community) evangelical church in the city of San Lorenzo in Argentina has done.¹

Apparently, in Argentina the restrictions on activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been easing (as they have here in Australia). Bars and restaurants have been allowed to open from 7am to 11pm at up to 30% capacity. But churches are still restricted to a maximum of ten. So, partly as a form of protest, and partly as a way of working around the restrictions, pastor Cattaneo has reopened his church as a bar. A “worship bar.” Bar tables were placed inside the church, and pastors dressed as waiters carried Bibles on trays. “We want to exercise our constitutional right to practice our faith,” Cattaneo told local media. “Bars can open, shops can open, why are they discriminating against us?”

The church is considering further creative alternatives to avoid the ban, with the announcement that there will be a trial “drive-in worship” in an open block of ground near the church (behind the cemetery, in fact).

Like the church in Argentina, many Christians in Australia have expressed a degree of bewilderment at the apparent inconsistencies in the easing of restrictions. Why is it that bars, cafes, restaurants, and hotels were granted different rules for public gatherings than churches? Why could children go back to school Monday-Friday, but not to Sunday School on Sunday?

Of course, we must understand that the government has to draw the line somewhere, and there will be no easy and simply “one size fits all” rules around this. And rather than grumble against our government, we ought to support them, thank God for them, and pray for them as they care for and lead us (Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 13:1; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:17; Titus 3:1-2).

I must admit that in the back of my head, there were some alarm bells about pastor Cattaneo’s “worship bar.” Should we pretend to be something we’re not, in order to get around the law? What about being subject to those in authority (Romans 13)? What about letting our yes be yes (Matthew 5:37), and recognising that it is better to walk in integrity than be crooked in our speech (Proverbs 19:1)? What about the potential reputational damage to the church if we are seen to be acting in any way other than honestly and uprightly – aren’t we to keep our conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that see our good deeds and bring glory to God (1 Peter 2:12)? And what would God feel about turning his house into anything other than a house of prayer – isn’t that something Jesus objected to (Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Matthew 21:13)?

And yet, on the other hand, I come back to what Paul said. In changing and challenging circumstances, we have to be flexible and creative for the sake of the gospel. But we have to do it without compromising our integrity or bringing dishonour to God. We have to get the balance right. We have to be, in Jesus’ words, as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16).

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/13/argentina-pastor-turns-church-into-bar-in-protest-at-uneven-coronavirus-restrictions>