



DON'T MENTION POLITICS!

The Top Five Reasons For *Not* Preaching about Industrial Relations

Brian Edgar
Director of Public Theology

CONTENTS

Part A: The Top Five Reasons For Not Preaching about Industrial Relations

Part B: What I would preach about the proposed industrial relations changes

Part A:

The Top Five Reasons For *Not* Preaching about Industrial Relations

Some preachers have referred to industrial relations in their sermons but many have not. Let me suggest the top five reasons preachers give for avoiding any significant reference to industrial relations proposals in their preaching:

1. 'It's too political an issue and therefore too controversial. To many people, 'political' means 'controversial' and 'divisive'. Therefore it is best to leave such issues alone in order to allow individuals to make up their own minds about them. It's safer that way.'

The trouble is that the gospel affects the whole of life. Some say that Jesus stressed the spiritual rather than earthly, political matters ('My kingdom is not of this world'). But what cannot be denied is that what he said and did ultimately has implications for the whole of life and for society ('The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor'). In that sense he was political and at times very controversial.

But controversy is not to be sought for its own sake and much can be achieved without being divisive. In fact it is better for preachers to avoid the unfortunately well accepted processes of polarised thinking and confrontational debate which characterises most public dialogue today. This approach emerges out of the fundamental political division between a government and an 'opposition' and is fuelled by the need of the media for conflict and confrontation. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of a preacher's contribution to this subject could well be the way they model how to engage in a mature, biblical consideration of the issues. Engagement without polarity is not the same as indecision or going soft on fundamental matters of injustice. But it does mean refusing to unthinkingly adopt existing divisions as the only options.

2. 'It's too impersonal an issue and doesn't relate to people's real lives. Congregations do not like preaching which is not immediately applicable to their personal or family life.'

The importance of the present industrial relations debate lies in the way it draws together so many fundamental dimensions of contemporary Australian life. It is not just about how a wage is set, it is about the kind of society we want to be. It deals with important aspects of the way people are treated, the nature of social relationships and the significance of family life. One does not have to be an expert to appreciate this. Any preacher can easily read the outline of the government proposals (although the legislation is intimidating!). A Christian view of the proposed legislation will require reflection on the biblical and theological principles which relate to at least five broad areas of life –

- **Money and economics:** these deal with wages and what is fair and appropriate reward for work done, especially concerning the establishment of minimum levels of remuneration.
- **Time and the relationship of work to other activities:** there is a potentially significant shift in the social philosophy of the way that time is viewed in our society. It deals with the way special times and days (such as Anzac Day and other public holidays, Sundays and annual holidays) are treated. There is also a potential shift in the proportion of time to be spent in work as compared to other activities.
- **Relationships between people, families and other social groups:** the legislation affects families and the ability of individuals to provide for dependants. The net amount earned is important but it is not the only issue, security and tenure are equally important.
- **The freedom, choice and the power of the individual:** especially in relation to business. This lies at the heart of the philosophical debate about the proposed legislation. There are significant differences of opinion about where power lies and ought to lie. A shift towards a more individualised approach to relationships between employees and employers is proposed. This calls into question the nature of power that individuals have and whether they will benefit or find themselves disempowered by circumstance or lack of innate ability.
- **The treatment of the weak, the less able and the disadvantaged:** for some this is the central issue. Given that the gospel has a bias towards those who are disadvantaged the proposed legislation must be able to answer the question as to whether it will provide appropriate economic support and care for those who are disadvantaged and whether it will advantage or hinder those in our society who are less able when it comes to looking for work or negotiating conditions.

Even if it is not possible, or thought not desirable, to give a final, overall judgment on the value of the legislation it would be good to help Christians discern some of the issues involved and to begin the process of the application of theological and biblical principles to this issue and others which will arise in the future.

3. 'It's too negative and doesn't build up individuals or the congregation. It is all right to challenge individuals about aspects of their spiritual lives but preaching on industrial relations will not build up the individual or the congregation.'

There is a perception that preaching on social issues is a form of 'prophetic' preaching that involves critiquing social situations and being pretty negative about the world. Some preachers stick with criticising society's repudiation of family values while a few are prepared to engage broader matters of social justice. But for many 'prophetic preaching' is not helpful to the positive development of congregational life and therefore is rarely undertaken. This understanding of 'prophetic' preaching as a negative critique has emerged as a reaction to an overly privatised view of the gospel. The characterisation of Old Testament prophets as solely engaged in social critique is misleading because it ignores the strong covenantal character of what they were doing and their strong expectation that the people of God have the primary responsibility to demonstrate in their corporate life the way a society should live. It is important to preach about broad matters of social and public concern not merely to critique what society does but in order to emphasise the responsibilities of the covenant people. Preaching and teaching about industrial legislation is important for the people *within* the community of faith, as well as for the wider community. The church must model appropriate relationships and values if it is to address society's broader issues. Preaching about public issues should be positive and enhance the life of the church as well as of society.

4. 'It's too difficult and has not been part of my training. You need to be an expert in economics to be able to comment intelligently on a topic like this. There are people in the congregation who know more about this than I do. And it isn't reasonable to spend a lot of time trying to deal with something so complex when it will soon pass out of public attention.'

It is true that few preachers have an economics background and such issues can be difficult and complex – but only if one assumes that the purpose is to provide unchallengeable and definitive answers to all the issues raised. The role of the preacher can be to point in a direction rather than to describe in detail the destination. You don't need to understand the mechanics of a bus engine in order to decide whether you want to get on or not. All you need to know is the direction it is heading. So too with the industrial relations proposals, **you do** not need to understand the full detail to understand the direction it is going in, the values it espouses and something of the techniques it will use to get there. What a preacher should understand are the basic values of the gospel and be able to relate them to relationships, the exercise of power, the value of economic development and the protection of the weak. Let's not under-estimate what biblical values and theological principles can bring to an issue such as this. And don't under-estimate the interest of the people in church or their ability to continue working it through after the preacher has finished preaching.

5. 'It's not relevant to the gospel and doesn't appear in the Bible. Preaching on industrial relations won't save anyone. It is not really a gospel issue and it doesn't appear in the Bible. Best to stick to the gospel.'

The dichotomy between social action and evangelism is a false one. The evangelical proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all

areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. It is always wrong to preach on issues such as industrial relations without speaking about Jesus. Even in the public realm we must not allow anyone to think that we act on our own behalf or in our own strength. It would be wrong to artificially conceal the reason for our involvement: the call of Jesus and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Whenever possible Christians should not speak about industrial relations without speaking about Jesus.

* * * * *

Part B:

What I would actually preach about the proposed industrial relations changes

Having said this it is only fair to ask what I would preach about it - as someone who, like most preachers, is neither an economist nor a labour market expert. Trying to discern a way through these proposals requires a bit of work but if it is good enough for me to encourage others to do it I should be prepared to say how I see the gospel as relating to this situation. I would talk about the things mentioned above and relate them to the following.

The stated aim of the proposed industrial relations changes is enhanced economic development through the simplification of the present award system. It is argued that this is best for everyone, including the lower paid and the less able because it will result in more jobs. But some commentators have doubts about the effectiveness of this approach. A business saving on employment costs through a simplified system will not necessarily employ another person. They may take the saving as profit or use it in other ways. Peter Lewis, Director of the Centre for Labour Market Research, University of Canberra points out that while research indicates that a 10% increase in *average* wages increases employment, changes to the *minimum* wage hardly affects the overall employment rate as 'the effect on the average wage is small and, thus, the impact on total employment and unemployment is also small'.¹ Now this is where the preacher-as-economist is in difficulty as it is possible for another economist to put a contrary view. So, for the present exercise, in order to put the government's proposal in the most positive light, let us initially say that Lewis is wrong and assume that there *will* be some reasonable benefit in terms of the number of jobs available. At this point I would want to relate this to passages in Genesis, Proverbs and the New Testament which affirm that work is a good and healthy part of God's plan for humanity. Government policies which maximize work opportunities are therefore to be encouraged.

However, even if more jobs are created there is no doubt that the economic lever that is being pulled in order to assist businesses develop is the lever which affects, that is, puts in question, a significant number of the existing working conditions and benefits of employees. The government's own example of 'Billy' is instructive. Under the new laws, to get a job as a retail worker Billy has to sign an individual contract that removes his rights to public holidays, rest breaks, bonuses, annual leave loadings, allowances, penalty rates, overtime and shift loadings. Conditions which other retail workers in the same business retain. The defence of this is that Billy would prefer to have a job. The implied assumption is that he is probably a young teenager starting out in his working life. However, 'Billy' could quite easily be 'William', a 36 year old

father of two who has worked in a hardware shop for 20 years which has now closed down and he is looking for a new job in a large chain hardware and home products store.

The proposed 'simplification' affects workers' economic situation (their pay), their social stability (by potentially affecting job tenure) and their relationships and lifestyle (through changes to their ability to control working times). Most employers will assume that 'simplified' actually means 'reduced'. Unless they are reduced there would be little advantage in proceeding. If I was preaching on this I would note that according to Jesus economic issues are not the only, or even the most important, issues of life. And therefore the effects of the industrial relations proposals on other dimensions of life must be carefully watched. Our relationship with God and our relationships with others come ahead of our relationships with possessions.

The terminology used in the proposals is significant. The stress is on the 'simplification' of the numerous awards and pieces of legislation which control wages and conditions. Now, it is undoubtedly the case that the present system is complex and that there are serious problems for employers in some regards. There seems to be no need to doubt that there are situations where owners and employers of small businesses in particular are significantly disadvantaged. But one could 'simplify' the situation in other ways, such as by consolidating workers on a reduced number of awards with better conditions for all. It hardly needs to be said though, that this is *not* the aim of this proposal. 'Simplification' is a euphemism for a large scale 'reduction' of rights and benefits.

So, the present system is not perfect and it could be argued that the system needs changing and there is nothing sacrosanct about the present format. But what is also clear is that the re-structuring proposed here is not aimed at immediately protecting the workers or enhancing their lives or their relationships. And even when it is argued that the *ultimate aim* of the present proposal is to enhance the lives of the worker it is clear that the *methodology* used involves a reduction in benefits of those who are unskilled and low paid and who have the least bargaining power in their relationships with employers. The claimed benefit to some disadvantaged people is obtained through further disadvantage to other disadvantaged people *and* through potentially significant changes to social structures which have not been the focus of public discussion. In relating this to biblical principles I would note that the weakest and least advantaged members of a society are the ones which Jesus calls us to serve the most. His own life was an example of this.

In the light of this and the principles outlined above I conclude that the proposals lack consistency with the best biblical and theological principles. That is what I would clearly say in my preaching. But then I would be asking what the implications are for our life together as a *church* as well as for our broader social life. How do we as a church demonstrate those values and issues noted in (2) above? By placing the matter in a broader context which includes the church and which assumes that the listeners are to test what is said and by exposing my own reasoning to public scrutiny the worst excesses of dogmatism and divisiveness can be avoided while clearly relating the gospel to the current situation.

This approach is not only informed by gospel principles but also by two other convictions. The first is that it is wrong to assume that the only alternatives in this public debate are to accept or reject the proposals. Unfortunately, the present highly polarized political atmosphere is not conducive to the introduction of alternatives. But it would be too accepting of a highly adversarial political system to assume that there are no alternatives.

Secondly, it would be wrong to assume that a job at all costs is better than no job. Indeed, it is wrong to assume that a job necessarily takes a person or a family out of poverty. In developed countries such as the USA there are many millions of 'working poor'. This is tragic and unacceptable and it would be a regressive social step to allow this to develop in the Australian economy. Although the USA, the most powerful economy in the world, is sometimes held up as an exemplar of labour market reform it has developed many inequalities. Having just lived for six months in Kentucky, one of America's poorest states, as I have done, one cannot remain unaware of the huge disparity there is in that country. It is observably and statistically far less equitable than Australia. Under their 'Fair Labor Standards Act' the minimum adult wage of \$5.15 per hour has not changed in eight years. Economist James Galbraith says the USA is actually an example 'of full employment achieved by accepting poverty', an approach which ought never be acceptable and which must be resisted in our own country. When considering the Australian proposals for our own 'Fair Pay and Conditions Standard Commission' we must not accept disadvantage to the least able as an appropriate price for economic growth.

The Australian Evangelical Alliance Inc. is a national fellowship of individuals, churches and organisations. Its aim is to be a catalyst for Christian unity, cooperation and mission, and it has been operating in Australia since 1959. AEA is affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, an international fellowship embracing more than 150 million Christians in 120 countries. The AEA web-site can be found at: www.ea.org.au Correspondence on this matter should be directed to the Director of Public Theology, Dr Brian Edgar on 03-98900633 or brian@ea.org.au

ⁱ Philip Lewis, 'Low Pay or No Pay: economics of the minimum wage' *Policy Magazine*, Vol.221, No.3 (Spring 2005) full text available at www.cis.org.au/Policy/home.htm