



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
& CULTURE



Maintaining Gospel Unity in a Polarising Society

RESOURCE PAPER 24 — 2026

From Gadigal to Gaza

On Monday night February 9th 2026, Sydney's CBD experienced a violent protest that resulted in the firing of tear-gas and dozens of arrests being made.

The protestors were condemning the visit to Sydney of Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, who was on a four-day state visit to express Israel's condolences to survivors of the Bondi massacre. A peaceful demonstration was promised, however, the event descended into fights and scuffles. Organisers say the trouble began when police forcibly removed Muslim men praying outside Town Hall.

Both the New South Wales Premier, Chris Minns, and the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, condemned the chanting of "Globalise the Intifada", as highly insensitive, coming so soon after the deaths at Bondi. The chant was elongated to: "Globalise the intifada, from Gadigal to Gaza", a reference to the First Nations name for the land upon which Sydney now stands.

Prospective worshippers at St Andrew's Cathedral's Evensong had been instructed to reconsider their attendance that night. The service went ahead as planned with a heavy police presence around the building.

Whatever one's take on the Israel/Gaza situation, it is clear that there are deep faultlines in the West that such events expose. There is an increasing sense of polarisation, as social cohesion frays and communities fracture along social, political, cultural, religious and ethical lines.

Ongoing situations such as the Gaza conflict, as well as one-off "Black Swan" events such as the assassination of US conservative leader, Charlie Kirk, are apocalyptic in nature: these are not the causes of the friction and polarisation, rather they reveal to us that such frictions and

polarisations already exist. What had been bubbling below then springs up above the surface.

While the mantra in the Western nations has been that diversity is our strength, there is little agreement as to what unifying forces underpin such diversity. The vision of what it means to flourish as a society, and the direction in which we ought to go, is contested at a level, and with an increasing ferocity, that is unnerving people. We have little social capital to unify ourselves around. Political parties, along with other major institutions, are deeply distrusted. The UK and Australia have had a string of Prime Ministerial changes in the past decade, while the turmoil, accusations, and intemperate language around elections in the US has increased exponentially.



The Online World

Blame for this widening chasm has been sheeted home to the rapid expansion of online life and social media. Yet the question is whether this is merely a reflection of real life. Which is chicken and which is egg?

US commentator and journalist, Ezra Klein, in his book, "Why We're Polarised", blames his own vocation, stating:

The political media is biased, but not toward the Left or Right so much as toward loud, outrageous, colourful, inspirational, confrontational. It is biased toward the political stories and figures who activate our identities, because it is biased toward and dependent on the fraction of the country with the most intense political identities. ^[1]

The political online media has exacerbated the matter, rewarding outrage with algorithmic reach. New York University's Jonathan Haidt observes that social media is an amplifier:

"In my 35 years of studying moral psychology, I have come to see this as one of humanity's greatest problems: we are too quick to anger and too slow to forgive. We are also hypocrites who judge others harshly while automatically justifying our own bad behavior."^[2]

The Christian faith also states this about the human condition. Yet regardless of where we believe the source of our bad behaviours lies, it is irrefutable that we are experiencing a rising level of hostility between antagonists.

Meanwhile, the language we use to describe those with whom we disagree has become sharper, attributing dark motives, and ideologically extreme positions, to our opponents. Coupled with the immediacy of social media, we see both a heightened response and a much quicker turn around on which matters we disagree upon.

The list of potentially polarising topics ranges from responses to COVID19 mandates; opinions around gender and sexuality; the narrative around Israel/Gaza; reactions to major traumas such as the deaths of conservative influencer Charlie Kirk, or anti-ICE protestors, Renee Good and Alex Pretti. These have been the touchpaper that has spread the flames of division within Western societies.



The Church World

And within Western churches. Polarisation is not limited to the secular space. Political schisms are smuggled into the church. We grapple with our differences around how to resolve matters that, while outside our remit, affect our church life.

COVID-19 revealed strong divisions among many congregants. What government actions should be heeded? Which should be ignored – or protested – as overreach? Church splits and congregational infighting ensued.

Such political tensions were not limited to COVID-19. After I wrote about the murder of Charlie Kirk, a woman from my former church, whose son identifies as transgender, expressed her anger towards Kirk publicly on social media.

A young man from the same church then phoned me in tears. Kirk's Christian faith had been inspiring to him. Having read the online comment of his fellow church member, he could not see how to "do church" alongside this woman. How could he share a common communion loaf with her with any integrity?

This paper's remit does not permit a deep dive into the wider cultural strains. Rather it will focus on how the church can first understand, and then navigate, the leaching of such tensions into our congregations.

First, it will explore a major reason why churches can struggle with ostensibly "secular" matters at a level more pronounced than in the past. What might be a lead driver in this division?

Second, it will examine how church leaders can offer congregations clear and pastoral theological frameworks in polarising times. How does the gospel dial down the heat, and enable us to avoid ungodly division?

Transcendent Politics: COVID 19 - A Case Study

Western politics has become “transcendent” in its reach. As the social imaginary inspired by Christianity has receded from the Western mindset, the political sphere replaces the divine as the source of ultimate ideals.

Politics makes teleological claims about human flourishing that were once the church’s remit. Christians are not immune to being captured by these political visions, even as we confidently state the creeds each Sunday. And as politics has reached up higher, it has reached across wider. Ready access to sources of political discourse has rarely been freer. As citizens of a global, interconnected age, this affects all of us.

COVID19 was a prime example of this reach. And its fallout. The disquiet, distrust and anger expressed by church members either towards their denomination, or towards fellow congregants, during COVID19 mandates was a shock to many. Initially mooted as a public health matter, it moved at speed to a moral matter, and a test case of one’s ecclesiology in the face of the secular state.

Many churches muddled through. Others were riven apart. While reaching its apex five years ago, this issue still lingers in terms of effect. Should we obey the government restrictions on

meeting or is that a simple case of the state interfering with the church? What must be done?

For some, obedience was a simple matter: love your neighbour! We obey the government. We trust the science of those in charge of our nation under God (Romans 13). Given the chance to show that we were willing to serve the interests of others rather than our own (Philippians 2), it ought to have been a simple health AND theological matter.

For others disobedience was a simple matter. A high level of trust in government was unwarranted in what was a rapidly moving situation. Acquiescence was a rejection of God’s command to not neglect to meet together (Hebrews 10:25). Worse, this was a government attempt to destroy the line between the secular and spiritual spheres. Once destroyed there would be no turning back.

A helpful overview of the legalities and implications for the Australian context was provided by Christian law professor, Neil Foster.^[3] Meanwhile In the USA, Christianity Today Editor at Large, Russell Moore, wrote of the lockdown restrictions that involved churches:

The current situation facing us is not a case of the state overstepping its bounds, but rather seeking to carry out its legitimate God-given authority. Nowhere, at this point, have we seen churches targeted because of their beliefs or mission...This is an area—the protection of public health—



where the state has not just a legal authority but an authority granted by God himself...Governments are seeking to limit gatherings of people. That is a legitimate public interest, and the government is seeking to do so in the least intrusive way possible.^[4]

Yet Moore begins the next paragraph with “Not yet”. Governments could use this as an excuse to tighten restrictions in other areas of perceived “public safety”. So far they had not done so.

The complexity arises when we discuss the meaning of the term “public safety”. This concern is, after all, the alleged primary motivation for the widespread introduction of other laws hostile to gospel witness, namely conversion therapy legislation. Such laws directly affect pastoral care models and, potentially, public proclamation and preaching.

The late John MacArthur of Grace Community Church, while initially being circumspect about the shutdowns^[5] in May 2020, citing the same passages as Moore, shifted his position considerably by July 2020, when the data around COVID19 was being contested. He stated:

Christ is Lord of all. He is the one true head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18). He is also King of kings—sovereign over every earthly authority (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16). Grace Community Church has always stood immovably on those Biblical principles. As His people, we are subject to His will and commands as revealed in Scripture. Therefore, we cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings. Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord's clear commands.^[6]

By this stage MacArthur's stance had shifted away from Romans 13, hardening towards a less irenic understanding of the state, including an apocalyptic framing of government power (Revelation 17 and 19). MacArthur believed the

state had moved beyond the “not yet” stage.

The Australian situation tracked with both positions in the USA, even though the political and religious settlements between the two nations are slightly different, and definitely less polarised.

While there are historical reasons for this, we now have access to a variety of global media unavailable to previous generations. Not only do we access such media more readily, we afford it more authority. Australian pastors were often blindsided by angry congregants who, having digested copious amounts of online material, were making definitive statements about what was godly and what was ungodly to do with church gatherings.

One's political leanings become a useful predeterminant in answering the question of whether the government was overreaching or not. And much of this was outside the control of church leadership, the former source of authority for many Christians.



Quite apart from COVID-19, many of the political and sociological matters straining relationships between citizens within the public square, are also straining relationships between fellow believers. International politics, issues around sexuality (attending a same-sex wedding for example), Trump abroad, Albanese at home, anti-Semitism, all have potential and actual polarising effects among God's people.

Locus of Identity

Ezra Klein identifies a secular phenomenon (though it has roots in theological categories) for this

polarisation. “Psychological sorting” is a term describing the internal process by which we categorise the importance of our core values and beliefs. And political conviction is increasingly the locus of identity among our widely, though perhaps not well, digitally informed lives in the West.

The widening interest in politics in the West is not simply down to accessibility. It resides in the totalising nature of politics in the secular age and our readiness to “sort”. As politics has widened its remit to include intrusion into, and celebration of, a range of ethical matters once relegated to the private realm, we find ourselves “sorting” deeper and wider.

Western nations are experiencing intense societal churn as governments fail to come to terms with national imperatives, including open borders, rising Islamic fundamentalism, Right wing nationalism, a debt crisis, plummeting birth rates, energy instability, climate concerns, AI intrusions and fears, questions around freedom of speech and religious liberty, the list goes on.



Having mostly eschewed quietism, churches have developed a growing awareness of our requirements as public citizens engaged in the secular space at exactly the time that public life is fracturing. Meaning that we are fracturing too.

Many Christians have settled convictions around partisan political matters at a time when political opponents are not merely labelled “wrong”, but “evil”. Hence for one to hold a political position contrary to us, often risks estrangement.

In a sobering Substack piece, *Last Coffee With a Former Friend (only he doesn't know it yet)*^[7] the author relates how he silently cancels a friend who is scathing towards his views of, among other things, JK Rowling, right-wing Christians, and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). The author concludes:

I want to argue with my suddenly-former friend. Unfortunately, I'm a "sits quietly and writes" writer...I never liked bullies, and I won't be bullied, not even by proxy by a meme. So I pre-cancel myself. I ghost. I fade away. Let the paths diverge. My former friend doesn't know it, but that was our last coffee.

Pre-cancelling. We get it. We do it. Church members holding diametrically opposing viewpoints, struggling to find common gospel voice on issues like Gaza and hate speech laws are at risk of such behaviour.

As we become more politically engaged, our theological convictions can be subsumed by our psychological sorting. Ezra Klein summarises a set of psychological research data indicating that:

In forming an opinion, the question for the unengaged citizen is, what will this policy do for me? Among the engaged however, reactions to economic issues are better understood as expressively motivated signals of identity. The question for the engaged citizen is: what does support for this policy position say about me?^[8]

Klein concludes:

When we participate in politics to solve a problem, we're participating transactionally. But when we participate in politics to express who we are, that's a signal that politics has become an identity. And that's when our relationship to politics, and to each other, changes.^[9]

The shift from transactional politics to identity politics is a critical one. Once the Rubicon has been crossed it is hard to return. As we both become more widely informed (regardless of whether that is more deeply informed), this identitarian rubric becomes more compelling. We are drawn into it.

The biblical framework and our gospel convictions provide us with a remedy. It alone can take the drive for identity that our modern, psychological age encourages, and reframes it within a larger narrative that celebrates diversity within a more compelling and complete unity.

Restrained Not Erased: Identity in Christ

The key to unity within the church is not simply to parrot our “identity is in Christ”. This must be unpacked. While we should understand this as an undergirding reality, we have a more complex relationship to other intersecting identities. We are not “just” Christians. We are women, men, racially distinct, socially mobile, relating within family structures and historical communities.

A more sustainable, and honest, self-appraisal, and one that I believe aligns with scripture, is that our identity in Christ restrains all other identity tags that we inhabit and that, indeed, inhabit us.

A caveat here is that there are some identities that do have to go! Sinful proclivities that have the propensity to define us are clearly put away, as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 shows. Note that Paul describes these wicked works as those of “wrong-doers”. Christian sanctification is a constant process of leaning into our true identity

and sloughing off sins that would define us either negatively, or indeed positively (I’m thinking here of “being true to oneself” sexually for example).

Our “in Christ” identity works at a granular level, neither denying other aspects of our identities, nor giving them free rein and allowing us to utilise them as uncrossable boundary markers. Understanding this will ensure that we can live alongside other believers more closely even as we disagree with them, perhaps even because we disagree with them.

This is hard work. It chafes at our reflexes. Hence having lunch with a reformed evangelical pastor from Lebanon, whose view of the Israel/Gaza conflict differs to mine, we both feel the tension.

We both admitted that there is no simple “two state solution”, or indeed a merely right or wrong position. The gospel reminds us that we are both victim and perpetrator. Indeed the only solution is a “gospel solution”. This, of course, sounds trite. And it does not address the real-world issues and the secular politics that could resolve the current bout of conflict.

The polarised world will force us into either/or categories around Palestine/Israel for example, yet regardless of which way we lean, when it comes to such matters only a secular or tribal perspective can simplify this matter into right versus wrong. The gospel and its spiritual announcement about humanity’s rebellion



against our Creator must dial down simplistic black and white thinking. This does not answer every historical, social, cultural or political question, but it does alert us to the need for a safety brake when we are tempted to become either/or.

We left that lunch under no illusions that we have differences on this issue. And that we will have to navigate these differences. But we also left knowing that this would not be the last coffee or lunch we had with each other. Neither of us would need to pre-cancel the other. Why? Because the gospel will not allow us to do so, even if our “psychological sorting” wishes to. Our common identity in the gospel must inform our other identities. Only this will reduce the risk of polarisation.

Ephesians 2: Hostility Destroyed

Ephesians 2:11-22 is a crucial passage navigating the polarisation we face. Paul begins by reminding Gentile believers of the chasm between themselves and the Jews, not simply cultural polarisation, but also salvific polarisation. The chasm is both horizontal and vertical.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2:11-12)

The pivot verse (v13) in which both vertical and horizontal chasms are closed, is followed by the manner in which Christ achieves this at the cross:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His

purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. (Ephesians 14-18)

The vertical chasm between humans and God because of sin is resolved. The result is “Humanity 2.0”, a reconciliation that extends to the horizontal frame. This is a self-consciously Trinitarian passage, all of God is involved in the work of uniting Jew and Gentile with common access to God.

Next is the hard work: the reality of our new identity in Christ is to be worked out in community:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)



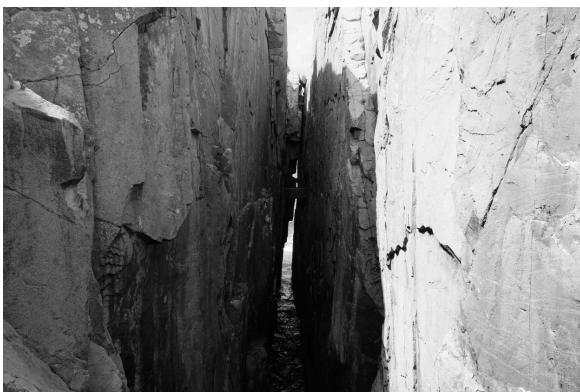
The propositional reality reframes the dynamic of personal relationships.

This is not the only passage of Paul, or indeed the New Testament (think of James' exhortations to not show favouritism to our economic heroes in James 2), in which the communal outworking of the gospel is presented.

Hence we get the "strong and weak" in Romans 14, the complexities around food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, and the unfortunate social categorising at the one meal that should bring all together in 1 Corinthians 11. The Gentile and Jewish divide was a constant burr in the gospel saddle, as Acts and Galatians attest.

The New Testament writers never throw up their hands and admit defeat. They work hard, calling out divisions that otherwise in the culture are either left unchecked or celebrated.

Even in the Jerusalem church, populated by religiously and ethnically observant Jews (Acts 6), the apostle Peter, upon listening to Paul's missionary experiences, observes that the same Holy Spirit promised to Jews has been poured out upon Gentiles. The chasm has been closed by God himself.



But this did not dial down the Jewishness of Jewish believers. Neither did it require the keeping of the ceremonial laws, circumcision and food laws, by Gentiles. Specific identities were not erased. Rather, they were domesticated. A gospel guard encircled them,, lest they too readily become the defining identity feature of a subset of God's new covenant people.

Mind the Gap

How do church leaders encourage their churches to close the gaps that may have opened between members around the polarising issues of our times? There is proactive and reactive work to be done. Here are some sample ideas to consider:

Proactive

i. Preaching and teaching

There is plenty of unity material to mine in the New Testament around identity and common purpose including passages cited already (Ephesians 2, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians etc). The teaching elders of the church ought to lead their people by exploring prayerfully and carefully where disunity is most present in their church, before offering the medicine of Scripture. This will mean paying close attention to the strains within the congregation around the issues we are most likely to "psychologically sort" among ourselves.

There are also public resources available that model good debate and highlight how Christians can argue well with those with whom they disagree (e.g., Dan Paterson's YouTube site *Questioning Christianity*)

ii. Public prayer

We often pray for our governments, but how often do we pray for Opposition parties also, and name the leaders of our nation in our prayers? This both humanises those who govern us, reminding us that they are made in the image of God, while it also places their authority under a higher authority. Public confession of the sin of unnecessary division also places the matter at the forefront of the congregation.

iii. Showcase true diversity

We can bring genuine differences into the open and demonstrate that these do not completely define us. This leaves room for public Q and A, group discussions, interviews from the front of church with people who hold different perspectives on political

matters. Mature Christians who view political and cultural matters from opposing views can model to the congregation how they navigate these differences while maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There are also resources online which unpack how Christians have brought healing to divided communities, exhibiting how the gospel brings warring factions together (in my own background I have seen this happen in Northern Ireland).

iv. Create diverse communities

Ensure that when we form community/gospel groups we do our utmost to avoid the homogenous unit principle wherever possible. There are great riches to be mined by including people from all ages and stages of life, different social, educational and relational backgrounds in long-term community groups within the church. My own experience is that of caring for “weaker” brothers and sisters, or sharing ongoing hospitality with those of different political stripes enriches us and widens our empathy.

v. Evangelism

Ongoing evangelism will always encourage congregants to listen to others with different perspectives, indeed opposing perspectives, to Christians on many social and cultural matters.

Learning how to have an answer for the hope that is within us (1Peter 3) requires that we first understand the defeater beliefs to the gospel that non-Christians may have.

Reactive

i. Pastoral Intervention

When we sense disharmony among our congregants,, we ought to lean into this pastorally and bring the various factions together to discuss the concerns and bring the issue under the authority of God’s Word. We ought to be more “interventionist” than we have been when it comes to congregational schisms. This may include forms of church discipline to those who may be causing dissension.

For example, if a church member who insists that a particular YouTube channel’s teaching or response to a matter is the Christian – and only faithful – response to a cultural matter, we should not let this lie. The leadership has a responsibility to warn divisive people, and take necessary steps to shut down their influence.

ii. Personal Responsibility of Leaders

Church leaders should take a personal inventory of where they source their cultural and sociological material from. There is nothing wrong with well-formed and strongly held convictions, but it is our responsibility to read and listen to opinions that we



do not agree with. Do we model an irenic nature, even when expressing our opinions, on our social media?

Do we have repair work to do with other Christians? As those who often have deeper theological understandings, are we careful not to weaponise our convictions? We are to watch our life and doctrine closely for the sake of our hearers.

iii. Preaching and Teaching

How do we raise contemporary matters in our preaching and teaching? How did we respond to Bondi and to COVID19 from the pulpit? While the pulpit is primarily the place for the Word of God to be proclaimed, such proclamation has application. Have we considered how to address the ongoing public matters that our congregations come to Sunday having consumed (as we also have) during the week?

Preaching and teaching leaders ought to work hard to apply the Word of God to actual situations and call for gospel responses to the culturally divisive issues we face. How do we raise matters such as hate speech laws, global conflicts, antisemitism, government overreach in legislation that directly affects the church?

Conclusion

We are set for an increasingly polarised Australia. We are tracking with the UK and the USA experiences. We can see how divisions are wreaking havoc politically and socially in those nations, and we are beginning to experience these also, not least of all in the terrible events of Bondi.

With the ever- intrusive realm of social media amping up the heat in these areas of life, churches are not immune from the “psychological sorting” that sees citizens sort themselves in identity sub-groups, risking our gospel unity in the process. Our task is to ensure that gospel identity restrains and retrains our other identity markers, not negating them, but putting them within an eternal and transcendent perspective, one provided not by any earthly government or institution, but by the one true King, who rules and reigns over all: the Lord Jesus.

Endnotes:

^[1] Ezra Klein, Why We're Polarised, p 170

^[2] Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation, p237

^[3] <https://lawandreligionaustralia.blog/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/freedom-of-religion-and-the-impact-of-covid.pdf>

^[4] <https://www.russellmoore.com/2020/03/19/does-it-violate-religious-liberty-to-close-churches-over-coronavirus/>

^[5] <https://www.gty.org/sermons/print/GTY176/thinking-biblically-about-the-covid-19-pandemic-an-interview-with-john-macarthur>

^[6] <https://www.billygraham.ca/stories/john-macarthur-the-churchs-duty-to-remain-open/>

^[7] <https://substack.com/home/post/p-161453699>

^[8] Klein, p 48

^[9] Klein, p48

The Gospel Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers and Bible Studies aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW. For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see www.gsandc.org.au.

The research and writing for these studies were done by author Stephen McAlpine. GS&C has a partnership with Stephen for 2024-2026

Main image: Sam Balye, Unsplash

Image 1: Courtesy Atlantic Council

Image 2: Christian Agbiede Unsplash

Image 3: CDC Unsplash

Image 4: DJ Paine, Unsplash

Image 5: Markus Spiske, Unsplash

Image 6: Marek Studz, Unsplash

Image 7: Aaron Burden, Unsplash

Image 8: Luo Jin Hong, Unsplash

Image 9: Alexander Wark Feeney, Unsplash

© Gospel, Society and Culture committee, PCNSW 2026.

The authors of this paper hold the copyright to all original work contained herein and offer it free to be distributed and reproduced in original form for non-commercial use, education, and review in accordance with the copyright laws of Australia, while in no way altering the copyright of other authors whose work is contained herein such as images and direct quotations.

