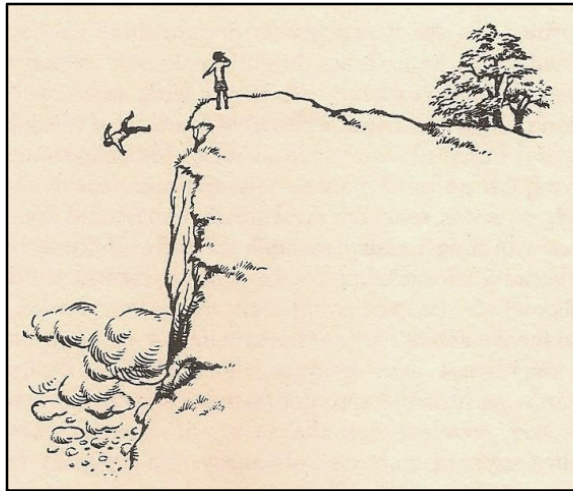


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The Slippery Slope Was a Precipice After All

Stephen McAlpine

For all the talk of slippery slope arguments, when it finally came to the same sex marriage decision in Australia, it was not a slippery slope. It was a precipice after all.

And in such times we need precipitous thinkers. We need leaders in our church who are not content to wait for the cultural changes to come our way, dodging and weaving until the last minute, but who lean into the changes and prepare their people with the ropes and tackle that a precipice requires.

Why precipice thinkers?

Because the recent vote was precipitous. It was, ironically, a binary decision. It was a decision – no matter what was claimed before – that this vote would now determine *everything* about the direction of sexuality in our culture, not just who could marry who.

And it was precipitous too because it laid claim to determining the kind of Australia we are going to be publicly; and what is transgressive to bring into the public square and what is not.

No sooner had the vote come in than every conversation turned to talk about religious freedom and the role of religion in the public square. It was obscenely quick. And for the loudest and most influential of Yes voters that meant religion no longer had such a role. That was almost a given.

And precipitous because, despite the honourable attempts by the likes of Andrew Hastie, our Parliament had no intention of ensuring religious freedoms, had no

clue what that even meant, and when presented with the most basic amendments voted them down to roars of approval from the public gallery.

Meanwhile Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten, proved once again how much he runs with the hounds and the hares. All through the SSM campaign Shorten labelled No voters as bigots and homophobes – no questions asked. Suddenly he's all for religious freedoms. What will this man not do to become Prime Minister? He won't have to do all that much unfortunately, because the current PM is such a dud.

Mineshaft, precipice, take your pick. It was only a week before the news articles started appearing in the mainstream media, first as news, then as opinion. News about how gay teachers were losing their jobs in faith schools, followed up with op-ed pieces about how faith schools need to be stripped of their funding unless they renounce discriminatory employment practices.

A week. There has been no slippery slope. There has only been a precipice. It was always going to be that way.

In a sense, I find this refreshing. For a while now I have been saying that most Christian apologetics in the public square is a waste of time. It has constantly sought to find the middle road in the culture, and point out how sensible we actually are, and if we play nice can we join in. That era is over. As Caitlyn Stark might say to those who espoused such an approach: "*You are the knights of summer, and Winter is coming.*"

That era was all about slowing the slide down the slippery slope, and showing that, despite the fact we believe in some crazy stuff like resurrections and sex within marriage and all, we're just like the rest of you at heart. We all seek the common goal of human flourishing after all, don't we?

Actually, we don't. And the Yes vote showed up that sort of "we're just like you" approach as hopelessly outdated. In fact, it's primary

conclusion was that the Bible's model of human flourishing is not only no good, nor is it even a quirky neutral position. It is intolerably *bad*.

The Yes vote pretty much ensured no Christian apologist will ever get a hearing about sexual ethics again on the ABC or in the public square – not in the sense of having something sensible to say, at least.

Besides, as Charles Taylor states, it is only in recent times that Christianity has adopted human flourishing as its goal, rather than as the means to the greater goal of the glory of God. The future of Christian apologetics must insist that we have our humanity in common, but not our destiny.

And that's kind of refreshing too. The precipice gives us a sense of urgency and vigour that the slippery slope does not. It stops us becoming a whiney self-indulgent

Winter is coming.

bunch, worried about what we have lost. Sure, what we have lost is worrying, but not in the grander scheme of things. I no more require Bill Shorten's help than evangelicals in the US required Donald Trump's. I don't elect my saviour, my Saviour elected me.

The precipice means that our primary task is to look the next generation in our church in the eyes and tell them that we will help equip and support them to stand firm in the face of a sexualised culture that refutes the gospel sexual ethic. To encourage them that we have their backs as they start their careers and raise their families. I make no apologies for saying this: but the primary role of the church is not to be a place that tries to attract non-Christians to attend. The primary role of the church is to equip the church to live in the light of the gospel in a dark world.

Someone recently lamented that it's no wonder we can't get non-Christians to go to our churches because we won't change our thinking on this sexuality matter. Sorry, but our aim is not to get non-Christians to go to church. Our aim is to equip the church to go out into the world and lean into it, in all sorts of brave and noble ways for Jesus. I am confident enough that if we make that our aim then the by-product will be that some non-Christians will come to church.

But they won't be coming to be affirmed, they'll be coming because no matter how much affirmation they're getting out there, they don't have the joy and peace and self-confidence of the young Christian woman who works at the desk next to them.

We welcome everyone and affirm no-one. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Hence, in the clamour for everyone to ensure they're a welcoming church to whatever sub-grouping is labelled marginalised by the secular culture today, let's not neglect those sitting in front of us who are desperate for some vision in precipitous times. They need leaders to be braver and clearer than they perhaps have been.

Our task as precipice leaders is to ensure the next generation of Christians is not dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks below. Our task is to equip them to live godly and joyous lives in a peer group that will assume they are hate-filled bigots and that will have the legal, political, and cultural backing to hunt them down in their professions and expose them as such.

The problem, of course, is you can't fatten the pig on the way to market. If you haven't spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally prepared your people for precipice life by now, then it's probably too late. If all you have to offer them is escapism in Sunday worship that is all sugar and no gristle, then you've doing them a great disservice. Quit now.

How then do we equip our people for life over the precipice? Well perhaps, for one, we need to delete all that is not necessary, as the church in China was forced to do when its social setting changed precipitously.

I was sitting with some close friends the other night talking about this matter, and in spite of their concerns,

there was a palpable sense of excitement. Increasingly we are being given the opportunity, like Jesus, to be numbered among the transgressors. I didn't sense fear. I didn't sense anger. I sensed a joy, nervous joy, but joy nonetheless, at becoming a creative minority.

Precipice thinkers will delete all that is not necessary. Precipice thinkers also realise that some of what is not necessary, not truly necessary, will be deleted for us whether we wish it to be or not.

And we will have to adjust to that. Adjust to the loss of that fringe benefit payment system for church staff. That public school building we use for church. That faith based school education. That government FEE Help for tertiary theological training.

These things are nice, and I would like them to remain, but they're not necessary, ultimately, and they're likely to go. If you can't adjust to those minor changes, then there's no chance you'll adjust to the increasing level of scorn and the social isolation that will come from being openly faithful to the gospel.

Precipitous thinkers will guide their church communities away from busyness in church programs, and towards long-term low-key relational life. Older couples will spend time with younger couples and their kids, encouraging them in the gospel.

Oh, and we'll ensure that we maintain our focus on the poor – the truly marginalised in our community. The kind of people that

don't see the QANTAS rainbow ads at the airport because if they want to go interstate to see a dying relative they have to catch a Greyhound bus for three days. Remember those people? Jesus does.

I suspect that over the coming generations Christians who could otherwise have done quite well in many professions, will find themselves identifying just that little bit more with the poor, for they will be poorer themselves.

Here's the great thing about a precipice though. Sometimes falling over the precipice is the solution. Sometimes it is the doorway to something far better, more noble, and more urgent. Jesus comes not to escape the precipitous quest, but to take part in it, boldly and courageously. The precipice is the key to our future.

We don't need Bill Shorten to rescue us or give us our freedoms as we go over the precipice. We're soaring with Jesus.



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