

The game is up for conservative Christians

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The Andrew Thorburn debacle at the Essendon Football Club demonstrates two things. First, the Bombers are a shambles. But we already knew that. The second, and most weighty, thing it shows us is that Christians who hold to traditional beliefs about moral issues are no longer welcome in professional sport.

The precedent was already in place with the treatment of Israel Folau by Rugby Australia. Folau posted comments about his religiously driven views of homosexuality on social media and quickly found himself out of a job.

The difference with the Thorburn case is that Thorburn has never once publicly expressed a view on same-sex relationships or anything controversial about social policy issues.

His sin was by association. Thorburn is involved with City on a Hill, a Bible-believing church in Melbourne that continues to hold out against the prevailing cultural winds on sexuality. Thorburn's appointment as chief executive of the club was announced on Monday and he resigned on Tuesday.

Essendon president David Barham cited two important points. One is that the views that were of concern were "not ... views that Andrew Thorburn has expressed personally".

His sin was attending a particular church. It was not that Thorburn had posted on Twitter or Instagram that anyone should burn in hell for their sexual preferences. He didn't do that. It was not that he had acted in a discriminatory manner against any of his employees during his (extremely) short tenure at the Essendon Football Club. He never did that, so far as we know.

The second important thing that Barham noted in his public statement was that the furore over Thorburn's appointment was because of a sermon preached at the City on a Hill church in 2013. That is not a typographical error. In 2013, a sermon was preached that condemned abortion in no uncertain terms. Another stated that "homosexuality is a sin".

These sermons are from almost a decade ago. They are not Thorburn's sermons. He may never have even heard the sermons. The connection between Thorburn and these 2013 sermons is tenuous at best.

Yes, he is the chairman of the wider City on a Hill group of churches. But how are these words uttered years and years ago connected to his role as a football club chief executive? How can the words of another person, words Thorburn never endorsed, be used against him?

Some people have found a way to do so, and Thorburn is no longer the chief executive of the club he says he loves.

Australians used to be able to associate with causes they believed in, be they churches, lobby groups, political parties, sporting clubs, or whatever, without looking over their shoulders. Sure, some discrimination was necessary. A climate change denier couldn't be the president of the Greens. A Muslim couldn't become a Christian church minister.

Today it is different, as the Folau controversy and Thorburn debacle clearly shows. Folau showed us that Australians, especially prominent Australians, are no longer welcome to voice their opinions if they aren't in lock-step with the new moral orthodoxy. That means the voices of conservative Christians, Muslims and others with traditional moral views are no longer welcome.

The Thorburn debacle takes things a step further. As he noted in a public statement on his LinkedIn profile, his "personal Christian faith is not tolerated or permitted in the public square". Further, Thorburn states that "my association with my church (is) unacceptable in our culture". Note that it is Thorburn's faith and his church association, not even certain stated beliefs or convictions, that preclude him from taking a prominent corporate leadership position.

Thorburn's resignation is a sign that Australians, especially those in prominent positions or those who aspire to the same, cannot be seen in the company of those deemed to be bigots.

Daniel Andrews waded in with some public theology to explain this. "Aren't we all God's children?" the exasperated Victorian Premier said, after characterising the views expressed in the 2013 sermon as "hatred" and "bigotry".

In his public statement, Thorburn said: "Australia has a long tradition of diversity and religious freedom, that must include preserving space for religious people to be able to express their religious beliefs." The Catholic and Anglican archbishops of Melbourne have both gone further, rightly expressing concerns that the Thorburn saga shows this freedom to express his beliefs has been substantially eroded.

The Essendon Football Club board presumably appointed Thorburn based on his credentials and because he had a vision for the organisation. But hours later, because of a 2013 sermon he may never have even listened to, Thorburn was out of a job. His sudden demise shows that, for those who aspire to prominence

in the corporate world, the freedom to associate is on the chopping block. Apparently, the game is up. Conservative Christians need not apply.

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