

The Secularisation of the Church of Scotland – What Really Happened at the Assembly?

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A Report on the 2017 Decision to Permit Same Sex Marriage

Much to no-ones surprise, the Church of Scotland General Assembly has just voted to accept the Theological Forum's report which changes the Churches definition of marriage to include same sex marriages and to apologise to gay people for their previous understanding. I know there are various caveats and nuances but that is the reality of what has just happened – and although some will say 'its not over' – in the eyes of the Kirk, it's a done deal. One of the devils greatest tricks is that he loves to sow confusion and doubt, and thereby cause division. Yesterday was a great example of that. The following is an attempt to clear the fog and present a clear analysis and to show why the Theological Forum's report, accepted by the Assembly, is poor theology, poor ecclesiology and poor practice.

My motive for writing this is not to have a go at the Church of Scotland – or to say 'I told you so' but is best summed up by John Owen:

“On these and the like considerations I have thought it necessary for myself, and unto the church of God, that the Scriptures should be diligently searched in and concerning this great matter; for none can deny but that the glory of God, the honour of the gospel, the faith and obedience of the church, with the everlasting welfare of our own souls, are deeply concerned herein.”

(Owen – Vol 3 – On the Holy Spirit – p44).

What Happened?

[This report](#) was placed before the Assembly. Unlike the previous six reports it makes no pretence to either balance or to assess what the bible actually says. It was argued that it was rather a 'theological' understanding – which is a rather interesting definition of what the word 'theological' means. Theology without the Bible is like Christianity without Christ. You can [read the whole report Here](#)

Professor Iain Torrance, as convener, introduced the report. Iain is an excellent speaker and is an intelligent and compassionate man. I like him. In fact at one point he even did me the honour of referring to me as his 'friend', but on this occasion he is clearly on the wrong side of history/theology and the bible. You can [read his whole speech here](#).

I don't wish to offer a detailed analysis of the whole speech, or the discussion that followed; just some lessons that we can all learn from it.

Given that the General Assembly accepted the report **this is now the official position of the Church** so, whilst recognising that there are Christians within the Church of Scotland who do not accept their own church's teaching, I am now dealing with this as the official position of the Church of Scotland

1 – The Church of Scotland is wrong about Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Firstly and most importantly – the view of Scripture which was espoused in the speech, and which, to be fair to Prof Torrance, is now the view of the Church of Scotland, is one that is far removed from the Reformed, Catholic and Apostolic view of the Church. Why do I say that? Because it relies on saying that everything is about 'interpretation' and we are all on a spectrum of interpretation. So *our* interpretation becomes the measuring standard. The bible itself is fundamentally unclear. The Holy Spirit may have inspired the words, but He was clearly not able to make it clear and so he needs us to complete the job – or to re-interpret for the 21st century!

Again it astounds me how spiritual and charismatic our liberals sound when they use this language. Prof Torrance spoke of being '*guided by the Spirit of God, as we try to apply Scripture to the concrete messiness of living*'. I would say Amen to that – except that I know what it means. **The Spirit of God uses the Word of God, which he inspired, to guide and help us.** But this new version of 'guidance' largely sets aside the Word of God and relies instead on the courts of the church and the pontifications of theologians who may, or who may not, believe the Bible. In fact, they usually believe the bits of the Bible with which they agree and amazingly enough discover that the 'Spirit' is guiding them to reject those bits with which they disagree. In this new version of guidance, unless you have a PhD in Theology from an institution that denies that the Spirit inspired the Bible, then you cannot be guided by the Spirit! This is not the church being the pillar and foundation of the truth – it is the church being the poisoner and underminer of the truth.

When, in response to a question about the lack of Scripture in the report, Prof Torrance replied, "We had six reports which dealt with Scripture...we were trying to do something else," he inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. Those six reports had still left the church with the traditional biblical position which the Clerk of Assembly, John Chalmers, assured us even last year meant that the church's position had not changed. But now they were trying something else – something other than Scripture.

I should also add that this view of the Holy Spirit is theologically and biblically bizarre and heretical. Rather than the Spirit being the third person of the Trinity who inspired the Scriptures, who uses them to regenerate people, and who guides through His inspired word, the Holy Spirit has become an 'it'; a force which enables those in charge of the church to justify their going against the inspired Word. **If they accept the personality of the Spirit at all, it is a split personality where the Spirit guides against what the Spirit guided!** I would suggest that instead of reading Prof Song, the Theological Forum would be better off reading John Owen's *The Holy Spirit*.

2 – The Church of Scotland first makes something permissive, then declarative.

It was astonishing to see how much Prof Torrance relied on the ordination of women as setting a precedent. He declared that heterosexual v. homosexual needs to be reframed like ordination of women. But rather than support his report, I think his stress on this totally undermined it. Why?

He described how the Church of Scotland gradually introduced women for ordination and then came to a *'deeper'* understanding that the priest was representing Christ at the Eucharist in his person not his gender. For a Presbyterian this is a strange argument. When did the Church of Scotland ever think that the minister was a priest who represented Christ at the communion? We have always believed in the priesthood of all believers. We have ministers who are to preach the Word (incidentally removing faith in the Word kind of wrecks that and turns ministers into administrators and glorified social workers – talk about turkeys voting for Christmas!), pastor and care for the flock and to administer the sacraments. We are not priests in the Roman Catholic sense.

But the main issue here is that the issue of women's ordination IS a clear indicator of how things will go. It is not the centrist/middle of the road way that the report claimed to be. The position of the Church of Scotland now is that same sex marriage will be 'permitted' but not mandatory. In other words, protections should be in place for those who 'in good conscience' (i.e. they believe the Bible and what Jesus teaches) cannot perform them. But this won't last long, despite these nice sounding, if somewhat arrogant, words:

“After much discussion the Forum saw this as one of those historic points where a deepening occurs in theological thinking, where suddenly the pieces of a long argument come together in a different way. Where both sides can flourish, both may be protected and both may be celebrated.”

What happened with the women's ordination question? What was once permissive, very soon became declarative – and all without the Assembly voting again on the subject. Indeed at this Assembly there were calls for those who believed that the Holy Spirit inspired 1 Timothy to leave the church! So much for tolerance and the buzz phrase of the Assembly *'constrained difference'*.

Of course the trajectory having been set (and it was set in 2007), there is no way it is going to end here. Just as the evangelical congregations who refused women's ordination were picked off one by one (the larger ones were of course left to last because they were the ones who were paying lots of money and providing ministers) so, within a decade, it will be considered sinful to go against what the Spirit has been so clearly teaching the churches. It is disingenuous to claim that *'both sides will be celebrated'*. This is not the case even within the report where the evangelical side is caricatured to the point of mockery. At best, the biblical side will be tolerated because the C of S cannot afford to lose many of its best givers and workers Besides which, where are the liberals going to get their converts from? Liberalism is so unattractive and has nothing to say to non-Christians, they need to fish in the evangelical pool! At worst, evangelicals will be increasingly marginalized, especially as more and more of them will sell out to the spirit of the age and go silent.

3 – The Church of Scotland is Confused in its Theology.

There was a lack of clear theological thinking. I hate to say this of a respected theologian but there was one stand out phrase which seemed to me theological nonsense. Jesus becoming incarnate ‘changed what it is to be human’. I don’t think it did. A human being before Christ was the same as a human being after Christ. I think he became what we are that we might, to some extent, become what he is. But he didn’t change what humanity is. He certainly set up the possibility for humans to change; from our fallen, sinful state in Adam, into a new creation. Unless Prof Torrance believes that, by virtue of the incarnation every single human being is saved (even if they don’t want to be) I cannot see this making any sense at all.

4 – The Church of Scotland lacks clear logical thinking.

Apparently it is sufficient if people live in faithful relationships whether those relationships are homosexual or heterosexual. On that basis, the Church of Scotland will have to accept both polygamy (why can’t people be faithful to their two wives or their two husbands?) and incest. Is the Theological Forum prepared to follow its own reasoning to its logical conclusion?

Another astonishing use of illogical language and caving into the culture was the use of the term ‘non-binary’; not in the sense of gender identity (although the C of S will cave on that one much quicker than they have on SSM) but rather in the sense of there being more than two positions.

Forgive me for using that Scottish Common Sense Philosophy but is the question not, “Can same sex marriages be performed in the Church of Scotland?” One position is Yes. The other position is No. What would be the third non-binary position?

Imagine a couple standing before the minister at the wedding and the husband to be being asked, “Do you take this woman to be your lawful, wedded wife?” Imagine if he said, “I’d like to take a non-binary position.” I suspect this marriage would be over before it began! That is the level of illogicality being displayed here.

5 – The Church of Scotland is ignoring the teaching of Jesus.

When it came to the questions there was one cracker. Did Jesus not teach about marriage as being between a man and a woman? After a pause for thought, Prof Torrance suggested that this was not a definitive list of relationships blessed by Jesus. The follow up question should have been, “OK. Where is the list of those relationships blessed by Jesus?” To be fair to Prof Torrance he obviously realised his answer was inadequate and came back later to talk about it being about divorce.

But the real importance of that question was simply this. Jesus’ teaching about marriage did not even appear in the report! Remember that this was a theological report for the church about marriage – and it didn’t even mention the clear teaching of Jesus!

6 – The Church of Scotland is in danger in the Middle of the Road

Let's talk about the middle of the road. Much to my astonishment Prof Torrance cited me as his friend and quoted my statement about 'the person who stands in the middle of a road gets hit by a bus'. Other commissioners picked up this analogy as well. Prof Torrance decided to accept the analogy and declared, "*I am happy to be in the middle of the road.*"

“my friend David Robertson, who blogs as The Wee Flea, speaks about the middle of the road. I am happy to be in the middle of the road”.

There are two things to say about that. Firstly, the report is not remotely 'middle of the road.' The only carrot it offers to evangelicals is, "We won't prosecute you and we will try to protect you from prosecution." Secondly, the more important issue is illustrated by a friend of mine who, when we were crossing the road opposite Pollock Halls in Edinburgh, pompously mocked us as we ran to avoid a bus. "It's not cool to run!" whereupon he got clipped by the bus. Our response, in the midst of the laughter, was "It's even less cool to be hit by a bus!"

Rev Lesley Stewart thought that the report had provided a middle ground and she picked up on the bus analogy. "*It's not about throwing people on one side or the other under the traffic.*" But here, neither she nor Prof Torrance grasps the analogy. The bus in the road is not one of the various theological camps within the church which they, as skillful traffic policemen, are somehow directing. No. What is in the middle of the road, coming like a truck to hit us, is the contemporary secular culture; the '*elemental spiritual forces of this world*' (Colossians 2;8). 'The middle of the road' approach suggested by the Forum is powerless before such forces. The church will be carried along by the culture and blown here and there by every wind of doctrine.

I'm sure Prof Torrance will recall that Jesus spoke about this 'middle of the road' attitude. He called it 'lukewarmness', blowing neither hot nor cold. Rather than applaud at the 'tolerance' and being 'led in the new way of the Spirit', it made Jesus sick. (Revelation 3:15-16.)

7- The Hypocrisy and Impossibility of 'Constrained Difference.'

What about this constrained difference? One liberal minister stood up and said that though she had disagreed with a neighbouring colleague who was a strong evangelical, yet they worked and worshipped together. She asked, "Is that not what should be aiming for?" In doing so she actually placed her finger on one of the key problems and key reasons for the decline of the Church.

Far too often evangelicals have bought into this doctrine of 'constrained difference'; giving the impression to people that these were just minor theological differences of no great difference and that they were just representatives of one party within the church. This is the road to self-destruction.

Let me put it another way. Supposing I had a colleague who was an out and out racist. Suppose that I just said, "Well, that's his view. We just disagree on that...but we work together with 'constrained difference'." What message would that convey? Why is it any different when

someone professes a different faith, a different God and a different Bible to the one I profess? If you doubt that, please read Gresham Machen's 'Christianity and Liberalism'.

'Constrained difference' is a lie.

In the New Testament, Paul faced a similar situation with a church that the C of S faces today. The church at Corinth was into 'constrained difference' about several issues, not least sexual practice and idolatry. Paul's response was not to waffle, or to create a new theology, or to suggest that we all just be nice to one another (the modern translation of 'love'). Nor did he say that they got it so wrong in the Old Testament. Instead, he quoted Leviticus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Samuel and applied sanctified logic and theology to ask them:

"What fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"

(2 Corinthians 6 – read the whole chapter!).

8 – Evangelicals are hamstrung by the doctrine of niceness.

There were some good speeches from evangelicals. Stephen Reid, Hector Morrison, Alastair Horne, Jonathan De Groot and others spoke up for the Lord. In fact, I think the vast majority of speeches were from them. And, like in the past couple of years, I wondered why the liberals were so silent. Admittedly, they were not silent all the time. Occasionally the mask slipped. One liberal minister warning about the 'lack of respect being shown to the Theological Forum.' This snowflake theologian was saying, "Play nicely or we'll take the ball away." Usually such passive aggressive threats are met by evangelicals apologizing; because the last thing we can ever do is appear to be 'not nice'!

But the reason for the liberals being so silent is that they didn't have to speak. It was already in the bag. I think the attitude is, "Let the evangelicals have their wee rants and their amendments. Why, we can even afford to let them have a few wee victories, but they won't get anywhere and they won't do anything."

Actually, the evangelicals didn't even come close to getting any crumbs of victory. The evangelicals have been politically and spiritually naïve. The Establishment have played them beautifully. Even today the debate was curtailed and kept very limited. The establishment were so confident that they could even afford to leave the debate to the very end, when at least 200 commissioners were not present or could not be bothered voting.

The first counter motion failed – 249:149. As did every other one. The most stunning was the failure of Hector Morrison's entirely reasonable motion. All it asked was that those sections of the report that were clearly biased and misrepresented the evangelical position, should be removed. But even that small, simple and honest request was denied. The whole thing was a charade and a mockery.

That charade is something that will hurt and wound many evangelicals within the Kirk when they become aware of it. But sadly there are too many evangelicals who now play along with it. They are more prepared to have ‘constrained difference’ with those who deny the faith once delivered to the saints, than they are to have constrained difference with those of us outside the Kirk. They pay lip service to Christian unity, but denominational unity is the modus operandi of their ministry. **This needs to stop. Denominations do not matter – the one Church of Christ does.**

9 – The Church of Scotland is inconsistent and hypocritical when it comes to ecumenical relations and evangelicals.

It was good that Colin Sinclair’s amendment to ‘consult with other ecumenical partners’ was accepted by the convener. But it too will make no difference.

On the one hand, a call was made for those who don’t accept women’s ordination to leave and the Kirk permitted SSM. On the other hand, the Kirk was lauding links with the Coptic church; a church which does not allow women’s ordination and regards homosexual practice as a sin.

Every time the goalposts get moved as different carrots are dangled and different sticks used. We have moved from ‘victory’ being seen as preventing the Kirk from moving away from biblical doctrine to ‘victory’ now being that evangelicals can be permitted to hold to biblical doctrine, as long as they don’t let it interfere with the church!

10 – The Theological Forum Report was clear in its rejection of the Biblical position.

I want to commend Prof Torrance and the Forum for not writing, as he put it, a watered down report. After six reports of acknowledging the evangelical position (and seeking to keep them on board) this was the time to remove the gloves. Prof Torrance said that they could have written a report full of stories about those who had been marginalized – the usual modus operandi of the liberals – but instead he wanted to take this theological approach. I give him credit for that.

Of course there are other stories that could be recognised, not least those Christians who do experience same sex attraction yet are trying to be faithful to Christ and the Scriptures (only to have the ground cut under from them by the church saying that, after all these centuries, both the church and the Bible got it wrong and now ‘the Spirit’ is leading us into pastures new. Isn’t it convenient that these pastures just reflect the zeitgeist of our contemporary culture?)

I agreed with Prof Torrance when he said, “We owe God honour and worship.” Amen! But it’s what is not said that is just as important. We also owe him obedience and love. If you love me you will obey my commands.

11 – Where is the zeal for the honour and glory of God?

When evangelicals are reduced to saying, “The report belittles my tradition,” then the game is over. Who cares about our traditions? We should be fired up for the glory of God. The Church

of Scotland today exchanged the truth of God for a lie. That should cause us to tremble...and weep.

But the church is not trembling and weeping...it is boasting about its own humility and grace! If you want to see what I mean have a look [Here](#) at what 121 [put out as their account of the meeting](#). I have a feeling that 121 would consider that much of the Bible lacked grace and humility and was lacking in 'respectful dialogue'!

I'm sorry but I watched the whole thing and I did not see or hear much grace and humility. I heard a church being so arrogant as to say that the Bible was wrong; that the whole church had been wrong for 2,000 years and that the vast majority of the church is wrong today.

I heard dialogue being curtailed, stage managed and manipulated in a way that the control freaks of political parties could learn from.

I saw political manipulation, spinelessness and Godlessness at work.

There were exceptions – but these were notable precisely because they were exceptions. There was little or no repentance, humility or desire for the honour and glory of God.

12 – There is no going back.

Hector Morrison made a very interesting observation:

“We recognise we are in a situation of constrained difference – there is no going back”.

This is a dose of welcome realism. For years I have been listening to evangelicals say that one more push and we will be over the top and evangelicals will reverse the situation. At least Hector's position is a more realistic assessment.

The Church of Scotland will not return to a more biblical position. The question is now whether evangelicals can live with that in a hierarchical, highly controlled and centralized system? Can they fulfill their ordination vows by submitting to an Assembly which so clearly and specifically does theology without the Bible?

Where do we go from here?

This article is already too long so that will have to wait for another day but let me finish by returning to the title of this article. Why do I describe this as, 'The Secularisation of the Church of Scotland'? It's because the reason the Church of Scotland is affirming SSM has nothing to do with theology (despite Professor Torrance's well meaning intentions), nor the Bible, nor Jesus. It is simply following the agenda of the culture.

This was seen in so many other ways. In fact, for all the pious spiritual talk, the Assembly sounded more like the Lib-Dems at prayer than it did a Christian Church! After writing this article I came across this in Nick Spencers ‘ *The Mighty and the Almighty*. It seemed apposite. Speaking of Gordon Brown –

“Theologian Doug Gay finds Brown to be one among a generation of high profile Scottish Protestants who would display a residual loyalty to the Kirk as a source of identity, but who show very little sign of ever having been emotionally, spiritually or intellectually captured by the Christian gospel: Brown is the ‘quintessential, modernist, demythologised, liberal, kultur – Presbyterian”

The C of S has become the ‘quintessential, modernist, demythologised, liberal, kultur – Presbyterian” church!

Prof Torrance used Martin Luther’s phrase somewhat jocularly, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” It’s actually a matter of dispute as to whether Luther actually used this phrase but, if he did, it came at the end of a speech in which he stated:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason – for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

The Theological Forum was not taking a Luther like stand on the Word of God. It was going precisely against Luther’s position. In fact, it’s even worse. Instead of, ‘Here I stand. I can do no other,’ the Church of Scotland’s position is now, ‘Whatever the culture says we will meekly follow on. It doesn’t matter what the Holy Scriptures say.’

I know that the Convener of the Youth Report meant well when he spoke about gender non-conforming, transgender and gender justice but he might as well have been speaking at the Scottish Youth Parliament, as at a Christian Assembly. The secularization of the Kirk is almost complete. It is a disaster for the whole church in Scotland and for the people of Scotland.

Earlier in the Assembly the following was unanimously accepted:

“The General Assembly issue a call to the Church of Scotland to pray that God will do a fresh work amongst us as God’s people and instruct Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions to consider how best to respond to this call”

This was described by one evangelical organization as a ‘good start to the Assembly’. It would have been if it had had any meaning. As it stands, it was just pietistic, meaningless, spiritual waffle. I would simply ask – which God? Who are God’s people? What is a ‘fresh work’? If

we are calling out to a God whom we just invent and ignore the God who is there, then we are wasting our time.

The Church of Scotland – like all of us – needs to stop being so arrogant, proud and blind. We need to recognize what is going on. We need to stop telling God where he has got it wrong. Ironically, we need the very thing that the C of S was boasting that it had, whilst demonstrating it did not; grace and humility.

And those of us who are professing bible believing Christians should repent of our own cowardice, lack of love, repentance and humility. We should stop commending, working with and supporting those who mock Jesus, his Bible and those people who seek to remain faithful to him. And we should do our utmost to work with believers who accept the words of Christ and seek to be faithful to him.

Let The Word have the last word.

John 17:6 “I have revealed you ^a to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and **they have obeyed your word.** Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.

⁸ **For I gave them the words you gave me^a and they accepted them.** They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me...

¹⁴ **I have given them your word and the world has hated them,** for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

¹⁷ **Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.**

¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

UPDATES

In the early evening edition of Reporting Scotland on BBC 1 last night, there was a rather interesting providence in the running order of the news items on the programme. Watch to see what comes after the report on the Church of Scotland. (for those who don't know Hill's most famous photo hangs in the Free Church Presbytery Hall in Edinburgh – it is a photo of the Disruption).

LINKS

I have followed this issue for ten years and written much about this trajectory. Sadly, although I was mocked and abused for predicting this day, what I feared has come to pass. If you type 'Church of Scotland' in the search facility of this blog you will come across the articles. Here are some:

[What the Bible Really Says About Sex and Sexuality](#)

[A Last Minute Plea to our Brothers and Sisters in the Church of Scotland The Record Editorial – May 2017](#)

<https://theweeflea.com/2015/10/23/whither-church-of-scotland-evangelicals-now/>

<https://theweeflea.com/2014/05/22/reflections-on-a-sunny-sad-historic-afternoon-at-the-church-of-scotland-general-assembly/>

David Robertson