



## By What Standard?

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*Outside Verdict* rattles out criticisms, ideas and pseudo-revolutionary proposals at such a rate as must have astonished even the author himself. Yet what I found most fascinating was the set of underlying criteria by which the Kirk is judged. The most obvious of these is statistical. Church membership has declined from 1,300,000 in 1957 to a mere 600,000 in 2001. Only a Hyper-Calvinist could view such figures with equanimity. But there was also a raft of qualitative criteria. Is the Kirk democratic? Does it have a high national profile? Is it run according to the best modern business practice? Does it have a rapport with Scotland's artistic community? Does it offer young people what they want?

But one criterion is conspicuous by its absence: theology. "I have shied away from, rather than engaged in, theology," writes Dr Reid (p. 227), and he has, of course, the same right not to be a theologian as I have not to be a journalist. But is it really feasible to undertake a Performance Audit of the Kirk without any reference to theological bench-marks?

The omission is all the more striking in the light of Dr Reid's obvious admiration for John Knox and the Scottish Reformation. The Reformers were hugely interested in the "Notes of the Church", as Article XVIII of the *Scots Confession* makes plain, and when it came to the question how the true church could be "decernit" from the false, Knox was in no doubt: "The notes of the trew Kirk of God we belevee, confesse and avow to be, first, the trew preaching of the Worde of God ...". The other notes were the right administration of the sacraments and the upright administration of ecclesiastical discipline, but there can be no doubt that "the trew preaching of the Worde" always enjoyed a primacy: a primacy highlighted by the distinction between the *esse* ("being") of the church and its *bene esse* ("well-being"). The sacraments and discipline were marks of the *well-being* of the church. The true preaching of the word constituted its very *being*.



This clearly accords with the New Testament understanding of the church. The original Christian community had no church-buildings, no priests, no Christian Year and certainly no denominational headquarters. What it did have was a message, and the delivery of that message determined every element in its organisation. The Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) clearly put a primacy on truth and proclamation, and this primacy is reflected in all the subsequent apostolic literature. In 1 Timothy 3: 15, for example, the church is described as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth”.

If this is so, then a non-theological assessment of the Kirk makes no more sense than a non-medical assessment of the NHS or a non-educational assessment of schools and universities. The mission of the kirk is inextricably linked to its message and any meaningful audit has to concentrate on one pivotal question: Is she faithfully and effectively delivering the message of her Master?

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## Preaching

Many of the issues raised by Dr Reid are sub-divisions of this larger question. For example, one of the most heartening features of *Outside Verdict* is its extremely positive assessment of the preaching Dr Reid encountered on his whistle-stop tour through the Kirk: “I doubt very much if better sermons than these are to be heard with regularity anywhere in the English-speaking world.” (p. 37) It was clear, too, that many ministers still regard the Sunday morning sermon as the most important task of the week and spend long hours in preparation; and equally clear that that preparation often involved desperate searches for ingenious ways of arresting and holding attention. I have no quarrel with that. A sermon needs more than orthodoxy.

But we must still ask, Was it true? Was it faithful to the kerygma? Take, as an example, a fine sermon preached by Rev Andrew McLellan during his year as Moderator: “Jesus’ central message was the unlimited, unconditional grace of God ... It was for that theology that they tried to throw him over a cliff. And it was for that theology that he was crucified” (p.219).



Is this theologically (or even historically) correct? It is at least ambivalent. When we speak of “the unlimited, unconditional grace of God” do we mean that the kingdom is open to all prodigals and that Christ is there for all the world’s drunkards, drug-abusers, murderers, child-molesters, sectarian bigots and spin-doctors to come to? Or do we mean that all the prodigals are already in the kingdom and that the whole Christian inheritance is already the personal property of every inmate of our prisons, even if he remains for ever in the Far Country, never coming to himself and never saying, “I will rise and go to my father!”? This seems to bring us perilously close to what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”: forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession and absolution without contrition.<sup>1</sup> Such grace is theologically aberrant and when Bonhoeffer called it, “the deadly enemy of our Church” he spoke in full accord with Jesus’ warnings against doctrine which destroys the church and poisons human lives (Mt. 7:15-20). Theological evaluation is an indispensable element in any critique of Christian preaching.

## **Theological pluralism**

Another sub-division of the theological issue is the question of theological pluralism. Is it to have no limits? Time was when the theological freedom of the Kirk’s teachers was circumscribed by the Westminster Confession. These days have long since gone. The Westminster Confession no longer represents the mind of the church and no one in his right mind would say to an enquirer, “If you want to know what the Church of Scotland thinks, just go home and read its Confession of Faith!”

This renders irrelevant all talk of the merit or demerit of the Confession. It simply is not any longer the faith of the Kirk and the sooner she faces up to that honestly, the better. But what is to be put in its place? Is there no option beyond unlimited theological pluralism, leaving the Kirk without any symbol of its doctrinal unity? Are we to allow a situation in which pulpits openly contradict each other, not merely on secondary matters but on the very fundamentals? Are we to abandon

the great Scottish vision of a Kirk united not by Common Prayer but by Common Preaching?

The terrifying thing is that there is now so little in the area of doctrine (that is, in the content of its message) on which the Kirk can reach a verdict on which all agree. At the moment, the only constitutional limits on theological pluralism are the *Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland on Matters Spiritual* (1921). These articles commit the Kirk to one single doctrine, the Trinity, but he would be a bold man, nonetheless, who would aver that there are no Unitarians in the Kirk or that it would matter if there were.

The *Articles* also commit the Kirk to being "Protestant". But what does that mean? As Dr Reid makes plain, the Church of Scotland has little pride in her past and none at all in her most notable Reformer, John Knox. In what sense, then, is she Protestant? Does she protest for the great Reformation watchwords, *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*? Does she (dare she) protest against the aberrations of Catholic dogma: against, for example, the papal claim to be the infallible Head of the Church and the Bishop and Pastor of every parish in Scotland? What would James MacMillan say then?

This lack of theological coherence is fatal to the Kirk's identity. There is no, "The Message of the Church of Scotland". It will not do to fob us off with the answer that moderns have no patience with dogma. The Roman Catholic Church has retained its dogmatic spirit and fared none the worse for it; and in any case the herald has no right to change the message. We must preach it whether men will hear or whether they will forbear.

## **The ministry**

Closely linked to this is the question of the nature of the ministry. Dr Reid makes plain that he is very much pro-minister. He also predicts that it will change; he wants it to be easily identified (by the wearing of a dog-collar); he has a predilection for collaborative ministry; and

he would like to see the outstanding, most creative ministers gathered together in centres of excellence scattered throughout the country.

But this whole discourse is conducted without any theological reference-points, least of all with regard to the nature of the ministry itself. What, for example, is the relation between minister and elder? In Presbyterianism, the minister shares the oversight (pastoral care) with the elders. In this sense, every Church of Scotland congregation is by definition a team-ministry, in which “the minister” is but one of maybe forty or even more “pastors”, all committed to shepherding the flock. What, then, is the *distinctive* task and responsibility of “the minister”? To preach and teach: a task for which he or she needs the antecedent spiritual qualification of being “apt to teach” (*didaktikos*, 1 Tim. 3:2); a task which we can perform well only if we make it the main business of our lives; and a task for which we require specific training.

Dr Reid nowhere addresses this issue of ministerial training, although he did occasionally stumble on it. It was raised, for example, in a conversation with Rev. Ian Watson, Minister of Caldercruix in North Lanarkshire: “I’m not sure that I was trained properly. I was certainly never taught how to grow a church. These days, when you should be training, you are in essence doing a secular university course and doing what your lecturers happen to be interested in. So many of the students in the divinity faculties are not going to be ministers anyway” (p. 49).

Incidental though these remarks are to the overall plan of the book, they raise a matter of fundamental importance. The delegation of ministerial training to the universities has a long and honourable pedigree in Scotland, but there are crucial differences between current arrangements and those put in place by the Kirk’s Makers. In the days of Knox and Melville, the university arts curriculum was specifically designed to provide ministers with the requisite preliminary training in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Philosophy; everyone holding a university chair had to subscribe to the Westminster Confession; and every



professor in divinity faculties had to be ordained ministers of the Church of Scotland.

Whether these arrangements were good for the universities is a moot point. But now all is changed. Not only universities, but their divinity faculties, are thoroughly secularised. There is nothing inherently improper in that. It is as appropriate to teach religion in a secular university as it is to teach it in a state-school. But any contribution made by such a system to equipping men for the Christian ministry is purely accidental. No other profession would (or does) train its apprentices in this way.

It would be unfair of me, as the representative of a very different system, to be prescriptive on this point. But the Kirk has to give it hard and serious thought. The first prerequisite of a herald is a message; and if the distinctive task of a Presbyterian minister is to teach, then he or she must have a professional mastery of that message and a professional competence in delivering it. So far as I can see, no university offers a programme of studies of which these skills are the intended outcome.

Having its own theological college would obviously put the Kirk to considerable expense. But to the charge that such an arrangement would isolate students from the rigours of the secular academic world, there is an obvious reply: every candidate should first of all have to take a secular degree. In any case, we are long past the day when the typical divinity student suffered from an overdose of monasticism. The clamant need now is not for men and women thoroughly immersed in the world, but for disciples who have spent time in the company of their Master. This need not involve any compromise in academic rigour. The Church can educate to University standards.

### **Readers and non-stipendiary ministers**

Dr Reid muses, too, on the responsibilities of Readers and on the possibility of greater use of non-stipendiary clergy. That raises no theological problems. The less Canon Law the better. There are, however, serious practical problems. Episcopalians make widespread

use of non-stipendiary clergy, but the role of Episcopalian clergy is quite different from that of Presbyterian ministers. The Episcopalian is primarily a celebrant; the Presbyterian primarily a preacher. It is extremely difficult for anyone to perform this latter function regularly and adequately while holding down a full-time secular job. In the exceptional cases where a “lay-man” clearly has an outstanding gift of teaching and preaching he should be told, “Your Church needs you!” and persuaded to undergo appropriate training for full-time ministry. Apart from all else, the last thing a stress-ridden ministry needs is the undermining of its own professionalism by men (or women) who receive all the plaudits of the ministry but take none of its risks.

There is, however, one area where the division between elders/readers and ministers must be broken down: the celebration of the sacraments. It is impossible to argue on theological grounds that only an ordained minister can administer Baptism or the Lord’s Supper. Admittedly, the Westminster Confession (Chapter XXVII.IV) appears to insist on the restriction: neither Baptism nor the Lord’s Supper “may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the word lawfully ordained.” However, the operative phrase here is “a minister of the word”. The divines would not have countenanced what we today call lay-preaching. Modern Presbyterians, however, do countenance it, and their countenancing of it is a form of “lawful ordination”: lawful enough, I am sure, to satisfy the apostles, if not the canon lawyers. Once we authorise a man to preach it is absurd to ban him from dispensing the sacrament (whatever that means). The only possible reason for banning him is a theologically indefensible view of the sacraments: either that we need someone with the “grace of ordination” to effect the conversion (transubstantiation) of the elements into the body, soul and divinity of Christ; or, at the very least, that we need someone with more than “lay” powers to utter the *epiklesis* and invoke the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the elements. Both of these, in my view, are nonsense. The preaching of the word is the higher function and if we have authorised a man to perform that task we can confidently authorise him to perform the lesser. What, after all, is the “celebrant” doing? Nothing, except reading, preaching and praying.



## The media

It was inevitable that Dr Reid, a professional journalist, would have a special interest in the Kirk's media-profile and this is reflected at many points, particularly in the recurring pleas for "a principal official media spokesperson" and weekly press-conferences. Here again, the underlying issues are theological, relating mainly to the nature of the church, its ministry and its message.

The most obvious question is what we mean by "the church". Dr Reid assumes throughout that the church is a centralised national institution with headquarters in Edinburgh and a Principal Clerk "at the helm". This is a serious misconception. The radical church is the local church, and that local church is little answerable to headquarters. Instead, all the primary functions of the church are decided upon and administered locally and the only justification for headquarters is that they facilitate, service and encourage spiritual life at the local level. Locally, of course, every parish in Scotland has its official spokesperson, the minister, and the result is a national communications-network which any political party would envy.

The perception underlying the oft-heard plea for official press-officers is that the church needs a national, as well as a local voice, and in a sense that is true. The problem is that we assume that the national message has to be radically different from the local message. Indeed, any message which hopes to command media attention has to be quite other than the local message. The local message (assuming we remain apostolic) is unashamedly evangelistic and theological: "we preach Christ crucified". That is of no interest to the media, who gleefully edit the word "God" out of every ecclesiastical pronouncement.

At the moment the Kirk is guaranteed media coverage only when she is rent by splits or afflicted by scandals, and it is a moot point whether such situations are either exacerbated by adverse press coverage or mitigated by skilful media relations. Those who live by the press die by the press. But what Dr Reid has in mind is that the church should be making pronouncements on important public issues and disclosing





these to the media at weekly press conferences. This sounds very promising in theory. But in practice?

Take all the topics which might conceivably be aired on such occasions: war with Iraq, lesbian and gay marriages, abortion, cloning, legalising cannabis and free care for the elderly. What is the Kirk's line on such issues? The very question assumes a Roman Catholic model where a Supreme Pontiff literally pontificates on such matters and lays down a line which is binding on all the faithful. That is not the Protestant way. In the matter of abortion, our women have a right to choose. On the question of cloning, every minister is entitled to her own point of view. That is how it must remain. No Moderator, Clerk, Convener, Press Officer or even General Assembly can express the Kirk's official view on such questions.

But there is a deeper issue: the perception that what is said from pulpits up and down the land is nothing like as important as some pseudo-political pronouncement which might secure a headline. Let's not be beguiled! There are few public questions on which the Kirk can claim a direct word from the Lord: and when she relies on her own political sagacity it seldom (even in my own case) rises above the level of the nation's editorials. Christ did not send us to pronounce on the politics of the Middle East or the merits of GM foods. He sent us to preach the gospel. We have no right to abandon that merely because the press refuse to give coverage to our sermons. Nor should we give the slightest countenance to a policy which suggests that when a Convener speaks the Church speaks.

### **A national church?**

But what of the position of the Kirk as the national church, recognised as such by the Revolution Settlement and the Treaty of Union? When these arrangements were formalised the Kirk was literally the only denomination in Scotland (Catholics were outlawed and the small band of Cameronians were numerically insignificant). Today, the situation is dramatically different. The immigration of the 19th century transformed the religious demography of Scotland, giving Catholicism



new strength and confidence; and Presbyterianism itself was rent by the Secession of 1733 and the Disruption of 1843. These developments meant that the Kirk was now only one denomination among many, representing but a minority of Scotland's Christians. It is hardly surprising that these changes bred resentments and that a powerful Voluntary movement developed, protesting against the pact between church and state, and arguing that the only responsibility of government towards religion was to have nothing to do with religion.

This Voluntary tradition became a powerful element within the United Free Church when that body was formed by the union of the Free Church and the United Secession Church in 1900. Indeed, to the UF Church, the principle of Spiritual Independence mattered above all others. They believed (wrongly, in my view) that it was utterly incompatible with establishment and under Dr Alexander Martin of New College they made it the main sticking-point in the protracted negotiations with the Established Church which led to the union of 1929. Most Church of Scotland ministers, if asked today, would instantly affirm that the Kirk is no longer established. I very much doubt if that is the legal position as defined by the Articles Declaratory. But three things are clear.

First, that virtually all modern Scottish Christians would agree with the position adopted by American Presbyterians in their amendments to the Westminster Confession (1729 and 1788): the civil power should not give the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest.

Secondly, Church of Scotland ministers still tend to regard themselves as *the* parish minister. The underlying thinking here becomes clear in a conversation Dr Reid had with Andrew McLellan. If you give up the idea of the Kirk as a national church, said Dr McLellan, "you would then abandon that sense of care that good ministers, sessions and congregations have for *everyone* in their parish. Inevitably, Catholics, Episcopalians, Baptists and others in Scotland see their pastoral responsibility as being to their own folk, whereas we see it as

being to everybody, including people who are members of no church at all.”

Dr McLellan probably has no idea how much this is resented by clergy of other denominations, particularly in rural areas. Free Church ministers studiously avoid visiting Church of Scotland homes, regarding such poaching as unprofessional and discourteous. By the same token, they take it ill when the occupant of the Church of Scotland manse presumes that he is in a different position and that every home in the parish is his. On the other hand, so far as the unchurched are concerned every Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian and Free Kirker in Scotland feels exactly the same sense of responsibility towards them as do Dr McLellan and his colleagues.

Thirdly, wherever the *Articles Declaratory* left the Establishment Principle, there can be no doubt that they gave the Church of Scotland a special national role: “it is a representative witness to the Christian faith of the Scottish people”. I do not resent one iota of that special privilege. What I do resent is that the Kirk has so blatantly reneged on it. To quote the Secretary of the Law Society of Scotland, she has not punched her weight. She has confused personal (or at least institutional) humility with humility about the gospel itself and stood so far back as to convey the impression that in her view public life should be a God-free zone. She has failed to insist that institutions, no less than individuals, are bound by the Moral Law and that government, no less than the governed, are obliged to live by Christian values. She stood idly by, terrified of appearing intolerant, while Donald Dewar’s Scotland Act redefined Scotland, at a stroke, as an officially secular state. This is a different matter entirely from the pronouncements of Official Media Spokespersons or weekly press-briefings. It is a question of major public issues, with clear moral and theological implications, on which the Church’s doctors should be able to speak with such clarity and the General Assembly with such authority as to unite the whole Christian community of Scotland. The fact that the Kirk is too theologically incoherent, fragmented or even illiterate to make this possible is part of the tragedy.



## Evangelicals

There is space only for a brief treatment of one remaining issue: the position of Evangelicals within the Kirk. There are three specific issues.

First, marginalisation. In the Church of England, due respect was shown to such Evangelicals as Donald Coggan, John Stott and George Carey. By contrast, men such as Eric Alexander and James Phillip found themselves frozen out.<sup>2</sup> Some argue, of course, that they marginalised themselves, behaving as Congregationalists, but if they did, it was only because long years of trying to belong proved utterly fruitless and they found relief by immersing themselves (often with dramatic effect) in their local ministries.

Secondly, the stigma of obscurantism and fundamentalism. Despite being among the most highly qualified and widely experienced scholars in the Church men like Dr Andrew McGowan and Dr Sinclair Ferguson find themselves convicted of the Unpardonable Sin: Certainty. Doubt, it seems, is the supreme grace. How did we get here? There are of course, many things, including matters of Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation, on which all of us are uncertain. But is it wrong for a bishop (albeit a Presbyterian one) to be certain on the fundamentals?

Thirdly, Evangelicals often see themselves as victims of an invisible Creed. The Kirk no longer has a Rule of Faith and it wouldn't dream of putting anyone on trial for heresy. But there are unwritten rules, particularly at Selection School. The most important of these is, "You must be prepared to ordain women." This is now very close to being the single non-negotiable article in the Kirk's Creed, rivalled only by the doctrine of infant baptism.

After centuries of discrimination against women it is absolutely right to affirm gender-equality as a fundamental article of the gospel. But for most Evangelicals this issue has nothing to do with gender. It is about the authority of scripture, and some regard should surely be

paid to the fact that many Christians without a male-chauvinist bone in their bodies still feel bound to abide by the *prima facie* import of Paul's statements on the role of women. I no longer believe that this issue can be settled on the basis of such statements alone. Neither do I believe, however, that it is justifiable to make acquiescence in the dogma of women's ordination a non-negotiable condition of admission to the ministry. On such an issue, the Kirk (led by its women) should exercise patience towards conscientious objectors.

The core fear of Evangelicals was highlighted by Rev Ian Watson: coercion. How far will it go? At the moment Evangelicals are prepared to live with a situation where they are forced, against their consciences, to ordain women. But will they be able to adopt a similar approach when the screw is tightened further and the dominant party insist, "Thou shalt marry a homosexual couple"? "If that happened," says Ian Watson, "I'd have to leave" (p.49).

Evangelicals should never leave. If the worst comes to the worst - if they are required to perform an action which they believe God forbids - they should collectively refuse and collectively face the consequences. An evangelical secession would be calamitous. There is no other denomination in Scotland in which Church of Scotland Evangelicals would feel comfortable and the inevitable result of a secession would be a new Presbyterian denomination. God forbid! Excommunicate the whole of Christendom and risk hell-fire?

- <sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 6th Edition, 1959). pp. 35-36.
- <sup>2</sup> Dr Reid and others make a great deal of the fact that neither a woman nor an elder has ever been Moderator of the General Assembly. But who was the last Evangelical Moderator?

