



A Response to the Symposium

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The Editor has kindly given me the opportunity to respond to the symposium on *Outside Verdict*. As I write this I have seen four or the responses, but I wish to reply to just two of them: those by Prof. Donald Macleod and Rev Marjory MacLean.

First, however, I'd like to make a few general comments about the overall response to the book. Since it was published in May, the sheer scale of this response has been both gratifying and humbling.

I'd divide the reaction into three main segments. First: reviews and discussion in the Scottish media. For the most part, these have been both positive and thoughtful. Secondly, the vocal response as experienced by the Very Rev Andrew McLellan and myself as we toured Scotland on our so-called roadshows, and latterly after I have addressed meetings of Kirk sessions and presbyteries. These have tended to be more critical, but on the whole appreciative and generous. And thirdly, the personal letters (well over 200 of them) I have received. I have found many of these letters moving, and some of them disturbing. The tone has for the most part been considered and warm, but many correspondents, to my great surprise, have chided me for being far too upbeat. Three different writers upbraided me for being too "irenic" (surely a rarely used word?) in tone. And one, writing from the heart of 121 George Street, forcefully accused me of being excessively timid, and not nearly radical enough. I have this extraordinary document before me. The author, a well known servant of the Kirk, demands the abolition of the General Assembly and consequently the moderatorship.

I mention these letters, in particular, because the concerns and views raised in them are hardly reflected in the four contributions to the symposium which I have seen. As so often in Scotland, you get the sense of a debate that is atomised and contained in little adjacent but not overlapping circles.



Anyway, nowhere, until I came across Prof. Macleod's piece for this symposium, have I been criticised for my neglect of theology. Obviously, in a journal bearing the title *Theology in Scotland*, theology must be considered important.

When I was embarking on the project, I had a long conversation with the then principal of Edinburgh University. Lord Sutherland advised me, in his gentle and kind way, not to get "bogged down" in theology. Perhaps this advice was based on my perceived cerebral inadequacy; I prefer to think that his view was that any discussion of theology would merely get in the way of an analysis of the Kirk's current ills. I received remarkably similar advice in one of the many helpful conversations I had with my mentor, Andrew McLellan, and also in a conversation I had with another good friend, Rev Ron Ferguson.

Stewart Sutherland did however suggest that if I engaged, even superficially, in theology, then my starting point could be Paul Tillich. Several months later, I was pleased to come across a passage by Tillich in which he wrote of the difficulties people had experienced in trying to penetrate his theological thought. He indicated that the existential *implications* of his theology were more clearly manifest in his sermons. (My italics).

If I have read little theology, I have listened to, and read, many sermons, including Tillich's; and in the best of them theology has certainly been implicit, if not explicit. I think I could assess these implications; on the other hand, and here I totally accept Prof. Macleod's strictures, I well understand that theological evaluation was not a component in my response to, and my critiques of, these sermons. Indeed, I am prepared to accept, further, that my avoidance of theology reflects to some degree what Professor Macleod calls "the lack of theological coherence" that is "fatal to the Kirk's identity".

The other essay I wish to comment on, briefly, is that by The Revd. Marjory MacLean, whom I got to know during my recent brief stint as interim editor of *Life & Work*. In her discussion of Kirk's administrative arrangements, I think Marjory reveals herself to be deeply conservative.

My personal view is that there is a pressing need for radical overhaul of the Kirk's administrative and structural dispositions. Pruning and rationalisation is needed, especially at headquarters. If these are not accomplished soon, sensitively and graciously, the process will be all the more painful when it is eventually undertaken, as it will be.

I think we reach the key subtext in Marjory's piece when we come to the sentence about decision-making in the Church which contains these phrases: "the voices of the content are much quieter than those of the complaining" and "the people who know how to make an Assembly work". I am genuinely amazed that any members of the Church of Scotland can be, presently, content. (Many, perhaps most, clearly aren't, and good luck to them). How can Christians be content with a national church that is clearly failing, as it is operating in a nation that is mired in the ghastly process of losing Christianity? As I have confessed above, I have not grappled with theology; even so I think I know enough to aver confidently that contentment is a not major requisite for following Jesus Christ. And a successful, revving church is surely one that is filled with the discontented; otherwise, how can it be reviving?

As to those who know how to make an assembly work — well, whatever they are doing and whoever they are, they clearly hold no sway in the Church of Scotland, for its assembly is most manifestly not working. And this is not just my opinion; it is the opinion of countless ordinary Kirk members. Administrative dispositions regarding cloak room arrangements, printing schedules, where people are to be accommodated and so on are bureaucratic side-issues. I would never wish to demean the good work of those who toil behind the scenes to ensure that a big gathering works smoothly; but that is not the "work" that ultimately counts. I reckon that the assembly as presently constituted is more concerned with quasi-legal matters and maintenance of the *status quo* than with the missionary work that is desperately required if Christianity is to be revived in Scotland.

And I would not for a moment deny that the assembly occasionally encompasses gentle reform; maintainers of the *status quo*, of the church

as it is, often think the best way to keep things the same is to give just a little here and there.

In conclusion, I may say that I am somewhat battered and bemused, not by any hostility I have encountered (there has been far less than I expected), but rather by the seriousness and intensity of the response to a book which was written in a hurry, and by the patent sincerity, pain and indeed passion of so many of my correspondents, who care desperately and deeply about our national church and its failings. In that spirit, I thank the participants in this symposium, and the Editor of this journal.