



The gift of an aging church

Eric G. McKimmon

This paper expresses a quite particular point of view concerning the future of the Church of Scotland. I write as a retired parish minister and I have accompanied the church through some of the challenges it has faced in the late twentieth century. My remarks may sound defeatist to some readers but, hopefully, to others an encouragement to think what may seem unthinkable.



Contextualising decline

Much money, time and effort has been spent by the Kirk, from the General Assembly through Kirk committees to Presbyteries and congregations, in order to maintain the church as a visible, institutional presence throughout the length and breadth of Scotland. However, decline in church membership, which began in the 1960s, continues. This phenomenon is not unique to the Church of Scotland; indeed, every older Protestant denomination rooted in the sixteenth-century reformations is in serious decline. This is an issue that also affects Catholic forms of Christianity, both Roman and episcopal. The reflections in this essay, however, are essentially concerned with the Church of Scotland. The Kirk's response to decline has in the past decade largely been one of rebranding; renewal has been sought through fresh expressions in worship, restructuring of leadership and more imaginative use of buildings. It can appear peevish not to wish success to these earnest and sustained efforts at saving the Kirk, but what if the enterprise that began with *A Church Without Walls* in 2001¹ is fundamentally flawed, both in its premise and strategies? An enduring institutional Church of Scotland may not be the Divine will. The long trajectory of diminishing numbers should in itself cause reflection on that possibility.

The churches in Scotland and the United Kingdom are not unique in the difficulties they face. Religious decline has taken place all over Europe and Christendom has been replaced by the secular state. What took over a millennium to build has crumbled in barely a century. The rapid process of secularisation has no single explanation. It is foolish to think that some inner fault in the Kirk has caused the exodus from the pews, or that some extra effort by the Kirk will bring people back. It is, certainly, a very partial diagnosis of the Kirk's ills that ignores the wider cultural history of Europe. The intellectual environment in which churches in Europe operate today can be traced back to philosophical and religious trends pre-dating the Reformation and the Renaissance.³ Nietzsche's utterance 'God is dead' seemed far from the mark in 1882;⁴ but a long incubation period has brought the proverbial chickens home to roost.

The unspeakable possibility is that the decline and death of the Kirk is providential and to be embraced with faith and courage. This is a hard thought for the Kirk to entertain. First, to admit such a possibility seems a failure in faith, even though the acceptance of failure is often one of the real tests and evidences of faith. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. A second reason why the Kirk is reluctant to face the hard thought of institutional eclipse is that organisations are by nature self-serving and self-preserving. Even a summary glance at history, however, shows that every institutional expression of the faith has a limited life span. The Church is always a gift of grace and not a permanent possession. For example, the extraordinary events of the day of Pentecost gave birth to a charismatic community which practised a primitive communism, holding 'all things' in common. But this initial messianic community proved transitory, though similar forms of community have recurred throughout Christian history. From small, messianic beginnings emerged an embryonic Catholicism – visible in the Pastoral Epistles – the forerunner of Christendom. Monasticism played an important part in the first fifteen hundred years of the Church's life and may do so again. The congregational expression of Christianity has been with us for only around five hundred years and, in the broad sweep of history, is relatively new; though the congregational model has deep roots in Judaism. The modern Pentecostal movement has been an explosive form of the Church in the twentieth century. It may be called the

‘fresh expression’ par excellence, issuing in megachurches in various parts of the world. This very brief sketch illustrates the variety and impermanence of historical expressions of Christianity; they should caution against the human drive for institutional longevity. New wine bursts old wineskins.



Dying with Christ: The Kirk’s vocation

To return to the Kirk: should the Kirk resist its terminal decline? Or is there more active faith in dying gracefully? It may be that the most effective witness the church can make on behalf of its Lord is to accept its death without fear and with confidence in his love. Secular culture has little space for death and the myth that science will ultimately bring immortality sometime in the future has a fair wind in the popular imagination. People resist the aging process through cosmetic surgery – ‘nip and tuck’ allows for a fresh expression, for a time. But, finally, the choice is either to rage, rage against the dying of the light, or to accept mortality as a fact of life. The religious insight is not to see death as inimical to life; but rather a ‘presence’ that gives depth to life. This perspective is powerfully articulated by Sophie Sabbage – a sufferer from terminal cancer – in her book *The Cancer Whisperer*. She writes: ‘Death, I am learning, is not the opposite of life or even just the end of life. It is the ebb of life’s flow, a presence not an absence, an intimate companion on life’s journey [...]’.⁵

Jesus similarly spoke of death as integral to life. He cautioned that it is possible to be so grasping of temporal security that the spiritual value of death is eclipsed.⁶ From a sacramental point of view, the baptised die with Christ. Christ has united himself with our suffering and mortality that we may share in his life. We do not escape death but face it in the fellowship of his love. Christ is not defeated in death but, rather, he changes death from something to be avoided to being an instrument accepted as God’s will. ‘Not my will but yours be done’⁷ is the confession both of the crucified Jesus and of his disciples who share his faith. Death is part of the providential ordering of life – of the individual, of the Church and of all creation. Nothing under the sun and including the sun is exempt from death.

A complementary insight predominates the New Testament; namely, history is an open-ended process that awaits completion in God. As New Testament scholars have said, apocalyptic sensibility was the mother of Christianity. Now, as then, Christians are permitted, indeed called, to think outside the box of continuing earthly security. The eclipse of institutions should not be an alien thought to Christian faith: 'For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the one that is to come'.⁸ What will come after the passing and loss of the church is not something that can be known save that the purposes of God at 'the end' will be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, there are patterns and possibilities that provoke reflection. If the Kirk as we know it died, perhaps the people of Scotland would remember its life and witness appreciatively and inspiringly. Or, maybe the death of the Kirk would not be missed at all. The human spirit may come of age; though this hope has the danger of shallow optimism. Experience does illustrate, however, that there are non-church people who have acute moral vision and mature spirituality. It may be that five hundred years of Christian work and witness in Scotland have done their work and that the culture *per se* has within it the essentials of the kingdom of God: compassion, justice and care for creation. Of course, in the event of the collapse of secular culture, religious traditions may be sought out and rehabilitated. The remnant theme runs through the Bible. In any trajectory, a human need for forms of worship is unlikely to go away. The hallmarks of traditional church life: holiness of place, sacramental immediacy, the beauty of music, the challenge of the gospels, these may prove enduring in a post-ecclesial environment. As the Messiah came from the root of Jesse,⁹ the spirituality of the future may have roots in the past. In the sense of a 'people of God' there will always be a Church.¹⁰

These ruminations are not aimed at prescription for either the present or the future; they are designed to provoke thought as to what life would be like without a Kirk, but *with* God. The 'cloud of unknowing' between present and future behoves reverence and humility on the part of the churches.



Pastoral priorities

Openness to God's future would rescue the Kirk from preoccupation with what may be termed *churchianity*, a naval-gazing pre-occupation with survival. Congregations, especially small and struggling ones, are frequently burdened by ministers who dutifully preach 'change to survive'. It is often the case that Kirk Sessions have no voices strong enough to question the wisdom of the latest survival strategy; such voices as exist are frequently dismissed as old and inconsequential. In the pew, longsuffering worshippers in many parishes listen to sermons lamenting that they are not the congregations that they should be: innovative and growing. The best that can be said is that these 'sermons' are naively didactic, at worst hectoring. 'The church' is substituted for God as the subject of preaching and, consequently, there is little reflection upon 'the divine mysteries' of which ministers are meant to be 'stewards'.¹¹

In these days a frail and vulnerable church needs pastoral care. It seems to me that this should include listening, respect and gratitude to the elderly. Also, in these times of transition, the 'parish ministry' – far from being obsolete – remains a precious gift to the church. Clergy have traditionally embodied a unique blend of learning, pastoral professionalism and caring outreach; these are as apposite now as in the past. Where the opportunity exists, children may be nurtured and educated in the rich spiritual heritage of the Kirk; but with awareness that young people do not automatically become bearers of tradition. Let the subject of the death of the church be addressed with candour and faith. Most people have trust that in every circumstance the ways of Providence are gracious and good. This elemental faith is the spiritual legacy of a Calvinistic heritage. As grannies say: if it is for you, it will not go past you!



The kingdom of God is not the Church

The French Catholic modernist Alfred Loisy famously said, 'Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came'.¹² This, Loisy added, is no guarantee of permanence; the church may anticipate a long future on earth but she 'regards herself nevertheless as a provisional

institution, a transitional organization'.¹³ This is a word for the Kirk of today. It is only hubris that supposes the ways of Providence are identical to earthly structures, plans or ambitions. When Jesus spoke of his death to his disciples, it caused alarm and despondency. Peter even 'took him aside and rebuked him'.¹⁴ Rebuked him for what? Stupidity, defeatism or deception! In the event, the Messiah's death proved to be providential; the death of the Kirk may be providential too. The sun rises in the East and sets in the West – an allegory, perhaps, of the course of historical Christianity. Sunsets are often beautiful and it is important that we appreciate the gift in them all.

Notes

- ¹ General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, *A Church Without Walls: The Report of the Special Commission anent Review and Reform* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2001).
- ² An early twentieth-century attempt to interpret the decline and fall of Christendom positively is found in the work of Orkney theologian John Oman (see *The Problem of Faith and Freedom in the Last Two Centuries*; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906). Oman believed that the teaching of Christ and the spirit of early primitive Christianity legitimises the hope of non-institutional forms of Christian association. These would be based on personal consecration to the ideals of the kingdom of God and realised in relationships of freedom and love. Indeed, for Oman these already exist alongside and outside organised Christianity.
- ³ A useful point of entry to the subject of cultural theory and the end of Christendom is found in the work of Terry Eagleton, see *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), and more recently, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2014) and *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015). From a Roman Catholic

- perspective see Joseph Ratzinger [Pope Benedict XVI] and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- ⁴ Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (trans. Shelley Frisch; London: Granta, 2002), 128, 232, 254, 271f.
- ⁵ Sophie Sabbage, *The Cancer Whisperer: How To Let Cancer Heal Your Life* (London: Coronet, 2016), 85.
- ⁶ ‘Very truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life in this world will lose it and those who hate their lives in this world will keep it for eternal life’ (John 12:24–25).
- ⁷ Matthew 26:42; Luke 22:42.
- ⁸ Hebrews 13:14.
- ⁹ Isaiah 11:1.
- ¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass, writing from an American perspective, identifies a new spiritual awakening that is distinct from revivalism. It is rooted in mystical experience beyond religious labels and is transformative of culture, community and politics. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2013).
- ¹¹ 1 Corinthians 4:1.
- ¹² Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (trans. Christopher Home; London: Isbister & Co., 1903), 166.
- ¹³ Ibid, 168.
- ¹⁴ Mark 8: 32–33.