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Linguistic diversity within the Church: A theological defence

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Abstract

This article argues that linguistic diversity is vital for the health of the Church. Although multilingualism has been crucial to human history, linguistic imperialism has become characteristic of the modern age. The article contends that Christians should defend the right of linguistic minorities to worship in their accustomed (usually native) languages, since linguistic diversity is tied to the health and identity of faith communities. The article uses a case study, the decline of Gaelic in Scottish Presbyterian churches, to show how linguistic imperialism can harm faith communities.

Introduction

The world today stands at a linguistic crossroads, and more theologians ought to be aware of it. This article begins by explaining the current threat to linguistic diversity. It then shows how the topic relates to the Church.

Since time immemorial, linguistic diversity has characterised humanity.[1] There were, of course, lingua francas that built bridges between peoples. There were also conquerors who insisted that subject peoples speak the tongue(s) of their new overlords. However, these phenomena

[1] A good introduction is, Nicholas Ostler, *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (HarperCollins, 2003).

were always localised. Even Rome, the proverbial empire of Western history, did not mandate Latin for everyone. In North Africa, people spoke Punic for centuries after Cato the Elder had ruled that 'Carthage must be destroyed' (*Carthago delenda est*).[2] The eastern half of the empire kept Greek as its lingua franca, and only used Latin in isolated locales, such as law courts. The same spirit of multilingualism was evident in the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great (c. 590–530 BC), the Byzantine Empire of Justinian I (482–565), and the France of Louis XIV (1638–1715).

Globalisation and modern nationalism radically changed this picture. As the world became more interconnected, lingua francas gained a broader scope. These lingua francas were almost invariably the languages of the richest and most powerful countries, which were usually Western. Modern nationalism, for its part, had a utopian bent. It wanted to squeeze diverse communities into an idealised box labelled 'the nation'. Manufacturing linguistic unity was vital to the project. France is a case in point. From the French Revolution (1789–1799) onwards, French was pushed as the language of patriotism and civilisation. Other languages spoken within its borders, such as Breton, were dismissed as barbaric relics.[3] Those who wanted social advancement switched to French and abandoned much of their ancestral culture. Those who clung to their native tongue could find themselves persecuted by government officials.

Nation states that built empires might be a little more tolerant towards colonies, but only a little. Indigenous peoples who wanted to rise in the social hierarchy needed to adopt the rulers' language and culture. This kind of linguistic coercion involved considerable personal suffering, not only because of the heritage left behind, but because few second-language speakers ever attain the fluency of native speakers. The native speaker can say everything they want, whereas the average second-language speaker expresses only what they can.

This process has been catastrophic for linguistic diversity. Owing to the political hegemony and economic might of the British Empire and, later, the United States of America, English has become the dominant lingua franca. In many spheres, it is treated as the only acceptable international language. Even in the humanities, where multilingualism has

[2] Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5–6.

[3] Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts* (Yale University Press, 2004), 250–81.

been entrenched for centuries, English is becoming hegemonic for publications and conferences.[4] The historian Andrew Roberts compares it to a 'monstrous sci-fi extra-terrestrial growing ever stronger by gobbling up its opponents'.[5]

Before this juggernaut, other traditional lingua francas find themselves on the back foot. Their proponents have responded by cracking down even harder on smaller languages within their perceived spheres of influence. Many of these smaller tongues have become extinct. Others are on life support, kept in the public eye through (often half-hearted) government funding, but shorn of the native speakers and breathing space required to recover lost ground. The world, in other words, is increasingly monochrome. People speak fewer languages, and people who speak the dominant tongue, English, have less incentive than ever before to learn others.

Language, Church, and community

The erosion of linguistic diversity ought to concern the Church. Language is intimately tied to human identity. It is scientifically disputed whether people think differently in different languages. But it is clear that, to cite the linguist Einar Haugen, 'The learning of language is closely tied to the learning of cultural behavior of all kinds.'[6] Language is essential for individuals and communities to express themselves and conceive of reality. This includes Christian individuals and Christian faith communities. God reveals Himself to His people by means of language, and mandates that the Church utilise language to articulate orthodoxy. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that, 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness' (KJV). Scripture states that speech is integral to evangelism (Exod 3:14; Matt 28:19–20; 1 Pet 3:15).

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[4] Martin George Holmes, "Language Learning and Historical Research: The Danger of Anglophone Parochialism", *The Historian* 85, no. 3 (2023): 315–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/00182370.2023.2397205.

[5] Andrew Roberts, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 573.

[6] Einar Haugen, *The Norwegian Language in America: A Study in Bilingual Behavior*, 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 1969), 9.

Despite the clarity of these pronouncements, many Christians pay insufficient attention to language issues. They have only a dim understanding of how they affect the Church. Of course, there is longstanding interest in translating the Bible accurately and disseminating it in as many languages as possible. Even here, however, there are signs of flagging commitment. In 2012, for example, the biblical scholar Larry W. Hurtado lamented the rise of Anglophone doctoral students in biblical studies who do not bother to learn Hebrew and Greek, let alone research languages like German and French.[7] These individuals seem to believe that English alone is sufficient for expertise in biblical studies, a distressing perspective for Christians who take the motto *ad fontes* ('back to the sources') seriously. The fundamentals of the faith can be conveyed in translation, certainly. But experts ought to know the original languages, since translation is a delicate process. To render a text into another tongue requires meticulous knowledge of the languages at hand, lest shades of nuance be lost and the meaning of Scripture distorted.

Few Christians recognise how nuances in language have profoundly affected church history. In the fourth century, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches split over Christology – a disagreement that, Bishop Kallistos Ware indicates, was due in part to slippery translations and phraseology.[8] Western theologians have historically misinterpreted the stance of the Church of the East as Nestorian because, until recently, there was little effort made to consult the relevant Syriac sources.[9] Following the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants and Catholics produced Bible translations that reflected their respective theologies. For example, Protestant Bibles, relying on the Greek, translate Matthew 3:2 along the lines of 'Repent ye' (KJV), which is concordant with the Protestant concept of justification by faith alone. The Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible, in contrast, adheres to the Latin Vulgate, and renders it 'Do penance' – words that reflect the Catholic emphasis on the sacramental system.

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[7] Larry W. Hurtado, "On Diversity, Competence, and Coherence in New Testament Studies: A Modest Response to Crossley's 'Immodest Proposal'", *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no. 2 (2012): 356, https://doi.org/10.11157/rsrr2-2-554.

[8] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin, 1997), 312.

[9] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, trans. Miranda G. Henry (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 2–3.

Differences among Bible translations, and the fervour with which they are defended, illustrate how deeply language shapes faith communities. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fourth century, recorded the outcry after a bishop in North Africa switched Scripture readings from the Old Latin Bible to Jerome's Vulgate: 'There was such a disturbance made among the people' because the Vulgate was 'very different from the version enshrined in the memory and hearing of all and sung for so many generations.'[10] A modern incarnation of this trend is the debate among conservative Protestants over the King James Version. Some insist that the venerableness of the KJV gives it an incomparable poetic grandeur. They also argue that it is more reliable, since newer translations interact with higher criticism and a variety of textual variants that, in the minds of these conservatives, undermine inerrancy. In contrast, other conservatives maintain that the King James is inaccurate at certain points, and that fidelity to the Word of God demands new translations. The acrimony of this debate is intense, involving character assassination and allegations of heresy.[11]

The language of the liturgy is another area of conflict. When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer mandated the English-language *Book of Common Prayer* in the sixteenth century, the Cornish – who spoke Cornish and worshipped in Latin – launched an armed rebellion. Although economic grievances and Catholicism played a role, English services were the immediate cause of the revolt. The rebels stated, 'And so we the Cornish men (whereof certain of us understand no English) utterly refuse this new English.'[12] More recently, the Catholic Church's liturgical changes of the 1960s, notably the shift to the vernacular, appalled traditionalist Catholics whose faith revolved around the Latin tongue. No less a figure than the philologist J. R. R. Tolkien, whose scholarship and *Lord of the Rings* novels are infused with Catholic themes, stormed out of his parish church in disgust.[13]

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[10] Augustine of Hippo, *Letters: Volume I (1–82)*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons (The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 71.5.

[11] James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Bethany House Publishers, 1995), v.

[12] Henry Jenkyns, *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer, D.D.: Archbishop of Canterbury*, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1833), 230.

[13] Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (ISI Books, 2003), 49.

The importance of linguistic diversity: A case study

The intimate relationship between language and faith communities makes linguistic diversity vital. All too often, Christians have assumed that the modern world's trend towards linguistic centralisation is a good thing. A common language, they reason, facilitates the spread of the Gospel. Hence widespread Christian support for colonial empires and homogenous nation states. Although the excessive violence of imperialism might dismay them, they thought that these short-term negatives would be outweighed by the long-term fruits of Christianity and modernity that empires brought with them.

In reality, linguistic diversity is a more effective way of spreading the Gospel. It is true that linguistic centralisation and imperialism have brought the Gospel to new places. However, neglect of the close relationship between language and identity always comes at a cost. Christians who are inattentive to indigenous languages and traditions can alienate local communities and raise unnecessary obstacles to people hearing the Word of God. In the sixteenth century, Spanish Franciscans ministered to over a hundred thousand Native Americans living within modern-day California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and Florida. Their missions continually collapsed, not because Native Americans lacked interest in Christianity, but because the Spanish frequently sought to stamp out indigenous languages and traditions.[14] Indigenous peoples grated against this coercion. For this reason, despite two and a half centuries of effort, Spanish Catholicism made little headway in these regions. The same weakness was reflected in early Anglican missions to New Zealand in the early nineteenth century.[15] The leading evangelist, Samuel Marsden, believed that for the Gospel to take root, the indigenous Māori must adopt Western mores. They needed to speak English, dress like Europeans, and till the land like British yeomen. Marsden's strategy failed: many Māori were interested in Christianity, but they were determined to maintain their ancestral culture. It was only from the late 1820s that this situation changed. After this point, missionaries prioritised preaching in Māori,

[14] Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Praeger, 2004), 5.

[15] For a detailed discussion, see Michael Corboy, *Between God and a Hard Place: A Re-examination of Church Missionary Society Evangelisation of Māori, 1814–1840* (O'Corrbui, 2022).

getting a Māori Bible into circulation, and respecting indigenous culture. By the late 1830s, Māori were converting in droves, and the Gospel was being carried to the farthest ends of the country by Māori missionaries.

Linguistic diversity is also an effective way of maintaining healthy faith communities. There are many variants of Christianity, some radically different from one another, others less so. Theological disagreements have caused perennial debates within churches, schisms to form new churches, and persecution of heretics (however defined). Language often occupies a prominent place in these disputes because, as noted already, language and identity are closely intertwined. The Cornish Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549 protested the switch from Latin services, which represented Roman Catholicism, to English services, which were the harbinger of Protestantism. In other words, Latin, the language to which the Cornish were accustomed in the ecclesial context, was like a shield for their faith. To safeguard Latin was to protect the faith they knew and loved. Likewise, for Archbishop Cranmer, to impose English was to punch through the defences of Cornish Catholicism with the fist of the Protestant Reformation.

Another example, which serves as the chief case study of this article, is the relationship between Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) and Scottish confessional Calvinism. The latter term refers to conservative believers who hold rigorously to the sixteenth-century Westminster Standards of Faith. The case study is chosen for three reasons: 1) This article is published in a Scottish journal; 2) The author of this article is a confessional Calvinist aware of Gaelic's historical significance; and 3) The decline of Gaelic is a classic example of linguistic imperialism in action.

The linguistic divide between the *Gàidhealtachd*, the Gaelic-speaking area of Scotland, and the Scots/English-speaking area has been a defining feature of the country's history. Scots/English speakers predominated in the Lowlands, which has been the country's economic and political powerhouse since the late Middle Ages. The *Gàidhealtachd*, located mostly in the Highlands, was poor and isolated by comparison. From the sixteenth century, the Scottish state worked to undermine Gaelic language and culture. Viewing Gaels as uncouth and lawless, the state wanted to make them – the clan chiefs, especially – adopt Lowland language and mores.[16] This activity intensified after Scotland entered the united kingdom

[16] Michael Fry, *Wild Scots: Four Hundred Years of Highland History* (John Murray, 2005), 13–15.

of Great Britain in 1707, since the Westminster parliament was even less sympathetic to a non-English-speaking minority scattered along the northern fringe of the realm. Throughout the eighteenth century, Christian evangelists – Protestants, above all – treated the Gaels as Marsden did the Māori: Gaels were taught that to be good Christians, they needed to abandon their native language and culture. The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, for instance, used to humiliate and beat children who dared to speak Gaelic in its classrooms.[17]

Despite the persecution of Gaelic, many evangelists did eventually see value in the language, and the *Gàidhealtachd* became a bastion of confessional Calvinism. The Protestant Reformation initially had little impact on the Scottish Highlands. Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism remained strong, as did folk traditions from old pagan times. From the mid-eighteenth century, however, evangelists made an effort to preach in Gaelic and disseminate Gaelic Bibles and devotional tracts. For a hundred years, an evangelical revival rocked the Highlands, winning many souls for the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.[18] Literacy became common for the first time as believers strove to read the Word of God, which was widely available in Gaelic from 1801.

Although not everyone in the Highlands became Presbyterian, confessional Calvinism became a defining feature of the region. Open-air communion seasons were mass events; fencing the communion table was normative; the Sabbath was observed with solemnity. Eloquent preachers such as John Kennedy of Dingwall were veritable celebrities. Owing to the poverty of the Highlands, many Gaels migrated to the dominions of the British Empire and to the United States. They brought their faith with them, establishing a particularly strong base in the Canadian Maritimes.

Gaelic and confessional Calvinism became so closely intertwined that it was considered an intrinsically religious language. A popular anecdote held that Adam and Eve had spoken Gaelic in the Garden of Eden, and therefore it was nicknamed 'the language of Eden'.[19] Even after most

[17] Fry, *Wild Scots*, 126.

[18] Allan W. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community: Christianity and Social Criticism in the Highlands of Scotland, 1843–1893* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 68.

[19] Martin George Holmes, "The Language of Eden in God's Own Country: Gaelic Presbyterianism in Aotearoa New Zealand", *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 4 (2024): 13, https://doi.org/10.52230/WGEZ6484.

Gaelic speakers gained a working knowledge of English, they wanted to worship in Gaelic. Many thought that Gaelic was specially suited for communicating Christian truth. James MacGregor, a Gaelic Highlander who taught systematic theology at New College, Edinburgh, from 1868 to 1881, argued that Gaelic expresses the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone more naturally than English. 'It is a misfortune for us that our noble English version [the King James] does not show the fact, that the appropriate Scripture word for "justify"', *dikaioein* in Greek and *hitzdik* in Hebrew, 'is literally "make righteous"'.[20] English does not make clear that in both languages, justification and righteousness share the same root. In contrast, Gaelic reflects the link forthrightly. 'This advantage the Gaelic reader obtains from the relative use of words in his Bible. The relative words in the Gaelic Bible are formed from the root *fior* (*verum*), "true."'[21] Righteousness is *fireantachd*, justify is *fireanaich*, and a justified man is *firean*.

The conversion of so many Gaels was a godsend for confessional Calvinism. From the eighteenth century onwards, Presbyterianism in the Lowlands took a decidedly latitudinarian and liberal turn. The Church of Scotland permitted the British state to interfere in spiritual matters; it also began relaxing adherence to the Westminster Standards. In 1843, after years of bitter conflict with the moderate wing of the church, most confessional Calvinists – approximately a third of the ministry and half the laity – split to form the Free Church of Scotland. They declared themselves the authentic Established Church. The loyalty of the Gaels was integral to the Free Church's success. Almost all Highland Presbyterians switched allegiance.[22] In the diaspora, Gaelic congregations were the most likely to endorse the Free Church and maintain the Westminster Standards.[23]

In one of the greatest ironies of ecclesiastical history, the Lowland Free Church itself largely abandoned confessional Calvinism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[24] As liberals relaxed adherence

[20] James MacGregor, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, 2nd ed. (T&T Clark, 1881), 32.

[21] MacGregor, *Epistle*, 32.

[22] MacColl, *Land*, 31.

[23] See, for example, Holmes, "Language of Eden", 24–35; Malcolm Prentis, *The Scots in Australia* (University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 178–80.

[24] For a detailed discussion, see James Lachlan MacLeod, *The Second Disruption: The Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the Origins of the Free*

to the Westminster Standards, Gaelic once again became a rallying point for conservatives. Only in the Highlands did confessional Calvinists have the upper hand. In the words of the historian Allan W. MacColl, by this point, the Highlands were 'the last stronghold of a thoroughgoing, socially pervasive [C]alvinism in the British Isles.'[25] The Gaelic language was a valuable bulwark because in Scotland, progressive literature and preaching took place overwhelmingly in English. The literature of the language of Eden, in contrast, was a safe haven for conservatives, since it revolved around the Bible and conservative devotional tracts. The Regulative Principle of worship, which conservatives in those days interpreted to mean that musical instruments and non-inspired hymns are unscriptural, was also more enduring in Gaelic-speaking Presbyterianism.

As the wider culture turned against confessional Calvinism, this safe haven was needed more than ever. In 1893, up to 20,000 confessional Calvinists split to form the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. It was an almost exclusively Highland denomination, in which Gaelic played a prominent role. In 1900, the liberal majority of the Free Church voted to join another liberal denomination to form the United Free Church of Scotland. A conservative minority resolved to remain within the Free Church, most of whom were Highlanders. The situation was repeated in the Diaspora. Still other conservatives, such as Murdo MacAskill and James Orr, remained within the liberalising mainstream in an attempt to bring it back to the straight and narrow.

Of course, none of these conservative communities ever forsook the use of English. They saw value in linguistic diversity. Gaelic was important as a language of spirituality for those who spoke it. Yet, English was increasingly vital for use in daily life, and was indispensable for engaging with Calvinists elsewhere in Britain and throughout the world. English was also part of the heritage of British Reformed Christianity: it was the language, for example, in which the Westminster Standards were originally written. In consequence, conservative churches never discriminated against monoglot English-speaking brethren or made learning Gaelic compulsory for church membership.[26] They held church proceedings in English, and prioritised English-language materials when

Presbyterian Church (Tuckwell Press, 2000).

[25] MacColl, *Land*, 9.

[26] MacLeod, *The Second Disruption*, 243–44.

engaging with the wider culture. Some even expressed interest in alternatives to the King James Version of Scripture, so as to ensure greater accuracy in their English-language Bibles. James MacGregor, for example, welcomed the publication of the English Revised Version in the 1880s, which made use of the 1881 Westcott and Hort New Testament Greek critical text. MacGregor continued to use the King James as his default English text, but where necessary, he pointed out inaccuracies or poor translations by comparing it with the Revised Version.[27] Although Scottish confessional Calvinism became known for its Gaelic character, therefore, it upheld the principle of linguistic diversity.

Had this wider culture been equally attentive to linguistic diversity, confessional Calvinism could have flourished. Fortified by the language of Eden and the *Gàidhealtachd*, confessional Calvinists could have forged a strong counterculture to protest the liberalisation of the mainstream churches. However, there was still a prevailing belief in society that Gaelic was a backward language spoken by a backward people. It is certainly true that the *Gàidhealtachd* ranked among the poorest areas of the British Isles. Hence the exodus of young people migrating to greener pastures, as well as the tendency of Highlanders to support political radicals: they wanted a better life for themselves and their descendants.[28] Poverty and migration, however, are not automatic death sentences for languages. What undermined Gaelic, ultimately, was the perception that it was ill-adapted to modern life.[29] Social advancement, it was thought, required knowledge of English. Once English was acquired, Gaelic was superfluous, for it was little more than a vestige of the poverty one sought to escape. The ideology of modern nationalism was also integral: there was a belief that in Britain and most British dominions, people should speak English. Exceptions were made only for those groups who, if linguistic rights were denied to them, might foment rebellion: the Boers in South Africa, Francophone Canadians, and so on. Scottish Gaelic did not make the cut. Thus, when Gaels moved out of the *Gàidhealtachd*, they were under pressure to leave Gaelic behind, so as not to promote sectarianism in the public square.

[27] For example, see James MacGregor, *Exodus: Part 1: The Redemption: Egypt* (T&T Clark, 1889), 66, 99.

[28] Fry, *Wild Scots*, 239–54.

[29] Holmes, "Language of Eden", 14–17.

Gaelic Presbyterians were no exception. Cape Breton, Canada, is a case in point. Many Presbyterian Gaels migrated to Cape Breton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They brought with them the tradition of open-air communion seasons. Thousands of people would gather to hear sermons and disputations in Gaelic by ordained ministers and lay preachers. Gaelic was not the sole means of communication. Nevertheless, the language of Eden was the most distinctive feature of these communion seasons, and it helped maintain the vibrancy of the faith in a new land. Or, rather, it did until prejudice undermined its credibility.[30] Increasingly, Anglophone ministers complained that open-air communion seasons were unruly, and that having them in Gaelic was sectarian, given that Cape Breton is part of English-speaking Canada. They wanted services to be held indoors, in English, and under their supervision. The neglect of Gaelic in seminary education further reinforced this bias. Many young boys from Gaelic homes lost facility in their native tongue, even as they were encouraged to become polyglots familiar – at least – with English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Gaelic faded away as a strong community language in the early twentieth century, and confessional Calvinism shrank along with it.[31]

An increasing number of Gaels also embraced this rhetoric, throwing off their native language for the sake of social mobility and social respectability. Most Lowland Gaelic congregations, established for Highland migrants, faded away for this reason. In addition to outside pressure from higher authorities to switch to English, many migrants – and their immediate descendants – advocated English in order to succeed more easily in their Lowland surroundings.[32] The same situation took place overseas. The nineteenth-century missionary Alexander Duff regarded English as the language of the future within the British Empire. He therefore abandoned his mother tongue, in the words of the historian James Lachlan MacLeod, 'like a man escaping the ghetto'.[33] He encouraged other non-English speakers to do the same: in India, where his mission work was based, Duff aggressively pushed English-medium schools to create the

[30] Laurie Stanley-Blackwell, *Tokens of Grace: Cape Breton's Open-air Communion Tradition* (Cape Breton University Press, 2006), 77–108.

[31] Stanley-Blackwell, *Tokens of Grace*, 106. See also Tanner, *Celts*, 285–311.

[32] Charles W. J. Withers, *Urban Highlanders: Highland-Lowland Migration and Urban Gaelic Culture, 1700–1900* (Tuckwell Press, 1998), 199–203.

[33] MacLeod, *Second Disruption*, 132.

Anglo-Indian elite yearned for by imperialists such as Thomas Babington Macaulay. In Duff's mind, teaching Indians in their own languages could only go so far, because he perceived them to be ill-adapted for modern use.

Another famous example is the Highlander Donald McNaughton Stuart, a leading figure in Dunedin, New Zealand, a city founded as a religious colony for Free Church Presbyterians.[34] There were many Gaels in Dunedin and the areas surrounding it, yet Stuart was reluctant to devote resources to a Gaelic ministry. He avowed that there were sufficient ministers – including himself – to attend to Gaelic immigrants, and that the Gaelic community would soon be learning English anyway. Of course, many Gaelic speakers continued to agitate for more Gaelic services, despite all this pressure. Nevertheless, these persons did not handle the levers of ecclesial power. By the early twentieth century, the language of Eden had largely faded away within New Zealand Presbyterianism.[35]

Gaelic has survived as a language of faith in the Scottish Highlands to some degree. But even here, it has diminished in importance, even within the traditionalist Free Presbyterian Church. Members nowadays all speak English, and Gaelic is shrinking as a means of everyday communication in the *Gàidhealtachd*. The journalist Marcus Tanner, an afficionado of Celtic languages, notes that the linguistic proficiency of Gaelic congregations is not always high.[36] The language will, of course, survive in these churches for years to come. But it does so as a relic, a homage to the past, rather than as a vibrant community language.

This state of affairs injures both the language and the community that speak it. Confessional Calvinists in these areas can no longer seek shelter within a ruggedly Presbyterian *Gàidhealtachd*. They are more exposed to the progressive influences they decry, and less able to call upon the fruits of the Highland revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to oppose it. The language itself has suffered because churches are some of the last places where Gaelic is used. Scottish Gaelic is now in an ailing state; its future looks bleak. The lack of confessional Calvinists in Scotland makes matters all the worse for it.

[34] Holmes, "Language of Eden", 26.
[35] Holmes, "Language of Eden", 32–35.
[36] Tanner, *Celts*, 41.

Conclusion

This article has argued that linguistic diversity is under greater threat than ever before, and that the Church ought to respond by reaffirming the importance of language issues. Globalisation and modern nationalism have prioritised a handful of languages at the expense of all the others. Social pressure and legal discrimination have ensured widespread linguistic decline. The social consequences are serious, since language is closely tied to how humans conceive of themselves and build communities.

Christianity is no exception. Faith communities have distinguished themselves by, and drawn strength from, the languages they use. Those with minority views, above all, can benefit from worshipping in a different tongue. Interfering with these languages can undermine the strength of faith communities. The article used Scottish Gaelic as a case study. The language was a rallying point for confessional Calvinists from the mid-eighteenth century. It helped them build a strong counterculture based around biblical piety. However, widespread prejudice towards Gaelic led to the decline of the language, and in so doing weakened the support base of confessional Calvinism. Whether one appreciates confessional Calvinism or not is beside the point. What matters is that a vibrant tradition of Christianity has been driven to the social margins, in part because many of its members were discouraged from using Gaelic, a language so tied to faith that it was nicknamed the language of Eden. No church community should face such discrimination.

It is hoped that those who read this article will take these comments to heart and be more attentive to linguistic issues in future.