

# This is my Story This is my Song

Reminiscences and Musings of a Maverick Presbyterian

Alasdair Gordon



Eva Publications  
Hamilton, South Lanarkshire, Scotland  
2013

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God when I will send a famine on the land: not a famine of bread; or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

Amos 8:11 (NRSV)

For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God  
I Peter 4: 17 (NRSV)

Never ask, "Oh why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question

Ecclesiastes 6: 10 (GNB)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 31: 31 (NRSV)

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.

Joel 2:25 (KJV)

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
Foreword	4
Early Years and First Call to Ministry	7
Climbing the Mound	10
The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen	15
Exile and Return	24
Crisis, What Crisis?	30
Dark Clouds	38
Where now?	42
Things ain't what they used to be	49
Be Thou my vision	61
Other Publications by Alasdair Gordon	67

## ***Foreword***

This little booklet is at least semi-autobiographical in that it covers certain aspects of my own life and my various careers. The booklet also looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland, an organisation for which I have both affection and respect but of which I am not uncritical.

I have divided the booklet into two parts:

- Part 1 (This is my Story) deals almost exclusively with my life history and my somewhat ambivalent relationship with the Church of Scotland.
- Part 2 (This is my Song) looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland and how I see things changing and developing in the future.

I was prompted to put pen to paper as I recently passed my seventieth birthday and have come to realise that I am now living in the later chapters of my life.

This booklet is certainly not an academic treatise nor does it pretend to be a work of originality or of great insight. The booklet, especially Part 2, is both unashamedly subjective and opinionative. Some people may well consider it to be highly opinionated.

The reason for including some autobiographical material is to put myself in context. So, I have dug a little bit into my own past. I have done this in summary form and have missed out a considerable amount of what could be tedious and irrelevant details of my personal history. So, it is not a full autobiography.

I have also kept the names of living people to a minimum as I have no wish to embarrass anyone. Responsibility for what is recorded on the following pages rests with me and with me alone.

There are comments in the booklet that some readers could well find upsetting, unsettling or plain downright annoying. I have tried to be honest. I have no wish to offend anyone. I am not setting out to justify myself, score points or settle scores.

If people choose to take offence at anything that I say in the following pages, that is their option and their choice. If I have been unfair or unduly harsh, I am sorry. I hope too that at least some readers will find my comments interesting and stimulating.

We have an established and honourable tradition in the Church of Scotland that principles should not be confused with personalities. I wish to adhere to that tradition.

This booklet was mainly written during the month of July 2013. Subsequent events may cause at least some of my comments to go out of date quite rapidly.

To avoid doubt, I do not consider that my opinion is the last word on any subject.

This is *my* story, this is *my* song!

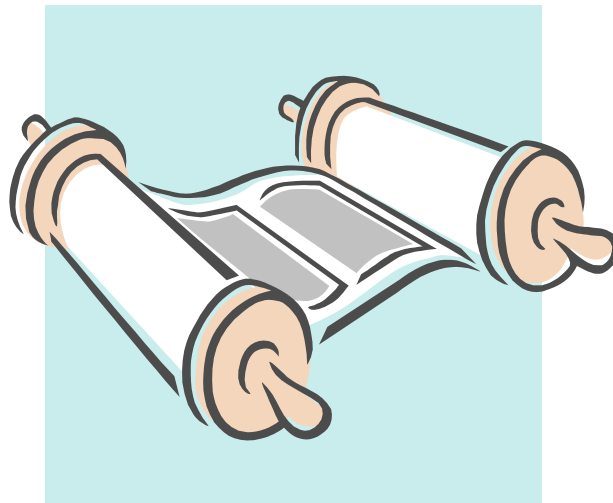
Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton,  
South Lanarkshire  
Scotland

July 2013

# Part 1

## This is my Story



## Early Years and First Call to Ministry

I am an only child which may account for the fact that I do tend to be somewhat self centred and self-opinionated. I would not, in all honesty, describe myself as a natural team player. People who know and are well disposed towards me will probably say that I have always been quite an independent thinker. Those who are less well disposed may consider me somewhat of a maverick or even a loose canon. I certainly have the reputation across the board of being unpredictable. So, although I have a very long connection with the mainstream evangelical tradition in the Church of Scotland, I have never been one who blindly follows any party line. In Kirk politics, I have often taken a pragmatic approach.

I was born in Aberdeen during World War II. In fact, I was born on 20 April 1943, the day before the worst air-raid to hit that city. At the time, my parents were resident in Peterhead (Aberdeenshire) and my father was Principal Classics Master at Peterhead Academy.

I have been connected with the Church of Scotland for just about as long as I can remember. My parents were "Kirk" people, although not fanatical in any way. My father was an elder for most of his adult life. As a teenager and young man, he had attended Torry United Free Church in Aberdeen, then, as now, a strongly evangelical congregation. My mother was brought up in church culture as her father - my grandfather - was an enthusiastic church organist in Peterhead from the age of 18 to the age of 80. My earliest recollection of church was being taken to an Infant Sunday School in Wick, Caithness. At the time my father had recently been appointed the Rector of Wick High School.

When I was aged five, we moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed as Rector of Dunfermline High School. During our twenty year stay in Dunfermline I went to Sunday school at Dunfermline Abbey and, as a young man, was actively involved in the life of another congregation in the town.

In my early teens, I was certainly affected by the "Tell Scotland" movement and the visits of Dr Billy Graham. Dr Graham made a particular point of working with local churches throughout Scotland. It was a time of real refreshing and renewal and its effects were long lasting. Even people who were not card-carrying evangelicals surprised themselves by being caught up in it. There was a young doctor in Dunfermline at the time who

had a severe drink problem. He was on the verge of losing his career, livelihood and family. Without telling anyone, he went to the Billy Graham Crusade in Glasgow and "went forward" in the Kelvin Hall. He experienced a remarkable healing and never touched a drop of alcohol again. In typical Scottish understatement, people in Dunfermline remarked that there must be something in this religion stuff, right enough!

In my mid-teens, partly as a result of visiting Oberammergau in 1959, I seriously thought about converting to Roman Catholicism. I loved the ritual and order as well as the more mystical aspects. I was also very much aware that for Catholic people, their religion seemed to make them happy, whereas the opposite seemed to apply in Presbyterianism. Also, as this was before Vatican II, the Mass was still said in Latin, which greatly appealed to me. Anyway, the Roman Catholic Church has a narrow escape in that this adolescent phase passed quite quickly and I returned to the fold of the Kirk.

At school, I was very interested in religious studies. In my time, the exams for the Highers were held just before the Easter holidays. This left us with a summer term that was filled with interesting and non-examinable activities and projects. I chose on one occasion to go in search of Saint Serf, a Celtic Saint, known as the Apostle of the Ochils. I cycled for miles over several weekends, accompanied by a long-suffering school friend (whose daughter is now the Minister of Dunfermline Abbey). In my sixth year, I wrote a booklet "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History" which was also serialised in the local newspaper. This gained me the school Divinity prize, one of the very few prizes I have ever won throughout my entire life.

I was ordained as an elder of the Church of Scotland at the tender age of 21, which was probably too young.

Both as a child and as a teenager, I was a bit of a day-dreamer. I was often, it seemed, somewhere else. I was very well behaved at school, although by no means academically distinguished. I was told in later life that, both at primary and secondary school level, I had the reputation among my teachers as being the one pupil in the class who was most likely to ask a really awkward question. Some people might say that I have not greatly changed!



I also have had a great interest in hypnosis and altered states of reality since I was schoolboy. I see no problem with hypnosis being used in Christian circles. I see great value in the use of Christian meditation. It may seem odd for someone who is known to be in the evangelical tradition of the Church of Scotland to be somewhat of a mystic. I am sorry if I don't fit the template. As I have already said, I do not always tow the party line.

I originally took a degree in law from Edinburgh University. In those days, the Law Faculty was really easy to enter, even with my mere minimum entrance group of Highers. I enjoyed the course well enough, although my heart was not entirely in it. I studied harder than I needed to as I had rather low self esteem when it came to academic matters and did not consider myself particularly bright. At school, as I have indicated, I had not been the sharpest knife in the box.

After graduation, I served the traditional two year law apprenticeship with an Edinburgh firm of solicitors. It was valuable experience but my heart was even less in legal practice than it had been in legal study. During this time I decided that I wanted to test my call to the ministry of the Church of Scotland.

For the first time in my adult life, I felt really thrilled and excited.

My destiny was calling me. My life's work was beginning to open up before me; or so it seemed.

## Climbing the Mound

There were a number of formalities to go through to be recognised as a candidate for ministry. I had to complete the usual application form, of course. In those far-off days, there was no Selection School for ministry candidates. Instead, I had to present myself in my uncomfortable best suit before a roomful of the great and the good in the Church of Scotland Offices at 121 George Street in Edinburgh. They were all men. There were some ministers and senior elders plus a number of academics, who (perfectly graciously) grilled me for the best part of an hour.

One member of the panel was Professor Norman Porteous, the Principal of New College, whom I liked immediately. Though he looked somewhat austere, he had a twinkle in eye and gave me the impression of someone who was able to carry his considerable scholarship surprisingly lightly.

Professor Porteous encouraged me - in fact, virtually instructed me there and then - to sit the New College Bursary Competition. When I said I did not think I was of sufficient academic calibre, he told me not to put myself down and that the Faculty of Divinity took a very kind view of anyone who attempted the Competition. To cut a long story short, I did attempt it. Part of the exercise involved writing screeds of essay questions on subjects I knew next to nothing about. Being somewhat self-opinionated, this was not such a major challenge as I had anticipated. I came in fourth in order of merit out of five candidates and was awarded the Buchanan Bursary of just over £40 a year, which bought a great deal more in 1966 than it would today. It proved to be very welcome over my three years of study.

Before that, there was the formal acceptance by the Church of Scotland as a candidate in training for the ministry plus the required endorsement by the Presbytery of Dunfermline and Kinross.

Before entering New College, I also had to attempt to master the elements of New Testament Greek in my spare time and pass a prescribed exam. I had studied a little (and I mean "a little") classical Greek at school before dropping the subject like a hot brick so at least I knew the alphabet, if nothing else. In spite of some anxiety, I did manage to pass the exam and, to my surprise, New Testament Greek actually became one of my strong subjects.

We also were required to sit a pre-entry exam, set on behalf of the Church of Scotland, on certain books of the Bible. So, even before I arrived at New College, I felt that I had been well and truly examined.

There were also Church of Scotland exams on the Bible at the beginning of our second and third years of study. Even today, many people seem to assume that the purpose of a Divinity course is to teach students the Bible. In fact, it was assumed that we student were all familiar with Scripture before darkening the door of New College. And the Church of Scotland just wanted to make sure that we were! To fail any of the Bible exams was considered somewhat of a disgrace. I know of one student who did. He kept it very quiet and, when the re-sit came round, took himself off to attempt it at Trinity College, Glasgow!

I had chosen to attend New College because it was nearest to my parents' home in Dunfermline and because I was already a graduate of Edinburgh University. The twin towers of New College are a familiar landmark on the Mound in the Edinburgh. The College was built in 1846 as the nucleus of a new university that was to be set up by the recently formed, ambitious and thrusting Free Church of Scotland. Originally the plan was to found a new university. There were to have been three quadrangles but, as it happened, only one was ever built. The scheme was, even by Free Church standards, over-ambitious. The distinguished architect, William Playfair, had envisaged a building in the classical style but the Free Kirk was having none of such apparent paganism. The result was a mixture of fake Tudor and Gothic.

At the time when I attended New College, surprisingly little had actually changed internally in more than 100 years. The lecture rooms were spacious and well proportioned though somewhat tired in appearance. The antiquated central heating system always seemed to be struggling in some parts of the building. Life at New College was fairly Spartan. There was also a certain degree of "maleness" about the College at that time. Female students were very much in the minority, across the board. There was only one "loo" for women, half way up one of William Playfair's twin towers.

A considerable proportion of the BD students were candidates for the Church of Scotland ministry which, at that time, was only open to men. These candidates included a high proportion of younger men, liker myself, in their twenties. There were also a few in their thirties and forties. The College was further enriched by having BD students for ministry in traditions other than the Church of Scotland, both from the United

Kingdom and further afield. In addition, there was a good cohort of PhD students. Many were from the USA. Religious Studies were also available as components of an Arts degree but, at that time, were taught in the main University and not in New College.

Even in the 1960s, most of the academic staff at New College had some record of service in the ministry of the Church of Scotland although that was beginning to change even by the time I graduated in 1969.

By and large, my time at New College passed happily enough. Although I was still a very young man, I now had the confidence of having already achieved one degree (something I had thought in my schooldays might never happen) and I was no longer a raw school leaver. I realised for the first time that possibly I was reasonable bright. I encountered some very interesting people, both staff and students, who both encouraged and challenged my faith.

At the end of my first year of divinity studies, I accepted a voluntary three month summer student assistantship at the linked charge of Altnaharra and Farr in the Presbytery of Sutherland. It was a useful introduction to the Highland aspects of the Church of Scotland which, culturally seemed a hundred miles away from what I was accustomed to as a town and city boy.

During my student days at New College, I also undertook student assistantships. In my second year, I was assigned to Morningside Parish Church where Professor Porteous, the Principal of New College, was a member. So, occasionally I had to preach to the Principal. He was always very gracious although I used to wonder what he actually thought. In my final year I was attached to Broughton Place Church on the edge of the New Town of Edinburgh. One prominent member of that congregation was one of the judges in the Court of Session. I used to wonder whether he thought I argued my case well, or not!

By the time I began my second year at New College, I felt confident and comfortable in my theological position as a "main stream" Church of Scotland evangelical. I was not and never have been what is commonly called a fundamentalist. I believed - and I still believe - that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world and that the Bible is the Word of God. I prefer not to press matters too much further. In Scotland we believe in

using a good modicum of common sense and I believe that this approach can be - and has been - brought to our interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Possibly because of my legal training, I enjoyed systematic and dogmatic theology because it seemed to make sense and to hold together. I know men and women who have less of an attachment to Scripture and doctrine generally than I have and who are certainly just as good Christians as the next. To me, anyone who believes in Jesus Christ is potentially my brother or sister, even if we take up different positions on some areas of theological interpretation.

In my second year of study, I decided that I would take the Honours rather than the Ordinary BD degree and that I would specialise in the New Testament. It was, for me, a close call. I was greatly attracted to Christian Dogmatics and valued being taught by the powerful lectures of Professor Tom Torrance. However, I felt that I did not have a sufficient background in philosophy, so I opted for New Testament.

I remember with appreciation the personal support of Rev Robin Barbour, MC, Senior Lecturer (later a Professor at Aberdeen) in New Testament who always had a genuine pastoral concern for his students. I also had to choose one elective speciality which, in my case was textual criticism. I discovered that I was the first student in about ten years to have chosen this subject. The choice meant that I had regular one-to-one seminars with Rev Dr Ian Moir, who was always a scholar and gentleman and with whom I kept in regular touch after I left New College. He could look at the most obscure and illegible ancient document and read it with as much ease as one might read a newspaper.

I was also particularly fortunate in being able to attend the seminars offered by Professor James S Stewart, still a much respected and charismatic figure. I also remember with affection, the very thorough seminars on the Acts of the Apostles and I Peter provided by the patriarchal Dr Alan Barr from the United Free Church of Scotland.

During my second and third years, I stayed in the New College Residence on Mound Place, immediately next to New College. The Residence was built on the site of a house occupied by Mary of Guise, when she was Regent of Scotland. It commands the most fantastic view over Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth, Fife and far beyond. The building dated from the earlier part of the nineteenth century and was literally creaking at the seams. The

plumbing was antiquated and the electrics decidedly dodgy. The Residence was almost entirely populated by Divinity students and we enjoyed great fellowship, sharing our aspirations, hopes and fears, to say nothing of many good laughs. The Residence in my time was under the supervision of the redoubtable Miss Mackenzie, whom we men-folk liked, respected and sometimes even feared!

I left New College in 1969 with a Second Class Honours degree in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology.

It was an exciting time.

## The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen

I was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Edinburgh shortly before graduating in 1969.

My first steps into real ministry were taken at the former Church Extension charge of Aberdeen: Garthdee where I served for a year as a probationer assistant. Garthdee was a settled congregation set in the heart of one of the "better" post-war council housing schemes. I was very fortunate in my time there. It was a busy charge and the minister, Rev W P Drummond was a faithful and conscientious pastor with a visiting list that would make many ministers groan.

Mr Drummond gave me the opportunity to take part in all aspects of parish life. At no time did he "dump" tasks on me. I heard from some of my contemporaries that they were much less favourably treated in their assistantships. I have always been grateful to Mr Drummond for the gracious way in which he handled our relationship. In stature, he was a small man, which meant that he was sometimes underestimated. In the things that matter, he was a big man - and also big-hearted. I was sorry that he only lived for a short time after his well deserved retirement.

When my probationary year at Garthdee came to an end, I was eligible to be called to my first charge. This was both an exciting and stressful part of my life. I was not yet married and, at that time, this was a considerable disadvantage. Many congregations still expected the minister's wife to adopt a particular role, including teaching in the Sunday School, presiding over the Guild and generally being a supplier and distributor of bounty and good works. In addition, it was expected that she would maintain the manse like a new pin and provide a 24-hour unpaid administrative and messaging service for the minister.

There were plenty of vacancies at the time although not all that many congregations were interested in a young bachelor looking for his first charge. Yet, things moved quite quickly. I was ordained and inducted into the newly linked rural charge of Fintray with Kinellar & Blackburn ("FKB") on the edge of the Presbytery of Aberdeen in 1970. The vacancy committee told me that the congregations both wanted change and were looking for a young man, like me, to stir things up a bit. I am sure the committee members meant what they said, but it became clear to me at an early stage that they were not speaking for the congregations as a whole. It was

not long before I found that the situation on the ground was rather different.

There were two services each Sunday morning - one at Fintray at 10.30 am and the second service, three miles away, at Kinellar & Blackburn at 11.45 am. This arrangement was all right in summer - although the timing was a little tight - but it was a source of anxiety in winter when the narrow road up the hill to Kinellar Church could be icy and dangerous. Even getting out of the manse, with its long pot-holed drive, could be nerve racking.

Fintray Parish Church was constructed around 1821 to the design of a distinguished Aberdeen architect John Smith. It is a plain and quite handsome building, but far too big for the tiny congregation (20 was a good turn-out) who tended to huddle themselves together in the two side aisles. The result was that when I stood up on Sunday morning, I was mostly speaking to rows of empty pews. I found this both artificial and dispiriting. However, any suggestions that folks might move into the centre area and that I might come down from the very high pulpit were firmly rejected. I was told in no uncertain terms that people would rather not come than move "their" seats. There is no point in pursuing a lost cause and I soon gave up trying to do anything differently.

With honourable exceptions, I found that Fintray, as a congregation, was quite a hard furrow to plough. In spite of the assurances that the congregation wanted change, the opposite was clearly the case, as illustrated by my futile attempt to review the seating arrangements. By and large, the small number of people who attended generally wanted the *status quo* to continue unchallenged. There was immediate resistance to any suggestion that even the smallest thing could ever be done differently. In the popular view, a major part of my role was to be permanently grateful to the congregation for allowing me to be their minister and for the fact that anyone even bothered to turn up on Sunday. It did not seem to occur to many people in the congregation that I could have done with some support and occasional encouragement.

Curiously, the vast majority of the congregation - i.e. those who seldom or never attended or gave any financial support - were equally unwilling to change in any way. They wanted the church to be there for them if and when they might need the ordinances of religion on the assumption that everything would be just as it had been in the time of their grandparents. Even more curious was the fact that many of those nominal members who



were so resistant to change were also among the most vocal critics of all aspects of the church as it was.

A small number of the Fintray elders - and I stress that it was a minority - started what I could only describe as a whispering campaign to ridicule and criticise everything about my ministry. I was constantly compared critically with all the previous ministers who, it seems, had been possessed only of virtues and were without any kind of fault. This grew very wearying.

I remember well that I wrote and published a short history of Fintray Parish Church. It was received in total silence and no one even acknowledged its existence. In 1971, I suggested that it might be appropriate if, in some way, we could mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building of the present church. This was summarily rejected as unnecessary. Even the suggestion that we might obtain a Church notice board to advertise the service times, was also rejected out of hand. That was fairly typical.

Of course, there are always two sides to any story. I am absolutely sure that there were faults on my side. None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes and misjudge situations. Possibly, because I was a young man I was too impatient and maybe somewhat brash. I wanted to make things change and for the church to move forward and possibly I expected too much too soon. Maybe I did not fully understand country ways. But I did not deserve the treatment meted out to me by some of the people at Fintray.

I want to balance this by reminding myself that there were some ordinary folks in the congregation who were unfailingly pleasant and appreciative. It was certainly not all negative and all of life's experiences surely have something to teach us. On the positive side, I remember that a very successful and encouraging Children's Mission was carried out in the parish by David Tate of the Scottish Evangelistic Council in 1973 at my invitation.

The situation was rather different in Kinellar & Blackburn. The place of worship - Kinellar Parish Church - was a small, pleasant and unpretentious building, completed in 1801 but built on a very ancient Christian site. There was a more enthusiastic, though small, congregation and, in contrast with Fintray, people were generally much more open and did genuinely want to take the church forward. We seemed, however, to be constantly hampered

by lack of funds and resources. Kinellar is the smallest rural parish in Aberdeenshire and much of it is not strictly rural. The village of Blackburn, the main centre of population, included some council housing. Since my time, the village has greatly increased in size as a result of private housing developments. By and large, my relations with the Kinellar & Blackburn people were very positive and they were, on the whole, much easier for me to minister to than their neighbours in Fintray on the other side of the River Don.

In 1972, some young folks from the neighbouring parish of Newhills provided a week of mission in Kinellar & Blackburn which was a real time of encouragement and refreshment. The young folk were also supported by one or two members of Aberdeen University Christian Union, one of whom was Carole Morton, later to become my wife!

I was extremely sorry to learn that Kinellar Parish Church has ceased to be a place of worship and that this lovely little church is now in a semi-derelict condition.

The manse for the linked charge (the former manse of Fintray) was not exactly comfortable. It was one of several almost identical manses built in the north east to the design of the Aberdeen architect William Smith who also built Balmoral Castle for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. It was clearly designed for the days when ministers usually had large families and a fleet of servants. The rooms were large and difficult to heat. The building was damp and had suffered from years of virtual neglect.

Living in the manse over the winter was a feat of endurance, especially with the power-cuts of the 1970s. When, after a few years, some people took pity on me and decided to install central heating, the oil crisis of the time caused the price of heating fuel to sky-rocket and the cost of central heating even part of the house became prohibitive. I well remember how one member of the Fintray congregation - the wife of an elder - never missed an opportunity to tell me how comfortably well off and highly paid I was!

During my time at FKB I made many interesting contacts. I struck up some friendships and especially so with Rev David Searle and his wife Lorna at the neighbouring parish of Newhills. David and Lorna were very tolerant of me and put up with a great deal. It left a considerable gap in my life when

David was called to be minister of Larbert Old Parish Church. I missed their understanding and support.

I also turned my hand to writing and published a number of articles and booklets. I was a popular speaker at Guild and similar meetings throughout the Presbytery of Aberdeen. I also struck up a strange, if brief, friendship with the new Professor of Practical Theology at Christ's College, Rev Ian Pitt-Watson.

I say "strange" because I do not think when we first met that we took an instant liking to one another. I thought that he was rather intense and far too academic for my comfort. But, we seemed to grow on one another and he gradually brought me in to help him with some of his Practical Theology classes. I really liked and respect Ian and, at one stage, I was in his confidence over a personal issue that was troubling him. I was pleased for him when he was appointed as a Professor at the prestigious Fuller Theological Seminary at Pasadena, California. I am sorry that thereafter we lost touch. We did not have the advantage of email in those far off days!

I do believe that people cross our paths for a purpose. We always have something to learn from them and we also have something to teach them. We often do not see this at the time. It is part of the mystery of providence.

In 1974, I married Carole Morton, an Aberdeen psychology graduate from Hamilton and several years younger than me. We were married in Carole's own church, Gilcomston South, Aberdeen by the minister, the redoubtable Rev William Still. David Searle was my best man. Carole went on to have a successful career in further education teaching before moving over to the University of Aberdeen as a Lecturer in Education. We have no children and we are still happily married.

Since 1972, I had been part of the "Crieff Fellowship" an informal gathering of ministers hand-picked by Mr Still who met occasionally for fellowship, discussion and teaching at Crieff Hydro.. This gave me a valuable opportunity to meet a number of very interesting fellow ministers including James Philip (whom I already knew), George Philip, Eric Alexander, Sandy Tait and Tom Swanson.

From quite early in my time at FKB, I became involved in Presbytery committees. At the time, Aberdeen Presbytery contained 82 charges - stretching from Stonehaven in the south and almost as far as Peterhead to the north - and was an interesting mixture of city and rural charges. Somewhat to my surprise, in 1974 I was appointed Assistant Presbytery Clerk, which meant that I actually acted as Presbytery Clerk during the year when the much respected holder of the post, Rev John Mowat was moderator of Presbytery.

With my legal background I enjoyed the procedural aspects of the Clerkship and the small amount of church law involved. Much more rewarding were the many pastoral opportunities such as encouraging ministers and elders, troubleshooting misunderstandings in congregations, providing a shoulder to cry on and sometimes even (dare I say it?) suffering fools gladly. It was a ministry in its own right and like all ministries much of its most useful work was hidden and secret. Although I can be both outspoken and self-opinionated, people have been kind enough to tell me that I can also be a good listener and mediator.

John Mowat could not have been more encouraging or supportive. Although my appointment as Assistant Clerk was initially for one year only, there was always an unspoken hope and expectation that I might succeed Mr Mowat as Clerk when he retired. Although no one has yet been born who pleases everybody, it is fair to say that my tenure as Assistant Clerk was popular. I fell into the post easily and I was known to be approachable and fair-minded. The fact that I was a "known" evangelical was neither an advantage nor a handicap. I adopted my usual pragmatic practice of perceiving all the ministers, elders and church members whom I met or with whom I corresponded as my brothers and sisters in Christ. There was no question in my mind of some being more equal than others.

But there was a problem. The local authority boundaries were due to be realigned at the end of 1976. The General Assembly had decided that it would be in the interests of the Church of Scotland to ensure that Presbytery and local authority boundaries coincided. Aberdeen Presbytery had been a large and diverse Presbytery, especially since it had absorbed the former rural Presbytery of Ellon earlier in the century. Under the proposed adjustments, most of the rural charges were to be disjoined and added to new re-formed Presbyteries. FKB was to be added to the new Gordon Presbytery. Clearly, I could not be Clerk to Aberdeen Presbytery if I lived in and ministered in another Presbytery.

Aberdeen Presbytery wanted me to fill the pending vacancy of Clerk. This, of course, was flattering and, to be honest, I allowed myself to be flattered. To cut a long story short, I was offered a new combined post that would allow me to continue having some kind of pastoral ministry and also undertake the duties of Clerk in what was a reduced but still large Presbytery with just over 50 charges. It should also be pointed out that I had absolutely no clerical support as Clerk. I had to do everything from answering the phone and buying the stamps to arranging the formal meetings and inductions and the 101 other duties that go with the territory.

So, with a certain degree of relief, I demitted FKB at the end of 1975 and took up a post of 50% Presbytery Clerk and 50% Associate Minister at the Langstane Kirk, a newly united charge of nearly 2,000 members situated in a rather splendid Victorian Gothic building on Union Street in the heart of the City of Aberdeen. (I may say that this congregation is now dissolved and the building has become a pub.).

Well, the Good Book tells us that we cannot serve two masters and this turned out to be true. Within a short time, I was trying to hold down the equivalent of two 75% jobs and the Langstane Kirk office bearers were making noises about how expensive it was having an additional minister. I also got the impression - the impression - from some quarters that I was considered as really not quite "good enough" for a congregation of the high "status" of the Langstane Kirk, whose previous minister had been Moderator of the General Assembly. How are the mighty fallen!

However, my time at Langstane was certainly not without encouragements. One elderly lady, whom I remember well, as I visited her quite regularly, was a Miss Cox. She was the only daughter of the Rev James T Cox, DD, formerly Clerk to the Presbytery of Aberdeen and Principal Clerk to the General Assembly. Older ministers and elders will remember that he was the editor of the book "Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland", better known simply as "Cox."

The fact that I was her father's (unworthy) successor obviously intrigued her, but there was another aspect of me that seem to catch her attention even more. She had a considerable personal interest in spiritual healing (in a Christian context) and told me more than once that I should consider developing a healing ministry. Her reasoning seemed (to me) to be highly subjective. She told me that I had a nice smile and gentle manner and that

she could see something in my soul. (Little did she know how abrasive and dismissive I can be in some circumstances?) I did not take much heed at the time but I have often gone back to her words and thought about them. Later - much later - I would partly develop that aspect of myself, although somewhat covertly.

I loved being Presbytery Clerk and I was popular and respected in that post, despite my relative youthfulness. I think I did quite a good job. However, after only 18 months I had little choice but to move on, as the combined post was no longer financially viable. That was a very real disappointment to me but I did not want in any way to outstay my welcome (such as it had been) in the Langstane Kirk.

I was then appointed minister at the Church Extension Charge of Aberdeen: Summerhill. There had been some problems there, with factions and infighting in the congregation. The Church of Scotland Home Board, the Church and Ministry Department and Aberdeen Presbytery all thought that I was the "right man" for this charge. However, it was a case of "out of the frying pan into the fire." Given the wisdom and benefit of hindsight, I was probably the wrong minister for that congregation and they were the wrong congregation for me. In fairness to myself, I did manage to bring the congregation together again and the in-fighting stopped.

At first, Summerhill actually seemed a good move until the true picture began to emerge. The building, which is architecturally interesting, had been put up in the 1960s. In order to save money, the Church of Scotland Home Board had knocked one third off the original costs, with the result that the building though modern and superficially attractive was cheap and gimcrack in construction. The building was really just a poor imitation of what it should have been.

It was a nightmare to heat, being virtually a collection of drafts and leaks. On a wet Sunday, buckets had to be put in place all over the main sanctuary to catch the drips from the failing flat roof. Even to put these relatively new buildings into a wind and water-tight condition was going to cost eye-watering amounts of money which the congregation simply did not have.

I felt that I had been left holding the baby. Everyone seemed to have unreasonable expectations of what I could accomplish. The state of the

building had certainly not been disclosed to me at the time of my appointment.

After three years and a half years, I had had enough and demitted the charge. I was virtually burned out. It was a dreadful time. I felt that I had been a complete failure and had let everybody down. I also felt that the Kirk had let me down.

For several years after I left Summerhill, I regularly experienced migraine headaches, from which I had not previously suffered. Invariably, they occurred on Sundays.

It was a major bereavement to have lost my ministry and, with it, my vocation.

It is loss from which I have never fully recovered.

## Exile and Return

I was very fortunate indeed to obtain an administrative post with Voluntary Service Aberdeen a large and diverse local charity where I spent nearly ten very happy years just being ordinary. For me, going into secular employment was the beginning of a long healing process. The work was well within my competence and I gladly took on a higher and more responsible work load. I was soon promoted and ended up in a position of responsibility and trust. The people with whom I worked were friendly and cooperative.

I had assumed that when I left Summerhill, I would have the advantage of understanding and support from fellow evangelicals but, with honourable exceptions, this was not so. Curiously enough, I received far more personal support and good wishes from fellow ministers and elders who I would have categorised as more "liberal" in their theology. It is indeed a funny old world.

The church where Carole and I had married in 1974, Gilcomston South, by and large gave us the cold shoulder (again, with honourable exceptions). By leaving ministry, I had let the side down, was the very clear message. Maybe sooner or later I might come to my senses. Until I did, I would remain *persona non grata*. And, in fact, that is what I have remained. I bear them no grudges and that is now behind me. Let the dead bury their dead.

Mr Still himself certainly did not take this attitude. Indeed he was very kind and understanding. He was quite hurt, I think, when I ceased attending his church, but he did understand. I never went back to Gilcomston South but I am glad that, many years later, I wrote to Mr Still to assure him that he and I had no unfinished business.

Mr Still and I had actually published a small book in joint names in 1977 on the Hope of Israel. I had not always agreed with Mr Still on every issue. I am too much of an individual to do that with anyone. Nevertheless, I had regarded him as a father in God and held him in great esteem. In my mind there is no doubt that he was the Lord's anointed. He died in 1997, a couple of months after I had written to him. I decided not to attend his funeral as I had - and have - absolutely no wish to re-enter Gilcomston South Church. However, I watched his remains being placed into the hearse at the end of the service from the other side of Union Street. I had paid my respects and it was the right thing to do.



Carole and I had tried a few other churches in Aberdeen but my angry and negative feelings at that time towards the Church of Scotland - to say nothing of my own feelings of failure and guilt - kept getting in the way. Somewhat to our surprise, we landed up attending the local Elim Pentecostal Church. We were made very welcome by the congregation and people did not ask a whole lot of intrusive questions. This little fellowship truly was for me, a place of refreshing, like the Palms of Elim in the Old Testament.

For someone as Scottish, conventional and reserved as I am, the choice of this kind of fellowship must have seemed an odd one. Yet I found classical Pentecostalism to be quite gentle and liberating. The prejudiced stereotype of Pentecostal churches being populated by crazed wild-eyed people dancing in the aisles or swinging from the chandeliers could not have been further from the truth. Services were conducted decently and in order.

In case anyone is interested, I will say that I can speak in tongues although I would never do so in a way which might embarrass anyone. My time in the Pentecostal fellowship also did reignite my somewhat vague interest in spiritual healing.

The pastor and I became friendly and I gradually started to take part in a few of the services, moving on to quite regular preaching. To my surprise, people in the Elim congregation warmed to my somewhat laid-back style of speaking. All was going really well until the church was rent apart by the revelation of a sexual scandal involving the pastor and a member of the congregation. He had to leave. His leaving the ministry brought to the surface a whole lot of forgotten issues for me. There were also now some quite bitter divisions in the congregation as to future direction.

Whilst I did not in any way condone the pastor's behaviour, I was one of the very few people who continued to visit him and his wife. I supported him on a personal and non-judgmental level. I did not ask him any questions and accepted only what he wanted to share with me. I helped him too when it came to looking for a secular job in which, fortunately, he was successful.

But "things" for me were never the same again in the congregation. A new pastor was appointed and he was approachable, friendly and supportive. Yet someone Carole and I never settled down again into the Elim fellowship. Spiritually, it seemed as though I had suffered another major setback.

In 1982, after my father died, Carole and I bought my parents' house in Milltimber and moved out of our small flat in the city centre. There is a thriving and prosperous independent church a couple of streets away. We decided to give it a try and indeed we went to services there regularly for a number of years. The original church was founded mainly by Brethren people. I found the culture just a bit oppressive and controlling and very much into the prosperity "gospel", although there were - and are - some lovely and genuine people who worship there. Carole offered her services as a counsellor (in which she is well qualified and experienced) but that was ignored. I did not care for their patronising attitude to women. The pastor at the time certainly did not warm to me. Maybe he found me somewhat threatening. Eventually, we just stopped going. I am sorry to say that we did not worship regularly anywhere else for a number of years.

Meanwhile, after nearly happy ten years at Voluntary Service Aberdeen, I took up a post of Lecturer in Business Studies, specialising in Law, at Aberdeen College. I also undertook the in-service further education teacher training at Jordanhill College in Glasgow. I enjoyed my time of teaching, especially the interaction with the students. I did reasonably well, including the publication of three student textbooks by a reputable publishing house. I had very mixed feelings when, at age 55, I was given early retirement.

After a few months of temporary employment with the civil service (an education in itself!), I took up an appointment as Personal Development Tutor at a Vocational Training Centre for people recovering from brain injury. In other words, I became somewhat of a self-help guru, which I rather liked. I stayed there for twelve years until I retired at the age of 68.

During that time I clocked up (mainly in my own time and at my own expense) a good number of new qualifications, including Master Practitioner of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). There was a standing joke among colleagues that I have so many letters after my name, that I cannot remember what some of them stand for. (Not quite true!)

Interacting with and encouraging people who have brain injury was a demanding job and some of the clients were certainly "challenging" - and I enjoyed the challenge. The centre was run on a shoestring and I believe that it has done a good job often with staff that were poorly paid and

given little encouragement by the centre's parent body, which will remain nameless and with which I was much less impressed.

During my latter years in Aberdeen I lived a more or less secular life and did not regularly attend any Church. I certainly still believed strongly in the integrity of the Christian Gospel: but there was also quite a lot of negative energy still hanging around. I had developed a kind of love-hate relationship with the Church of Scotland. Rightly or wrongly, I felt that the Kirk had let me down and had failed to support me on several important occasions in my life. At the same time, I retained a certain feeling of guilt at having left full-time ministry.

In spite of my negativity, I never broke the tie with the Church of Scotland and - even though I often worshipped elsewhere or nowhere - I hung on assiduously to my "status" as an ordained minister through the Presbytery of Aberdeen. Fortunately, in recent years my attitude to the Kirk has moved in a much more positive direction. I longed for some way to return to active participation in church life but somehow could not find that opportunity in Aberdeen.

Carole's home town is Hamilton in South Lanarkshire and her mother lived in and around the town all of her life. We had been very regular visitors to Hamilton for nearly forty years and liked it. We thought that we might move house to Hamilton on our retirement to give more support to Carole's mother. Carole was given the offer of early retirement from the University in 2011 and took it. I decided to retire as well, although I had originally planned to continue until my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013.

Just as we were in the process of retiring, Mrs Morton had a fall and died in hospital six weeks later. So, there was no longer any obvious reason to come to Hamilton. However, to cut a very long story short, we decided to come anyway. We both felt that there was too much personal baggage in Aberdeen and we were attracted by the idea of retiring to somewhere fresh but not entirely unknown.

We now live in a pleasant and old established residential street, near to the centre of the town of Hamilton. Our house is actually the lower half of what used to be the Episcopal Rectory.

Since coming to Hamilton, I have gladly linked up again with the Kirk in an active sense and I am a member of the Presbytery of Hamilton. To me this

has been a real process of healing and, although I am aware that the Church of Scotland is not without its faults, I am more pleased than I can say to have "come home" again.

Carole and I both attend Hamilton Old Parish Church which is within easy walking distance of where we live and, to my surprise, I have joined the choir. I have been made very welcome. The church is well attended and enthusiastic and, at the moment, all goes well.

But when I look round and see that nearly all the heads in the congregation are grey, I do wonder how "things" will be in 20 years time.

I have not made my ministerial status a secret in Hamilton but neither have I made it widely known. I did not wish to be stereotyped and to have a set of expectations imposed on me. I have had too much of that in the past.

I do not where God will lead me in this latter part of my life. I am open to possibilities.

As I have got older, I have become more interested again with matters of spiritual healing. I am a Reiki Master and Teacher and occasionally operate distance healing. Some Christians will disapprove of this but I take the view that the earth and all its fullness is the Lord's.

So much for me and where I have come from: in Part 2, I want to turn my attention to less personal and much more important issues.

## Part 2

# This is my Song



## **Crisis, What Crisis?**

People of my age and older will remember Prime Minister James Callaghan uttering these words on his return to the United Kingdom in the midst of a petrol crisis (if that is what it was!).

So, is the Church of Scotland currently in a crisis? (I am writing this in the summer of 2013) Let's look at some of the evidence for and against.

For the past few decades there has been a steady decline in membership and the number of churches. In my own native Aberdeen, the city centre now looks more like Moscow in the days of the Cold War, with a depressingly high number of closed church buildings.

Until I was given a seat in the Presbytery of Hamilton in 2012 my entire ministry had taken place in Aberdeen. When I look at the edition of the Aberdeen Presbytery calendar that was in use when I was Clerk and then compare it with today's edition, I am shocked at just how much the visible church has shrunk in that city.

Apart from a growth in small independent and charismatic fellowships, there is almost nothing but retrenchment in churches throughout Scotland. Even churches that had large, strong and well attended congregations (like the Langstane Kirk that I mentioned earlier) have shrunk and disappeared without trace.

So, what has gone wrong? Of course, if I actually knew all the answers, I would be in great demand. All I can do is contribute to the ongoing debate.

When I first entered ministry in 1969, there was a real spirit of optimism, especially among the new breed of younger evangelical ministers. If we remained faithful to Jesus Christ and proclaimed the Gospel, God would indeed refresh and revive the Church of Scotland. It was a strategy that could not fail, or so we thought. Yet the reality has been different. I have seen many thoughtful, intelligent and well balanced men who have faithfully and graciously preached the Gospel and pastored their flocks. Yet, many of them have seen surprisingly little actual growth. Sometimes, if the truth be told, there has been no growth.

Whilst there are congregations whose memberships have grown, in practice this has often been at the expense of others. It is as though the same people are continually recycled through the church system.

Of course, there have been major sociological changes. Family life is different and society is much more individualistic. Due to the internet, the world is a smaller place. Expectations are also very different. "Church" for many people has a somewhat negative connotation. In the past, people who were not believers were generally prepared to live and let live. Now, there is far more open hostility from secularists. An increasing number of weddings and funerals are being conducted by secular or humanist celebrants without the perceived need for any religious input. When filling in forms, many people now tick the box "No Religion" as a matter of course.

I remember reading a rather challenging book some years ago titled *The Gagging of God* by Gavin Reid. Certainly God seems to be increasingly gagged in modern Scotland. My own University (Edinburgh) no longer includes a prayer at the start of a graduation ceremony. Local authorities who are generally old-maidish in their political correctness routinely ban the use of such terms as "Christmas" like latter day Scrooges. The Boy Scouts, of which I was a member throughout my school days, have recently removed the need for any reference to duty to God.

The ostensible reason for such change is the need to avoid offending people of other faiths in today's diverse society. My perception is that people of other faiths are not in the least offended by Christian practices or festivals. It is the secularists who now seem to both take centre stage and call the tune. To them, the secular view is the only correct way of thinking and they will often defend it with an anger and ferocity that can only be described as a form of fundamentalism. Secularists now seem to have a constitutional right not to have any opportunity to be offended by even the slightest whiff of religion anywhere. Christians, on the other hand, can apparently be called for everything and generally rubbished and ridiculed with impunity.

The disgraceful episodes of child abuse by some clergy - even though most of it has taken place in the Roman Catholic Church - unfortunately has by association tainted everyone in the Christian church. It has reduced the moral authority of the wider church. The recently revealed double standard

of a senior cleric in the Catholic Church in Scotland has also had a knock-on effect

The current furore over gay ministers and gay marriage has shown just how far the church is out of kilter with society in general. It seems, in popular perception that the church is generally dragging along at least 50 years behind public opinion.

There was a time - not so very long - when, in Scotland, the ministry was one of the most highly regarded of professions. The same certainly cannot be said today. More often it is the target of ridicule or even contempt. The ministry is also an increasingly ageing profession. At the time of writing there are only three ministers in the Church of Scotland under the age of 30 and the average age of candidates for the ministry (who are few and far between) is 46.

Now, it can be validly argued that it is not the role of the church to follow every whim of society. Saint Paul explicitly warns us not to be conformed to this world. Yet, the other side of the coin is that in its anxiety not to compromise with worldly values, the church forgets how to accommodate itself to the world.

If we look at the life of Jesus, we see someone who never compromised himself in any way yet who constantly accommodated himself to the people whom he met, even to their sinfulness. His critics never lost an opportunity to point out that he ate and drank with publicans and sinners. Looking round the town in which I have lived for only a year, I already have a mental list of places I wouldn't want to be seen dead in, mainly pubs and night clubs. Yet, I have the distinctly uncomfortable feeling that, if Jesus walked the earth today, he would go first to these very places. I find that a very disturbing and highly inconvenient thought.

The church is certainly capable of accommodating. Even during the so-called swinging sixties, it was considered rather shocking for an unmarried couple to live together. Now, it is almost the norm, even among Christians, that couples live together and sometimes even have children before they get married. It is not that the church has given approval to this. This would be compromise. It simply means that it has accommodated itself to the people whom it serves which, to me, is a Christ like thing to do.



Another example of accommodating is the dedication of infants. Although I cannot claim responsibility for this innovation, I remember suggesting the possibility in the then recently created *Ministers' Forum* (a newsletter for ministers) in 1979 (issue 18) that ministers who felt that they could not offer full baptism to children of non-members, could offer a service of dedication (sometimes known as a "dry christening") instead, so as to avoid the clear negative impression that somehow God was not prepared to bless their children. I was surprised at the time that this suggestion was quite well received and certainly there are ministers who now regularly offer dedication ceremonies.

Unfortunately, some Christians fail to see the sometimes subtle but absolutely crucial distinction between compromising and accommodating.

In spite of the many forebodings, the Church of Scotland has also been able not only to tolerate but to embrace the ministry of women. I would go further and say that the Kirk has been enriched by the growth in numbers of both women elders and ministers. The world has not come to an end. Unfortunately, even though the Church of Scotland has been quicker to accept the ministry of women, the wider church is still perceived as being somewhat misogynistic.

However, at the time of writing, the Kirk has got itself now into a disproportionately frightful mess and tangle over the issue of gay ministers.

In 2008, the Rev Scott Rennie, minister at Brechin Cathedral, received a call to Queen's Cross Church in Aberdeen. Mr Rennie is openly gay. He has also been in a conventional marriage and is now divorced. He entered a civil partnership in 2013. At the time he was called to Queen's Cross, Mr Rennie was not under any kind of discipline or investigation by his own Presbytery.

The issue of Mr Rennie's call to Queen's Cross sparked a country wide debate on so-called "gay ministry" which ended up at the General Assembly. Some individuals appealed to the General Assembly against the Presbytery's decision to sustain the call. However, the Assembly of 2009 sustained it. Gay clergy ordained before May 2009 would also be allowed to stay in post although no further gay men or women could be ordained or accepted for training in the meantime.

In 2011 the General Assembly postponed a formal decision on the wider issues involved and set up a Theological Commission to look at the matter in

detail. It also took the quite extraordinary and highly un-Presbyterian step of placing an embargo on public comment or discussion of the issue.

Jesus, of course, has not left us any specific teaching on the question of homosexuality. Actually, there is very little mention of the subject in the Bible as a whole. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the following but I have heard it said that in the entire sweep of Scripture there are seven verses which are *possibly* against homosexuality, twelve verses against divorce, four against sex with a woman who is menstruating, 2,350 about money and 300 about social injustice and the poor. And how far, in context, some of the seven verses against homosexuality are permanent instruction is open to debate, especially those from the Old Testament. We all tend to pick and choose when it comes to Biblical teachings.

At the risk of shocking some of my evangelical friends, I have to say that I simply cannot get myself into a moral outrage over an issue that, in the larger picture, I believe to be trifling. There are far more important issues facing the church and society today than what a few ministers do in their bedrooms. That may sound like compromise. To me it is simply a pragmatic approach.

The Report of the Theological Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry that was submitted to the General Assembly of 2013 contained thoughtful and scholarly summaries of what have now become known as the traditional and revisionist approaches respectively. (This is rather more helpful than the familiar categories of evangelical and liberal which have ceased to have any clear meaning.)

This little booklet is not a theological work and I will not attempt to replicate any of the arguments, so well set out in the Commission's Report. The Report did make it clear that homophobia has no place in the Church of Scotland. That clear statement was to be welcomed and is certainly not a contentious issue. How many people outside the Kirk will have read the statement is quite another matter.

The Commission itself was divided and made no recommendation, although three possible deliverances were originally published. Almost literally at the eleventh hour, the Very Rev Albert Bogle, retiring Moderator of the General Assembly, presented a notice of motion putting forward a new deliverance that has become known as 2(d). Basically 2(d) affirms the Church's historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to human

sexuality (i.e. that homosexual practice is against the teachings of the Bible) nonetheless permits those Kirk Sessions who wish to depart from that doctrine and practice to do so.

The legal and doctrinal questions arising from the deliverance 2(d) - which was carried - will be further considered by the appropriate bodies and brought to the Assembly of 2014. If a total package of arrangements is agreed in 2014, the proposals must go down to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act procedure, coming back to the Assembly for a final decision in 2015. Indeed, the mills of God can grind exceedingly slow.

This deliverance was certainly well intended and set out to be inclusive. It succeeded in wrong footing some members of the Assembly. Given that its ramifications had not been fully considered at the time, some commissioners are now expressing regret at having voted for it. It was perhaps unfortunate that Dr Bogle's motion had to be voted for on the hoof and was not given more mature discussion and consideration before the vote was taken.

To me, it seems that the traditionalists really could not have expected to achieve more and might well have got considerably less had Dr Bogle not intervened. If 2(d) becomes the law of the church (and even now that is not a foregone certainty) it would allow revisionist congregations (such as Queen's Cross) to call a minister in a same sex relationship or civil partnership. It would also allow men and women in a same sex relationship or civil partnership to enter training for the ministry or the diaconate.

No congregation will be forced to accept a gay minister. Equally, no congregation, it seems, will be prevented from having a gay minister.

The General Assembly usually tries to pass deliverances that are seen to be inclusive. As far as possible, the Assembly will do what it can to allow people to have their cake and eat it. Perhaps too often it sets out to try to please everybody, which in a diverse Christian organisation, is impossible.

Since the days of the Jerusalem Council in the Acts of the Apostles, there have been elements of disagreement. However, the outcome of the Jerusalem Council shows that disagreement need not involve division. Sadly, however, often it has and only too often it does.

Critics of 2(d) on all sides are already saying that it is classic fudge. Well, get real, guys! The Christian church has been fudging for many centuries simply because both in doctrine and in ethics it is not as easy as it seems to achieve total certainty on any subject involving faith, far less total agreement.

Incidentally, I find no evidence in Scripture, Old Testament or New, for a voting process when it comes to important decisions in a Christian context. I believe that wherever possible the church should keep debating difficult issues until a way forward can be found that includes everyone.

Including everyone is *not* the same as pleasing everyone and, of course, the process of discussion and negotiation can take a much longer time.

I have to nail my own colours to the mast here. Whatever reservations I might have deep down, society is moving strongly and quickly in the direction of gay equality. People are who they are and there are certainly a good number of gay people in the church who are faithful and valuable contributors.

There have also been homosexual ministers both from the traditional and revisionist elements of the Kirk although to say so has been taboo. There seems to be some crazy assumption in some quarters that because someone is homosexual, it follows that s/he is automatically promiscuous and even dangerous. Such an idea is utterly preposterous as well as being unworthy.

If I had still been in ministry, I would have been prepared to give a blessing to a civil partnership. Probably my Presbytery would have stopped me from doing so. If two people want to commit to one another in a permanent loving relationship, I feel that it is nothing short of cruel for the church to withhold its blessing. It also gives a negative and judgemental picture of the church.

Personally, I would have strongly preferred that the distinction between marriage (i.e. between a man and a woman) and civil partnership (i.e. between two people of the same gender) could have been maintained. However, gay marriage is, to all intents and purposes a done deal.

Although gay marriage was not in the manifesto of any of the major political parties, we are now on a political roll and nothing will stop it from reaching the statute book. By continuing to oppose it, the church is in very

real danger of further forfeiting its credibility because it is not responding to the needs of the very people it is called to serve and for whom Christ died on the Cross.

Probably the time will come, maybe not in my lifetime, when gay marriages will be possible in the Kirk and no one will give it a second thought.

## Dark Clouds

The induction of Scott Rennie proved to be a spark that lit a few fires. Whether these fires will spread further or will remain localised and die out remains to be seen. To keep with the fire-related analogy, the huffing and puffing started in earnest almost as soon as the Presbytery of Aberdeen first sustained the call to Queen's Cross.

It opened wide a door of opportunity to the more hard line evangelicals - many of whom are not even members of the Kirk - to engage in a veritable feast of judgement and condemnation. And how some of them loved it! It was like cream to a starving kitten. It gave a wonderful excuse to point out the speck in the Kirk's eye, without having to consider the planks sticking out of their own eyes.

Of course, some good and devout people were and are genuinely concerned and uncomfortable about the possibility of a gay minister and I would not in any way wish to criticise them or their theological position.

But I do criticise those who have used this opportunity to let fly with a flurry of sanctimonious and self-righteous claptrap that would have embarrassed the Scribes and the Pharisees. What kind of Christian witness is that to the world? Some people seem to believe that because they are Christians, they can do and say what they like, without even having to take account of the normal rules of courtesy and politeness.

The Free Church of Scotland - hardly a detached or objective observer - seems to have taken a particular satisfaction in pointing the finger. The Free Church has been a carping and sometimes ungracious critic of the Kirk for the best part of two centuries. Given that a small number of congregations have decided to leave the Church of Scotland, the Free Church in 2013 suddenly declared itself to be a friend and is inviting ministers and members to join its own depleted and divided ranks. Whether this is an act of kindness or pure opportunism, I leave for others to decide.

Some ministers and congregations in the Church of Scotland were already making noises. Suddenly the whole issue seemed to grow legs. For some of the more hard-line traditionalists, it seemed as though the Kirk, by sustaining Scott Rennie's call, had turned its back entirely on every word of Scripture and was therefore in a crisis situation.

The more hot headed wanted to take immediate action and some did. More moderate counsel suggested that a "wait and see" attitude should be adopted.

The first real significant break came with the congregation of St George's Tron in Glasgow deciding in 2012 to leave the Church of Scotland. There was no doubt that this was a major blow and a great loss as well as a disappointment to many. Older people remember the remarkable ministries that had been offered in that iconic city centre building, including those of Tom Alan, Eric Alexander and Sinclair Ferguson.

These were men who were not uncritical of the Church of Scotland at various times, but their criticism was always balanced and came very much from within. St George's Tron was a flagship of the great evangelical tradition within the Church of Scotland. It was a congregation and a witness in central Glasgow of which the Kirk could be proud, in the best sense. Even ministers and elders, who would not have described themselves as "card-carrying evangelicals" held St George's Tron and its ministry in great respect. And in recent years the congregation has given sacrificially towards a major renovation and modernisation of the building.

The last minister adopted a more hard line attitude. In 2012, the Tron left the Church of Scotland. Critics at the time said that, under the current ministry, it had actually left the Church of Scotland some years previously. But, things are seldom as simple as they seem.

A congregation is not an incorporated body; it is simply a collection of individuals who, in law, are represented by their office-bearers or trustees who accept personal liability. A congregation cannot legally secede from the Church of Scotland, lock, stock and barrel. Nor can a seceding congregation normally claim ownership of the church building even if the title is held by local trustees. (I am aware that I am in danger here of over-simplification.)

Events of the last few months of 2012 were a complete public relations disaster for everyone involved in the Tron debacle. No one came out of it well, although everyone wants to claim the moral high ground. It was one of these situations in which everybody - the congregation, the minister, the Presbytery of Glasgow, the people of Glasgow and the Church of Scotland - lost out.

If the truth be told, human pride played a major part and continues to do so. The difficulty in attempting to give any kind of objective assessment is that different people whose word I would normally accept without hesitation give such diametrically opposite and polarised accounts. At any rate, feelings ran very high.

The Presbytery of Glasgow wished the tradition of a conservative evangelical ministry and associated outreach to continue, based in St George's Tron Church. Given that the vast majority of the existing gathered congregation would no longer be members of the Church of Scotland, the ambition to bring together a new gathered congregation seems (to me) to be a touch unrealistic.

However, it was becoming clearer that the building was going to be a great issue. I have seen it stated that the breakaway congregation was offered a lease of the church building and manse at an early stage and turned the offer down. I have also seen that same claim hotly denied.

The end result was that in late 2012 the breakaway congregation left the iconic building - on which they had sacrificially spent hundreds of thousands of pounds - to the sound of the hymn "The Son of God goes forth to war". A sign was put up outside "The living church has left the building." Olive branches were, it seems, in short supply.

In general, the media favoured the breakaway congregation in its reporting. This congregation had lost their building but now had the great advantage of being seen as brave victims and martyrs who were being turned out on to the street by a harsh, triumphalist and compromised Church of Scotland. The media did seem to overlook the fact that the congregation had themselves voted almost unanimously to leave.

At the time of writing, the Church of Scotland has brought in a transition minister based in the empty Tron building. Few would envy him his job.

It had been known for some time that Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen also intended leaving. I suspect everybody learned some lessons from the Tron disaster. Gilcomston South has had courteous and amicable discussion with Aberdeen Presbytery and, at least in the meantime, the newly formed independent congregation of Gilcomston Church will lease their Union Street building (on which they too have spent large amounts of money) from the Church of Scotland.



**As a result of the 2013 Assembly, another prominent evangelical church, Holyrood Abbey in Edinburgh has stated its intention to leave the Church of Scotland by 2015.**

**There will, no doubt be others.**

## Where now?

At the time of writing, the evangelicals are (as usual) in disarray and disunited, in spite of assurances of underlying Christian unity. There is a strange irony in the fact that an avowedly Christian website titled "Christians Together" (an oxymoron?) in the past year has published quite a number of scathing and sometimes even poisonous comments about the Church of Scotland, mainly by members of other traditions or by discontents who have left the Kirk and want to claim the high moral, spiritual and Biblical ground exclusively for themselves.

Such comments do the writers no credit and certainly do not take forward the Kingdom of God. They do, on the other hand, feed into spiritual pride. There is a large supply of the latter commodity going around at the present time. It is not, of course, in any way confined to evangelicals. To me, it is one of the worst kinds of pride.

Many of the comments in "Christians Together" and in the popular press do not make for pleasant reading. It seems as though much of the evangelical church has followed the lead of contemporary society in that debate on important issues cannot be carried out unless it is accompanied by mud-slinging and aggressive insults. And if Christians cannot behave with minimal courtesy, what credibility can they expect in the real world?

(Note: please do not confuse "Christian Together" with another body, "Forward Together".)

To give everyone their due, the comments made by the Church of Scotland and the Presbytery of Glasgow have been generally mild and conciliatory.

There is a story (probably apocryphal) that one night there was a knock on the door of a certain Scottish manse. When the minister answered the door, he found one of his parishioners standing there, somewhat the worse of wear.

"Minister," he said, "I've come to speak to you about the schisms in God's Kirk."

"Well", said the minister, "you can come back and speak to me about that when you're sober."

"Minister," replied the parishioner, "when I'm sober I won't be caring much about the schisms in God's Kirk."

I confess that I have a certain degree of sympathy with the drunken parishioner's viewpoint. Scottish Presbyterianism has a woeful history of strife and division and we do not seem to learn many lessons from the past.

In recent times, even the smaller strict Presbyterian traditions, the Free Church and the Free Presbyterian Church (who, to outsiders seemed as alike as Tweedledum and Tweddledee) have had their splits, including spats and lawsuits over property. It would be funny if it was not so sad and pathetic.

There is now also a new kid on the block - the International Presbyterians. The particular origins of this organisation are in the work of Francis and Edith Schaeffer who went to Switzerland in 1948 as highly respected missionaries from the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the USA. In Scotland the IPs have already included Trinity Church Aberdeen (formed by a secession of the former minister and a majority of the congregation of Aberdeen: High Hilton) and the new modestly titled Highland International Church, Inverness. The British headquarters of the International Presbyterians are in Ealing, London which people my age, rightly or wrongly, associate with comedy.

There has even been talk of forming yet another Presbyterian denomination in Scotland to accommodate those who wish to leave the Church of Scotland. We really do need another Presbyterian denomination like we need a hole in the head. Anyone wanting to join a Presbyterian Church in Scotland already has a choice of eight different models.

Meanwhile, the Free Church of Scotland, in its new all singing all dancing model, has suspended its usual role of nagging and carping harridan in respect of the Kirk and substituted that of a seductive siren, calling on men (and I mean men) who want to leave the ministry of the Church of Scotland to come and join its ranks.

How well the Free Kirk would adjust to an influx of ministers who have enjoyed a remarkable degree of personal freedom in the Church of Scotland is untested. And how well former Kirk ministers would adjust to the culture of the Free Kirk and its more rigid adherence to the Westminster Confession is also uncharted water. Certainly, they will find the attitude towards women rather different and they may find taking on a degree of alien cultural baggage is a price they would rather not pay.

The United Free Church - hardly a major player in today's ecclesiastical arena - is already in a covenant relationship with the Church of Scotland. It is known that the UF Church is far from happy about 2(d) but, of course, the latter has not yet passed into the law of the Kirk and possibly may never do so. The UF Church is as much of a mixture as the Church of Scotland when it comes to ecclesiastical polity. However, in recent years, it has tended to return more strongly to its evangelical roots. It has sometimes served as a place of refuge for malcontents from the Church of Scotland. It too will probably welcome with open arms any refugees from the Kirk.

It is not original for me to suggest that all this reorganising and rushing from one denomination to another is about as productive as reallocating the cabin accommodation on the Titanic. I trust this does not sound too cynical. People believed that the Titanic could not possibly sink but everyone knows the end of that story. It was a tragedy in every sense of the word. But we can forget that the tragic sinking of that great ship was actually a bitter memorial to human pride. To run from one denomination to another is a negative witness, irrespective of whoever may be the most theologically sound.

At the end of the day, some people will have moved denominations. The church as a whole will have been further fragmented. In spite of some churches reporting growth, there is actually no sign of overall growth in committed church-going people across Scotland. So called growth is frequently no more than malcontents moving from one church to another. And, of course, people will go to the places where people go. Birds of a feather flock together.

It is painful for me to say so, but I see a great deal of the wrong kind of pride in much of the Christian church today. I would go further and say that the finger points especially at the evangelical part of the church, much of which seems to be obsessed with numbers, buildings, equipment, power, control and money. The evangelical churches have to succeed. In fact, they also have to be seen to succeed. If they do not, there is a presumption that something is wrong. Is there enough prayer? Is the Word not being proclaimed faithfully enough? I suggested earlier that there was a belief in the 1970s that if the Gospel was effectively proclaimed by this new breed of keen young ministers, all would be well. Yet that did not happen. The expected time of refreshing and revival did not come.

Now, some men and women are leaving the comfort and relative security of the Church of Scotland and going elsewhere, sometimes at real personal sacrifice, as in the case of St George's Tron. Has it been worth it? Those who have done so will firmly say "yes", but then they would say that, wouldn't they? In a very real sense they simply cannot afford to fail. A loss of face would be greatest loss of all. I was interested to see recently that the minister of the breakaway Tron congregation in Glasgow is already reporting a ten per cent rise in his congregation since leaving the Church of Scotland. Make of that what you will.

The other side of the coin is that not only do the breakaway congregations have to succeed but the Church of Scotland, in turn, has to be seen to fail. God, in the eyes of the breakaways, cannot possibly bless either the theologically compromised Kirk or even those evangelicals who choose to remain in its service.

The fact remains that divisions have been created now that will not easily be healed. The ministers and congregations who have broken away will certainly expect to be vindicated in the eyes of both God and man (especially the latter?).

To me, it looks as though the process we are going through in some ways mirrors the Disruption of 1843 although in other respects it is very different.

Scholars and historians still disagree as to whether the Disruption, ostensibly over the issue of a congregation's right to call a minister of their own choosing, was necessary. Many people believed that it was intolerable that the final choice of a minister rested with a patron, often a local landowner who was perhaps an absentee and had no interest in the Kirk. Necessary or not, the Disruption happened and a very large number of ministers and elders "went out" to form the Free Church of Scotland.

To the Disruption fathers, the sky was the limit. Churches sprang up here there and everywhere (Well, not quite everywhere. With some exceptions, they tended to spring up in areas where the new congregations could afford to pay.) At least one entirely new University was planned. The new thrusting and ambitious Free Church virtually became the Liberal Party in Scotland at prayer. It was also be an important agent in the rise of the new and growing middle class in nineteenth century Scotland.

To be fair, many ministers and their families, suddenly without church, manse and stipend in 1843 did suffer very considerable privation. Equally, many people gave of their means sacrificially. Some historians view the Disruption as a noble act, where people were willing to stand up for what they believed. I would not want to poor-mouth anyone who is prepared to sacrifice what for s/he believes to be right. However, noble or not in its intentions, I believe that the Disruption was one of the worst events that ever overtook the Kirk in Scotland.

The Disruption led to an unpleasantly competitive attitude and effectively quenched the Holy Spirit. The Free Church looked at the Kirk and attempted not only to mirror what it did but always to go at least one better.

When in 1874, patronage - the ostensible cause of the Disruption - was removed by Parliament the Free Church was far from pleased. It seemed now that there was really nothing left over which to be divided. Yet divided is what they remained for many years to come.

Traces of this competitive outlook still mar some parts of church life in Scotland to this very day. Spiritual pride effectively postponed full reunion for roughly 50 years. In 1900 most of the Free Church chose to unite with the United Presbyterians, with whom they had much less in common than the Church of Scotland, to form the United Free Church.

In 1929, the majority of the United Free Church united with the Church of Scotland. In both cases, minorities stayed out. Nevertheless, in 2013 we seem to have as many Presbyterian denominations as ever.

However, there are important differences between the Disruption and the fragmented and the muddled and chaotic situation we find today. The first difference is that of numbers. Although the loss of committed congregations of the calibre of St George's Tron, Gilcomston South and Holyrood Abbey is a very real loss and should not underestimated - not least for the large amounts of money that these congregations have paid into the Kirk's central funds - their withdrawal does not compare numerically to those who "went out" at the time of the Disruption.

The second and the greatest difference can be seen in the organisation. The Disruption was very well stage managed with a degree of skill and detailed planning that would be the envy of today's spin doctors. In

fairness, it has to be conceded that the incipient Free Church took ten years (known as the "Ten Years Conflict") to plan the event. And this degree of administration continued with the setting up of a centralised bureaucratic organisational model of the church and highly efficient methods, such as the Sustentation Fund, to ensure necessary ingathering of finances.

The third difference is that at the time of the Disruption, there was a real uniformity of purpose. This is in vivid contrast to the situation today. The evangelicals are in disarray. Some - and these are only a sample - of the respective positions seem to be:

- We have already left the Kirk and plan to remain independent.
- We have already left the Kirk and intend to form a new Presbyterian body.
- We have already left the Kirk and plan to join another Presbyterian body when we find one that is good enough for us.
- We are planning to leave the Kirk but intend to take our time to secure buildings and other assets before we do so. We may or we may not join another denomination.
- We will wait and see which way the wind blows. We might still leave the Church of Scotland if there was sufficient support.
- We will do nothing; it's business as usual. In the meantime, we will keep our heads down. The present difficulty will blow over.
- We would only leave the Kirk if "things" get very much worse for evangelicals.
- We have absolutely no intention of leaving the Kirk.

Some of my brother ministers have suggested that the Kirk is in a real crisis, which brings me back to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter.

I respectfully disagree. To me, the Kirk is in a mess rather than a crisis. That mess does not only affect the evangelicals (traditionalists). It involves everybody. The more liberal (revisionist) part of the Kirk is not thriving and growing either. True, it is not splitting but then it was scarcely united in the first place. People who call themselves liberal vary greatly.

I have known some liberals who are surprisingly conservative and even "evangelical", who read the Bible at least as frequently as many of the card-carrying evangelicals. At the other end of the spectrum, are those of

a very radical viewpoint. In between, there are many people who are largely untaught and unsure of what they actually think.

This mess is not something new. It is simply that it is becoming more noticeable.



## Things ain't what they used to be

It is easy for people (like me) to pontificate and to tell everyone else where they have fallen short. It is less easy to suggest a positive way forward. I find this especially challenging as I believe that before things can get better, they will probably first have to get worse.

Because we have centuries of Christian tradition - much of it honourable and valuable - behind us, we can be fooled into thinking that all we need to do is to re-establish what we used to have.

At a great many points in the long history of the church, people have felt a real need to return to the perceived simplicity of the age of the apostles.

When I was a student at New College and for reasons best known to myself at the time, I opted to study the history of the early church rather than the church at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps I naively thought that the early church would be less complicated and easier to understand. I soon had another think coming. There was a dizzyingly wide divergence of beliefs and practices. Most prevalent among those who are considered heretics were the Gnostics who were quite ruthlessly suppressed. There were many other divergent practices and schools of thought.

The earliest New Testament writings are probably the letters of Paul, who is much exercised on matters of doctrine and practice and says tantalisingly little about the person and life of Jesus. The four Gospels are later and, of course, there were many other gospels and similar writings in circulation than now exist. Many of these other writings were lost, suppressed or deliberately destroyed. We have the Roman Emperor Constantine to thank for the present New Testament canon. We also have Constantine to thank for the lack of the divine feminine in much of Christian practice.

Whilst it is highly unlikely that the canon of the New Testament will ever be redefined, modern discoveries and rediscoveries have brought some early or "lost" documents to light which give some very interesting insights into life in the early church. Maybe they can also help us to understand some of the problems we are facing in the contemporary church,

When most people think of the early church, they imagine that Nicene orthodoxy emerged peacefully more or less after the day of Pentecost. Nothing could be further from the truth. The young church suffered

dreadful persecution under some of the Roman emperors. At the same time, this persecuted church could itself be harsh and even violent towards those whom it regarded as heretics.

One of the less attractive legacies Constantine has left us is that in most traditions of the Christian church we still follow a "Roman" model. This involves direction, control and uniformity under the direction of clergy. The Roman model is certainly not confined to the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, it is very prevalent across many traditions of Protestantism.

There is no doubt that many people have an idealised and romantic view of the early church. They forget not only the terrible persecution it had to endure but also the diversity of belief and practice that was prevalent. Much of this centred round the person and nature of Christ. In addition, there were Christian mystery schools and esoteric sects that would surprise and even embarrass us today. It is simply impossible to go back to an idealised apostolic age that probably never existed when we are living in the twenty first century.

Of course, firm doctrine and rigid teaching can bring a real sense of security. This can be both comforting and reassuring. It is one of the major attractions of the modern cults. Like political hard-liners they provide only one simplistic answer to everything.

In spite of the Reformation, the Protestant churches in many respects followed a Roman model; only the players were different. There was no Pope. Instead there were ministers and Confessions of Faith. We forget that the latter were originally and primarily confessions of *faith* [my emphasis]. The Scots Confession was a good example.

By a strange accident of history, the Presbyterian Church in Scotland adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith in the seventeenth century. This distinguished document was an English Puritan work yet its influence has been considerable in Scotland and minimal in England. It would be ungracious and totally unworthy for me to rubbish the Westminster Confession. As an established document of faith it deserves to be held in respect. But it is quite a different matter to suggest that the language or sentiments of the seventeenth century communicate adequately with the twenty first century.

The Church of Scotland accepts the Westminster Confession as its chief subordinate standard recognising liberty of opinion on such matters as do not enter into the substance of the faith. This is the so-called conscience clause. What these "such matters" are is, of course, again classic fudge but it is fudge that has served us surprisingly well. It has actually allowed the Church of Scotland to hold its varied traditions together as a coalition.

There are those who (like me) think that the diversity and inclusiveness of the Kirk has been one of its greatest strengths. Equally, there are those who consider that it is the Kirk's greatest weakness. It all comes down to perception as do most things concerning personal faith.

The conscience clause can mean everything and nothing. During the 1970s the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine was of a mind to ditch the Westminster Confession and substitute a much shorter Statement of Belief but *without* a conscience clause. This possibility was widely debated not just at General Assembly and Presbytery level but also by Kirk Sessions. The more conservative evangelicals and the more liberal liberals were curiously united in their opposition to the new Statement - the former because it was a cultural step too far to cut loose from the Confession and the latter because there was no conscience clause to accompany the new Statement which, though brief, was entirely orthodox.

The Very Rev Dr Andrew Herron, Clerk to the Presbytery of Glasgow successfully moved that the General Assembly depart from the matter as it was proving too divisive. It was, once again, easier to hold the Kirk together with a classic fudge.

So we still have the Confession hanging round the necks of the Church of Scotland. Professor James Denney, traditionally one of the darlings of evangelicals, referred to the Confession as that "old man of the sea". In practice we now raise our hats to it and hurry on. For most people in modern Scotland, the Westminster Confession (if they have even heard of it) has no relevance.

It is (to me) surprising that some of those who are in the process of leaving the Kirk seem to be perfectly at ease at the possibility of joining another Presbyterian tradition that accepts the Westminster Confession without the protection of a conscience clause.

Just as some people fondly imagine that it is somehow possible to tear up nearly 2,000 years of Christian history and tradition and go back to apostolic principles, so are there those who want to go back to some idealised golden age of Scottish piety that, again, never existed. I confess that I am surprised at how even some ministers fail to understand that the Church of Scotland is indeed a coalition and has been such for many a long year.

In Scotland, we have a centuries old respect for the Bible. We used to be known as the Land of the Book. At the same time, genuine respect for the Bible and its teachings was, in Scotland, rather different from the text-jabbing hard-line fundamentalism that has come into favour in some quarters. In Scotland we have been able to temper our very real and genuine respect for the Word of God with a dose of good old fashioned Scottish common sense.

I would be the last person to suggest that Christian doctrine does not matter. Yet one could be forgiven for thinking that, for some people it seems to be the *only* thing that matters. There are those who take great pride in calling themselves evangelicals and parade their doctrinal soundness in public like the scribes of the New Testament paraded their long robes. Yet these same sound people often do little or nothing to proclaim the good news of the Gospel either in word or in deed. There is much nit-picking and criticising and even the broader evangelical movement seems to have become self-obsessed and to have lost sight of its vision. If a little less time was to be spent on carping and doctrinal nit-picking and a little more time spent on knocking on a few doors (literally or metaphorically), then Scotland might be a much more Christian country than it is now.

It almost beggars belief that in these days when the Christian faith and the Christian church is being assailed on all sides, when aggressive secularism is making major inroads into society, the evangelicals are in such a disarray and dissemblance. It is as though they are fiddling while Rome burns. Is it because they are so afraid of what is really happening "out there" that they cannot cope with it and turn instead to a self indulgent obsession with doctrinal niceties? Or maybe it is part of a bigger picture. Maybe it is the beginning of the end of the road for the church as we now know it?

Another trend that has not been helpful and which is espoused by many Christians is that there should be a clearer distinction drawn between the

spiritual and the material. I find this an extraordinary approach, especially when it most commonly comes from evangelicals. It seems to make a mockery of the incarnation, the mystery that in Jesus Christ, God and man came together.

It is simply not good enough for Christians only to concern themselves with Bible study and doctrine, however important and necessary that is. I have even heard some evangelical ministers and elders criticise the Church of Scotland's own social outreach, as though it was something to be shunned and avoided. It is as though they consider themselves too good or too holy to be troubled with such matters leaving them to more liberal Christians or to the state. But surely when Jesus fed the multitude, he fed them on bread that was both spiritual and material?

In fact, looking back at the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the evangelicals who were at the forefront of social change. When the early Scottish Chartists used to gather together on Glasgow Green in the early part of the nineteenth century, they owed nothing to Karl Marx (who had not yet been born) but they owed more than perhaps they themselves knew to the legacy of John Knox. The evangelicals seem to have lost much of their social conscience as well as their prophetic voice.

I know that the church as whole is not going to close tomorrow. Yet it would be wilful blindness to ignore the fact that "things" do not look good. No one needs to be told that attendances are steadily falling nationally and that the trend is towards an ageing and declining church.

The influence of the Kirk on society in general has greatly reduced, especially since the re-introduction of the Scottish Parliament. On paper, the Church of Scotland is still the established church but that title is no more than an empty shell. It will probably mean even less if Scotland achieves full independence. Scotland is an increasingly secular society in its outlook.

Society as a whole is also much less interested in institutions. This is not surprisingly, given the loss of trust not only in the church but in politicians, national and local government, police, hospitals and financial institutions. Scotland used to be famous as a centre of finance and know for its fairness, prudence and probity. The Scottish Banks were institutions that people could look up to. Now they are bankrupt (in reality) and a laughing

stock on the world stage. This is certainly not the fault of the church, but it does get caught in the knock on effect.

The institutional church model to which we are accustomed may well not survive the end of this century, apart from in small pockets.

Presbyterianism has been a faithful servant to the people of Scotland. It has influenced other bodies and probably contributed indirectly to the setting up of the American Constitution. Whilst we have never really enjoyed a fully egalitarian society, there is something about the relatively classless Presbyterian system that appealed to the mind of many Scots. We would rather be governed and directed in our church life by a number of people, rather than by a bishop.

Of course, all has not been sweetness and light. Like it or not, the Presbyterian system, which has served us very well in the past, may itself be moving towards its sell-by date. Congregations do not always like to be told by the eldership what they should do, the eldership don't like being told by Presbytery what to do and Presbytery does not always appreciate being told by the General Assembly what to do. Congregations over the past decades have been gradually moving towards a more congregationally-based model. They are certainly much less deferential towards Presbytery which is often commonly perceived as being an interfering "outside" body. The cracks are certainly beginning to show. I suspect that they have been showing for a long time but people have been unwilling to see them.

Society as a whole is also less willing to be told what to believe. People are not content to form part of a passive docile flock who will accept without question what some minister tells them. There is much that they want to question. There is much that they want to discuss. Yet, in most cases, church is the last place they would go. Fortunately, there are exceptions.

Attention has already been drawn to the problem of an ageing ministry. There has been a huge drop-off in numbers offering themselves for full-time service. If there was not a fairly large pool of retired ministers on which to draw, there would be barely enough to go round even as things are now. In the not too distant future, that pool will reduce as retired ministers inevitably age further and are less able to take on preaching and pastoral duties. Whilst there are people coming forward to train for diaconate and readership, there is not enough to go round, assuming a *status quo* model.

The honourable vision of the Church of Scotland, as the national (but not the state) church, serving every square inch of the mainland and islands of Scotland through a settled parochial ministry is growing dimmer by the year.

Because so many congregations are uniting out of sheer necessity, Scotland is now littered with closed church buildings. Many of these act as negative advertisements for the Gospel when they fall into disrepair or are converted into public houses and night clubs. These abandoned buildings give off a strong message that the church is a thing of the past and not of the present or of the future.

Within my living memory, the term "Christian" was synonymous with being hard working and upright, moral and generous. Nowadays, the word tends to a stereotype of a religious fanatic or bore. Few people will readily admit to being Christian at social gatherings or in work-place chat. If they do, it will often be fenced with excuses such as "Of course, I really go to church for my wife's sake." Conversely, some people will readily admit to being Christian and then weary their listeners with a gratuitous lecture on salvation, Hell and damnation.

Many people have come to realise that actually they can get by without church. Maybe they did not get round to having their children "christened" but these same children have still turned out well. Work and family life seems to absorb even more of people's time and who wants to go and sit in a stuffy Victorian church on a pleasant - or even an unpleasant - Sunday morning?

If a wedding is needed, there are plenty of hotels who offer no strings attached humanist weddings (for a fee). Even modern Registry Offices have become comfortable and user-friendly with special rooms and halls dedicated to weddings. And who really needs a religious funeral, when the deceased had no church connection?

Social work functions that had often been pioneered by the church have largely been taken over by the state or by voluntary bodies. There are also many excellent counselling and similar support facilities available from secular agencies and which come without the moralistic baggage expected from the church.

There is the popular perception - which is not entirely ill-founded - that the church is obsessed with sex; and if not obsessed, then highly dysfunctional. Certainly, if you look through the Kirk Session minutes of any parish church in the nineteenth century you will find plenty of evidence of what I can only describe as a form of sanctimonious voyeurism. There are sometimes surprisingly vivid accounts of acts of antenuptial fornication and even of adultery. The ministers and elders seemed to have overlooked the highly inconvenient statement of Jesus that the man who commits adultery in his heart is as guilty as the man who does it in deed. Of course, all of this sexual activity took place in the days before modern birth control which now gives people the opportunity sexually to have their cake and eat it.

Whilst I do believe that adultery is a very serious wrong because of its elements of betrayal, I would suggest that there are worse matters than the minor sexual sins with which the church often seems obsessed. I remember Lord MacLeod of Fuinary referring to them as "mere bagatelle." Christians can get themselves very worked up about such matters and yet seem to turn a blind eye to some of the greatest affronts in society today.

Why do the rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer? Why do certain bankers who misuse large sums of money that belong to others get off scot-free? Why do we buy goods that originate under intolerable conditions abroad, just because they are cheaper? Why do poorer people have to pay extortionately high rates of interest? There are many issues on which the church is often strangely silent. The announcement by the Archbishop of Canterbury in July 2013 that he intends to take on the pay-day loan companies is surely a welcome sign that the prophetic voice and the social conscience is not entirely dead.

The reader already knows that I personally cannot get myself worked up into a high degree of moral outrage over the bedroom habits of a tiny minority of ministers. The knock-on effects of the Scott Rennie case seem, to me, to be a gross over-reaction. To those outside the church, we are really just making ourselves look out of touch and rather ridiculous. And the so-called crisis is being talked up, often by people who are not even members of the Kirk.

The Emperor Constantine not only imposed a Roman model on the church; he also imposed a male dominated model. (This in itself may have considerably contributed to the sexual dysfunction of much of the later church.) There



is little doubt that women played a greater part in the ministry of Jesus and in the early church than might at first appear. It could be said that the Christian Gospel revolutionised the status of women. Looking at the later history of the church, one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. The New Testament itself gives us examples of women playing a prominent part in the life of the new Christian church.

There have been some outstanding women throughout the later history of the church, including Saint Margaret in Scotland, Hilda, Etheldreda and Ethelburga in England. Other remarkable women include Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Joan of Arc and Theresa of Lisieux, to name only a very few. In recent years, the writings of Lady Julian of Norwich have come to the fore. Women have been prolific writers of hymns and devotional literature. Women have been pioneer missionaries and teachers. In spite of the immense contribution of women, both past and present, their role has only too often been ignored or patronised by men.

In recent years, the "Great European Heresy" - which suggests that Mary Magdalene was either the wife or the lover of Jesus - has again surfaced, largely through the alternative history book "Holy Blood, Holy Grail" and was subsequently popularised by the blockbuster work of fiction, "The Da Vinci Code."

This "underground stream" of teaching challenges the traditional sex-free view that a celibate Jesus was born of a virgin, and that his closest friends were Lazarus, Martha and Mary, a celibate brother and his two spinster sisters. Indeed, although the Gospels show that Jesus had brothers and sisters, the Roman Catholic Church suggests that they were the children of Joseph, the putative father of Jesus, by an earlier marriage.

Actually, the possibility that the Saviour of the World might have been married and sexually active does not seem to have raised the adverse reaction that might have been anticipated. It has certainly not shaken the Christian church to its very foundations, as some had suggested it would.

A great lack in the Christian tradition has been that of the divine feminine. God, even in his three persons, is perceived being as male in each case. Until recently, clergy were exclusively male (in some traditions they still are) even though the church itself is traditionally perceived as female. Maybe that explains the hang-up over sex in many quarters. When some

years ago, the President of the Woman's Guild prayed to "God our Mother" at a Guild Rally, these words were sheer dynamite.

Even the Catholic Church has, perhaps subconsciously, realised that God must also be allowed to show a feminine side. Partly to compensate, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is seen as a perpetual virgin mother, Lady Star of the Sea and Queen of Heaven. Although Catholic friends will assure us that they do not actually worship "Our Lady", it has to be said that they come pretty near to it. It cannot be without significance that Pope John Paul II seriously considered declaring the Virgin Mary as Co-Redemptrix with Jesus Christ. Something seemed to be lacking in the Godhead.

Most generally, the church as a whole certainly does not enjoy any monopoly on morality. Of course, it never has. However, for centuries the church has enjoyed a perception that it was, at least to some degree, the guardian of public morality. One wonders why, given the amount of infamy that has been practiced in the ostensible name of Jesus.

However, there are many examples from people of other faiths and none which demonstrate that the church can no longer expect to lay down moral rules for other people to follow. We are not the only people to have moral standards. I have heard people complain about the lack of moral standards today. In fact there is no such lack. The problem is that there are so many moral standards and people want the opportunity to make their own ethical choices.

Since at least the time of the Reformation, religion in the Protestant west has been highly cognitive. What people think and believe has been very important; much more important than what they do or what they feel. Our faith has been centred on the Bible and studying the Bible. In Scotland, one of the great legacies of Knox and the reformers was the importance of education for both boys and girls. That is something of which we can be proud. But maybe it has also tended to exclude other perspectives.

In the western world, we have this long love affair with reason. We have been trained to believe as a society that there must be an answer to or a reason for, everything. If a difficult event occurs, we tend to look for a way of making sense of it. This attitude is surprisingly deeply entrenched in our religious outlook as well. Yet because many issues in life actually do not seem to make sense, confusion arises. Modern secularism mocks at anything to do with religious faith. Science will, according to the more radical

exponents, such as Professor Richard Dawkins, eventually provide an explanation for everything. The popular love affair with reason has not disappeared but people now look towards science for "the answers" and certainly not towards the church. And yet, in looking to science alone, there is often disappointment and a feeling that something important is missing. Yet, judging by recent events, to some evangelicals the only thing that matters is doctrine.

In the Protestant tradition, we seem to have lost sight of many of the more mystical and aesthetic aspects of faith. We operate with a left-brained cognitive model that no longer seems to cut ice. When those of us from a Reformed faith visit some of the dazzling churches of the Counter Reformation, such as are found in parts of Southern Germany and in Spain, we do not quite know to react: similarly when we view and hear a Russian Orthodox service.

So where do people go if they want something more mystical? There are still traditions of the wider church that can cater for this. On the surface, the Catholic Church with its saints, relics, pilgrimages, holy wells and grottos is in a much better position. When it comes to visual spectacle, even the modern Catholic Church can upstage us any day. Yet it too is losing followers at an alarming rate.

People generally are becoming more individualistic in their religion as well as in their ethics. They prefer a "pick and mix" religion with a little bit of this and a little bit of that. People of my age and background find this somewhat unsettling. Most faith traditions, apart from the Baha'i, are still highly resistant to such an approach. This move towards individualisation partly explains the rise in the popularity of many New Age beliefs and practices, such as angel therapy and crystal healing which the church usually falls over itself to condemn out of hand.

Of course, the great advantage of New Age beliefs is that they can be practiced without the need of churches and clergy. The church has been rather good at pouring scorn on some New Age practices, often doing so more out of prejudice and presupposition than by actual knowledge. The church has failed to understand that people turn to alternative spiritual practices because the established churches are simply failing to fill the gaps in the lives of many seekers.

**And, sad to say, if the genuine seeker looks for serious answers to difficult questions, the last place s/he will generally do so is in the church.**

**Yet, although this land may not be fully aware of the fact, I believe that Scotland is crying for the Ark of God.**

## Be Thou my vision

In Scotland, we have been fortunate in never having had a state church or a state controlled church. On the contrary, Scotland has been (historically) a Calvinist society where the church is part of society but definitely not part of the state. As in the case of Presbyterianism itself, the cracks in this model are becoming only too visible. Most people today, inside and outside the church, see religion of any kind as a purely personal matter. Very few would see the church as part of society. Increasingly, all traces of the Christian tradition are ignored or marginalised in public events or issues.

Of course, plenty of people have been aware of the potential problems facing the Church of Scotland for many years. There have been initiatives - and few things seem more dated than yesterday's innovations - with differing degrees of success. People of my age and older will remember the Committee of Forty of the early 1970s. I remember when I was Presbytery Clerk of Aberdeen being ordered to attend a conference on the Committee's deliberations. What happened to the Committee's long deliberations over the future shape and mission of the Kirk in Scotland? They seemed to disappear as did many of the modernising initiatives of that decade.

More recently, there was the excellent "Church without Walls" initiative of 2001 which has been more successful in some hotspots. Yet, nationally the initiative does not seem to have made the progress nor instilled the degree of change that might have been hoped for or which it deserved.

Many men and women, ministers, elders and members of the Kirk continue to do their very best, working and giving sacrificially for the work of the Kingdom. I take my hat off to them. It is all too easy to sound negative and discouraging. That is not my aim or purpose. May God bless, strengthen and encourage them in every way.

I have already suggested (with genuine regret) that the Presbyterian system, already fragmented and likely to further division, has had its day. Unfortunately we have a habit in the church of assuming that once something is established, it must be continued unchanged for ever. We are not always good at taking our leave of traditions and practices that have served us well in the past but are no longer fit for today's purpose.

One of the cries often made is that without a proper Presbyterian system, there will be no proper church discipline. For the word "discipline", substitute the word "control" (and usually by men). And, of course, the question of who is in control and who is the greatest is a question that has been around since Jesus walked the hills and lanes of Galilee. Living in a less structured faith system can seem scary, but it could work and, indeed, it may have to.

Earlier in this booklet, I was critical of those who, at various times throughout the history of the church, have tried to return to the perceived simplicity of the apostolic age. My main criticism of that approach is that it frequently has a romanticised view of what the early church was like. In fact, far from being a unity, it was highly diverse, as has already been suggested. So, in a roundabout way, we may actually return to the early church - but a very different early church from what some would have in mind.

I suggest that the church of the future will be much more diverse in its beliefs and practices, even perhaps touching such untouchable areas as reincarnation to say nothing of radically questioning the nature of the Holy Trinity and the Person of Christ. Again, this is scary. The big difference I might foresee is that diverse views will be able to cohabitate in a way that could not be even contemplated at the present time.

There will be far less need for a settled parochial ministry which, for centuries has been the backbone of our Kirk.

I believe that when it comes to numbers of ministers, members and congregations, these will continue to fall. Interestingly enough, there is a twelfth century series of prophecies by the Archbishop of Armagh, later canonised as Saint Malacy concerning the Papacy. According to some readings of the prophecies, the recently appointed Pope, Francis I, will be the last to hold that office. (See Robert Howells, *The Last Pope*, London 2013). The problem of declining Christian influence in the western world is not something that is confined to any one tradition or denomination.

Of course, the one factor that all denominations and traditions tend to share is that they and they alone are the only hope for the future. Many main stream denominations such as the Church of Scotland frankly do not know where to turn next. If the Kirk becomes stricter and more doctrinal, people may respect it for taking a stand. There will be clear water between

the values and beliefs of the world and of the Christian community. On the other hand, people may be put off by perceived rigidity and authoritarianism. If it becomes more liberal, people may find it easier to associate with it. But they may wonder what, if anything it does actually stand for and if it is even necessary.

When I look around me, I see many people who have questions about life and faith that they would really like to ask. In the church generally we have not always been very skilled at inviting questions or at listening. We have been good at supplying answers, often to questions that no one is actually asking. I remember disgracing myself with some evangelical brothers some years ago in Aberdeen when a crusade was promoted in the city entitled "Christ the Answer". I asked at a meeting "So, what's the question?" (Yes, I do still often ask awkward questions, just as I did when I was a schoolboy!) My question on this occasion was certainly not appreciated.

Indeed, the church often does not even like to answer questions about itself. It is though, like Parsifal in his search for the Holy Grail, the church continually fails to ask the right question.

I have been impressed by the work that has been done through the Alpha Courses over a wide cross-section of churches and traditions. These courses for enquirers began in the Anglican Church of Holy Trinity Brompton and have spread and developed. One of the most appealing aspects of the course is that there are no holds barred when it comes to questions. Participants may ask anything they wish about the Christian faith and they can also challenge any of its cherished doctrines. Nothing is off-limits and there is no pressure to sign up. It is not surprising that these courses have been so successful.

I believe that although the signs are not presently good for the institutional church, the Christian gospel will eventually prevail in the longer term. I doubt if all this will happen in my lifetime. It may not even happen in this century. I suggest that there will be many followers of Jesus Christ but probably less conventional than most of us would like. There will be a diversity of views. There will be meetings together for fellowship and discussion but probably not in large stone-built churches. There will be very few full time clergy. Where there are worship services, many of these will be led by lay people. The God we worship and the Jesus we follow will probably be more

inclusive and much more tolerant than yesterday's model. God our father will also be God our mother.

I have become convinced that we rely too much on ministers. We (rightly) expect a great deal of them but perhaps we expect too much. And maybe even congregations rely far too much on the personality of their minister. As this profession is continuing to decline, this will become less of a problem.

So, I stated earlier that by the time I had finished my first year at New College, I felt comfortable in my position as a mainstream Church of Scotland evangelical. It is more than forty years since I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Have a changed my outlook or beliefs? I suspect that we all change. Indeed, the Christian Gospel is all about change. I would hope that I am a wiser and more rounded person than I was when I was first ordained. I have had quite a few hard knocks along the road (Who hasn't?), yet I have also had many interesting experiences.

In the last ten years, I have expanded an interest from my earlier days and am both a qualified hypnotherapist and NLP Master Practitioner. I have read, with considerable interest, many books that might be considered New Age. Some I have found helpful and some less so. I have become much more interested in the wider aspects of spirituality and more open to discussing such difficult issues as reincarnation with others. I have become interested in the great European Heresy, referred to above.

But yet, I continually cast my anchor back to where I first began.

Yes, whatever label other people may slap on me, I consider myself as still belonging to the great evangelical tradition of the Church of Scotland. I still believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the World and that the Bible is the Word of God. I maintain a deep love for and burden for our national Kirk.

The main change I see in myself is that I no longer feel the need always to be "right" nor do I wish to correct those who differ from me. I am much more live and let live. Whilst I might prefer that there was more uniformity, I need to learn to live without it. All of us in church will probably have to make this adjustment. We all see through a glass darkly.



We must all learn to shed ourselves of our spiritual pride - and I say that to myself more than to others. If anything I have said in this wee booklet offends anyone, then I am sorry.

It is only too easy to forget that Jesus Christ is not the property of the church. He is a cosmic figure that belongs to all faith traditions. He is highly respected in many of the great world religions. I do not feel a great need to force people of other faiths to convert. I am well aware that Jesus said that no one can come to the Father except through him. But, just as Christ was latent - but present - in the Old Testament, he can also be latent in other faiths. We give our gods different names and yet the great world religions have far more in common than they themselves might think.

I make one very important exception to this. Jesus was himself a Jew. It is a though we have forgotten this somewhat inconvenient fact. Of course, God is faithful beyond our understanding. He made the Old Covenant with his chosen people. He sent his only Son to them and they rejected him. Yet, because he is entirely faithful, God cannot go back on his word and will never break the Old Covenant. When the veil that is over the eyes of the Jewish people is lifted, when they see that Jesus Christ is their messiah, it will be, as Saint Paul tells us, life for the dead (Romans 11: 15). That is a great event that has still to happen. At New College, Professor Tom Torrance told us that it could be within the next two hundred years.

Our mission to the Jews has to be carefully and respectful. There are centuries of persecution, hurt and misunderstanding to be dealt with. The Cross remains a stumbling block. The Jews will never become "Christians" because that word has too much negative baggage attached to it. They will retain their Jewish identity but they too will live under the hopes and promises of the New Covenant.

In closing, I want to share a vision that I had recently. I saw again a picture of the Burning Bush, the bush that Moses saw in the wilderness that burned but was not consumed. The Burning Bush is the emblem of the Church of Scotland. I believe that the fire of God is burning through his church both in judgment and renewal.

Every year in Scotland, large areas of heather moor are burned so that healthy re-growth may take place. I believe that something similar is taking

place in the Kirk. I also believe it is more important to think about the renewal than to be obsessed with blaming and finger pointing.

I do genuinely perceive that God is preparing to do a new thing in Scotland. The New Covenant promise made in Jeremiah was, of course, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Yet, every day, God remembers that he made his Covenant both under the old and the new dispensations. However bleak the landscape may seem for the Kirk at present, God has not forgotten this little land of Scotland.

But his judgment will fall first on all of us. The evangelicals (in some cases) believe that everyone but themselves is due for judgement. That is a delusion. All will be judged and all will have fallen short. We can only do the best we can and come just as we are, clinging only to the Cross of Christ.

At the end of the day, we are - all of us - unworthy servants, no one more so than me.

This is my Story

This is my Song

## **Other Publications by Alasdair Gordon**

*Lochore and Ballingry: A Parish History* (1961)

*Consider your Verdict* (1971)

*Beneath the Cross of Jesus* (1972)

*Historical Notes on Fintray Parish Church* (1973)

*The Hope of Israel* (Alasdair Gordon and William Still, 1977)

*Elements of Scots Law* (Alasdair Gordon and David Field, 1997)

*Contract Law Basics* (2nd ed. 2003)

Contributor to *Fundamentals of Scots Law* (2003)

Contributor to the *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (2005)

*Succession Law Basics* (2nd ed. 2007)

Contributor to *Understanding Scots Law* (2007)

*Christmas Snow and Other Poems* (2013)

*Dial Good News* (2013)

Some of the above are out of print and may be reissued at some future date in electronic form. In addition, there are a number of articles in magazines and periodicals that have not seen the light of day for many years. It is planned also to reissue at least some of these in electronic form, on a gradual basis.