

This is my Story This is my Song

Reminiscences and Musings of a Maverick Presbyterian

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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)

Where there is no vision, the people perish

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

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)

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Joel 2:28 (NIV)

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

Joel 2:25 (KJV)

Run the straight race through God's good grace

Lift up your eyes and seek his face;

Life with its path before us lies;

Christ is the way and Christ the prize.

[John S B Monsell]

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Foreword to First Edition

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,
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July 2013

Foreword to Second Edition

I am grateful to all of my friends who made comments on the first edition of this booklet. I *do* listen to what people say and in some cases I have taken their comments or criticisms on board.

Some people were kind in their responses. Others received my various thoughts graciously, albeit with politely disguised irritation. Some said nothing at all, which leaves me guessing.

I have revised and considerably expanded my original text for this edition. I have also corrected a number of minor errors and updated certain factual information.

Let me emphasise again that his booklet makes no pretensions to being either a literary or scholarly work. It is written in a conversational style.

As before, I take sole responsibility for all comments and interpretations in the booklet. If there are times when I sound harsh or critical, please bear in mind that the person whom I criticise most is myself.

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

Alasdair Gordon

August 2014

Foreword to Third Edition

I am taking the opportunity to update and slightly expand the second edition. The foreword comments I made on previous editions still apply.

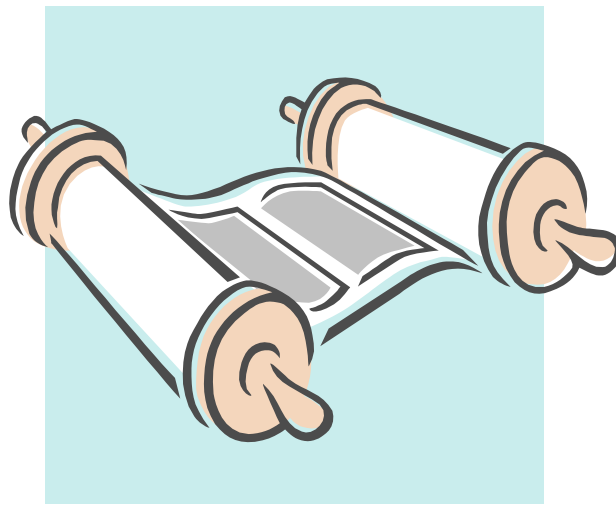
This is *my* story, this is *my* song!

Alasdair Gordon

August 2015

Part 1

This is my Story



Early Years and First Call to Ministry

I am an only child. This 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 me, 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 to be somewhat of a maverick or perhaps even a loose cannon. I certainly have the reputation across the board for being unpredictable and for often surprising people. My own mother said of me that I was a "dark horse" and she was never entirely sure of what I was thinking. When I was a child, she used to say that she could read me like a book. The truth is that she and I both knew that this was completely untrue!

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 one party line. In Kirk politics, I have often taken a pragmatic approach, which some colleagues at times have found both puzzling and frustrating.

I first saw the light of day 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 still consider myself to be a "Peterheid loon".

Not surprisingly, people can see in me some similarities to both of my parents. However, I am not obviously like either of them. In particular, I do not seem to have inherited many of their respective abilities and talents. My father, Charles Gordon, was somewhat of an intellectual and had about him the touch of a Renaissance man. He did not have an easy young life. His mother, a strong, stable and resourceful lady, died when he was a young teenager. His father had been invalided out of the First World War. Charles very much had to make his own way in the world. After mopping up many school prizes at Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen (where he was a scholarship boy), he managed to clock up two First Class Honours degrees in different subject areas when such awards were much rarer than they are now. He was a brilliant linguist. Although on paper he only had schoolboy French, he was often complimented (by French people) on his elegant and accurate written French.

Dad had a lifelong interest in cryptic crossword puzzles which would have left most people standing. Even in his last illness and only days away from death, he was still solving the Sunday Times "Mephisto" puzzle! Yet, although most people thought of him as a linguist, he also had a lifelong interest in Mathematics. During the time that he was Rector of Dunfermline High School, if a member of the Maths department was absent, he would willingly step in and teach such areas as calculus, trigonometry and solve complicated algebraic equations. I have often thought that, with his unique insights and knowledge, he would have made a good code breaker. After he retired, one of his neighbours was a lecturer in mediaeval French at Aberdeen University. He used to often bring in texts of documents written in obscure and archaic French mixed up with smatterings of Latin. Dad could almost invariably decipher them.

After his death, I made a point of depositing his personal papers, writings and other items, such as his University Greek medal, to Aberdeen University Library archives for preservation. I am glad that I took that simple step.

In spite of his academic achievements, Charles was always modest and unpretentious. He carried his learning very lightly. Whilst some people have unfavourably compared me with him intellectually, he himself never once made such an unfair comparison. He had no wish for me to be a carbon copy of him, simply to be true to myself. I do readily admit that I am not half the man that he was.

My mother (Gena) was much more artistic. She came from a family for whom music was very important. Gena was a brilliant pianist (LRAM in pianoforte), a competent organist, a good singer and she could turn her hand easily to drawing, painting, embroidery, cooking, baking and such like. How far, if at all, I have inherited any of my parents' talents and attributes, other must judge.

I was always close to both of my parents and still miss them.

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 schoolboy and as a student, 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 and committed church organist in Peterhead from the age of 18 to the age of 80.

My own earliest recollection of church was being taken to an infant Sunday school in Bridge Street Church in Wick sometime around 1945. At the time, my father had recently been appointed Rector of Wick High School. Right through my childhood and my teenage years, God was very real to me and I do not recollect having any particular problems of doubt. This means that I cannot point to a great "conversion" moment in my life when, as it were, I saw the light. I cannot really remember a time when I hadn't seen it although, like most people, I have blown hot and cold over the years.

In 1948, when I was aged five, we moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed Rector of Dunfermline High School. It was a huge cultural shock for me. Apart from Sunday school, I had never really interacted with other children before. People in Caithness speak quietly and avoid eye contact, whereas in West Fife people tend to be rather loud-mouthed and "in your face". It seemed to me that everyone was shouting. I found this scary and I can only describe my first day at school in Dunfermline as among the worst days of my life. Fortunately, I did settle down surprisingly quickly. Children are much more resilient than we sometimes imagine.

Primary school was happy enough for me. It was a very different world and school was certainly low-tech. In the infant class we were still often using slates and the building was illuminated by gas. Paper was in short supply in these somewhat austere post-war years. Sweets were also strictly rationed and I believe that did me no harm. Kids of my vintage were quite fit and well enough fed. There were few, if any, obese children nor did we seem to be affected by the various allergies that seem to dog many children today.

I doubt if any of my former teachers would have described me as in any way troublesome. I was a quiet child and basically did as I was told. I managed to keep out of scrapes. I remember when I was aged around nine, a rather rough boy tried to pick a fight with me in the playground. I punched him so hard that I sent him flying. I am not proud of doing so but it did demonstrate to my contemporaries that, even if I was quiet and solitary, I was not going to allow myself to be bullied.

I remember very vividly the early 1950s with the unfolding of various important events - the Festival of Britain, the death of King George VI,

the conquest of Everest and, of course, the Coronation in 1953. In those times, the general feeling was optimistic and forward looking. Rationing had recently come to an end and people were moving into new houses. Our primary school was wired for electricity. Parents and staff raised sufficient funds to provide a school radio system. There was still a real sense of community. This contrasts with today, where so many people seem to be highly competitive, cynical, disillusioned or angry.

At the time of the Coronation, there were some popular songs surrounding the event. One of these began with the words "Elizabeth of England..." When we were learning it class, I sat silent with my arms folded. The teacher stopped playing the piano and asked me why I was not singing. I replied politely but also assertively, that the Queen was not the Queen of England, that she was Queen of Scotland too and that it wasn't fair! The teacher gave me the strangest look - a mixture of smile and frown. Anyway, nothing more was said and I always remained silent at any class renderings of this trivial ditty. Once again, I had demonstrated my unpredictability!

Not long after this event, when I was aged ten, I contracted viral pneumonia. This is the only time in my life to date when I have been seriously ill. The doctor was in a state of considerable anxiety as he had lost a strong young farmer to the same virus only the week before. Antibiotics were of no use as it was a virus. I was comatose and withdrawn. I sensed something was wrong because of my parents' forced jollity and their whispering with the doctor outside my bedroom door. Children may be small, but they are not stupid. The doctor was visiting me up to three times a day, although unable to do anything of consequence. I thought that there was at least a possibility that I was going to die. In fact, I asked my mother if I was going to die and her immediate denial of such a suggestion was totally unconvincing.

I wasn't really afraid because I did actually believe, with a simple and childlike faith, that Jesus would take me to heaven. I was a bit worried, however, as to how I was going to manage without my Mum and Dad to look after me. I did not realise at the time how difficult it must have been for them to face the real prospect of losing their wee boy. In any event I made a full recovery and have enjoyed remarkably robust health throughout my adult life. This is something that I do not take for granted and hope that I never will. We can never know what lies ahead of us.

During our twenty year stay in Dunfermline I went to Sunday school at Dunfermline Abbey and, as a young man, I was actively involved in the life of Erskine Church which was, at the time, located in the centre of the town.¹ This congregation subsequently moved out of the town centre and relocated in a residential area. On my last visit to Dunfermline in 2013, I was sorry to see my old church boarded up and derelict.

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 the momentum, just as had happened in the previous century with the revivals of Moody and Sankey.

There was, at the time, a young doctor in Dunfermline who had a severe drink problem. He was on the verge of losing his career, livelihood and family. In those days, the police were able to turn an occasional blind eye to drink driving in a way that certainly could not be tolerated today. However, he was on his last warning. Without telling anyone, the doctor in question 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 on a school holiday 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 often seemed to apply in Presbyterianism! As this was before Vatican II, the Mass was still being said in magisterial Latin, which aesthetically greatly appealed to me, although I make no pretensions to being a classical scholar. Anyway, the Roman Catholic Church had a narrow escape in that this adolescent phase soon passed and I returned to the fold of the Kirk.

Both as a child and as a teenager, I was somewhat of a mystic and a day-dreamer. I was often, it seemed, somewhere else. I generally preferred

¹ *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 25-46. Also *Whose Faith Follow* pages 10-19

my own company to that of my peers. Even now, I still value a degree of solitude.

My parents were concerned that I spent too much time on my own and felt that I would benefit from the company of other young people of my age. I was sent to join first the Cubs and then the Scouts. I think it was good for me and in many ways I enjoyed it. I did not much care for the annual camps with their rain-sodden tents, terrible food and unspeakable sanitary arrangements. However, in those days such conditions would have been considered as character forming. Maybe they were. At a later date, I was connected with the Boy's Brigade, an organisation for which I also have considerable respect. Dual nationality can sometimes come in handy when it comes to organisations.

At school, I was very interested in religious studies. In my time, the exams for the Higher Leaving Certificate 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 as a religious studies project to go in search of Saint Serf, a Celtic Saint, known as the Apostle of the Ochils. I cycled for miles over several Saturdays, accompanied by a long-suffering school friend (whose daughter, Rev MaryAnn Rennie, is now the Minister of Dunfermline Abbey).

We were very fortunate at Dunfermline High School in having a specialist teacher in Divinity, Rev Edwin S Towill, an Anglo-Scot who came originally from Carlisle and had enjoyed a very successful parish ministry in Edinburgh. He had a remarkable understanding and tolerance of teenagers, whilst at the same time establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries. He had his own unique way of opening up religious debate and making people think. He also had a wide knowledge of church history and understood its many traditions.

He was one of the few people whom I have met who could actually be "all things to all men" and yet maintain his own position and integrity. He seemed to be equally comfortable in preaching in Dunfermline Abbey as in the local Baptist church where he was an established favourite. I think he taught me to see that it is important to know what you believe and why you believe - but equally important to understand why others sometimes take a different position - and to be able to respect that tradition. Mr Towill did a great deal to foster my own self-esteem and I owe him a considerable

debt. It is with regret that I say now that I don't think I ever thanked him properly.

In my sixth year at school, with Mr Towill's encouragement, I wrote a booklet entitled "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History"² which was also serialised in the local newspaper, "The Dunfermline Press". My teachers and peers expressed considerable surprise. Teenage schoolboys do not generally write articles for newspapers. I was told (neither for the first time, nor for the last time) that I was a "dark horse". The articles gained me the school Divinity prize, one of the very few prizes that I have ever won throughout my entire life.

I was very well behaved at Dunfermline High School, although by no means academically distinguished. As my father was Rector of Dunfermline High School, I maintained a low profile throughout my time there. Some fellow pupils and teachers were a little wary of me, fearing that I might tell tales out of school. I never did, nor would my father have dreamt of putting me into such an invidious position. Nevertheless, my experience at school did tend to foster my existing tendency to be somewhat solitary.

I was told in later life that, both at primary and secondary school level, I enjoyed 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 in that respect.

At school, I absolutely hated games and gymnastics, I suppose largely because I am not a natural team player. I was fortunate in that my gym teacher at school was very understanding and did not force me. I was allowed to go running or swimming on my own or with one or two pals to count as the equivalent of a gym period. I still have no interest in any kind of sport, either as a participant or a spectator.

I also have had a great interest in hypnosis and altered states of reality since I was a schoolboy. I see no problem with hypnosis being used in Christian circles although some people will rush to condemn it, usually out of ignorance and prejudice. I also see great value in the responsible use of Christian meditation. I am interested to see the increasing use of Mindfulness, even though its origins are not specifically Christian. To me, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. It may seem odd for someone who is known to be in the evangelical tradition of the Church of

² *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 12-24

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 any party line.

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

After leaving school I read for a degree in law (LL.B) at Edinburgh University. It was actually easier at that time to get into Law than into Arts, provided the applicant had a pass in Latin. I note with some amusement that when I applied for admission to the Law Faculty, I was accepted by return of post even with my minimal entrance group. Those were the days! There was, however, a high drop-out rate at the end of the first year. I was greatly relieved not to be among that number.

In the early 1960s, only some ten per cent of young people went on to University. We Scottish students all got our fees paid (by memory the fees for the whole year amounted to around £35!) plus an allowance from the Scottish Education Department. Even wealthy students received a minimum grant of £50 per year, worth much more then than now. There was no anxiety about finding employment after graduation as there were more jobs available than people to fill them. Life was simpler and, relatively speaking, cheaper. We did not have computers or smart-phones. Students did not leave University with huge debts as some do today. Indeed, in those days, nobody wanted to lend money to students. We were expected to be impecunious.

I enjoyed the Law course well enough, although my heart was not entirely in it. I studied harder than I needed to as I still 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. I was surprised to find that I was passing the law exams quite comfortably. I made some friends at the time and went around with a pleasant crowd of young men, with all of whom I have now lost touch.

I well remember my graduation day in the McEwen Hall in Edinburgh. In fact, I had what would now be called an "aha" moment. I had always assumed that if anyone went to University s/he would emerge at the other end knowing a great deal. Actually, I somewhat ruefully realised that although I had managed to pass a lot of tiresome exams, I had forgotten most of what I had swotted up and that I probably did not know very much that was actually worth knowing. This was a very significant discovery for

me. I believe true wisdom often lies in being aware of what we do not know. Whilst I do value the privilege of University education, I realise that it is not the "be all and end all" of everything. The most important lessons of life are not taught there or indeed in any place of learning.

After graduation, I served the traditional two year law apprenticeship with an Edinburgh firm of solicitors. It was a useful experience in some ways although my heart was even less in legal practice than it had been in legal study. I did, however, enjoy conveyancing, which had been my strongest subject at University. I remember spending more time than I really needed, in the handsome search room of HM Register House at the end of Princes Street pouring over copies of (mainly) Victorian feu charters. It was during my time of apprenticeship that I decided to test my growing sense of a 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

Not surprisingly, there were a number of formalities to go through in order to be recognised as a candidate for the ministry. I had to complete the inevitable application form and supply appropriate references. In those far-off days, the selection process for ministry candidates was surprisingly light and informal compared with today. I was invited to attend for an afternoon interview in the Church of Scotland Offices at 121 George Street in Edinburgh. On the basis of the interview, the decision would be made.

I duly presented myself in my uncomfortable best suit and white shirt before a roomful of the great and the good. They were all men, of course, and comprised a selection of senior ministers and 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 and whom I would come to know better at a later date. Though he looked somewhat austere, he had a twinkle in his 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 quite firmly 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 about which I knew next to nothing. Being self-opinionated, this was not such a major challenge as I had anticipated. I am not someone who is generally short of words, although sometimes I can be short on depth and content!

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 certainly bought a very great deal more in 1966 than it would today. It proved to be extremely welcome over my three years of study. Once again, I was also fortunate enough to have my University fees paid and I was awarded a grant by the Scottish Education Department.

There duly came my formal acceptance from the Church of Scotland as a candidate in training for the ministry plus the required endorsement by my (then) home 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 comfortably and, to my great surprise, New Testament Greek actually became one of my strongest subjects. I do sometimes surprise myself.

We were also 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 presumed that students were all thoroughly familiar with Scripture before darkening the door of New College. And the Church of Scotland just wanted to make quite sure that we were! To fail any of the Bible exams was considered to be somewhat of a disgrace. I know of one fellow-student who did. He kept it very quiet and, when the re-sit came round, took himself off to sit it covertly 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 opened 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 complete university and not merely a theological college. 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 to match his other buildings at the foot of the Mound, but the Free Kirk was having none of such apparent paganism. Playfair's revised plan was what we see today, a curious mixture of fake Tudor and Gothic.

At the time when I attended New College, surprisingly little of the building had actually changed internally in more than 100 years, although it has since been radically modernised. 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 definite 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. The male students used the impressive brass and black marble General Assembly toilets in the College basement!

Edinburgh in the 1960s was a rather different city from what it is today. To state the obvious, there was no Scottish Parliament. The city had a somewhat comfortably down-at-heel feeling. It was very much a city that was living on its past, or so it seemed. It was also still living up to its nickname of "Auld Reekie" in many respects. Many of the iconic buildings had been blackened by generations of smoke. One clear recollection of student days both at the Old College and at New College is the distinctive smell of beer being brewed. Depending on the direction of the wind, this quite pleasant smell might be wafted from the Holyrood brewery (where that extraordinary looking Parliament building now stands) or from Fountainbridge. The rubber works could also add its unique contribution. Another recollection is the sound of horses' hooves on cobbled streets. St Cuthbert's Cooperative Society milk floats were all horse-drawn and there were also many brewers' drays transporting barrels of beer to hostelrys throughout the city.

The majority of the BD students at New College were candidates for the Church of Scotland ministry which, at that time, was only open to men³ although that position was to change during my time at New College. Ministry candidates included a high proportion of younger men, like me, in their twenties. Most of the younger men, unlike me, had come straight from an Arts degree. There were also a few "mature students" 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

³ Ordination of women to ministry was approved in 1968.

but, at that time, were taught in the main University and not in New College. As time has gone on, Religious Studies has proved a major growth area whereas the numbers of men or women seeking to enter ministry via the traditional BD route has considerably shrunk.

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 had a bit more confidence, 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 at least reasonable bright. I had no real difficulty in passing the exams. 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 (usually referred to as Bettyhill) 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.

I was especially puzzled at the Highland communion practices whereby the communion "season" lasted for several days. Even more puzzling (to me) was that at the actual communion service on Sunday morning, only a tiny handful of the well-attended congregation came forward to take communion.

The communion season was officially opened on Thursday morning with a service attended by pupils from the local primary school. There were further preparatory services on the evenings of Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Communion was dispensed on Sunday morning with a thanksgiving service in the evening. Some churches even had a further service on Monday evening.

The communion season was a feat of endurance and usually a visiting minister preached at the preparatory services. Even more puzzling was the so-called "fast day", on the Thursday. During my time at Bettyhill, I attended a Thursday morning service at Elphin, a crofting township in Assynt, about 15 miles north of Ullapool. The Free Church folk, almost

next door, were (as is their custom) observing communion at exactly the same time as the Church of Scotland. The clergy and elders from both churches adjourned to a local bed and breakfast where we were served with one of the biggest lunches I have ever seen. Even for a hungry young man, finishing the meal was quite a struggle. I asked why Thursday was called a "fast day", when we ate so much. Judging by the silence that followed, I had asked the awkward question, not for the first time (or the last time) in my life.

I spent three full months at Bettyhill, preaching most Sundays at Altnaharra and also in the little "tin tabernacle" church of Syre at the head of Strathnaver. On two Sundays, armed with the confidence of youth, I travelled south to conduct the morning service at Laing Parish Church which, at the time, was vacant. For me, this was all good experience.

During my days at New College, I also undertook student assistantships during the term. In my first year, I was assigned to Saint Paul's Parish Church in Dunfermline, which provided a good introduction. Sadly, this handsome hexagonal building in the town centre was later destroyed by fire and the congregation was dissolved.

In my second year, I was assigned to Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh 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 in his comments although I used to wonder to myself what he actually thought.

He did give me one useful piece of advice that I remember to this day. He told me that when I was announcing the Scripture Reading, it was important to pause and look up at the congregation. I still remember his words: "It's the Word of God for the people of God." On a much less important matter, Professor Porteous also showed me the knack of how to stand, talk to people and comfortably hold a cup of tea all at the same time, which was certainly an excellent example of practical theology!

In my third and final year I was attached to Broughton Place Church, a handsome classical building ⁴ on the edge of the New Town of Edinburgh. A previous minister of the congregation had been one of several distinguished "John Browns". ⁵ A prominent member of the congregation in my time was

⁴ Now an auction room.

⁵ *Whose Faith Follows* pages 26-30

one of the judges in the Court of Session. I used to wonder whether he thought I argued my case well, or not. Perhaps fortunately, I will never know.

By the time I had entered 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 now commonly referred to as 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 measure of common sense and 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 person. 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. Although it is a cliché, it is surely true that the things that unite are more important than the things that divide.

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 and challenging lectures of Professor Tom Torrance.

However, I felt that I did not have a sufficient background in philosophy to grapple with Dogmatics, so I opted for New Testament. Given the wisdom and benefit of hindsight, I am not sure that I made the best decision (for me).

I do 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 attended several extra tutorial groups that he held in his home. I don't think I ever thanked him properly.

I also had to choose one elective speciality within New Testament studies which, in my case was textual criticism. I discovered that I was the first

student in about ten years to have chosen what was perceived as a boring subject, although I personally found it fascinating. The choice meant that I had regular one-to-one seminars with Rev Dr Ian Moir, who was always a scholar and a 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 today's newspaper.

In my final year, I was particularly fortunate in being able to attend the seminars offered by Very Rev Professor James S Stewart, still a much respected and charismatic figure. He was kind enough to invite his seminar class to his own home. To my surprise, he handed out copies of the Billy Graham Song Book and competently accompanied our singing on his grand piano!

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 who spoke with quite a thick Glasgow accent and carried his considerable knowledge very lightly. He had a dry sense of humour that he could use effectively in class whilst, at all times, handling the Scripture text with unflinching respect.

The Professor of New Testament, Hugh Anderson, suffered a tragic bereavement with the totally unexpected death of his son, aged (by memory) around 20, half way through my second year. This meant that he was really not functioning fully for quite some time and he had virtually no input into my final honours year. This was a considerable lack and three of the four New Testament honours students, including myself, virtually had to teach ourselves with some help behind the scenes from the kind and diplomatic Robin Barbour.

As an honours student, I had the option, in studying church history, of taking classes in the early church rather than in the reformation period. I went for the early church option, something I have never regretted. Our teacher was the distinguished patristic scholar, David Wright who, at the time was still quite a young man. David certainly knew his stuff and was incredibly thorough although he showed little empathy with people who wanted to enter the ministry. If, today, I have any insight into the complicated history of the early church, it is because of David's classes.

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 during the minority of her daughter, the future Mary Queen of Scots. The Residence commands the most fantastic view over Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth, Fife and far beyond. I did not really appreciate this at the time.

The building dates from the earlier part of the nineteenth century and, in my time, it was almost literally creaking at the seams. The plumbing and heating systems were antiquated and the electricians decidedly dodgy. The Residence was, at the time, 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 a matron, the redoubtable Miss "Minnie" Mackenzie, whom we young men-folk liked, respected and sometimes even feared!

One fellow student whom I particularly remember from New College Residence days is George Dragas, who came from Athens and, at the time, was studying to become a minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Greece, although at a later date he moved over to the Greek Orthodox Church. George spoke almost perfect English and even developed a slight Scots accent during his time in Edinburgh.

He was certainly the brightest under-graduate in the Faculty of Divinity in my year. Later, he would be appointed as a Lecturer at the University of Durham and later still Professor of Patrology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts.

George could never understand why we Scots always complain about our weather when we have such a wonderful cool climate! George paid several visits to my parents' home in Dunfermline. He and Dad hit it off immediately and spent some happy times discussing the correct pronunciation of certain Greek words!

My father retired from his post as Rector of Dunfermline High School in 1968 and was invited to take up a Research Lectureship at Moray House College of Education. At the same time, my parents relocated from

Dunfermline to a new house at Milltimber on lower Deeside on the outskirts of Aberdeen.

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

It was an exciting time. "Life with its path before us lies."

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 (now linked with Ruthrieston West) was a settled congregation situated 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 hard-working, faithful and conscientious pastor with a congregational visiting list that would make most ministers groan in disbelief. He also maintained a very comprehensive record of all the homes in the parish and what church connection, if any, each family had.

Mr Drummond had been the first, and thus the only, minister of the charge which had given an element of continuity that was unusual in church extension. Only too often, idealised young men had accepted appointments to church extension charges only to leave, exhausted and burned-out, after five years. And in those days, church extensions ministers were pretty far down the "status" order, if the truth be told, nor were they paid much above the minimum stipend.

I was also fortunate in being able to live in the new parental home at Milltimber during my Assistantship.

Mr Drummond gave me the opportunity to take part in all aspects of parish life and freely shared his own experiences with me. At no time ever did he "dump" tasks on me. He always gave me my "place" and treated me more as a colleague than as an assistant. He always referred to me as "Mr Gordon" in front of the congregation. I conducted one of the two services every Sunday, which was good practice for me.

I heard from my contemporaries that some of them 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 pleased for him that in his last year of his twenty-year ministry at Garthdee, he was elected Moderator of the Presbytery of

Aberdeen - not before time. I was sorry that he only lived for a short time after he moved to St Andrews for 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 for a minister. 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 many congregations were interested in a young bachelor looking for his first charge. I was "heard" by a number of vacancy committees, including a "good" charge in Carluke and the inner city, traditionally evangelical, Aberdeen congregation of John Knox (Gerrard Street). Both were genuinely interested but neither of them felt that I was "their man". And they were probably right.

Yet, things suddenly moved quite quickly. Slightly to my surprise, I received a call to the newly linked rural charge of Fintray with Kinellar & Blackburn ("FKB") on the edge of the Presbytery of Aberdeen. I was ordained and inducted into the charge at Fintray Parish Church in June 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" (their words, not minesim). I am quite sure that the committee members meant what they said, but it became clear to me at an early stage in my tenure of the charge that they were certainly not speaking for the congregations as a whole.

It was not long before I found that the situation on the ground was rather different from what had been presented. There were no parish profiles in those days and cards were not always put on the table. The last thing that most of the two congregations actually wanted was any kind of change, even in the smallest detail. Also, the recent linking was (perhaps inevitably) unpopular with most of the two congregations who, perversely, seemed to blame me for it! During my ministry, even the office-bearers of the two congregations barely communicated with one another, which did not make matters any easier for me.

There were two similar but not identical services each Sunday morning, one at Fintray at 10.30 am and the second service, some three miles away, at Kinellar & Blackburn at 11.45 am. This arrangement operated well enough in summer, although the timing was just a little tight. People in Fintray criticised me for leaving their church as soon as the 10.30 am service was over, but I had little choice. The journey between the two churches was a source of anxiety in winter when the winding 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 in my time) who tended to huddle themselves together under the gallery 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 rather dispiriting. However, my tentative suggestion that folks might move into the centre area and that I might come down from the very high pulpit to speak from the communion table were firmly rejected. I was told in no uncertain terms that people would rather stay away from church than move "their" seats. There was no point in pursuing a lost cause and I soon gave up trying to do anything differently in this regard (and in most other regards, to be honest).

With honourable exceptions, I found that Fintray, of the two congregations, was easily the harder furrow to plough. In spite of the assurances of the vacancy committee that the congregation wanted change, the exact opposite was clearly the case, as illustrated by my futile attempt even to suggest a 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 might 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 maybe even an occasional word of encouragement.

Curiously, the vast majority of the congregation - i.e. those who seldom or never attended or gave 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. This was based on the assumption that everything would remain just as it had been in the time of their grandparents. Even more curious was the fact that many of those same nominal members who were so resistant to change were also among the most vocal critics of me and of all aspects of the church as it was.

A small number of the Fintray elders - and I stress that it was only a minority - started what I could only describe as a whispering campaign to ridicule and criticise everything about me and my ministry. I was constantly compared critically with all the previous ministers who, it seems, in contrast to me, had been possessed only of the most outstanding virtues and had been totally without any kind of fault. This grew very wearying, especially as there was really nothing I could do about it except try to be faithful and maintain my dignity.

I remember well that when I wrote and published a short history of Fintray Parish Church ⁶ 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 150th anniversary of the building of the present church. This was summarily rejected as quite unnecessary. Even the suggestion that we might have a Church notice board to advertise contact details and the time of the service, was also rejected out of hand. That was fairly typical; everything was perfect as it was, it seemed!

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 at times. I wanted to make things better and to see the church moving forward; perhaps I expected too much too soon. Maybe I did not fully understand country ways. But I do not think I deserved the treatment meted out to me by some of the people at Fintray.

Curiously enough, some years after I had left, an invitation was extended to me, instigated by some of the people who had not exactly been among my staunchest supporters, to return one Sunday to Fintray as a guest

⁶ *Autumn Leaves* Volume 3: 4-17

preacher. Great surprise was expressed when, without the slightest hesitation, I gave them the response that most people would surely expect!

I want to balance this by reminding myself that there were also folks in the congregation who were unfailingly pleasant and appreciative. It was certainly not all negative and I believe that all of life's experiences 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 of Fintray 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, reconstructed in 1801 on a very ancient Christian site at the top of a hill. There was a more enthusiastic, though small, congregation and, in contrast with Fintray, people were generally more open and did genuinely want to take their church forward. We seemed, however, to be constantly hampered by a lack of funds and resources.

Kinellar is the smallest rural parish in Aberdeenshire in terms of area and much of it is not strictly rural. The village of Blackburn, the main centre of population, was largely made up of council housing in my time. Since then, the village has greatly increased in size. Its culture has also somewhat changed as a result of several private housing developments. Although there had been a place of worship in Blackburn (former Free Church) it had closed some years earlier, having been judged unsafe by the Presbytery's Property Committee although, to the best of my knowledge, the building is still standing and some fifty years later, in use as commercial premises. The lack of a physical church base in the middle of the village was undoubtedly a considerable handicap. The church did have the opportunity to hire what was then the village hall in Blackburn, a cold, bleak and depressing building if ever there was one!

By and large, my relations with the Kinellar & Blackburn elders and office-bearers were positive. I also felt that the congregation was easier for me to minister to than their neighbours in Fintray on the other side of the River Don. The church was very fortunate in having a thriving Sunday school in Blackburn, ably led by Mrs Margaret Campbell of Kirkton farm, who was always a great support to me and my ministry.

In 1972, some young people 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 some 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 pleasant little church is in a semi-derelict condition and on the "Buildings at Risk" register at the time of first writing. There are plans to turn it into a private house, even though it lies in the middle of a graveyard. The Kinellar & Blackburn congregation now worship in the new Kinellar Community Hall.

I remember one strangely significant event that took place in my time at Kinellar. The local authority had designated a large field at Clinterty on the edge of the parish as a residential camp site for travelling people. This initiative was as generally unpopular with local people then as it probably would be today.

My first dealing with residents of the site was officiating at a wedding. The ecumenically-minded travelling people of Scotland expect to be married in a church although they will tend to go to the nearest one available, irrespective of tradition or denomination. I remember that the wedding in question was a somewhat chaotic event but I was perfectly happy to officiate at it and the families involved were entirely respectful.

My second dealing with the travellers was quite different. I was called in by Telephone Samaritans to speak to a young couple at the site who believed they were being tormented by some kind of evil spirit. I have always been quite sensitive to positive or negative "vibes" in places. At one or two points in my life I have actually seen dead people, including my own grandfather. I tend to sit lightly to all this as the veil between the world of the living and the dead can be very thin.

I do actually believe in what are often called ghosts, although most of these phenomena are no more than left-over energy and are quite harmless. What people see and experience of the phenomena often called ghosts is really no more than the equivalent of viewing a clip from an old film. They are not seeing a real person or a current event. It is rare for the appearance of a ghost to be evil. I also maintain a healthy degree of

scepticism and would always first look for rational explanations of apparent strange noises and unusual phenomena.

However, when people meddle with the occult, they should be aware that they can be dealing with potentially dangerous forces. Just as there are people in the world who seem to be evil, so it is also in the spirit world. In this case, two feckless young couples in the travelling community had been playing a game with a Ouija board. Travelling people are traditionally involved in fortune telling, cursing and such like, most of which is hocus-pocus but which can provide a gateway into more sinister phenomena.

There was a woman living on the site who had led the couple into "playing" with the Oija board. Curiously enough, I recognised her as someone I had recently visited in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in my capacity as parish minister. On that occasion, her reception of me had been cool, to say the least of it. Now, she was openly hostile and unwilling to speak to me at all. Indeed, she looked at me with what I could only describe as loathing. Just a few weeks later, she was prosecuted in Aberdeen Sheriff Court for ill-treating a dog. There is little doubt in my mind that this woman was into some pretty unpleasant stuff.

What might generically be called evil forces can only be present when someone has given them that right, as certainly happened in this case. The couples became frightened at the messages that issued from the board. They actually wrote them down and insisted that I must read them. The messages were clearly of a depraved and evil nature and I will say no more than that. I felt quite sickened just reading them. It was as though in some way my mind had been contaminated.

Since the Ouija session, one of the two couples had been plagued at nights by an apparition (seen by both of them) of a sinister-looking young man dressed in a fringed leather jacket and wielding a knife. This apparition was also, they told me, accompanied by an unpleasant smell and a strange greenish light. The couple involved were genuinely terrified out of the few wits that they possessed between them. I doubt if I have ever witnessed people as afraid as they were. They were literally shaking and the young man hung on to the sleeve of my jacket and seemed unwilling to let go.

I will not go into details about what I did. I will simply say that I pretty soon sent this evil spirit, or whatever it was, packing in the name of Jesus Christ. When I eventually got home, I was shivering and shaking like a leaf

and had to lie down. It was as though the experience had temporarily drawn power out of me.

Of course, the story was soon round the parish and people looked at me with a new respect for at least a week thereafter! I am not the kind of person who sees evil spirits lurking behind every bush, but let no one try to convince me that there is no such thing as a force of evil. Not everything in the spiritual realm is benign, by any manner of means. The fact that many people today do not believe, or do not want to believe, in forces of evil does not mean that they do not exist.

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 of Scotland to the design of the Aberdeen architect William Smith who also built Balmoral Castle for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Although quite a handsome building, Fintray Manse 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 whole house was damp and had suffered from years of virtual neglect.

Living in the manse over the winter could only be described as a feat of endurance, especially with the power-cuts of the early 1970s. When, after a few years, the fabric committee took pity on me and decided to install central heating, the oil crisis of the time had 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.e. over-paid) I was. And, of course, I was so "lucky" in having a house provided "for nothing". I can only presume that this lady subscribed to the popular misperception that ministers only work for one hour each week! Fintray manse was sold some years ago and the present minister lives in a modern house at Blackburn.

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 greatly missed their understanding and support. I was honoured that David asked me to "preach him in" at Larbert. After an outstanding ministry at Larbert, David moved to a charge in Northern Ireland before moving back to

Scotland to take up a strategic and pioneering post as Warden of Rutherford House in Edinburgh whose basic mission is to help people in Scotland to think biblically and theologically.

I also turned my hand to writing and published a number of articles and booklets, some of which I have reproduced in my Autumn Leaves project, although I destroyed most of my unpublished material some years ago. I proved to be 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 that, when we first met, either of us took an instant liking to the other. I thought that Ian 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 came to like and greatly respect Ian and, at one stage, I was in his confidence over a tricky and delicate personal issue that was troubling him. I was pleased for him when he was subsequently 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. He too did not live to see old age.

I also became friendly with a Divinity student named Cliff Rennie, who was a member of Newhills Church, where my friend David Searle was minister. Cliff and I could not have been more different in many ways. He was about my age and probably cleverer than me. He already had a good Second Class Honours degree in English. He had the reputation (which he quite enjoyed) of having been quite a "wild" boy and never out of trouble at school. On the face of it, he seemed an unlikely candidate for ministry. He certainly did not fit the ministerial stereotypes. Cliff used to talk to me about his life for hours on end. I was never quite sure why, except that I listened to what he said and did not pass judgement although I did try to encourage him in what I perceived (rightly or wrongly) as being the "right" direction. He also knew that I do respect and keep confidences.

To cut a long story short, Cliff did manage, after a few wobbles, to be licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Aberdeen and began what was to be a two year assistantship at my old stamping ground at Garthdee.

Towards the end of his time there, I noticed that the charge of Altnaharra and Farr ("Bettyhill"), where I been on a student summer placement in 1967, had become vacant. I urged Cliff to apply. He summarily declined to do so as he refused in principle to apply for any charge. His view was that the Lord would open the right door at the right time. I tend to take a much more pragmatic view and believe that God helps those who help themselves.

So, I took matters into my own hands and secretly contacted the interim moderator on his behalf. Some weeks later, Cliff told me with great excitement that he had been invited to preach "with a view" for Bettyhill. I expressed pleasure and feigned surprise at this news. He was eventually called to that charge. He never knew that I had any part in the process. Was I being an interfering busybody or was I an instrument of God's purposes? Others must judge.

Cliff was married at King's College Chapel, Old Aberdeen, shortly before he moved north. I was his best man. After some years at Bettyhill, Cliff moved to Larbert Old to succeed my good friend and his former minister, David Searle (who, later, was to be *my* best man) when the latter moved to Northern Ireland. After a long ministry at Larbert, Cliff tragically died only a few months into his well-earned retirement.

I strongly 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.

During my time at FKB, I also used to make regular visits to Rev David Randall and his wife, Nan, at Macduff. Dave had been a fellow Honours New Testament student at New College and we had become good friends. He was to have a long, faithful and fruitful ministry at Macduff Parish Church and I always looked forward to renewing fellowship with Dave and his family. He was to spend his entire ministry at Macduff. I was more sorry than I can say when, in his retirement, Dave decided to leave the Church of Scotland in the wake of the "gay minister" furore. However, we can only do what we believe to be right and I am certain that it would not have been a decision that was made lightly.

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 of Newhills (soon to move on to Larbert Old), 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. Carole is also an experienced and well qualified counsellor, involved not only in her own practice but in training and supervising others. We have no children. We are both now retired and still happily married after over forty years.

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 interesting fellow ministers including such names as James Philip (whom I already knew), George Philip, Eric Alexander, Sandy Tait and Tom Swanson.

From quite early in my ministry at FKB, I became involved in Presbytery committees. At the time, Aberdeen Presbytery contained over 80 charges and stretched from Stonehaven in the south to almost as far as Peterhead in the north. It 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.

Being a Presbytery Clerk is a ministry in its own right and like all ministries much of its most useful work tends to be both 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. I am not judgemental and I can - and I do - keep confidences. By nature, I am not a good leader, which perhaps is one of the reasons why I was not a particularly successful minister. However, as Clerk I did not really need to have such skills and the job seemed to suit my personality.

John Mowat could not have been more encouraging or supportive. Although my appointment as Assistant Clerk was initially for eighteen months, 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 eighteen-month tenure as Assistant Clerk was generally 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 was it 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; besides which, a Presbytery Clerk should and must always be even-handed in all of his dealings.

But there was a problem. The local authority boundaries throughout Scotland were due to be radically realigned. The General Assembly, for reasons best known to itself, had decided that it would be in the interests of the Church of Scotland to ensure that Presbytery and new local authority boundaries coincided. Aberdeen Presbytery was then a large and diverse Presbytery, especially since it had absorbed the entire landward Presbytery of Ellon and parts of the defunct Presbytery of Kincardine O'Neil earlier in the twentieth century. Under the proposed adjustments, most of these landward charges were to be disjoined and added to two new re-formed Presbyteries: Gordon and Kincardine and Deeside. 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 very much wanted me to fill the impending vacancy of Clerk. I had been acting acceptably as such for more than a year. 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 quite large, Presbytery with just over 50 charges.

It should also be pointed out that I had absolutely no administrative 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. On paper, it seemed an ideal arrangement.

Well, the Good Book warns us ⁷ that we cannot serve two masters and this turned out to be highly relevant in my case. Within a short time, I was trying to hold down the equivalent of two 75% jobs. Meanwhile, after only a few months, the Langstane Kirk office bearers began to make noises about how expensive it was having two ministers. I may say that I was paid at a rate considerably below that of the actual minister.

I did not have an entirely successful working relationship with the minister at the time. Looking back on this now, I regret that I didn't handle things better. I felt that I was treated very much as an assistant rather than as a colleague. The reality is that neither of us ever properly discussed our relative roles in the congregation. In retrospect, I think that if I had been more open about my own feelings, the relationship (which was superficially perfectly amicable, if a little stiff) might have been very much better.

I also got the distinct impression from some quarters that I was not considered as being quite "good enough" to preach to a congregation of the high "status" of the Langstane Kirk, whose previous minister had been Moderator of the General Assembly. I may say that this congregation, for whom I was thought by some as not quite good enough, is long since dissolved and the splendid building, still incorporating its fine stained glass, has been turned into a nightclub called "Soul". How are the mighty fallen!

However, my time as associate minister at Langstane was certainly not without its encouragements and I enjoyed the liberty of preaching in the large and well filled building. Although I wouldn't cross the road to listen to myself, it is probably fair to say that I am a reasonably competent speaker and preacher. My harshest critic would not accuse me of being dull.

One elderly lady in the Langstane congregation, whom I remember well, as I visited her quite regularly, was a Miss Cox. She was the only daughter of the late Rev Dr James T Cox, formerly Clerk to the Presbytery of Aberdeen and Principal Clerk to the General Assembly. Older ministers and

⁷ Matthew 6: 24; Luke 16: 13

elders will remember that he was the editor of the book "Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland", better known simply as "Cox" that went through many editions.

The fact that I was her father's (in my view, 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 my own 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 good in my soul. Little did she know just how abrasive and dismissive I can be in some circumstances! I did not take much heed to what she said 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.

Sometime around 1974, the Presbytery of Aberdeen was offered the gift of a building at 112 Crown Street, Aberdeen. At the time, it was the premises of the British Women's Temperance Association ("BWTA"). The ladies involved in the BWTA felt that they were all getting older and no longer had the funds or resources to maintain their building. However, it was necessary on this occasion to look the gift horse in the mouth. The proviso from BWTA was that the premises had to be used either to promote temperance or to support people who were addicted to alcohol.

Much of the early negotiation had taken place through Rev Alan Swinton, the Hospital Chaplain at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Although we represented very different theological backgrounds and outlooks, Alan was always well disposed towards me and there was a mutual feeling that we could trust one another. Together we formed the outline of a plan whereby the Presbytery would accept ownership of the building as trustees and use it as a Day Centre for people with alcohol problems. We would invite the local authority, the health board and the Church of Scotland to fund the work as a shared project.

Alan had good contacts within the statutory authorities whereas I, as Presbytery Clerk, had (at the time) maybe just a wee bit of clout within the Church of Scotland, which I was certainly not above using. The problem was that, in those days, statutory bodies did not easily communicate with

one another. However, the social work department and the health board were able to speak to one another on this occasion through the Church of Scotland.

A small steering group was formed, of which I was a member, and we met regularly in on Monday afternoons in an office in Queen's Road, belonging to the health board, just opposite my own birthplace at 55 Queen's Road (which, at the time was the office for the water board). After a considerable amount of planning and discussion, funds were made forthcoming from the local authority and the health board. The building was duly transferred to the Presbytery with my name on the title deeds as one of the trustees.

The upgrading of the building was set in motion, members of staff were appointed and the Centre duly opened its doors, after roughly three years of planning and negotiation. The Church of Scotland (through what would now be called Crossreach), blew hot and cold about being involved, far less providing any funding. They eventually decided not to become involved due to their insistence that anything with which they were connected had to have a distinct Christian ethos with all staff claiming a live church connection. I perfectly understood and respected this position. At the same time, I was a little sorry that they were unable to share resources with the two statutory bodies. That would have been a real breakthrough.

The Day Centre functioned for a good number of years and did a good job. I still regard it as somewhat of a triumph that the church (largely through Rev Alan Swinton and, to a lesser extent, myself) was able to persuade the local authority and the health board to cooperate so closely. At the time, this was thought to be almost impossible. In our own modest way, we had made history. I retained my connection with the Day Centre for many years and served as treasurer for a time.

I loved being Presbytery Clerk and I believe I was reasonably popular and respected in the post, despite my relative youthfulness. I think I did quite a good job. However, after only 18 months in the new joint position I felt I had little choice but to move on, as the post was no longer financially viable, according to the Langstane Kirk. 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. There is no doubt that the Presbytery was disappointed as well. However, it was clear that they could

not afford to fund a post of full-time Clerk, much as they might have wished to.

I now had to look for a charge. Due to a large number of unions, there were not all that many vacancies at this particular time, in contrast with the position today. Ian Pitt-Watson wanted to put my name in for a charge in Washington DC, which was far too scary for a Scottish laddie like me. In addition, there was a problem on the home front. My mother, at age 60, had taken a massive stroke only a few months after I was married. She never entirely recovered either her speech or mobility. My father had to take responsibility for her care which he did, incredibly patiently and faithfully, until only a few weeks before his death in 1992. I felt that, as their only child, I could not move too far away from my parents. I may say that this was entirely my own decision. My father, characteristically, stated quite firmly that I should always put myself and my ministry first.

To cut a long story short, I was appointed minister at the Church Extension Charge of Aberdeen: Summerhill. As it was a Church Extension charge, I was appointed by the Church of Scotland and not called by the congregation. The previous minister had been Rev David W Torrance, the youngest brother of Professor Tom Torrance of New College and a distinguished scholar in his own right. However, there had been some recent problems at Summerhill, with factions and in-fighting in the congregation.⁸

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. Not for the first time, I allowed myself to be flattered. I was duly inducted. Mr Still and David Searle both spoke at my induction social. My pal from New College days, Dave Randall from Macduff, preached me in on the following Sunday. All seemed set for a successful ministry.

However, it actually turned out to be 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. They really needed someone with strong leadership skills, which I simply do not possess. In fairness to myself, I did manage to bring the congregation together and the in-fighting stopped. A handful of people left but, if I am being completely honest, they were no great loss to that particular fellowship.

⁸ *The Reluctant Minister*, David W Torrance (2015)

One great encouragement to me in my time at Summerhill was the stalwart support of a Deaconess of the Church of Scotland, Mrs Nan Bryden. Nan was, at the time, Chaplain's Assistant at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, which was a responsible and demanding post. She lived in a small house in the parish, which she opened up regularly for Bible studies and prayer. She did many good works "by stealth" and proved to be a valued friend and confidante.

Another encouragement came through one of the younger elders, Roy Massie. Roy's connection with Christ's Kingdom had formed slowly over the years. His background was Congregational but he and his wife had attached to Summerhill Church when they moved into their Council house in the parish. At the time he was a laboratory technician at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Originally having had a somewhat nominal church connection, Roy had been considerably influenced by David Torrance, my predecessor. Following the disagreements in the congregation, he had somewhat cooled off again.

During my ministry, he spoke to me at length about many issues of belief and practice and I saw many changes in him. It was very encouraging when, after going to night classes to attain further qualifications, Roy was accepted as a candidate for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. He was to serve faithfully in two charges - New Pitsligo and Moniefeith. I was very sorry to learn of his death in 2012 at the age of 69.

The Summerhill church complex is architecturally interesting. It was erected in the 1960s and comprises a spacious sanctuary, two halls (one is now used as a lounge), kitchen, toilets and ancillary accommodation. In its earliest days, the new congregation had worshipped temporarily in a nearby converted farm building, known locally as the "Barn Kirk".

When the time had come to provide a permanent building, a local architect, Mr W Coutts Youngson, had been invited to produce a plan that retained some of the barn-like features of the congregation's first home. The result was an interesting design that included a large sloping slate roof.

In order to save money, the Church of Scotland Home Board knocked off one third from the original costs, with the result that the building, though unique and superficially attractive, was cheap and gimcrack in construction. The building is really no more than a poor imitation of what it should have been and what the architect had envisaged. In particular, the roof was

constructed of felt and not slate. There is one absolute rule affecting all felt roofs; sooner or later they will always leak and require replacement.

This substandard building proved to be 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 felt roof. Even to put these relatively recent 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. Those who had told me that I was the "right man" now seemed conspicuous by their absence. Everybody seemed to be washing their hands of the problem.

After three years and a half years at Summerhill, 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 badly. I was hurt and angry but I was not sure exactly who I was most angry with - myself or the Church of Scotland.

I was never called to be the minister of what might be called a "good" charge. I do sometimes wonder if things would have turned out differently for me if I had been called to minister to an enthusiastic and supportive congregation. I suspect that the outcome could have much more positive, but I will never know. As it was, I had started as minister of a somewhat grudging linking, moved on to a congregation that did not really want me and finally to a congregation that was doomed to have years of financial struggle just to stay (literally) in the same place.

Just over a year after I went to Summerhill, the post of full-time Clerk to Glasgow Presbytery had fallen vacant on the retirement of the much respected Very Rev Dr Andrew Herron. I did think very seriously about applying for this post and I even had my letter of application written. I have no idea what my chances would have been, although, without being conceited, I think I would certainly have been in the running. On an earlier occasion, Dr Herron had been kind enough to tell me that I was doing a

“wonderful job” as Clerk to Aberdeen Presbytery and he was certainly not the kind of man to throw insincere compliments around.

However, I believed that it would have been morally questionable for me to leave Summerhill after such a short time; probably it would! Certainly, if I had been successful, my life and ministry would have been very different. The job would have been demanding. There would have been real challenges, not least with the many unions and closures caused by the redevelopment of so much of Glasgow. But I would have coped and I would have remained firmly in the service of the Church of Scotland. I often wonder what would have happened if I had posted that application. Did I dodge what might have been my destiny? I will never know.

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

It was a major bereavement to have lost my ministry and, with it, my vocation. Without being melodramatic, it was a far worse bereavement than the death of either of my parents.

It is loss from which I have never entirely recovered and possibly never will.

Exile and Return

After Summerhill, 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 happy years just being ordinary. For me, going back into secular employment was the beginning of what proved to be a long healing process which perhaps is still not yet entirely complete. The duties of the post were well within my competence and I gladly took on a greater 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, cooperative and highly motivated.

I had assumed that when I left Summerhill, I would have the advantage of understanding and support from fellow evangelical ministers but, with honourable exceptions, this was not to be so. Curiously enough, I received far more personal support and good wishes from fellow ministers and elders whom I would have categorised as more "liberal" in their theology. It is indeed a funny old world. It is one of several reasons why I now describe myself as a disillusioned evangelical. I will say more of that in Part 2.

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. That, at least, was the very clear message that I received. 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 that congregation no grudges and all that is now behind me. Let the dead bury their dead.

Mr Still, the minister who had married us, certainly did not adopt this attitude. Indeed he was very kind and understanding, although I am not entirely sure that he did actually understand. He was rather hurt, I think, when I ceased attending his church only a few months after my leaving Summerhill, but he accepted it with characteristic good grace. I never returned to Gilcomston South after that, 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*.⁹ I had not always agreed with Mr Still on every issue.

⁹ *Autumn Leaves* Volume 1: 24-47

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. To 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 absolutely no wish to re-enter Gilcomston South Church. However, I watched his remains being placed into the hearse at the close of the service from the opposite side of Union Street. I had paid my respects and that was the right thing to do.

Carole and I had tried attending a few other churches in Aberdeen after leaving Gilcomston South but my angry and negative feelings at that time towards the Church of Scotland - to say nothing of my own feelings of personal 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.¹⁰

For someone as Scottish, conventional and reserved as I am, the choice of this kind of fellowship must have seemed an odd one. Of course, I have always had the capacity to surprise, being, in my mother's words, a "dark horse". I found classical Pentecostalism to be quite gentle and liberating. The prejudiced stereotype of such 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. In my experience, worship 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. I am always slightly at a loss as to why so many Christians pray for healing and yet seem unwilling to believe that their prayers might just possibly be answered. In fact, perhaps because of an over-reliance¹¹ on a book "Counterfeit Miracles" by the distinguished Princeton Scholar, Professor B B Warfield, many evangelicals are dead scared of any movement of the Holy Spirit, indeed of almost anything that might be termed miraculous and over which they do not have direct control.

¹⁰ Exodus 15: 27

¹¹ In practice, many people who quote this book have never read it.

There were things in the Pentecostal fellowship that occasionally I did find at least mildly irksome. It was considered almost unspiritual to be organised and everything seemed to be done "at the last minute". Occasionally, people ham-acted a little or exaggerated their experience of the Holy Spirit. This is nothing new. It goes back to the time of the New Testament. It almost invariably happens too that at times of revival and renewal some people will go over the score.

My time in the Elim church has certainly taught me to be more tolerant and laid back. I sometimes think that it would be good for every Kirk member to spend at least a year in a Pentecostal fellowship as part of their spiritual education! We can sometimes be too tight, rigid and controlling, especially in the evangelical tradition, and most of us could benefit from lightening up just a little. After some two thousand years, we, as a Christian church, still seem to be searching for the true freedom of the Holy Spirit. One day we might find it but, I suspect that like the Lost Chord, it will be only in heaven.

In 1994, there arose a strange phenomenon now referred to as the "Toronto Blessing". It centred on the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, described as being a neo-charismatic evangelical church, in Ontario, Canada. People taking part in worship claimed to have experienced personal transformation, healing and a greater experience of God's love. That sounds fairly uncontroversial. Less conventionally, worship was said to include falling in the Spirit, shaking, laughter, strange noises and other unusual manifestations. The Toronto congregation increased ten-fold over a short space of time and became part of a larger movement that spread, in small pockets, to the United Kingdom.

Not surprisingly, the whole movement was surrounded in controversy. By and large, evangelical ministers in Scotland were falling over themselves to misrepresent, condemn and ridicule it and to make sure that none of "that sort of thing" found its way into any of their sound Biblically-based churches. As usual, I decided to make up my own mind and I went to hear Guy Chevreau, one of the leaders of the Toronto church and also read his book.¹²

I was actually quite impressed by his moderate and balanced approach. I believe there was a true movement of the Spirit - a touch of revival - and, as often happens, some people did get too carried away. So far as one can

¹² *Catch the Fire*, Guy Chevreau (1994)

judge, it was the same at the Scottish Revivals of Kilsyth, Shotts and Cambuslang and at the time of the American "Great Awakening". In making blanket condemnations of the behaviour of a minority, there is always a danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. But then, evangelicals are often much better at reacting than they are at responding. I would say that some (not all) of those who were so quick to condemn were themselves, dealers in small wares.

The Elim 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 and Presbyterian style of speaking. Also, my Church of Scotland background and membership was not seen as a problem. This was a good time for me and I felt I was spiritually moving forward again. All was going really well until the fellowship was rent asunder by the revelation of a sexual scandal involving the pastor and a young women in the congregation. He had to leave his post immediately. His quitting his ministry brought to the surface a whole lot of forgotten issues for me, even though his reasons for leaving were very different from mine.

There were also now some quite bitter divisions in the congregation as to its future direction. Recriminations and accusations were flying around like bullets in a Wild West saloon.

I did not, and do not, in any way condone the pastor's behaviour which I perceived as a gross abuse of his office and a betrayal of trust. However, let him who is without sin cast the first stone.¹³ I was one of the very few people in the fellowship who continued to visit him and his wife (who suffered far more than anyone else as a result of what had happened). I supported him on a personal and non-judgemental 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. He went on to train successfully for a career in social work.

But "things" for me were never quite the same again in that congregation. A new pastor, Rev David Holdaway, was appointed and he proved to be approachable, friendly and supportive. I greatly appreciated his friendship. He brought a real sense of healing to the church. Yet someone Carole and I never settled down again into the Elim fellowship. Spiritually, it seemed as though I had suffered another major setback.

¹³ John 8: 7

In 1992, after my father died, Carole and I bought my parents' house in Milltimber, on the outskirts of Aberdeen, and moved out of our small flat in the city centre. My mother had to be placed in a local nursing home. This strained our family finances and, more importantly, our physical and spiritual resources. She was well enough cared for but her stay in that home for some eleven years until her death in 2003 was more like a sentence in many ways. She had a long and wearisome time and, if I am completely honest, it did not strengthen my faith. However, we did the best we could.

There was (still is) a thriving and prosperous independent church a couple of streets away from our new home in Milltimber. 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 rather tight 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 to the church as a counsellor (in which she is well qualified and experienced) but that was completely ignored. Frankly, I did not care for their rather patronising attitude to women in general.

The pastor at the time certainly did not warm to me. He was sincere and hard-working, although I thought he was somewhat limited in outlook and, as is often the case with Englishmen, did not entirely understand the spiritual scene in Scotland, but thought that he did. I suspect that he found me to be somewhat threatening, although he had no need to. He certainly avoided contact with me whenever he could. I remember him making sarcastic and unfairly disparaging comments from the pulpit about all things charismatic and I did not respect him for that. Eventually, Carole and I just stopped going. This was a relief in some ways and yet, for me, it was yet another setback and another excuse to perceive myself as a disillusioned evangelical.

I am sorry to say that we did not worship regularly anywhere else for a number of years thereafter. Interestingly, independent churches which claim triumphantly that they are free from the shackles of established churches often develop a tight and controlling culture and finish up being more rigid than the churches with which they consider themselves too good to be associated.

Meanwhile, after nearly ten happy years at Voluntary Service Aberdeen, I took up a post of Lecturer in Business Studies, specialising in Law, at what was then Aberdeen College of Commerce (now part of North East Scotland 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 believe I did reasonably well, including the publication of three student textbooks by a reputable publishing house. Two of these are still in print, although now under a different authorship. I had very mixed feelings when, at age 55, I was given early retirement.

In 1999, 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 enjoyed. I stayed there for twelve years until I retired at the age of 68 in 2011.

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. (This is not *quite* true!)

My major project over a period of three years was a professional doctoral degree in education (EdD) from Calamus International University, an overseas university, which included some very unusual and interesting courses, e.g. positive psychology, emotional intelligence and contemporary spirituality, subjects which would not normally be found in conventional university courses. I learned a great deal from this period of study, although it was hard work and a major commitment. I cannot help feeling just a little resentful when some people, who should know better, look down their noses at overseas qualifications, assuming that they are all worthless. I know of plenty UK qualifications that are frankly not worth the paper they are written on!

Interacting with, coaching and encouraging people who have sustained a brain injury was a demanding job and some of our clients were certainly "challenging". But, I enjoyed the challenge and was able to rise to it. 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 I prefer not to name and with which I was much less impressed.

During my last few years in Aberdeen I regret to say that I lived a more or less secular life and did not regularly attend any church, although we visited a few. I certainly still believed strongly in the historical integrity of the Christian Gospel: but there was also far too much 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 definite feeling of guilt and personal failure at having left full-time ministry.

In spite of my negativity, I never broke my ties with the Church of Scotland and even though I sometimes 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 gradually but surely 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, where she was born and went to school, is Hamilton in South Lanarkshire. Her mother lived in and around that town all of her life. We had been very regular visitors to Hamilton for nearly forty years and rather liked it. Indeed, 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 Aberdeen University in 2011 and took it. I decided to retire as well at the same time, although I had originally planned to continue until my 70th 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 relocate to Hamilton. However, to cut a very long story short, we decided to make the move anyway. We both felt (me especially) that there was rather 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.

Carole and I are both registered volunteers at Woodburn Court, where Mrs Morton lived for nearly ten years and was one of the very first residents. Through our frequent visits, we had got to know many of the residents and also became friendly with some of the staff. We now make regular visits to the complex and provide support through a "Down Memory Lane" project and occasional social events. I have also been involved in some staff training on communication skills.

Since coming to Hamilton in 2012, I have gladly linked up again with the Kirk in an active sense and I am a full member of the Presbytery of Hamilton. To me this has been a real process of healing and, although I am well aware that the Church of Scotland is not without its faults, I am more pleased than I can say to have "come home" again. I feel that I have come back to my rightful place at the table.

Carole and I are now members of Hamilton Old Parish Church which is within easy walking distance of where we live and, to my surprise, we have both joined the choir. We have been made very welcome. I have been elected Vice President of the Monday Club, which gives opportunity for fellowship, mainly among older people, over the winter. Carole is also involved as its membership secretary. In addition, both of us are on the Link Committee which provides occasional functions and outings for members of the congregation over the age of eighty (whose number increases every year).

Hamilton Old, whose congregation worships in a handsome eighteenth century building, designed by William Adam, is well attended and enthusiastic and, at the moment, all seems to go well. But when I look round and see that nearly all the heads in the congregation are grey, I cannot help wondering how "things" will be in 20 years' time. At the time of the second edition of this booklet (2014) the pastoral charge had recently become vacant and the congregation were looking forward to calling a new minister. I suspect that Hamilton Old, like most churches, will have no one united view as to what kind of minister they will seek out. There will be the usual fantasy figure of someone who will be good at everything, will fill the church with younger people and be happily married with a wonderful family. That is the fantasy; the reality will almost certainly be different.

At the time of this third edition (2015) the charge is still vacant. With a rapidly ageing ministry and fast approaching a 20% vacancy rate throughout the Church of Scotland, it may be a slow process to find the "right"

person. We have been very fortunate in having Rev Norman McKee, retired minister of Uddingston Old, as Interim Moderator and *locum* Minister. Norman has kept the congregation together and done much more than would ever have been expected of him. What would the Church of Scotland do without its retired ministers?

I have not made my ministerial "status" a secret in Hamilton but neither have I gone out of my way to make it widely known. In coming to a new area, 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.

At the time of writing, I have taken one service at Hamilton Old and invited to take another. I occasionally receive approaches from churches within Hamilton Presbytery to give holiday pulpit supply, which I usually respectfully decline. As I no longer drive, offering supply is not really a viable possibility. Also, I prefer to attend my own church on Sundays and to leave pulpit supply for those who are more in need of the money than I am. In summer of 2015, I did provide supply on a couple of Sundays at Cadzow Parish Church in Hamilton, which is also within walking distance of where I live.

My other current ministerial duty is occasionally providing a brief Sunday afternoon service at Woodburn Court, on behalf of Hamilton Old.

I do not know where God will lead me in this latter part of my life. I am still open to possibilities as to how I might serve the church. Early in 2014, I applied unsuccessfully for the temporary post of Assistant Clerk to the Presbytery of Hamilton. Considering that I don't generally even go to its meetings, I think I had a bit of a brass neck. I was interviewed by a panel of four and was extended every courtesy. The interview lasted a full hour. I gave the interviewing committee a run for their money and felt I had acquitted myself well enough. Possibly I had a narrow escape. Possibly the Presbytery of Hamilton had a narrow escape. So, although I remain open to possibilities as to how I might best serve the church, no obvious doors seem to open. Maybe I need to learn that it is more important simply to *be* faithful and to concentrate on being rather than on doing.

As I have got older, I have become more interested again in matters of spiritual healing. I am a Reiki Master and Teacher and occasionally operate distance healing when requested. Some Christians will disapprove of this.

They can disapprove if they wish. Frankly, I don't much care. I take the view that the earth and all its fullness is the Lord's.¹⁴

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.

¹⁴ Psalm 24:1

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 state of crisis? (I first wrote these words 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 active 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, many converted into night clubs or public houses. I am sorry to say that a blood relative of mine owns a couple of them.

Until I was given a seat in the Presbytery of Hamilton in 2012, my entire ministry had taken place in and around Aberdeen. When I look at the edition of the Aberdeen Presbytery calendar that was in use when I was Clerk in the mid-1970s 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 some apparent increase in numbers attending independent and/or charismatic fellowships, there is almost nothing but retrenchment in churches throughout Scotland. Some 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 simply could not fail, or so we thought. There was a very real spirit of optimism in the air. Yet the reality has been different. I have seen many thoughtful, intelligent and well balanced ministers 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 visible growth at all.

Whilst there are some 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. There are very few actual genuine "converts" in modern Scotland. I would go further and suggest that some other denominations and independent fellowships see the Church of Scotland as fair game and are certainly not above poaching its members.

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 undoubtedly a smaller place. Expectations are also very different. "Church" for many people now 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 to the Christian message from hard-line 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.¹⁵ Indeed, even some people who would consider themselves to be at least nominally Christian will tick that box, feeling that otherwise they may be discriminated against or thought to be fanatical.

I remember reading a rather challenging book some years ago titled *The Gaggling of God*.¹⁶ 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 and similar statutory bodies, who are generally touchy and old-maidish in their political correctness, routinely ban the use of such terms as "Christmas", acting 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, such as moderate Islam, Judaism, Buddhism or Hinduism are not actually those who are offended by Christian practices or festivals

¹⁵ According to recent statistics, 46% of Scots now place themselves in this category.

¹⁶ Gavin Reid, 1969

taking place within the United Kingdom. It is the secular humanists who now seem both to take centre stage and call the tune. To them, the secular view is the only viable and intelligent 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 religious anywhere in public life. Christians, on the other hand, can apparently be called for everything and generally misrepresented, 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 damaged the moral authority of the wider church. This is a blow from which the church may never fully recover.

The recent furore in the Church of Scotland over gay ministers, civil partnerships and gay marriage has also 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. Many people simply cannot be bothered waiting for the church to "catch up". The increasing number of humanist celebrants at naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals demonstrates that they are perceived as being more friendly and accepting than traditional clergy. That perception may be unfair, but it is there nevertheless.

There was a time - and not so very long ago - when, in Scotland, the ministry was one of the most highly regarded of all the professions. The same certainly cannot be said today. Only too often ministers are the target of pity, ridicule or even contempt. There are parts of our towns and cities where it might be inadvisable nowadays to be seen wearing a clerical collar. To many people, the presence of a minister is no longer a requirement at any stage of life.

The ministry is also an increasingly ageing profession. At the time of the second edition (2014) there were only two 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) was 46. The General Assembly of 2014 was told that the Church of Scotland needs to prepare itself for a more or less permanent ministerial vacancy level of 20%.

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.¹⁷ Yet, the other side of the coin is that in its anxiety not to compromise with worldly values, the church can forget 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 of Hamilton, where I have lived for only a few years, 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 seems to be 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 practice. That would be compromise. It simply means that the church has accommodated itself to the people whom it serves which, to me, is a Christ-like thing to do.

Another example of accommodation is the dedication of infants. Although I certainly cannot claim responsibility for this relatively recent innovation in the Church of Scotland, I remember raising the possibility in the (then) recently created *Ministers' Forum* (a newsletter for ministers) in 1979¹⁸ that ministers who felt that they could not offer full baptism to children of non-members, might offer a service of dedication (sometimes known colloquially as a "dry christening") instead. This was an attempt to avoid the negative impression that somehow God was not prepared to bless their children. I was surprised, at the time, that this suggestion was so well received by colleagues. Only one person expressed "dismay" at the suggestion and it was clear from his comments that he had not actually bothered to read the article in question! Certainly there are ministers who now regularly offer dedication ceremonies.

¹⁷ Romans 12: 2

¹⁸ Issue 19; See *Autumn Leaves* Volume 3: 18-22

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 relatively quick to accept the ministry of women, the wider church is still perceived as being somewhat misogynistic. There is certainly some justification for this perception.

Also, there is no doubt that the Kirk did get itself into a disproportionately frightful mess and tangle over the so-called 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 been in a conventional male / female marriage and is now divorced. He entered a civil partnership with his male partner in 2013. At the time he was called to Queen's Cross, Mr Rennie was not under discipline 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 Aberdeen 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 openly 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 women 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.

As regards the New Testament, much centres round the interpretation of Romans 1: 24-27.¹⁹ Some scholars suggest that the original Greek text refers to such matters as male prostitution, molestation of boys or men or promiscuity rather than committed same sex relationships (which would have been virtually unknown at the time). I am not a sufficiently competent scholar to give an authoritative judgement on this. However, I do get impatient with sanctimonious and patronising people who jab at this text and tell me that the "Bible is quite clear." (The clear implication being that if I don't agree, I am not a proper Christian.) The Bible on this point, to me, is not actually clear beyond all possible doubt and I would hesitate to erect any doctrine on such a shaky foundation. As is often the case, the experts do not agree, not that in my wildest dreams would I claim to be an expert.

At the risk of shocking some of my evangelical friends, I have to say that I simply cannot work myself into a state of 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 tiny minority of ministers might 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 perhaps 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 certainly should not be a contentious issue. How many people outside the Kirk will have read that part of the statement is quite another matter. Perception is everything and there is no doubt that many people do perceive the church in general as being homophobic.

¹⁹ *Paul on Homosexuality*, Michael Wood (2011)

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 (the one he had prepared earlier) putting forward a new fourth deliverance that has become known as 2(d).

Basically 2(d) affirmed 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 permitted 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, were further considered by the appropriate bodies within the Kirk. Draft legislation was brought to the Assembly of 2014 and, after a thoughtful debate the package of arrangements was agreed in principle. These proposals went 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.

As most people would surely have anticipated, a majority of Presbyteries (31 to 14) approved of the draft legislation that put 2(d) into effect and this became the law of the Kirk after the Assembly of 2015. Following this historic vote, it means congregations may now call a minister or deacon in a same sex civil partnership. However, that provision does not yet extend to any ministers entering into same sex marriages. (Special provisions were agreed which protect any minister or deacon ordained before May 31st 2009 who is now in a same sex marriage.)

A proposal to amend the legislation of 2015 to include ministers or deacons in same sex marriages, as distinct from civil partnerships, must now go down to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act, with a view to approval by the General Assembly in 2016. Very Rev Albert Bogle once again raised his head above the parapet and moved a counter-motion that sought to defer any decision on this matter until the Theological Forum submits a report on same sex marriage to the Assembly in 2017. However commissioners voted for the proposal and against his counter-motion by a very narrow margin of 213 in favour to 205 against. There is the real danger, as pointed out by Dr Bogle, that if the Barrier Act proposals are agreed in 2016 (which seems highly likely) the public perception will be that the Church of Scotland is now generally in favour of same sex marriage.

The original 2(d) deliverance in 2013 was certainly well intended and set out to be inclusive. Dr Bogle, in my perception, was one of the more "real" Moderators of recent years. He did have things of value to say beyond the usual run of wish-washy and complacent platitudes that are, unfortunately, expected of Moderators. I think it is grossly unjust that so much sharp, and even bitter, criticism has been aimed at him personally.

His deliverance did, however, succeed in wrong footing some members of the Assembly. Given that its ramifications had not been fully considered at the time, some commissioners quickly expressed regret at having voted for 2(d). It was perhaps unfortunate that Dr Bogle's motion had to be voted for "on the hoof", as it were. Dr Bogle considered that, as long as he was still Moderator, it would be inappropriate for him to bring forward his motion. Whilst this is understandable it was unfortunate that 2(d) was not given more mature discussion and consideration *before* the vote was taken in 2013. He could surely have put a notice of motion forward through someone else?

To me, it seems that the traditionalists really could not have expected to achieve very much more than 2(d) and the legislation that flowed from it in 2015. They might well have got considerably less had Dr Bogle not intervened when he did. Some traditionalists seem to miss this very basic point.

The new legislation allows revisionist congregations (such as Queen's Cross) to call a minister in a same sex relationship or civil partnership. It also allows 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. Is it not possible to live with that and move on? Apparently not, so far as one can judge, in the case of some people.

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 theological cake and eat it. Perhaps too often it sets out to try to please everybody, which in a diverse Christian organisation, is impossible, even if it laudable in its intention.

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. It is unfortunately that there are people within the church who think, when they disagree on an issue, that it is their Christian duty to be as disagreeable as possible.

Critics of 2(d) on all sides have said that it is classic fudge. Well, get real, guys! Even the Nicene Creed is a fudge. The Christian church has been fudging for many centuries simply because both in doctrine and in ethics it is not as easy as it might seem to achieve total clarity and certainty on any subject involving faith, far less total agreement.

It is part of our western way of thinking that we assume that there can only be one possible correct solution to, or explanation for, any issue. I submit that this is a blinkered and limiting approach.

Incidentally, I find no evidence in Scripture, Old Testament or New Testament, for a voting process when it comes to important decisions in a Christian context, even though it is well entrenched within our Presbyterian tradition. I believe that wherever possible the church should keep debating difficult issues until a way forward can be found that includes everyone or at least as many as possible. To suggest that because a majority voted in favour of any proposal is the end of the matter seems (to me) to sit uncomfortably with any concept of unity of the Spirit.

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 personal reservations I might have deep down, society has moved 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 have been and are faithful and valuable contributors. Traditionalists often overlook this uncomfortable fact.

In the past, there have certainly been homosexual ministers both from the traditional and revisionist elements of the Kirk although even to suggest so has been an absolute 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 active ministry, I think I might have been prepared, in principle, to give a blessing to a civil partnership, if asked so to do. I might also have been willing to do the same for a same sex marriage, whatever my own personal reservations. Almost certainly my Presbytery would have stopped me from doing so and, of course, the matter is purely academic. If two people want to commit to one another in a permanent and loving relationship, my own feeling is that it is nothing short of cruel for the church to appear to withhold its blessing. It also gives the wider world a picture of a church that is negative and judgemental and this plays right into the hands of the secular humanists. How the world perceives the church *does* actually matter; in fact, I would suggest that it matters a great deal.

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, with the proviso that legal rights and duties arising from civil partnership should be, as far as possible, equivalent to those of marriage. However, it became clear at an early stage that gay marriage was, to all intents and purposes, a done deal. For some Christians now to keep ranting about it is about as effective as Canute telling the waves to go back.

Although gay marriage was not in the manifesto of any of the major political parties in the 2010 General Election, there was a popular roll of opinion in that direction and nothing could realistically stop it from reaching the statute book. By continuing to oppose same sex marriage, the church is in very real danger of further forfeiting its credibility simply 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.

The Scottish Parliament has now passed the Marriage and Civil Partnership Act 2014 and the first same sex marriages have already taken place.

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

Who knows? Never say "Never!"

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 for 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 have 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.

I want to stress and to acknowledge, without reservation, that there are many good and devout people who were, and are, genuinely concerned and uncomfortable about the possibility of any gay minister. I would not in *any* way wish to criticise them or their theological position nor do I wish to be perceived as claiming some moral high ground for myself. We all have to do what we believe to be right. For example, the Presbytery of Lewis has expressed its disappointment at the passing of the 2015 legislation. At the same time, they have confirmed their wish to continue to be part of the established Church of Scotland. To me, that is a position that can be accepted and respected. As stated above, the church as a whole has never been in total agreement on every issue. The Church of Scotland continues to recognise liberty of opinion on matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith. Long may it continue to do so.

But I do criticise those who have used the gay minister debate as an opportunity to let fly with a public 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 holding the Bible in one hand, 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, ungenerous and sometimes ungracious critic of the Kirk for the best part of two centuries. Indeed opposition to the

Church of Scotland is the Free Kirk's basic *raison d'être*. Given the possibility that a small number of congregations might wish to leave the Church of Scotland, the Moderator of the Free Church, on the eve of the 2013 General Assembly, invited ministers and members of the Church of Scotland who wished to leave to come and join the Free Kirk's own (depleted and divided) ranks. Whether this was an act of genuine kindness or of naked opportunism, others must judge. It has to be kept in mind that the Free Church are our brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not mean that they are our friends.

Some ministers and congregations in the Church of Scotland were already making noises. Suddenly the whole issue seemed to grow arms and 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 single word of Scripture and was therefore in a crisis situation, sinking into a veritable morass of apostasy and immorality.

The more hot-headed wanted to take immediate action and some did. More moderate counsel in other places suggested that a "wait and see" attitude should be adopted. Some even now feel themselves pulled in different directions, which is understandable. Issues are seldom as clear cut as they might appear. There are now a confusing number of associations and pressure groups representing a wide cross section of views.

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 is 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, particularly those of Tom Alan, George Duncan, 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 justly 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.

Their last minister adopted a more hard line attitude. In 2012, the minister and the vast majority of the St George's Tron congregation left the Church of Scotland to reconstitute themselves under the name of the Tron Church in nearby Bath Street. Critics at the time said that, under its latter ministry, it had actually left the Church of Scotland some years previously. But, again, things are seldom as simple as they seem.

Contrary to popular perception, a congregation is not an incorporated body; it is simply a collection of individuals who, in law, are represented by their office-bearers as 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 during 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 wanted to claim the moral high ground. Writs were flying around and there were angry exchanges in the newspapers. It was one of these situations in which everybody involved – 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 on all sides has played a major part and continues to do so. The difficulty in attempting to give any kind of objective assessment is that there are people whose word I would normally accept without hesitation who give such diametrically opposite and polarised accounts. At any rate, feelings ran very high.

The Presbytery of Glasgow and the Ministries Council 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 seemed (to me) to be more than a touch unrealistic.

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 very short supply. In fairness, neither the

Presbytery of Glasgow nor the Kirk's spokesmen in Edinburgh seemed to be in the mood to mend fences either.

The Church of Scotland brought in a transition minister based in the empty Tron building. Few would envy him his job. The words "poison" and "chalice" came to my mind, at the time. However, although it is still early days, there do now seem to be some encouraging signs of rebirth and renewal in St George's Tron.

In general, the media favoured the breakaway congregation in their reporting. This congregation had lost their building but now had the great advantage of being perceived as brave victims and principled martyrs who were being turned out on to the street by a harsh, triumphalist and compromised Church of Scotland. The media did generally seem to overlook the crucial but simple fact that the congregation had themselves voted almost unanimously to leave. No one had asked them to leave. No one in the Church of Scotland or the Presbytery of Glasgow wanted them to leave. It was their decision and their decision alone. According to their website, the Tron congregation felt they had "no option". Again, that is surely a matter of perception.

However, some of the powers that be in the Church of Scotland did not help themselves by giving an impression that the Kirk was not unduly worried at the prospect of losing so many committed and contributing members. It was a case of "...business as usual", according to the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly. Were these words a sign of wilful complacency or a genuine attempt to reassure the Kirk? Personally, I think the words were well intended but they might have been better left unsaid or expressed differently, given the wisdom and benefit of hindsight.

It had been known for some time that Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen (the church in which Carole and I were married in 1974) also intended to leave. I suspect everybody learned some lessons from the Tron disaster. Gilcomston South held detailed and courteous discussions with Aberdeen Presbytery and, at least in the meantime, the recently formed independent congregation of Gilcomston Church are leasing 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, stated its intention to leave the Church of

Scotland by 2015. Similar statements have come from St Catherine's Argyle and New Restalrig congregations in Edinburgh. Large numbers of the congregation have meanwhile left Larbert Old and Dundee: Logie and St John's Cross (to form a Grace Church in both cases) and also St James Broughty Ferry (to form Brought Ferry Presbyterian Church).

There may yet be others but, at the time of the third edition (2015) "things" do seem to have somewhat settled down.

In late 2014, yet another pressure group, the Covenant Fellowship, opposed to the ordination of ministers in active homosexual relationships, was founded in Glasgow.

Just how many more of these well-intentioned, but basically impotent, pressure groups do we actually need?

Where now?

At the time of writing, the evangelicals are, unfortunately, still in disarray and disunity, in spite of hollow assurances of underlying Christian unity. There is a strange irony in the fact that an avowedly Christian website titled "Christians Together" (an oxymoron?) over a period of months in 2012/13 published 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 wanted to claim a monopoly of the high moral, spiritual and Biblical ground for themselves.

Such comments did the writers no credit and certainly do not advance the Kingdom of God. They did, on the other hand, feed into the hungry jaws of spiritual pride. There has been a large supply of the latter commodity. It is not, of course, in any way confined to evangelicals. To me, it is one of the worst kinds of pride.

Some of the comments in "Christians Together"²⁰ and in the popular press certainly did not make for pleasant reading. It seemed as though much of the evangelical church had followed the lead of contemporary society in that debates on important issues apparently cannot be carried out unless accompanied by mud-slinging and aggressive personal insults. And if Christians cannot behave with minimal courtesy towards one another, what credibility can they expect in the so-called real world?

The comments made through the Church of Scotland offices and the Presbytery of Glasgow have been generally milder, although tinged perhaps with more than a degree of complacency.

Much more helpful, were the comments made by the retiring Moderator, Very Rev John Chalmers, at the 2015 Assembly when he said:

"I am not speaking to one side or another of the theological spectrum. I am speaking to both ends and middle. It is time to stop calling each other names, time to shun the idea that we should define ourselves by our differences and instead define ourselves by what we hold in common - our baptism into Christ, our dependence on God's grace, our will to serve the poor and so on."

²⁰ Not be confused with another body called "Forward Together".

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 alcohol.

"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 Tweedledee) 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 (non-Scottish) kid on the block - the International Presbyterians ("IPs"). 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 in Inverness. The British headquarters of the International Presbyterians are in Ealing, London.

There had even been talk of forming yet another Presbyterian denomination in Scotland to accommodate those who wished 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. Surely that is more than enough?

Meanwhile, the Free Church of Scotland, in its new all singing all dancing model, temporarily suspended its familiar role of a nagging and carping

harridan in respect of the Kirk and substituted that of a seductive siren, calling on men (and I mean only men) who want to leave the ministry of the Church of Scotland to come and join its ranks.

How well the Free Kirk could, in practice, have adjusted to an influx of ministers, who had enjoyed a remarkable degree of personal freedom in the Church of Scotland, is (perhaps fortunately) untested. And how well former Kirk ministers would adjust to the tight and controlling culture of the Free Kirk and its more rigid adherence to the Westminster Confession is also uncharted water. Certainly, they would find the attitude towards women to be rather different and they might perceive that taking on a degree of alien cultural baggage is a price they would rather not pay.

The United Free Church ("UFC"), hardly a major player on today's ecclesiastical stage, was in a Covenant relationship with the Church of Scotland. It was known at an early stage that the UFC was far from happy about 2(d). The UFC 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.

As a result of the 2015 outcome the UFC General Assembly regretfully agreed to take steps to bring the Covenant with the Church of Scotland to a close as there was "a fundamental difference between our two denominations, not only on same-sex relationship but on how we regard and interpret scripture." More positively, it was stated that, even with the ending of the Covenant, it would still be possible for local cooperation to take place, formally or informally, between the two denominations. In other words, they were standing their ground but, unlike the Free Church of Scotland, they wished to remain on reasonably amicable terms. The UFC has sometimes served as a place of refuge for malcontents from the Church of Scotland. It too will probably welcome any refugees from the Kirk with open arms.

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 real 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, not just in Scotland. I would go further and say that the finger points especially at the evangelical wing of the church, much of which seems to be obsessed with very worldly issues such as numbers, buildings, equipment, power, control and money. These 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 must be 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 Scottish ministers, all would be well. Yet that did not happen across the board. The expected time of refreshing and revival did not come; or if it did, we somehow managed to miss it.

Now, some men and women have left the comfort and relative security of the Church of Scotland and gone 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 the greatest loss of all, far greater than the loss of the building. I was interested to see 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 in this generation. 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). They will not easily maintain open fellowship with their Church of Scotland colleagues, whatever may be said to the contrary.

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 actually 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 frequently an absentee and with little 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 honourable exceptions, they tended to spring up in areas where the new congregations could afford to pay their way.) At least one entirely new University (New College) was planned. The new thrusting and ambitious Free Church virtually became the Liberal Party in Scotland at prayer. It was also to 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 perversely was far from pleased. It seemed now that there was really nothing left over which to be divided from the Church of Scotland. Yet divided is what they were to remain 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 actually had far less in common than the Church of Scotland, to form the United Free Church. The fact that the Free Church and the United Presbyterians were uneasy bedfellows was demonstrated starkly when the conservative remnant of the Free Church that had stayed out of the Union were awarded title to all the property belonging to the pre-1900 Free Church in a celebrated House of Lords case.²¹ The continuing Free Church was unable to use much of this property and, failing agreement between the two churches, a parliamentary commission was set up which led to the passing of the Church of Scotland Act 1905. This commission reallocated property more realistically between the two churches. It is fair to say that the continuing Free Church was treated generously; some might say over-generously.

In 1929, the majority of the United Free Church united with the Church of Scotland. As with the Union of 1900, a minority (known popularly as “Continuers”) elected to stay out. Nevertheless, in 2015 we seem to have as many Presbyterian denominations as ever.

However, there are important differences between the Disruption and the fragmented, muddled and chaotic situation that 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 certainly not be underestimated – not least for the large amounts of money that these congregations have paid into the Kirk's central

²¹ Bannatyne v. Overtoun [1904] AC 515

funds – their withdrawal does not compare proportionately 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”)²² 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 systems, such as the Sustentation Fund, to ensure necessary ingathering of finances. The more recent haemorrhage from the Kirk cannot, by the widest stretch of the imagination, be described as well organised.
- 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 and doing what, sad to say, they seem to do best, namely quarrelling among themselves

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 an actual crisis. The mess does not only affect the evangelicals (traditionalists). It involves everybody. The more liberal (revisionist) part of the Kirk is not generally thriving or growing either. Its spokesmen tend to present themselves as wishy-washy and self-satisfied as well as considering themselves to be the “true” historic Church of Scotland. In public, they seem to be in denial that the Kirk is facing any real problems. Their motto might well be “Keep taking the tablets”.

It is fair to say that the revisionists are not split, as is the case with the traditionalists, but then they were scarcely united in the first place. Judging by some of the anodyne comments made by the more liberal Moderators in recent years, there are some revisionists who believe in so little as to leave nothing about which it would be worthwhile differing. Yet people who call themselves liberal can also vary greatly without showing the same outward signs of disunity as do the evangelicals or traditionalists.

²² Robert Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict* (1854)

I have known people who think of themselves as liberal and yet, in practice, are surprisingly conservative and even "evangelical", who read the Bible at least as frequently (sometimes more so) as many of the card-carrying evangelicals. At the other end of the spectrum, are those of a very radical viewpoint who seem to believe passionately in next to nothing and seem to me to be more like humanists than followers of Jesus Christ.

In between, there are many well intentioned and faithful people who are largely untaught and unsure of what they actually think and believe. All this shows how unhelpful and unfair it can be to slap labels on people.

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 are falling short. Besides which, what gives someone like me, perceived by my harsher critics as a failed minister, the moral right to criticise? That would be fair comment. It is not 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. When in difficulty, it is an understandable reaction to wish to return to the perceived security of the past. I well remember a little mantra with which I became familiar in the days when I was learning some of the skills of Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP): "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." In fact, if the Kirk continues to do as it has always done, it may well finish up with *less* than it's always got!

At a great many points in the long history of the church, people have felt a real need to go right back to the perceived simplicity of the age of the apostles. If only it were that simple.

As I stated earlier, 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 in those far-off days. Most prevalent among those considered as heretics were the Gnostics who were quite ruthlessly suppressed. There were many other divergent practices and schools of thought. The church of the New Testament also managed to function surprisingly well without the benefit of a written New Testament.

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 slightly later and, of course, there were a great many more apocryphal gospels and similar writings in circulation than are generally available to us today. 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 belief and 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 our contemporary church,

When most people think of the early church, they tend to imagine that Nicene orthodoxy emerged 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 same persecuted church could itself be exceedingly harsh, violent and even vindictive towards those within its own ranks whom it regarded as heretics. Beliefs were not a purely personal matter. It mattered a great deal what people thought.

One of the less attractive legacies Constantine has left us is that, in most traditions of the western 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 every bit as prevalent across many traditions of Protestantism where people are frequently told by the clergy and fellow believers what they "must" believe and do, otherwise... Churches can be highly manipulative places.

There is no doubt that many people have an idealised and romantic view of the early church. They forget not only the terrible persecutions it had to endure but also the diversity of beliefs and practices that was prevalent. Much of this diversity 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 with them 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 every issue.

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

By a strange accident of history, the Presbyterian Church in Scotland adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith in the seventeenth century. This distinguished document is an English Puritan work, although I readily concede that there was a valued input from Scottish theologians. 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 and historical document of faith it deserves to be held in great 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. Indeed, do they communicate at all?

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 - yet 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 again to perception, as do many matters concerning personal faith.

The conscience clause can mean everything and nothing. During the early 1970s the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine was of a mind to ditch the Westminster Confession altogether 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, although relatively brief, was entirely orthodox.

I was a member of the *ad hoc* committee in Aberdeen Presbytery that was set up to consider and report on the proposed new statement of faith. With the exception of Rev David Torrance (whom I eventually succeeded as minister at Summerhill), ministers of an evangelical leaning within the Presbytery were generally unwilling to let go of the Confession, although it seemed that the Church of Scotland as whole was moving in that direction.

To cut a long story short, 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. With an almost audible sigh of relief, the Assembly accepted the motion. It was, once again, easier to hold the Kirk together with a classic fudge. It seems unlikely that anyone will want to stir up that particular hornets' nest again in the foreseeable future.

So, in theory, 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, in or out of the pew, 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 *any* conscience clause. Indeed, in some of the stricter Presbyterian traditions an outsider looking in could be forgiven for thinking that the Confession is their chief authority and that the Bible is their subordinate standard.

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 so-called apostolic principles, so there are those who want to go back to some idealised golden age of Scottish piety that, again, never truly existed. I confess that I am surprised at how even some ministers still fail to understand that the Church of Scotland is a coalition and has been so 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 aggressive text-jabbing hard-line American-style fundamentalism that has now 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 some of these same "sound" people often do little or nothing to proclaim the good news of the Gospel either in word or in deed. Indeed, they can sometimes be a stumbling block. People move from one denomination to another and, if unable to find one that is entirely suitable, they can go for the self-indulgent option of founding their own bespoke independent fellowship which, like a well-tailored suit, fits them perfectly in all the right places. 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. Discussion and dialogue seems to be becoming a thing of the past. Even to ask certain questions now is like poking a wasps' nest.

Perhaps if a little less time was 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 today.

To me, it almost beggars belief that in these days when the Christian faith and the Christian church generally is being assailed on all sides, when aggressive secularism is making major inroads into society, the evangelicals are in such a state of 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? Perhaps that assessment is far too harsh. Maybe what we are seeing now 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? If that sounds pessimistic, please focus on the words "as we now know it". I will return to this theme shortly.

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. It is sometimes suggested that "real" Christians should be concerned with sound teaching and prayer and not be over-concerned with social action. I find this an extraordinary approach, especially when it almost exclusively comes from evangelicals. It seems to make a mockery of the incarnation, the mystery that in Jesus Christ, God and man, the spiritual and the material, actually came together.

It is simply not good enough for Christians only to concern themselves with Bible study and doctrine, however important and necessary this 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 spiritual to be troubled with such matters, leaving them to be taken up by more liberal Christians or by 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 of today 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 down tomorrow. Yet it would be wilful blindness to ignore the fact that "things" are not looking particularly good at the present time for the Kirk in Scotland. No one needs to be told that attendances across the board are steadily falling nationally and that the trend is moving relentlessly towards an ageing and numerically declining church.

The influence of the Kirk on society in general has greatly reduced, especially since the re-introduction of the Scottish Parliament, which has made the General Assembly appear to be less relevant. On paper, the Church of Scotland is still the established church but that title is really no more than an empty shell. Whether Scotland will ever become an

independent country remains uncertain, in spite of the recent referendum. Even with so-called devo-max, the Church of Scotland may find itself in an increasingly isolated position. Shortly after the result of the referendum was announced, the Church of Scotland offered a service of reconciliation and unity in St Giles. Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon were conspicuous by their absence. Scotland is an increasingly secular society in its outlook.²³

Society as a whole is also much less impressed by institutions. This is not surprisingly, given the loss of trust not only in the church but in politicians, entertainers, national and local government, police, hospitals and financial institutions. Scotland used to be famous as a centre of finance and known for its fairness, prudence and probity. The Scottish Banks were institutions that people all over the world could respect. Then in 2008 our two major Banks became bankrupt (in reality) and a laughing stock on the world stage. This is certainly not the fault of the church, but it does seem to get caught up 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 many other bodies and probably contributed, at least indirectly, to the setting up of the American Constitution. Whilst we have never really enjoyed a fully egalitarian society in Scotland, there is something about the relatively classless Presbyterian system that has appealed to the mind of many Scots. We are all "Jock Tamson's bairns". We would rather be governed and directed in our church life by a number of people, than by a bishop.

Of course, not all has 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 does not like being told by Presbytery what to do; Presbytery does not always appreciate being told by the General Assembly what to do.

Congregations of the Church of Scotland over recent decades have been gradually moving towards a rather more congregationally-based model. In general, they tend to be much less deferential towards Presbytery which is

²³ Recent statistics suggest that people claiming a connection with the Church of Scotland has fallen to 24% of the population. And, of course, connection does not necessarily mean commitment.

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 acknowledge them.

Society as a whole is also less willing to be told what to think or believe. People are not content to form part of a passive docile flock who will accept without question what some minister in a high pulpit tells them on Sunday. 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 to do so. 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 although at the time of the third edition, there have been some more encouraging signs of interest. If there was not a fairly large pool of retired ministers, auxiliary ministers, deacons and readers on which to draw and who are willing to fill gaps caused by vacancies and other ministerial absences, there would be an insufficient supply of ministry even as things stand now. In the not too distant future, that pool is bound to reduce as retired ministers inevitably get older and are less able to take on preaching and pastoral duties. Whilst there are people coming forward to train for diaconate and readership as well as ministry, there are not enough to go round, assuming a *status quo* model.

The honourable and cherished 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 Victorian buildings give off a strong message that the church is a thing of the dead past and not of the living 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, there will always be some people who will readily admit to being Christian and then weary their listeners with a gratuitous lecture on salvation and damnation (especially the latter).

Many people have come to realise that actually they can get by well enough without the church. Maybe they have never got round to having their children "christened" but these same children have still turned out well enough. God (if he exists) does not seem to have withheld his blessing, does he? Work and family life seem to absorb even more of people's time and who wants to go and sit in a stuffy old fashioned 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 secular or humanist weddings (for a fee). Even modern Registry Offices have become comfortable and user-friendly with special rooms and halls dedicated to wedding ceremonies. At Mansfield Traquair in Edinburgh, the former Catholic Apostolic Church, famous for its wonderful religious murals by the Scottish artists, Phoebe Traquair, it is possible to have a secular wedding in what still looks remarkably like a church. In fact, their website calls the building "Edinburgh's Sistine Chapel". The words "cake" and "eat" come to mind. And who really needs a religious funeral, when the deceased had absolutely 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 that people (usually mistakenly) expect from the church.

There is also the popular perception - which is not entirely ill-founded - that the church is obsessed with sex; and if not obsessed, then highly dysfunctional in that area. 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 ante nuptial fornication and even of adultery. The ministers and elders seemed to have overlooked the highly inconvenient statement of Jesus²⁴ 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

²⁴ Matthew 5: 27-28

modern birth control methods which now give 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 hearing the late 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. It is easy to fall into the trap of, metaphorically, tithing mint, dill and cumin and yet neglecting the most important aspects of God's law.²⁵

Why, for example, do the rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer? Why do certain bankers who misuse enormous 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 in general and the evangelicals in particular are often strangely silent. Conversely many of the recent pronouncements from the Church of Scotland's "Church and Society" sound depressingly like those from a humanist convention, virtually devoid of theological insight, far less appearing to be in any way prophetic. The announcement by the Archbishop of Canterbury in July 2013 that he intended to take on the pay-day loan companies was surely a welcome sign that the prophetic voice and the social conscience can still function together.

The reader of this little book 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 frankly rather ridiculous. And the so-called crisis has been talked up, often by people who are not even members of the Kirk or who have left it behind.

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 much greater part in the ministry of Jesus and in the early church than might at first appear. It could justifiably be

²⁵ Matthew 23: 23

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 (such as Gladys Aylward and Mary Slessor) have been pioneer missionaries and teachers, often enduring considerable hardship. In spite of the immense contribution of women, both past and present, their role has only too often been ignored or patronised by men.

So, the Christian church has been left with a male triune God, whose church has been ruled by men. And when men alone have control, too often they resort to aggression and violence. The roles of men and women should complement and balance one another. During my lifetime, equality of the sexes has been a major issue. I generally welcome this warmly but I do think that sometimes the feminists of today have taken a wrong turning. Equal does not mean the same. Male and female complement and balance one another. Both are needed and need one another in society, just as the left hand needs the right. The concept that a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle²⁶ is as ludicrous and insulting to men as many of the male chauvinist remarks that have, in the past, been aimed at women.

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"²⁷ and was subsequently popularised by Dan Brown's blockbuster work of fiction, "The Da Vinci Code". (And it is important to remember that it *is* a work of fiction.)

This "underground stream" of teaching challenges the traditional sex-free view that a celibate Jesus was born of a perpetual virgin, and that his closest friends were Lazarus, Martha and Mary, a celibate brother and his two spinster sisters. Indeed, although the Gospels clearly show that Jesus

²⁶ A phrase attributed to an Australian Senator, Patrician Dunn (b. 1948)

²⁷ Michael Baigent and others (1996)

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. This curious explanation has about it more than a touch of silliness not to say desperation.

We all tend to interpret the New Testament through the filters that have been applied by subsequent generations - and this applies even to those who express a wish to return to the seeming simplicity of the early church. It has to be kept in mind that the New Testament does not state that Jesus was married. *However*, it does not state that he was not married. A Jewish Rabbi required to be married and if Jesus had been an exception to that rule, I suggest that at least one of the Gospel writers would have surely mentioned it. There are certainly references to a close relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in some of the apocryphal Gospels.

Actually, the possibility that the Saviour of the World might have been married, virile 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 might. Of course, the most controversial aspect of this is that if Jesus was actually married, he might have had children and his descendants might be with us today.

There is an ancient legend that Mary Magdalene, along with various others (depending on which version is consulted) and accompanied by Saint Maximim, one of the Seventy, escaped in a boat and landed on the south coast of France.²⁸ There is another complementary legend that the Merovingian line of kings (i.e. the Frankish dynasty founded by Clovis and reigning in Gaul and Germany *circa* 500-750 AD) was descended from Jesus.

These are all fascinating claims and, of course, the full truth will never be known. I believe that as Christians, we worship the Jesus of faith rather than the Jesus of history, although the two are certainly not mutually exclusive. There will always be an element of mystery about the Person of Christ. As the distinguished scholar, Albert Schweitzer, pointed out at the end of his *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*,²⁹ he comes to us today as he came of old by the lakeside, as one unknown.

²⁸ *The Magdalene Legacy* Laurence Gardner (2005); *Mary Magdalene* Lynn Picknett (2003)

²⁹ 1906

A great lack in the Christian tradition has been that of the divine feminine. God, even in his three persons, is perceived being as strictly male in each case.³⁰ Until recently, clergy were exclusively male (in some traditions they still are) even though the church itself is traditionally perceived as female. Maybe that partly explains the hang-up over gender issues in many quarters. When some years ago, the President of the Woman's Guild (as it then was) prayed to "God our Mother" at a Guild Rally, these words proved to be sheer dynamite.

Even the Roman Catholic Church has, perhaps unconsciously, 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, the latter titles having been adopted from the ancient Egyptian Isis pre-Christian tradition. Although Catholic friends will assure us that they do not actually worship "Our Lady", it has to be said that they come pretty close 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 must have seemed to be lacking in the Godhead for him to make such a radical suggestion.

More 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 morals. One wonders why, given the amount of infamy and cruelty that has been practiced in the ostensible name of Jesus.

However, there are many examples of people of other faiths and none that demonstrate that the church can no longer expect simply to lay down moral rules for other people blindly to follow. Christians are not the only inhabitants of the planet 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. We need to learn to live with this, even if we do not like it.

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

³⁰ *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* Margaret Starbird (1993)

education for both boys and girls. That is something of which we can be justifiably proud. But maybe it has also tended to exclude other important perspectives when it comes to personal faith.

In the western world, we have a 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.

Much of modern secularism mocks anything to do with religious faith. Science will, according to its more radical exponents, such as Professor Richard Dawkins, eventually provide an explanation for everything. That proposition is, of course, itself a matter of faith, even if it is not religious faith. The popular love affair with reason has not disappeared. Many 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. Sadly, judging by recent events, for some evangelicals the only thing that matters is congratulating themselves on their own soundness of 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 entirely to cut ice. When those of us from a Reformed faith background 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 how 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 and kinaesthetic spectacle, even the modern Catholic Church can upstage us any day. Yet it too is losing followers at an alarming rate, at least in Europe. It has been seriously suggested that Pope Francis could be the last Pope ever, something that may have been prophesied by the twelfth century Saint Malachy of Armagh, a friend and associate of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. I return to that rather shocking prediction briefly in the next chapter.

People generally are becoming more individualistic in their religion as well as in their ethics. They prefer a "pick and mix" system with a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Maybe we are seeing the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, when perceptions will become more fluid. People of my age and background find such an approach rather unsettling. Most traditions, apart from the Baha'i, are still highly resistant to such individualism. 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 for churches and clergy. The church has been only too 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 simply because the established churches are largely 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 culture 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 now perceive the church as being a 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 many recommendations from that Committee over the future shape and mission of the Kirk in Scotland? They seemed to disappear as have 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. There are other worth-while initiatives, such as Messy Church and many other local programmes.

In the meantime, dozens of 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. This seems to be the somewhat complacent attitude of many in our Church of

Scotland liberal establishment. 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 functioning 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 in the Kingdom ³¹ is a question that has been around since Jesus walked the hills and lanes of Galilee. Living in a less structured church and / or faith system can seem scary, but it could work and, indeed, it may have to.

Elsewhere in this booklet, I have been 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 such an approach is that frequently it presents 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 be returning 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 taboo areas as reincarnation, to say nothing of radically questioning the nature of the Holy Trinity and the Person of Christ. Again, I personally find this more than a little scary. The big difference I can foresee is that diverse views will be able to cohabitate in a way that could not be even contemplated at the present time. Certainly, in 2014 there was little unity and peace in the Kirk. Since the passing of Act 1, 2015, "things" do seem to have settled down - or have they possibly run out of steam?

There will also be 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 Malachy concerning the Papacy. According to some readings of the prophecies, the recently appointed Pope, Francis I, will be

³¹ Matthew 18: 1-5

the last to hold that office.³² 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 the belief that they, and they alone, are the only hope for the future. More realistically, many main stream denominations such as the Church of Scotland frankly do not really know where to turn next. If the Kirk becomes stricter and more doctrinal, people may respect it for taking a stand. There can then 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 associating with it is easier. But they may then 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 extremely good (if that's the right word) at supplying answers, often to questions that no one is actually asking. We have also been very good at excluding and withholding. Frequently we talk too much and listen sparingly.

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 that occasion was certainly not appreciated.

Indeed, the church often does not even like to search too deeply into its own soul. It is as though, like Parsifal in his search for the Holy Grail, the church continually fails to ask the right question. The result is that the king remains wounded and the wasteland is not healed.

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.

³² See *The Last Pope*, Robert Howells (2013)

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" at the end. It is surely 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 certainly prevail in the longer term. I doubt if this will happen in my lifetime. It may not even happen in this century. I suggest that when Samson's hair begins to grow again, there will be many followers of Jesus Christ but possibly less conventional than many of us might prefer. There will be a diversity of views. There will be meetings together for fellowship and discussion but possibly not in large stone-built churches. There will be relatively few full time clergy. Where there are worship services, many of these, perhaps most of them, will be led by lay people. They may not always be confined to a Sunday.

The God we worship and the Jesus we follow will probably be more inclusive and much more tolerant than yesterday's (or even today's) model. God our father will also be God our mother. The more feminine aspect of God will, at long last, be realised. The left-brained, rational and hierarchical model will be balanced (but not replaced) by an intuitive and compassionate feminine side. It is as though the Prince will cut through the thickets of centuries and awaken his Sleeping Beauty.

I have certainly become convinced that we rely far too much on ministers. We (rightly) expect a great deal of them but perhaps we expect too much. And maybe even congregations put far too much emphasis on the personality of their own minister. As this profession is continuing to decline, this will perhaps become less of a problem. Many parish profiles now specifically state that Nomination Committees in vacancies are not looking for a perfect minister! This is surely to be welcomed.

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 now more than forty five years since I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Have I changed my outlook or beliefs? I suspect that we all change to some extent. Indeed, the Christian Gospel is all about personal change and transformation. I would hope that I am a wiser and more rounded person than I was when I was first ordained. Like most people, I have had quite a

few hard knocks along the road, yet I have also had many interesting experiences.

In the last fifteen years, I have expanded an interest from my earlier days and am both a registered hypnotherapist and a Master Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). I have read, with considerable interest, many books that might be considered New Age. Some I have found helpful and others, frankly, 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 even if I also openly describe myself as being disillusioned. If I am disillusioned, it is not with Jesus Christ; it is with some of his followers. It goes without saying that some of them are disillusioned with me.

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 and I feel deeply saddened when I look at the damage that has been done to it in the past few years as a result of the "gay minister" controversy. However, I frankly cannot be bothered being drawn into the blame game nor am I interested in scoring points.

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

People of my age and background do not find this easy. We must learn to shed ourselves of our spiritual pride and, actually, I say that to myself much more than to others. If anything I have said in this modest booklet seriously offends anyone, then that is something I regret. I am stating things that lie heavy on my heart. I may well be wrong in at least some of my perceptions. I often am. We all see through a glass darkly.

In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, many evangelicals find that they are disunited, hurt, angry, dispirited and confused. Individuals have become touchy and even paranoid. I suspect that any church historian attempting, in fifty years' time, to give a fair assessment of the present difficulties will point to the uncomfortable fact that this was the decade in which the evangelicals in Scotland lost not only the plot but also their own vision. And where there is no vision, the people perish.³³

It is only too easy to forget that Jesus Christ is not the property of the church. He is a cosmic figure who belongs to all faith traditions. He is highly respected in many of the great non-Christian 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.³⁴ But, just as Christ was latent - but present - in the Old Testament, he can also be latent in other faiths. They may give their gods different names, yet the great world religions have far more in common than they themselves might think or even admit.

I make one very important exception to this. I strongly believe that Christians are called to witness to the Jews. Jesus was himself a Jew. It is as 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.³⁵ That is a great event that has still to happen. At New College, Professor Tom Torrance openly suggested to us as students that it would probably take place within the next two hundred years.³⁶

Our mission to the Jews has to be carried out very carefully and respectfully. There are centuries of persecution, hurt and misunderstanding to be dealt with. The Christian church has made a dreadful mess of its relationships with the Jews. To them, the Cross, with all its shame and all its foolishness, remains a stumbling block. The Jews will never become

³³ Proverbs 29: 18

³⁴ John 14: 6

³⁵ Romans 11: 15

³⁶ *The Hope of Israel*, Alasdair Gordon and William Still (1977)

“Christians” because that word has too much negative baggage attached to it. We must not expect them to. They will retain their Jewish identity but they too will live under the hopes and promises of the New Covenant. They were, and still are God's chosen people.

It not necessary to point out that the modern state of Israel has not always behaved as we might wish. Many people in the West (including the majority of Jews in the United Kingdom) would like to see a peaceful Palestinian state, with well-defined borders, living at peace with its neighbours. Support for Israel and for a Palestinian State need not be co-exclusive.

Certain statements from the 2014 General Assembly seem to indicate that the Church of Scotland is cooling considerably in its vision for the future of Israel, which is a cause of much pain and disappointment to me personally.

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 judgement and in 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 and pray about the possibility of 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 judgement will fall 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, and 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 yours truly.

This is my Story.

This is my Song.

Religious and Theological Writings

Lochore and Ballingry: A Parish History (1961) * ³⁷

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) *

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

Contract Law Basics (2nd ed. 2003) ³⁸

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³⁷ A * indicates that this text has been republished in my *Autumn Leaves* series.

³⁸ Subsequent editions of the Law Basics books appear under joint names of Alex Gibb and myself