



Does the church in Scotland still need theology?

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*Not through the book, but through the parable;
not through the thesis, but through the testimony;
not through dissertations, but through dances;
not through concepts, but through banquets;
not through a system of thinking, but through stories and songs;
not through definitions, but through descriptions;
not through arguments, but through transformed lives.¹*

Questions – if they are true questions at all, and not asked for sport – arise because of genuine problems. That the question of the place of theology in the life of twenty-first-century Scotland could have arisen at all is testament to the marginalisation – and even rejection – of theology within the Scottish church. The natural reaction of those that have an interest in theology is to try and overcome this marginalisation by advancing constructive reasons for the importance of existing forms of theology to the practice of ministry and the life of faith. Yet the marginalisation of theology is not due to ignorance of such arguments, but due to deep structural changes in Scottish Christianity over the last two hundred years, changes which have altered the position of doctrine, and brought new understandings of faith to the fore. Before we can answer ‘Does the church need theology?’ then, we must first answer ‘What church are we discussing?’ and ‘What theology are we talking about?’, for there is no one shared understanding of theology in Scotland, but many. The most prevalent, however, may be described as liberal and evangelical, two positions which customarily reject each other. Moreover, because of the presuppositions that structure their thought and practice, even within *their own* church cultures both groups are equally dismissive of theology. This means that any attempt

to promote existing forms of theology within the church will fail on two counts. First, it will, at best, only be accepted by those within one's own church culture, whether liberal or evangelical. Second, even if it is accepted by some within one's own church culture, the vast majority of liberals and evangelicals will have little interest. It is from this sober reality that we must ask a further question: What must theology become if it is to stand a greater chance of being accepted by a broad section of both liberals and evangelicals? It will be argued that if theology is to succeed in the Scottish church it must become philosophically informed and diagnostic. This may seem a surprising claim. Yet it is only through the adoption of a philosophically-informed, diagnostic theology that analyses the genealogy, presuppositions, and lines of questioning that structure theological positions that the marginal position of theology in the Scottish church can be improved, providing liberals and evangelicals with a descriptive, non-partisan analysis of the theological issues that engender conflict within the church, and between the church and wider society. By rising above confessional positions, and presenting new insights into intractable problems, a philosophically-informed theology will better meet the needs of the Scottish church.



Liberals and evangelicals

The question of the place of theology in the life of the Scottish church is impossible to answer unless we recognise that there is no single conception of Christianity in Scotland. There are different – and often competing – parties within the Scottish church, membership of which determines one's conception of theology and one's estimation of its utility. If we posit two ecclesiological poles in the Scottish church, between which run a wide spectrum of particular combinations of thought, we might term these poles *liberal* and *evangelical*. I do not pretend that these are anything more than terms of art. Yet as representative categories they express a cluster of opinions, practices and attitudes which commonly exist together. By identifying the genealogies of liberalism and evangelicalism, we can begin to understand the marginalisation of theology within Scottish church life.

While the decline of interest in theology within the Scottish church

can partly be traced to the marginalisation of Christianity within public life, the primary reason for this marginalisation comes from changes that have taken place *within* the church itself; changes in the understanding of what it is to be a Christian, and changes to the status of doctrine in the wake of biblical criticism. While the ecclesiastical landscape in mid-nineteenth century Scotland was dominated by the Disruption, as this institutional separation occurred, changes were taking place that would prove far more pervasive and long-lasting. While a native form of evangelical piety had existed in Scotland since the sixteenth century, a *new* form of evangelical piety, originating in England a hundred years before with Whitefield and Wesley, was gradually extending its influence over Scottish church life. While this form of evangelicalism is habitually difficult to define, David Bebbington's delineation of four principles has become generally accepted: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism.² The activism of this evangelicalism, and its emphasis upon the anti-institutional and experiential aspects of Protestantism already implicit within *sola fide*, had three major effects on the Scottish church. First, it exerted an ecumenical influence, lessening institutional and theological differences between Christians by emphasising their shared experience of salvation. Second, because of its emphasis upon personal conversion and transformation, it sought to bring the light of salvation to all, which meant a growth in missions to the poor, who, it was felt, needed to be taught and fed before they could come to faith. Third, and most importantly, evangelicalism had the effect of changing traditional understandings of what it is to be Christian. A Christian came to be seen not primarily as someone who gave intellectual assent to a set of doctrines, or who was baptised into the church, but as someone who had been changed by a personal, loving relationship with Christ.³ This understanding of Christianity exerted a tremendous effect on mid-century British society,⁴ and the experiential and ethical re-orientation of evangelicalism began to weaken the place of traditional creeds and confessions within Scottish church life.⁵ At this time, however, evangelicalism was not doctrinally or institutionally distinct. The Evangelical Alliance (established 1846) was a broad grouping incorporating a range of denominations and theological positions, and did not hold to a single doctrine of inspiration.⁶

It was the advent of biblical criticism that provided the catalyst for the separation of evangelicalism and liberalism, and laid the foundation for their common rejection of theology. Scottish biblical criticism was not, as one might think, the result of a liberal rejection of Scripture's normative status, but was instead the product of evangelical biblicism, and the defence of biblical inerrancy by the fathers of the Free Church. It was the very primacy of Scripture within the Free Church that led Robertson Smith to make a diligent study of it, allowing it to speak for itself, and considering it apart from the confessional structure of Calvinism. In doing so, he believed he was carrying forward the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.⁷ Although Robertson Smith managed to combine his criticism with a commitment to orthodoxy, the advent of biblical criticism began to exert a polarising effect upon doctrinal opinion in Scotland, forcing a decision between Scripture as the infallible revelation of God, given once and for all, and a collection of works written within particular contexts, giving imperfect witness to God's revelation in history. The effect of this polarisation was to create, within the majority of the church, a growing indifference toward doctrine, for the authority of confessions and standards of orthodoxy depended upon the authority of Scripture, and as this authority was questioned, so too was the theology that derived from it. What remained of late nineteenth-century Calvinism in Scotland when confessional orthodoxy was subtracted was a commitment to love and social justice, and it would be this, in addition to latitude in doctrinal matters, that would come to characterise liberalism. The growing liberalisation of doctrine, with its resultant ecumenism, increasingly divided the Evangelical Alliance as the twentieth century progressed. The result was the gradual disappearance of a liberal-evangelical within the Alliance, replaced by an increasingly defensive conservatism, which interpreted doctrinal development and concession to theological difference as an implied rejection of the truth of Scripture.⁸ By the end of the twentieth century, then, two different conceptions of Christianity had established themselves in Scotland, each with a distinct understanding of the faith. Before we can answer the question 'Does the church in Scotland still need theology?', then, we must first ask: What is the role of theology within the *particular* Christianities that constitute the Scottish church?



Whose church? Which theology?

In order to understand the marginalisation of theology in Scottish church life, we must identify the distinct ways in which theology is understood by liberals and evangelicals. In its academic form, evangelical theology is confessional and conservative. The International Christian College in Glasgow states that it stands in the ‘evangelical tradition of Bible colleges’. It is ‘convinced that the proclamation and explanation of Scripture results in changed lives’ and affirms its faith in ‘The divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.’⁹ Likewise, Highland Theological College declares itself to be ‘evangelical and Reformed’ in its Basis of Faith, affirming that ‘All Scripture is self-attesting and being truth requires the human mind wholeheartedly to subject itself in all its activities to the authority of Scripture’.¹⁰ In contrast, the theology carried out in the ancient universities of Scotland is explicitly non-confessional. Trinity College, Glasgow claims that ‘All of our subjects can be studied from within or without a personal faith base’,¹¹ and New College, Edinburgh comprises students from ‘a variety of religious affiliations’, where ‘If you love to learn, delight in keen thinking and appreciate diversity, you will feel at home’.¹² These academic differences toward theology are reflected in the beliefs of Scottish Protestant denominations. The United Reformed Church in Scotland affirms its commitment to express the ‘unconditional love of God’ in an ‘inclusive’ and ‘radical’ way, working with people of all faiths and none for peace, justice, and the good of creation,¹³ a message echoed also by the Iona Community.¹⁴ The Church of Scotland, in “What the Church of Scotland Believes”, states that while it believes the Bible to be the ‘supreme rule of faith and life’, many of the issues it deals with ‘are quite difficult for us to follow and understand’, but that ‘there are many pertinent remarks about morality’ which are of use to us today.¹⁵ The Evangelical Alliance, on the other hand, declares its belief in the ‘supreme authority’ of the Bible as the ‘written Word of God’, welcoming ‘all who experience the grace of new birth, bringing them to that fear and knowledge of God which is expressed in a life of obedience to His word.’¹⁶

These approaches are the result of the different questions that liberals and evangelicals ask of Scripture. The primary question the liberal asks is ‘What in Scripture affirms the centrality of love and the alleviation of social problems?’ The primary question the evangelical asks is ‘What does Scripture say, and what is its relevance for a distinctly Christian life?’ These questions arise, in turn, from the presuppositions that each party has inherited from the past. Because of its textual history, the liberal cannot read Scripture at face value as presenting certain, authoritative truth, and is therefore open to redeveloping doctrine in light of current knowledge and experience. While there is lack of certainty on a range of Scriptural teachings, there *is* one aspect of the Bible’s teaching that the liberal *can* be sure of: the importance of love and care for others. For the evangelical, on the other hand, Scripture is wholly trustworthy, and can therefore be read at face value. For this reason, doctrine, as the systematic re-statement of biblical teaching, is essentially fixed. Where change *is* permitted, however, is in the means by which this unchanging truth is communicated, the end of biblical teaching being the upbuilding and advancement of personal faith and discipleship.

As different as these presuppositions and lines of questioning are, they *both* result in the marginalisation of theology. Because the liberal holds doctrine to be largely provisional, and not essential for the purposes of improving society or promoting loving equality, it plays a limited role in preaching or mission, for the essentials of love and justice are obvious to all. While it might be thought that evangelicals, who affirm the full normative status of Scripture, would be very much concerned with theology, they too marginalise it, for while theology may be the systematic re-statement of Biblical truth, it is precisely *because* of this that it is largely irrelevant, for it adds nothing new to the understanding of the individual Christian that cannot be discovered by reading Scripture. Moreover, as ‘head knowledge’, it is secondary to the ‘heart knowledge’ of conversion and deepening spiritual intimacy with Jesus, experiences which are understood to take place in a conceptually unmediated way. If the liberal rejects theology because it is uncertain and irrelevant to moral and social improvement, then, the evangelical rejects it because it is *all too* certain, and secondary to the knowledge of the heart.

When liberals and evangelicals with an interest in theology seek to reverse its increasing marginalisation, they therefore face two difficulties. First, constructive reasons for the utility of theology advanced by liberals will not be accepted by evangelicals and *vice versa*, for each party has very different conceptions of what theology is. Second, and even within *their own* churches, liberals and evangelicals will only be able to persuade a small minority of people of the utility of theology, for it will be rejected by the majority of liberals as being uncertain, speculative, and a diversion from ethics, and rejected by the majority of evangelicals as saying nothing that is not found in Scripture, as well as being secondary to the personal relationship with Jesus available in prayer and worship. If theology is to be of use to the wider Scottish church, then, a new approach must be found.



Philosophy in the service of the church

What must theology do, then, if it is to stand a greater chance of being accepted by both liberals and evangelicals, and be of interest and relevance to the needs of church members? It must, in short, follow the method adopted in this essay. It must become philosophically informed.

This may seem a surprising suggestion. It may be thought that philosophy is an attempt to answer timeless questions such as ‘What is the good?’ or ‘Is there a God?’, questions whose formulation and method of enquiry seem to be unrelated, or even opposed, to Christian theology. Yet the philosophical method I am proposing – derived from the thought of R. G. Collingwood – is applicable to all areas of thought, including theology.¹⁷ It is not constructive in the sense of altering or developing doctrine, nor prescriptive in the sense of discovering ‘who is right’. Rather, it attempts to be purely descriptive and diagnostic, analysing the structure of theological problems by identifying the lines of questioning, presuppositions, and genealogies of the parties involved. If theology is to rise above confessional positions, and stand a greater chance of being accepted by a broad section of liberals *and* evangelicals, it must adopt such an analysis. It satisfies the presuppositions of liberal thought by being concrete, grounded in observable fact, and directed toward the resolution of

theological controversies that create conflict within the church and between the church and the world. It also satisfies the evangelical by adopting a non-critical attitude toward the content of doctrine, while nevertheless saying something new that Scripture does not. It is also innovative, providing new insights into tired theological problems which existing forms of theology all too often perpetuate. Because this method may still be somewhat alien to readers, this essay will conclude with two examples of this diagnostic, philosophical approach toward theology. The first concerns the problem facing the main Christian denominations from fundamentalism on the one hand, and polemical atheism on the other. The second concerns the current controversy in the Church of Scotland over the ordination of gay men and women.

A great deal of the ‘religion’ which is presented by the media is that of the fundamentalist – usually American – Christian, who represents in the popular imagination a supposedly bigoted and irrational past. The supposed opposite of this position is filled by the liberal, progressive atheist, who with a thorough use of impartial logic, exposes the absurdities and cruelties of religious ‘delusion’. The way in which theology usually engages in such debates is to produce rebuttals of specific atheist or fundamentalist arguments. A philosophical approach, on the other hand, would not attempt to argue for or against a specific position, but would instead look at the questions that Christian fundamentalists and polemical atheists ask of faith in general and Scripture in particular. This would reveal that both ask ‘What does the Bible say?’ It would then attempt to identify what the presuppositions behind this question are, discovering that fundamentalists and atheists both believe that Scripture should only be interpreted in its plain or literal sense, and that religious questions should be answered using the same method as scientific questions. This yields, amongst other things, a reading of Genesis as providing a scientific description of cosmology. A diagnostic analysis would then trace these presuppositions to their historical source in the English Reformation and its aftermath, noting the ways in which the need for an authoritative basis for faith apart from the Roman Catholic church led the Reformers to declare Scripture to be self-interpreting. Yet, in their personal readings, many soon came to interpret Scripture in ways contrary to the established church, thereby precipitating the

English Civil War, and the politically radical heterodox groups that flourished during that time. In order to restrain socially disruptive readings, Locke and the Restoration divines went even farther than the Reformers by giving allegorical readings a univocal meaning, and denying the legitimacy of confessions and theological systems as aids to interpretation. This approach established – over 150 years before Benjamin Jowett – that Scripture should be read as any other book, without the guidance of theological tradition. When this strategy resulted in further heterodox readings, Newtonian physics and the design argument were advanced to shore up the faith. The first organised atheist movements of the nineteenth century accepted these presuppositions in their entirety, and because of them, came to indict the Bible for its inner contradictions, dubious textual history, and promotion of creation over evolution. The fundamentalists of the early twentieth century also accepted these presuppositions, but through the adoption of a Scottish Common Sense epistemology interpreted them in a different sense, meaning that it was irrational and unscientific to look behind the written text to assess its textual history, or to accept scientific evidence that contradicted its literal sense. Such an investigation of the genealogy of fundamentalist and atheist thought would thus reveal that far from being opposites, fundamentalism and polemical atheism share a common historical and philosophical heritage, both arising from structural difficulties within English Protestantism, and the adaptations made to stabilise them. Such an analysis would not only correct the intellectual and religious narratives of fundamentalists and atheists, but would also provide the church with guidance about the structural faults within Protestantism, thereby calling forth constructive theological enquiries to examine these and related issues.

The second example of the application of a diagnostic, philosophical approach to theology is the current controversy over the ordination of gay men and women in the Church of Scotland. Once again, the popular image of the debate is between backward, hateful conservatives versus progressive and unbiblical liberals, an image accepted by many within the church itself. As the inconclusive outcome of the Theological Commission's report demonstrated, it is commonly thought that there is an incommensurable stalemate

between two parties. In reality there are at least three main positions. The first is what we might term biblical-conservative, which seeks to preserve the *status quo* by reference to Scripture. The second is what could be termed biblical-revisionist, which seeks to argue for a change to the Church of Scotland's position on the basis of a theological re-assessment of Scripture. The third is the liberal-revisionist, which argues for a change to doctrine on the basis of love or equality, principles which are said to be derived from Scripture. These are not, as is sometimes assumed, 'different religions', or 'incommensurable positions'. Rather, each party reaches different conclusions due to the distinct questions they ask, and because of these distinct questions, the answers of one party will not answer the questions of the others. The biblical-conservative asks 'What evidence is there in Scripture against homosexual practice?', the biblical-revisionist asks 'What evidence is there in Scripture for a qualified acceptance of homosexual practice?', and the liberal-revisionist asks 'What is the loving and egalitarian way to treat homosexual practice?' The next stage is to ascertain what presuppositions underlie these questions. For the biblical-conservative the presupposition seems to be 'Homosexuality is sinful', for the biblical-revisionist 'It may or may not be sinful, but if it is, it is not as serious as other sins', and for the liberal-revisionist either 'Homosexuals should be treated like everyone else' or 'Homosexuality is not sinful at all'. The task facing the philosophically-informed theologian is then to ascertain where these presuppositions come from. This would reveal that the presuppositions of the biblical-conservative are inherited from the tradition of the church, the liberal-revisionist's from contemporary mores, and those of the biblical-revisionist from both church tradition and contemporary society. Such an analysis would reveal certain surprising results. It would show that liberals and conservatives are *both* correct in their intuitions regarding the origins of each other's positions. First, the biblical-conservative is correct in seeing the liberal-revisionist position as arising from its adoption of presuppositions and lines of questioning from contemporary society. Yet the liberal-revisionist is *also* correct that the biblical-conservative is not immune from this tendency, for their substantive position on the issue of homosexual practice is determined as much by the tradition of the church as it is by what is written in Scripture. This is challenging

for the biblical-conservative, for it highlights her dependence upon the teaching and tradition of the church, a source of doctrine that is incompatible with the principle of *sola scriptura*, the supposed foundation of her position. Yet it also raises questions for the biblical-revisionist, who is then faced with the task of conceptualising a coherent account of the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and contemporary norms. After a philosophical diagnosis is made, new theological enquiries can be launched, such as an examination of the notion of Scripture's self-interpretation, or the role of tradition within Reformed Christianity. If the newly-formed Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland is to produce research that is creative, and does not simply accept existing binaries and assumptions, it must first undertake a diagnostic analysis of this kind.



Conclusion

The church in Scotland *does* need theology then, but a theology which rises above partisan positions through philosophy, to produce analyses that stand a greater chance of being accepted by a broad section of liberals and evangelicals. As these examples illustrate, a philosophical approach toward theology attempts to be impartial in its treatment of theological positions, not asking 'Who is right?' but 'What is the structure of the debate?' Moreover, this diagnostic analysis does not preclude constructive theological enquiry but encourages it, providing guidance and new lines of enquiry for future research. A serious debate over the function and nature of theology in the Scottish church is only possible if we first engage in diagnostic analysis of our own and our neighbour's beliefs. This will take the form of ascertaining what questions are being asked, what the presuppositions of these questions are, and where these presuppositions come from. This approach, borne out of genuine interest in the beliefs of our adversaries, and motivated by love of truth, stands the best chance of addressing the interests and fears of Scottish Christians, and raising theology to a new prominence in the life of the church.

Notes

- ¹ Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 196. Quoted in Church of Scotland, “Reformed, Reforming, Emerging and Experimenting” <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/reformed-reforming-emerging-and-experimenting>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–19.
- ³ Cf. Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11.
- ⁴ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, ix.
- ⁵ Cf. A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland’s Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1983), 82f.
- ⁶ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 86–91.
- ⁷ A. C. Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 130–32; R. A. Riesen, “‘Higher Criticism’ in the Free Church Fathers”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 20 (1979): 119–42.
- ⁸ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 252f.
- ⁹ International Christian College, “Home Page” <http://www.icc.ac.uk> and “Basis of Faith”, <http://www.icc.ac.uk/basis-faith>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹⁰ Highland Theological College, “Basis of Faith” <http://www.htc.uhi.ac.uk/about-us/community-of-faith>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹¹ University of Glasgow, “Theology and Religious Studies”, <http://www.gla.ac.uk/subjects/theology>, accessed June 28 2013.
- ¹² University of Edinburgh, “Location and Community” <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/about/location> and “Undergraduate Study”, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/studying>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹³ Scottish Synod of the United Reformed Church, “About Us” <http://www.urcscotland.org.uk/about-us>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹⁴ Iona Community, “Operating Principles” <http://iona.org.uk/about-us/operating-principles> accessed 28 June 2013.

- ¹⁵ Church of Scotland, “What the Church of Scotland Believes” <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/what-church-scotland-believes>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹⁶ Evangelical Alliance, “Basis of Faith” <http://www.eauk.org/connect/about-us/basis-of-faith.cfm>, accessed 28 June 2013.
- ¹⁷ See R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).