

Clouding or clarifying? Using the bible to explore the Scottish independence referendum question.

Eric Stoddart
University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK.

Abstract

This article reports on one dimension of a series of focus groups conducted, mostly in the summer of 2014, in which participants were facilitated through a cycle of practical theological reflection by which to consider their impending decision in the referendum on Scottish independence. Attention here is given to the range of biblical passages which the participants themselves brought to the discussion. These are categorised under three headings: an issue, the manner of the debate, and political theory. A detailed account and analysis is offered of a text around social justice and another adopting a virtue ethics standpoint. Boff's 'correspondence of relationships' hermeneutic sheds light on the sophisticated approach that participants took to the use of the Bible to consider a pressing political question – about which a dichotomous answer was required in the ballot box.

Keywords: Bible, Scottish Independence, practical theology method.

'Scripture ends up clouding the matter.' Charlie, a focus group participant, expressed his concern over my invitation to bring a bible passage to the discussion on Scottish independence.¹ My intention in this article is not to answer the dichotomous question 'clouding or clarifying?' Rather, I want to examine how particular Christians brought specific choices of bible passages when offered the opportunity to spend a Saturday in the summer of 2014 to reflect on the upcoming referendum question, 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' We now know that a majority (55.3%) chose to retain the Union of the Parliaments – at least for the meantime.

It is important to study the focus groups because they demonstrate quite how difficult it can be for people to connect the bible with a contemporary political issue. This has serious implications for how Christians might be prepared for other political decisions about which an answer (rather than on-going discussion) is demanded. In the UK there will be held a referendum on membership of the European Union in the not too distant future. Referendums come around with some frequency in many other jurisdictions, particularly so in many states within the USA. Furthermore, the contribution of the bible is highly relevant to political-type decisions made within church bodies; equal marriage being particularly pertinent in many. The difficulties inherent in bringing the biblical text into contentious discussions involves not just 'bible-believing', conservative Christians but spans the theological spectrum. Whatever is someone's view of the bible, it still confronts. This article deals exclusively with the biblical texts; analysis of other dimensions are available (Stoddart 2014a: 29-50) (Stoddart 2014b).

1.0 The context

This study arises from a series of focus groups I convened in the shadow cast from the Scottish independence referendum that, at the time, lay in the future. This was to be the first

¹ I am grateful to financial support from The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and support in kind from Crown Terrace Baptist Church in Aberdeen, a Church of Scotland parish church in Renfrewshire, and two members of the Scottish Episcopal Church in Oban. The focus groups were conducted according to the research ethics protocols of the University of St Andrews, reference DI10984.

ever opportunity for the people of Scotland to decide the nation's relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. The union of the Crowns took place in 1603 when James VI of Scotland inherited the English crown upon the death of the heirless Elizabeth I. In 1707 an Act uniting the two nations' parliaments was ratified – in a period long before fully democratic franchise. Interest in Scottish Home Rule had ebbed and flowed from the middle of the 19th century but it was not until 1979 that a referendum on devolving some powers to a revived Scottish parliament was held – and lost. A Constitutional Convention, involving MPs, local councils, trades unions and churches, took a prominent role in not only campaigning, but drafting putative legislation, for devolution. A 1997 referendum resulted in more than 74% voting for a parliament in Scotland that was then 'reconvened' on 12th May 1999 after a gap of almost 300 years.

In the 2014 referendum campaign the churches generally adopted a neutral stance – although individual members, including clergy, took part in public debates at community and national level. The Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council organised 32 community-wide discussions involving over 900 people across the country (Church and Society Council 2014). Whilst it may be that some participants mentioned biblical texts in their small groups it is notable that in the official report participants' voices disappear in what are called 'theological reflection' sections. Instead, in these sections that were written by three theologians, biblical texts are introduced to complement the broad themes that had been raised by the discussion-participants. The Bishops' Conference of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland was largely silent throughout the debate although the Justice and Peace Office of the Archdiocese of St Andrews & Edinburgh did offer training of people to lead small reflection groups on the independence question – here with biblical texts and extracts from Catholic Social Teaching offered as discussion starters. Some smaller denominations designed study materials – the four words inscribed on the Parliament's mace often being a stimulus, viz., justice, wisdom, compassion and integrity. Biblical texts were, in various ways, attached to the topic in what we would recognize as an applied-theology model. These are discussed in more detail in (Stoddart 2014b)

The most distinctive feature of the focus groups I convened was the invitation, indeed encouragement, for participants to bring *their own* choice of bible passages to the event. Each group last for about six hours on a Saturday which, once refreshment breaks are discounted, allowed for around four hours of intense conversation. Participants were advised in advance that I would facilitate them through a cycle of practical theological reflection. The method was an adaptation of Thomas Groome's, explained in the recruiting material as: naming what is happening in the referendum campaign, reflecting on what is happening, bringing in the Christian story, our stories and the Christian story and, finally, how do we respond? (Groome 1998) (Stoddart 2014b: 338-40)

Asking people to surrender an early summer Saturday for theological discussion – using a method unfamiliar to most – was challenging. The final participation was four in Aberdeen (two Scottish Episcopalians and two Baptists); three in Renfrewshire, south of Glasgow (again two Episcopalians and one Church of Scotland member); six in Edinburgh (one United Reformed Church member, one Church of Scotland member, and four Episcopalians); and six in Oban (two Episcopalians and four Church of Scotland members). An earlier Edinburgh group, held in November 2013 had been five (two Church of Scotland members and three Episcopalians). We would rightly consider Scottish Episcopalians to have been over-represented had this been a random sample but not materially relevant given the nature of these conversations. As a matter of interest, of the 24 participants, four were aged between 20 and 39 years; 10 in the 40-59 age bracket and 10 in the 60 and over category. Despite my attempts to recruit from a variety of contexts almost all the participants turned out to have been educated to at least degree level. The absence of any Roman Catholic participants is regrettable but not through lack of trying on my part. Overtures to parish priests were not acknowledged. To offer as much scope as possible for people to explore their own viewpoints I made it clear that I would not be contacting them after the Referendum to ask how they voted, or even if their opinion had been changed as a result of the focus group discussions and their further reflection. Early on, I took the view that such an approach would too easily turn

an unnecessarily too-intense spotlight on the participants that might, by having them think about ‘giving an account of themselves’ at some point in the future, hinder their openness to explore their views at this stage. Furthermore, I did not wish to further hinder recruitment by any implication of a request to later divulge their decision made at the ballot-box.

2.0 The Bible passages

It is important to note that the biblical passages were discussed *after* the reflections on what had been happening thus far in the referendum debate. Typically, it was after about an hour or 90 minutes that I brought the groups to this phase in the cycle. In Table 1 we can see the range of passages, in the order in which they emerged in each group.

Edinburgh – 16th November 2013		
Gen. 32:22-32	Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok Brook.	Jack
Rom. 13:1-7	Submitting to the civil authority.	Emily
Heb. 13:14	No lasting city; ‘we seek the city which is to come.’	
Micah 6:8	‘To do justice, to love kindness.’	
Haggai 2:6-9	‘I will shake the heavens and the earth... the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former.’	Charlie
Rev. 7:17	‘God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’	
1 Cor. 12	One body, many parts	Harry
2 Tim. 1:7	Not having a spirit of fear.	Jessica
Col. 3:15	Letting peace rule in your heart	
Aberdeen – 7th June 2014		
1 Cor. 13:4-7	‘Love is patient...’	Adrian
Isa. 2:4	‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares.’	Adam
Matt 25:41-45	‘As you did it not to one of the least of these you did it not to me.’	
Phil 2:1-4	‘Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with one another.’ (New Living Translation)	Abbi
Rom. 10:16-18	‘Salvation is for everyone.’ (Chapter heading in New Living Translation)	
Micah 6:8	‘To do justice, to love kindness.’	Adele
Edinburgh - 14th June 2014		
Ezek. 34:1-16	‘I myself will be the shepherd...I will feed them with justice.’	Edna
Isa. 35	‘The desert shall rejoice and bloom.’	Edelmira
Lk. 6:38	‘Give and it will be given to you.’	Esme
Acts 2:1-12	The Day of Pentecost.	Eddie
Ps. 82	‘Give justice to the weak.’	Edith
Isa 40:15-17	‘All the nations are as nothing before him.’	Edwin

Eaglesham - 28th June 2014		
1 Sam. 8	‘Give us a king to govern over us.’	Moira
Matt. 25:34-40	‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’	Debbie
Acts 2:1-12	Day of Pentecost.	Matt
Oban – 5th July 2014		
Heb. 13:7	‘Remember those who first spoke God’s message to you.’ (un-identifiable trans.)	Talia
Matt. 24:42	‘Keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.’ (NIV)	Sadie
Rom. 13: 1-4 Acts 1:23-26	Submitting to the governing authorities. Choosing the replacement for Judas, by lot.	Clive
Prov. 29:18 1 Cor. 13	‘Where there is no vision the people perish.’ (KJV) ‘If I speak with tongues of men and of angels but have not love...’ (ESV)	Rob
Gal. 5:1 Matt. 7:3	‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’ (NIV) ‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye?’ (NIV)	Ursula
Rom. 12:18	‘Where ever possible live at peace with one another.’ (paraphrase)	Penny

The passages can be gathered into three categories: (a) those dealing with an issue that participants felt ought to be significant in deciding the answer to the referendum question; (b) texts that were taken to speak more to the manner in which the referendum debate had been, or ought to be conducted, and (c) those used to explore an aspect of political theory or governance. Table 2 shows the categorisation.

Issue		
Social justice		
Lk. 6:38	‘Give and it will be given to you.’	Esme
Matt. 25:34-40	‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’	Debbie
Prov. 29:18 1 Cor. 13	‘Where there is no vision the people perish.’ (KJV) ‘If I speak with tongues of men and of angels but have not love...’ (ESV)	Rob
Gal. 5:1 Matt. 7:3	‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’ (NIV) ‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye?’ (NIV)	Ursula
Haggai 2:6-9 Rev. 7:17	‘I will shake the heavens and the earth... the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former.’ ‘God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’	Charlie
Isa. 2:4	‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares.’	Adam

Matt 25:41-45	‘As you did it not to one of the least of these you did it not to me.’	
Micah 6:8	‘To do justice, to love kindness.’	Adele
Ezek. 34:1-16	‘I myself will be the shepherd...I will feed them with justice.’	Edna
Isa. 35	‘The desert shall rejoice and bloom.’	Edelmira
Ps. 82	‘Give justice to the weak.’	Edith
Pluralism/diversity		
Acts 2:1-12	Day of Pentecost.	Matt
Unity		
1 Cor. 12	One body, many parts.	Harry
Manner of the referendum debate		
Gen. 32:22-32	Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok Brook.	Jack
2 Tim. 1:7 Col. 3:15	Not having a spirit of fear. Letting peace rule in your heart	Jessica
1 Cor. 13:4-7	‘Love is patient...’	Adrian
Phil 2:1-4 Rom. 10:16-18	‘Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with one another.’ (New Living Translation) ‘Salvation is for everyone.’ (Chapter heading in New Living Translation)	Abbi
Heb. 13:7	‘Remember those who first spoke God’s message to you.’ (unknown trans.)	Talia
Matt. 24:42	‘Keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.’ (NIV)	Sadie
Rom. 12:18	‘Where ever possible live at peace with one another.’ (paraphrase)	Penny
Political theory or governance		
Acts 2:1-12	The Day of Pentecost.	Eddie
1 Sam. 8	‘Give us a king to govern over us.’	Moira
Rom. 13:1-7 Heb. 13:14 Micah 6:8	Submitting to the civil authority. No lasting city; ‘we seek the city which is to come.’ ‘To do justice, to love kindness.’	Emily
Rom. 13: 1-4 Acts 1:23-26	Submitting to the governing authorities. Choosing the replacement for Judas, by lot.	Clive
Isa 40:15-17	‘All the nations are as nothing before him.’	Edwin

2.1 Comments regarding categorisation

The social justice theme was clearly dominant although by no means did all participants go into much detail. Remarkably little attention was paid to questions of Scottish history and, in

that sense, Nationalism as an exclusionary identity. Rather most conversation was around civic nationalism; the forms of governance that might best promote social justice. The less-obvious categorisations require some brief explanation. Charlie's passages from Haggai and the Book of Revelation captured for him the eschatological vision of justice to which a contemporary right-ordered society ought aspire. For Harry, the question of unity was one that stretched both ways across the Scottish-rest of UK (but predominantly English) border"

1 Corinthians 12, [has] the idea of the one body and each part of the body needing each other and if one part of the body suffers it all suffers with it. And actually if we apply that over, for instance, the Union – is there deep down this sense that we do actually need one another? Could that be expanded to be Europe needs one another further expansion – do we all need one another? (Harry)

Arguably Harry's choice of passage is about governance but I think the tone places it more as an issue.

Jack (openly pro-independence) offered what was the first text in the focus group series on Jacob wrestling with God. I place it in the 'manner of the debate' category although it is not easily categorised. To Jack the passage seemed to put him in touch with his feelings regarding the possibilities for a new constitutional settlement:

This mysterious encounter as [Jacob] was left alone, everyone else had gone on – and he had this struggle in the darkness. As I say, it's on the verge of a new future for him and he's given a new name which becomes the name of the new people and he is blessed in the action and he's wounded by it. (Jack)

For reasons of space I intend to examine in detail only two passages: one from the 'issues' and another from the 'manner' categories.

3.0 Logs of blame in Westminster eyes

Ursula is a woman in her late-40s or early 50s, a member of a Church of Scotland parish in the Oban area. She offered two texts, the second being more important to her pro-independence stance. Ursula was fifth in her group of six participants to present her biblical passages and opened with Galatians 5:1 - 'it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery'. We will shortly see how Ursula returns to this later in the group's discussion but she wanted to focus on the familiar passage from Matthew 7:3 about first taking the plank out of our own eye so that we might see clearly to remove what is, after all, merely a speck in a brother's eye. Ursula explained her choice:

I think we're developing very much into a blame society. Blaming other people for our ills and I think from the Westminster government it's coming that the 'scroungers' and these are the words they use for people who are relying on benefits. It's all these derogatory terms that are used for them. And so they talk about scroungers – so they're to blame for the problems. We wouldn't live in such difficult times if it wasn't for the cost of these people. Whereas they don't say anything about the financial sector who are taking millions of pounds and paying millions in bonuses to people – which to me is just completely obscene. So I don't want us to live in a society where we blame others for our problems. I want us to live in a society where we all take responsibility for each other and we don't judge people we don't decide people have a worth or they don't have a worth. And again it's easy to read the words and to say them but it will be a huge challenge.

Sadie, seated next to Ursula, immediately adopted this text as a call for social equality, 'let's put ourselves all on the same playing field.' Ursula distanced herself from this interpretation – but a little later in the conversation, as we shall see below. Penny was prompted to reminisce about the glimpses of equality she had seen whilst living in an African country for many

years. Her own and local children played together as equals in a miniature replica castle her husband had built for them. Adults had also demonstrated equality when whites, facing food shortages, shared a rare bag of flour amongst other whites. Penny referred also to kindness, regardless of political party, shown in the queues for petrol – but it is unclear whether or not she had observed cross-racial equality on those occasions.

The idea of hypocrisy from the Matthew text prompted Rob, a former merchant seaman, to recall the subversion of the British trade sanctions against Rhodesian asbestos exports in 1966. Rob's point seemed to be that the Royal Navy was patrolling off Mozambique whilst everyone knew that Mombasa in Kenya was a port used for busting the sanctions. With a non sequitur not unusual in group conversation, Rob returned to Ursula's quotation of Galatians 5 and observed:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free stand firm then, throw off the yoke of slavery – we're not actually slaves in this context are we? It's probably talking about sin is it?

Ursula was quick to remind the group about the limitations of drawing on biblical texts for a discussion on Scottish independence: 'That's why I said it's one of these verses that you can use, take it out of context – and use it.' It is then Rob's response that let Ursula make clear the connection in her mind between Galatians and Scotland.

Rob: I very deliberately said earlier on, Scotland is not an occupied country. We have the freedom to take our own choices and independence in relation to that. Yeh, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free – part of freedom is able to make your choices.

Ursula: The right or the wrong choices. Good or bad.

Clive pulled the group back to Ursula's primary text on the log in the eye from Matthew 7. His concern was with the blame culture behind which, to him, politicians seem to readily hide: 'To what extent are the political leaders looking at what might need to be changed in their own behaviour?' Clive pursued the critique of Westminster but, from his point of view, it was the limited range of powers of the Scottish Parliament that constrained the extent of political corruption there. In an unconscious reflection of one of the Aberdonian texts (which we discuss next), Clive mused about the character of the politicians he would take seriously: 'So I can see people living and recognizing planks in all our eyes maybe those are the people I'll go for.'

I invited Ursula to reflect on what she'd heard from others about her texts – but not before Rob had interjected with the claim that the Galatians were Celts (albeit Central European Celts) – about which we make no comment here! Ursula makes a distinction between Sadie's claim for equality and her own for social justice. It is, for Ursula, the possibility of autonomy (hence her Galatians passage) from a *Westminster* discourse of blame directed at those receiving social security benefits that links Matthew 7:3, and its logs and specks, with Scottish independence.

Yes, I think Sadie I'm not sure that I was seeing equality in this because I don't believe we will ever have equality but for me it was about those who have will look after those who don't – that's my vision for my country. It's that we will look after those who don't have it. There will always be people who have more than others – and Penny, about the blaming and to have a way forward we need to have someone to blame for us always to be that same direction – that's why, and I know you acknowledge that – it's a huge challenging verse. But this can only be my vision and my aspiration that we could become a country, we could become a people that don't look to blame others for our suffering. And I know that at the moment, we blame Westminster for all our problems. But I don't want us to be blaming other people in society – those who don't have, the vulnerable people for our problems. And I know it will be challenging – and not everyone believes what I believe. So, but I can't speak for other people,

I can't change, make the change their lives or way of thinking. But this is just the verse that gives me my reason for wanting our independence. Ursula

3.1 Discussion

If we focus here on the figures in the Matthew pericope and those in Ursula's mind we can see something quite interesting going on. The biblical passage has Jesus criticising self-righteous Jews who judge and denigrate the ordinary members of the community who do not match the elites' scrupulosity. Ursula also posits two groups: Westminster politicians and those seriously and adversely impacted by poverty. In her mind, the political elite judge and, significantly blame, those economically disadvantaged. They are categorised as welfare 'scroungers' and a drain on the nation's resources. There are at least two shifts in context here: from religious observance to economic activity and from judging to blaming.

We might usefully understand Ursula's hermeneutical move as an instance of what Clodovis Boff describes as a hermeneutic of correspondence of relationships rather than of terms (Boff 1987). A correspondence of terms is akin to staging a re-entactment in modern dress with characters drawn from our contemporary world (e.g. the part of the Sadducees played by figures of dependent bourgeoisie, that of the Zealots by revolutionaries). Boff argues that such a hermeneutic fails to respect the real differences in conditions between then and now, especially as regards the complexities of our own culture. We too easily fall into a view of history repeating itself when we look for correspondences between biblical designations and categories used today. A more nuanced approach is appreciating how Jesus (and other biblical figures) responded to the events of their day with creative fidelity to their own vision of God. We are faced with our own events and our responsibility is to respond to those in continuity *with the way in which* the biblical figures responded to theirs:

We need not, then, look for formulas to 'copy', or techniques to 'apply' from scripture. What scripture offers us are rather something like orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations – elements permitting us to acquire, on our own initiative, a 'hermeneutic competency', and thus the capacity to judge – on our own initiative, in our own right – 'according to the mind of Christ', or 'according to the Spirit', the new unpredictable situations with which we are continually confronted. The Christian writings offer us not a *what*, but a *how* – a manner, a style, a spirit. (Boff 1987: 149, emphasis in original.)

To a very limited extent Ursula is making a correspondence of terms (self-righteous, scrupulous Jews are mapped to Westminster politicians who scape-goat the poor but shelter their own friends in the City). However, Ursula's is a more sophisticated hermeneutic of a correspondence of relationships. The correspondence seems to be the issue of blindness to one's own biases (even faults) by which one legitimates (to oneself and others of like-mind) the stigmatizing of others. However, there is an important further move that Ursula makes. It's not apparent in the Matthew text that the scrupulous Jews are blaming the 'careless' masses for the ills that are befalling the nation under Roman occupation. (But of course we should not dismiss this possibility given the shadow cast by Deuteronomic blessing and curse theology.) In Ursula's reading of Westminster political discourse, more widely recognised as a neoliberal, small-state, economic and political model, welfare recipients are not only stigmatised but scape-goated for their drain on an already pressured national economy.

I think we might also observe a considerable creativity in Ursula's hermeneutic. Walter Brueggemann appreciates imagination as 'the human capacity to picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens' (Brueggemann 1993: 13). In acknowledging (without necessarily endorsing) the cultural turn to the imaginative (away from settled, hegemonic certitudes) considerable opportunities exist for us where we can capitalise on an 'as if'. We embrace a different kind of reality by thinking of our contemporary world 'as if' it were different, not in a generalised but in very specific ways. This funding is 'to provide the pieces,

materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined' (Brueggemann 1993: 20). We construct a counter-world by focusing on the 'little stories' instead of attempting to excavate universals. Ursula's use of the log and speck *in conjunction with* being set free in Christ for freedom is, it seems to me, profoundly imaginative. Of course, the Galatians passage has been wrested from a discussion on the law and sin as an enticing (if not always controlling) power, and co-opted into an argument for national autonomy (or at least the freedom to make choices). If we were to interpret Ursula we might find that the blindness of the log in the elite's eye is but an occasion of the distorting power of sin – from which Christ offers freedom. Whereas a traditional reading of Galatians may place it in the context of personal freedom, a socio-political dimension emerges for Ursula which it could be claimed, sees the importance of sparks of gospel-freedom. This could be the freedom of God in history that Jürgen Moltmann calls the 'transformations of God' (Moltmann 1974: 321), 'anticipations' (Moltmann 1974: 273) or '*praesentia explosiva*' (Moltmann 1974: 338). I do not want to go too far down the road of interpreting Ursula's contribution as it is but one of many over the course of these focus groups. However, further sophisticated theological reflection can spring from what is a considered contribution to a focus group of invested participants.

4.0 The character of proponents

Adrian is around 50 years old and a member of a Baptist church in Aberdeen. He offered one text, that – because it had been so important to him in his Christian formation over the years – he had committed to memory.

Love is patient, love is kind, does not envy, does not boast, is not proud. Is not rude, is not self-seeking is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Adrian's explanation as to how this bears upon the independence referendum took him to the character of the politicians who are propounding the alternative stances, but first Adrian set the context of his faith journey:

I find life very confusing. That's being a bear of very little brain. And being a Christian I find, I find a real strength in the solidness of lots of parts of my faith. And I find I need to have a reference, a strong reference point, and these verses I've just read are really personal to me and are fundamental to everything that I try and do. I try and fail miserably very often but that's absolutely fundamental to everything that I believe in. And that's how I would measure any human being, if I have any right to judge. That's the ideal. And most of all I measure myself against that. And I see our leaders and that's how I measure them. How do they compare? They're as imperfect as I am. But I have met some of them, I've met some of our leaders and that informs, that informs me very much.

He was honest about the challenging nature of living Christian faith – and was, unduly, modest about his intellectual capacities. To the best of my knowledge Adrian has not had formal theological education. When faced with decisions over matters that he acknowledged to be confusing, Adrian takes the quality of Christian love as his reference point. He was concerned about the attitudes demonstrated by the principal protagonists. It was not immediately clear to the other participants as to how this related to the referendum question although Adele remarked that:

I know for me one of the influences when voting in an election is actually the person not the political party. And often it's about the person I believe would hold the greatest Christian principles. (Adele)

Adam invited Adrian to elaborate. This took Adrian into organisational theory and the trickle-down effect of leaders' behaviour and attitudes:

I feel that in my limited experience that an organisation often reflects its leader. I've found that to be an accurate maxim. And if a leader is like that, if a leader is exhibiting any negative tendencies then I wouldn't be at all surprised, I would be surprised in not seeing that reflected through the organisation. And not just for the independence debate, but for anything I'm called upon for an opinion. Does that help? That's probably a bizarre verse to choose but I find the enormity of all the argument always bewildering driven back on to things that I'm absolutely sure about. And I'm absolutely sure about that. (Adrian)

In this context Adrian, at my prompting, was willing to clarify that he meant the leaders of political parties. This was the first contribution of a biblical text and the group were not yet particularly responsive to one another. In response to my question about holding such contemporary politicians to a Corinthian high standard Abbi brought up the recent expenses scandals as evidence of what could be at stake. Adele made a link between Judeo-Christian leaders and contemporary politicians:

There's also a biblical principle about leaders being judged more harshly for the responsibility that they've been given. They will be asked of God you know what did you do? And I see that as – that's fair enough. (Adele)

Her allusion is rather unspecific; she may have had New Testament leaders in mind, such as those warned in James 3:1 that they will be 'judged with greater strictness' (ESV). Adele may also have been alluding to the biblical evaluations of the kings of Judah and Israel. In any event, Adam proffered a possible distinction between the person and their political acumen, 'maybe you could be a very sinful person but a good politician'. Adele was not convinced because for her there is a link between personal values and the quality of one's leadership. This was certainly Adrian's perspective, as he elucidated:

Because they're as human as I am. And as, hopefully not as flawed as I am, but I'm sure they are. It is a tall order, a really tall order but I think Israel in times of David and Solomon were well when those kings were on form, and fell apart when they fell apart morally. I think the moral standing of someone has got an awful lot of influence on things they do, choices that they make.... (Adrian)

This very clear reference to kingship in the Hebrew Bible elicited Adele's musings on what I would call the possibilities of a 'correspondence of terms' reading that might inform her decision in the referendum:

When I was thinking about Scripture – that whole thing, that nationhood thing kinda came into my thinking. And thinking about Israel and I actually asked myself exactly the same question is Israel the same as Scotland or is Scripture, is Israel unique or does it give an idea? And I'm not sure if I arrived at a conclusion. But I also had to think it, can we take principles about Israel or what's it about, it talks about Israel not being divided. Is that same as UK? We shouldn't be divided? (Adele)

Adele's high theology of Divine Providence, perhaps hinting at the Apostle Paul's view of governing authorities in Romans 13:2, was, albeit tentatively, expressed:

And that whole notion of the Lord of God appointing kings in a sense the same way he has appointed David Cameron and Alex Salmond, potentially. (Adele)

4.1 Discussion

Adrian quite definitely plants a flag in the territory of virtue ethics. This is not the land of utility or duties but the terrain of the personal character of the political agents who are,

variously, championing one or other of the sides in the referendum debate. It is noteworthy that Adrian turns to the famous panegyric on love – and not to other features of leadership such as boldness, courage, or conviction. These might easily be additional (perhaps occasionally contradictory) virtues of leadership as it is presented in the New Testament. Because Adrian himself makes reference to Kings David and Solomon, it is not unfair to ponder quite how well those two monarchs might have fared under a Corinthian evaluation. Adrian's hermeneutic effectively dissolves politicians' pleas for a division between public and private. He wants to hold together the development of character across all domains of a leader's life with the actions that leader chooses to make in the political arena. Virtue ethics is not, for Adrian, the only basis for his imminent decision in the ballot box but, as he said, 'that will very much inform me, and that is very much information me at the moment'. He does not reveal the other grounds although later that in the morning's discussion he did bemoan the 'strife' in which politicians operate:

And that's a turn off for me. And there's not enough strife without creating some more, creating another border? He said, perhaps nailing his colours, theoretically. (Adrian)

The selection of virtues gets entangled in the hermeneutics of reading the Hebrew Bible, around which Adele began to grope. In what ways, if at all, is the covenanted nation of ancient Israel a model for Scotland and/or the United Kingdom? It is not insignificant that Adele has roots in Highland Presbyterianism that has borne memories of the 17th century covenanting tradition that embedded Reformed doctrine and practice against innovations by the Stuart monarchy. For well over 20 years Adele has been in a Baptist church and significantly influenced by the charismatic movement. In her later contributions to the focus group Adele was struggling to coordinate human voting patterns (free will) with God appointing leaders:

...in the Old Testament, God appoints leaders of nations. And so therefore, after you know, if there is independence or whatever again it's leadership and God appointed, anointing leadership – or at least allowing [it] to happen. (Adele)

Adrian and Adele – aided by Adam and Abbi – are, it might be said, wrestling with the biblical text at the confluence of three streams: (a) the utilitarian, even pragmatic, political arguments for Scottish independence or the value of the United Kingdom, (b) a virtue ethic through which to evaluate the protagonists, and (c) a residual deontological Scottish Covenanting tradition where the duty is faithfulness to a political structure that best settles and extends the Reformed Faith.

5.0 Conclusions

It is important to remember that participants shared their passages from the Bible *after* around an hour to an hour and a half of discussion around how they had seen the independence debate progressing in public. In a contribution at the very end of the day, when asked about the process, Adrian addressed the holding back from starting with the Bible with an observation that recognises the artificiality of compartmentalising:

Although the questions, the discussion, wasn't overtly biblical it's always there, for me. There's nothing that's divorced from my faith...it's the fundamental of my life and so that was fine – it didn't make a huge difference, I don't think. (Adrian)

I agree that each of the phases of practical theological reflection are mutually influenced one by another. However, I tend to agree more with Adam, also from the Aberdeen group, who found that this disciplined sequence 'meant the responses were less pre-conceived'.

It is also vital for those of us who are accustomed to thinking on our feet, especially in discussion groups, that this process demands a lot from participants. Ursula, herself a not-

inexperienced facilitator, captured this challenge in her concluding reflection on the day's process in Oban:

I think I've managed better than I thought I would 'cos I'm not very good at thinking quickly about things. And probably tomorrow I'll be thinking, I wish I had said that. So there's a wee bit for me being asked to reflect on what the group have said after [I've] read a verse, that is quite challenging to be able to do that immediately. But I think I did OK today. (Ursula)

Whilst Harry, a theology undergraduate student in the early pilot group, had voiced his concerns about 'hermeneutics with a crow bar' when it came to bringing a biblical passage, he admitted that it had been valuable if not always qualifying as 'good' exegesis:

It did illuminate our conversation and was actually an interesting guide into some areas I don't think we would have touched on if we hadn't come from those stories and those passages. So that was actually quite reassuring to watch that happen. (Harry)

Certainly the sheer range of texts proffered by the focus group participants is fascinating. This is both an encouragement and a warning to practical theologians. It is an encouragement to provide spaces for people to engage in facilitated discussion that does not cohere around 'approved' passages. There is a richness to the texture of grappling with the bible that affirms the loose ends. The warning comes when we appreciate how poorly equipped it seemed that many, if not even most, of the focus group participants (including those with an academic qualification in theology or biblical studies) were in finding the bible helpful when faced with a political questions such as Scottish independence. What I was asking them to do – in choosing a passage and spending an extended period (really a six hour event in most cases) in group reflection – was so unusual and unfamiliar. They eschewed proof-texting but were at a bit of a loss as to alternative strategies. Sharing in this process seemed to (helpfully) cloud *and* clarify, not 'what the bible says about Scottish independence', but the deeper themes of Christian concern that people saw as important for their decision on 18th September 2014.

References

- Boff, Clodovis (1987), *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis).
- Brueggemann, Walter (1993), *Texts under Negotiation :The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press).
- Church and Society Council (2014), *Our Vision: Imagining Scotland's Future* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland).
- Groome, Thomas H. (1998), *Sharing Faith : A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry : The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock) xiii, 569 p.
- Moltmann, Jürgen (1974), *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press).
- Stoddart, Eric (2014a), *Advancing Practical Theology: Critical Discipleship for Disturbing Times* (London: SCM Press).
- (2014b), 'Public Practical Theology in Scotland: With Particular Reference to the Scottish Independence Referendum', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18 (2), 317-47.