VII

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC QUESTIONS, RELIGION& MORALS

Introduction

We live in a time when everything seems to be changing, and some things at a remarkable pace. Technology is one example. We hear a lot about such things as Artificial Intelligence, quantum computing, blockchain, genome editing and nanobots, and probably struggle to make much sense of any of them. Innovations such as these have momentum behind them, both financial and political. They will undergo further development and have an impact on society, whether for good or for ill.

What is unquestionably detrimental to our society is the *moral* change that has occurred over the last few generations. The nature of the change is indicated by a term coined in the 1960s, namely, 'the permissive society'. This moral transformation, although distinct from technological advances, is not unconnected to them. Technology may be morally neutral, but those who originate it, operate it, or make use of it are not. In the fallen world in which we live, the sad fact is that devices which have great potential to benefit mankind can also be utilised for evil purposes.

The increase in immorality in recent decades has coincided with the growth of the mass media and latterly social media. These media have made a significant contribution to the spread of sinful behaviour, especially among teenagers. According to Ofcom, the government-approved regulatory authority for broadcasting and telecommunications, by the age of twelve, 97% of children in the UK now possess a mobile phone, with nearly a quarter of five-to-seven-year-olds having one. If parents and guardians are not diligent in their supervision, children may be in danger from immoral content on the internet and harmful influences on social media channels. Such is the concern that there were reports in April that UK ministers are considering banning the sale of smartphones to children under sixteen.

It ought to be a warning to any society when many of its youngest members appear to be disillusioned, disoriented and fearful about the future. Statistics show a rise in mental health problems, sexual assault and suicide among young people, with material viewed online often being cited as a factor. A report published by Public Health Scotland in 2022, covering the period 2011 to 2020, found that suicide was the leading cause of death across the 5-24 age group, accounting for a quarter of the total. While the suicide rate per head is lower among this group than for older age groups, the trend is upward. This does not bode well for our nation.

The moral deterioration can be traced to the *spiritual* change which has taken place in our country. The results of the 2022 census of Scotland relating to religion have not yet been published, but data are available from the annual Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, which is funded chiefly by the Scottish Government. Since 1999, the Survey has interviewed a representative random sample of the population annually. In 2015, the data showed that for the first time a majority of Scots were not religious, the proportion being highest in the youngest age bracket. Two-thirds of people said that they did not attend religious services. The picture was not uniform among the churches, however. The Church of Scotland showed a substantial decline, affiliation to it having halved since 1999, whereas the Roman Catholic Church and the 'Other Christian' category were unchanged.

The lesson to be learned here is that churches can have no hope of retaining the allegiance of their people unless they are seen to stand for something definite. The apostle Paul shows us what that 'something definite' is when he describes the church as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). He is of

course referring to the church's relation to, and duty towards, the Word of God. Christ affirmed it as truth (John 17:17), and so must His Church.

There is ample evidence by now that the Church of Scotland has more regard for modern secular thought than for the teaching of the Scriptures. This was exemplified by the remark of one Commissioner at the Kirk's 2011 General Assembly, which voted to allow ministers in same-sex relationships to be inducted into pastoral charges: "We now know better than the Bible". When the Kirk is dismissive of God's inspired Word and unable to speak clearly on right and wrong, why should anyone pay heed to it?

This attitude to the Bible is not new and has long had consequences for the Kirk's relation to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, with its thoroughly Scriptural teaching. In 1910, the Church of Scotland altered its Formula of subscription. The effect was that, while office-bearers were required to accept the Westminster Confession as the Church's Confession, they were not required personally to believe any more than "the fundamental doctrines contained therein". In 1926, in the fifth of nine articles declaratory of her constitution, the Church of Scotland officially acknowledged "due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith", and the words used in ordination and induction services since then have reflected that. Neither the "fundamental doctrines" nor the "substance of the Faith" were defined.

In 1986, the General Assembly passed a Declaratory Act in which it formally disassociated itself from certain statements in the Confession. By 2018, the former Principal Clerk and past Moderator Dr Finlay Macdonald could state, with alarming candour: "The Church is not well served by a subordinate standard that, let's be honest, is not taken seriously across the Church." The implication was that the problem is with the Confession when it actually lies with the Church. Because the Kirk no longer takes her Confession seriously, people do not take the Kirk seriously.

The 2023 Church of Scotland General Assembly approved an overture from its Theological Forum to replace the Westminster Confession as the Church's subordinate standard with a 'Book of Confessions' containing five subordinate standards, and potential for additions over time. The book consists of the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Scots Confession, Westminster Confession and the 1992 Statement of Faith. (The last of these documents is similar in content to the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed; while it has more detail, it makes no direct reference to Christ's virgin birth, His burial or His ascension.) The book has been sent to presbyteries for their approval, under the Barrier Act.

If the book is finally approved, would it mean that the Kirk has finally identified the 'fundamental doctrines' of the Christian faith? Not exactly. The first paragraph of the revised Formula of subscription simply identifies the *location* of these fundamental doctrines, without defining them. "I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds." These creeds certainly contain important doctrines, yet Roman Catholicism can affirm them too. The precious 'solas' of the Reformation are not to be found in these creeds, nor the doctrines of grace.

The revised Formula continues: "I promise to be guided in my life and doctrine by the Book of Confessions of this Church." Because the Confession of Faith will remain a subordinate standard of the Church, the Forum believes that this confessional reform will strengthen the Reformed nature of the Church. This represents either extraordinary optimism or wilful blindness, as the Confession will no longer be the Kirk's *principal* subordinate standard and her office-bearers will no longer have to make vows concerning it or subscribe to it. In reality, this is just a further retreat from the Reformation. Changes of this sort will not improve the spiritual condition of the Church of Scotland, and neither will they do so for any other denomination. They incur God's displeasure and invite His judgements.

The changes we see in the church and the world remind us of Solomon's observation concerning mankind: "Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many

inventions" (Ecc. 7:29). What must the Lord's people do when unwelcome moral and spiritual changes are happening? Surely the same things that we ought to be doing at all times: trusting in the Lord and pouring out our hearts before Him; holding to the truth and walking in the old paths. Our encouragement is in the God who never changes and is sovereign. He made the world out of nothing, He preserves and governs the whole creation, and He has redeemed the Church through the blood of His dear Son.

In a time of change, it is reassuring to know that *our triune God rules the world in His providence*. "For God is King of all the earth...God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness" (Ps. 47:7,8). This universal and invincible dominion surely tells us that God is well able to fulfil all the promises He has made concerning His Church. With our physical eyes, we see the nations in rebellion against God, yet with the eye of faith we perceive the hand of God in history, preserving and advancing His cause.

In a time of change, it is comforting to know that *our Lord Jesus Christ rules the church in His grace.* "That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21). Christ is the Head of a people who have been renewed by His Spirit and are joined to Him by faith. He brings them into a willing subjection to Himself. He strengthens them against every foe and they get the victory over each one in the end. The Church can say with confidence, "the Lord is our king; he will save us" (Isa. 33:22).

God is ever at work, and we believe that He is at work in Scotland now, despite the many discouragements. He causes the gospel to be published in all the world, and He gathers His people out of every land. Over time His rule is seen everywhere. "Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him" (Ps. 72:11). This being God's promise, it is what we must pray for, labour for and hope for, fighting the good fight in these dark days.

Matthew Henry said of the Church and her Lord: "Such an army, under such a commander, will at length carry all the world before them." May the Lord hasten it in His time!

ISSUES CONSIDERED

The number of issues that come within the Committee's remit and which could potentially be taken up by them is vast. Their chief attention is given to moral matters and particularly those that are currently before the Scottish Parliament. Most of the issues considered by the Committee during the past year were once again continued from the previous year. In many cases, there has been little development. The Report therefore consists largely of brief updates on these matters.

1. Child Discipline

The Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Act 2019 came into force on 7th November 2020. It prohibits parents from using *any* form of corporal punishment with their children, including a gentle smack, and covers carers, visitors and holidaymakers. The result is that the law of the land in this area is now in conflict with God's law. According to Scripture, physical chastisement, when rightly used, is a means for good. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Prov. 22:15). As opportunity affords, the Committee will continue to make the Scottish Government aware of the detrimental effect the lack of proper discipline is having on the behaviour of children in general.

In far too many areas of life, the state is going beyond its rightful sphere and reaching into the domain of the family. Perhaps the most brazen example of this was the 'Named Person' scheme, which would have seen a 'state guardian' appointed for every child under eighteen in Scotland. We should remember how the Scottish Government had to scrap the scheme finally. The smacking ban is similarly unwarranted. It would be good to see the God-given right and duty of parents to chastise their children in a reasonable way recognised, and this legislation revoked.

2. Gender Recognition

Last year we reported on how the Scottish Government's Gender Recognition Reform Bill, which had been approved by a large majority in the Scottish Parliament on 22nd December 2022, had begun to falter. The Bill aims to simplify the process whereby people can obtain a certificate giving legal recognition to a change in their gender, and have the sex recorded on their birth certificate changed accordingly. Applications must be granted if the conditions which are minimal are met. A person's legal gender, even for those as young as sixteen, would effectively become a matter of 'self-identification'. The bill was backed by 'trans' groups and their supporters but opposed by several women's groups, on the basis that it poses a threat to women's identity and safety. We particularly abhor the apparent willingness of the Scottish Government, by this and other legislation, to promote gender confusion among children.

On 16th January 2023, the UK Government indicated that it would use its powers under the Act setting up the Scottish Parliament to block the Bill from going for royal assent, on the grounds of a perceived conflict with UK equality law. On 12th April 2023, Humza Yousaf, the First Minister, indicated that his government would seek a judicial review of the UK Government's action. The case was heard in the Court of Session on 19th & 20th September, and in its ruling delivered on 8th December, the Scottish Government's legal challenge was rejected.

Can we now speak of this Bill in the past tense? Not yet. On 20th December, Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, announced that the Scottish Government would not appeal the ruling, but would also not withdraw the Bill from parliament. She said: "For the avoidance of doubt, this Bill is not in the bin and is waiting an incoming UK Government that has more respect for devolution." As we noted last year, providence has intervened in a remarkable way concerning this Bill. We should take encouragement from that, and pray that it will do so again.

3. Transgenderism

By 'transgenderism' is meant the idea that people can change their gender from the one that matches their sex to the one that corresponds to the opposite sex. Associated with this is the demand that 'transwomen' should have the rights and privileges belonging to women, and likewise 'transmen' the rights and privileges belonging to men. This is even though sex itself cannot change, it being a matter of biology: sex is evident in the very cells which make up our bodies. To adopt a gender identity which is contrary to one's sex is to infringe the ninth commandment. According to the *Shorter Catechism*, the ninth commandment requires "the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man" (Q.77).

Transgenderism is closely linked to gender recognition. The Committee have been of the view that the issue of transgenderism is of sufficient importance that it may warrant a public statement on behalf of the denomination. However, the lack of clarity regarding the fate of the Gender Recognition Reform Bill is not helpful and means that some caution is required. The subject will be kept under review.

4. Conversion Therapy

The Scottish Government is seeking to legislate the banning of so-called 'conversion practices', but their plans have been delayed. In March 2022, the Scottish Government set up an Expert Advisory Group on Ending Conversion Practices, and its report and recommendations were published in October last year. The plan was to introduce a Bill to the Scottish Parliament by the end of 2023, but this was watered down to a consultation.

A consultation document outlining the government's proposals was published in January, with a foreword by Emma Roddick, Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees. She states that these conversion practices "aim to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity", and that the government's focus is on "protecting people from harm". She says that its approach will ensure that "fundamental rights already enjoyed by people in Scotland, such as freedom of religion and the right to family and private life, are upheld".

What is meant here by "protecting people from harm"? The language cannot refer to conversion practices which use violence, as these are already illegal; likewise most – and perhaps all – medical and surgical treatments and psychological therapies. We know that some who are pressing for a ban want it to be a comprehensive one, such that even so-called 'talking therapy' is outlawed. If this happens, then despite the reassurance about freedom of religion, the Church's work of prayer and preaching may be under threat. The call that Peter gave to the people gathered near the temple must continue to be issued to all: "Repent ye therefore, and be *converted*, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).

It is not known when the results of the consultation will be published, and precisely what form any 'ban' on conversion practices will take. The Committee agreed last year that a document should be drafted pointing out the dangers posed to Christian conversion by the sort of ban the government appears to have in mind. However, the delay in the appearance of any firm proposals means that the wisest course at present is for the Committee to maintain a watching brief on the issue.

5. Abortion

In May 2022, Gillian Mackay MSP lodged a proposal for a Member's Bill to introduce 'buffer zones' around healthcare settings that provide abortion services. The effect of her Abortion Services Safe Access Zones (Scotland) Bill would be to prevent pro-life protests in an area measuring 200 metres from an abortion clinic. The bill was introduced on 5th October 2023. The 'impact assessment' of the bill on the Scottish Government website states that the Bill contributes to the following 'National Outcomes':

- We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination;
- We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe; and
- We are healthy and active.

This is surely a perverse assessment of a Bill which, if it becomes law, will potentially criminalise people who are determined to respect, protect and fulfil the right to life of the most vulnerable of our fellow human beings. The likely effect of this Bill would be that some women who might otherwise have been dissuaded from having an abortion will now not be. The 'impact' of this on the unborn children concerned – though our society may wish to deny it – is that their lives will be brought to an untimely and cruel end. Those who insist on labelling even silent witness outside abortion centres as 'harassment' and 'intimidation' might care to think about that. We must remember that there is also an 'impact' on the mothers – one which is deliberately ignored because of its inconvenience to the 'positive' narrative of 'choice' and 'rights'. It is there in the shame that will not go away and the scars that do not heal.

Sadly the way was opened for this Bill in December 2022, when the UK Supreme Court ruled that legislation setting up buffer zones in Northern Ireland does not "disproportionately interfere" with protesters' rights. It is not yet known when the Bill will proceed further. The Committee have agreed to keep a watch on its progress, with the intention of contacting MSPs as and when appropriate, to urge them to protect the unborn by voting against the Bill. We pray that this legislation will yet fail.

6. Assisted Suicide

On 10th October 2022, Liam McArthur MSP won sufficient support from MSPs to officially introduce his proposed Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill to the Scottish Parliament. The title is something of a misnomer, as what is envisaged is not simply the ending of life-prolonging treatment, but doctor-assisted suicide. The Bill was finally introduced on 27th March and will now be subject to committee scrutiny before it is debated, probably in the autumn. The Committee have not yet had the opportunity to consider the proposed legislation.

It is often argued that people who endure debilitating conditions have little or no quality of life, and the sufferers themselves may be tempted to think that. God is the judge of these things, however. We must be guided by the sixth commandment, which says, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exod. 20:13). Suicide may put us

into a far worse eternity. We ought to be very sympathetic to the suffering, but compassion should show itself in caring, not killing.

It was sad, although not altogether surprising, that at the 2023 Church of Scotland General Assembly a motion from the Theological Forum restating the Church's long-held opposition to assisted dying was defeated. A countermotion carried which recognised the existence of "a range of theological views and ethical opinions" on assisted dying within the Church. The Faith Impact Forum was instructed to work with the Theological Forum and other relevant parties to explore the range of views and opinions and report to a future Assembly.

We are thankful that although the Bill has considerable support in Parliament, there are some significant voices against it. The present and the previous First Minister have indicated their opposition, as has Emma Roddick, Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees. Sue Webber, a Conservative MSP, acknowledged recently: "I was pro-assisted [suicide] until I got in here ... being in that role of legislating I don't think I would be able to feel comfortable knowing that one person has died because of a decision that I've taken." We pray that more of our politicians will begin to see things that way, and resist the clamour for assisted dying.

The Committee intends to contact MSPs nearer the time of the debate and urge them to affirm the value of all human life by voting against the Bill.

7. Lord's Day Matters

For several years the Committee has had 'Lord's Day Matters' as a standing item on its agenda. Periodic requests are made to Presbyteries that they report any notable infringements of the Sabbath within their bounds, so that the Committee are aware of them and able to take them up if appropriate. This is not at all meant to replace the actions of Presbyteries, who are primarily responsible for responding to such matters. No particular issues were reported during the past year.

8. Climate Change

At their meeting in October, the Committee agreed to make 'Climate Change' a standing item on their agenda. The Editor of the *Free Church Witness* magazine was requested to contact Dr James Wanliss, an elder in our Greenville Congregation (South Carolina), and ask him to write an article on the subject for the magazine. A brief article appeared in the April issue, for which we are grateful to Dr Wanliss, and we hope that further material may appear. Given the prominence of this issue in the public discourse, Christians need to be informed on the subject, and armed with the teaching of Scripture concerning the future for our planet. The truth is that we need not fear 'climate change' so much as the harmful things governments may do in their vain attempts to limit it.

The Scottish Government's policy on climate change states that, if Scotland's target of "net zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045" is to be met, "a rapid transformation across all sectors of our economy and society is required." From what we have seen already in Scotland and elsewhere, this transformation could involve such things as carbon taxes, inflated domestic energy prices, curbs on personal travel and even changes to our diet.

We must ever beware of what is called 'government overreach', and the erosion of our civil liberties. Governments have a tendency to want to control everything, and something as existential as the climate provides them with the perfect opportunity to do that *and* justify it. Could the transformation involve silencing those who are regarded as 'climate deniers' – including those who warn that extreme weather events may have more to do with God's displeasure against sinful nations, than with the Industrial Revolution and its benefits for mankind?

9. Funerals

Last year we reported that, at the request of the Publications Committee, the Committee had considered two subjects raised within the Publications Committee in connection with the draft of a document on Funerals by Rev. James Gracie. The subjects were practice at funerals and cremations. The Committee set up a sub-committee to look at these subjects and report to the Committee. The Committee have now agreed on some suggested rewording of the text and some further possible adjustments, and their suggestions have been forwarded to the Publications Committee. It is understood that the draft that emerges will then be considered by Mr Gracie.

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10. Conclusion

John Newton has some suitable words for us as we fight the Christian fight in an evil day, whether as individual believers or together in the fellowship of the Church:

> Why are we called soldiers – but because we are called to a warfare! And how could we fight, if there were no enemies to resist? The Lord's soldiers are not merely for show, to make an empty parade in a uniform, and to brandish their arms when none but friends and spectators are around them. No, we must stand upon the field of battle – we must face the fiery darts – we must wrestle (which is the closest and most arduous kind of fighting) with our foes! Nor can we well expect wholly to escape wounds, but the leaves of the tree of life are provided for their healing. The Captain of our salvation is at hand, and leads us on with an assurance which might make even a coward bold – that, in the end, we shall be more than conquerors through Him who has loved us!

May the Lord hear the prayers of His people in our land and have mercy upon church and nation.

DAVID M. BLUNT, *Convener*
LINDSAY M. MACCALLUM, *Vice-convener*

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Public Questions, Religion & Morals Committee and thank the Committee, especially the Clerk, Convener, and Vice-convener;

2. The General Assembly commend the work of the Committee to the prayers of our people. They encourage Church courts to take up matters of moral and spiritual concern as appropriate, and to notify the Committee of any issues which may be of relevance to the wider Church and which might benefit from being considered in greater depth;

3. The General Assembly note the Committee's ongoing concern for the right of parents to exercise biblical discipline in the training of their children, with the benefits this has for wider society. They encourage the Committee to persevere in raising this issue with government;

4. The General Assembly note the Court of Session ruling concerning the Gender Recognition Reform Bill, and that this ruling was not appealed by the Scottish Government. They urge the people of our Church and Christians throughout our land to continue in prayer that this unwarranted and harmful legislation will be abandoned, and that the ideology behind it will be rejected by governments and society throughout the UK;

5. The General Assembly note that the Committee have not thus far produced a public statement on transgenderism, and the reason for this. They pray that the Lord will continue to grant the Committee guidance as they keep the subject under review;

6. The General Assembly note that the Committee have not thus far produced a document highlighting the

threat to the work of the Church and Christian conversion posed by a possible ban on so-called 'conversion therapy'. They pray that the Lord will give the Committee guidance as they maintain a watching brief on the issue;

7. The General Assembly note the Committee's intention to contact MSPs to urge them to protect the unborn by voting against the Abortion Services Safe Access Zones Bill. They encourage the Committee in this, and commend to the prayers of the Church the various efforts being made to bring the evil of abortion to an end;

8. The General Assembly note the Committee's intention to contact MSPs to urge them to affirm the value of all human life by voting against the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill. They encourage the Committee in this, and pray that the Lord, in whose hand the hearts of all men are, will turn MSPs who are minded to support the Bill away from a decision which would lead to more deaths by suicide;

9. The General Assembly lament the increasing desecration of the Lord's Day throughout our land and encourage Presbyteries to take up local violations. They exhort our people to be steadfast in keeping the Sabbath holy and commend to all God's people a day of rest and its benefits to man;

10. The General Assembly note the Committee's interest in the issue of climate change, and look forward to the appearance of further material considering this subject from a Biblical perspective;

11. The General Assembly urge prayer for Christian members of the various Parliaments in the United Kingdom, that the Lord may grant them strength and boldness in asserting biblical teaching and bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ;

12. The General Assembly appeal to governments throughout the United Kingdom, and in particular at Holyrood and Westminster, to recognise that they are ordained of God and accountable to Him, to acknowledge the truth that "righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34), and to begin to repeal ungodly legislation.