VII

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC QUESTIONS, RELIGION & MORALS

Introduction

The Public Questions, Religion & Morals Committee exists to address those moral issues that confront the Church and the Christian in the public square. The Report details a number of issues that we are faced with in modern society. There is constant agitation to legalise what previous generations rightly rejected. What is shocking to many is how irrational a number of these demands are. While one could detail the social and political causes for this agitation, few will delve beneath the surface of things to locate the real cause, preferring instead a superficial, psychological answer.

However, the unspoken reason for this agitation is the loss of Gospel influence. We must therefore face the central question. What is lost when the Gospel is lost across society?

Consider the following remarks (lightly edited) by the Puritan Thomas Brooks (1608) in his farewell sermon preached in 1662. Ask yourself, Is this not true of Scotland and the United Kingdom in general?

1. *When the Gospel goes, peace, plenty, and trading go* (2 Chronicles 15:3,5 & 6 compared).
'Now for a long season Israel hath been without the true God, and without a teaching priest.' Why? They had priests; but they were Jeroboam's priests, as you may see. 'Have ye not cast out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and have made you priests after the manner of the nations of other lands? so that whosoever cometh to consecrate himself with a young bullock and seven rams, the same may be a priest of them that are no gods (13:9).'

A little business will buy a priesthood, and so they are said to be without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law. Mark what follows, 'And in those times there was no peace to him that went out, nor to him that came in, but great vexations were upon all the inhabitants of the countries. And nation was destroyed of nation, and city of city, for God did vex them with all adversity'. [In other words, as gospel prosperity declined, so material prosperity declined.]

2. *When the Gospel goes, safety and security goes*
The ark was taken away, and when that was taken away, their strength and safety was gone. When the Jews rejected the gospel, the Romans came and took away both their place and nation (John 11:48). About forty years after, Titus and Vespasian took away their city. They cried, 'If we let him thus alone, the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.' And this was the ready way to bring the Romans upon them.

3. *When the Gospel goes, civil liberty goes*
When the Jews slighted the gospel, and turned their backs upon it, they quickly became bond-slaves to the Romans.

4. *When the Gospel goes, the honour and glory, the splendour and beauty of a nation goes*
It is the Gospel that is the honour and glory of a nation, and when that goes, all the glory goes. As old Eli said, when the ark was taken away, 'The glory is departed from Israel' (1 Sam. 4:22). 'Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit' (Jer. 2:11-13) - that is, the worship of God into the traditions of men. What is it that lifts up one nation above another but the gospel? Above all nations of the earth, England hath been lifted up to Heaven.

> 5. *When the Gospel goes, all soul-happiness and blessedness goes*
> The Gospel, you know, is the means appointed by God to bring souls to an acquaintance with Christ, to an acceptance of Christ, to an interest in Christ, to an assurance that he is theirs, and they are his. Now, when this goes, all soul-happiness and blessedness goes.
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> 6. *When the Gospel goes, the special presence of God goes, for that still goes with the gospel*
> There is a general presence of God, as the Psalmist speaks. 'Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Ps. 139:7) This presence of God reacheth from heaven to hell; in that sense, God is included in no place, nor excluded out of any place. But alas! what is this general presence? When the Gospel goes, the special presence of God goes.

Because Brooks' analysis was a biblical one, it has abiding validity. Who in our own day cannot say that we are seeing the same problems? Economic decline; loss of freedom and liberty; irrationality abounding where men and women believe they are in the wrong body; violence being carried out against those who disagree with the whole 'woke ideology'. People find themselves arrested for questioning the prevailing ideology, while others are sacked from their posts.

This Report then serves as a reminder that the Church must be alert and free to speak the truth to those who are taking our culture into greater wickedness. The Committee are to be commended for their work in seeking to alert the Church to the issues that we all face.

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.

Gender Recognition

Last year we reported on how the Scottish Government's Gender Recognition Reform Bill had faltered. The Bill was approved at Holyrood, but it was blocked by the UK Government under the Scotland Act 1998. While the Scottish Government may still have an ambition to proceed with it or similar legislation at some point in the future, we are content to report on the Bill this year in the past tense. We should take encouragement from that and pray to the Lord for further deliverances.

Transgenderism

The idea that people can change their gender to match what they perceive themselves to be psychologically has become something of a fad. It is simply the return of Gnosticism, which maintains that the material is irrelevant and feelings are everything. The Committee, viewing this to be a matter of considerable importance, have agreed a 'Statement on Gender and Transgenderism' which is appended to the Report. We thank Rev. David M. Blunt for his work on this Statement.

Conversion Therapy

This matter has been driven forward by activists who appear to have an unexplained goal in mind. There is a growing recognition that without a specific definition of 'conversion therapy' it is virtually impossible to ban it. Westminster has been trying for five years to produce a legislative ban and has thus far failed. Activists are not satisfied with the current criminal law but are demanding something additional to it that will cover Church activities. And therein lies the problem.

In Scotland efforts to produce a legal ban have halted, out of fear of a judicial review. The Scottish Programme for Legislation 2024-2025 made no reference to conversion therapy. The Irish Government, after a number of attempts, has halted its pursuit of the matter for now. Again, we are encouraged that

providence has thwarted attempts to introduce what will effectively be a gag upon the Church. The Committee are keeping a watching brief and hope yet to produce a response on the subject when practicable.

Assisted Suicide

The Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill was introduced at Holyrood by Liberal Democrat MSP Liam McArthur on 27 March 2024. Since then its progress has been slow, and the Bill is not due to complete Stage 1 until 23 May. At some point after this MSPs will vote on the Bill's general principles. The Committee are actively corresponding on this matter and intend to contact MSPs nearer the time of the vote.

Events in Scotland have been somewhat overtaken by those at Westminster. A Private Members' Bill was introduced there by the Labour MP Kim Leadbeater on 16 October 2024. The Bill passed its second reading on 29 November but since then it seems that concern among MPs has grown. Various adjustments have been made at the Committee stage, many of which are concerning. We prayerfully await the outcome of these deliberations.

Abortion

Following the passing of the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Act 2024, the Committee wrote to the First Minister, Mr John Swinney, regarding 'Safe Access Zones', expressing their disapproval of this legislation. They continue to keep a watching brief on this matter. We note that a retired Minister in Northern Ireland has been charged for preaching near or within such a zone. The Christian Institute has taken on his case to test the current law.

Climate Change

The Committee have kept this subject on their agenda. We note that while numerous political leaders are promoting the need for increased expenditure and legislation to combat what they perceive to be a problem with the earth's climate, other individuals are opposing the entire agenda on a scientific and economic basis. It is of interest that the new leader of the Conservative Party has announced the abandonment of the party's commitment to reach 'net zero' by 2050. The Committee will continue to note developments.

Lord's Day Issues

The keeping of the Lord's Day is an imperative. There has recently been an extension of Sabbath shopping on the Isle of Lewis. Despite widespread objection to the opening of its Stornoway store on the Lord's Day, the first such opening being on 17 November, Tesco has refused to alter its policy. We are thankful for the ongoing protests and the encouragement of those who have refused to do their main shopping at Tesco and are now patronising shops that close on the Lord's Day. The Committee are fully aware of the importance of the Sabbath and encourage Presbyteries to write to political representatives when local breaches of God's Day occur.

E. TREVOR KIRKLAND, *Convener*
LINDSAY 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 Convener, Vice-convener and Clerk;

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 that the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill has not been able to proceed any further, and express their thanks to the Lord for His merciful providence in this;

4. The General Assembly welcome the 'Statement on Gender and Transgenderism' produced by the Committee. They commend the Statement to the use of the Lord's people and encourage the Committee to circulate it as appropriate;

5. The General Assembly note the Committee's ongoing concern over proposed bans on conversion therapy and request prayer to our Almighty God that such a law will not be passed anywhere within the United Kingdom. They are encouraged that difficulties in implementing such a ban are becoming increasingly obvious to legislators;

6. 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 (Scotland) 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;

7. The General Assembly note with sadness that the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill was passed at Holyrood on 12 June 2024 and received Royal assent on 22 July. They encourage the Committee to continue to highlight the national scandal of abortion, and commend to the prayers of the Church the various efforts being made in the UK to bring this evil to an end;

8. The General Assembly note the Committee's continuing interest in the issue of climate change, and look forward to the appearance of more material considering this and other topical subjects from a Biblical perspective;

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 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;

11. 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.

APPENDIX

Statement on Gender and Transgenderism

The Public Questions, Religion & Morals Committee are responsible for representing the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)'s view on matters of spiritual and moral concern.

The Committee believe that, among the many topical issues, one in particular demands that the Church state its position. The subject of gender and transgenderism has profound implications for individuals, for our society, and even for reality. The topic is undoubtedly controversial, but it cannot be ignored.

Gender

It is vital to understand what 'gender' is and how it relates to sex. Some consider gender from a psychological standpoint and others from a biological one. As a Christian Church, we believe that it must be viewed chiefly from a Biblical perspective. The Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the only rule to direct us and the measure of all things moral and spiritual.

We believe that the following points are significant concerning gender:

1. *Gender exists by God's design*

The World Health Organisation defines gender as "a social construction relating to a set of norms, roles and relationships that is founded on social mores, laws, processes and policies based on labels of masculinity and femininity." This says that gender develops differently according to culture and evolves over generations. It is essentially a human idea and there is nothing absolute about it.

Such ideas of gender conflict with Christian teaching. In the opening chapter of the Bible, we learn of man's origin, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him: male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27). God made man to exist in two distinct sexes, male and female.

After God had created the first man, He provided for his welfare. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Genesis 2:18). Man was formed to be a social animal. Causing Adam to sleep, God took one of Adam's ribs, made a woman and brought her to Adam (Genesis 2:22). Woman was so-named because she was "taken out of" Man (Genesis 2:23). Man exists in two distinct sexes, male and female, and two distinct genders, man and woman.

The difference between the two sexes is the basis for marriage. In His wisdom God made the woman that she would be "an help meet" for the man (Genesis 2:18). Adam was not complete without Eve as his wife. She was "of the man" and "for the man" (1 Corinthians 11:8,9). A Christian writer said, "As God by creation made two of one, so again by marriage He made one of two."

The two sexes are opposite to each other and yet compatible. To fulfil His purposes in the world, and for the good of mankind, God designed man and woman with a natural, wholesome and mutual attraction between them. Remarkably, it has become unpopular to say this, but it must be said nonetheless.

The two sexes and two genders benefit each other by the fact of being different from each other. So-called 'same-sex marriage' is a contradiction in terms; such unions are futile, and can never amount to marriage. It is clear evidence of God's judgement when the attraction is no longer for the opposite sex and gender, but for the same (Romans 1:22-27).

2. *Gender depends upon our sex*

Sex is assigned by God to each individual at conception. Because sexual identity is located in the body, a midwife or doctor can recognise a newborn baby's sex. Yet sexual identity is not simply a matter of a

difference in external characteristics. Underlying the physical difference is a genetic difference.

Most cells in our bodies contain 'chromosomes' carrying genetic material. A baby's sex is determined by the chromosome make-up at conception. The father and mother contribute one sex chromosome each to the baby's genetic material. A male has one 'X' and one 'Y' chromosome, and a female two 'X' chromosomes. The man's contribution determines whether the child is a boy or a girl.

Because of the link between sex and gender, gender also is assigned by God at conception. Gender identity is located in the mind rather than in the body, so there is a sense in which gender can also be said to be learned. Our understanding of our gender identity develops in childhood through instruction and example, especially from parents. This shows us the importance of the Biblical model for the family. Father and mother model male and female roles respectively, the one to boys who are growing up to be men and the other to girls who are growing up to be women.

Sex and gender are both binary: each of them is a duality or pair. For this reason, sex and gender have been used interchangeably. Today, gender is increasingly being used with reference to a range of gender identities, in the belief that a person's natal sex characteristics do not necessarily indicate that person's gender identity.

3. *Gender is expressed in specific roles*

In terms of sex, a person is either male or female. In terms of gender, a person is either a man or a woman. Another way of expressing the difference is that a person is either masculine or feminine. In marriage, as God has ordained it, we see better than anywhere else the specific gender roles of men and women. There is plurality and unity, "they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). There is diversity and equality: the roles of men and women differ, yet they are of similar importance.

The sexual difference between man and woman is necessary for procreation, but the complementary nature of the whole range of differences between them allows for mutual flourishing generally. Both man and woman were made bearing God's image (Genesis 1:27), yet they do so as counterparts. God's glory is fully reflected between the man and the woman.

The covenant relation between Christ as the Husband and the Church as His Bride is instructive for the gender roles in marriage. There is to be a benevolent headship on the husband's part, with sacrificial and protective love of his wife. This is to be matched by a devoted submission on the wife's part, with willing subjection to her husband (Ephesians 5:22-29).

The different roles of men and women in marriage, the family, and society are not to be explained as simply a matter of tradition. They are inbuilt in mankind, because God has created men and women to be different. Interference with God's pattern will have harmful results. We are bound to say that the blurring of gender roles in recent decades has paved the way for what we witness now: the blurring of gender identities.

Transgenderism

The term 'transgender' refers to people who claim a gender identity that does not align with their birth sex. The philosophy of 'transgenderism' maintains that what people feel about their gender is determinative, even though their feelings may conflict with their anatomy. People are told that they can 'cross over' to their preferred gender. Those who try to do this are termed 'transwomen' or 'transmen', and it is insisted that they must have the rights and privileges which belong to their chosen gender.

Our objection to transgenderism has nothing to do with a hatred of such people. It is solely to do with truth. The Bible brings clarity to subjects which, if considered apart from its infinite wisdom, lead only to confusion.

We believe that the following points are significant concerning transgenderism:

1. *Individuals may experience dissatisfaction with their gender*

The term 'gender 'dysphoria' describes the unhappiness which some people feel, particularly at a young age, regarding the difference between their biological sex and their preferred gender identity. Reason, however, must come before our feelings. The fact is that someone cannot be 'born in the wrong body'. This language does at least remind us that we have a soul as well as a body.

Christ said that in the resurrection people "neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:30). Some interpret this to mean that in eternity we shall be 'genderless'. They argue that if that is our final state then we cannot be made subject to binary definitions of sex and gender here, but may choose our gender identity. Yet Christ was simply teaching that as the angels are not married, neither shall we be in the next world. He was not saying we shall cease to be male or female, men or women, masculine or feminine.

Some transgender people insist on using pronouns matching their chosen gender, accusing those who refer to them by pronouns matching their actual gender of 'misgendering'. It is instructive that many languages assign genders to parts of speech, especially nouns and pronouns. While English became largely genderless centuries ago, the third-person singular personal pronouns – 'he', 'she', and 'it' – remain. The pressure to use 'preferred pronouns' or 'gender-neutral' language must be resisted. To use them is to bear false witness and deny reality.

The condition known as 'intersex' is not the same as transgender. A person does not become intersex but is born like that. At birth, the person may have some male anatomical characteristics and some female, or the anatomy of one sex outside and the opposite sex inside. At puberty, the person may produce a hormone associated more with the sex opposite the one assigned at birth. The intersex condition is wrongly used to support the idea that sex is not binary but a spectrum, and gender likewise. It is said that it should be up to individuals where they choose to sit on the 'gender spectrum'. Gender ought to be a matter of scientific fact, not personal preference.

2. *Our gender cannot be changed*

Gender self-identification has become a harmful craze. People are told that their dysphoria can be medically 'fixed'. Surgery and hormone therapy can alter someone's physical appearance, making a man look more like a woman and vice versa, yet the term 'sex change' is a misleading one. No amount of medical intervention can change a person's sex. Trillions of cells in the body defy this. It is biologically, physically and emotionally impossible. The only change that can happen is a change in persona.

If we challenge transgenderism we may be condemned as 'transphobic', yet we must continue to oppose the idea of 'gender change'. It challenges the created order. To live as the opposite sex dishonours the God who made us and gender reassignment surgery desecrates the body He gave us. The Bible teaches that human beings are a coherent whole, with body, soul, and spirit. We do not simply inhabit our bodies; they are part of who we are, as the resurrection will reveal. We are to serve God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Transgender ideas have influenced the thinking of the establishment. Over the last twenty years, several Western countries have passed laws recognising people in their new gender identity. In the UK, the Gender Recognition Act was passed at Westminster in 2004. Since then, a man who has fathered children can obtain a birth certificate stating that he was born female. Objective reality has been replaced by fantasy. It is telling that advocates for transgenderism make little or no appeal to science. In their minds, feelings outweigh biology.

3. *People ought to be affirmed in their God-given gender*

Sadly, the 'trans' movement has gained a foothold within the visible church. In 2018, the Church of England published a document containing guidelines for services celebrating the completion of 'gender transitioning' by Anglicans who identify as transgender. This affirms a person's self-identification, and not Scripture, as authoritative. At its 2023 General Assembly, the Church of Scotland instructed its Theological Forum to explore the theology of transgender identities. Again, this ignores God's authority over man. It panders to our sinful desire to be independent of God, doing as we please to our hurt, and not as He commands for our good.

Sympathy must be shown to individuals who are struggling with their biological gender. The aim, however, should be to encourage them to accept their actual identity rather than strive against it. People tempted to live as the opposite sex need help to come to terms with reality. Showing the love of Christ to people who are transgender must include telling them of their need for repentance, as it must for everyone else. God calls us to live in harmony with how He has created us. This will be challenging for some, but pursuing an identity contrary to our created one will lead to much deeper distress.

Conclusions

The root cause of the current gender confusion is sin, which is rebellion against God. His righteous law is ignored in favour of man's wicked inventions. The consequence is very serious. When people continue to reject God, He ultimately rejects them, giving them over to a mind that is empty of judgement (Romans 1:28-32).

We should be very thankful to God, who reigns over this world, that moves in Scotland to make gender change easier have thus far failed. The Scottish Government's Gender Recognition Reform Bill aimed 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. From the age of sixteen, a person's legal gender would effectively become a matter of self-identification. The Bill was approved in December 2022 but the UK Government blocked the Bill from going for royal assent, because of a perceived conflict with UK equality law.

The Scottish Government sought a judicial review of the UK Government's action, but this was rejected by the Court of Session. In December 2023 the Scottish Government said it would not appeal the ruling but would not withdraw the Bill. The final report of the Cass Review of gender identity services for children and young people was published in April 2024 and has caused some to rethink gender change. The Prime Minister has said that the block on the Bill will remain.

We believe that divine providence has worked to frustrate this Bill. We pray that the Lord will continue to thwart it and every other scheme that threatens the physical, moral and spiritual well-being of vulnerable individuals. In the end, what we all need is salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. In Him, we discover our true identity and are enabled to fulfil the end for which God created man, which is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.