

**The Unity of the Church**  
**by**  
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**Introduction**

As a Church of Scotland minister, I have been involved for the past ten years in discussions regarding whether or not evangelicals should remain in the Church of Scotland. My own view is that we should remain and work for the reformation of the Church. This conviction led to my involvement as a member of the Theological Commission of the Church of Scotland, looking at the issue of same-sex sexual relationships (2011-2013). In addition, I currently chair Covenant Fellowship Scotland, which was created specifically to work for the reformation of the Church of Scotland. In addition to this, I have recently begun to write a book on the Unity of the Church. For these reasons, and as Chairman of the Theological Commission of the WRF, I would like to make a contribution to the debate sparked by Sam Logan's post.

During the debates in the Church of Scotland I spoke at two large gatherings of evangelicals, the first in 2001 in Inverness and the second in 2013 in Perth. Much of the argument that follows was rehearsed in those gatherings. The arguments are in summary form but should be sufficient to indicate direction of travel.

Let me begin by asking a few questions to highlight the problem: What is the Church? If ten members of a congregation leave and start holding 'services' in

a local hall, is that a Church? Does a Church not require to be formed by elders? When does schism become acceptable? When should a schismatic group be 'normalised' if ever? Is the Church created by God or by us? Do we join ourselves to the Church, or does God join us to the Church? Is the Church a voluntary society or is it a covenanted community under God? Those who believe that we should leave our churches, if they move in a liberal direction, must try to answer these questions and give some rationale as to what constitutes a Church.

### **God and the Nation**

Many of my friends who have left the Church of Scotland have argued that they must leave the Kirk in order to be faithful to Scripture. There are two problems with that argument. The first one concerns denominationalism. There is nothing in the Bible about denominations. In many ways, denominations are a curse rather than a blessing. The idea of multiple denominations as we have them today, is entirely foreign to the Bible. How then can we say we are being faithful to Scripture if we perpetuate denominationalism?

The Bible talks about nations, rather than denominations. The Bible calls nations to submit to God. There are also promises of God's blessings on those nations which do submit to the Lord.

When God called Abraham in Genesis 12 he told him that he was going to be the father of a great nation. Interestingly, he also told him that other nations would be blest by that great nation. In the Old Testament prophets we also see God dealing with the nations. In Matthew 25, in the parable of the Last Judgement, it is the 'nations' that are gathered before the throne of God. Anyone who has read the Old Testament would not be surprised by that

language. It seems to me that we have neglected the place of God's corporate dealings with the nations.

In the Bible, God works through families and tribes, through nations, through Israel and through the Church. In my view, we have been so affected by western individualism that we have completely neglected the corporate nature of God's dealings with humanity. This affects our reading of the Bible. The Church is regarded by many people, not as a corporate body formed by God and through which God works but as a collection of individuals who have chosen to band together for religious purposes.

This neglect of the nations in the plan and purposes of God was not something of which our Scottish forebears were guilty, quite the reverse. They were concerned for the nation. The Establishment Principle, established in the post-Reformation period in Scotland, is vital for our self-understanding. Knox and Melville did not regard the Church of Scotland as a 'denomination' among others, they regarded Scotland as a covenanted nation under God, the Kirk being the public expression of the religious life of the nation of Scotland. The relationship between Church and State is based on this theology. They also recognised the importance of the Church's prophetic ministry in speaking to the nation and calling the nation to order its affairs according to God's Word.

It follows from this that the Church of Scotland has a public duty to the nation and people of Scotland. We have a responsibility to provide worship, Bible teaching and pastoral care in every corner of the land. You might say that we have a covenant with the nation and people of Scotland. We are not congregationalists, we are Presbyterians.

On the wider front, the Church of Scotland also has a public duty towards Presbyterians all over the world. The Kirk is the Mother Church of world Presbyterianism and Presbyterians all over the world look to us. Even when, as now, they grieve over the direction the Church is taking, they pray with us that a more biblical position can be restored.

### **The Biblical Teaching on Unity**

The other problem with those who have left the Church of Scotland insisting that they had no choice but to leave in order to be faithful to Scripture, concerns the biblical teaching on unity. In other words, by leaving the Church ‘in order to be faithful to Scripture’, there is simultaneously a disobedience offered to other parts of Scripture. Let’s just touch on one of these (although there are many more we could have chosen).

In John 17:21-23, Jesus prays, ‘that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me’. There is a complex of relationships described here which we need to open up a little, so as to get the meaning.

The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. The perfect love and communion which they share is holy and beautiful. The very Gospel flows out of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The work of the Son in salvation is the work of the Father: ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’. The second aspect of the relationship is that the believer is united with Christ through faith. In that union with Christ we are caught up into the very life of God. By being ‘in Christ’ we are in the Father. Thus, we share in

the very life of God. It was precisely for this relationship with God that we were created. We were made as 'relational' creatures and only find true fulfilment in that relationship with God. Outside that relationship, there is something not right, something missing.

It follows from this that those who have come to share in the life of God are bound together. Just as Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus, just as the believer is in Christ and Christ in the believer, so believers are united to one another. The Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ unites us to one another.

With that background in our relation to God, we can now begin to speak about unity. The relationships that exist between the Persons of the Trinity, between Christ and believers and between believers in the Church, are relationships of deep unity. It is this unity for which Jesus prays. In particular, he prays that believers will be 'one' as the Father and the Son are one.

Human beings were created to live in unity with God and with one another. The reason human beings find it so hard to live in harmony is because the Fall has taken place. Being no longer in relationship with God, human beings are no longer in relationship with other human beings (the first murder in the Bible immediately follows the Fall). Human beings think of themselves as individuals first and foremost, rather than as a corporate body before God. Every human being seeks his or her own pleasure, fulfilment and purpose, often at the expense of others.

This affects the Church. We are not content to live in relationship if our own pleasure and fulfilment get in the way. I have a different view of baptism, so I am going to form a new Church... I have a different view of the Holy Spirit, so

I am going to form a new Church... I prefer Psalms to hymns, so I am going to form a new Church... I prefer a different kind of preaching, so I am going to form a new Church... I don't think that the other people in my Church are really Christians, so I am going to form a new Church... and so it goes on.

The sinful desire for independence from God and the self-centred desire to obtain my own pleasure, gets in the way of the relatedness which truly constitutes human nature as designed by God. Society becomes individualistic: it's all about me and what I want.

The Church then becomes a voluntary society, where any group of people can hire a room and form a 'Church' so-called, because they don't like the one they were in before. The Church, however, is not a voluntary society, it is not constituted by the actions of human beings but by the action of God by his Holy Spirit. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity not of division and separation.

### **The Reformed Doctrine of the Church**

The next reason for remaining in the Church of Scotland is the Reformed doctrine of the Church. Recently, some people have been saying that it is time to leave the Church of Scotland, which they describe as a 'mixed' denomination. Let me tell you this: if anyone says that his Church is **not** a mixed Church, he does not know his Bible. Scripture teaches that every denomination is mixed until the Day of Judgement!

John Calvin, in his battle against the Anabaptists, addresses this matter in the introduction to his commentary on Psalm 15. In that commentary, Calvin notes that believers sometimes feel they should leave a Church in which there is

moral corruption, in order to form a purer Church. He strongly resists this idea.

Listen to what he says:

As we too often see the Church of God defaced by much impurity, to prevent us from stumbling at what appears so offensive, a distinction is made between those who are permanent citizens of the Church, and strangers who are mingled among them only for a time. This is undoubtedly a warning highly necessary, in order that when the temple of God happens to be tainted by many impurities, we may not contract such disgust and chagrin as will make us withdraw from it.

Later he adds:

The Anabaptists, at the present day, renew the same schisms, because it does not seem to them that a Church in which vices are tolerated can be a true Church. But Christ, in Matthew 25:32, justly claims it as his own peculiar office to separate the sheep from the goats; and thereby admonishes us, that we must bear with the evils which it is not in our power to correct, until all things become ripe, and the proper season of purging the Church arrive.

Notice that: some people were saying that a Church where vices are tolerated cannot be a true Church. John Calvin, the great leader and theologian of the Reformed Church is telling them that they are wrong.

Now, of course, Calvin stresses that we must not be indifferent to sin and must do everything we can to purify and reform the Church. Ultimately, however, he says that there is no such thing as a pure Church, that there will be wheat and tares in the Church until the day of Judgement and that it is Christ's responsibility to finally separate the wheat from the tares on that day. You see, it is possible to have too tender a conscience and to say, 'I can't stay in a Church like this' when, in our history, many **have** remained in the Kirk, often through darker days than these and their position has been vindicated later.

When we think of the condition of the Church in Calvin's day (a thousand times worse than the state of the Church of Scotland) it is instructive that he calls believers to remain and condemns the Anabaptists for leaving. Calvin did this because of his Reformed understanding of the Church. Today, many people do not understand this doctrine. Instead they have become voluntarists, or Anabaptists, or congregationalists. In the Reformed doctrine of the Church, the Church is not a voluntary society, it is a covenanted community established by God and not by us. The idea that people would pick and choose their denomination on the basis of their individual tastes is entirely foreign to the Bible and to the Reformed doctrine of the Church. The model established in Scotland is a truly biblical model and is true to our Reformed heritage. The problem is that many people today have not truly thought through the doctrine of the Church. We need to recover a corporate, biblical, Reformed doctrine of the Church.

### **The Sin of Schism**

Now, of course, I recognise that there can come a time when a Church has become so corrupt and has so abandoned the faith that it might be necessary to leave. I believe, however, that this is an extreme situation and I do not believe that we are in that situation today. For that reason, I find it very disturbing when people use the language of 'apostasy' and say that the Church of Scotland is 'no longer a true Church.' We ought to be very careful in our language and in our assessment of the situation in which we find ourselves. John Calvin recognised that there were many faults in the Roman Catholic Church of his day but he still believed that it had the rudiments of a true Church, not least in respect of its commitment to the Trinity and the historic doctrines of the Creeds. For that reason, he insisted that we did not re-baptise those who came to the



Reformed churches from the Roman Catholic Church. That has consistently been the position of the Reformed Churches. If the Roman Catholic Church in Calvin's day had about it the rudiments of a true Church, then how can anyone argue that the Church of Scotland today is not a true Church?

Nevertheless, we must agree that The Church of Scotland has certainly moved a considerable distance from her moorings in Scripture and in the Westminster Confession of Faith. What should we do in such a situation? Historically, there have been two options: either we continue to hold to our principles within the Church until we change the Church or are put out (the model provided by the Great Ejection of 1662-3) or we take the decision that it is impossible to remain (the model provided by the Disruption of 1843).

It seems to me that Secession (or schism) is a very serious matter indeed and that those who call people to leave their Church have often treated the matter too lightly and have sometimes refused to see the complexity of the issues involved. Personally, I was persuaded of the sin of schism by reading a sermon by Thomas Boston on 1 Corinthians 1:10: 'I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.' The sermon was entitled 'The Evil and Danger of Schism.' It was preached on 12th December 1708 and Boston tells us the circumstances in which it was preached: 'Upon public reading of the act of the commission of the General Assembly, against Mr John Macmillan and Mr John Macneill, the two preachers of the separation...' The sermon is strongly against schism and if you have an opportunity, I would urge you to read it.

Boston begins by pointing out the sinfulness of the divisions which existed in

the Church at Corinth and expounds his text. He pursues the matter at some length, showing the various schisms and divisions which are described in Scripture followed by some references to subsequent Church history. His conclusion is that Schism and division are evil and are to be avoided.

I think Boston was right about the evil and dangers of schism but that does leave us with a question: is schism ever justified?

I am not arguing that we should stay in the Church of Scotland unconditionally, regardless of whatever decisions the Church might make in the future. I am simply arguing that this matter of sexual immorality is not a sufficient justification for leaving. I have said to my own congregation that if the Church bowed to pluralism and denied the uniqueness of Christ as the eternal Son of God, through whom alone salvation is to be found, then I would feel bound to leave. Why? Because at that point, the Church of Scotland would have ceased to be a Christian Church.

The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that some churches have become so degenerate that they are no longer true churches but it also says that ‘The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error’. To leave the Church of Scotland now because there are sins and errors within it would be, in my view, a grave error of judgement which does not fit with Scripture (especially the prayer of Jesus) nor with the Reformed doctrine of the Church as expressed by our Confession of Faith.

### **Faithful Remnant**

In my own view, the Church of Scotland is recoverable and I believe that those of us who are true to our orthodox, Reformed heritage should refuse to walk

away. Instead, we should work and pray to recover it. Over the past ten years, I have been told by many people that we have no option but to leave the Church of Scotland because, even if we are successful in the current crisis, those who oppose our evangelical position will come back again and again until eventually they win the day. I must say that I cannot understand this view because it seems to me to be a denial of the sovereignty of God. How can it be that those who argue against what the Bible clearly teaches will ultimately triumph? Many who have made this argument claim to be Calvinists but at the same time they assume that God will not vindicate his Word and his people. God is able to do whatever pleases him. He is the sovereign Lord and can turn things around in an instant. The entire Soviet Union was brought down in less than eighteen months, the Church of Scotland is not such a big problem! Do we believe in the sovereignty of God? God and good will ultimately triumph, not evil.

It is notoriously difficult to read the providence of God except in retrospect but I do believe that, in his providence, God has been doing a remarkable work in the Church of Scotland over many years and I do not see why he would stop now. There was a day when there were very few evangelical ministers and congregations in the Church of Scotland. God has raised up several generations of ministers who trust God and believe his Word and have sought to build congregations on solid foundations. In my view, if the present crisis had not divided us, with some leaving the Church, we would be progressing towards the point where we would have become a majority in the Church and thus be able to restore the Church to its roots in Scripture, as has been done in Northern Ireland. Is it any wonder that the devil should seek to prevent this happening?

Many were delighted but also astonished when the Highland Theological College, a Reformed and evangelical college, was permitted to educate

candidates for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. This was the first time in 400 years that theological education of the Kirk's ministers moved outside Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews and Aberdeen. Why did God do this astonishing thing which no-one expected? This is to say nothing of the work that is being blessed by God in Church of Scotland parishes across the land. The evidence of God's providence suggests to me that he is not finished with the Church of Scotland and therefore we should not be either.

A study of church history demonstrates that secessions, schisms, disruptions and splits rarely achieve anything and few last more than a generation. The residue of our divided Presbyterianism is there for all to see. There are small Highland villages with four Presbyterian churches to serve less than 600 people. Is this situation not scandalous, tying down four ministers in one place where in other places there is no gospel ministry? This is to say nothing of the resources wasted on four churches and four manses and often four Church halls, when any one building could accommodate all those who worship on a Sunday. Think of the money which could be liberated for mission if there was just one Presbyterian Church in each place.

The other lesson we can learn from Church history is that the Church of Scotland has gone through good days and bad days, high times and low times. There have been days of great gospel witness and missionary expansion and there have been dark days when little light was to be seen. In all of this, God has never left himself without a witness and he has regularly restored his Church and renewed it and revitalised it. He has even brought glorious days of revival.

When we read the history of Israel, this is surely what we ought to expect. The Israelites regularly fell into sin and disobedience and even went after other gods. When they did so, the Lord punished them, he withdrew from them and he allowed their enemies to triumph over them. Very often, only a remnant survived who did not succumb to sin and disobedience. Nevertheless, God kept his covenant promises and restored them again.

What God did for Israel, he can do for the Church of Scotland. In the meantime, we must serve as a faithful remnant. After all, we are the true Church of Scotland, in the sense that we affirm the constitutional documents of the Church: The Scriptures, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Articles Declaratory. Why then should we give up our Church? No, we must work and pray and wait for better days.

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