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A tradition in crisis: understanding and repairing division over homosexuality in the Church of Scotland

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Abstract

Like many Western churches, the Church of Scotland has been divided in recent years over the ordination of gay clergy in committed relationships, and, more generally, over the status of homosexuality for Christian ethics. Yet there has been no academic research undertaken which situates the debate within the wider context of Scottish theology. This failure has resulted in theological and ecclesial impasse, which this paper seeks to remedy through a diagnostic analysis of division over homosexuality, drawing upon the analytic tools developed by R. G. Collingwood. While this article has as its focus the Church of Scotland, its method and conclusions will be relevant to other Protestant denominations, especially Reformed churches such as the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Keywords: Church of Scotland, hermeneutics, homosexuality, plain sense, R. G. Collingwood, Word of God

Introduction

If one were to hear two people arguing and were asked to provide a description of their argument, two approaches might present themselves. First, one could enumerate the topics of disagreement, noting the arguments advanced by each side, before outlining what conclusion, if any, was reached. Alternatively, one could look beyond the substantive arguments presented by each party, and investigate *how* the disagreement arose in the first place – what constellation of ideas and circumstances gave shape and structure to the position of each party, and to the basis of the argument. While the second approach requires the first to succeed, the first does not require the second and, moreover, is unlikely to be used when one is not merely a disinterested observer, but one of the combatants themselves. The Church of Scotland finds itself in the midst of such an argument, as it verges on the brink of its first schism since the reunion of the United Free Church and the Auld Kirk in 1929. The issue that divides it is familiar to many Western churches: the ordination of gay clergy in committed relationships and, more generally, the status of homosexual practice for Christian ethics.

Unlike other churches, however, there has been no academic work devoted to analysing the controversy over homosexual practice within a Scottish context. Instead, the debate within Scotland has been driven by a series of reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. While presenting a variety of arguments, each of these reports has been written from a partisan perspective, although in recent years each report has also included both 'revisionist' and 'traditionalist' perspectives, these terms denoting those that support and resist, respectively, church sanction of committed homosexual relationships.[1]

The cumulative outcome of these reports has been the exhaustion of *one type* of description, namely, that which summarises the arguments advanced by each side. What has only very rarely been touched upon, however, is a *second* type of description, which investigates *how* such a debate could have arisen in the first place. This form of description has been overlooked for two reasons. First, the cause of the debate appears to be clear and does not appear to require further investigation: do we not know why traditionalists and revisionists are fighting? Second, because of the emotive nature of the subject matter, each side has been committed to defending its own position while casting doubt on that of its opponent, and have only very occasionally stepped back to consider the nature of the debate itself, and, in particular, its position within the wider tradition of Scottish theology.

This paper will attempt to remedy these deficiencies through a detailed description of how this division has arisen. It does not seek to answer a first-order theological question, such as 'Who is right?', but the second-order analytic or philosophical question, 'What is the structure of these two positions, and how have they arisen within the tradition of a single church?' This second-order analytic or philosophical form of investigation is derived from R. G. Collingwood, and, in particular, the analytic tools developed in *An Essay on Metaphysics*.[2] This form of analysis recognises that theological positions are never fixed or abstract, but arise from distinct traditions and cultures, which change over time. Such a second-order philosophical investigation has some resemblances to the cultural-linguistic approach associated with George Lindbeck and others. Yet unlike this approach, the method adopted here does not seek to be theologically *constructive* but *diagnostic* and *reparative*. It does not seek to *advance* one position or *defeat* another, but in examining the structure and genealogy of the debate, seeks to diagnose the problems that

[1] While these positions do not exhaust the range of opinion within the Kirk, their dominance in General Assembly reports makes an objective assessment of each position imperative if the debate is to be opened to more fruitful alternatives.

[2] R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

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led to division, thereby clearing a path for further historical and doctrinal investigation. Moreover, as it is historical rather than abstract, it avoids the danger of ossifying church cultures into immutable, closed systems,[3] or treating homosexuality as if it were an issue which affects all churches in the same way, independent of historical, social and ecclesiological context.

The following analysis will reveal that when traditionalists and revisionists approach the issue of homosexuality – even with the same explicit questions in mind – they do so with different *implicit* questions, questions that arise from the differing theological and philosophical presuppositions they hold. These differing presuppositions have arisen from a tension within Scottish theology between the saving love of Jesus Christ on the one hand, and the confessional and scriptural structure that presents and communicates that saving love on the other. This tension has divorced the *form* of Reformed doctrine from its *content*, and has led to ambiguity over the identity of the key concept in the debate, the *Word of God*. This ambiguity in the tradition means that neither traditionalist nor revisionist can decisively advance and defend their stance on homosexuality, an impasse which has given rise to psychological explanations focusing on the supposed moral failings of one's opponent, with the accompanying strategies of domination or separation. By uncovering the historical and doctrinal structure of the debate, this paper seeks to show that these strategies are illegitimate, and that the only strategy likely to result in the victory of one position is the repair of Scottish theological tradition through renewed research and dialogue. While the focus is upon the Church of Scotland, its method and conclusions will be highly relevant for other Protestant churches, and especially Reformed denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Questions and answers

On the face of it, the questions asked by traditionalists and revisionists when addressing the issue of homosexual practice appear to be clear. Across the particular General Assembly reports dealing with matters of human sexuality, marriage and ordination, the remit to the authors of these reports by the General Assembly in relation to homosexual practice might be summarised as:

> Should the Church of Scotland condone or condemn homosexual practice within committed relationships?

[3] Cf. K. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 121.

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Unsurprisingly, revisionists answer this question by condoning homosexual practice within committed relationships, while traditionalists condemn it, along with any other physical expression of homosexual orientation. They come to these two contrary positions in spite of a shared recognition of scripture as the 'supreme rule of faith and life'.[4] Because both parties are found within the same church, appear to be answering the same questions, and are taken to have the same theological authorities, one explanation that frequently presents itself is that one side has been driven by subjective influences to distort the truth. Traditionalists imply that revisionists are engaged in a wilful rebellion against God's commands, while revisionists suggest that traditionalists are driven by homophobia (1994a: 270–1, 280; 2013: 20, 68). Yet when one turns to the specific answers that each side gives, it becomes apparent that imputations of moral turpitude are unfounded, and are themselves an irrational response to the existence of difference. For an examination of the answers given by each party reveals that they differ *not* because of personal failings, but because of the contrary presuppositions they hold, presuppositions that constitute the two parties not as 'good and bad' or 'Christian and non-Christian', but as two very different church cultures.

Although the question of homosexuality was first raised in the 1950s, it was not until 1994 that the contemporary debate can be said to have truly begun.[5] That year saw the presentation to the General Assembly of two reports which examined the theology of marriage. The Panel on Doctrine report was presented to the Assembly with a majority of one, six members of the Panel dissenting from its findings (1994a: 285). While the report's authors do not dispute scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life (p. 261), they aver that it is only a fallible witness to the saving love of God that culminates in Christ, and may therefore contain 'sub-evangelical' elements. The promotion or acceptance in scripture of actions now considered to be abhorrent casts doubt upon the truth of its sexual commandments (pp. 262–3). Moreover, the context in which the texts were written are so different from ours that even 'clear' words such as 'fornication' and 'adultery' do not relate to contemporary social phenomena (pp. 262–5). On the specific question of homosexuality, Paul's condemnation does not apply to all homosexual practice, but only to pederasty, or occasional homosexual

[4] *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1994–2013), by the Panel on Doctrine (= 1994a), p. 261, by the Board of Social Responsibility (= 1994b), p. 283; Panel on Doctrine (1995), pp. 232–3; Special Commission (2011), pp. 23/26. Further references to these reports give the date of presentation and page reference, and are included in the main text.

[5] For the background to the debate, see F. A. J. Macdonald, *Confidence in a Changing Church* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2004), pp. 147–52.

acts by heterosexual individuals (p. 280). Instead of becoming an 'arbiter of righteousness' on sexual matters (p. 271), the church should seek to communicate the unconditional love of God, a 'methodology' in relation to sexual questions which seeks, like the incarnation, to identify with a fragile and flawed world, transforming it from within (p. 283). Because the love of God is primary, the church can affirm the goodness of committed sexual relationships outside of marriage (e.g. pp. 276–8, 284), including homosexual relationships (pp. 279–80).

The Board of Social Responsibility report from the same year takes a different approach. While accepting that the foundation of sexual ethics is the unconditional love of God, and while giving qualified acceptance to some forms of committed cohabitation (1994b: 507), the Board argues that there is no biblical warrant for changing the church's position on homosexuality (p. 506), for the meaning of the scriptural texts is clear (p. 514). Although scripture must be interpreted with regard to its historical and social context, this should be a spur to further investigation, not an excuse for ending it (pp. 506–7).

The controversy surrounding the 1994 Panel on Doctrine report led to a more balanced approach in the Panel's 1995 report. The approach adopted, however, was not to investigate the *cause* of disagreement but, starting a precedent, to invite liberal and evangelical parties to present their contrasting positions. Although scripture is, for the liberal, the supreme rule of faith and life (1995: 232), it is God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ that is the ultimate authority (p. 235). Furthermore, 'Scripture itself bears witness to a Gospel which in turn demands that Scripture itself be judged by that Gospel' (p. 235). Because scripture contains a human element, the biblical writers are not safeguarded from false conceptions of God, and we are therefore invited to ask whether their theology corresponds to the Gospel or not (p. 235). Christ himself questioned the authority of inherited doctrine (pp. 232–3), and is still active today, directing the church's theological discernment in a changing, secular world (pp. 230–2). Like the liberal, the conservative does not deny that God's self-revelation in Christ is authoritative, but insists that this self-revelation is now only accessible through scripture (p. 231). Scripture, as the work of the Holy Spirit, cannot be contradicted by contemporary discernment of the Spirit's will (p. 234). While not denying biblical criticism, the conservative argues that, taken to its logical conclusion, emphasis upon the social and historical context of scripture's human authors reduces all biblical teaching to time-conditioned opinion, including its witness to the saving love of God (p. 233).

The Special Commission report of 2011 and the Theological Commission report of 2013 continue the approach of the 1995 report and present

separate traditionalist and revisionist sections. Due to the similarity of argument presented in these reports, they shall be considered together. The fundamental point at issue in the Church of Scotland is the meaning of the Word of God, and how this Word is discerned (cf. 2013: 20/15, 20/32–3). The traditionalist party argue that there is no disjunction between the written text of scripture and the Word of God (2011: 23/29). The reference in Article I of the Declaratory Articles to 'the Word of God contained in the Old and New Testaments' must be interpreted in the light of Article II, which affirms the Westminster Confession as the Church of Scotland's subordinate standard. The Confession clearly identifies the Word of God with the written text of scripture in its entirety (2013: 20/67), so that the church is bound by scripture's literal meaning (2013: 20/88). Revisionists possess 'no clear criterion' for departing from the plain sense of scripture, or for selecting some texts as normative and rejecting others (2011: 23/29). While the church has changed its view on slavery and the role of women, the trajectory of scripture already moves in this direction. The same cannot be said concerning homosexuality, which is uniformly condemned, and attempts to see Paul's condemnation as extending only to the area of sexual exploitation have no academic credibility (2011: 23/30–1). Because there is no scope for legitimate disagreement on the issue of homosexuality, the revisionist party are not guilty of errant exegesis, but of outright rejection of scripture's teaching (2013: 20/68).

In contrast to the traditionalist emphasis upon scripture's plain sense, the revisionist position is founded on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, in which God's triune being is revealed as relational, loving and just (2013: 20/39). Because the Word is identified with Christ, God's Word cannot be confined to the written text of scripture (2013: 20/33–5, 57). Christ shows that God subverts law that is not in line with love (2011: 23/32), and the Old and New Testaments witness to the progressive expansion of God's love, with a corresponding diminution in beliefs and practices that oppose that love (2011: 23/26). Many words in scripture that are taken as the Word of God are, in fact, nothing more than products of human fear or an obsession with purity (2013: 20/49; 2011: 33). While it is likely that Paul *did* intend to condemn all homosexual practice (2011: 23/33), his views are only a personal response to God's revelation in Christ, and must be tested against the fundamental hermeneutical principle of love (2013: 20/39–44; 2011: 23/32), which grants normative status to texts that encourage equality, unrestricted compassion and freedom from the chains of law (2011: 23/24).

Having examined the answers given by each party concerning the issue of homosexual practice, it becomes clear that, while traditionalists and revisionists may *appear* to be answering the same question, their differing

presuppositions give rise to other, *implicit* lines of questioning that differ markedly from each other and elicit different answers. We may reconstruct these questions as:

1. Does the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by scripture condone homosexual practice in the context of a loving, committed relationship?
2. Does the plain sense of scripture condone or condemn homosexual practice?

Given these different lines of questioning, it becomes clearer how two groups within the same church can draw such different conclusions from the scriptures they both claim to be following. These different lines of questioning arise from the differing presuppositions held by each party concerning the relationship between the Word of God and the written text of scripture. For traditionalists, the Word of God is identified as Jesus Christ, but access to this Word is through the written text of scripture, whose ultimate author is God. Due to its divine origin, scripture is normative, and this normative status is acknowledged by accepting scripture's plain sense as the Word of God. One gains access to the plain sense of scripture through the plain reading, a hermeneutic that has a strong preference for univocal, literal readings of scriptural texts. As the plain reading of scripture presupposes scripture's abiding normative status, its purpose is to explicate the meaning and content of these normative texts.

The revisionist position also identifies the Word of God with Jesus Christ, yet believes that he is only *witnessed* to by the written text of scripture. Whatever normative status scripture has comes from Christ, whose Spirit is active in the church, directing it to discern what is loving – and therefore Christian – in the light of current experience. While the General Assembly reports sometimes feature the argument that the plain sense of Romans 1 refers to exploitative sexual practice (an approach – if not a conclusion – consistent with traditionalist presuppositions), it is more often one of two forms of what might be termed the *hermeneutic of love* that is being advanced. In both its forms, the hermeneutic of love does not deny the plain sense of scriptural passages that address homosexual practice, but, unlike the plain reading, does not presuppose their abiding normative status, and therefore accords them another non-prescriptive status. In its weak form, the hermeneutic of love, while not necessarily denying the divine authorship of scripture, reads scripture as a witness to the progressive unfolding of God's love, a narrative reading that views biblical injunctions against homosexual practice as having been *transcended*. The strong form of the hermeneutic of love goes further,

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however, and *rejects* the divine authorship of offending texts, arguing that these are nothing more than products of human intolerance. In both its forms, then, the hermeneutic of love does not function as a means of explicating the meaning of scriptural texts in the manner of the plain reading, but determines what scriptural texts are normatively binding and, in the case of its strong form, exercises something approaching a canon-defining function.

The existence of these very different presuppositions concerning the Word of God means that when each party is faced with the existence of another that does not share its stance on homosexual practice, it interprets this difference as a rejection of what its proponents understand to be the foundation of the faith. For traditionalists, this is the plain sense of scripture; for revisionists, it is the love of God in Jesus Christ. The difference between these two church cultures, with their differing conceptions of the faith, has been revealed by the controversy over homosexual practice. These differences cut to the heart of what it is to be a Reformed denomination, supposedly founded on the principle of *sola scriptura*. As its participants often feel it to be, it is a conflict over the very identity of the Kirk.

The genealogy of division

Having uncovered the presuppositions that produce two distinct church cultures within the Church of Scotland, it is now necessary to ask where these differing presuppositions come from, and how two church cultures could have arisen within the same small denomination in what appears to be a very short period. One answer that presents itself is that these cultures are the outcome of differing psychologies. Some people are happy with increased tolerance and openness to diversity, and some are not. Yet this psychological approach begs the question, for it does not explain *why* differing responses to social change were, first, possible, and, second, actually occurred. To answer this question, we must examine the *genealogies* of the traditionalist and revisionist positions. This will reveal that division over homosexuality has arisen from a long-standing tension within Scottish Reformed theology between the saving love of Jesus Christ on the one hand, and the doctrinal and scriptural framework that presents and articulates this saving love on the other.

Before the Reformation, the hermeneutical practices of the Western Church coalesced in what came to be known as the four senses of scripture: the literal, the allegorical, the moral (or tropological) and the anagogic. While the literal sense held prominence as the only sense that could determine doctrine, it was nevertheless balanced by a number of other senses, which overlapped even within the same text. Under the impetus of

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humanism, with its emphasis upon primary texts and philological study, this interpretive framework began to give way to a new emphasis upon the Bible's literal sense, championing the unadorned text over the glosses of scholastic commentators. While this new hermeneutic influenced all of the Reformers, its effect was particularly pronounced upon John Calvin.[6] Calvin saw much patristic and medieval exegesis as an expression of human pride, and a cover for disobeying the clear teaching of the Holy Spirit.[7] While Calvin did not reject typology or metaphor,[8] his emphasis was upon the clarity and simplicity of scripture's teaching, with an accompanying dislike for strained or tortuous readings.[9] This meant that a correct reading of scripture became identified with its plain, or literal sense, producing a reduced, univocal meaning for scriptural texts.

The Church of Scotland adopted the plain reading of scripture at the Reformation, and, unlike the post-Reformation Church of England, was not beset with conflict over the relation of scripture to tradition, or to the authority of the church. The plain sense is mentioned in Chapters XVIII and XX of the Scots Confession, and is outlined in more detail in Chapter II of the Second Helvetic Confession, which was approved by the Scottish Parliament. While the Westminster Confession of Faith does not make explicit reference to the plain sense, its influence is seen throughout, especially Chapters I and XXXI. From its adoption at the Reformation, this interpretive tradition would remain largely unchallenged until the second half of the twentieth century. It is this interpretive practice that continues to inform the traditionalist position within the contemporary Church of Scotland.

The trajectory in Scottish theology that would eventually issue in the hermeneutic of love can be traced, perhaps surprisingly, not to non-Christian sources, but to the development of evangelical piety in Scotland, and to the dialectic between scripture and the Westminster Confession. While evangelicalism found an early conservative, sectarian expression in the Praying Societies which formed the backbone of the Secession Church, its influence was most clearly felt from the early nineteenth century onward, when romantic influences shifted emphasis from the cognitive content of faith to its affective form.[10] At this time, men such as Erskine of

[6] Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (London: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 44–57, 153–8.

[7] R. W. Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 128–9.

[8] D. C. Steinmetz, 'John Calvin as an Interpreter of the Bible', in D. K. McKim (ed.), *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), p. 285.

[9] Holder, *Grounding of Interpretation*, p. 131.

[10] A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688–1843* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1973), pp. 49–51.

Linlathen and John McLeod Campbell began to question received Calvinist orthodoxy, especially in relation to the issue of election and unconditional grace. Evangelical piety, with its emphasis upon the Bible, the individual's experience of God's saving love, and a missional imperative deriving from the great commission, led to a growing sense that the Westminster Confession unduly limited the saving action of God, replacing him with a shadowy, arbitrary deity, who damned and saved without reference to his own revelation in Jesus Christ.[11] The Jesus of the Gospels and the God of the Westminster Confession came to be set against each other, and, for a time, the Confession won out.[12] As the century wore on, however, the influence of the Westminster Confession began to decline, leading to the adoption of Declaratory Acts by the United Presbyterian, Free Church, and Auld Kirk, which introduced a conscience clause for subscription at ordination, limiting the authority of the Westminster Confession to those doctrines which were of the 'substance of the faith'.[13] While the Declaratory Articles of the reunited Church of Scotland preserved the Westminster Confession as the church's subordinate standard, the reunited church also retained the conscience clause, thereby robbing the Confession of any real authority. This lack of doctrinal specificity was to facilitate the growth and development of two very different church cultures.

While the tension between the saving love of God in Jesus Christ and the theological framework which presented this love began by undermining the authority of the Confession, the advent of biblical criticism ensured that this tension would develop into a new disjunction between the saving love of God in Christ and the scriptures themselves. While Reformed theology in Scotland had always had scripture as its basis, it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the doctrine of inspiration became fully articulated. This was in response to the genesis of biblical criticism, with the Scot Robert Haldane being among the first to advance a strong doctrine of inerrancy.[14] The growing realisation that the books of scripture had not fallen intact from the hand of God, but instead bore the marks of the social and historical context of their writers, had the potential to disorientate a tradition so heavily reliant upon scripture's status as the written Word of God. While inerrancy was never, perhaps, the dominant

[11] D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1–19.

[12] T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 130–146, 243, 287–9.

[13] A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland 1874–1900* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1978), pp. 215–6, 290.

[14] See R. Haldane, *The Evidence and Authority of Divine Revelation* (Edinburgh: A. Balfour, 1816).

opinion in Scotland, it found strong support in the Free Church and the first faculty of New College, Edinburgh.[15] These Free Church divines rejected the study of scripture as any other work of ancient literature, along with the notion that its inspiration arose from the native genius of its various authors.[16] Nevertheless, it was ironically the very interest in the Bible shown by the Free Church that would give rise to the flowering of biblical criticism in Scotland, and its great martyr, Robertson Smith.[17]

By the turn of the twentieth century, the battle against criticism was lost, and, for a time, the Scottish Church was successful in adapting itself to the new discipline.[18] The inter-war years saw the reunion of the United Free Church with the Auld Kirk, and the spirit of the first New College faculty gave way to what has been described as 'liberal evangelicalism',[19] a commitment to the fundamental doctrines of the catholic faith, but with less emphasis upon catechesis, and themes of judgement and atonement.[20] It was during this period that Karl Barth began to impact theological thought in Scotland. Barth's account of revelation helped to dissociate the Word of God from the written word of scripture, which came to be seen as a – potentially fallible – witness to that Word rather than the Word itself. This would furnish an important presupposition for the revisionist position.

While the dominance of liberal evangelicalism persisted until the 1950s, the failure to implement confessional reform after the reunion of 1929 saw the relative unity of this period fragment and polarise under the new pressures of ecumenism, radical theology and unprecedented social upheaval. While the ecumenical movement decreased interdenominational tensions, it heightened tensions *within* denominations between liberals and conservatives.[21] This polarisation led to the decline of the older moderate and liberal parties within evangelicalism, with a corresponding rise in conservatism.[22] The post-war years saw the beginning of the ministry

[15] A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843–1874* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pp. 252–5.

[16] See e.g. J. Bannerman, *Prevalent Forms of Unbelief* (Edinburgh: W. P. Kennedy, 1849), pp. 23–4.

[17] R. A. Riesen, 'Higher Criticism in the Free Church Fathers', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 20 (1980), p. 120.

[18] A. C. Cheyne, 'The Bible and Change in the Nineteenth Century', in D. F. Wright (ed.), *The Bible in Scottish Life and Literature* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1988), pp. 202–5.

[19] See A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1983), pp. 194–5.

[20] For a picture of the age, see C. Rawlins, *William Barclay* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 40–8.

[21] H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 99–100.

[22] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 252–3.

of William Still at Gilcomston South, and that of the Philip brothers at Sandyford Henderson and Holyrood Abbey, ministries that helped to establish conservative evangelicalism in contemporary Scotland. The trend towards polarisation and increased conservatism was strengthened by the doctrinal flux of the 1960s. The advent of radical theology led to a spate of investigations into accusations of heresy, prompting the General Assembly to take up the issue of doctrinal revision.[23] This should have afforded the opportunity to make explicit the issues that would later prove so determinative for the controversy over homosexuality, namely, the meaning of the Word of God 'contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments' and the authority of the plain sense.[24] Yet the opportunity to re-examine the faith of the Church of Scotland was thwarted by an alliance of those who did not desire any greater specification of doctrine and those who feared the loss of the Westminster Confession as the church's subordinate standard.[25]

The consequence of this failure was to give free rein to increasing polarisation, and to amplify the effects of social changes in society. It was the social upheaval of the 1960s, more than any explicitly theological trend, that realised the destabilising potential of biblical criticism, and brought about the translation of the older tension between the saving love of God in Christ and the Westminster Confession to a new locus: scripture itself. Liberal theology had, until this point, been largely concerned with questioning traditional doctrines such as penal atonement theory and eternal punishment, and liberals broadly shared the same moral outlook as conservatives. Yet unprecedented revision of sexual morality in the 1960s affected major changes in liberalism's moral outlook, and brought increasing tolerance toward lifestyles that had been traditionally condemned, including homosexuality.[26] In society at large, traditional gender categories were gradually erased, leading to a collapse in the Church of Scotland's core female constituency.[27] In this increasingly pluralistic society, the Church of Scotland, which had drawn upon traditional familial and community ties to supply its membership, struggled to find its identity, and was faced with a choice between entrenchment of its traditional views, or accommodation with the

[23] D. Murray, *Freedom to Reform* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 119.

[24] Article I of the Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland. See J. T. Cox, *Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1964), pp. 366–8.

[25] D. A. S. Fergusson, 'Response to Douglas Murray', in D. A. S. Fergusson and D. W. D. Shaw (eds), *The Future of the Kirk* (St Andrews: St Mary's College, 1997), p. 51.

[26] O. O'Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin* (Edinburgh: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 1–17.

[27] C. G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 196–204.

new culture.[28] The new sexual ethic made it absurd to many Christians that the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ could possibly condemn committed homosexual relationships. If scripture appeared to condemn homosexual practice, there were therefore two options available: *either* the church had misunderstood the meaning of the text, *or* the text itself was wrong.

While the social changes of the last five decades were not, then, the *sufficient* condition for the development of the revisionist hermeneutic of love, they nevertheless provided its *necessary* condition, by realising the radical potential of biblical criticism to undermine the normative status of the plain sense of scripture. By the early 1990s, these social and theological changes had resulted in the formation of a new liberal culture within the Church of Scotland, with its own presuppositions concerning scripture, hermeneutics and sexual ethics. Because these social and theological changes were felt most strongly in the central belt and in the cities, ministers and church members in less populated areas were more successful at maintaining traditional beliefs and practices, leading to a social – as well as theological – element to the increasing polarisation. These social and theological differences gave rise, in turn, to political manoeuvring within the Church of Scotland between liberals and evangelicals, leading to accusations of marginalisation by the latter.[29] By 2013, these differences looked likely to result in the Church of Scotland's first schism since reunion.

Overcoming division

The preceding analysis has shown how revisionists and traditionalists, when answering the same explicit question concerning homosexual practice, are guided by different implicit lines of questioning. These lines of questioning arise from presuppositions which ground the position of each party, presuppositions that have developed from long-standing tensions within Scottish theology. While both parties draw upon tendencies within Scottish theological tradition, this tradition has been unable to hold these tendencies together successfully and, under the strain of biblical criticism and social change, has broken apart. The result is polarisation into two church cultures, a polarisation replicated in the General Assembly reports charged with overcoming it. While the preceding analysis may be thought to *confirm* this

[28] See W. Storrar, 'Understanding the Silent Disruption', in *Future of the Kirk*, pp. 21–36; and Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 166–70.

[29] H. Reid, *Outside Verdict* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2002), pp. 197–201; J. Denniston, 'The Last Taboo?', in S. Mallon (ed.), *Inside Verdict* (Edinburgh: Scottish Churches Press, 2003), pp. 37–43 at 38–9.

polarisation, it provides a source of *hope* for the peace and unity of the Church of Scotland. It reveals the following:

1. The difference between the parties arises from an objective problem within Scottish theological tradition, rather than subjective failings.
2. Their different attitudes towards homosexual practice are fully justified within their respective church cultures.
3. The choice between one culture and another cannot be fully justified given the ambiguities present in each.
4. The possibility of a decisive justification, acknowledged by both parties, can only occur if the tradition is repaired through research and renewed dialogue.

Points 1 and 2 provide the basis for continuing dialogue, for if the disagreement over homosexual practice does not arise from homophobia or wilful disobedience, and if the position of each party towards homosexual practice is justified within its own culture, then it is not possible for either party to dismiss the other as wicked or irrational. Point 3 follows from this, and prohibits either party from seeking to dominate, or separate, from the other, for there are outstanding questions that each must address.

It is clear that the revisionist position is largely unsupported by the majority of Scottish – and ecumenical – tradition. The change in hermeneutics advocated by revisionists is likened in the General Assembly reports to the Copernican or Darwinian revolutions, where experience showed that church teaching was incorrect (1994a: 265). Yet the change wrought by the hermeneutic of love is far wider in effect than these scientific advances. For while these advances cast doubt upon traditional *interpretations* of certain passages, they did not necessarily cast doubt on the inspiration of those passages or their normative status, and were thus not incompatible with traditionalist hermeneutics. In its weak form, the revisionist hermeneutic of love openly questions the normative status of substantial sections of scripture, and in its strong form, upon their inspiration and divine authorship. While there has been a long-standing tension between the saving love of Christ and the doctrinal framework of Reformed theology in Scotland, this has not, until now, resulted in the rejection of the authority of substantial sections of the written text of scripture. Such an innovation requires sustained theological explanation, for it overthrows the principal foundation of Reformed theology and, through the identification of Christ's will with what the church considers loving in a given context, presents a novel epistemic basis for Christian ethics. In addition, there has been no discussion in the reports to the General Assembly as to why the historical and social context in which the canon was

written and formed should preclude its inspiration and abiding normative status. Such an assumption is rendered dubious by the acceptance of biblical criticism by the majority of traditionalists, who do not see any decisive difficulty in reconciling criticism, inspiration and the normative status of scripture in its totality (cf. 1994b: 506–7; 2013: 20/67).

While the traditionalist position has the weight of Christian tradition behind it, central to its approach is the plain reading of scripture, which, paradoxically, is not taught by scripture. As we have seen, the plain reading is an interpretive tradition adopted at the Reformation due to philosophical presuppositions concerning texts. In and of itself, the divine origin of the text of scripture does not necessitate the plain reading. The patristic and medieval church accepted the divine origin of scripture also, yet adopted hermeneutical practices unacceptable to contemporary traditionalists. As we have seen, a weak form of the hermeneutic of love can also accept the inspiration of scripture while simultaneously rejecting the abiding normative status of passages that appear to contradict the progressive unfolding of God's love. In order to justify the authority of the plain reading, then, it is necessary to turn to tradition – something which is explicitly ruled out by the Scots and Westminster Confessions. Even these documents, however, are not explicitly clear – *plain*, one might say – about the authority of the plain sense, and the Second Helvetic Confession does not attempt to justify its promotion of this interpretive method. If the plain sense is to be defended, then, it will be necessary for traditionalists to demonstrate that the plain reading is taught by scripture, or else give an account of the relation between scripture and tradition justified by scripture. Moreover, with regard to inspiration, the traditionalist must give a better account of how the clear historical and cultural conditioning of scripture is compatible with all of its contents having their ultimate origin in God.

Until answers are given to these issues-issues that go to the heart of what it means to be a church founded on the Word of God-neither party has any definitive justification for separating from, or dominating, the other. On the contrary, the only way in which either party can hope to legitimise its position is through the *repair* of Scottish theological tradition, for it is only when each side finds itself within the same church culture and tradition that there can be the possibility of definitive agreement on the issue of homosexual practice. The repair of the tradition will require both academic and pastoral approaches. Academically, historical research and constructive theological enquiry are necessary to ameliorate the tensions and ambiguities that this article has uncovered. If the Church of Scotland is to extricate itself from partisan conflict, it must not settle for commonplace descriptions of the positions of traditionalists and revisionists, but address itself to questions such

as: what is the status of the plain reading of scripture for Reformed theology? What should be the relationship between scripture and tradition? What is the importance of biblical criticism for questions of inspiration and canon? How can the unity of the saving love of God, and the doctrinal and scriptural framework which presents this saving love, be strengthened? The reports of the General Assembly have barely touched upon these questions. This omission has, and will continue to have, grave consequences for a conflict in which sound theology has a vital role to play. Pastorally, the existence of two distinct cultures within the Church of Scotland will continue to give rise to serious disagreement, and necessitates a new approach to intra-church relations, perhaps drawing upon approaches used in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue such as scriptural reasoning. While the substantive theological differences between the two parties may prove impossible to overcome in the short term, new methods of dialogue would ameliorate the social and political factors that play an important role in maintaining theological enmity. The alternative to research, dialogue and the repair of the tradition is the slow disintegration of the Church of Scotland over this, and related, issues.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to look beyond the superficial arguments advanced by traditionalists and revisionists over the issue of homosexuality to uncover the underlying differences that divide them. By identifying the implicit questions asked by each party, and the presuppositions that give rise to them, the controversy over homosexuality has been shown to be a manifestation of long-standing tensions within Scottish theology. Yet the ambiguities of Scottish theological tradition mean that neither party can persuade the other, and the only hope either party has to convince its opponents is a repair of the tradition from which they both arise. While this article has focussed on the Church of Scotland, similar tensions will be present in other Protestant denominations, and the repair of division within churches may require more intentional sharing of research and successful methods of dialogue. For the issue of homosexual practice is not confined to one church, or to that section of Christian doctrine that considers ethics, but goes to the heart of what it means to be a Protestant denomination, founded upon the Word of God alone.