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THE KIRK, THE WORD, AND THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE: A SMALL NOTE ON A GREAT MATTER

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For better or for worse, the Church of Scotland has developed something of a reputation for theological liberalism. This has been confirmed by recent events, where the General Assembly has debated—and consistently voted—to move the Kirk toward the acceptance of ministers and deacons in civil partnerships, and, most recently, in civil same-sex marriages. Central to this trajectory is a distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture, which has enabled successive General Assemblies to concede the existence of Scriptural injunctions against same-sex sexual activity while, simultaneously, believing that God is calling the Church to a new understanding of this activity.

Given the importance of this distinction between Word and text, readers of this Bulletin might have assumed that it had been formally debated and adopted by the General Assembly. This, however, is not the case. This is because the distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture is viewed - almost universally - to be a foundational element of the constitution of the Church of Scotland. In spite of this near universal agreement, new evidence has been uncovered that points in a different direction, and casts doubt upon the received wisdom that the constitution of the Kirk recognises an operative distinction between Word and text.

In the article that follows, I will rehearse existing understandings of the relation between Word and text in the Kirk, before presenting the new evidence that has come to light. I will then conclude with some possible implications of this new evidence for the practice and self-understanding of the Church of Scotland. In writing this article, my intention is not to cast aspersions upon the Kirk as a whole, but only its reliance upon a theology of the Word that is both historically dubious and theologically untenable. It is my hope that when these problems are recognised a more adequate theology of the Word might be found.

RECEIVED WISDOM

The Christian Church has always recognised a distinction between Jesus Christ as the Word of God and the text of Holy Scripture. If it did not, then John 1:1-18 would refer to the pre-existence and incarnation of a

collection of ancient texts. Yet, within the Church of Scotland, this distinction has developed in a way largely unknown to earlier Church tradition. Within a number of Reports to the General Assembly, this *logical* distinction between Word and text has become an *operative* and *practical* distinction, so that the Word of God can communicate teachings that are different from—and even in direct conflict with—the written text of Scripture.¹ This has enabled the so-called ‘revisionist’ party in the Kirk to concede the presence of Scriptural injunctions against same-sex sexual activity while, simultaneously, believing that the Word of God is now teaching the Church something new.²

In spite of the difference between the contemporary and historic Church on this issue, it is taken as axiomatic by every authority that the *Declaratory Articles of the Church of Scotland* have recognised, since the Church Union of 1929, that the written text of Scripture is not only logically but operatively and practically distinct from the Word of God. Article I of the *Declaratory Articles* states:

The Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.

Of the phrase ‘the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments’, James Weatherhead, former Principal Clerk and Moderator of the General Assembly, writes:

Both in relation to the Scriptures and in relation to the *Westminster Confession*, the *Declaratory Articles* use the phrase ‘contained in’. This is quite explicitly to recognise that the Scriptures are not *per se* the Word of God, but that the Word of God is contained in them...³

¹ See, e.g., ‘Special Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry, in *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2011), 23/26, 33; ‘Theological Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry’, in *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2013), 20/33–5, 49, 57.

² The ‘revisionist’ section of the 2011 Special Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry accepted that Scripture as a whole, and Romans 1 in particular, intended to condemn same-sex sexual activity, but still argued in favour of committed same-sex relationships. See Church of Scotland, ‘Special Commission’, 23/33.

³ J.L. Weatherhead, *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1997), IV.4.

From this observation, he draws the following implications for members and office-bearers:

A member or office-bearer of the Church is free to believe that all the words in the Bible are together literally the Word of God, but that is not required of all members and office-bearers.⁴

The import of these comments is that, while an office-bearer is free to believe so, it is not the intention of Article I to make any identification between the Word of God and the text of Scripture. In agreement, another former Principal Clerk and Moderator of the General Assembly, Finlay Macdonald, writes:

The Church does not hold that the words of the Bible constitute the infallible Word of God, though, being a broad church, any member of the Church is free to believe that. What they are not free to do is insist that everyone else believes the same!⁵

This judgement is shared, and amplified, by others. Of Article I, Douglas Murray writes:

It had been said that the supreme standard is the Word of God contained in the scriptures, not the scriptures themselves. It should be noted that an identification between the Word of God and the scriptures was not being made... It is interesting to note that the constitution of the Kirk thus does not identify the bible and the Word of God and therefore has a non-fundamentalist view of scripture.⁶

Weatherhead, Macdonald, and Murray's belief that the Church of Scotland has, since reunion, recognised an operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture, was challenged by the so-called 'traditionalist' section of the 2013 Theological Commission. It was pointed out there that the phrase 'contained in' had been used in a number of Scottish Church documents ever since the *Westminster Confession*, and that—in the absence of an explicit statement to the contrary—its presence in the *Articles Declaratory* should be understood in its traditional Reformed sense.⁷ While this argument makes a good deal of sense, the 'tradition-

⁴ Weatherhead, *Constitution and Laws*, IV.5.

⁵ Finlay A.J. Macdonald, *Confidence in a Changing Church* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2004), p. 184.

⁶ Douglas Murray, *Freedom to Reform* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 44.

⁷ Church of Scotland, 'Theological Commission', 20/67-8.

alist' section of the 2013 Theological Commission did not examine the drafting process that led to the framing of the *Articles Declaratory*, and, for that reason, it might still be reasonable to suppose that the framers of the *Articles Declaratory* had intended to use the phrase 'contained in' in a new way.

NEW EVIDENCE

When we examine the process that led to the drafting of the *Articles Declaratory*, however, it becomes clear that a serious misinterpretation of the Kirk's constitution has taken place. My curiosity in this issue was raised when I reflected on the anachronism so clearly visible in Murray's argument. He claims that the United Free Church and the Auld Kirk elected—*ten years* before the outbreak of the fundamentalist controversy in the United States—that a 'fundamentalist' understanding of the Bible should be rejected, and that an operative distinction should be made between Word and text. My curiosity was raised further when I realised that the basis for Murray's claim was a *single source*, the Minutes of the Joint Committee on Liberty in Relation to Creed, which met on 15th September 1910. Upon consulting the minutes of this meeting, however—which are held in the archives of New College, University of Edinburgh—all that was found in the minute was the following passage:

The Rev. Professor Cooper, seconded by Mr Wotherspoon, moved that Clause I. [later Article I] read as follows: -

"The supreme standard of faith and practice is the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."

On a vote being taken the First Motion [which would form the text of Article I] was carried by a large majority Professor Cooper dissented.⁸

Notable by its absence in this minute is any reference to fundamentalism, or any operative distinction between Word and text. Evidence that the issue discussed that day was not a distinction between Word and text is increased when we turn to consider Cooper's dissent, which was also supported by Wotherspoon. The dissent makes no mention of a distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture, and does not even make mention of the phrase 'contained in', which Murray claims was the chief target of the dissent. On the contrary, the dissent's reference to the *Confession of Faith Ratification Act 1690* makes it clear that its primary

⁸ *Church of Scotland and United Free Church Conference Sub-Committee on Liberty in Relation to Creed*. New College Library, Papers of Alexander Martin, MSS MART 3.

interest was the *Westminster Confession*. Even in spite of this textual evidence, or lack thereof, there is still the basic issue of plausibility. Can it really be maintained that every one of the dozens of clergy and elders present that day, at the dawn of the twentieth century, really believed that the Bible and the Word of God were operatively distinct, potentially teaching completely different things, and that only *two delegates* disagreed?

Fearing that I was jumping to conclusions, I decided to investigate the other Reports, Interim Reports, and other Memoranda produced at the time. In these investigations, I uncovered *no evidence* of any operative distinction between Word and text. On the contrary, the formulae in these various documents, repeated over and over again, insist that the Holy Scriptures 'must be recognised as the unchangeable standard'⁹ or that 'The supreme rule of faith, as of practice, must be the Holy Scriptures.'¹⁰ In every document I consulted, the textual and historical context made it clear that a traditional understanding of Word and text was intended.

This is also the case for other historical documents making reference to the Word of God 'contained in' the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Apart from its similarity to Chapter I of the *Westminster Confession*, and the Answer to Question Two of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, the phrase 'contained in' is also found in Article I of the *Articles Forming the United Presbyterian Church* of 1847, and Paragraph 2 of the *United Free Church Act Anent Spiritual Independence of the Church* 1906. While doubts might be directed toward the construction of the phrase 'contained in' within Article I Declaratory, and perhaps the 1906 Act, they cannot reasonably be directed toward the 1847 *Articles*, promulgated, as they were, before the dawn of biblical criticism in Britain. We must therefore conclude that the phrase 'contained in', in and of itself, implies no operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture, and that the inclusion of this phrase in Article I was only intended to reference these earlier Articles and Acts.

Given that the historical and documentary evidence points to a traditional understanding of Scripture as the written Word of God, and that the only source cited for an operative distinction between Word and text in the *Articles Declaratory* says something quite different from what Weatherhead, Macdonald, and Murray claim, what is the reasonable conclusion

⁹ *Church of Scotland and United Free Church Conference Sub-Committee on Liberty in Relation to Creed*. New College Library, Papers of Alexander Martin, MSS MART 3.

¹⁰ *Committee of Conference, Interim Report by Sub-Committee on Doctrinal Liberty in Relation to Creed*. New College Library, Papers of Alexander Martin, MSS MART 3.

to be drawn? I believe it is this: *Article I Declaratory was not intended to recognise an operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of the Old and New Testaments*. The prevailing interpretation of this Article—put upon it by Weatherhead, Macdonald, and Murray, and believed by thousands of Church of Scotland office-bearers—is, therefore, a wishful anachronism.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

This conclusion has a number of possible implications for the self-understanding, theological basis, and legal position of the Kirk. If the drafters of Article I Declaratory on 15th September 1910 did not intend to frame an operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture, then the opinion of some of the most senior leaders of the Church of Scotland on this subject is incorrect, as is the majority opinion of most ministers and office-bearers of the Kirk. If, as Murray and many others believe, the traditional Reformed conception of Scripture is a ‘fundamentalist’ one, the Church of Scotland, rather than being a bastion of liberalism, is shown to be ‘fundamentalist’ to the core.

This leads to an obvious question: does the discovery of the Minutes of the Joint Committee on Liberty in Relation to Creed, which met on 15th September 1910, provide grounds for legal challenge against any Act that contradicts the literal sense of Scripture? Is it possible that the General Assembly - and, by extension, its Councils and Committees - have acted *ultra vires*, inasmuch as they have proposed and passed legislation that contradicts the literal sense of Scripture? While, *prima facie*, these questions might be answered in the affirmative, Article VIII of the *Articles Declaratory* gives the Kirk great discretion in interpreting its conformity with the first Article Declaratory, and this discretion is probably sufficient to protect the Church from judicial review by the civil courts. Nevertheless, familiarity with the preceding argument would help the Kirk to forestall any potential challenge.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the legal consequences of the argument presented in this article, it nevertheless presents—if nothing else—a strong historical argument against the current operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture prevalent within the Church of Scotland. It confirms that the drafters of the *Articles Declaratory* did not recognise such a distinction, and would most probably have rejected it. Whatever we may think of the aspiration to a ‘broad Kirk’, then, we should not pretend that

this aspiration was necessarily shared by those who were responsible for the Church Union of 1929. In addition to this historical argument, we might add a theological one. While an operative distinction between the Word of God and the text of Scripture affords the Church of Scotland latitude to alter its doctrine and practice in light of current experience, it raises a host of problems. Epistemically, in the absence of the literal sense of Scripture, what are the criteria for judging what is, and what is not, the Word of God? Ecclesiologically, how is one small denomination, on the edge of Europe, better placed to discern the Word of God than billions of Christians elsewhere in the world? Doctrinally, if the Word of God can teach the Kirk that its traditional understanding of sexuality is seriously misguided, what else might it come to teach? Are there any limits to the Word of God's potential supersession of Scripture? Time will tell.

