

Theological Forum Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev Dr Liam Fraser

Moderator -

The theme of this year's Assembly is *Remember Who You Are*.

In a time of church unions and linkages, of declining finance and personnel shortages, it can be tempting to focus on the practical, bread-and-butter issues that keep churches open and services going.

But leadership isn't only about buildings and pounds and pence but something else – it's about identity and purpose.

Who are we as a Church? What are we for? And how, during a time of unprecedented challenge and change, can we remain faithful to God's will for us, rather than our own?

These questions lie behind all of the work of the Theological Forum this past year, but are addressed most fully in our report on the Calling of the Church. While discussions of calling can sometimes focus exclusively on individual callings, particularly those of ministers, our report argues that the Church *as a whole* has a calling, a calling to become Christlike, that by worshipping, loving, serving and witnessing like our Lord the Kingdom might be manifested, disciples made, and the world changed. Yet this common calling of the Church as a whole is only fulfilled through the particular giftings that we and all individual Christians are given by the Spirit. These giftings are the basis of God's call upon us as individuals, and it's when the gifts of *all* God's people are recognised, developed, and deployed that the fullness of Christ's presence is revealed to the world, and to this post-Christian Scotland we now live in.

Building on this basic theology, our report makes a number of recommendations. First, faced with ministerial shortages and growing missional challenges, we want the Church to provide resources to enable every member of the Church to discover, develop, and use their giftings, so that all Christians can serve and witness in Christlike ways. But those giftings need to be used in concrete ways within the life and mission of congregations. And so second, we want to introduce training for Ministers in particular, to create genuinely enabling ministries, that equip and deploy members and elders to witness and serve in contextually relevant ways. Yet while giftings are the key drivers in fulfilling the Church's calling, giftings of teaching and leadership are recognised in our tradition through offices.

The Theological Forum is fully aware of the shortage of ordained ministers within our church, and so we want to work with other relevant committees to look again at sacramental ministries, and how we might enable more people to be ordained, at local level, to a ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Finally, given the pain of the Presbytery Planning processes that we are living through, we want to work with others to provide pastoral guidance for situations where an individual, or a congregation's sense of call is not affirmed by the wider church, recognising how important it is that we get that discernment right.

Yet as we consider the call of God upon us - who we are, and what we are for - we need to consider whether the *constitution* of our church, and the vows we make as office holders, help or hinder that calling.

The General Assembly of 2018 instructed the Theological Forum to carry out a review of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the vows and subscription that office holders make in relation to it when they are ordained or inducted. After consultation with Presbyteries, congregations, and individual members, the Theological Forum brought its final recommendations to last year's Assembly, and having approved them, the Assembly instructed us to return this year with the overture before you now. The recommendations embodied in that overture are that the Westminster Confession of Faith should be *retained* as a subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland, but that other creeds and confessions should also be recognised as subordinate standards. In order to reflect this change, and to ensure that it is clearer what Christian beliefs are fundamental and which are not, we have also proposed a number of changes to the vows and subscription that we as office holders make.

We believe our proposed reforms would bring a number of benefits to the Church. First, by focussing attention on the Apostles and Nicene creeds as expressing the core of our faith, it will be made clearer that even in a broad church, we really do have more in common than what separates us. Yet that point, second, also holds for our relation to other churches. Recent years have seen important developments in our relationships with the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Scottish Episcopal Church, and in a time of secularisation, where it has never been more important to share resources and labour in mission together, we believe our reforms will make it easier to find commonality with other Christians, and secure that fully ecumenical ministry with other denominations that we spoke of during Saturday's debate on Ecumenical Relations.

Our proposed reforms, however, are not only about clarifying what we hold in common with other denominations, but also, third, to help us to clarify *our own* Reformed identity. As is made clear in our report on the Calling of the Church which re-affirms our Reformed

identity, we want to rediscover elements of that identity that have been overlooked or forgotten. Chief among these is the Scots Confession, the original confession of our Church, and indeed, the whole Protestant Church in Scotland. By adding the Scots Confession to our subordinate standards, we will once again be able to hear from John Knox and his contemporaries, so that a legitimate emphasis upon the Apostles and Nicene Creeds will not lead to the loss of our unique Reformed, and Scottish identity.

While the Book of Confessions is new for the Church of Scotland, other Reformed churches already have multiple subordinate standards. This includes the Hungarian Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, two Reformed churches with very different cultures, and which demonstrate that a Book of Confessions is not tied to any one particular theological or political outlook.

But even when we remember who we are, and are clear on our identity, our purpose, and our calling, the times we live in throw up new situations and issues, situations and issues that require a response.

One of these is the presence of transgender people within Scottish society and our congregations. The General Assembly previously instructed the former Mission and Discipleship Council to produce pastoral guidance to help support transgender people, and last year the Assembly endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding against so-called conversion practices, practices that seek to coerce people into changing their gender identity. While these resources are helpful, the Theological Forum, after consultation with Legal Questions and the Principal Clerk, believe that further theological work is needed to fully clarify and express the Church's policy towards transgender people. This work would not seek to address every aspect of transgender experience, but only those issues that pertain to the faith and life of the Church.

While these matters are contentious, it is precisely *because* they are contentious that we need a coherent and principled way, whatever our views on gender, of living together as the people of God. And if we can find that way of living together, and demonstrate how to live with difference in a mature way, then we may be able to model something to wider Scottish society, which continues to be greatly divided over this issue.

For no matter the challenges facing our church – and there are many – we remain one people in Christ Jesus, and it's by focussing on our shared identity in Jesus, and his calling upon us to worship, love, serve and witness like him, that we will find our way through this time of trial. For while - like the burning bush on our church's emblem - we may feel at times as if we could be consumed, we will not be consumed, but will live again, for Scotland and for Christ.

Moderator - I present the report and move the deliverance.