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# Assembly Address 2011

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The Glory of  
Christ in Relation  
to the Life of the  
Church

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James Maciver

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# The Glory of Christ In Relation to the Life of the Church

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Fathers and Brethren,

*“The glory, life and power of Christian religion, as Christian religion, and as seated in the souls of men, with all the acts and duties which properly belong thereunto and are, therefore peculiarly Christian, and all the benefits and privileges we receive by it....with the whole of the honour and glory that arises unto God thereby, have all of them their formal nature and reason from their....relation unto the person of Christ; nor is he a Christian who is otherwise minded” (John Owen, Works of John Owen, Volume 1, page 104).*

So wrote the great Puritan theologian John Owen, reminding us that everything in the Christian religion is connected, vitally, with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I have chosen to address you today on a topic which I know we can all unite around and which will, I trust, at the same time help to bring other more contentious topics into proper perspective. The title of my address is ***“The Glory of Christ in Relation to the Life of the Church.”*** We have been through a stressful time as a denomination over the past year, to say nothing of the past decade. My deliberate intention in setting this topic before you is that, as we focus together on the glory of Christ, we may be constrained to see everything else in the transforming light of his glory. I set this before you today with the conviction that the more we contemplate all aspects of the glory of Christ the more likely we are to approach every other subject, however controversial and trying, with the *“mind which was also in Christ Jesus.”*

In doing this I am but following a method employed in the New Testament letters of the apostles. To the divided Corinthians Paul's appeal directed them to the unity of Christ and to the "*gospel of the glory of Christ*", a description I will mention frequently in this paper. For the compromising Galatians Paul similarly emphasised the glory of Christ in the sufficiency of his death in which Paul himself "*gloried*". As the Colossians struggled against heretical opinions Paul presented Jesus Christ in his pre-incarnational glory as well as in his now exalted glory, demonstrating that God's purpose in calling Paul to announce the gospel to the Gentiles was to "*make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

I have divided my treatment of the subject under four heads: (1) The Glory of Christ in his Person; (2) The Glory of Christ in his People - in their Unity, Worship, and Relevance; (3) The Glory of Christ in our Preaching; and (4) the Glory of Christ in Public Life.

## **1. The Glory of Christ in his Person**

In the magnificent Prologue to John's Gospel we are taken at the outset to the triune being of God, within which the "*Word*" - a term itself packed with revelatory significance - "*was*", and "*was with God*", and "*was God.*" Then we are told in verse 14 that "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (AV has 'the Only-begotten of the Father'), full of grace and truth.*" The outcome of this incarnation as revelatory is then summarised unforgettably in verse 18 -

“No one has ever seen God. The Only Son” (ESV) or “*the Only-Begotten*” (AV) “*who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*”, (*exegeomai* - from which we derive the word ‘exegesis’). In the incarnation of the Son God has made himself “visible”; in Jesus Christ the Father has opened and exegeted his redeeming heart to us. This has important links to the visibility of the Church which I will refer to later.

Similarly in Hebrews 1:3 the writer begins his great discourse on the supremacy of Christ by insisting that he is “*the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*” (*Hebrews 1:3*). Likewise James, the Lord’s blood brother by a common maternity, refers to “*our Lord Jesus Christ, the (Lord of) glory.*” Again, when Jesus changed the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, it was “*his glory*” which he “*manifested*”.

From these few references we see how it is impossible to detach the concept of “glory” from the New Testament’s portrayal of Christ. It is evident in his assumption of our humanity, his perfect life, his obedience unto death, his triumphant resurrection from the dead, his ascension, his session at God’s right hand, his headship over all things for his Church, his priestly intercession, and also in his presence with his people as he dwells with them and walks with them through life and death.

Yet it is all too easy, as I know from my own experience, to be distracted from the *glory* of this Person - especially at those times when we are caught up in personal, congregational or denominational difficulties - which is

why we need to keep sight of his glory, not only in his person but also, as we will now see, in his people.

## **2. The Glory of Christ in his People**

### ***(1) In the Unity of his People***

I deal firstly and at greater length with “the glory of Christ in the unity of his people”, not merely because I think it timely, as I do, but because I believe that Scripture itself requires this.

Shortly before his final journey to the cross, our Lord prayed to the Father in terms which embraced all his people to the end of the world. Having stated that he was not asking that they be taken out of the world, and that he had sent them into the world, he prayed that *“they may all be one, just as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be (one) in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfect in one, so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”* (John 17:21-23).

While there are not a few exegetical difficulties in the passage, it is clear that Jesus connected the oneness of his people with the oneness he had with the Father. It is also clear that the unity of his people for which he prayed was not an invisible, “spiritual”, unity but one which would be visible and noticed by the world, so that the world might “believe” - an organisational

unity, corresponding as much as possible to the organic, spiritual, unity his people have in union with him.

We cannot hide behind the notion of invisibility when it comes to our thinking and practice of what the Church is, or must be, in the world. Nor can we erect it as a screen in an attempt to conceal our visible disunity. Too often we have lived with, and justified, division and separation by claiming that what Jesus prayed for was an “invisible”, spiritual unity in the truth. Unity in the truth, yes - we repudiate the species of ecumenism that holds lightly to doctrinal distinctives. But unity in the truth must be *visible*, and therefore external, if it is to mean anything at all in relation to the Lord’s desire that the world may believe and come to know the love of God. Just as the “grace and truth” of God were visibly displayed in the incarnate Son while he dwelt among us, so they are to be made “visible” to the world in the unity of the Church.

It would appear that the “glory” of which Christ spoke in this passage is to be understood as the glory of being one. He did not step out of *that* glory of being one with the Father by becoming an obedient Servant, though the essential glory of his deity was hidden from view by the necessity of his circumstances in his state of humiliation. And so he gave a corresponding “glory” to his people, namely “that they be one”, even as he and the Father are one.

If this is indeed how we should understand these words, then it follows that the glory of Christ is inseparably bound up with the unity of his people,

and that there is a glory for them in being one in him, just as there is for him in being one with the Father. It also follows that in the hierarchy of doctrines that God has placed into our care, the visible unity of the Church is to be placed above most.

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul introduces his treatment of the unity of the body of Christ by an appeal. *“I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace”* (Eph. 4:1-3). It is *we* who are responsible for the maintenance of the unity the Spirit has created. Yet this must be in full awareness that the glory of Christ is our primary consideration. We are not to maintain unity for unity’s sake, but for his glory’s sake. Later in the passage the apostle, in stating the diversity of offices and gifts within the oneness of the Church, shows that these are to be exercised *“for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”*, and that moreover, *“speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, unto Christ”* (Eph. 4:12-16).

In other words, it is plain that the glory of Christ in the life of his Church is a glory inseparable from, and revealed through, the unity of his people as they grow towards *“the measure of the stature”* of his fullness. His glory attaches to the unity of his people as much as to any other aspect of the life of his Church. That is why we must be committed against division and separation; equally so our concern must be to heal division whenever it occurs.

In the current fragmented state of the Church in Scotland, not least the Presbyterian arm of it, I am convinced that the works of our Scottish theologians of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, on this doctrine of the unity of the Church, are essential reading. Men like Melville, Rutherford, Gillespie, Durham and others had to protest strongly against serious doctrinal defection and the imposition of ceremonial elements in worship, yet the idea of breaking away from the Church was a thing they viewed with horror. This need not surprise us. In ecclesiastical considerations of this kind they took their cue from the early Church Fathers as well as from the Reformers. They would have no sense of embarrassment or quarrel with John Calvin's strident dismissal of separation from the Church when he wrote,

*"The Lord esteems the communion of his Church so highly that he counts a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the Church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished.....he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the Church (where the word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons" (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chapter 1, part 19.)*

How very far removed this is from the "conscience" that insists on separating from the Church rather than separating from what is found to be offensive to conscience within it!

In addition, the concern of our Scottish theologians of that period was not merely the unity of Christ's Church in Scotland; the Visible Church for them was the Church catholic, the one Church of Christ, whether manifested

in Scotland, Europe or elsewhere in the world. James Walker says of their high view of catholic Church unity, that for them,

*“the Churches of the various nationalities...though they are so far independent of each other, yet they are so one, that membership in one is membership in all, and separation from one is separation from all. This conception of the Church, of which, in at least some aspects, we have practically so much lost sight of, had a firm hold of the Scottish theologians of the 17<sup>th</sup> century” (James Walker, The Theology of Theologians of Scotland, Lecture IV).*

This has important implications for us today. Firstly, for our relationship with other denominations. Our Ecumenical Relations Committee can rightly justify its existence and remit on the basis of this principle of the unity of the universal Church of Christ. Where his people are found we are united to them; where there are divisions they affect the whole body. The rationale of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, of which the Free Church is a founder member, is largely this, that denominations sharing the Reformed Faith have an obligation to support one another as they belong to the universal Church of Christ. And its European branch, the EuCRC, is committed to the aim of cooperation in evangelism and theological education as mentioned in the report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee.

But, secondly, this emphasis on the Church being one and on maintaining the visible unity of Christ’s Church has obvious relevance internally for our own denomination. We could do no better than heed the counsel contained in the writings of our old Scottish divines in our circumstances today. No greater tribute could be paid to their memory than that we follow them in *“maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.”* James Durham, in his classic work *Concerning Scandal*, lists the

many “*evils*” which inevitably follow division and separation in the Church, because, as he observed, “*the edge of our zeal is then bent towards the differences*” which divide us. So, he urges that every effort should be made to prevent division, but also to mend it when it occurs. In picturesque but telling words he states,

*“It will also readily be granted, that it is the duty of all Christians, especially of ministers of the gospel, to endeavour the preserving of unity and the preventing of division, and the recovering of unity and the removing of division, by healing of the breach when it is made. Never did men run to quench fire in a city, lest all should be destroyed, with more diligence than men ought to bestir themselves to quench this in the Church; never did mariners use more speed to stop a leak in a ship, lest all should be drowned, than ministers especially, and all Christian men should haste to stop this beginning of the waters of strife, lest thereby the whole Church be overwhelmed”* (James Durham, *Concerning Scandal, Part IV, chapter 3, page 259, 1990 edition*)

I shall deal with the glory of Christ in our preaching shortly, but here I must also mention, the place given to the preaching of the word of God in relation to the unity of the Church by these Scottish theologians of the past. This is highly significant in any consideration of how we are to arrange a hierarchy of the doctrines revealed in Scripture for the life of the Church. In the words of John MacPherson in *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*,

*“our covenanting forefathers, strict and even scrupulous as they were in regard to ceremonies in worship which did not have the sanction of Holy Scripture, made the preaching of the word the principal, and sometimes, it would seem, the only absolutely indispensable note of the true Church. Hence they refused to unchurch any communion in which the word was preached, or to deny the name of a true Church to any body in which Christ was proclaimed as the Saviour, even though the proclamation might be very defective, and though it might be accompanied with many additions of doctrine that have no scriptural warrant, and with ceremonies which they could only regard as idolatrous”* (John MacPherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology, 1903, page 107*).

Such a high view of the unity of the Church, and of Christ's glory in relation to it, has profound implications for us now in practical terms; it impinges on Church membership, admission to the sacraments, ecclesiastical discipline and corporate worship. While our form of worship rightly has a high position, it does not seem to me, as I follow the analysis of these ecclesiastical giants, that we should place it on the level of the preaching of the word. Nor should differences over it ever lead to leaving the Church!

None of us may insist on always having our opinion prevail and at the same time expect that this will always honour Christ's glory. After all the glory of *his* obedience lay in the fact that he did *not* set out to please himself, nor to insist on his own will being done. The paradox of his life is that glory lies in self-abasement which leads to higher glory. In this we must follow him as much as in anything else. His penetrating question to the disciples after he had washed their feet is one we need to hear for this Assembly, as indeed for every day we live - "*Do you know what I have done to you?*", he asked. It was a question intended to redirect their minds from *their* idea of "glory", in having the highest seat at table, to *his*, in taking the lowest! So he added, "*you call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly I say to you a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things blessed are you if you do them*" (John 13:13-17).

Peter, the very man at the centre of these events, later wrote, “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges righteously*” (1 Peter 2:21-23).

There, Fathers and Brethren, is where we have our pattern. I trust that whatever conclusions are arrived at by this Assembly, even if there be some, as there will be, which do not meet with our personal preference, we will all nevertheless accept them in the spirit with which Christ accepted the decisions of his antagonists, and in the conviction that conscientious dissent secures for us a committing of ourselves to him who judges righteously.

There is, thirdly, one other matter of considerable importance when we take stock of our theological and ecclesiastical heritage as I have briefly set out, and that is the concern to mend divisions as much as to prevent them. Whatever cannot justify separation in the first place cannot justify keeping up a separation where it exists. Undoubtedly this requires considerable self-denial, courage, perseverance, a “thick skin” and much prayer. But it is our bounden duty to be “peacemakers” as much as “peacekeepers.” They, after all, are termed by Christ himself “*the children of God.*” We are never more like our God than when we are making peace!

Reconciliation, forgiveness, reunion, and mending divisions are all ideals but they are also practical aims for every Christian denomination which

sincerely owns the doctrine of the glory of Christ in the unity of his people. Fathers and Brethren, is it not required of us by the terms of the glory of Christ in the unity of his people to take the initiative in reaching out to those of like mind estranged from us with a sincere purpose that we be one? Is it not true that we must today confess with shame that we have presented to the world for too long the image of division in the body of Christ as the norm rather than the glory of our unity with him?

Have we not for too long given prominence and energy to maintaining a witness to separation instead of showing the world the beauty of oneness in Christ? Have we not had our part to play in the encouragement of atheism by resisting the challenges of restoring the broken body of Christ to a more united witness to the world? Samuel Rutherford would say that if we can worship with others some of the time then we should worship with them all of the time. In other words we have no justification for separation in many of the situations where it exists. As leaders in the Church, let us be leaders in this especially. We owe it to our Lord to think, and to do, no less, for his glory's sake.

Fathers and Brethren, I confess to you today that I am tired - tired from a haemorrhaging of energy, moral and mental, over the past decade and more. Many of us have expended much energy on disputes, claims and counter claims, dissensions, appeals, buildings, and such like. I know that these things must have their own place and that for many of our people their congregational life is deeply and adversely affected, and I want us to fully support our dispossessed and frustrated people. But I have found little of the

glory of Christ in these things. That itself should make us long for the day when we can fully expend our energy unitedly on the gospel.

As a boy on the east coast of Lewis I often gazed at the mountains of Sutherland on the horizon, wondering what it was really like to be close to them and climb them. Some days they seemed very close, while on other occasions they were obscured altogether. It seems to me that not a few of our aims and objectives in life, and I speak especially of the life of the Church, are like these mountains were to me then. We see the peaks of Christian unity, reunifications, gospel partnerships, cooperation in evangelism, and pooling of resources in engaging with immorality and poverty. But they remain distant peaks. Since then I have had a closer view of these peaks of Sutherland than I had as a boy, but I have never climbed any of them, and I doubt if I ever will now! I wonder though, will I ever climb above the lower foothills of Christian unity in my time?

Now I come to speak of the glory of Christ in his people, in the worship of his people.

## ***(2) In the Worship of his People***

I am confining myself here to what most of us will recognise as “public worship”, the worship of the Church gathered together in a congregational way. Most of us will likely be familiar with the comment of Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113, writing to the emperor Trajan for advice about the interrogation of Christians, saying that they claimed that “*the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that*

*they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and”, he went on, “persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.”*

The worship of Christians is a good indicator of their theology. The worship of these Christians in Pliny’s day was obviously consciously and deliberately Christocentric. I have no intention here of entering into what constitutes a biblical “form of worship”; on that we have differing opinions among ourselves and with other denominations. But I do wish to say that if worship is to be *“in spirit and in truth”*, then it must adore and exalt the glory of Christ. Materials and elements of worship must not give primary emphasis to the human element, even in expressing our concerns and confessing our sins in prayer and praise. Our worship must be and continue to be our adoring response to God in Christ. We are to seek that we praise him on earth even as he is praised in heaven - *“worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. And heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them saying, ‘to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might, for ever and ever’*. *And the four living creatures said ‘Amen!’*, and the Elders fell down and worshipped” (Revelation 5:12

As sons of the Reformers, our reformed worship flows from reformed theology. There are many examples in the evangelical world of services

geared to “attracting” outsiders, or tempered to the expectations of those who are invited to church, or accommodating of other forms of “spirituality” in the interests of a wide ecumenism. For them the vital question seems to be “is our worship contemporary?” For us it must be, “is our worship glorifying to Christ? Do we exult in his glory?” In saying this I do not wish to give the impression that we should tolerate bad singing, poor quality preaching, prayers which have had no prior thought given to them, or sloppy demeanour in the pew. It is as easy to worship God badly with the right materials as it is to worship him sincerely with the wrong ones.

Now a word on the glory of Christ in his people, as in their relevance as a people for this age.

### ***(3) In the Relevance of his People - a People for this Age***

The revelation of God’s love, wisdom, power and grace, through the incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ, is what makes the Christian faith immeasurably superior to every alternative religion and to non-religious philosophies and world-views. To suggest otherwise is to do a dishonour to the glory of Christ.

Even the revelation of God prior to the incarnation, in the law and worship of the Old Testament, is greatly surpassed by what has come to be revealed and established in Christ. *“For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end*

*came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:9-11)*”.

We must remember that *we* today are the privileged ones, the people of “*the gospel of his glory*”, not the people who saw the glorious elements of the tabernacle and temple in the pre-incarnational stage of revelation. We live in the “last days”; we belong to the age of the Holy Spirit; we have the privilege of being God’s people now, people with the advantage of knowing the glory of Christ in his Church.

But it is not enough for us to realise this aspect of biblical theology. We must be a *gospel Church* in 2011 - in our allotted portion of the “last days.” What is a “gospel Church”, we might ask? Suffice to say that in studying First Thessalonians with my congregation I have (and I hope they have too!) come to appreciate anew that the chief characteristics of a gospel Church are that it is: aware of its grounding in God; prizing the word of God; regularly worshipping the living God; communicating the gospel; experiencing conversions; serving God and living to please him; standing fast in the Lord; increasing in brotherly love; and waiting for his Son from heaven. What I say in my final section also applies; a gospel church is a church that is committed to serving Christ in matters of public life. What I wish to emphasise in relation to my theme today is that the glory of Christ is intimately connected with all these elements - the glory of his resurrection power, his rights, his lordship over the whole creation, his example, and his return as the Judge of all.

Moreover, we possess the most potent weapon mankind has ever known - the gospel of the glory of Christ! We must maintain our confidence in that gospel itself - really because it is the gospel of his glory, with all that that means - as we live, worship, evangelise and witness. We must not yield to the temptation to adjust the gospel itself under pressure from liberal theology, social conditions, ecumenical developments or political will.

Nor must we transfer the confidence we place in the gospel to the structures which support it - like the methods we use in outreach and evangelism, the form of our worship, the level of our finance, or the calibre of our preachers and people. All these are important and to be given the most careful study and application. But it is the gospel itself which is “*the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16). Against an array of rival religions and philosophies Paul had total confidence in the gospel. So must we. It is “*the gospel of the glory of Christ*” after all!

I now turn to my third section, to the related matter of the glory of Christ in our preaching.

### **3. The Glory of Christ in our Preaching**

It is imperative that we always remember that the gospel we preach is “*the gospel of the glory of Christ*” (2 Cor. 4:4). Every aspect and emphasis of our gospel announcements are to be crafted so as to connect with the glory of Christ. Whether we are expounding what the Scriptures teach about the need for faith in Christ, or forgiveness of sin, or the Christian lifestyle, or the law of God in connection with the condition of our society, or indeed any other topic,

we must always seek to relate them to his glory. We must ask in preaching from Amos as much as from Romans, “where does this connect with the glory of Christ and how do I bring this out to view without imposing anything on the text that is not already there?” We must be as certain that the glory of Christ belongs to the law as surely as it does to the gospel, and indeed to the relation between them. The glory of Christ cannot be relegated to a secondary level when dealing with such things as the gravity of sin, the need for faith and repentance, the assurance of faith, the obligation to evangelise, the beauty of holiness and the final judgement. Our sermons must be full of Christ and his glory or else we will not be true to the revelation God has given us in his word.

And we must preach the glory of Christ’s own person and work - the glory he always has had as the Son of God, the glory of his perfect, sinless life, the glory of his atoning death and triumphant resurrection, the glory of his present status at God’s right hand and of his Headship over all things to his Church.

We who preach the gospel must also increasingly know in our own hearts the power of God’s truth and we will only know this as we behold the glory of the Christ who lives in us and communes with us. In the words again of John Owen,

*“It is the power of truth in the heart alone that will make us cleave unto it indeed in an hour of temptation. Let us then not think that we are anything the better for our conviction of the truths of the great doctrines of the gospel for*

*which we contend, unless we find the power of the truths abiding in our own hearts, and have a continual experience of their necessity and excellency in our standing before God and our communion with him. (John Owen, Works of John Owen, Volume 12, page 52)”*

Our preaching must also educate and motivate our people to live to the glory of Christ. It must assure them that the holiness God requires of them is really the very likeness of Christ being wrought in them by the Holy Spirit; that one of their greatest privileges for their advancement and assurance consists in their beholding the glory of Christ. We instruct them that the love of God is shown forth in its glory in the face of Jesus Christ; that only as they gain understanding of Christ’s sufferings, death and resurrection, do they really understand the Scriptures; and that when spiritual decay spreads over their souls, as from time to time it will, their only remedy for recovery is to look to Christ with a view to concentrating on his glory by faith.

Finally, let me set out a few thoughts on the glory of Christ in public life.

#### **4. The Glory of Christ in Public Life**

What I mean by this is the way in which the glory of Christ relates to the whole fabric of society and also to the Church’s responsibilities and role in public life, whether in our local communities or in the nation.

The Headship of Christ has rightly been given a prominent place in our denomination’s history. The idea that the State should be a secular institution based on secular principles has always been repudiated by the Free Church of Scotland, on the primary grounds that the idea is contrary to the lordship rights

of Christ. He is not just the Head of the Church; he has been made Head over all things to his Church. He is the Head of the State as surely as he is of the Church. It is from him that the Church has received the mandate to “*go and make disciples of all nations*”; but equally so, the mandate given to the State to govern justly in the fear of God is from the same Jesus Christ as Lord of all.

Under the Headship of Christ the Free Church has always believed in the Establishment Principle, involving the recognition and upholding of the Christian religion by the State. It is not that the Church insists that the State give no freedom to individuals to hold beliefs contrary to the Christian faith. Indeed we insist that the State is required to allow freedom of religion, and the freedom to have no religion at all, to those who would be so minded. In saying this, we both uphold freedom and denounce the persecution or coercion of religious minorities. We ourselves as Christians are a minority within our society, but we rightly protest when actions amounting to intolerance or persecution are taken against us. The General Assembly in 1846 declared explicitly that,

*“while the Church firmly maintains the same scriptural principles as to the duties of nations and their rulers in reference to true religion and the Church of Christ, for which she has hitherto contended, she disclaims intolerant or persecuting principles, and does not regard her Confession of Faith, or any portion thereof, when fairly interpreted, as favouring intolerance or persecution...” (Act XII, 1846).*

But this recognition and tolerance of religious minorities is very far removed from the State absolving itself of the responsibility, as a God-appointed authority, to uphold the Christian religion. It may be difficult nowadays to say with confidence that we still have a Christian State, yet, whether this is the case or not, the biblical injunction that the State recognise

and endow the Christian faith remains, since Christ is the Head of both Church and State.

Instead of this being the case, however, for many years we have seen the steady secularisation of our political, educational and financial institutions and agencies, often under pressure from vociferous minorities who, not content with the freedom to exist and live according to their minority views, seek to impose their will on the majority. Almost immediately after the new SNP government was elected the homosexual lobby group, Equality Network, called upon Scotland's new government to fundamentally redefine marriage. Their spokesman, Daniel Donaldson, said: "We hope and expect that a consultation will now proceed quickly." Similar pressure is expected again from Exit (formerly the Scottish Voluntary Euthanasia Society) to legalise euthanasia. Christian values regarding marriage and family life are commonly undermined in popular and influential "soap opera" storylines. Apparently, Coronation Street currently features two lesbians, four homosexual men and a transsexual.

To advance this secularising programme the pressure groups, and the powers that be, need not destroy the gospel; only to "privatise" it. Relegate the gospel to a position where its values apply only in the private, individual sphere, and you create the conditions for secularism to grow.

What we do not always realise is that the growth of secularism is an assault on the glory of Christ. Abortion and euthanasia assault the Creator rights of Christ; making human rights the basis by which a society decides

what is of most importance assaults the glory of Christ's right to rule by his law. Exploitation of the poor and the disadvantaged is a slight on the glory of Christ's identification with the weak and exploited in society and the glory of his personal choice of "making himself poor, although he was rich, so that we through his poverty might become rich." The allocation to minority religions of a position equal to Christianity attacks the glory of Christ as "*the way, the truth and the life.*"

In his penetrating assessment of the consequences of communism, Peter Hitchens in his book *The Rage Against God*, concludes that societies in history which sought to eradicate God from the lives of their people, in the name of reason, science and liberty, succeeded only too well in showing that "*good societies need God to survive...and when you have murdered Him, starved Him, silenced Him, denied Him to the children and erased his festivals and his memory, you have a gap which cannot indefinitely be filled by any human, nor anything made by human hands.*" (Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 2010, page 158)

But he goes on to ask, "*Must we discover this all over again?*" To which he answers,

*"I fear so. A new and intolerant utopianism seeks to drive out the remaining traces of Christianity from the laws and constitutions of Europe and North America....This utopianism relies for human goodness on doctrines of human rights derived from human desires and - like all such codes - full of conflicts between the differing rights of different groups. These must then be policed by an ever more powerful state...Inevitably it is the Christian Churches who are the last stronghold of resistance to this change. Yet they are historically weak, themselves infiltrated by secular liberalism, full of uncertainty and diffidence. The overthrow of Christian education is a real possibility in our generation. The removal of Christianity from public*

*ceremonies is almost complete. Expressions of Christian opinion or prayer in public premises can be punished in Britain under new codes which enjoin a post-Christian code of 'equality and diversity' on all public servants. Secularists are equating the teaching of religion with child abuse and laying the foundations for it to be restricted by law. Britain's next monarch is likely to be crowned in a multi-faith ceremony whose main significance will be that it will be the first Coronation not to be explicitly Christian in more than a thousand years. The Rage against God is loose, and is preparing to strip the remaining altars when it is strong enough to do so" (Ibid, page 158).*

And in case we may think that such secularising developments are confined to places like Edinburgh or London, let me tell you of a recent conversation I had with an elder from the Stornoway congregation. I was shocked to be told by him that he and two colleagues - all elders in the Free Church and also acting councillors in the local authority - had been called to be interviewed by the Commission on Equality and Human Rights. This is the taxpayer-funded body which last March called upon the next Scottish Government to alter the law on marriage. The Commission had received a letter of complaint claiming that these three Councillors were not fit for public office seeing they were elders in a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland, a Church which requires its officebearers to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith, a document considered to be wholly unsuitable for men in public office to subscribe to, seeing it upheld, so it was claimed, certain Old Testament practices such as stoning a person for Sabbath desecration!

More than a decade ago now, as one of a party of Church representatives and religious leaders on a visit to Brussels, I recall being told persuasively by a Christian official there that our most dangerous enemies were not the other "faiths" with which we have profound differences but the

“nihilists” as he called them - people whose philosophy includes the eradication of *all* religions and all religious involvement in public life. Afterwards a Muslim member of our party said to me, “You are not my greatest enemy, nor am I yours. They are our greatest enemy.” He was referring to the “nihilists.” I believe he was right on that score. I am not in favour of false ecumenism let alone a syncretisation of religions. I abhor the idea that Christ will share his glory with any other. But I cannot dissociate myself from the concerns of a Muslim, or any other, against the eradication of religion from our society. Without in any way compromising the uniqueness of the Christian religion, or the glory of Christ in it, we must enlist the help of all who have an interest in withstanding the nihilistic agenda of the militant godless. This is where the frontline of the battleground is! This is where we must concentrate our energies! The more we withdraw into internal skirmishes, the more certain is that we will lose the battle for the gospel. The ark of God will be lost again to the Philistines and “Ichabod” - “the glory has departed” - will be pronounced once more over the Church of God.

We also need to motivate our people to involve themselves in public life as much as they are able to. Principles do not apply themselves. They must be encouraged to participate in local and national politics and initiatives and those already involved must be supported. The idea of the “Big Society” has potential in this regard. In official statements issued by the Big Society Network it is stated that,

*“we see the core of the big society as three principles: (1) empowering individuals and communities; decentralising and redistributing power not just from Whitehall to local government, but also directly to communities, neighbourhoods and individuals:*

*(2) encouraging social responsibility; Encouraging organisations and individuals to get involved in social action: (3) creating an enabling and accountable state; transforming government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives. Big Society is about a cultural change where people...feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities."*

For all the "political speak" evident in these words, they sound to me just like what Christians already have a mandate from Christ to do. Three weeks ago the Prime Minister, in a speech to a gathering of Christians, surprised many with his forthright approval of a *Christian* input to the "Big Society". He said,

*"I think Churches, and religious organisations, have a huge amount to bring to the Big Society. I look around the room and I see Churches that are already running schools, I see Christians who want to start free schools, I see organisations deeply involved in civic society and providing great services... So I think the Big Society is something that people of all faiths, but particularly of the Christian faith, can get very involved in."*

Whatever prompted it, we should welcome the fact that he said it and hold him and his government to it, but more importantly avail ourselves of whatever opportunities this may bring for us to advance the claims of Christ.

In the crisis following Israel's idolatry with the golden calf Moses interceded for the people and was assured by God that the Lord's presence would indeed go up with them. Then Moses pleaded, *"I beseech you, show me your glory."* May we harbour this prayer for the duration of this Assembly and beyond. God answered the prayer of Moses the next day when the Lord passed before him and reaffirmed his "name" in covenant faithfulness and blessings. But I believe his prayer was answered ultimately in the glory of Christ - "And

we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father” (John 1:14).

May we, then, know in this Assembly the presence of Christ; may the Lord Christ be pleased to show us his glory. May all we do and say be in conscious awareness of his glory, and may we leave this Assembly more determined than ever to promote the glory of Christ in our personal lives, in our homes, in our families and congregations, and in our public witness.

Thank you.