

EDITORIAL

SCOTLAND: GOSPEL AND CULTURE

The four papers presented in this issue of the *Bulletin* were first given at a day conference of the Aberdeen School of Christian Studies in May 1994 under the title 'Scotland: Gospel and Culture'. Chairing the conference was Dr. William Storrar, Lecturer in Practical Theology in the University of Aberdeen and himself a vigorous contributor to national discussion of the conference theme, not least through his book *Scottish Identity: a Christian Vision* (Handsell Press, Edinburgh, 1990).

Setting the agenda in the conference programme were a string of questions:

Are national history and national identity relevant to the progress and nature of the Christian cause in Scotland? What impact has Evangelical Christianity had on the development of Scottish society, and how has Christianity in Scotland been influenced by its cultural environment? What is the present importance of distinctively Scottish culture for Christians in Scotland? How have Gaelic language and culture interacted with Christian experience, and how do they now interact? What is the importance of such factors as language, geography, national institutions (legal, social, political and ecclesiastical) and church history in determining our *Christian* identity and character?

SBET is pleased to be able to offer to a wider readership the four papers that addressed these questions in Aberdeen. For they are posed at a time of critical transition in Scottish life.

Gallopings social and cultural change is the order of the day. To judge by the big cities, the Scottish sabbath is dead and buried. Regions in the north and west where it still commands some respect are nevertheless not immune to lottery-mania and playground drug abuse. In traditionally Presbyterian Scotland, the only mainline denomination to be growing, according to the recent census, is the Scottish Episcopal Church, while the Church of Scotland is declining so fast that, in terms of church attendance, it will soon be clearly second to the Roman Catholic Church. The latter in turn is grappling with a grave dearth of vocations to the priesthood.

Whether Scotland is experiencing secularization or paganization, the Christian church is slipping irredeemably from its commanding height in its corporate life. Media-driven conversion to a predominantly 'pop' culture – reflected so patently even in those quality newspapers that protest their Scottishness most loudly – seems to breed an intelligentsia no longer Scottish enough to take Christianity seriously. 'Calvinism' is

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a favourite whipping-boy for all manner of ills (and pity the *Scotsman* that cannot even spell 'Calvanism' correctly).

By contrast, if there is one area of national life where the language of rebirth might still carry conviction, it is politics – or better, government. If any forecast is safe a year or less ahead of a general election, Scotland will have its own parliament again within a few years – for the first time for almost three centuries. What might this momentous development mean for the Christian good of the Scottish people? Will it free the national church – and in particular its bureaucracy and General Assembly – from its self-assigned role as guardian of the nation's political virility – and free it to re-centre its heart and mind on the great commission to make Christ's disciples of all Scots people? Will a parliament in Edinburgh serve to defend and promote Gaelic-language culture?

Another set of questions suggests itself. How ready will Scottish Evangelicals be to seize the challenges and opportunities of such epochal constitutional reform? To serve among a new generation of home-based Scottish parliamentarians? To lobby and brief and prime as effectively as a group of London-based organizations have been doing for the cause of evangelical politics and values? To instruct Christian people in the art and craft of bearing faithful witness amid a sceptical or apathetic or hostile only-lately-ex-Christian majority? To bolster Christians to plead the Christian cause without benefit of establishment or inherited privilege?

Scottish Evangelicals have a great deal of catching up to do in these reaches of cultural and social responsibility. In good part what we have to catch up with is our Reformed identity, for in grappling with the unnerving present and the daunting future we dare not be anchorless. Not that nostalgia will serve us well, whether for the heady era of revivals or the years of Tell Scotland, or even for a selectively skewed repristination of Celtic spirituality. By God's design, church history goes forward. Past centuries may furnish a rich menu of admonitions, but they cannot prescribe. There is no substitute for the hard graft of working out a distinctive Scottish evangelical Christian vocation at a time when so little of the country's Christian past can any longer be taken for granted. In this task these Aberdeen lectures will prove a rich resource.