



Freedom of religion and education in connection with the relations of church and state in Scotland

Thank you for the opportunity to address you. My title reveals a particularly Scottish perspective which I hope will be of interest to you. I must begin by stressing that I am not an educationalist, nor, in any sense, an expert in the field of Christian education. I am here as a minister of the gospel. Much as I might wish to, I don't however intend to preach a sermon. So, I hope you will bear with me, and with my Scottish accent, and that you will find some of the issues I raise to be relevant.

I want to look at four things in the time available:

- 1. Some background concerning education and freedom of religion in Scotland**
- 2. Two different responses to the situation**
- 3. How Reformed principles would, and in my view should, impinge on education**
- 4. Offer some practical suggestions for addressing the present need in Scotland**

I want to open by giving you a general picture of religion in the Scottish education system.

(1) Legal situation. In terms of law, religion in Scottish schools has a favoured place. This dates back to 1872 when most schools, then run by Churches, came under state control and a national system was devised. Religious instruction and religious observance were specially protected.

In 1929 an Act of Parliament ensured that this religious instruction and observance 'cannot be discontinued in any Local Authority school without a resolution to discontinue being submitted to a poll of electors in that area and approved by a majority.' This has never happened in any part of Scotland.

There has always been a conscience clause which provided for any child being withdrawn from such instruction or observance without being placed at any disadvantage with regard to secular instruction provided.

The law remains unchanged from 1980 in these two particulars.

(2) Practice. In terms of practice, obviously it was originally intended that religious instruction and observance would be in the Christian religion. This prevailed in Scottish schools until fairly recent times. I was brought up with the Bible, prayer and the Psalms in primary school every morning. Basic Bible knowledge was either assumed or generally encouraged in

religious education. Even in secondary school the religious observance remained broadly Christian, even if not Reformed.

(3) Change. This has changed considerably. Ministers from local Churches are still given access to primary and to some secondary schools across Scotland to lead assemblies and conduct worship. But more often, primary schools attend a local Church once or twice a year for this. However, I now withdraw my children from the kind of religious observance offered in my local primary school. There is nothing Christian about what goes on. Christianity in secondary schools is almost extinct in our towns and cities.

However, a recent petition to Parliament by the Scottish Secular Society to change the 1980 law did not succeed. They wanted the conscience clause to be changed from “opt out” to “opt in” for religious observance. The result was that the ability to “opt out” was just re-emphasised.

The low standard of religion in the churches, and intolerance towards Reformed Christian instruction and worship means that compliance even with the letter of the law, has all but disappeared when it comes to instruction and observance. To add insult to injury, in 2005 the Scottish government changed the definition of religious observance. The definition now used is:

“community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community.”

This can mean anything. Seldom is it Christian. Religious instruction in Christianity has been replaced by the study of comparative religions. So, the securities for Christian instruction and worship, insisted on by the Churches when their schools were handed over to the state, have been forgotten and trampled on.

(4) Christian influence remaining. (i) *Teachers*. A great deal depends on the character and wisdom of a teacher, and particularly of a head teacher in a school. Their own ability to nurture Christian values among pupils in individual schools or classrooms will depend a lot on personal convictions and careful interaction with the school authorities. In some well-run schools, some Christian teachers can still adapt the requirements of the curriculum to teach meaningful Christian truth. (ii) *Parents*. However, evolution, sex education and humanism remain serious obstacles which Christian parents must address and navigate with their children in state schools. In the case of sex education, so far children can be withdrawn in many cases, or the materials adjusted for them individually in line with parents wishes. Where that is not possible, or proves difficult, some families withdraw their children from the school.

That is a summary of the situation in our schools.

What about the general picture in respect of freedom of religion?

(5) Freedom of religion.

Along-side this decline in schools, there is the continued secular humanist endeavour to force alternative values on all publicly funded institutions in Scotland. The national media has actively contributed to this and has been a powerful force in degrading biblical morals throughout the UK for many decades now.

However, in terms of freedom of religion, the UK does not yet have a very significant problem for Christians. From time to time instances emerge where street preachers or even private Christians feel threatened or may even be arrested or cautioned regarding things they say which do not fit with the new morality. This is perhaps more common in England

however. I don't think we are quite at the stage in Scotland where Christians are feeling threatened.

On the other hand, new laws about a state guardian for every child, prohibiting physical chastisement, monitoring of families from unusual or strict back-grounds, and general suspicion of true Christianity are, however, real problems in Scotland.

While this is true, I don't think all cases that come to public notice are quite as they may be portrayed by lobby groups, nor are they anything like the religious persecution of Christian truth in countries all over the world, Yet, to many they are worrying trends.

I've tried to give you the general background picture. Let me now move on to consider some responses.

2. Two different responses to the situation

The question arises, how should Christians respond to all this? What is the remedy for this situation? This growing secularism supplanting Christian truth in schools and the perceived loss of religious liberty and sense of threat to freedom – how should Christians react? Should we just accept it as the inevitable reproach of the cross? Too often we compromise and adapt our methods to suit the new agenda, rather than truly bearing Christ's cross. Silence seems more prudent. We prefer to keep our heads down. Others react with outrage, and appeal to the supposed "freedom of expression" and "freedom of religion" rights as defined by international bodies.

Few really think through the implications of these ideas of freedom, and few, I fear, are willing to face up to the real causes of the present situation. Why have we descended into national atheism and apostasy from the Reformed religion which once characterised Scotland in all its public institutions? There is a lot of confusion over what needs to be done.

(1) To illustrate this, let me look at one example of an organised response to perceived threats to religious freedom in the UK.

A campaign was launched in February 2018 by the Barnabas Fund, and supported by a long list of agencies (Affinity, Anglican Mainstream, Christian Education Europe, The Freedom Association, Grassroots Conservatives, Peacemaker Trust, Revelation TV, Christianity without walls, Firebrand Notes and others). I'm sure similar moves may be desired by similar groups in other countries. These organisations are petitioning for a new Act of Parliament which, they propose, will "guarantee seven fundamental aspects of Freedom of Religion, consistent with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

These are listed: (1) freedom to read Scripture in public (Scripture of any religion they say!!), (2) freedom to interpret Scripture without government interference, (3) freedom of worship, (4) freedom to choose or change your faith or belief, (5) freedom to preach or try to convince others of the truth of your beliefs, (6) freedom to establish churches, synagogues, mosques etc, (7) freedom from being required to affirm a particular worldview or set of beliefs in order to hold a public sector job or stand for election, work in professions such as teaching and law etc.

At one level, I think such a law would be useless. Those who want to persecute Christians would ignore it; the government would find it impossible to police it and most of what it addresses is covered by other laws already. More seriously, this approach does not address the root cause of the attacks on our Christian heritage and does nothing to recover it.

But, such a law would take us in completely the wrong direction. In some of its terms, however innocent or well-intentioned these may seem, I think the freedoms desired are unbiblical and dangerous. Such a law would further remove the rightful constitutional place of Reformed Christianity in our country. It would enshrine multi-culturalism and multi-faith confusion in the statute books in a manner not yet imposed. It would place Christ and Mohammad as equals in our laws – they are not equals and should never be enshrined in law as such. But laws don't just protect. Permissive laws eventually become normative. We must also be clear that Christianity should not be treated like a commodity to which the supply and demand rule applies. Man's corruption will produce every kind of abomination if left to market forces. That is what has happened and it is the cause of our present situation.

So, what should be the response to the felt loss of religious freedom and to the loss in Scotland of our once Christian education system? Are we just to accept pluralism, multi-culturalism and the loss of established religion and privilege? Are we to view the norms of the past as gone for good? Are we to make the best of secularism and carve out a place for Christian liberty in the terms imposed on us by the secular world we seem to inhabit? My answer to these questions is simple – No.

(2) So I want to offer to you a Reformed Scottish response

In response to the doubtless well-intentioned campaign for a new law protecting freedom of religion, Reformed Scottish Protestants must say:

(1) We do not want laws which give the religion of Islam or Buddha the same place of public honour as the holy gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We ultimately want false religion suppressed and removed, and we want those under its tyranny emancipated.

(2) We do not want laws in which every self-proclaimed preacher is given formal licence to teach his creed publicly on an equality with those to whom Christ has committed the keys of his Kingdom. We should know who his public ambassadors are. They should only teach truth and if they teach publicly it should only be the form of doctrine we acknowledge publicly as Reformed, still enshrined in our statute books in Scotland.

(3) We do not want laws in which the civil ruler, who has God-given responsibilities for legislation, government, justice and punishment, nor do we want laws in which teachers and lecturers can be Buddhists, Atheists, Pantheists and Islamists. We believe that a Reformed Christian worldview needs to be a condition for entry into such offices and functions.

There are three principles which I think must govern our response. These principles are enshrined in our Reformed Confessions, but for pragmatic reasons many have parked them and largely forgotten them. However, if they are principles, we should keep them and they should affect our actions and direct us in what we aim for.

1. We must reject enlightenment libertarianism and return to the definitions of liberty enshrined in our Protestant creeds. God alone is Lord of the conscience and his Lordship extends to all. In a fallen world liberty requires to have defined limits which are set and enforced by lawful authority. Opinions and practices which cause harm destroy true liberty.

2. We must aim for a return to the relations of Church and State envisaged at the Protestant Reformation. This will mean that we recognise that the free-for-all Voluntaryism of the past 100 years has failed and has contributed to the gathering tyranny of national atheism under which we languish. We must seek to recover a Reformed Establishment if genuine Christian freedom is to be protected from arbitrary state power.

3. We must teach the Ten Commandments as an absolute and universal moral code and must exclude relativism and multi-faith confusion from our ethical framework.

I would like to be able to enlarge on these, but this is not the time or pace to do that. These principles are however enshrined in our Reformed Confessions and we should recover them.

So, I come then to my third point. I hope I have given you a background to religion in the Scottish education system and a general look at the situation with respect to freedom of religion and how I think we should respond to it.

3. How do these Reformed principles impinge on education?

I don't have any doubt that Scottish children in the state sector do not get what *you* would call a Christian education. In many cases, Christian parents have no other option. Private schools may be better, but they are too expensive for most. The very few Christian schools are not yet felt to be reliable as an alternative. No secondary Christian school provision exists. Those sheltered by a Christian primary school would be all the more vulnerable, it would seem, when going at the age of 12 or 13 to a state secondary school. Also, many Scottish Christian parents value the national and comprehensive nature of education in Scotland and believe that it has other notable advantages over more independent or strictly ecclesiastical systems.

On the other hand, the absence of Reformed Christianity in schools is painful to us. How should we respond to this loss? We long to see Christian truth restored to our national education system in Scotland. We are concerned to avoid a complete disengagement of the Christian church from the world of secular education. Many do not agree that state schools are the real source of the problem of young people forsaking Christianity. Others are convinced that this is the reason, or a significant factor in a list of several reasons. Is there a solution to be aimed at which is realistic and which might aid a recovery of what we have lost?

If I was to speak for the Reformed church, we want the recovery, reassertion and resurrection of our old Scottish Establishment. We want our Christian schools with state funding back. Are independent Christian schools a means to this end? I also wonder if a Reformed influence in independent secular schools, with funding of places for the poor by Churches and Christian charities, may yet set a standard and lead the way for state schools to follow? Should we try to set up Christian schools in Scotland?

I want to suggest four areas in which the Reformed Scottish perspective on freedom of religion would impinge on education.

(1) Educators are given a sacred trust of truth and must not hide that truth from those they teach.

We must assert the exclusive claims of Christianity. In doing so we must clearly distinguish between liberty and licence. We must teach and not hide from our children that there can be no neutrality in relation to what the law of God declares. This applies to every sphere of life, and certainly it applies to civil government. We must tell them that liberty is defined and informed by the law of God and is protected in a fallen world by personal, ecclesiastical, social and national restraint and, if necessary, degrees of compulsion. It is not to be equated with the licentious and revolutionary individualism preached by Enlightenment thinkers.

(2) We must resist new-age concepts of well-being and reassert the Christian golden rule of love to God above all, and love to our neighbour as ourselves.

There is increasing emphasis being placed in our secular societies on what may appear a close parallel to Christian spirituality and well-being. A mystical Christian religiosity fits into

this paradigm and is increasingly influencing even Christian circles, especially where multi-faith dialogue is considered obligatory. Transcendence, mindfulness, engagement with nature, absolute equality and respect for difference together with self-discovery and self-identity are key concepts used in the education setting. These concepts are not derived from Christian truth and lend themselves to multi-cultural denial of Christ's exclusive claims.

If our youth are to be instructed in what is for their spiritual well-being as individuals, the spirituality of Scripture must be the only source of instruction. There is only one standard by which thoughts, words and actions are to be weighed and well-being advanced. You can be assured that if you don't tell them what well-being is, an atheistic society will attempt to do so. Our Scottish Reformers began by teaching that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." We wish to see a recovery of that definition of well-being.

(3) We must restore confidence in the Reformed worldview and demonstrate that only Reformed Christianity provides a complete philosophical answer to the competing world view of exclusive humanism.

I think that Christian educators should have a clear Biblical political theory of government. God is sovereign as the Creator and civil government is ultimately derived from and accountable to him. Rulers are his ministers for good and a terror to evil. They should be elected or removed as they adhere to God's requirements of them. The Protestant Reformation in Europe was the deliverance of the whole of society from tyranny and bondage. The principles worked out then are timeless and to be treasured. Let us be bold in saying that a mutually supportive alliance between Church and State as two independent jurisdictions is a philosophically sound proposition. It provides real answers to the great questions of liberty and equality before the law.

We should have full confidence in the definition of liberty of conscience in the Westminster Confession of Faith. "God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men." But in saying so, we affirm that it is God, not man, who *is* Lord of the conscience. He has set bounds for fallen man and ordained means of preserving true liberty in societies of fallen men. Reformed Protestantism identifies and coherently teaches what these bounds are. By benign and Biblical means it effectively suppresses the open, persistent and flagrant breaches of the moral law which would harm society. Protestant children need to be brought up in our schools and homes and churches to be unashamed of this world-view.

(4) A Biblical alliance of church, state and family is the context for the promised blessing given in Scripture to the Kingdom of Christ.

All the Reformers had the promised future blessing of the nations of the world in view in the measures they adopted. The national comprehensive education envisaged by John Knox in *The First Book of Discipline* in 1560 was seen as a duty laid on rulers, and on the Church and on parents together. The importance of this three-fold alliance was articulated by James Begg at the time in the 19th century when the Churches handed over their schools to the state:

"These two propositions lie at the foundation of all sound views on national education: (1) That there are three parties empowered by God himself, to see that the work is done; and (2) that no particular part of the work is the exclusive province of any one of them, but each has had laid on it the obligation to see to the discharge of the whole. Grant these two propositions, and the Christian education of such a community as ours need not be a difficult problem. Deny them and it is scarcely possible to see how it can be solved." (SRSHJ. Vol. 3, 2103, p. 214)

The society has changed, but the God-given responsibilities have not. God's promises concerning the Church, given first to Abraham and repeated through-out the Old Testament, have a direct bearing on the education of our youth. The Church, the state and the family all have a part to play. Many examples from scripture could be given, but I think the following from Isaiah should instruct and stir up to activity today:

"Thus saith the Lord God, behold I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers; they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me." (Isaiah 49:22, 23)

4. I will conclude by offering some practical suggestions for addressing the present needs of Scotland in the field of education

(1) The Scottish education system is in serious moral decline and Christianity is rapidly disappearing from it.

The motto for the city of Edinburgh is *Nisi Dominus Frustra* – "Except the Lord, in vain." We need prayer. As you will know, the Scottish Parliament, which runs our education system, is in the vanguard of immoral legislation in the UK. It is set on a course of aggressively promoting homosexuality, intolerant of any principled opposition. Our national church only encourages this degrading spiral. New programmes such as "time for inclusive education" in which homosexuality, transgenderism, and other corruptions are actively promoted as part of the curriculum, are now being rolled out across the nation. There is a growing sense in Scotland that morally and even in purely academic terms our education system is rapidly failing. It has lost its Biblical foundations. May I invite you to pray for us.

(2) The Reformed church is extremely weak to respond.

I offer three reasons for this: (i) Most Christians erroneously view the state as obliged to be neutral towards religion. (ii) Ecclesiastical division has led to a paralysis in terms of united Protestant action. (iii) Worldliness and inconsistencies in worship practice and in life-styles among professing Christians has weakened us spiritually and in our public testimony.

(3) Can we believe that national Christian education of God-honouring kind can return to Scotland?

There is possibly a small awakening of interest in Christian education in Scotland today. I hope that friends here in the Netherlands will continue and indeed increase your support of the fledgling Christian Schools in Glasgow, in Edinburgh, in Stornoway and I think beginning also in Inverness. I hope that these schools will prove successful and that they will either become Reformed in their outlook and practice, or, if already so, that they will adhere firmly to Reformed principles and worship. I do not know if setting up new Christian schools by parents or Churches is the answer to our present need. They are very vulnerable to small interest groups with their own agenda, and equally vulnerable to aggressive state power if they become prominent.

However, if such Christian schools retreat from the field and become enclaves of unconcern for an apostate and godless society, then I fear that the endeavour will be short-lived and counter-productive. I would rather see a national vision for expansion and enlargement of truly Reformed Christian education for all of Scotland. Change at a national level, led by teachers and educationalists is urgently needed.

Is this possible? Can independent and privately funded schools be populated by Reformed teachers? Can there be Reformed influence brought to bear on Roman Catholic schools? Can the Reformed church, parents and Christian societies seriously attempt a recovery of what has been lost from our state system?

(4) The legal and financial impediments are considerable but are not insurmountable.

There is surely a role for the Church and for Christian philanthropy in any national provision. It was to these sources of funding that John Knox appealed in his call for a comprehensive national education:

“The rich and those able to pay may not be permitted to suffer their children to spend their youth in vain idleness ... but they must be exhorted and by the censures of the Kirk compelled to dedicate their sons by good exercises to the profit of the Kirk and Commonwealth; and that they must do of their own expense because they are able. The children of the poor must be supported and sustained on the charge of the Kirk...” (FBD, Cameron, p. 132)

There are resources in churches and there are wealthy philanthropists who have already supported the funding of Christian schools in England. It can be done in Scotland too. The vision of John Knox is not yet dead. The idealism of the Christian education of the whole nation, is not without prayerful adherents in Scotland still. I believe there are those in the teaching profession and perhaps some even in positions of influence and in independent educational institutions as well as in churches, who might respond positively to an energetic attempt to revive our failing system.

(5) I want to conclude therefore with an appeal to the conference to consider how you may advance these dreams by making **teacher training** a priority concern.

I am not an educationalist, but I spent 10 years serving on a state-run Local Authority Education Committee. I saw the decline of that Christian influence which was once integral to the whole Scottish education system. Sadly we can no longer rely on laws and protections for religious instruction and religious observance.

One remaining strength in Scottish education is the God-fearing Christian teacher. Zealous teachers continue to devote their lives to their Christian calling in the classroom. God can raise them up in every generation. Like the Hebrew midwives in Egypt who refused to kill the children at birth, God will bless those who fear his name. I believe his Church is called today to put its protective and prayerful arms around such and provide them with the means to perform their blessed work. Can we not equip them so that once again we would find the Ten Commandments, the Psalms of David and the Shorter Catechism in Scottish schools? The Christian teacher has a noble and high calling, and in the state system can be a wonderful power for good.

My vision is for a Teacher Training College in Scotland run by Reformed Christians in Scotland. With God's blessing, this would have a tangible and lasting impact on the state system. It would resource and reform *failing state schools* in our cities. It would leaven *influential private schools* with real Christianity. It would challenge and set an example for the increasingly *anti-Christian state school system*. Thoroughly Reformed and zealous Christian teachers coming through a Reformed teacher training college would also be the only real long-term security for the *fledgling Christian schools* emerging in Scotland. There are significant powers that would resist such an endeavour – not least the powerful socialist unions in our state system – but nothing is too great for the God of the Bible.

Perhaps true friends of the Scottish Reformation, whether in Scotland, England, Europe or North America, might be willing to take concrete steps to establish a robustly Reformed teacher training college network in Scotland.

Thank you for your time tonight and I hope that my vision, however grand, may not be in complete conflict with some of your ideals as you support and promote Christian education in Europe.