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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

Knox, Bible, IBS 12, 1990

The Bible in Irish Presbyterianism. (Part ii)

R. Buick Knox.

In the meantime, while these domestic issues were exciting the Assembly and the Church, the influence of the wider movements of biblical and scientific study was being felt in the Church. A mild injection of the new outlook came with the appointment of the Scottish scholar, David Smith, to be the professor of Theology at Magee College in Londonderry in 1909. He was translated to the College in Belfast in 1922. His writings showed a wide knowledge of the trends of biblical studies. His books, The Days of His Flesh and The Disciple's Commentary brought the Jesus of the Gospels before his readers and showed how the different strands in the Gospels illuminated the life and work of the Saviour. Principal Paul paid tribute to Smith as an author of world-wide reputation, a teacher and writer of distinction and a friend of students. He was also known to many through his correspondence column in The British Weekly in which for many years he answered readers' queries with clarity, learning and charity. His calm style conveyed sound and fresh learning without arousing bitter controversy. He also was writing during the troubled years during and after the Great War of 1914 to 1918 when controversial issues tended to be muted.<sup>27</sup>

The appointment of Ernest Davey to the Church History professorship in the College in Belfast in 1917 brought into the service of the Church a young man of vast erudition, gracious spirit and courageous directness of speech. He combined in himself the warmth of a Keswick experience of the call of God and a thorough acquaintance with current theological trends.<sup>28</sup> His appointment was welcomed by many students but in the 1920s there were also students sensitive to any variations from the traditional mould of teaching. The title of his book, The Changing Vesture of the Faith, indicated his conviction that the Christian Faith as taught by the Presbyterian Church remained secure and unchanged but its expression had to change in response to growing study and knowledge in many fields of learning and

experience. This hospitality of mind to new ideas had its dangers; more than the vesture might be changed in the process and there were those who held that the traditional vesture of the Westminster Confession was an essential part of the package of the Faith.(29) Davey's method of teaching could be disturbing as he brought under scrutiny the text of the Scriptures and the doctrines of the Faith. Not all ministers and members of the Church were able to acclimatise themselves to his ways of thought. When Professor T.Alan Sinclair, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology in Queen's University, Belfast, presented Davey for an honorary doctorate in 1953 he said that "great learning, critical acumen and intellectual honesty" which were outstanding features of Davey's life were not popular qualities. Among his most vocal critics was an organization called the Bible Standards League led by Mr William H. Snoddy. This League sought with great zeal to awaken the Church to what it believed was Davey's departure from the Faith of the Church.

At the same time, the Church was facing a problem from another angle. Some able candidates for the ministry and some potential elders were refusing to subscribe to the Westminster Confession in the required form. They saw these terms as an acceptance of the doctrine of election which they held was not in accord with the main thrust of biblical teaching. They wanted a relaxing rather than a stiffening of the terms of subscription. In 1925 a committee was set up to consider the situation. Principal Paul was appointed Convener. In 1926 he reported to the Assembly that the committee had not reached the stage of making any recommendations for a change in the terms. He asked for the committee to be reappointed. An amendment was proposed asking that the committee be thanked and discharged. This was narrowly defeated by 299 to 288. It was then agreed to enlarge the committee by adding six ministers and eight elders. In 1926 the committee reported that it had examined the practice in other presbyterian churches.(30)

The Church of Scotland asked for subscription in

terms of belief in "the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith". This allowed a degree of latitude in that it did not list what the fundamental doctrines were. However, the Church had recently secured the passage of an Act of Parliament in preparation for the union with the Free Church of Scotland and this Act listed the specific doctrines held by the Church; these are belief in God the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ his only-begotten Son incarnate for our Salvation, the sole King and Head of his Church, in the Holy Spirit, three Persons in the Unity of the Godhead, in the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God through faith in Christ, in the renewing of the Holy Spirit and in eternal life. These articles of faith cover the points which parents are asked to confess at the baptism of their children and which new communicants are asked to confess at their admission.<sup>31</sup> The Act also left in the Church the power to further define its doctrines and the sense in which they were understood.

The United Free Church recognised liberty of judgment on points of doctrine which did not enter into the substance of the Faith and also claimed the right to "interpret, add to, modify or change her subordinate standards", and the prescribed questions asked for assent to the fundamental doctrines contained therein.

The Presbyterian Church of England recognized liberty of opinion on such points as do not enter into the substance of the Faith and also claimed the right to interpret, alter, add to or modify the subordinate standards. The prescribed questions asked for an assurance of belief in the substance of the Christian Faith contained therein. The English Church did not require written subscription.

The Presbyterian Church of Wales did not demand written subscription to its Confession of Faith, but there could be hesitation, if not refusal, to ordain any ordinand detected of being out of harmony with the faith and practice of the Church.

In the light of these examples the committee had considered if any change was desirable in the terms of subscription in the Irish Church. Rev James Hunter, the retired minister of Knock Church in Belfast, withdrew from the committee. He was opposed to any change in the terms and he was deeply involved in preparing the charges on which Professor Davey was about to be brought before the courts of the Church. The other members of the committee agreed to suggest two changes in the questions. The first question should be amended to ask if the ordinand believed that the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, were the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The fourth question should be revised so as to ask the ordinand if he accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms as "an historic testimony for truth and against error and as a continuing bond of union for members of the Church". The formula of subscription should be revised to read, "I accept these standards as an historic testimony for truth and against error and as a continuing bond of union for members of the Church". Paul submitted these recommendations as an overture for consideration at the next Assembly.

These recommendations had a degree of obscurity. They did not define what were the fundamental doctrines to be drawn from Scripture, and acceptance of the Confession and Catechisms as "an historic testimony for truth" was not exactly the same as accepting them as a present testimony of personal belief. It is therefore not surprising to find another overture above the name of Dr James Little, the minister of Castlereagh, asking the next Assembly to issue "a statement of the doctrines, faith and belief of the church".(32)

When the next Assembly met in 1927 these matters were overshadowed by the case of Professor Davey. Hunter and Snoddy and their supporters laid five charges against him. These charges were based on extracts from his writings and from the lecture notes of some of his students. These charges claimed that he was guilty of

"teaching doctrines contrary to the Word of God and the standards of the Church". The charges were (i) that he denied that God pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, (ii) that he taught what was contrary to Scripture on the absolute perfection of Christ's character, (iii) that he taught what was contrary to the Confession on the inspiration, infallibility and divine authority of Holy Scripture, (iv) that he taught what was contrary to the doctrine that "the sinfulness of all sins proceeds only from the creature and not from God", and (v) that he taught that the doctrine of the Trinity was not in the Word of God. These charges were heard by the Belfast Presbytery in fourteen sessions ranging from 15 February to 29 March 1927. At the end, Davey was acquitted of the charges by large majorities, in all cases except one by more than six to one. Davey claimed that on the first charge he had been misrepresented, and on the others he defended his teaching in impressive pleas of justification; he claimed he was faithful to Scripture, to the essential faith of the Church, to sound learning and to Christian experience.

The case was appealed to the Assembly in June. Hunter, Snoddy and others spoke in support of the charges. Presbytery representatives defended its decision and Davey spoke on his own behalf. It was proposed that the Assembly, having before it the record of the trial by Presbytery and having heard Davey's avowal of his own beliefs, his regret that his statements had been misunderstood, and his pleas of justification, should dismiss the appeal but also caution all professors to be mindful of their duty in all their teaching to maintain conformity to the standards of the Church. This was passed by 707 to 82. Davey's gracious spirit under the trial and his shining faith won over several who had intended to vote against him.<sup>33</sup>

Davey continued his ministry in the College and in the courts of the Church. In 1946 he was given a further doctorate of divinity by Edinburgh University; the

citation said the degree was given "in recognition of the exceptional versatility of his gifts and the admirable service he has rendered to presbyterian scholarship and education". He was convener of an Assembly committee which dealt with the causes of war, with the interpretation of the Church's task in the present crisis, and with national and international problems. For twenty years from 1938 to 1958 he presented to the Assembly reports which dealt in depth with many serious issues. When he retired from the convener-ship the Assembly said that he had brought to the preparation of these reports "massive biblical and theological scholarship, as well as a shrewd insight into the many ethical, social and political problems of this perplexing age". In 1953 he had been made Moderator of the Assembly.

The decisive acquittal in 1927 had been a great relief for the Assembly. The Church had come through a situation which might have torn it apart. The Assembly was not in the mood to take any steps which would revive the tension. Therefore, when it turned to the overture from Paul's committee on the revision of the prescribed questions and of the formula there was obvious uneasiness about where the matter might lead. Rev J.T. Anderson, minister of Bannside, Banbridge, was asked to lead in prayer for guidance. Paul pointed out that in the Code of the Church it was specified that subscription signified "adherence to the principles set forth in the Confession as a system of doctrine and worship" and the Rule of Faith stated that the Confession taught what the Church understood the Bible to teach on certain important points of doctrine and worship. These statements did not specify what the points were nor did they claim that every statement in the Confession was to be regarded as essential biblical teaching. Yet, in the formula of subscription that equation is made and signatories are asked to accept all the teaching of the Confession as in accord with the Bible. This, said Paul, was asking more than the Rule of Faith required and there was need of relief; there was also need for clearer definition of what were the "certain important

points" to which the Rule of Faith referred.(34)

The overture was left over until 1928 when an amendment was introduced proposing that as the Church agreed on the fundamental doctrines and regarded the present formula as a declaration of adherence to the said doctrines, and inasmuch as the proposed change had caused agitation in the Church, the Assembly should proceed no further with the proposed revision and should remove the overture from the books. Paul and his seconder, Mr John Williamson, J.P., withdrew the overture and the amendment was passed unanimously.(35) By this decision the Assembly left unchanged the questions and the formula. The Rule of Faith also remained unchanged and by its affirmation of the right of private judgment and the duty to receive light from any quarter it continued to enable the Church to embrace a considerable variety of emphases among its ministers and elders. At times this has been an uneasy comprehension.

The Assembly has from time to time issued statements setting forth the doctrines which it holds to have biblical warrant and to be the essential teaching of the Church. The growth of conversations with other Churches made it desirable to have such a statement. In 1961 the Assembly approved a declaration which had at its heart the statement that the Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures was the only infallible rule of faith and practice and that the church was under obligation to reform its faith and practice if this was shown to be necessary in the light of this word.(36) In 1962 the Assembly approved a revision of the questions put to ministers and elders at the periodic presbytery visitations of congregations. The elders are asked if the minister faithfully preaches the doctrines of the Gospel set forth in the Confession of Faith, "especially the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Christ, man's fallen condition, his recovery through the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, justification through faith in Christ, the deity, personality and work of the Holy Spirit, the Church and her missionary task,



the necessity of faith and repentance wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, and, as a mark of being in Christ, a life of practical godliness".(37) The word "especially" suggests that these are the main doctrines but that there are also other doctrines which the Church holds. The continuing lack of precision prompted a plea to the Assembly in 1968 to make its position clear so that all who had to subscribe to the Confession might know exactly the doctrines to which they were assenting.(38) Some members of Assembly now questioned the Church's right to revise or augment its doctrines without incurring legal risks to the tenure of its properties. Professor John Barkley had urged the Assembly to prepare Declaratory Articles on the Scottish model and thus assert its right to define its own doctrines.(39) In 1972 the Assembly approved a proposal to ask Parliament to pass legislation acknowledging the Church's spiritual independence.(40) In 1973 the Assembly's judicial committee advised the Assembly not to seek such a law because the Church already had as much liberty as it needed or was likely to need.(41) Dr Barkley lodged a learned paper to protest against this advice; he held that from New Testament times through the period of the early Church and of the Fathers and through the Medieval and Reformation periods the Church had asserted its right to make and revise its understanding of its doctrines; he claimed that the church would be unfaithful to its fundamental position if it did not secure its freedom.(42) However, these issues were by now being swamped by the violence which was beginning to affect Northern Ireland. The Assembly of 1966 had sensed the signs of unrest and had passed a special resolution which also took into account the messages coming from the Vatican Council. The Assembly once again declared the Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It also listed the doctrines as already set forth in 1962 and said it had no intention of "accepting any doctrine or standard contrary to God's Word or beside it in matters of faith and worship, but rather, not refusing light from any quarter, would, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, seek to commend

what we believe and preach to every man's conscience in the sight of God, whether it be in conversations with other Churches, in dealings with fellow-citizens in society, or in missionary undertakings in Ireland or abroad". The resolution also stressed the duty to respect the consciences of others and defend the common liberties and civic rights of all people, without regard to colour, class or creed. The Assembly ordered this resolution to be read in all the churches.(43)

The turmoil of recent years, the divisions in the community, the relations with other Churches and with the Church of Rome, and some features of the Church's own life have raised issues on which the General Assembly has found it difficult to agree on what guidance is to be drawn from the Bible.

The ordination of women to offices in the Church was proposed in an overture submitted to the Assembly in 1924. It was received and sent down to presbyteries for study and report. Twelve presbyteries were in favour of their ordination but twenty-one were opposed to it; the total of the votes in the presbyteries showed 146 in favour and 251 against; one presbytery did not vote and one was equally divided.(44) An overture asking for a decision to make women eligible to be ruling elders was submitted in 1925 and this was approved by the Assembly in 1926 by 149 to 144.(45) In 1929 an overture was submitted to the Assembly asking that women be eligible for the office of the ministry on the same terms as men but this was not followed up in 1930. It was over forty years before the issue was raised again. An overture was submitted in 1972 and it was sent down to the presbyteries. Presbyteries had by now been reorganised and there were fewer presbyteries; eighteen out of the twenty-one supported the overture and three opposed; the votes in presbyteries were 410 in favour of the ordination of women and 132 against. With such an affirmative sign of the mind of the church the Assembly proceeded to make this the law of the Church. The Assembly resisted an attempt to delay the decision on the ground that the move might be "a flat contradiction of Scripture

teaching".(46) In 1975 the Assembly approved the recommendation that when there was an election of elders or church committees the congregations should be reminded that women are eligible on the same terms as men.(47) Women have by now shown that they can be effective ministers and elders in the Irish Church, as they have also been in many other Reformed Churches. There is a section in the Assembly which continues to maintain that the ordination of women violates a clear biblical prohibition set forth by Paul who forbids women to be given positions of authority over men or to be allowed to speak in church.(48) It can be pointed out that Paul did not condemn slavery which was a widespread feature of life in his day, but he laid down the principles of human dignity in the sight of God which ultimately showed that slavery and Christianity could not co-exist. Similarly, he took an attitude to women which was common in his day, but he also laid down the principles which broke down that attitude and has led many churches to see that in Christ men and women can both be called into his service. Since 1981 there have been memorials from ministers asking that on grounds of conscience they be excused from taking part in the ordination of women.(49) The Assembly has taken the view that ministers at their ordination have vowed to exercise their ministry in accord with the law of the Church and therefore ought not to be excused from their duty but the Assembly has also given presbyteries the rather obscure advice that they should have a pastoral concern for those who have these conscientious objections.(50) The Assembly has also resisted attempts to get it to reject the candidature of women students.(51)

A further issue concerning the relation of the Confession to the Bible arises from the identification in the Confession of the Pope of Rome with the Man of Sin and the Antichrist mentioned in the Book of Revelation. In 1986 the Assembly of the Church of Scotland considered this point and in 1987 declared that this was no longer taken as the belief of the Church of Scotland. Following that example the Irish Assembly also considered the matter in 1986 and an overture asking for a

statement of the Assembly's position was lodged in 1987. In 1988 the Assembly passed a resolution which stated that it was "not manifestly evident from Scripture" that the Pope was "the personal and literal fulfillment of the Biblical figure of the Antichrist and the Man of Sin". The Assembly said that "a variety of views has long been held on this topic consistent with a loyal regard for the authority of Holy Scripture and a genuine acceptance of Reformation standards". Yet even this mild and hesitant withdrawal was bitterly opposed in the Assembly. The decision was approved by 317 to 270. Many of those who opposed the decision went on to record their dissent.(52)

Finally, the Assembly has been much troubled because of its membership of the World Council of Churches. The Irish Presbyterian Church had been involved from the start in the movement to bring the Churches of the world closer together to witness to their common faith that Jesus is Lord. The various strands of this movement came together in 1948 to form the World Council of Churches. The Irish presbyterian representatives had a strong influence in strengthening the biblical basis of the Council which now is "a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit".(53) However, due to the influence of several of its younger member Churches the Council supported groups whose purpose was to combat racism. Some of these groups were believed to have supported violent actions against racist governments. This caused much alarm among Irish Presbyterians many of whom were themselves the victims of terrorist violence. The Assembly was much agitated by fears that the funds of the World Council of Churches were being used to support violent movements. These fears were not removed by the assurance that the support was from a special fund and not from the general contributions of the member Churches. Added to this was an increasing agitation that involvement in the Council could risk a departure from

the biblical standards of the Church. For several years the Assembly had stormy debates in which appeals were made to Scripture to build up the case for terminating the Church's membership of the Council. This reached a climax in 1980 when the Assembly decided by 433 to 327 to terminate its membership.(54) This decision was much regretted by other member Churches. The Irish Church had brought to the work of the Council the experience of a Church accustomed to the harsh reality of life in a country where the encounter with the Church of Rome and the inheritance of past political, social and religious divisions made co-existence, not to mention, co-operation, a hazardous hope, and where there could be no easy answer to Christ's prayer that his disciples might all be one. This Irish experience was a salutary injection into a Council where grandiose conferences and copious reports could too easily be taken as the sure response to the Word of God in the Bible. The majority in the Assembly claimed that the decision was a witness to the presbyterian faithfulness to biblical truth but there are many to whom it is not manifestly evident that the decision was a mark of obedience to the Word of God.

This decision has been followed in 1989 by the decision of the Assembly to refuse to join the reconstituted British Council of Churches in which the Church of Rome and the Black-led churches will have a place. The plan for the new Council expresses hope that its member Churches will be ready to "progress beyond co-operation to mutual commitment in the search for closer and closer unity in Christ". It affirms that the Churches are "Churches together in pilgrimage". During a very heated debate the Assembly was swayed by the argument that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland dare not enter a commitment involving the Church of Rome many of whose doctrines were contrary to the biblical doctrines held by the Irish Church. It was claimed that membership of the new Council would dilute and compromise the Church's loyalty to its biblical basis. Supporters of the plan held that the proposed Council was the very place where the Irish Presbyterian witness to its biblical standards should be heard and where its hard experience of living

alongside the Church of Rome would be needed as a reminder that there was no easy solution to age-old divisions. By a vote of 453 to 289 the Assembly decided not to join the Council. This decision has caused much dismay among the other presbyterian and reformed Churches in Britain. They valued highly the Irish presbyterian part in the work of the old Council and they also respected the courage and constancy of the Irish Church in the recent years of trial. Once again, the majority claims that the decision is a witness to the presbyterian faithfulness to biblical truth and, once again, to many inside and outside the Church this will not seem manifestly evident.

Through the century and a half since the formation of the General Assembly the Bible has had a central place in the life of the Church. It has been the core of the teaching in Sunday Schools and Bible Classes. It has been read in the services of the Church, though it has to be noted that in Anglican worship with its regular round of lessons from the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels and with the singing of all the Psalms, people often hear far more of the Bible than do those in presbyterian services. The Bible has also been the basis from which sermons begin and on which they are meant to build.

The Bible has also been earnestly studied as the source of guidance for faith and practice. The Confession and Catechisms have on the whole provided sound instruction on the doctrines of God, creation and redemption, and they have kept before the Church a high biblical view of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Too often, indeed, ministers and members of the Church have drawn ideas from the Bible which have been hard to reconcile with the teaching of Christ, but in the sweep of the story of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland the entrance of the Word has given light. The church can still commend the study of the Bible in the confidence that through its words people will still hear the Word of God and that it will still kindle the light of faith by which we will see what we are to believe

concerning God and what duty God requires of the human race.

R. Buick Knox.

NOTES

- 27 R.Allen, op.cit., 261, 309-310. Smith produced twenty volumes.
- 28 A.A.Fulton, J. Ernest Davey (1970); R.Allen, op.cit., 310.
- 29 The Changing Vesture of the Faith was published in 1923. Towards the end of his life he published The Gospel of John which was surprisingly traditional; it was rather overshadowed by the magisterial works of C.H.Dodd.
- 30 MGA 1925, 22; 1926, 41 & 46; Reports to GA 1926, 148-152.
- 31 Augustus Muir, John White (1958), 466.
- 32 MGA 1926.
- 33 Record of the Trial of Rev. Prof. J.E.Davey by the Belfast Presbytery, 1927; MGA 1927, 40-44.
- 34 MGA 1927, 56; Reports to GA 1927, 74-75.
- 35 MGA 1928, 41.
- 36 MGA 1961, 48; submitted by A.A.Fulton & T.H.Mullin.
- 37 MGA 1962, 55
- 38 MGA 1968, 20; submitted by T.C.Patterson & J.L.M.Haire.
- 39 J.M.Barkley, op.cit.
- 40 MGA 1972, 38; submitted by A.J.Weir and J.M.Barkley.
- 41 Reports to GA 1973, 30; MGA 45.
- 42 MGA 1973, 53-55
- 43 MGA 1966, 27; submitted by S.J.Park and A.J.Weir.
- 44 MGA 1924, 30; 1925, 52; Reports to GA 1925, 130-131.
- 45 MGA 1925, 53; 1926, 32.
- 46 MGA 1929, 52; 1972, 30; 1973, 24 & 28; Reports to GA 1973, 1-29.
- 47 MGA 1975, 29.
- 48 1 Cor.11:7-10; 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12.
- 49 MGA 1981; 80.
- 50 MGA 1982, 39

Knox, Bible, IBS 12, 1990

51 MGA 1986, 78; 1987, 58.

52 MGA 1988, 54-56.

53 N.Goodall, The Ecumenical Movement (1964), 69.

54 MGA 1980, 54.