

What the Church of Scotland Believes

The Church of Scotland is by tradition, a 'broad' church meaning that it includes in its membership and congregations a wide variety of theological emphases and understanding of theology. By 'theology' we mean the talk about God, which in the Christian tradition is based on how we understand both the Old and New Testaments to bear witness to the creation of the world by God, the wish of God for the happiness and fulfilment of humanity, and the



freeing from the results of human selfishness, aggression, corruption and untruthfulness (often called 'sin'), through the life, teaching and message of Jesus and his death and resurrection. The Church of Scotland sees itself as being guided by the Holy Spirit as it attempts to translate and articulate the message of the early Christian writers into terms and concepts that can be understood today and are relevant to people's lives and work.

While there may be some Church of Scotland congregations, members and ministers who might interpret the Bible's message in different ways, the Church would allege that the Church of Scotland is both 'catholic' and 'reformed'. These two words mean in this context:

'catholic': reflecting the traditions handed down through the New Testament regarding the intention of Jesus in relation to the life of the community he called in to being through the disciples and apostles. It treasures the inheritance of the early Church as it struggled to express in terms of the Roman Empire what it meant to belong to the fellowship of believers in Jesus of Nazareth. The Church of Scotland sees itself historically as not coming into being with the Reformation of 1560, but as part of the Christian Church which came to develop in the land now known as Scotland, through the work and witness of early missionaries who were guided by the creeds, faith practices and worship of the early church. The traditions are those shared by many other denominations and the Church of Scotland is part of the World Council of Churches, and a participant in dialogue with those beyond the World Council of Churches claiming to be a church which honours and is guided by the heritage of faith from the time of the disciples after the resurrection of Jesus.

'reformed': claims that the events of 1560 onwards when the early leaders of the Reformation in Scotland, like John Knox and Andrew Melville, shaped and transformed the practice of the church through a closer interpretation of the Bible and introduced a new structure which emphasised the importance of all members in the church rather than those of special calling and influence, still characterises the worship and deliberations of the Church. The Church of Scotland is governed by a series of courts – Kirk session (congregation), Presbytery (groups of congregations in a geographical area) and General Assembly (a gathering of ministers and members of the congregations throughout Scotland), seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance to determine what is the appropriate methods of addressing the challenges to Christian faith in our communities and empowering individuals, in groups, in congregations and beyond, to live according to their faith and guided by the life and teaching of Jesus.

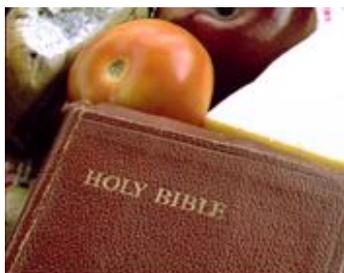


What Christians believe is very difficult to summarise quickly and simply. The faith that is confessed is expressed formally in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds (Creeds are short, summary statements of faith which have been agreed by a Council of the Church). The names of these Creeds suggests that these statements of faith reflect the original faith of the early apostles and those who attended a major Council of the Church in Eastern Europe in the

fourth century. Further faith statements have been developed over the years, and the one most associated with the Church of Scotland (its 'subordinate standard') is the Westminster Confession of Faith, reflecting the views of a conference of theological thinkers in the 16th century, and based on theological ideas that were current long before then, from the 11th century. There have been several more modern attempts to express in English the faith of the Church of Scotland, but these have not been as popular, or used in worship in any regular manner.

The Church of Scotland subscribes to the belief that the Bible is the 'supreme rule of faith and life'. This implies that in the pages of the Old Testament we are invited to see the nature and love of God for men and women revealed, particularly in the stories of the Covenant, the Patriarchs, the Exodus and the return from exile, and the promises of the prophets, who did not exactly foresee the future, but rather offered interpretations, or warnings, for the people of Israel, and us, regarding the signs of the times and the implications of certain decisions and actions. Similarly in the Gospel narratives of the life and ministry of Jesus and the writings of St Paul and the other epistle authors we are led on a journey of exploration of our need for the love of God to guide and transform our lives. Through the words we read we are brought into dialogue with God's will for human beings and how we might be freed from the impact of sin and alienation in our lives and be the human beings, the children of God as God intended us to be.

The Gospels we have are not biographies of Jesus. There is little of the material we would need to prepare a life story as we perceive a biography to involve in the accounts of the life of Jesus. In fact, if we read the book of Mark and followed its chronological sequence literally we would conclude that the ministry of Jesus lasted just over three weeks. In actual fact it is believed that his ministry occurred over a three year period, and that he was a Jew (a fact often ignored in the literature about him) and was educated in Jewish religious traditions. It is clear that he worshipped as a Jew in synagogue (a kind of local congregational meeting) and in the Temple (the large worship space in Jerusalem where the major religious festivals were celebrated).



He was well versed in the Old Testament (remember that he only knew the Hebrew Scriptures) and spoke of life in a minor part of the mighty Roman Empire as his familiar world and expressed the views and opinions of a person who did not have the benefit of the knowledge we have through modern science and the internet. He was essentially human, experiencing the issues of family life,

poverty, oppression and injustice that many millions still experience today. While he was fully human, the Church would also assert his divinity – that in his life and especially in the way he died he demonstrated the nature and extent of the love of God for human beings. One metaphor may help us understand this concept of his full humanity and divinity. When we are young children we may go to the sea shore and take a small plastic bucket and fill it with sea water. The water in it is the same as the water that huge liner and cargo ships sail upon, only limited by the extent of the actual size of the bucket. In the same way Jesus may be seen as demonstrating the divinity of God in his life, but limited only by the dimensions of human life that his true humanity impose upon him.



Jesus' teaching is often summarised by his response to the questions asked of him regarding the greatest of the commandments. He points to love of God and love of neighbour and spells what he means out in stories, called 'parables' – in the sense that they reflect and touch the ultimate meaning of life in ways that the simplest and the most deep thinking among God's children can understand and engage with. These stories are drawn from everyday life as he

knew it and as his original hearers experienced it. They give word pictures and often raise perturbing questions about our attitudes to inclusion and exclusion, the width and intensity of the grace and love of God, and the mistake we make when we think we have been able to reduce the message of God's love for human kind to some simple summary that is easy to apply and keeps us from involvement in thorough and important engagement with humanity. His teachings are all designed to encourage us to see the invasion of God in every aspect of life and the importance of being open to the challenges his mission opens up.

The rest of the New Testament is a collection of writings or sermons and reflections, letters to groups of Christians in the early Church who were exploring what it meant to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth after his death and resurrection. Some of the issues they deal with are quite difficult for us to follow and understand, like the debate regarding the consumption of meat offered to idol. However, there are many pertinent remarks about morality, the requirements of evangelism and the dangers of complacency which are highlighted and still have much to say to us in the 21st century. We listen to them being read trusting that the Holy Spirit will enable them to be interpreted anew and in a way that helps us grapple with the difficulties of following Jesus today.

The Church of Scotland would also assert that Jesus called us into communities of faith, where we have familial type responsibilities for each other and to each other. These are known as congregations and while we cannot say that any one congregation is perfect – after all they are all made up of sinners – they are intended to enable spiritual growth and development through worship and witness in the wider



community to the message of the Gospel – or ‘Good News’ (it is important to remember that literally the word ‘Gospel’ means the ‘good news’ of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ for human beings).

While there are several of the same stories in the Gospels, all of them have different perspectives and viewpoints, perhaps determined by their authors and their original intended audiences. While we have four Gospels in the New Testament, it is known that there were many more circulating in the early church. What makes these distinctive is that it was agreed by the Councils of the Church that these particular Gospels had material that reflected most accurately the teaching of Jesus as they had heard it spoken of over the years.



There are particular insights offered by the compilers of the different Gospel writers, one is interested in Jewish traditions (Matthew), with Jesus as a ‘new Moses’, while Luke is a Gentile (a non-Jew) and writes as a doctor, interested in health and healing and sight in particular, Mark writes his account with the intention probably that it would be read in the Churches in Rome, and John is much more stylised and has all the indications of being

written for congregations in the Greek influenced areas of the eastern Mediterranean. The point is not their historical accuracy – no one was there with a tape recorder to ensure the exact words of Jesus were written down. What is important is the way they help us understand both Jesus the Jewish prophet and the unique witness to God in human life. Their difference in emphasis is a real strength rather than a weakness, allowing Jesus to speak to a wide variety of people.

What is clear from all the Gospels is the way Jesus included the poor, the voiceless, the powerless, the marginalised and those on the edges of society and social acceptability, as well as the rich and powerful in his ministry and mission. He laid great importance on the children and the women of his time in his stories and actions. This was extremely counter-cultural in a time when both women and children were thought to be of very little importance. He was fearless in his denunciation of corruption where and when he observed it and was not intimidated by anyone, engaging in debate and clever responses with all who tried to trap him and silence his message. He announced the fact that God’s power was at work on the word at the present, not in some longed for and far off future, and all needed to make critical decisions which shaped their contemporary lives and their future beyond death.