

This little piggy stayed at home

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Row over same-sex marriage rages on

Is a society that accepts gay unions sexually deviant? Or is the Church of Scotland stuck in the dark ages? The debate continues, writes Kenny Farquharson

Sex and depravity are fascinating subjects for a good argument. How an unguarded turn of phrase can betray someone's true feelings. A good example came last week at the annual general assembly of the Church of Scotland (CoS), meeting in Edinburgh at its traditional home at the top of the Mound.

One minister, a hardline evangelical called the Rev Gordon Kennedy, used a striking analogy to explain his view of human sexuality. "We are like children left alone in a room full of toys," he said, "some of which are dangerous and might injure us."

What we needed in this romper room of sensations, said Kennedy, was the Kirk to tell us what was and wasn't permissible in our sexual play. In other words, sex was something dangerous that people need protecting from, and we could not be trusted to deal with it on our own instincts. So the Kirk needed to be a stern dominie, policing sexual antics in the bedrooms of Scotland's 600,000 Protestant churchgoers.

Kennedy's list of forbidden pleasures included everything other than sex between a man and a woman within marriage. But top of the list by a long way was gay sex, a depravity that was "against the word of God".

The issue of gay sex is currently wreaking havoc in the Church of England, to the extent that the Archbishop of Canterbury recently appealed to gay-rights groups to show restraint for the sake of unity. At the heart of the trouble is the Anglican church's refusal to sanction blessings for same-sex couples in civil partnerships.

Now the same issue is threatening a schism in Scotland's national church. Is this a tolerant, compassionate church that ministers to Christians as it finds them, without judging them? Or is it a stout defender of a traditional moral code, demanding a strict moral rectitude from an ever-dwindling flock? Last week, in a victory for the liberal wing, the Kirk assembly narrowly voted by 322 votes to 314 to allow ministers to "conduct a service marking a civil partnership". But the traditionalists have insisted the decision must be ratified by the Kirk's 46 local presbyteries in the hope that the grassroots of the church have a less forgiving view of homosexuality than the general assembly.

Such votes, invoked under a 17th century piece of church law called the Barrier Act, have played pivotal roles in shaping the Church of Scotland. Forty years ago it was used to back the ordination of

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women, and in 1989 it supported the practice of allowing divorcees to marry in church.

But are the traditionalists correct in assuming that the 2006 default position of Scots is anti-gay? Six years ago the Section 2a controversy saw Scotland become a moral battleground. Brian Souter, the transport tycoon, used his millions to whip up a populist howl of outrage at government plans to abolish Section 2a, which outlawed the "promotion" of homosexuality in schools.

Last weekend, however, when some newspaper front pages revealed that advice on gay sex and gay relationships was to become part of mainstream sex education in Scottish schools, there was barely a whimper of protest.

Meanwhile, the Scottish parliament has passed laws giving same-sex couples the same legal and financial rights enjoyed by heterosexual couples. Admittedly, Holyrood ducked the issue of civil partnerships and let Westminster legislate for it instead. But, with the exception of some resistance in the Western Isles, these ceremonies are now a routine feature of Scottish life.

The Church of Scotland is changing too, but the process seems to be a painful one. The liberal view that won the day in the general assembly last week was ground-breaking in more than simply accepting that its ministers should be able to bless same-sex unions. It also changed the nature of what we should expect from the Kirk as a pillar of Scottish society.

There was a time when the general assembly of the Church of Scotland was the nearest Scots had to a parliament. Despite concerning itself with only one half of Scotland's religious divide, it spoke with a voice that deserved to be listened to. The commissioners gathered in the assembly hall last week no longer seemed the moral arbiters of the nation. Since devolution Scots have had somewhere else to discuss themselves and their place in the world. The Rev Ann Inglis, convenor of the Kirk committee that pushed the liberal line on civil partnerships, believes the church is no longer obliged to have one definitive and proscriptive view on each moral issue.

"The church will never speak with one voice on this," she says of the civil partnership issue. "I don't believe consensus can be found." Her answer is to say that ministers who want to conduct such services should be allowed to do so and those who object should be allowed to refuse. The Kirk, she says, should be a broad church that can encompass opposing views.

But this flies in the face of the traditionalists' insistence that the Kirk be the adult in the children's playroom.

The prospect of a schism is being closely monitored by the Kirk's senior figures. The current moderator, the Rev Alan McDonald, recently acknowledged that talk of such threats must be taken very seriously. They were "part of Presbyterian history, and not a creative one", he said.

Yet the mood among some of the traditionalists is coming close to despair. "If we are not careful we will destroy ourselves," says the Rev Dr Bruce Gardner, a former divinity academic at Aberdeen University. "We are taking a historic decision to depart from god's world into a wilderness of our own making."

Kennedy, an austere looking bearded man, is the chairman of a powerful evangelical grouping within the church called Forward Together, formed to call the Kirk to heel on matters of sexual morality. To its critics, who accuse the group of seeking confrontation, the name is a misnomer. Kennedy affirms that in this theological war there will be casualties.

"Whatever's going to happen in this debate over the coming months, there will be people who decide they can't stay in this church," he says. "I don't want anybody to leave the church and I don't want anybody disciplined, but at some point in the future that's going to happen."

If the liberals win the day, some hardliners are likely to resign and there has already been rumours of a "pure" CoS being established. If the traditionalists are the victors, liberal ministers who perform blessings on same-sex unions are likely to face disciplinary action and could be forced from their parishes.

The Rev David McLachlan, a minister from a working-class parish in Glasgow, has a blunt verdict on Kennedy's punitive approach. "I don't have that Bible," he says. "My bible has a message of tolerance and compassion and forgiveness and love."

The traditionalists, believes McLachlan, are conveniently forgetting that some edicts in the Bible have been "time-barred by history".

"It says in the Bible it's okay to have slaves and have sex with them," says McLachlan. When Jesus left his disciples he didn't say: 'Here's a book, guys, it's all in there.' He said the spirit will guide you."

In the canteen adjoining the assembly hall last week, there were tea and biscuits to fuel the debate. One elderly commissioner from the northeast, who declined to be named, spoke of his irritation that the church's grassroots would now be spending the coming months debating the civil partnerships issue.

"I've no problem with ministers who want to bless these gay marriages, or whatever they're called," he said. "It takes all sorts. What I do have a problem with is that I'm going to be spending an awful lot of time in the next wee while discussing gay sex." He took a sip from his cup and made a face. "It's not my cup of tea."

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