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# The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Disruption of 1863

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The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland is the lineal descendant of the Covenanting movement of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The smallest and least well-known of the Presbyterian churches in the land of John Knox, she has maintained a separate organization, outside the established Church of Scotland, for over three centuries – longer than any other dissenting Church in the kingdom. Tenacity – in terriers and Churches alike – is often inversely proportional to size and this has certainly been reflected in the distinctive testimony of the continuing Church of the Covenanters. It was succinctly summarized by the Rev. S. M. Kennedy in his address to the Scottish RP Synod of 1932 – a comment all the more pointed because it was set in the context of the 1929 union of the two largest Scottish Presbyterian churches, the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church:

But the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland has continued on its way, little moved by these changes in the ecclesiastical world around it. And while your Church, like mine in Ireland, has had its difficulties and discouragements during the last thirty years, I have not the slightest fear that it will become absorbed in any of the other Churches in Scotland and lose its identity

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published in two parts in the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* (Vol. 11, Number 1, Summer 1993, and Vol. 12, Number 1, Spring 1994) and is presented here with some additional material and a brief Postscript on developments two decades on.

notwithstanding the talk of union among the smaller Scottish Presbyterian Churches.<sup>2</sup>

With only minor alterations, this might have been said at any Reformed Presbyterian Synod since the middle of the nineteenth century. She has continued on her way and remains unabsorbed by any larger Church, a tiny remnant of the Covenanting Cause. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the reasons for this. In particular, we will note the interplay of, on the one hand, her distinctive testimony – the principles that demanded her separate existence – and, on the other hand, the pull toward union with other Reformed Churches, the effect of the truths that cannot but draw together believers of “like precious faith” (2 Peter 1:1) in spite of their often very real differences. Our main focus will be upon the “Disruption”<sup>3</sup> of 1863 in the Scottish RP Church and its ripples down the years to the present. First, we must set the context by reviewing the beginnings of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.<sup>4</sup>

## I. THE CHURCH OF THE COVENANTERS

The movement that was later to become the Reformed Presbyterian Church emerged in the period immediately following the Rutherglen Testimony of 29th May 1679. Under the leadership of Richard Cameron and Donald Cargill, the more rigorous Covenanters affirmed afresh the binding nature of the National Covenant of 1638, and its twin doctrines of the *jus divinum* of a free, Presbyterian and reformed Church and a nation, in covenant with God, acknowledging the kingly rule of Jesus Christ over the affairs of the state. Although ostensibly still embraced within the bosom of the broad Church of Scotland, these Cameronians began to assume a distinct identity as a result of the interplay of their own doctrinal emphases and the persecuting zeal of the Privy Council. They organized as the “United Societies” on 15th December 1681. Their

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<sup>2</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 51 (1932), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to be confused with the more famous “Disruption” – that of the Church of Scotland in 1843, in which, over the issue of patronage and the spiritual freedom of the Church, some 450 ministers and elders walked out of the General Assembly to form the Free Church of Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> For a somewhat fuller account, see the author’s article “Reformed Presbyterian Church” in *The Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993).

position was vividly proclaimed in a series of public declarations, most notably those at Sanquhar (22nd June 1680), Torwood (also 1680), and Lanark (12th January 1682), and *The Apologetical Declaration* (1684) and *The Informatory Vindication* (1687).<sup>5</sup> The United Societies thereafter held aloof from the Church of Scotland – a separation which continued even after the end of the persecutions and the return to relative normality at the Revolution Settlement of 1690. These Societies were non-ecclesiastical in structure. Their ministers, Messrs. Shields, Linning and Boyd, left them for the Established Church in 1690 and it was not until 1706, when the Rev. John McMillan joined them from the Establishment, that they had regular gospel ordinances.

McMillan was the only ordained minister of the Societies for some thirty-seven years.<sup>6</sup> Then, with the accession of a second minister, the Rev. Thomas Nairn, the Reformed Presbytery was formed – at Braehead, near Carnwath, on 1st August 1743. Subsequent ordinations of new ministers allowed the organization of a Synod in 1811. During the period 1743-1863 the denomination appears to have remained stable in membership, perhaps growing slightly, with a constituency of more than 10,000 people. This was no little achievement, for there was a steady haemorrhage of emigrants to North America throughout the period and, in 1753, a serious secession known thereafter as “the Breach.”<sup>7</sup> The “Community”, as it was called in John McMillan’s day, was progressively transformed from one large congregation of scattered “Fellowship Societies” into a highly organized Presbyterian denomination with local congregations and regional Presbyteries.

It was only after 1761 that the Community was divided into congregations, and ministers assigned to them.<sup>8</sup> Fifty years later, in 1811,

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<sup>5</sup> The texts of these and other foundational Covenanter documents can be found in *Testimony-Bearing Exemplified* (New York, 1834), pp. 179-296. This compilation by Thomas Henderson of Kilmacolm was first published in Paisley in 1791. It includes George Gillespie’s “Concerning associations and confederacies with enemies of truth and godliness” (1649), James Guthrie’s “Causes of the Lord’s wrath” and the substance of a number of Acts of the Scottish Parliament during the Second Reformation period.

<sup>6</sup> The Rev. John McMillan (1669-1753) was ably assisted by John McNeill (1666-1732), who had been licensed to preach by the Church of Scotland in 1699, joined the Societies in 1708, and preached without ordination until his death.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Hutchison, *The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland, 1680-1876* (Paisley, 1893), pp. 197-198. “The Breach” gave rise to a body called “The Reformed Presbytery of Edinburgh”, which continued to exist until about 1817.

<sup>8</sup> Hutchison, p. 215. At first, there was only one division, into Northern and Southern congregations, with the ministers divided between them. The ministers were “the four Johns” – McMillan, Thorburn, Courtass, and Finlay.

there were eighteen charges and thirteen ministers in three Presbyteries,<sup>9</sup> while by mid-century there were forty-six charges in six Presbyteries, comprising a church of just over 6,900 communicant members, together with a proportional number of children and adherents.<sup>10</sup> This was the high summer of the Covenanting cause. Her churches were growing and, for all that she was dwarfed by the Established, Free, and United Presbyterian denominations, her testimony was highly visible in the Scottish scene. She rejoiced in a string of nationally known ministers and theologians – such as the Symingtons, Andrew and William, and William Goold, and his son William Henry Goold, the editor of the *Works* of John Owen. She was the church of John G. Paton, the heroic missionary to the New Hebrides. She had unchallenged claim to the legacy of the martyrs of the “Killing Time” and continuity with the heritage of the Second Reformation and the Covenants, National and Solemn League. “High summer”, however, was to become “high noon” in the Disruption of 1863.

## II. THE DISRUPTION OF 1863

Compared with the Disruption of the Established Church two decades earlier, the division of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1863 caused scarcely a ripple on the national scene. It was, however, a traumatic experience for the RP Synod. Stenographic records of Synod debates between 1859 and 1863 reveal a Church in turmoil, as the conservative minority sought to overturn the majority decision of 1858 relaxing Church discipline in the matter of exercising the Electoral Franchise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hutchison, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> For the annals of the RP Church of Scotland, see W. J. Couper, “The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland: Its Congregations, Ministers and Students”, in *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 2 (1925).

<sup>11</sup> Five annual stenographic reports of the Synod’s debates were published by “The ‘Reformation’ Association,” an organization of conservative RPs dedicated to maintaining the testimony of “political dissent” and the ban on voting and holding public office. These are: *Our Testimony Compromised* (Glasgow, 1859, 68pp.); *Principle v. Practice: Report of the Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, on Questions relating to “The Oath of Allegiance,” and the use of “The Elective Franchise”* (Glasgow, 1860, 54pp.); *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, at Edinburgh, May, 1861* (Glasgow, 1861, 86pp.); *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, in Glasgow, May 1862* (Glasgow, 1862, 126pp.); and *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, June 1863, 48pp.). Supplementary publications included: *Review of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod at Edinburgh, May 1861* (Glasgow, 1861, 24pp.); *Review of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod at Glasgow, May, 1862*; and *of the Committee of Synod’s Report, which*

These make sad, if absorbing, reading, as passions erupt on both sides and gather momentum to the point that division becomes not only inevitable but a kind of relief from otherwise incurable pain. The majority, determined for change, endures five years of debate and moves on, leaving the minority in isolated impotence, condemned to lose every vote and forced in the end to walk out and begin again to rebuild their shattered cause. The majority never looked back and in thirteen years were part of the Free Church. But for the minority, committed as they were to two hundred years of practical political dissent, this was a catastrophe and the most important setback to the Covenanting movement in all its long history. It was, however, also a re-birth of an unmodified Covenanting witness in the land of the Covenanters.

### A. TWO CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The RP Church had been agitated by two questions for several decades prior to 1863. These were the matter of the *Electoral Franchise*, already mentioned, and the pressure for *ecclesiastical union*. The former was, of course, the great obstacle to the latter, for the Covenanters' great practical "distinctive" of the time was that they had banned the use of "the vote" and made this a matter of discipline for their membership.<sup>12</sup> The non-voting position, with voting as a *censurable* offence, really only came into play with the extension of the Franchise in the nineteenth century, most notably the Reform Act of 1832. Prior to that time, the focus of the distinctive principles of the RP Church had been more immediately upon the doctrinal ramifications of the Covenants as these

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*was based on the legal opinions of Mr. Sheriff Bell, Mr. Sheriff Strathearn, Mr. A. Murray Dunlop, Mr. John Bright, and other six gentlemen* (Glasgow, May 1863, 93pp.); and *Disruption Portrait of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, June 1863, 8pp.). The last tract gives a synopsis of the course of the controversy from the minority standpoint. The Reformation Association published a number of other tracts during these years, including reports of her annual meetings and the polemical tract, *An Earnest Appeal to the Reformed Presbyterian Community, on the Present Posture and Duty of their Church, 1860* (Glasgow, 1860, 32pp.).

<sup>12</sup> The RP Church had never been persecuted in the New World and the political freedoms of the United States accelerated the tendency to tone down the polemic against the defects of the U.S. Constitution as an expression of Christ-less, Covenant-breaking civil power. That critique, nevertheless, did not disappear and continues to this day in a modified form. But the rigor with which it was pressed diminished and became more of a perspective than a distinctive, less a cause of separation from other Churches and Christians, and more a basis for co-belligerency in the quest to Christianize the nation. The New Light Split of 1833 in the American RP Synod therefore anticipated the 1863 Disruption in the Scottish RP Church.

were controverted between the different Churches. After 1832, the option to vote became a reality for large numbers of the citizenry, to whom, formerly, it had been no more than a theory. The advance of political freedoms in Britain thus forced the issue upon the Covenanters in a fresh way. The fact, too, that the RP Church was a hundred and forty years removed from the times of persecution and no longer felt herself to be an embattled and harried minority, was doubtless a large factor in softening her attitude to the putative immoralities of the Covenant-breaking state. It is no accident that a similar relaxation of view took place in America a full generation before it occurred in Scotland.

The practice of banning the use of “the vote” rested upon the doctrine of the perpetual obligation of the Covenants, National (1638) and Solemn League (1643), and the correlative theory that to involve oneself in an act that might imply the approval of the nation that had broken these Covenants was to become guilty of complicity in that nation’s error. Taking oaths of allegiance, serving in the military or in political office, voting for anyone who might take political office, and swearing to uphold the Covenant-breaking British constitution, were therefore to be avoided as the sin of incorporation with an immoral government.

Of all of these, it was abstaining from voting that was the visible, practical tip of the doctrinal iceberg – the whole covenanting corpus of doctrine – that separated the Covenanters from the rest of Scottish Presbyterianism. This in effect declared the latter to be in the grip of a religio-political palsy, namely, an unhallowed co-operation with an Erastian, Covenant-breaking state. At the same time, however, this collided with the Church’s own doctrine of the unity of the visible Church and her awareness that she shared a warm commitment to the Reformed Faith with multitudes in the larger denominations of the realm. A tension therefore came to exist between the distinctive principles that separated her from other Reformed Churches and the common principles which united her with others in a commitment to the doctrines of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

## 1. Church union

The movement toward Church union first came to the fore with the issuance of a resolution in the Synod of 1821, warmly promoting the principle of seeking the union of the visible Church.<sup>13</sup> This did not result

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<sup>13</sup> Hutchison, p. 263.

in any practical moves toward union and, if anything, received somewhat of a check in 1838, with the publication of the new doctrinal part of the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, approved by Synod in 1837.<sup>14</sup> The Doctrinal Part was approved in 1837 and published in 1838. The Historical Part was approved in 1838 and published (in Glasgow) in 1839. These are usually bound together, according to the original plan of the Synod. This remained the doctrinal standard of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland until early in the twenty-first century, when it was placed “in abeyance” in the interest of an effective reorganization of the denomination.<sup>15</sup> This very crisply underscored the doctrinal differences separating the RP Church from the other Presbyterian Churches in Scotland. With respect to the Established Church, the Covenanters, while not opposed to the principle of the establishment of religion by the state, did reject the particular Erastian relationship then existing between the Established Church and the British government. They also rejected the Voluntarism of the Secession and Relief Churches. Voluntarism denied any obligation of the state to establish and support the Church. In former years, the focus of this position was on the financial support of the Church by the state, from taxes and teinds (tithes) going back to medieval times. The RP Church was never the recipient of state funds, and so was “voluntary” *in practice*, but she strongly affirmed the principle that the state was duty bound to recognize the kingship of Christ and give legal status and protection to the Church, to the end of promoting the advance of the Gospel in the nation. Her goal was a covenanted Church in a covenanted nation.

Notwithstanding such trenchant indictments, the matter of union was taken up by the Synod of 1842 and sporadic negotiations were conducted thereafter with the Seceders, and, after 1863, with other non-established bodies.<sup>16</sup> This process was eventually to lead to the union of the post-1863 Majority Synod with the Free Church in 1876.

## 2. The Electoral Franchise

The flash-point of controversy was the use of the Franchise. Before 1832, this was not an issue, for few if any Reformed Presbyterians had the vote.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland* (Paisley, Alex. Gardner, 1838).

<sup>15</sup> See the Postscript appended to this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Hutchison, p. 300 (cf. p. 338ff.).

After that date, many did have the vote and apparently exercised the privilege.<sup>17</sup> The following year, without sending it down on overture to Sessions and Presbyteries in accord with the law of the Church, the Synod ruled that voting could only be construed as “direct recognition of the [British] Constitution” and was therefore “inconsistent with the enjoyment of the privileges of this Church”.<sup>18</sup> The Synod of 1833 marks the beginning of non-voting as the principal expression of bearing the testimony of political dissent. Indeed, that Synod effectively made non-voting a term of communion, although the actual disciplinary measures were left to the Sessions, without specific guidance from Synod. The lack of uniformity as to the penalty tended to ensure further controversy, if only to clear up the inconsistent practice across the Church. It seems certain that many in the succeeding years disregarded the ban on voting and were never subject to discipline.<sup>19</sup>

## **B. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SYNODS OF 1858-62**

For nearly a quarter of a century little was heard on the subject until, in 1857, petitions from congregations in Greenock and Airdrie re-opened the question, in the latter case specifically calling for measures to bring the practice of the Church into conformity with the position on voting as adopted in 1833.<sup>20</sup> In response, the Synod of 1858 ruled along traditional lines, affirming the position of the 1837 *Testimony* against voting, oaths to do with the Constitution, and taking political office.

### **1. The Synod of 1858**

There was still a question over the decision of 1833, which appeared to call for Church discipline in the case of any member who voted in parliamentary elections. Opponents of the application of discipline were not prepared to say that the *Testimony* was wrong in declaring it inconsistent for Reformed Presbyterians to “commission others to do for them what it would be unwarrantable and immoral for them to do in their own persons”<sup>21</sup> (i.e., vote for others to sit in Parliament), but wished

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<sup>17</sup> Hutchison, p. 281.

<sup>18</sup> Hutchison, p. 282. The term “the privileges of the Church” means, in general, membership in good standing, and, in particular, admission to the sacraments.

<sup>19</sup> Hutchison, p. 326.

<sup>20</sup> *Disruption Portrait of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Testimony* (1838), p. 222.



to allow liberty of conscience on this point. They would teach it, but not make it a point of Church discipline. So strong was this feeling in the Synod that the resolution to apply discipline (No. 4) was withdrawn – a tacit admission of defeat by the party that had proposed its adoption. Since the third resolution was to the effect that the Church’s practice be made conformable to the *Testimony*, it became clear that what was withdrawn in the fourth resolution (Church discipline) could not be implied in the passage of the third. The overall effect was to modify the enactment of 1833, which had clearly implied Church censures for voting. This modification was masked by the apparent re-affirmation of the political dissent doctrine of the Church and the absence of any explicitly stated change of practice.

It did not, however, go unnoticed. Not a few regarded the action of 1858 as a defection from the Covenanted testimony of Reformed Presbyterianism and, at that time, Dr. John Cunningham, the RP missionary to the Jews in London, asserted that the removal of discipline in the matter of voting was the first step to surrendering “the chief and distinguishing badge of adherence to the Covenanted cause, namely a practical protest against the British Constitution by refusing to vote and take the Oath of Allegiance”.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent events were to prove this analysis to be substantially correct.

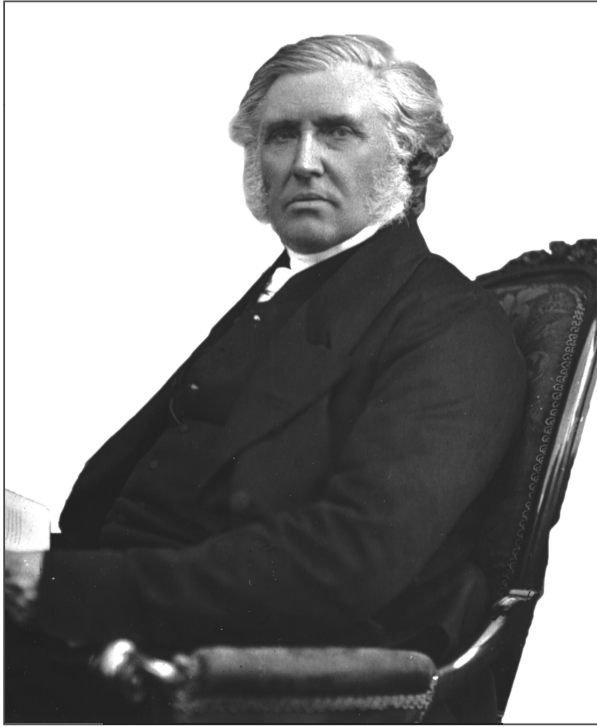
## 2. The Synod of 1859

The following year, petitions from London and Penpont congregations called upon Synod to require the exercise of Church discipline against any who exercised the Franchise. After a day-long debate, which ended a half-hour after midnight, Synod rejected the petitions and affirmed the third resolution of 1858, which had called for consistency between the *Testimony* and the practice of the Church, without specifying any disciplinary measures to be taken. This was, of course, a case of an unwillingness to censure anyone who actually voted, hiding behind an empty affirmation of a clear creedal ban on voting. It is clear from the debate that the leadership of the Church had changed its mind on this point.

William Symington, arguably the most widely respected theologian that the RP Church ever produced, came out strongly against discipline for voting and served notice on the minority that there was no road back on the discipline question. He noted that “the point upon

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<sup>22</sup> *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, in Glasgow, May, 1862*, p. 5.



*Rev. William Symington (1795-1862).*

which the whole diversity of opinion lies, is that of voting being identified with taking the oaths”,<sup>23</sup> and asserted that the taking of the Oath of Allegiance by Members of Parliament was “an accessory and accidental circumstance that does not reduplicate upon the individual”. He could not see that people should be shut out of the membership of the Church who were “not prepared to say – ‘I will not vote, and I believe that voting is a sin in the sight of God.’” He therefore did not favour discipline and thought that

“it would be a pity to split the Church on such a metaphysical question, as that of the identity of the voter with the person that takes the oath”.<sup>24</sup> Since Symington was a member of the committee that formulated the 1833 deliverance, this represented nothing less than a complete reversal of his earlier viewpoint and could only have been a stunning blow to the petitioners.<sup>25</sup> Symington’s and the Synod’s 1833 position was that “the exercise of the Elective Franchise, conferred by [the Reform Act of 1832], is a direct recognition of the Constitution, in virtue of the political identity subsisting between the representative and his constituents, and is therefore inconsistent with the enjoyment of the privileges of this Church”. In 1859, both were saying that the “political identity” between representative and constituents was a “metaphysical question” insufficient to warrant discipline (and splitting the Church). The subsequent vote buried forever, in the pre-Disruption RP Synod, any insistence that members should not exercise the Electoral Franchise on pain of ecclesiastical discipline.

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<sup>23</sup> *Our Testimony Compromised: A Full Report of the Discussion in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod regarding the Use of the Electoral Franchise*, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

One immediate consequence was the secession of Dr. John Cunningham, the RP missionary to the Jews in London, and the London congregation of the RP Church.<sup>26</sup> They were later to identify themselves with a remnant group of ultra-Covenanters in South-west Scotland, the “Societies of the Old Dissenting Presbyterians of Wigtonshire”,<sup>27</sup> and the equally rigorous “Reformed Presbytery” in North America (the “Steelites”). They were to remain aloof even from the post-Disruption minority after 1863.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. The Synod of 1862

Events moved rapidly to a climax. The 1860 Synod was largely absorbed by the case of David McCubbin, a member of William Symington’s congregation in Great Hamilton Street, Glasgow (First RP), who had won election to the Glasgow Town Council and had taken the Oath of Allegiance as a Councillor. A complaint against the Session for not exercising discipline in the case was, after a heated debate, dismissed with an encouragement that the Session continue to “proceed in the matter until they bring it to an issue”, in the meantime expressing approval for their actions to that point.<sup>29</sup> This was ostensibly only discipline deferred, but subsequent events showed that Symington and the majority in Synod had no intention of disciplining Mr. McCubbin

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<sup>26</sup> John Cunningham, *Our Testimony Kept; or the Position of Separation taken by the Reformed Presbyterian Congregation of London, in May 1859* (Glasgow, 1860), pp. 26-29. This largely reduplicates the text of *Our Testimony Compromised*, but with the addition of some analysis and comment and Minutes of the London RP Session and Congregation.

<sup>27</sup> *The London Scottish Reformed Presbyterian Magazine*, 1st January 1866, p. 1. This contains a brief account of the origin and progress of the Cunningham secession and their connections. The Wigtonshire “Society” was the remnant of the followers of the Rev. James Reid (1750-1837), who had withdrawn from the RP Church in 1825 on account of the removal from the Terms of Communion of the mention of the renovation of the Covenants at Auchensaugh in 1712. His massive work, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines*, was reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust.

<sup>28</sup> The “Reformed Presbytery” was a conservative split from the Old Light RP Church of North America in 1840 under the leadership of David Steele (see David Steele, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical of a Ministry in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, during fifty-three years* (Philadelphia, 1883) for a spirited account of this secession). The Steelites insisted that the perpetual obligation of the Scottish Covenants required their renewal by the American Church, but the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (“Old Light”) never took the step of such a Covenant renewal, after her organization as an indigenous American Church in 1798. Into the 1990s, a remnant Steelite congregation still met regularly for worship in the North Union RP Church, Brownsdale, Pennsylvania, singing praise from the Scottish Psalter of 1650, as had their forefathers for over three centuries.

<sup>29</sup> *Principle v. Practice*, p. 28.

at all. The only “issue” to which this matter came was for it to drop entirely from sight in the decisive action of the Synod of 1862 removing all threat of discipline over the “political dissent” doctrine of the Church.

In response to an 1861 overture from Dumfries Presbytery calling for a return to the former position as a solution to the prevailing ambiguity, a Synodical committee reported to the 1862 Synod with the finding that there was no connection between “the representative and the constituency as to implicate the latter in the oath which the former must take on entering office”. The Synod also recommended abstention from voting (and thus from “taking the oath in this sense”) but declared that it had no authority in the Word of God to apply judicial censure.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that hand in hand with the notion that there is an incorporation of the elector in the oath taken by the elected, was the idea that the Oath of Allegiance was more than simply a declaration of a general loyalty to the Sovereign. It was held to “reduplicate” all that was included in the monarch’s Coronation Oath. This included upholding the Constitution, being Head of the Church of England, and defending the establishment of Episcopacy in England and of Roman Catholicism in Lower Canada (Quebec) – all points wholly incompatible with the seventeenth-century Covenants. The idea of “complicity in error” is essential to the definition of the sin of “incorporation with an immoral Constitution” and, consequently, to any practical programme of “political dissent”. In denying a “complicity in error” connection between voting and the oath, the 1862 Scottish RP Synod not only pulled the rug from under the 1833 ban on voting, but seriously compromised the “political dissent” doctrine itself. Even more significant was the proffered basis for this decision, for the Synod explicitly repudiated her formerly held view that taking the Oath of Allegiance necessarily implied a “*complete* homologation of the evils of the British Constitution” [emphasis added]. Yes, the Constitution was defective, but, no, it was not as defective as had hitherto been thought. *Ergo*, voting was more a matter of judgment, than a definable sin.

In this way, the “distinctive” became a “perspective”, something for discussion perhaps, but not for discipline. This was what was then sent down in overture to Sessions and Presbyteries, for a vote, which would

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<sup>30</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine*, May 1862, p. 230 (Minutes of Synod). See also *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, in Glasgow, May, 1862*, pp. 122-123.

then be ratified by the 1863 Synod. Only two ministers and five elders registered their dissent.<sup>31</sup>

### C. DIVISION IN THE SYNOD OF 1863

When the Synod met in the First RP Church, in Great Hamilton Street, Glasgow, on 7th May 1863, it was reported that all the Presbyteries and a majority of Sessions had registered their support for the removal of discipline with respect to the exercise of the Franchise.<sup>32</sup> A motion distilling the essence of the overture was made by the Synod Clerk, the Rev. John Kay:

Synod, therefore, in accordance with these reports enacts that, while recommending the members of the Church to abstain from the use of the Franchise and from taking the Oath of Allegiance, discipline to the effect of suspension and expulsion from the privileges of the Church shall cease, and earnestly enjoin upon all under their charge to have respect to this decision, and to follow after the things which make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another.<sup>33</sup>

An amendment was then moved by John McDonald, an elder in the Third RP Church, Glasgow, to the effect:

That the Synod, on mature deliberation, reject the overture sent down from the last meeting of Synod to Sessions and Presbyteries, and resolve to adhere to the principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, clearly set forth in her *Testimony*, and faithfully maintain the same in both doctrine and discipline.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, in Glasgow, May, 1862*, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> This is to be compared with the irregular, if not indeed illegal, introduction of the rule against voting in 1833. On that occasion there was no overture and no ratification by the whole Church, according to the Church's own procedural law which had been adopted by the Synod in 1830: "No new regulations affecting the Church in general, that may be discussed in Synod, are to be finally adopted as the law of the Church, at the first proposal; they must first be transmitted to the different Presbyteries and Sessions for their report and approval." See *Reformed Presbyterian Synod in Scotland, A Book of Ecclesiastical Government and Discipline according to Presbyterian Principles* (Paisley, 1832), p. 23 ("New enactments").

<sup>33</sup> *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

It was a forlorn hope, as the minority party well knew. The majority simply no longer believed in the rigorous political dissent doctrine of their forebears, as enshrined in the non-voting rule of 1833 and the 1837 *Testimony*. The revolutionary motion carried against the reactionary amendment by 46-11, with 7 abstentions. The central practical “distinctive” of the Covenanting Church was thereby reduced, at a stroke, to a matter of opinion, even within her own communion.<sup>35</sup> The Rev. William Anderson,<sup>36</sup> Loanhead, then read a Protest on behalf of himself and others, declaring their purpose to maintain the former position of the Church and calling a meeting of a reconstituted RP Synod for the following day, 8th May 1863. After a short but rather heated discussion, this Protest was rejected, as was a similar document, delivered next day by the minority’s legal representative.<sup>37</sup> After “the dust had settled”, so to speak, it became apparent that the majority had retained the allegiance of some 85% of the people. The RP Church had changed at the grass roots, in both pew and pulpit, and the remnant who were persuaded of the old claims of the Covenants and political dissent were faced with rebuilding the old Church in a new and different world.

This was the moment that marked the beginning of the continued witness of the Minority Synod RP Church, a witness that has now survived by most of a century and a half the passage of the Majority RP Synod into history. The latter remained an independent body for thirteen years, until her union with the Free Church of Scotland in 1876. During that period, she effectively dismantled – as Dr. John Cunningham had predicted – the residual Cameronian positions that would hinder the union. “Covenanting” as a term of communion was dropped in 1872.<sup>38</sup> In 1876, the Majority Synod was simply absorbed into the much larger communion of the Free Church – *circa* ten thousand souls among a third of a million! Five congregations declined to enter that union. Of these, Douglas Water, Rothesay, Stranraer, and Whithorn later

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> William Anderson (1795-1866) was a native of Ballylaggan, Ireland. His entire ministry (1820-66) was in Loanhead, south of Edinburgh. He is known to have exercised discipline in the case of member who exercised the Franchise (6th March 1839). His only publication was *A Letter* (Glasgow, 1863), anent the division in the RPC. The RP building – built in 1858 during Anderson’s ministry – has the distinction of being the first church in Scotland to be built of concrete block. The RP congregation was dissolved in the 1990s and the building was renovated and became office accommodation. As a “listed” building, it retains the external features of the original edifice.

<sup>37</sup> *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Hutchison, p. 357.

returned to the continuing RP Church, while Carnoustie rejoined the Original Secession Church, whence it had come some years earlier.<sup>39</sup> The Majority RP Synod remained in existence as a legal entity until 1932 – a Synod *quoad civilia*, i.e., a Synod for civil purposes, without ministry or people, provided for under the law of the land for the purpose of benefiting from certain properties and trusts. A slightly ironic end, perhaps, for a body which, through most of its long history, had vigorously dissented from involvement with a Covenant-breaking state!<sup>40</sup>

### III. REBUILDING THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1863-1900

The principal task facing the minority was the re-establishment of some organizational integrity. The Synod was constituted on 8th May 1863 as a continuation of the original succession of Synods since 1811 and immediately adjourned to reconvene a month later. This meeting took place in Glasgow on 2nd June 1863, and by the close of that day the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland was regularly organized, with eight congregations and two nominal Presbyteries. The fact that these “Presbyteries” had to meet together as “the Joint Presbyteries of Edinburgh and Glasgow” thereafter – with the exception of the Synodical year 1870-71 – is a poignant testimony to the struggle it was to maintain the order of the full-fledged Presbyterian denomination she had been before the division. Notwithstanding the difficulties and disappointments, progress was made, so that by 1876 the Church had grown to twelve congregations, with seven ministers and just over 1,000 communicant members.<sup>41</sup>

The period after 1876, then, was dominated by the effort to recover from the Disruption and to see once again the growth of an uncompromised Covenanting witness. And indeed, throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, the Reformed Presbyterian Church did show modest growth, and that in spite of continuing emigration of her people from the British Isles to North America and the Antipodes. Lack of ministerial manpower was also a serious problem. Mission

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<sup>39</sup> Hutchison, p. 376ff. See Appendix for the statistics.

<sup>40</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 52 (March 1933), p. 51. The winding up of the *quoad civilia* Synod in 1932 is marked by a bronze plaque on a wall of the University of Glasgow.

<sup>41</sup> See Appendix for the statistics of 1876 and selected later years.



*Above: The former RP church in Thurso, built in 1859. The congregation closed in 1928 and the building was sold to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland who continue to use it.*

*Below: Martyrs' Free Church of Scotland in Wick. Built in 1839 as an RP church, the building was retained by the Majority Synod in 1863, passing to the Free Church in 1876 and the United Free Church in 1900. It was sold back to the Free Church in 1914.*





stations in Darvel, Dundee, and Lochgilphead, withered on the vine for lack of Gospel ordinances and some of the more distant centres seem to have survived without any settled ministry for many years at a time. The congregation in Thurso, in the far north, for example, had one visit from a minister in 1872 and just two visits in the following year. This suggests that the Church's growth might have been much greater had there been more labourers to send forth into the harvest. Over the course of the rest of the century, the smaller, more remote congregations were closed: Rothesay (1881), Douglas Water (1885), Girvan (1886), Wick (1893), Lorn (1893),<sup>42</sup> and Whithorn (1899). Still, by the early 1900s, the city congregations were doing well, and there were new congregations in Edinburgh and in north Glasgow. Some forty years after the Disruption, there were 1,125 communicants, ten congregations, and eight ministers. Total membership was higher than at any time since 1863.

Furthermore, the Church was clearly confident about her Covenanting heritage and testimony throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, for she sustained a vigorous polemic against the non-covenanted British nation and Churches. For the first decade or so, the focus of attack was the "New Light" Synod, as the majority came inevitably to be labelled. Exemplifying this testimony for "Reformation principles" was a public meeting held in Glasgow on 26th June 1876, under Minority Synod auspices and on the occasion of the Majority Synod's decision to unite with the Free Church. No fewer than eight speakers addressed themselves to the following motions, all of which were "unanimously carried" by the acclaim of a partisan audience:

- (1) That the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland is, historically and doctrinally, identified with the Church of the Second Reformation, and also with the position assumed by our fathers who, in 1688, protested against the Revolution Settlement in Church and State.
- (2) That the course adopted in 1863 by the majority . . . was an abandonment of the distinctive principles and position of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.
- (3) That we, representing the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, regard it as our imperative duty . . . to continue to occupy

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<sup>42</sup> The Lorn congregation, situated on the Island of Seil, Argyllshire, was the only Gaelic-speaking congregation in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, which, of course, was primarily found in the Covenanting areas of English-speaking Central and South-west Scotland.

the position, and to maintain and diffuse the principles of our *Testimony*, . . . being persuaded that these are Scriptural and shall ultimately triumph.<sup>43</sup>

“Reformed Presbyterians are not pessimists,” wrote James Kerr, pastor in Glasgow and one of their most prolific apologists, “they are the sons of the morning; and those who die ere their desires for their covenanted land and the world are realised, die with their faces to the coming Sun.”<sup>44</sup> Written at the close of Queen Victoria’s magnificent reign, this was the last sentence in a ringing call to the British Empire to embrace explicitly in her Constitution the supremacy of Jesus Christ. The tract, entitled *Political Dissent in Great Britain: a defence of the isolation of Reformed Presbyterians in the realm of politics*, catches the optimism and expectations common to Christians of the High Victorian era, but expresses them in terms of the distinctively Covenanter vision of an entire world renewed by God. Here is a postmillennial prospectus for the conversion of Britain and the nations before the great and terrible coming of the Day of the Lord.

After the New Lights had united with the Free Church, the polemics gave way, for a brief moment, to legal action. Since 1856, the united RP Church had shared in a fund called the Ferguson Bequest. This was denied to her after the Disruption, evidently as a result of “an indirect effort (by the Majority Synod] . . . in connection with the

<sup>43</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 6 (1876), p. 493ff.

<sup>44</sup> James Kerr, D.D., *Political Dissent in Great Britain* (Glasgow, 1901, 2nd ed.), p. 72. Kerr (1847-1905) received his D.D. from Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA – the liberal arts college founded by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. In addition to *Political Dissent* and some other minor items, he published the following: *Britain’s Legislation on Education: against the Book and for the Antichrist* (1872); *The Arminianism of the Confession’s Assailants* [first published as “*Creed Rebellion*” alias *Bible Rebellion: A Defence of the Doctrines of the Confession impugned by the Revs D. Macrae, F. Ferguson, and others. By John Calvin, Jr.* (1877)]; *Reformed Presbyterian Law Case: an exposure of the “Defences” of the “Civil” Synod* (1877); *A Third Reformation Necessary: or, The Piety, Principles, and Patriotism of Scotland’s Covenant Martyrs, with Application to the Present Times* (1880); *Consensus of Opinion on behalf of the Psalms alone in Praise* (1882); *The Church Question: An Examination of the Claims made on behalf of the Established Church of Scotland, by His Grace the Duke of Argyll* (1885); *Vivisection in Theology; and its Chief Apologist, Professor Dods, D.D.* (1890); *Church and State: Three Lectures* (1893); *The Covenants and the Covenanters* (1895); and *The Scottish Martyrs Defended* (1902). He also edited *Sermons by Martin Luther* (1875) and *Sermons in Times of Persecution in Scotland* (1880), providing biographical material for both volumes. A sermon, “The Martyrs: their piety as Saints and their power as Reformers”, is published in *The Lochgoin Conventicle* (1893), the commemoration of the centenary of the death of John Howie, author of “The Scots Worthies.” For an account of Kerr’s life, see Archibald Holmes, *Memorial Volume to the Rev. James Kerr* (Glasgow, 1906?).

Ferguson Bequest Fund [Trustees]”.<sup>45</sup> After the Majority Synod united with the Free Church in 1876, the continuing Minority RP Synod sued the Ferguson Bequest Trustees for reinstatement as qualified beneficiaries under the terms of the Trust. The case went all the way to Scotland’s highest court, the Court of Session, and became a landmark in Scottish legal history.<sup>46</sup>

A lively account of this case, supportive of the minority and critical of the majority, appeared in an editorial in the *Glasgow Herald* for 18th April 1878. This pointed out the legal measures adopted by the majority to keep the RP share of the Ferguson Bequest for themselves, even after they ceased to be Reformed Presbyterians. When they joined the Free Church, they still maintained themselves in law as a Reformed Presbyterian Synod *quoad civilia* (for civil purposes). In this way, the editor wryly observed, they

dissolved themselves spiritually but not secularly. They became Free Churchmen all the year round except on one day, on which they meet as the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to transact civil business. It reminds one of the old stories about the Fairies and the Dwarfs, who were only allowed to appear to and speak to mortals and hold high revel on earth on one particular night of the year, that night being, if we mistake not, in the ecclesiastical month of May. Next morning they were gone, leaving only the slightest trace of their presence. So this Reformed Presbyterian Church is unknown and unseen of men all the year through; but on one day it quietly leaves the Assembly of the Free Church, meets somewhere for an hour or two, and then mysteriously disappears with a share of the proceeds of the Ferguson Bequest in its coffers.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> James Barr, *The United Free Church of Scotland* (London, 1934), p. 194. The Ferguson Bequest was a sum of £300,000 – an enormous sum for those days – left in 1856 for the support of the churches and schools of five denominations – four Presbyterian and one Congregational – in the west of Scotland. From 1863, the Bequest Trustees only gave grants to Majority Synod churches and indicated that they would give nothing to Minority Synod congregations until legally required to do so.

<sup>46</sup> A. Taylor Innes, *The Law of Creeds in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 294-297. For RP perspectives on this case, see James Kerr, *Reformed Presbyterian Law Case*, and John McDonald, *Pactum Illicitum: Lord Curriehill’s Decision versus the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, 1878).

<sup>47</sup> This was published as a pamphlet: *Reformed Presbyterians in Scotland – Decision of Lord Curriehill – Court of Session – Edinburgh, Wednesday, April 17, 1878, showing their legal standing*, 12pp.

The interest of the Ferguson Bequest Case (*Wallace v. Ferguson Bequest* 1878, 6 R, 486) is that it was the first legal case in Scotland in which the “right of legislative or constitutional change . . . was deliberately brought forward”. The Minority Synod claimed exclusive right to the RP share of Mr. Ferguson’s money, on the ground that they were the true RP Church, constitutionally. The majority by 1878 had united with the Free Church and only existed *quoad civilia*, partly for the very purpose of retaining an interest in the Ferguson Bequest for her formerly RP congregations, now in the Free Church. The majority had of course felt it right to change their position and unite with the Free Church. In the event the court found that their changed position could not disqualify them from benefiting from the Bequest, but also found that the minority could hardly be denied the same benefits for *not* changing the position they had held all along. On 16th January 1879, the Court of Session ordered the re-instatement of the continuing RP Church as a beneficiary of the Ferguson Bequest. The Church eventually regained her former access to the Fund, a benefit which has been of indispensable value to the Church and her ministers from that day to this.<sup>48</sup>

In the period before the First World War, a remarkably high proportion of Reformed Presbyterian ministers were published writers. James Kerr, as we have seen, was the apologist for Covenanting distinctive principles. Peter Carmichael,<sup>49</sup> James Dick,<sup>50</sup> Archibald Holmes,<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Ferguson Bequest continues to give substantial grants to RP churches for building repairs and very generous stipend augmentations to RP pastors. When the present author ministered in the Wishaw RP Church in 1982-85, he derived fully one-third of his income from that source. Even when congregations were much larger, the Ferguson Bequest grants amounted to about 20% of ministerial compensation. For example, in 1915, the six ministers who qualified for Ferguson Bequest grants (those in certain counties in the West of Scotland) were paid an aggregate of £970 by their congregations, but received stipend augmentations from the Bequest totalling £205.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Carmichael (1809-67), was one of the three ministers who led the minority in 1863 (the others were William Anderson and David Henderson). Before the Disruption, he published *The Superlative Worth and Dignity of the Faithful Martyrs* (1857) and a Temperance tract, *An Earnest Appeal* (1860).

<sup>50</sup> James Dick (1842-1916), later the Professor of Hebrew in the RP Divinity Hall, Belfast, was minister in Wishaw (1870-84). A native of Ulster, he authored *The Headship of Christ* (1871), *Civil Rulers serving the Lord; or, the Scriptural Doctrine of National Religion* (1882), and *The Hymnary Discussions in the General Assembly . . . together with Letters on Hymns in Early Church History* (1899).

<sup>51</sup> Archibald Holmes (c. 1864-1932) spent most of his forty-five years in the ministry in his native Ireland, but he served in Paisley, 1900-03, and authored the *Memorial Volume to the Rev. James Kerr* (Glasgow, 1906?).

Cameron Mackay,<sup>52</sup> R. Thomson Martin,<sup>53</sup> John MacDonald,<sup>54</sup> Henry Paton,<sup>55</sup> and John Paterson Struthers,<sup>56</sup> all contributed, in quite different ways, to the presentation of the Reformed Presbyterian message to the wider Scottish public. Over a period of twenty-seven years, Struthers' magazine for young people, *The Morning Watch*, reached into over 13,000 homes – some twenty-five times the number of RP households.

These were the halcyon days of the post-Disruption Covenanting church. The high point was probably around 1906. Changes were, however, already in the air. The prominent men were beginning to fade from the scene. Kerr had died in 1905; Struthers and McDonald were in the closing phases of their long ministries. Men were not coming forward for the ministry and the Scottish church was beginning to depend upon the RP Church of Ireland to provide ministers for her pulpits.<sup>57</sup> Membership was turning down. The long decline of the Scottish RP Church had begun.

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<sup>52</sup> Cameron Mackay (1853-1937) was a Highlander of Free Church extraction, who ministered in Penpont between 1895 and 1905 and left over a doctrinal dispute. He published *The Dismissal of a Free Church Teacher* anonymously (he had been a schoolmaster in Halkirk, Caithness) and *Fifteen Bible Nuts opened and proved Sound* (1904).

<sup>53</sup> Robert Thomson Martin (1832-67) took Wishaw RP Church into the Minority Synod. He edited *Sermons, Prayers, and Pulpit Addresses by Alexander Henderson, 1638* (1855) and the *RP Witness* (1864-67). His 1865 sermon, *The Martyrs' Reward*, was published posthumously in 1867.

<sup>54</sup> John McDonald (1843-1933), pastor in Loanhead and Airdrie, wrote *Pactum Illicitum: Lord Curriehill's Decision versus the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (1878); *Jehovah Nissi: The Lord My Banner* (1882); *Romanism Analysed in the light of Reason, Scripture and History* (1894) and *Protestant Catechism* (10th edition, 1910).

<sup>55</sup> Henry Paton (1854-1942), minister in Edinburgh, 1903-1910, edited *The Register of Rev. John McMillan* (1908) and many other works.

<sup>56</sup> John P. Struthers (1851-1915), minister in Greenock, editor of the *Morning Watch* and author of the posthumously published *Pilgrim Cheer: A Book of Devotional Readings* (1924); *Windows in Heaven* (1926); and *More Echoes from the Morning Watch* (1927). See also T. Cassells, *Men of the Knotted Heart* (1915) and A. L. Struthers, *Life and Letters of John Paterson Struthers* (1918).

<sup>57</sup> Struthers died in 1915 and McDonald retired in 1920. No native Scot was settled in a Scottish RP congregation until A. Sinclair Horne was ordained in Loanhead in 1955. The Scottish Synod became, in effect, a Presbytery of the Irish church. For an account of the ministerial make-up of the Scottish Synod, see James Robb, *Cameronian Fasti: Ministers and Missionaries of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1680-1929)* (Edinburgh, 1975). This was updated to 1980 by a series of mimeographed "Corrigenda & Addenda".

#### IV. THE LONG DECLINE – THE RP CHURCH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is not likely that the onset of decline was all that evident at the time or that it had any impact on the morale of the people in the churches. The Glasgow North mission work closed in 1909 and the Edinburgh congregation, which had been an independent Seceder Church until 1903, seceded back to independence in 1910. But the core congregations continued much as before. Membership losses were still largely from the fringe. It was only between during and after the First World War that it became evident that the trend was down. In 1915 there were 913 members, and by 1922 there were 832.<sup>58</sup> Then, some established congregations began to close – Thurso, always very weak, in 1928; Penpont in the 1930s; Paisley in 1940; and J. P. Struthers' once flourishing Greenock in 1954.<sup>59</sup> By 1963, the centenary of the Disruption, membership was 548, in five congregations and with five ministers. Numerical decline continued and membership stood at 269 in 1983,<sup>60</sup> while a report issued in November 1987 estimated an *effective* membership of around 150. Of these five congregations only two survived – Stranraer and Airdrie. Glasgow and Loanhead congregations were closed in the 1990s and the Wishaw congregation was consolidated into Airdrie meeting in Airdrie. The Wishaw church was retained but not used.<sup>61</sup>

Assessing specific reasons for such a pattern of decline is a hazardous business. It is difficult enough to analyze the present spiritual condition of a Church of which we may have considerable personal knowledge and experience. How much more problematic it is to arrive at an accurate evaluation of the spiritual climate of Churches and people long ago and far away. What can be done is to weigh the effects of the

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<sup>58</sup> Manuscript statistical returns for these years, in the possession of the author.

<sup>59</sup> The building is now used by a Pentecostal Church. The Free Church is back-to-back on the same block and, about a block away and just round a corner, is the old 2nd Greenock RP Church (Majority Synod) which until the 1990s was used by the Free Presbyterian congregation.

<sup>60</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1984, p. 18. Of the 271 communicants, 129 were in the Stranraer congregation, which, however, recorded an average attendance at Morning Worship of only 40, an indication of serious nominality among the membership.

<sup>61</sup> *Statistical Report from Session to [of?] Special Meeting of Synod on 21st November 1987 in response to the Petition submitted from the Session of the Stranraer RP Church* (in the possession of the author). It was only after 2010 that a congregation was revived in Glasgow, particularly on account of a movement from the Free Church after its acceptance of uninspired hymns and musical instruments in worship (see Postscript below).



*Wishaw RP church, 1984.*

general trends and tone of the denomination as a whole, especially as these emerge from the activities of the leadership and its interaction with the membership at large. We know what absorbed the energies of the decision-makers and what issues most exercised them in the courts of the Church. And, now and again, we are afforded glimpses of the life of the body as a whole. Together, these provide materials for coming to some conclusions as to why things happened as they did.

### **A. MEMBERSHIP AND THE 1932 TERMS OF COMMUNION**

When the Thirties dawned, the RP Church's distinctive doctrinal standard, the *Testimony*,<sup>62</sup> had been out of print for half a century. It is a volume of some 450 pages, carefully and clearly expounding the doctrine and history of the Church. The 1930 Synod did not reprint it, but decided that a summary statement of "the matter of the *Testimony*

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<sup>62</sup> The Doctrinal Part of the *Testimony* (166pp.) was approved in 1837 and published in 1838. The Historical Part (268pp.) was approved in 1838 and published in 1839. It was last reprinted c. 1878.

. . . sufficient for young people and others joining the Church as a presentation of the Creed and Principles of our Church” would better serve the needs of the of the Church.<sup>63</sup> This *Summary of the Testimony* is a concise, if undistinguished, résumé of the basic contours of RP teaching. It affirms the “political dissent” doctrine of the minority of 1863, including the continuing obligation of the Covenants and the practice of declining to “give their vote to Parliamentary candidates who accept [the British] Constitution”.<sup>64</sup> The 1931 *Summary* was clearly designed to be a popular presentation and re-affirmation of the historic Covenanting position. It was not a substitute for the full *Testimony* of 1837-38 and accordingly did not need to be sent down on overture to the Sessions in the required manner for ratification of doctrinal standards.

This was not the case, however, for the “Terms of Communion” which were adopted on the same day as the *Summary*. These were sent down in overture and “duly approved by Sessions”, to be formally adopted by the 1932 Synod. The importance of this is that it represents changes in the *way* the *Testimony* was now to be held by the members, even though the *Testimony* itself remained unchanged. A comparison of the old and new Terms reveals several significant changes (see Table opposite). Three of the four new Terms continued the emphases of the past upon the claims of the Word of God and evangelical faith of the Gospel of Christ.

*Term I* is virtually identical in affirming that the Word of God is “the only infallible rule of faith and conduct”. The wording of the new term is less precise than the older one, for instead of identifying the Scriptures “to be” the Word of God, it only says the Word of God is “contained in” the Scriptures. While this is the wording of the *Shorter Catechism*, it has been exploited since the nineteenth century to shelter liberal views of inspiration. There is no evidence of any intent to weaken the RP Church’s view of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, as if to suggest that only certain parts of the Bible are the Word of God. It appears to have been more a case of careless imprecision.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Summary of the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1932), p. 6. This 68pp summary was prepared by the Rev. J. T. Potts (1862-1933), minister in Glasgow.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> Compare, for example, the first query of the Covenant of Church Membership of the RP Church of North America; “Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule for faith and life?”. The problem with the 1932 formulation was not lost on the 1976 Scottish Synod’s Code Revision Committee which rectified the problem in new Terms of Communion,



<b>Terms of Communion Compared</b>	
<b>Testimony (1856 ed.)</b>	<b>Summary (1932)</b>
<i>I</i> The acknowledgement of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God; and the alone infallible rule of faith and practice.	<i>I</i> Do you believe that the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and conduct?
<i>II</i> The acknowledgement of the <i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i> , and Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, to be founded upon, and agreeable to the Word of God.	<i>II</i> Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner and therefore in need of salvation; do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer of man; and do you accept and trust Him as your Saviour and your Lord?
<i>III</i> The owning of the Divine right, and original, of Presbyterian Church-government.	<i>III</i> Do you, as far as your knowledge extends, accept the views of truth and duty set forth in the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland?
<i>IV</i> The acknowledgement of the perpetual obligation of our Covenants, National and Solemn League. And in consistency with this, the duty of a minority adhering to these Vows, when the nation has cast them off; and under the impression of Solemn Covenant obligations, following our worthy ancestors, in endeavouring faithfully to maintain and diffuse the principle of the Reformation.	
<i>V</i> The owning of all the Scriptural Testimonies, and earnest contendings of Christ's faithful witnesses; whether martyrs, under the late persecution, or such as have succeeded them, in maintaining the same cause; and especially of the Judicial Act, Declaration and Testimony, emitted by the Reformed Synod.	
<i>VI</i> Practically adorning the doctrine of God, our Saviour, by walking in all his commandments, and ordinances, blamelessly.	<i>IV</i> Do you promise that by the help of God you will adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour by walking in His commandments and ordinances blamelessly?

approved in 1978. The new *Term I* is as follows: "1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the infallible Word of God and the supreme rule of faith and practice?" (*Minutes of Synod*, 1978, p. 6). The 1978 Terms are five in number. They cover the same ground as the 1932 Terms, but with consistently clearer and more felicitous language. The 1978 Synod also confirmed the action of the 1965 Synod in

*Term II* was altogether new. In keeping with the second-person-singular personal address of the new terms, it called for a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. *Term IV*, a commitment to living the Christian life, is a simple re-phrasing of old *Term VI* as a question.

*Term III*, however, represents a significant change. This replaced old *Terms II-V*. Instead of an explicit commitment to the entire corpus of Reformed Presbyterian doctrine and distinctive principles (the Westminster Standards [III]; *jus divinum* Presbyterian Church government [III]; the perpetual obligation of the Covenants [IV]; and the *Testimony* of the RP Church [V]), members would henceforth only acknowledge “the views of truth and duty” set forth in the *Testimony* “as far as [their] knowledge extends”.

What this meant was that membership of the Church was no longer on the basis of a credible profession of faith in Christ and an explicit commitment to the entire creedal position of the Church – a so-called *confessional*, or *creedal*, membership – but was henceforth to be on the basis of a credible profession of faith in Christ and an open, teachable spirit toward the Church’s doctrine – a *confessing* membership. In terms of the relationship of the members to the Church’s creed, this brought the RP Church into line with the other orthodox Scottish Churches, which only required commitment to the Confessional standards by their office-bearers – ministers, elders and deacons. It allowed for a range of dissent on particular teachings of the Church, which had always hitherto been denied.

The significance of this change could not be greater for a Covenanting Church. The essential point of the act of covenanting was for all of the members to uphold the whole *Testimony* of the body. Covenanting, to be covenanted uniformity in the historic Covenanter sense, demanded complete solidarity across the terms of the bond of that covenant. For Reformed Presbyterianism, this was not simply an agreement with the seventeenth-century Covenants (*National* and *Solemn League*), but with the *Testimony* as the definition and the vehicle of what it meant to uphold and apply the

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admitting non-Reformed Presbyterians to the Lord’s Supper, by allowing them to do so on the basis of those Terms of Communion (*I-IV*) which did not involve an explicit commitment to the distinctive doctrines of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. This confirmed the 1965 relaxation of the historic practice of “Close Communion,” which had permitted only Reformed Presbyterians to communicate in RP Churches. By the 1980s, the present writer – then a ministerial member of the Free Church of Scotland – was warmly accepted as Resident Supply in Wishaw and Glasgow RP congregations, with the privilege of administering the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Covenants faithfully. Historic Reformed Presbyterianism required a confessional, covenanted membership, because her concept of testimony-bearing was itself confessionally holistic – that is, it rested upon the distinctive principles, as of essential significance. The fact is that the 1932 *Term III* was effectively the end of “covenanting” as it had hitherto been understood and applied in the Reformed Presbyterian movement. Instead of embracing the *Testimony* explicitly, whole-heartedly, and without mental reservations, new members were now simply required to be Christians, who generally approved of the RP positions, as far as they knew them.<sup>66</sup>

The Church still formally held to the Covenants and to political dissent as set forth in the *Testimony*, but she had abandoned the essential condition for a covenanted testimony, namely a covenanted membership. This represented a fundamental departure from the stance of the minority of 1863.

### **B. VOTING – THE FRANCHISE QUESTION REVISITED**

We have already noted that abstention from voting was the practical linchpin of the RP Church’s distinctive position of political dissent after the Reform Act of 1832. We have also seen that it was the defence of this position in 1863 that decided the continued existence of the Reformed Presbyterian denomination in Scotland into the twentieth century. The post-Disruption RP Church continued to uphold the position of 1833 that voting was inconsistent with communicant privileges. The practice of the members of the Church, however, was not always consistent with its stated position. This was true even in the days of the strict subscriptionism before 1863, and could not but be a reality under the much looser subscription to the *Testimony* of the 1932 Terms of Communion.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find that by the 1950s, the very matter which had divided the Church in 1863 was again under discussion.

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<sup>66</sup> The same transition took place in the RP Church of North America in 1980, when, in the revised *Testimony* approved that year, the Synod ceased to require members of the Church to “believe” the Standards of the Church. Two years earlier, the perpetual obligation of the Covenants had been struck down by action of Synod. This writer recalls Rev. Sam Boyle, veteran missionary in Asia and a senior member of the Synod, declaring on the floor that this was the end of the Covenanter Church in which he had taken his vows as a minister. Any judicious assessment of the significance of these changes cannot but confirm the accuracy of that venerable brother’s judgment. It was indeed the effective abandonment of the original historic *raison d’être* of the Covenanting movement.

<sup>67</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 86 (1965), p. 106. The Synod of 1964 admitted the inconsistent practice in the Church, while quoting a pastoral address of the Joint Presbyteries, issued in Glasgow on 6th October 1868, to show that this position had been the practical reason for their continued existence as a denomination.



*RP Synod 1971 meeting at the Nicholson St. church in Glasgow  
(the site is now part of the Glasgow Sheriff Court car park).*

*Ministers present are Rev. A. Sinclair Horne (Loanhead), back row extreme right; Rev. J. T. Moffett Blair (Stranraer), back row 3rd from the right; and Rev. Archibald Guthrie (Wishaw), back row 5th from the right. The picture was probably taken by Rev. Marcus McCullough (Glasgow). Of the Synod members, only Mr. Horne and Mr. McCullough are still alive in 2015.*

In 1960, Synod adopted the recommendations of the Franchise Committee, which had been charged with resolving the question of voting. The main recommendation was “that in the case of Church members exercising the Elective Franchise, ordinary disciplinary measures as commonly understood, such as suspension from Church privileges, be held in abeyance”.<sup>68</sup> The Committee affirmed the continuing validity of “the principle of the Headship of Christ over the nation”, but argued that “the New Testament” did not give “specific guidance on the duty of Christians where the Franchise is concerned”, although we do have “broad principles” upon which to base our action.<sup>69</sup> For the second time, the 1833 rule against voting had been struck down by an RP Synod, only this time it was by the very body which owed its existence to its opposition to the original action in 1863! After nearly a century of continued testimony as a Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Synod in effect denied the very distinctive which had given her birth.

<sup>68</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 80 (August 1960), p. 122 (cf. p. 102).

<sup>69</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 79 (1959), p. 135 (Minutes of Synod).

At the same time, it was still asserted by the Synod that “voting” was integral to the “approval of the system” (i.e., the body politic).<sup>70</sup> This point had been denied by the majority in 1863. In fact, they lifted the ban on voting on the ground that voting did not imply approving of the system. So the 1960 position went beyond the 1863 decision, in that it, in effect, admitted that “approval of the system” was no more censurable than the exercise of the Franchise. “Political dissent” itself had been rendered a matter of opinion and had gone the way of the covenanted membership – a principle that could be taught, but not insisted upon. The second recommendation adopted in 1960 seems to sum up the drift into vagueness which had all but obliterated the sharp distinctiveness with which the RP Church had formerly approached her political theology: “that Church members be reminded of the Scriptural order of things for their guidance: 1st., the glory of God: 2nd., the peace and well-being of the Church: 3rd., the physical, moral and spiritual well-being of our fellow men, as well as ourselves, and to act with these guiding principles in mind: GOD FIRST: OTHERS SECOND: OURSELVES LAST.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, it was a matter of individual conscience, as to what one did about political dissent. The Disruption of 1863 had been undone. The minority had, in the end, joined the majority.

### **C. CHURCH UNION – STILL NOT “ABSORBED”**

The Minority RP Synod’s rigorous insistence upon the political dissent position after 1863 never inhibited the pursuit of talks on Church union with other Scottish Presbyterian Churches. The main exception has always been the established Church of Scotland, which was historically viewed by the Covenanters as an Erastian hireling.<sup>72</sup>

#### **1. The “ends of the Solemn League and Covenant” – 1871-8**

As early as 1871, James Kerr encouraged negotiations with the Original Secession Church and reminded the Synod of her “duty of seeking union in the Churches in fulfillment of the engagements of the Reformed

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 80 (August 1960), p. 122. The emphasis is in the original report.

<sup>72</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 8 (1879), p. 166ff.

Presbyterian Church to promote the ends of the Solemn League and Covenant".<sup>73</sup> This uncompromising basis for union would have aborted talks with any other Church, but the Seceders shared the Covenanter commitment to the descending obligation of the Covenants. Talks went on for no less than seven years, but came to nothing. "INCORPORATING UNION," said the RP Committee in 1878, ". . . could not prove a blessing, but an injury, to both Churches."<sup>74</sup> The process foundered, not on the Solemn League, but on the question of voting. The RP Church held that casting a vote was an *act* of incorporation with the nation, whereas the Seceders regarded voting as a *fruit* of incorporation.<sup>75</sup> For the latter, voting was therefore a duty, analogous to a shareholder's right to vote in his company's annual meeting. When a man (women still had no vote) bought Crown land to the value of £5 sterling, he qualified for the Franchise. For the Seceders, voting was no different from buying property, and no more sinful. Covenanters could buy property and thus gain the vote, but the RP theory of the relationship of voting to approval of the Constitution forbade their exercising that right. Once again the 1833 rule against voting proved to be the watershed issue of Reformed Presbyterian dissent from the rest of both the Church and the world.<sup>76</sup> The RP Church was for union, but only if others joined her.

## 2. So near and yet so far? – 1930-2

The issue did not arise again until 1930. In the aftermath of the 1929 union between the large, increasingly modernistic Established and United Free Churches, three of the smaller confessionally orthodox churches – the Free Church, the Original Secession, and the Reformed Presbyterian – went to the conference table.<sup>77</sup> By 1932, a "Preamble to a Declaration and Act of Union" had been formulated, but the Reformed Presbyterian Church withdrew, apparently because this excluded any

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<sup>73</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 4 (1871), p. 147.

<sup>74</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 7 (1878), p. 152.

<sup>75</sup> The RP position is made clear in a pamphlet, *Answers by The Union Committee of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, to the Questions and propositions proposed by the Joint Committee of the UOS and RP Churches* (Glasgow, 1875), p. 7. This asserts that "voters are necessarily identified with their representatives, and responsible for their official acts".

<sup>76</sup> Talks resumed in 1888 but foundered in 1890 with the conclusion that "points of difference . . . must prevent union". See *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 12 (1887-88), p. 435; Vol. 13 (1889-90), p. 446.

<sup>77</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 49 (1930), p. 158.

specific reference to their *Testimony*.<sup>78</sup> The RP Committee did remain in being, however, and in 1934 became involved in discussions with the same Churches, designed to “make united witness and protest on all matters affecting the Reformed Faith”.<sup>79</sup> These matters rested for a further thirty years – thoroughly justifying Samuel Kennedy’s confidence, already quoted, that there was little likelihood of the RP Church of Scotland losing her identity through absorption into larger Churches.<sup>80</sup> This was, however, arguably the closest to Church union that the Reformed Presbyterian Church had come since 1863, even if, in the end, there was really no readiness to concede her distinctive principles.

### **3. To “survive and . . . be worthy of the past” – 1961 to 1993**

In 1957, the Original Secession united with the Church of Scotland and the Church of the Erskines disappeared from Scottish history after a witness of some 224 years, too often sadly punctuated by division and dissension.<sup>81</sup> Thereafter, RP inter-Church relations were actively promoted with the Free Church as the principal focus. There is, however, little sense of any real enthusiasm for anything more than some vague “co-operation”.<sup>82</sup> In 1964, Synod asserted that her “priority in considerations” was the application of distinctive principles, namely, her view of “the Headship of Christ as related to the Elective Franchise issue”.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the RP Church approached the Free Church in 1966 to talk about the relations between the Churches. After the first meetings of their delegations in 1967, the RP Synod acknowledged that the “two principal matters” separating the RP and Free Churches,

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<sup>78</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 51 (1932), p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 53 (1934), p. 166.

<sup>80</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 51 (1932), p. 135.

<sup>81</sup> The last Seceder congregation in Scotland to retain its own organization was the Kilwinning congregation, which stayed out of the union and joined the Free Church in 1959. The last Seceder churches in North America united with the RP Church of North America in 1969. These were, and remain, in Washington, Iowa, Minneola, Kansas, and Rimersburg and Beaver (now called Tusca Area), in Pennsylvania. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in the USA is an historically Seceder successor denomination, formed from the 1782 union of the Associate Synod and the majority of the Reformed Presbyterians at that time. The present RPCNA was constituted in 1798 in Philadelphia from the Covenanters who remained outside of the 1782 Union, together with new immigrants from Scotland and Ireland.

<sup>82</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 81 (1961), p. 100.

<sup>83</sup> *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, Vol. 85 (1964), p. 107. See later Minutes of the Synod for continuing attention to this subject.

namely, the ban on voting and close communion, were “no longer such causes of separation as they once were”.<sup>84</sup>

#### **4. The decline of “distinctives”**

The reality was that by 1967 there was no more of a *doctrinal* cause of separation between the RP and Free Churches than there had been between the Majority RP Synod and the Free Church in 1876. With respect to distinctive principles, Reformed Presbyterians stood on the same ground as the majority they had so vigorously opposed a century before. They no longer exercised discipline for voting, or insisted upon a covenanted confessional membership, as they had in former days. They no longer practised close communion. On the other side of the equation, both churches held an unmodified commitment to the Bible and the Westminster Standards. Both sang the psalms of the Bible exclusively in the public worship of God, and without instrumental accompaniment. Both held the Scottish Covenants as part of their subordinate standards. We cannot escape the conclusion that doctrine *per se* was not the primary barrier to union with the Free Church. Arguably, the real barriers were those of size, practice, identity and ethnicity. Too much can be made of points like these, to be sure, for they are more often matters of perception than of substance. But it is important to reckon with the reality that doctrinal agreement is *in practice* rarely enough to make Churches embrace organic union. For Reformed Presbyterians, union would mean the final extinction of “the Covenanting Cause”. It would mean absorption – 250 people added to a body of some 20,000. A people’s sense of identity is a powerful force in their thinking. The mere thought that it might disappear gives pause and requires, at the very least, the triumph of faith over the pull of present attachments and long-standing sentiments. It also requires a vision of future possibilities sufficient to overcome any doubts and fears over what will be lost in the changes that must take place. The 1876 union occurred because *in practice* the Majority Synod RPs and the Free Church people of the time knew one another and found themselves to be so much of like mind, that they were persuaded that the union was right and desirable. Both were Lowland Churches. They overlapped in every community where RP churches were to be found. At every level, they appear to have been at ease with one another. Doctrinal hindrances

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<sup>84</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1967, p. 10.



had been removed, and they therefore worked hard – for fourteen years – to make the union happen.

For the minority of 1863, of course, the doctrinal differences were absolutely essential. Any practical or cultural differences were irrelevant, if they existed at all. In the 1990s the reverse was true. The doctrinal divide of 1863 no longer exists, for the minority, as we have seen, now stands very close to where the majority did by 1876. It is other factors which have held back the modern RP Church from following the majority into the modern Free Church. And what is different is the modern Free Church. It is no longer the Lowland Church of 1843, but the Highland, Gaelic-culture, ethnic Church of 1900, with her roots in a community that is distant and distinct from the Lowland Scottish ethos and history.<sup>85</sup> For this reason, union is difficult to contemplate, even though the former doctrinal hindrances have largely evaporated and even though personal relationships between ministers and members in both bodies are characterized by warmth and mutual respect. Yet the Scriptural demands of unity in Christ always transcend the personal and lay claim to the corporate. Consequently, many Reformed Presbyterians have keenly felt the tension between the harmony in Reformed doctrine and Gospel witness, which binds them spiritually to their brethren in other communions, and the fact of existing ecclesiastical separation. This tension is surely at the heart of the on-off nature of RP inter-Church union talks since 1871.

## **5. The Irish RP connection**

If the force of “distinctive principles” has diminished as a basis for a separate RP denominational existence, it has been balanced by a

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<sup>85</sup> The Free Church of Scotland, and after AD2000 the Free Church (Continuing), represent the continuation of the Constitutional minority which remained out of the union of the majority with the United Presbyterian Church in 1900. This minority was largely drawn from the Highlands and Islands. It is at least perceived by many outside observers as a largely Gaelic ethnic religious ghetto. This owes more to the popular media stereotype of the “Wee Free” sabbatarian in his black coat (exactly analogous to the American media myth of Puritans as men in black hats who burn witches) than to any judicious assessment of the facts or any experience of fellowship with the very fine Christians in that fellowship. Nevertheless it represents a cultural divide that has deep roots for Scots on both sides of the Highland line. And, unjust stereotypes aside, there are certain cultural perspectives that impact Church life significantly enough to give people pause – in both directions – from committing themselves to the uncharted waters of potential change. A bare creedal agreement is insufficient – there must be a faith-driven commitment to union and a confidence that it has the makings of a real blessing to the cause of Christ.

countervailing influence that has become stronger with the years – namely the “special relationship” that exists between the Scottish and Irish RP Churches. We have already noted that by the second quarter of the twentieth century, the Scottish RP Church was beginning to become a *de facto* Presbytery of her Irish sister Church. This was a function of available ministerial manpower and denominational size. A 1974 Synod report acknowledged that the steady stream of ministers from Ireland, and even from North America,<sup>86</sup> is “largely” the reason “the RP Church still exists in Scotland”.<sup>87</sup> Only two Scotsmen were ordained and inducted to Scottish RP pastorates in the twentieth century, and neither of them were children of the RP Church.<sup>88</sup> The predominantly Irish make-up of the ministry has proved decisive in charting the direction of the Scottish Synod. It kept the Church going, to be sure, but it transformed her into an appendage of the Irish Church. And since the Irish Church and her ministers still adhered with some vigor to the distinctive principles of covenanting and political dissent, their tendency was to retard any movement toward union with other Churches. Secure in their covenanting heritage, they had not come to Scotland to preside over the extinction of the cause in the motherland. Another deeper and more personal factor binding the two Churches are those bonds of Christian fellowship and affection that are shared by so many Reformed Presbyterians on both sides of the Irish Sea. This sense of belonging to the same Church family, reaching back through many generations, is a powerful force for maintaining an international Reformed Presbyterianism.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the closer the Scottish Church drew toward the Free Church, the more the Irish connection weighed in with encouragement and assistance in the interest of preserving and reviving the RP witness in Scotland. “Friendly contact” was maintained with “the Free Church ad hoc committee” through 1969,<sup>89</sup> but the Inter-Church Relations Committee, now under Irish conveners,<sup>90</sup> had, by

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<sup>86</sup> J. Boyd Tweed (Glasgow, 1938-40) and Paul E. Copeland (Wishaw, 1979-1982) from the USA, and Raymond E. Morton (Airdrie, 1975-89) from Canada.

<sup>87</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1974, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> A. Sinclair Horne, Loanhead, 1955; and James Clark, Glasgow, 1991. [Note: As of 2015, Mr. Horne is the Curator of the Magdalen Chapel in Edinburgh and is no longer an RP minister, and Mr. Clark is minister of the Free Church (Continuing) congregation in Inverness].

<sup>89</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1970, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> When Sinclair Horne, a native Scot, was Convener in the late 1960s, the primary focus was on the Free Church. From 1970-75, under Marcus McCullough and Archibald

1971, shifted the focus toward “greater co-operation with RP Churches.” By 1974 an “Ad Hoc Committee on Relationships between Irish and Scottish RP Churches” said the key to the Church’s future was “expansion” so as “to survive” and to be “worthy of the past and heritage of truth handed down to her”.<sup>91</sup> To this end, the idea of incorporating the Synods of Scotland, Ireland and North America in one General Assembly was suggested, with the understanding that this “Assembly would be responsible for the provision of manpower”. This would not be a “take-over bid”, the Convener reassured the Synod. After all, they – the Scottish Church – made the “request for fuller co-operation”. What was “absolutely essential to success” was the “definite commitment on the part of our people here in Scotland that they will retain their identity with the Reformed Presbyterian Church”.<sup>92</sup>

This is the theme which has guided the RP Church of Scotland ever since. A 1977 poll of the responses of the Sessions to the 1974 Ad Hoc Report showed widespread discouragement over continuing decline, but the majority did not favour becoming a Presbytery of the Irish Church.<sup>93</sup> Even so, discussions continued along that line, issuing in a Consultative Assembly in Edinburgh and Airdrie in 1979 with delegates from Ireland and North America, which adopted a number of co-operative measures for mission policy, theological education, a new psalter and mutual eligibility of personnel. At the heart of it, however, was the agreement that “the first call and commitment” was the maintenance of “the unity of the Spirit and Faith” within “our own Reformed Presbyterian Churches”.<sup>94</sup> That same year, the Inter-Church Relations Committee was abolished and the responsibilities for contact with other Churches placed in the hands of the Business of Synod Committee, a clear signal that the future, for weal or woe, rested with international Reformed Presbyterianism.<sup>95</sup>

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Guthrie, both Ulstermen, the Free Church receded from view and the idea of a global RP denomination was proposed. By 1976, when Mr. Horne was again Convener, the Report of that year gives more than a hint of disagreement with the drift to an exclusively RP focus. See *Minutes of Synod*, 1976, p. 12: “Inter-Church relations is a complex issue today and determining our position in relation to other bodies is not easy even within a Committee where different viewpoints can be expressed.”

<sup>91</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1974, p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1977, pp. 19-22. Airdrie, Loanhead, and Stranraer were against; Glasgow and Wishaw in favour.

<sup>94</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1980, p. 4. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee for Consultative Assembly. June 1979.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

The last flicker of the flirtation with the idea of Church union within Scotland in the twentieth century came in 1985, when a petition calling for union talks with the Free Church was dismissed. The RP Church of Ireland, on learning of the petition, had written to the Scottish Church urging them to take no action without consulting them. An opposing petition from Stranraer urging closer relations with the Church in Ireland was received and resulted in a Committee being appointed to discuss the matter with the Irish Synod in 1986.<sup>96</sup> The Church Union question, which had chased the history of the RP Church down the years since 1863, had apparently been buried. The future was now ineluctably linked to the brethren in Ireland.

## RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE

The most tangible legacy of 1863 is, of course, the *very existence* in modern Scotland of a Reformed Presbyterian Church. But for the steadfast conviction of William Anderson and his colleagues, and those who adhered to them, the Covenanting Church would have passed into history long ago. Their ruggedly independent spirit, their readiness to be a small minority upholding unpopular positions and their attachment to the heritage of their covenanting forefathers, has kept their particular emphasis on the Headship of Christ over the nation before at least a goodly section of the Christian community in Scotland for over a century, when otherwise there might have been silence.<sup>97</sup>

Somewhat less enduring have been the *distinctive principles* which had given birth to Reformed Presbyterianism. We have seen how the Church has modified her stance on several points that are central to being a *covenanted* body: membership ceased to be confessionally bound in 1932, voting became a matter of individual conscience in 1960, and close communion was relaxed in 1965. The RP Church has not altered her 1837-8 *Testimony* and so still officially holds the doctrine of the perpetual obligation of the Covenants as part of her creed. Nevertheless,

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<sup>96</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1985, pp. 1, 4.

<sup>97</sup> It was appropriate that it should have fallen to a long-time Reformed Presbyterian minister, Rev. A. Sinclair Horne, to head up the ministry of the Scottish Reformation Society, a society dedicated to proclaiming the Lordship of Christ over men and nations. Mr. Horne is the author of *Torchbearers of the Truth* (Edinburgh, 1966) and, with J. B. Hardie, of *In the Steps of the Covenanters* (Edinburgh, 1974), and was for many years the editor of *The Bulwark*, the magazine of the Scottish Reformation Society.

like the Majority Synod of 1876, she has effectively rendered this a matter of individual conscience for her people and embraced the very position which the men of 1863 so resolutely rejected. She is a Church without any solid doctrinal reason for her separate existence from other confessional Reformed churches in Scotland.<sup>98</sup> The RP Church of Scotland is, in practice, a generally Reformed Church with an unmodified commitment to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, within the shell of her covenanting tradition.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the Synod's awareness of the challenge she faces was vividly attested by her own deliverances.<sup>99</sup> In 1985, Synod published a pastoral letter entitled *Crisis in the Church*, which sought to assess the spiritual dimensions of the problem. This paints a bleak picture of a Church in which nearly half the members do not attend public worship, where a whole generation of young people have been lost, and where giving did not remotely approach the biblical principle of tithing. Quoting 1 Peter 4:17 – “It is time for judgement to begin with the household of God” – the letter called upon the membership to commit themselves to prayer, discipleship, evangelism, faithful attendance at worship, and biblical stewardship.<sup>100</sup> This theme continued in 1987 when Synod frankly debated the question of the “dissolution of the denomination while it can still be done with dignity”.<sup>101</sup> This resulted, however, not in dissolution, but in a renewed emphasis on the revitalization of the congregations. With the financial support of the RP Church of Ireland, evangelistic ministries were initiated in Wishaw, Glasgow, and Airdrie.

Time will tell what the future holds for the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Since 1863, the Church has significantly modified

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<sup>98</sup> As of 2015, there are nine Presbyterian denominations represented in Scotland with varying degrees of commitment to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. These are the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Church of Scotland, the United Free Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Associated Presbyterian Churches, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, and the International Presbyterian Church. Four of these Churches practise the same pattern of worship (Psalms only, without instrumental music): the RP Church, Free Church (Continuing), the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and the Associated Presbyterian Churches.

<sup>99</sup> *Minutes of Synod*, 1974, pp. 8-10; 1977, pp. 20-22.

<sup>100</sup> *Crisis in the Church* [March 1985], was published by action of the RP Synod, 20th October 1984, under the signature of A. Sinclair Horne. It uncompromisingly demonstrates that the health of a Church is a function of the commitment of her people, as opposed to the glory of her heritage or the purity of her creed.

<sup>101</sup> *Statistical Report from Session to Special Meeting of Synod on 21st November 1987*.



*RP Synod 1984 in the Airdrie church. Moderator Rev. Sinclair Horne welcomes Rev. Donald Lamont to address the Synod on behalf of the Free Church. Rev. Raymond Morton is Clerk of Synod (left). The two men in the pews are David Boyd and John Frame.*

her distinctive principles and practices and, of course, she is much reduced numerically. Yet the determined commitment to continue to proclaim Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of sinners and the Lord of men and nations still lives in the hearts of these descendants of the martyrs, as they work and pray for the renewal of the Church of the Covenanters for the twenty-first century. This may prove to be the most enduring legacy of the Disruption of 1863.

## **POSTSCRIPT 2015**

In the twenty years since the original paper was prepared, the RP Church of Scotland has undergone significant changes. The Synod has become simply a Presbytery – the “Joint Presbyteries” were always, as noted above, a legal fiction to maintain the continuing existence of the RP Synod. Of the five congregations in existence in 1983, as indicated in the Appendix, Glasgow and Loanhead were dissolved in the 1990s, and Wishaw has been joined to Airdrie.

The picture changed after 2010, not for any reason of extension from within the RP Church but indirectly through changes that took place in the Free Church of Scotland. In November 2010, the Free Church gave up her previous exclusive commitment to the use of inspired materials of praise without instrumental accompaniment, and this led to three former Free Church ministers and a number of people attaching themselves to the RP Church of Scotland.<sup>102</sup> New RP congregations were formed in Glasgow and Stornoway, principally from former Free Church members and adherents. In addition church-plants were initiated in Edinburgh and Stirling.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, there was a certain repositioning of the RP Church of Scotland in that the *Testimony* of 1838 was placed in abeyance and a fresh RP Constitution was drafted. This reaffirms the Westminster Standards and sets the testimony of the Church in the context of the affirmation of the Kingship of Christ over all of life – individual, family, Church, and state. Whereas the RP Church of Scotland in 1983 had five organized congregations with some 269 members, in 2015 she has four organized congregations and one mission church with around 300 members and adherents.

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<sup>102</sup> One of the ministers has subsequently left the RP Church of Scotland.

<sup>103</sup> The Stirling work has subsequently been discontinued.

**APPENDIX**  
**COMMUNICANT MEMBERSHIP IN THE REFORMED**  
**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

<b>CONGREGATIONS</b>	<b>1876</b>	<b>1915</b>	<b>1963</b>	<b>1983</b>
1. Glasgow	397	254	80	21
2. Airdrie	109	141	170	78
3. Wishaw	100	60	60	27
4. Loanhead	100	88	59	14
5. Greenock	165	200	<i>(cl. 1954)</i>	–
6. Paisley	68	49	<i>(cl. 1940)</i>	–
7. Penpont	84	?	<i>(cl. 193?)</i>	–
8. Thurso	?	?	<i>(cl. 1928)</i>	–
9. Wick	?	<i>(cl. 1893)</i>	–	–
10. Lorn	15	<i>(cl. 1893)</i>	–	–
11. Girvan	?	<i>(cl. 1886)</i>	–	–
12. Rothesay (1876)	?	<i>(cl. 1881)</i>	–	–
13. Whithorn (1878)	–	<i>(cl. 1899)</i>	–	–
14. Douglas Water (1880)	–	<i>(cl. 1885)</i>	–	–
15. Stranraer (1887)	–	121	179	129
16. Glasgow North (1899)	–	<i>(cl. 1909)</i>	–	–
17. Edinburgh (1903)	–	<i>(left 1910)</i>	–	–
<b>Total Membership</b>	<b>1,038</b>	<b>913</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>Ministers</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

**Notes:**

1. In 1863, the undivided RP Church of Scotland consisted of 46 congregations with slightly more than 6,900 communicants. There were five congregations in Glasgow – First RP Church in Great Hamilton Street had been pastored by William Symington (1795-1862), widely known as the author of *Atonement and Intercession* and *Messiah the Prince*. With 929 members, this was the largest congregation in the denomination. RP churches – many of a good size – were concentrated in the south and west of Scotland, the traditional Covenanting areas.

2. In addition to the above congregations, there were “mission stations” in Darvel, Dundee and Lochgilphead. These were conservative remnants from Majority Synod churches. There is no record of the membership of these groups.