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The Bible in Irish Presbyterianism,

R. Buick Knox

Presbyterianism had been planted in Ireland in the seventeenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Presbyterian congregations were organized in two Synods, the Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod. The congregations were brought together in 1840 to form the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the two Synods were united to form its General Assembly. These two Synods had derived from two strands of presbyterianism in Scotland.

Presbyterianism had been established as the form of government of the Church of Scotland in 1690 after William and Mary had become King and Queen in place of the exiled King James who was Mary's father and William's uncle. The Westminster Confession of Faith was also adopted as the Church's standard statement of the teaching set in the Bible. Since then, this Confession and its accompanying Larger and Shorter Catechisms have had a similar place in many Presbyterian Churches, subordinate only to the Bible.

This Confession had been drawn up at the Assembly which began in 1643 when the English and Scottish Parliaments were trying to plan forms of government in Church and State which would replace episcopacy in both countries and also curtail the power of the monarchy. It was envisaged that the agreed form would be imposed upon the Churches in both countries and that the civil authorities would ensure conformity to the new order.

Circumstances changed in 1660 and monarchy and episcopacy were restored in full and harsh rigour in Great Britain and Ireland. The Revolution of 1688 brought William and Mary to the throne and they were firmly against enforced conformity. In Ireland, the episcopal Church of Ireland retained its established position with many privileges, but presbyterians were allowed to meet, worship and organize according to their own principles. They were also granted a state subsidy, the Regium Donum or Royal Bounty, for the upkeep of

their ministers. These ministers and their congregations were organized into presbyteries which were combined within the Synod of Ulster. This Synod adopted the Westminster Confession as its standard of Faith and required ministers to subscribe to it as the confession of their own faith. There were some ministers who, while holding the doctrines set forth in the Confession, refused to subscribe to what they called "human tests of divine truth." Presbyteries of Antrim and Dublin were formed for these non-subscribers, but they were still within the Synod of Ulster.

The Secession Synod was formed in the eighteenth century from a number of congregations founded by people who had connections with the Scottish Seceders who had broken away from the Church of Scotland in 1733, These Seceders, both in Scotland and Ireland, also accepted the Westminster Confession as their standard and they were firm in requiring ministers to subscribe it as their own confession.

In the early years of the nineteenth century there arose within the Synod of Ulster a more serious questioning of some of the teaching in the Westminster Confession, particularly its teaching on the divinity of Christ and on the Trinity. This had echoes of the Arian controversy which had troubled the Church in the fourth century. A section of the Synod's ministers and elders held that some features of the Confession did not accord with biblical teaching and they therefore had reservations about subscribing to it as the Confession of their own personal belief. Many of them were influenced by the writings and speeches of English Unitarians. This led to fierce controversy in newspapers and pamphlets and on platforms between parties led by Henry Montgomery and Henry Cooke. Cooke was the champion of the full Trinitarian doctrine and the advocate of subscription without any reservations. /1 The controversy led to a division within the Synod and its congregations. In 1829, seventeen ministers withdrew from the Synod and formed the Remonstrant Synod. This minority and the congregations which followed them eventually became organized as the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church.

This Church has been commonly known as the Unitarian Church but it has never acknowledged this title. It claims that among its ministers and members there are those who

are Unitarians and those who are Trinitarians but it also asserts that they are all at one in refusing to subscribe to the man-made Confession and in "believing firmly that the Bible and the Bible alone should be their only rule of Faith and Duty." /2 Many of the more affluent members of the congregations in the Synod of Ulster were in this seceding minority and they were often the trustees of the churches and thus they were able to claim and keep possession of many of the old presbyterian churches. /3 Their notice-boards still proclaim that they were the First presbyterian churches in the area; this happened in Belfast, Dunmurry, Dromore, Banbridge and other places.

In this controversy there were vital doctrinal issues at stake. The residual Synod of Ulster held that it had maintained the essential Trinitarian teaching of the Bible which was set forth in the historic creeds and in the Westminster Confession of Faith. It claimed that it was the right and duty of the Church to define what it believed to be the essential teaching of the Bible and to ask its ministers for written assent thereto. At its meeting in 1834 the Synod made subscription to the Westminster Confession obligatory upon its ministers. This paved the way for union with the Secession Synod in 1840. The new General Assembly at once made the Confession its standard of doctrine. In the course of time the Assembly compiled a Rule of Faith which in its fully-developed form affirmed that in the Confession and the two Catechisms there is set forth what the Church "understands the Word of God to teach on certain important points of doctrine and worship." It also affirmed that the Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and practice and the supreme standard of the Church. The formula of subscription required subscribers to declare that the Confession was founded on and agreeable to the Word of God and that it was the confession of their own personal belief. /4

Shortly after the Irish union in 1840 the Church of Scotland was moving towards a further disruption. Patronage in the appointment of ministers was again an

issue. It had been festering since the earlier secession of 1733. In the course of the centuries local landowners had built and endowed churches and they secured the right to nominate ministers for these churches. This right had become a heritable possession and, despite several interruptions, the system had survived through the Reformation period and was fully restored in 1712. Patrons often had a far wider knowledge of available candidates than local parishioners could have and they had to choose from those ordained or licensed by presbyteries. In hundreds of cases the presentees of the patrons were accepted without question. However, there had recently been some very inappropriate presentations. The civil courts had compelled the Church to accept and install these presentees. Many ministers and church members became convinced that this was a gross infringement of the right of congregations to call their own ministers and they seceded and formed the Free Church of Scotland. The Irish General Assembly deplored the disruption but gave its full support to the Free Church which it said was standing for the Scriptural Principles of their reforming forefathers. /5

The Assembly took it as proven that the Church in New Testament times ordered its life by the teaching of Christ, the guidance of the Twelve and the leading of the Holy Spirit; it had to exist independent of any control by the government which at that time was the persecuting Roman Empire. However, the circumstances are rarely identical. In nineteenth-century Ireland the Presbyterian Church was not under persecution by a pagan ruler but was a tolerated minority still in receipt of the Regium Donum granted by a king whose own roots had been in the Dutch Reformed Church.

The Church thus claimed freedom from state control in its organisation, but, on the other hand, the Westminster Confession held that it was the duty of the civil magistrate to use his civil power to ensure conformity to the ordinances of God as drawn from the Bible and laid down by the Church. In 1850 a number of laymen laid before the Assembly a memorial setting forth their dissent from this statement. They held it to be an assertion to which many members of the Church could not subscribe and therefore would be unable to accept or be appointed to office in the

Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The memorial was referred to a committee which reported in 1852 that it had drawn up proposals which satisfied the memorialists. The committee said the offending words were in the Confession and could not be deleted, but it advised the Assembly to declare that it did not hold the words in the sense attributed to them by the memorialists; the Assembly should include in its formularies a definition of the sense in which it did understand them. This led to the inclusion in the Rule of Faith of the declaration that "although civil rulers are bound to render obedience to Christ in their own province, yet they ought not to attempt in any way to constrain men's religious beliefs or invade the rights of conscience." /6

Another change in circumstances came about when Gladstone, the Prime Minister, proposed a plan which he hoped would cure the resentment against the privileged position of the Church of Ireland. This resentment was felt by both Roman Catholics and Presbyterians who together made up the great majority of the Irish people. The plan provided for the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and the disendowment of all Churches. This affected the Church of Ireland severely though it may be adjudged to have been for its good in the long run. /7 It also meant the end of the Regium Donum which provided each presbyterian minister with £70 annually. This halved their income since the average stipend was £68 and some ministers were paid far below the average. The loss could thus be devastating. To soften the blow, the government granted to each minister a compensating lump sum. To the great credit of the ministers, practically all of them commuted that sum into a central fund for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of future ministers; four hundred and seventy-two ministers surrendered £308,000 to the Fund. The benefit of that is still being reaped by presbyterian ministers. /8

There were some voices in the Assembly of 1868 who supported the change and urged the Assembly to anticipate the change by renouncing the endowment. They held it would be much more in accord with scripture and

the Gospel for ministers to depend upon the freewill offerings of the people.. They also held that the end of the subsidy would open the gates of generosity of the people. They said it would be for the ultimate good of the Church and would bring it into line with the majority of evangelical Churches in the world. The Assembly did not share this view which it rejected after twenty-four hours of debate on three successive days. It repeated the view it had expressed in 1850 that "our Christian liberty is not in any way compromised by our acceptance of a parliamentary endowment." /9 The Assembly held it to be in accord with scripture for the State to encourage the growth and influence of the Church and to provide for its needs. It was pointed out that the seventeenth-century pioneers had come from Scotland to Ireland expecting to be taken into the established Church and to receive the usual ministerial support. Many of them had indeed ministered in parish churches for some years. The presbyterians had been much aggrieved when a firm episcopal policy brought this arrangement to an end. Their successors had welcomed the grant of the Regium Donum and their successors in their turn regretted its cessation in 1869. In course of time the Church abandoned any hope of such provision being restored and by now would look upon it as a threat to its independence, though, along with other charitable institutions, it receives some relief from taxation. /10

After the turbulent period of controversy over the doctrines relating to the Person of Christ the Presbyterian Church was ready for a period of stability and tranquillity. During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Assembly was little troubled with major doctrinal debates. Most members were content to accept the agreed position of the Bible as the source and norm of doctrine and the Confession the sound exposition of that doctrine. This calm was reinforced by the movement of Revival in 1859 which was based on Bible study and stressed the plan of salvation set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. Moreover, from 1866 to 1895 Robert Watts was the professor of Theology in the Church's college in Belfast and he was a strong champion of the Confession as the bastion of scriptural purity.

He kept at bay the contemporary challenges to the traditional position. /11

However, if the Irish Church had a time of doctrinal calm, the Churches in Scotland were being ruffled by current movements of thought and by the flood of scientific studies which raised questions about the origin and age of the universe, about the formation of the solar system in which the earth was one planet, and about the nature and destiny of the human race. Countless books appeared on the compilation of the Old and New Testaments. These studies showed how various strands of Jewish tradition had been woven together by Jewish leaders and historians to produce the Old Testament and to show therein the purpose of God for his chosen people and for all the human race. There were obviously different levels of moral and spiritual teaching in the Bible. Many readers found it difficult to grasp how some of the brutal massacres and plagues attributed to God in the Old Testament could be the actions of the God revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Many were asking how the teaching of Christ could be related to the teaching of the Confession and the Catechisms that God out of his mere good pleasure had elected some to receive eternal life and thereby seemed to leave the rest of the human race to a deserved and inescapable condemnation. All these movements and questions moved the Scottish Churches to draw up Declaratory Acts defining the sense in which they held the Bible to be the Word of God and the extent to which there could be liberty of interpretation. These Acts pointed out the other strand in the Confession which stressed the gift of grace freely offered to all in the Gospel.

The United Presbyterian Church was the first to pass such an Act. This Church had as its core the descendants of the Seceders of 1733 from whom the Irish Secession Synod had been derived. In 1847 these Seceders had united with the successors of a further group of eighteenth-century seceders. In 1879 this United Presbyterian Church affirmed in this Act that the ground of Christ's perfect sacrifice was the basis for the free offer of salvation in the Gospel to all, sufficient for all and adapted to all. It also held that there was liberty of opinion on matters not entering into the substance of the faith. /12

The Irish Church seemed to remain aloof from this turmoil. There were ministers who read much of the current spate of books and pamphlets and who even wrote letters and pamphlets on the issues but the Assembly was not seriously disturbed. Some of the ferment surfaced in the Assembly of 1900. There were a few United Presbyterian churches in Ireland and in 1900 they approached the Assembly with a view to joining the Presbyterian Church. The Assembly authorized negotiations. The United Presbyterian representatives asked for an assurance that their present and future ministers and elders would still be able to claim the benefit of the Declaratory Act. The Assembly refused to make this concession and insisted that all ministers and elders in the Presbyterian Church had to subscribe to the declaration that the Confession was agreeable to the Word and was the confession of their own belief. The negotiations proceeded no further at this stage. /13

Some members of Assembly held that there was already written into the Rule of Faith a measure of liberty which should have been sufficient to enable the United Presbyterian churches to enter the Presbyterian Church in Ireland without requiring a special concession. The Rule stressed "the inalienable right of private judgment and the obligation "not to refuse light from any quarter." Moreover the Rule stated that the Confession laid down what the Bible taught "on certain important points of doctrine and worship;" it did not specify what these points were and therefore did not tie ministers and elders to every detail of the Confession. This has been and remains a valuable latitude. It has enabled many ministers and elders to be at home in Irish Presbyterianism when the swirling winds of thought assailed the Church in the twentieth century. Stalwarts such as Professor Francis Petticrew upheld and even stiffened the Watts tradition, but the latitude in the Rule of Faith was sufficient to calm any agitation for a declaratory act on the Scottish lines.

Though the Church was not shaken in the latter part of the nineteenth century by doctrinal controversies which could have torn the Church apart, the Assembly's proceedings were not without times of excitement. There were occasional rumblings about the spread of rationalism and infidelity and

about the consequences of the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England; all these trends were said to be a departure from the teaching of Christ and the Apostles as set forth in the Bible, but the Assembly noted that there was in England the Presbyterian Church which had not turned its back on the people or its face to graven images! /14

The hottest proceedings in the Assembly centred around the domestic issues of the use of hymns and organs in the public worship of God. It is hard for the present generation which uses a variety of musical instruments in worship and sings medleys of modern songs to take seriously the earnestness with which these issues were debated in the Assembly. The Assembly laid down the principle that God should be worshipped only by the means which he himself had provided, namely, the human voice and the psalms. The NT did say that at the Last Supper Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn but it was assumed that this was the psalm usually sung at the end of a Jewish meal. /15 In messages to American Presbyterian Churches in 1853 and 1854 the Assembly urged them to keep to the psalmody which "should not be superseded by hymns of human composition." /16 One Presbyterian Synod replied in 1855 and assured the Assembly that it had kept separate from the larger Presbyterian Churches which did not adhere to the inspired Psalter in worship. The Assembly admitted that the standard of hymn-singing was low and needed to be improved to be a worthy offering to God.

Despite declarations that the Psalms of David were the only acceptable forms of praise in public worship, many congregations, though not all, made use of the Scottish Paraphrases which were tolerable as versions of the actual words of scripture. These were added to the 1879 edition of the Psalter, and five hymns were added, though these were rarely, if ever, used. Some congregations found the repertoire of hymns and paraphrases too limiting; the Assembly received petitions from Kingstown congregation in 1887 and from Elmwood in Belfast in 1888 asking for permission to use hymns but these requests were refused. In 1895 Professor Todd Martin, the convener of the Psalmody Committee, told the Assembly that the time had come for the production of a hymnbook. /17 The Committee felt

that many hymnbooks were being used for some services in various churches and therefore it was time to have a book containing hymns whose teaching was in accord with the Church's doctrine. The Assembly decided by 278 to 163 to appoint another committee to prepare the contents of a suitable book. Petticrew protested and held that the only scriptural warrant was to "sing psalms with grace in the heart;" there was no basis for a book of uninspired hymns which, in his view, was bound to undermine the regulative place of the Word of God. The committee replied that the NT did speak of "hymns and spiritual songs" and there was no evidence that these referred only to psalms. /18

The Assembly was then invited by the Free Church of Scotland to join with the other presbyterian Churches in Scotland, England and Canada in the preparation of a hymnbook. The Assembly gave a favourable response. In 1896, John McIlveen, minister of Crescent church in Belfast and convener of the hymnbook committee, reported that the Irish representatives had been warmly welcomed in the drafting committee. The Assembly voted by 331 to 242 to continue to share in the work. Petticrew again protested; he held that uninspired men had no warrant to prepared a book of uninspired hymns and no Assembly of uninspired ministers and elders could sanction an uninspired book which had no warrant in the Word of God. Moreover, when the draft list of hymns was submitted to the Assembly, Petticrew and others held that it contained pieces by "Romanists, Ritualists, Unitarians, Socinians and other errorists" and some of the pieces had "some of the worst errors of Popery." The Assembly's committee replied that authorisation of hymns did not put them on a level with the Word of God but they could contain teaching which was fully in accord with the Word of God. Moreover, Romanists and Ritualists held the great doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation and many of their hymns contained nothing but the truth. Despite an intensive campaign only 646 out of 2070 elders had been persuaded to sign a petition against taking part in the preparation of the hymnbook. / 19 In 1897 the number of protesting elders had risen to 835 but the Assembly defeated by 312 to 197 a proposal to opt out of the project. The issue was kept alive by an overture from the presbyteries of

Glendermott and Limavady claiming that "the elevation of uninspired hymns to the dignity of Scripture and to the place hitherto occupied by the inspired psalms which they are expected to supplant and finally to supersede has shocked the moral sense of multitudes and grieved the hearts of noble office-bearers and people as an offence bordering on sacrilege." /20 When this overture was considered in 1898 it had lost its point since the hymnary had now been published and was on sale in editions ranging in price from two pence to four shillings and sixpence. By 1899, over one million copies had been sold in the presbyterian world. There was a steady annual sale in Ireland ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 copies.

In 1920, the project for a revision was mooted. The Irish committee regretted "the proposed revision of a book which has not yet come to its own in Ireland in the matter of general adoption," but it also advised the Assembly that it would be a fatal mistake to remain outside the project. Professor Ernest Davey of the College in Belfast, Professor R.A.S. Macalister of the National University of Ireland and Rev. James Salters, minister of Regent Street Church, Newtownards, were the Irish representatives on the editorial committee. In 1926 the proposed list of contents was before the Assembly; there was considerable criticism of the list, but the Assembly's own committee asked members of the Church to look upon the Christian truth set out in the hymns as "a jewel with many facets" and to recognize that "others-differently-minded to ourselves must be credited with sincerity and with the best of intentions in their views as to the complexion the book should take." /21 The Revised Church Hymnary appeared in 1927 and proved to be one of the finest hymnbooks produced in the twentieth century. In its first three years 39,265 copies of the words edition and 3730 of the music edition were sold in Ireland. It soon became accepted over the whole Church. It can be said of it, as was said of its predecessor, that in many congregations its rich resources have never been fully used.

A parallel and much fiercer controversy had raged over the introduction of instrumental music as an aid to singing in the public worship of God. In 1868 the Assembly was asked by the Synod of Monaghan to give a ruling on

on the issue. Harmoniums had been in use for some years in Sabbath schools and weeknight meetings but Enniskillen was a pioneering congregation in using a harmonium in the stated services of the church. The presbytery of Clogher reported the matter to the Synod which now referred it to the Assembly. It was proposed that the Assembly set up a commission to examine the question and define the law of the Church. An amendment was accepted which stated that the law was clear and there was no need for further enquiry; the innovation was a breach of the Church's practice and had no scriptural warrant. The Assembly ordered the congregation of Enniskillen to silence the instrument at once. Enniskillen refused to comply. /22 In the following years, some congregations, especially in the south and west of Ireland, introduced instruments. Year after year, the Assembly launched stern orders commanding the silencing of organs. Commissions were appointed to visit offending congregations who proved resistant to persuasion. The instrumental infection spread to many churches.

In 1872 the Assembly considered a proposal to leave the matter to "the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word of God." This was opposed on the ground that it did not specify what the rules were and left the matter open to local decisions. After "protracted and very earnest discussion" this proposal was rejected by the surprisingly narrow margin of 180 to 145. A further proposal for the reiteration of the mandate that "vocal music is to be the only music in the public praises of God" produce a tied vote of 152 for and against. The Moderator suggested that the matter be left over for a year and in the meantime no congregation should introduce an instrument. This was agreed at 5.30 AM after twenty-two hours of debate. /23 In 1873 the Assembly admitted that the general standard of singing was "dark and disappointing" but "the ugly facts" were an argument for training congregations to sing and not for introducing organs. After eleven hours debate the Assembly decided to encourage congregations to improve their standard of singing. /24

During all these debates Scripture was cited again and again. One of the main arguments was that at the Last Supper when Christ and the disciples sang a hymn they had no instrumental accompaniment and this was the decisive

precedent. Over against this was the argument that the prohibition was an "unscriptural infringement of the rights and liberties of Christian people;" it was also pointed out that the Church had to take account of the whole range of Biblical teaching, and as the Bible included psalms which spoke of praising God with trumpets, strings, pipes and organs. The NT contained no condemnation of these instruments.

Each year the Assembly was assailed by petitions asking for urgent action to silence organs. In 1879, forty-five petitions were signed by 5098 persons; one from First Broughshane had 1157 signatures. In 1885, forty-eight petitions were signed by 18,592 persons. Eleven petitions, mostly from the south and west, asked for an end of the prohibition, but these were signed by only 647 persons. Petticrew had instigated and supported these petitions and he urged the Assembly to declare "the Scriptural mode of the worship of God is that observed by the Christian Church when under the guidance of the inspired Apostles in which there is no evidence that instrumental music had any place." The debate was so hot that a group of opponents of instrumental music walked out protesting that the Moderator was trying to stifle debate. They were only persuaded to return when they were promised unhindered liberty of debate. The tension was so great that it was at last agreed to postpone a further vote until 1886. In that year petitions signed by 27,376 persons were presented, but the Assembly was beginning to sense that it would be impossible to silence all organs. The issue rumbled on in Assembly after Assembly until 1892 when it was agreed by 111 to 86 to pass from the question. Attempts were made in subsequent years to revive the issue but the tide was now flowing not only for harmoniums but for pipe organs. /25 Alfred Hollins, the blind organist of St. George's Free Church in Edinburgh, crossed to Belfast on several occasions to give recital on new organs. Scriptural authority was given to the occasions by sermons on the text from Psalm 150, "Praise him with stringed instruments and organs." /26

Notes

1. J.L. Porter, The Life and Times of Henry Cooke (1875); R. Finlay Holmes, Henry Cooke (1981)
2. Statements by the officers of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Belfast Newsletter, 29 June 1989.
3. This was arranged under the Dissenters' Chapels Act which the Irish General Assembly later described as "legalized fraud;" Minutes of the General Assembly (hereafter MGA), 1844.
4. J.M. Barkley, The Westminster Formularies in Irish Presbyterianism (1956).
5. J.H.S. Burleigh, A History of the Church of Scotland (1969), pt.IV, ch.IV
6. MGA 1850 and 1852.
7. P.M.H. Bell, Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales (1970); see my review in The Expository Times, March 1970, 174
8. MGA 1871.
9. MGA 1850, 863.
10. MGA 1868, 999
11. R. Allen, The Presbyterian College, Belfast, 1853-1953 (1954), 177-188
12. A.L. Drummond & J. Bulloch, The Church in Late Victorian Scotland (1978), 36-39.
13. MGA 1900, 993; 1901, 61-62.
14. MGA 1899, 757 & 816
15. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI; Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God.
16. MGA, 1853 & 1854
17. MGA 1895, 998
18. MGA 1895, 1000 & 1024; Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI. v; Col.3.16.
19. MGA 1896, 95-6 & 136ff.

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- 20 MGA, 1897, 327-8 & 348; 1899, 762
21. MGA 1920, 1179; Reports to GA 1923, 62; 1926,66
22. MGA 1868
23. MGA 1872
24. MGA 1873
25. MGA 1886, 108-9; 1892, 317
26. A. Hollins, A Blind Musician Looks Back (1936), 98ff., 266

(To Be Continued)