

THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND AND THE DISRUPTION OF 1863. I. DISRUPTION AND RECOVERY

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The Reformed Presbyterian (RP) Church of Scotland is the lineal descendant of the Covenanting movement of the seventeenth century. 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 Revd 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 notwithstanding the talk of union among the smaller Scottish Presbyterian Churches.¹

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 Pet. 1:1) in spite of their often very real differences. Our main focus

¹ *Reformed Presbyterian Witness* 51 (1932), p. 135.

will be upon the 'Disruption'² 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.³

The Covenanters and their Church (1679-1863)

The movement that was later to become the Reformed Presbyterian Church emerged in the period immediately following the Rutherglen Testimony of May 29, 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 December 15, 1681. Their position was vividly proclaimed in a series of public declarations, most notably those at Sanquhar (June 22, 1680), Torwood (also 1680) and Lanark (January 12, 1682), and *The Apologetical Declaration* and *The Informatory Vindication* (both 1684).⁴

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,

2 This is not to be confused with *the* 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.

3 For a somewhat fuller account, see my article 'Reformed Presbyterian Church' in the forthcoming *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (1993).

4 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 Kilmaccolm was first published in Paisley in 1791.

Linning and Boyd, left them for the Established Church in 1690, and it was not until 1706, when the Revd 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.⁵ Then, with the accession of a second minister, the Revd Thomas Nairn, the Reformed Presbytery was formed – at Braehead, near Carnwath, on August 1, 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’.⁶ 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.⁷

Fifty years later, in 1811, there were eighteen charges and thirteen ministers in three Presbyteries,⁸ 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.⁹ This

⁵ The Revd 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.

⁶ Matthew Hutchison, *The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland, 1680-1876* (Paisley, 1893), pp. 197-8. ‘The Breach’ gave rise to a body called ‘The Reformed Presbytery of Edinburgh’, which continued to exist until about 1817.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Hutchison, p. 255.

⁹ For the annals of the RP C. of S., see W.J. Couper: ‘The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland: its Congregations, Ministers and

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, 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’ was, however, to become ‘high noon’ in the ‘Disruption’ of 1863.

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.¹⁰ These make sad, if absorbing, reading, as

Students’, in *Records of the Scottish Church History Society 2* (1925).

- 10 Five annual stenographic records of the Synod’s debate 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); *Principle v. Practice* (Glasgow, 1860); *Full Report of Discussions in the RP Synod, at Edinburgh, May, 1861...* (Glasgow, 1861); *Full Report of Discussion in the RP Synod in Glasgow May 1862* (Glasgow, 1862); and *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1863). Supplementary publications included: *Review of Discussion in the RP Synod at Edinburgh, May 1861* (Glasgow 1861); *Review of Discussions in the RP Synod at Glasgow, May 1862; and of the Committee of Synod’s Report, which was based on the legal opinions of Mr Sheriff Bell, Mr Sheriff Strathearn, Mr A. Murray Dunlop, Mr John Bright, and*

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 200 years of practical political dissent, this was a catastrophe and the most important set-back 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.

1. 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.¹¹ This practice 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 and voting for anyone who might take political office (and have to

other six gentlemen (Glasgow, 1863); and *Disruption Portrait of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1863).

11 The non-voting position (with voting as a *censurable* offence) really came into play only 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 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.

swear to uphold the covenant-breaking British constitution) was therefore to be avoided as the sin of incorporation with an immoral government. Of all these, it was *abstention 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.

1.1 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.¹² This did not result 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 1837.¹³ This very crisply underscored the doctrinal differences separating the RP Church from 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. She also

¹² Hutchison, p. 263.

¹³ *The Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland* (Paisley, 1838). 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 remains the doctrinal standard of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1992, although it was last reprinted in the 1870s.

rejected the voluntarism of the Secession and Relief Churches.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ This process was eventually to lead to the union of the post-1863 majority Synod with the Free Church in 1876.

1.2 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. After that date, many did have the vote and apparently exercised the privilege.¹⁶ 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'¹⁷ (*i.e.* membership). 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.¹⁸

The Synod of 1858. 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

14 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 recognise the kingship of Christ and give legal status and protection to the church.

15 Hutchison, p. 300 (*cf.* 338ff.).

16 Hutchison, p. 281.

17 Hutchison, p. 282.

18 Hutchison, p. 326.

position on voting as adopted in 1833.¹⁹ 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. But there was still the 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’²⁰ (*i.e.*, vote for others to sit in Parliament), but wished 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’.²¹ Subsequent events were to prove this analysis to be substantially correct.

¹⁹ *Disruption Portrait of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1863), p.1.

²⁰ *Testimony*, p. 222.

²¹ *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod in Glasgow, May 1862...* (Glasgow, 1862) p. 5.

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 credal ban on voting.

It is clear from the debate that the leadership of the church had changed its mind on this point. William Symington, certainly 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 which the whole diversity of opinion lies, is that of voting being identified with taking the oaths’,²² 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 shutting people 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 ‘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’.²³ 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 not but have been a stunning blow to the petitioners.²⁴ The

²² *Our Testimony Compromised: A Full Report of the Discussion in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod regarding the Use of the Electoral Franchise* (Glasgow, 1859), p. 20.

²³ *Our Testimony Compromised*, p. 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.19. 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

subsequent vote buried forever, in the pre-Disruption RP Synod, any insistence that members not exercise the electoral franchise on pain of ecclesiastical discipline.

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.²⁵ 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,'²⁶ and the equally rigorous 'Reformed Presbytery' in North America (the 'Steelites'). They were to remain aloof even from the post-Disruption Minority after 1863.²⁷

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

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).

25 John Cunningham, *Our Testimony Kept; or the Position of Separation taken by the Reformed Presbyterian Congregation of London, in May 1859* (Glasgow, 1860), pp. 26-9. This largely reduplicates the text of *Our Testimony Compromised*.

26 *The London Scottish RP Magazine*, 1 January, 1866, p.1. The Wigtonshire 'Society' was the remnant of the followers of the Revd 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.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 4. The 'Reformed Presbytery' was a conservative split from the Old Light RP Church of North America in 1840 under the leadership of David Steele (Steele, *Reminiscences. Historical and Biographical of a Ministry in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, during fifty-three years*, Philadelphia, 1883). At the time of writing, a remnant Steelite congregation still meets regularly for worship in the North Union RP Church, Brownsdale, Pennsylvania, still singing praise from the Scottish Psalter of 1650.

continue to 'proceed in the matter until they bring it to an issue', in the meantime expressing approval for their actions to that point.²⁸ This was ostensibly only discipline deferred, but subsequent events show that Symington and the majority in Synod had no intention of disciplining Mr McCubbin 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 in 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.²⁹ 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' [my emphasis]. Yes, the Constitution was defective, but, no, it was not as defective as had hitherto been thought. *Ergo*, voting was more a matter of judgement, 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

²⁸ *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), p. 28.

²⁹ *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine*, May 1862, p. 230 (Minutes of Synod). 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. (See also *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, in Glasgow, May 1862*, pp. 122-3.)

sessions and presbyteries, for a vote, which would then be ratified by the 1863 Synod. Only two ministers and five elders registered their dissent.³⁰

2. The Synod Divides – May 7, 1863

When Synod met in the First RP Church, Great Hamilton Street, Glasgow on May 7, 1863, it was reported that all the presbyteries and a majority of the sessions had registered their support for the removal of discipline with respect to the exercise of the franchise.³¹ A motion distilling the essence of the overture was made by the Synod Clerk, the Revd 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.³²

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.³³

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

³⁰ *Full Report of Discussions in the Reformed PresbyteriaSynod, in Glasgow, May 1862*, p. 122.

³¹ This is to be compared with the irregular, if not indeed illegal introduction of the rule against voting in 1833. On that earlier occasion there was no overture and no ratification by the whole church, according to the church's own procedural law.

³² *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1863), p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

communion.³⁴ The Revd William Anderson,³⁵ 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, May 8, 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.³⁶ 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 over a century the passage into history of the Majority Synod. 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 1872.³⁷ In 1876, the Majority Synod was simply absorbed into the massive structure of the Free Church – perhaps 10,000 souls among a third of a million! Five congregations declined to enter that union. Of these, Douglas Water, Rothesay, Stranraer and Whithorn later returned to the continuing RP Church, while Carnoustie rejoined the Original Secession Church, whence it had come some time before.³⁸ The Majority RP Synod remained in existence as a legal entity

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

³⁵ William Anderson (1795-1866), was a native of Ballylaggan, Ireland. His entire ministry (1820-66) was in Loanhead, south of Edinburgh. It is a testimony to his steadfast devotion to the old Covenanting position that his congregation in Loanhead still adheres to the modern RP Church. Their building – built during Anderson's ministry – has the distinction of being the first church in Scotland to be built of concrete block.

³⁶ *Disruption of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, p. 37.

³⁷ Hutchison, p. 357.

³⁸ Hutchison, pp. 376ff.

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 benefitting 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.³⁹

Rebuilding Reformed Presbyterianism, 1863-1900

The principal task facing the minority was the re-establishment of some organizational integrity. The Synod was constituted on May 8, 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 June 2, 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 from that day to this, with the exception of the synodical year 1870-71, these 'presbyteries' have had to meet together as 'the Joint Presbyteries of Edinburgh and Glasgow' is a poignant testimony to the struggle it has been for the last one-hundred-and-thirty years to maintain the order of a fully-fledged presbyterian denomination. 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.

The period after 1876, then, was dominated by the effort to recover from the Disruption and once again see 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 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

³⁹ *Reformed Presbyterian Witness* 52 (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.

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),⁴⁰ and Whithorn (1899). Still, by the early 1990s, the city congregations were doing well, 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 June 26, 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 – needless to say – '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 the position, and to maintain and diffuse the principles of our Testimony,... being persuaded that these are Scriptural and shall ultimately triumph.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 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 building still stands and is a restaurant.

⁴¹ *Reformed Presbyterian Witness* 6 (1876), pp. 493ff.

'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 realized, die with their faces to the coming Sun.'⁴² 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 coming of the great and terrible 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 Ferguson Bequest Fund [Trustees]'.⁴³ 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

⁴² James Kerr, DD, *Political Dissent in Great Britain* (Glasgow, 1901, 2nd ed.), p. 72. Kerr (1847-1905) received a DD from Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA, the liberal arts college founded by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. For an account of Kerr's life, see Archibald Holmes, *Memorial Volume to the Rev. James Kerr* (Glasgow, 1906?).

⁴³ James Barr, *The United Free Church of Scotland* (London, 1934), p. 194. The Ferguson Bequest was a sum of £300,000 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 gave grants only to Majority Synod churches and indicated that they would give nothing to Minority Synod congregations until legally required to do so.

became a landmark in Scottish legal history.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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,⁴⁶ James Dick,⁴⁷ Archibald Holmes,⁴⁸ Cameron

44 A. Taylor Innes, *The Law of Creeds in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 294-7. The interest of the Ferguson Bequest Case (Wallace v. Ferguson Bequest 1878, 6R, 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 united with the Free Church and only existing *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) had of course felt it right to change their position and unite with the Free Church. The court found that their changed position could not disqualify them from benefitting 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 Jan. 16, 1879, the Court of Session ordered the re-instatement of the continuing RP Church as a beneficiary of the Ferguson Bequest. For RP perspectives, see James Kerr, *Reformed Presbyterian Law Case. An exposure of the 'Defences' of the 'Civil' Synod* (Edinburgh, 1877) and John McDonald, *Pactum Illicitum. Lord Curriehill's Decision versus the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, 1878). A lively account of this case, supportive of the Minority, appeared in an editorial in the *Glasgow Herald* for April 18, 1878, 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.).

45 The Ferguson Bequest continues to give substantial grants to RP churches for building repairs and very generous stipend augmentations to RP pastors.

46 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*

Mackay,⁴⁹ R. Thomson Martin,⁵⁰ John McDonald,⁵¹ Henry Paton,⁵² and John Paterson Struthers⁵³ 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

Worth and Dignity of the Faithful Martyrs (1857) and a Temperance tract, *An Earnest Appeal* (1860).

- 47 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 wrote *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).
- 48 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 wrote the *Memorial Volume to the Revd James Kerr* (Glasgow, 1906?).
- 49 Cameron Mackay (1853-1937) was a Highlander of Free Church extraction, who ministered in Penpont between 1895-1905 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).
- 50 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 *R.P. Witness* (1864-67). His 1865 sermon on *The Martyrs' Reward* was published posthumously in 1867.
- 51 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* (1910, 10th ed.).
- 52 Henry Paton (1854-1942), minister in Edinburgh, 1903-10, edited *The Register of Rev. John McMillan* (1908).
- 53 John P. Struthers (1851-1915), minister in Greenock, editor (*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 J.P. Struthers*.

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.⁵⁴ Membership was turning down. The long decline of the Scottish RP Church had begun.

to be continued.

⁵⁴ 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 and Addenda'.