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THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND AND THE DISRUPTION OF 1863

II: The Long Decline (1900-Present)

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It is not likely that the onset of decline in the Reformed Presbyterian (RP) Church was all that evident at the time, or 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 1910.¹ But the core congregations continued much as before. Membership losses were still largely from the fringe. Only during and after the First World War did it become evident that the trend was down. In 1915 there were 913 members, and by 1922 832.² 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 1954.³ By 1963, the centenary of the RP Disruption, membership was 548, in five congregations and with five ministers. These five congregations remain today, but numerical decline has continued and membership stood at 269 in 1983,⁴ while a report issued in November 1987 estimated an effective membership of around 150.⁵

¹ The remnant of this congregation continued to meet, until their dissolution some time in the 1970s, on alternate Sunday afternoons in a room at The Scottish Reformation Society, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh. They sang psalms and listened to the reading of one of the late Henry Paton's sermons.

² Manuscript statistical returns for these years, in the possession of the author.

³ The building is now used by a Pentecostal Church. The Free Church is back-to-back on the same block. About a block away is the old 2nd Greenock RP Church (Majority Synod), now used by a Free Presbyterian congregation.

⁴ *Minutes of Synod 1984*, p. 18. Of the 271 communicants, 129 were in the Stranraer congregation which, however, recorded an

Assessing specific reasons for such a pattern of decline is hazardous. It is difficult enough to analyse 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 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 some conclusions why things happened as they did.

1. Membership: the 1932 Terms of Communion

When the 1930s dawned, the RP Church's distinctive doctrinal standard, the *Testimony*,⁶ had been out of print for a half of 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 ... 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 church.⁷ This *Summary of Testimony* is a concise, if undistinguished, resumé of the basic contours of RP teaching. It affirms the 'political dissent' doctrine of the Minority of 1863, including the continuing

average attendance at morning worship of only 40, an indication of serious nominalism among the membership!

⁵ *Statistical Report from Session to [of? G.J.K.] Special Meeting of Synod on 21st November 1987* (in the possession of the author). See Appendix.

⁶ 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.

⁷ *Summary of the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1932), p.6. This 68pp. summary was prepared by the Revd. J.T. Potts (1862-1923), minister in Glasgow.

obligation of the Covenants and the practice of declining to 'give their vote to Parliamentary candidates who accept [the British] Constitution.'⁸ 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 1837-8 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 Session', 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 figure 1). 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 1 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. 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.⁹

8 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

9 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?' [my emphasis]. 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 which were approved in 1978. The new Term 1 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

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 RP doctrine and distinctive principles (the Westminster Standards [II], *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 based on a credible profession of faith in Christ and an explicit commitment to the entire credal position of the Church – a so-called *confessional*, or *credal*, membership – but was henceforth to be on the basis of a credible profession of faith in Christ and an open, teachable spirit towards the Church's doctrine – a *confessing* membership. In terms of the relationship of members to the Church's creed, this brought the RP Church into line with the other orthodox Scottish churches, which required commitment to the confessional standards only by their office-bearers – ministers, elders and deacons. On particular teachings of the Church, it allowed for a range of dissent, which had hitherto always been denied.

confirmed the action of the 1965 Synod admitting non RPs to the Lord's Supper, by allowing them to do so on the basis of those Terms of Communion (1-4) which did not involve an explicit commitment to the distinctive doctrines of the RP Church. This confirmed the 1965 relaxation of the historic practice of 'Close Communion', which had permitted only RPs to Communion in RP Churches. By the 1980s, the present writer – then a ministerial member of the Free Church of Scotland – was warmly accepted as Residents Supply in Wishaw and Glasgow RP congregations, with the privilege of administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Figure 1. Comparison of the Terms of Communions

Testimony (1856 ed.)	Summary (1932)
<p>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.</p> <p>II The acknowledgement of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, to be founded upon, and agreeable to the Word of God.</p>	<p>I Do you believe that the Word of God which is contained in the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and conduct?</p> <p>II 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?</p>
<p>III The owning of the Divine right, and original, of Presbyterian Church-government.</p>	<p>III 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?</p>
<p>IV 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.</p>	
<p>V The owning of all the Scriptural Testimonies and earnest contentings 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.</p>	
<p>VI Practically adorning the doctrine of God, our saviour, by walking in all his commandments and ordinances, blamelessly.</p>	<p>IV 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?</p>

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 covenanting at all, demands 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 vehicle of what it meant to uphold and apply the Covenants faithfully. Historical 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 the end of ‘covenanting’ as it had hitherto been understood and applied in the RP 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.¹⁰ 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.

2. Voting: the franchise question

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

¹⁰ 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 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 abandonment of the historic *raison d’être* of the Covenanting movement.

seen that it was the defence of this position in 1863 that decided the continued existence of the RP 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 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.¹¹ 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.

In 1960, Synod adopted the recommendations of the Franchise Committee, which had been charged with resolving the question. 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'.¹² 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.¹³ 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.

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).¹⁴ This point had been denied by the majority in

11 *R.P. Witness* 86, 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 October 6, 1868, to show that this position had been the practical reason for their continued existence as a denomination.

12 *R.P. Witness* 80 (August, 1960), p. 122 (*cf.* 102).

13 *Ibid.* 79 (1959), p. 135 (Minutes of Synod).

14 *Ibid.*

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.¹⁵

In other words, it was a matter of individual conscience what one did about political dissent. The Disruption of 1863 had been undone. The minority had, in the end, joined the majority.

3. 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 had always been the established Church of Scotland, which was historically viewed by the Covenanters as an Erastian hireling.¹⁶

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 fulfilment of the engagements of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to promote the ends of the Solemn League and Covenant.’¹⁷ This uncompromising basis for union would have aborted talks with any other church, but the Seceders

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 80 (August 1960), p. 122. The emphasis is in the original report.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 7 (1879), pp. 166ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 6 (1871), p. 147.

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.'¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 five pounds' worth of crown land, he qualified for the franchise. For Seceders, voting was no different from, and no more sinful than, buying property. 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 doctrinal *Schwerpunkt* of the RP dissent from the rest of both the world and the church.²⁰ The RP Church was for union, but only if others joined her.

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.²¹ By 1932, a 'Preamble to a Declaration and Act of Union' had been formulated, but the RP Church withdrew, apparently because this excluded any specific reference to their

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 6 (1878), p. 152.

¹⁹ 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 U.O.S. and R.P. Churches* (Glasgow, 1875), p. 7. This asserts that 'voters are necessarily identified with their representatives, and responsible for their official acts'.

²⁰ Talks resumed in 1888 but foundered in 1890 with the conclusion that 'points of difference ... must prevent union' (see *R.P. Witness* 12 (1887-8), p. 435; 13 (1889-90), p. 446).

²¹ *R.P. Witness* 49 (1930), p. 158.

Testimony.²² The RP Committee remained 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'.²³ 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.²⁴ This was, however, arguably the closest to church union that the RP Church had come since 1863, even if, in the end, there was really no readiness to concede her distinctive principles.

To **'survive and ...be worthy of the past' – 1961 to the present.** 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, that had been sadly punctuated by an excess of division and dissension.²⁵ Thereafter RP inter-church relations were actively promoted with the Free Church as the principal focus. There is, however, little sense of enthusiasm for anything more than vague 'co-operation'.²⁶ 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'.²⁷ 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, namely, the ban on voting and closed

22 *Ibid.* 51 (1932), p. 160.

23 *Ibid.* 53 (1934), p. 166.

24 *Ibid.* 51 (1932), p. 135.

25 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. Almost coincidentally, the last Seceder churches in North America united with the RP Church of North America in 1969. These remain active in 1992 and are in Washington (Iowa), Minneola (Kansas), Rimersburg and Beaver (both in Pennsylvania).

26 *R.P. Witness* 79 (1961), p. 100.

27 *Ibid.* 85 (1964), p. 107.

Communion, were 'no longer such causes of separation as they once were'.²⁸

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, RPs 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 closed 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 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 RPs, union would mean the final extinction of 'the Covenanting cause'. It would mean absorption – 250 people added to a body of more than 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 Kirkers of the time knew one another and found themselves to

²⁸ *Minutes of Synod, 1967*, p. 10. Closed Communion was the practice of admitting only Reformed Presbyterians to the Lord's Table. This had been relaxed in 1965, by allowing members of other churches to commune on the basis of an acceptance of Numbers I, II and IV of the Terms of Communion (1932).

be so much of like mind, that they were persuaded that the union was right and desirable. Both were strong in the Lowlands. They overlapped in every community where RP churches were to be found. At every level, they were at ease with one another. And doctrinal hindrances had been removed. 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 is 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 strong in the Lowlands, but a largely Highland, Gaelic-culture church, with her roots in a community that is distant and distinct from Lowland Scottish ethos and history. 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 characterised 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 RPs 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.

The Irish RP connection. If the force of ‘distinctive principles’ has diminished as a basis for separate RP denominational existence, it has been balanced by a 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,²⁹ is 'largely' the reason 'the RP Church still exists in Scotland'.³⁰ Only two Scotsmen have been ordained and inducted to Scottish RP pastorates in the twentieth century, and neither was a child of the RP Church.³¹ 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 vigour 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 RPs 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' until 1969,³² but the Inter-Church Relations Committee, now under Irish conveners,³³ had, by

29 J. Boyd Tweed (Glasgow, 1938-40) and Paul E. Copeland (Wishaw, 1979-82) from the USA; and Raymond E. Morton (Airdrie, 1975-89) from Canada.

30 *Minutes of Synod, 1974*, p.9.

31 A. Sinclair Horne, Loanhead, 1955; and James Clark, Glasgow, 1991.

32 *Minutes of Synod, 1970*, p. 9.

33 When Sinclair Horne, a native Scot, was convener in the late 1960s, the primary focus was on the Free Church. From 1970-5, under Marcus McCullough and Archibald Guthrie, both Ulstermen, the Free Church receded from view and the idea of a global RP denomination was proposed. By 1976, when 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

1971, shifted the focus toward 'greater co-operation with RP Churches'. By 1974 an 'Ad Hoc Committee of Relationships between Irish and Scottish RP Churches' said the key to the Church's future was 'expansion' so as 'to survive' and be 'worthy of the past and heritage of truth handed down to her'.³⁴ 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'.³⁵

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 wide-spread discouragement over continuing decline, but the majority did not favour becoming a presbytery of the Irish Church.³⁶ 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'.³⁷ 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,

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.')

34 *Minutes of Synod, 1974*, p. 9.

35 *Ibid.*, 10.

36 *Minutes of Synod, 1977*, pp. 19-22. Airdrie, Loanhead and Stranraer were against; Glasgow and Wishaw in favour.

37 *Minutes of Synod, 1980*, p. 4 (Report of the Ad Hoc Committee for Consultative Assembly, June 1979).

for weal or woe, rested with international Reformed Presbyterianism.³⁸

The last flicker of the century-plus flirtation with the idea of church union within Scotland 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 1986.³⁹ The Church Union question, which had chased the history of the RP Church down the years since 1863, had finally been buried. The future was now ineluctably linked to the brethren in Ireland.

4. Retrospect and prospect

The most tangible legacy of 1863 is, of course, the *very existence* in modern Scotland of an RP 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, have 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.⁴⁰

Somewhat less enduring have been the *distinctive principles* which had given birth to Reformed Presbyterianism. We have

38 *Minutes of Synod, 1980*, p. 1.

39 *Minutes of Synod, 1985*, pp.1, 4.

40 It is appropriate that it should have fallen to a Reformed Presbyterian, 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. 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). He is the editor of *The Bulwark*, the magazine of the Scottish Reformation Society.

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 closed Communion was relaxed in 1965. The RP Church has not altered her 1837-8 *Testimony* and so officially holds the doctrine of the perpetual obligation of the Covenants as part of her creed. Nevertheless, 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 confessionally Reformed churches in Scotland.⁴¹ The RP Church of Scotland today is, in practice, a generally Reformed Church with an unmodified commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith, within the shell of her Covenanting tradition.

How enduring the RP Church will be, as we approach the year 2000 AD, remains to be seen. That the Synod is aware of the challenge is vividly attested by her own deliverances over the last two decades.⁴² 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 did not attend public worship, where a whole generation of young people had been lost, and where giving did not remotely approach the biblical principle of tithing. Quoting 1 Peter 4:17 – ‘it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God’ – the letter called upon the membership to commit themselves to prayer, discipleship, evangelism, faithful attendance at

41 There are four confessionally orthodox Presbyterian denominations in Scotland, all of them committed to the Bible as the infallible Word of God, the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith and practising the very same pattern of worship (Psalms only, without instrumental music). These are the RP Church, Free Church, the Free Presbyterian Church and, since 1989, the Associated Presbyterian Churches. They are separated, not so much by fundamental doctrines, but by particular perspectives and practices of their own, or even perceptions of the practices of one another.

42 *Minutes of Synod, 1974*, pp. 8-10.

worship and biblical stewardship.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ 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 have been 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 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 mankind 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.

APPENDIX

Communicant membership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland

CONGREGATIONS	1876	1915	1963	1983
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	(cl.1954)	—
6. Paisley	68	49	(cl.1940)	—
7. Penpont	84	?	(cl. 1937)	—
8. Thurso	?	?	(cl.1928)	—
9. Wick	?	(cl. 1893)	—	—

⁴³ *Crisis in the Church* (March 1985), was published by action of the RP Synod, 20 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.

⁴⁴ *Statistical Report from Session to [of? G.J.K.] 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).

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10. Lorn	15	(cl. 1893)	–	–
11. Girvan	?	(cl. 1886)	–	–
12. Rothesay (1876)	?	(cl.1881)	–	–
13. Whithorn (1878)	–	(cl. 1899)	–	–
14. Douglas Water (1880)	–	(cl. 1885)	–	–
15. Stranraer (1887)	–	121	179	129
16. Glasgow North (1899)	–	(cl. 1909)	–	–
17. Edinburgh (1903)	–	(left 1910)	–	–
TOTAL				
MEMBERSHIP	1,038	913	548	269
MINISTERS	7	9	5	5

Note: 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.