

Reformed Scottish Presbyterianism: Reunion in the 21st Century?

Introduction

This brief paper is designed to suggest a possible way forward in a matter which should be of profound spiritual concern to all Reformed and Presbyterian Christians in Scotland: that is, the reunification of all those Presbyterian Churches in Scotland which adhere to the doctrine, worship and government of historic Presbyterianism as prescribed in the Westminster documents.

The Existing Situation

At present, there are four churches which profess to hold to these standards. They are, in alphabetical order, the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC), the Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCC), the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (FP) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland (RPCS). As far as I am aware, these four churches hold honestly to the Westminster Standards and require strict subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith. They are also bound to the use of the psalms in worship without the accompaniment of musical instruments.

In a day in which history is largely neglected and forgotten, it is also worth pointing out that these churches are more closely related than most people realise: The first three (FP, APC and FCC) all trace their immediate roots to the Disruption Free Church of 1843. The remaining church (RP) is rooted in the 17th century Covenanters and was formed out of those who chose to remain outside the re-settled Church of Scotland in 1690.

However, the link between the RP church and the church of the Disruption was very real and spiritual: the RP church welcomed the Disruption of 1843 as an event which highlighted the Independence of the Church and the Headship of Christ – the very principles which the RP's felt had not been properly honoured or safeguarded by the Revolution Settlement. On its part, the FC was keen to identify with the Covenanter legacy and recognised kindred spirits in the RP Church. It was, therefore, in some ways at least, not surprising that the majority of RP's eventually joined the FC in the 1870's. However, all of us who belong to the four churches listed above would acknowledge that, in doing so, they joined a church which was just beginning on a path of serious spiritual declension. Indeed, within a few short years, those who remained behind in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, although hugely weakened numerically, were thankful that they did so.

For now, all this serves simply to highlight that the four churches are not just bound by a *common doctrine, worship and government* but that they have all, through common

heritage, taken a *distinctive stand for the Headship of Christ and the Spiritual Independence of the Church*. And all of these principles, according to their own constitutions as churches, remain living principles which all of these churches are prepared to confess and avow – if this was not the case, there would be little point in writing this paper. This provides a starting point.

Again, it is as well to begin also by acknowledging the fact that, whatever the precise reasons for it, it is an undeniable fact that *current denominational walls are separating people who hold common convictions*. In belief and practice, these people are as one (at least, as far as I am aware) but they find themselves existing apart from one another in these four denominations – and, indeed, in other denominations too although, crucially, only these four share the commitment to Westminster doctrine, worship and practice. Whatever, the precise reasons for this, the bare fact alone should lead, at the very least, to self-examination and a humbling of ourselves before God.

While it may be the easiest course of action just to accept this existing situation and simply try to get on with the Lord's work as best we can, there are several reasons why we should ask whether that is all we *could* or *should* do. I would suggest three reasons why unity among Scottish Reformed Churches should be considered.

Some Reasons to Unite

First, *the times call us to consider it*. To us, anyway, they seem to constitute nothing less than a providential call from Almighty God to re-examine our current standing as denominations.

Nationally, the moral and spiritual disintegration of Scotland is advancing at an alarming rate. Clearly, 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Rom 1:18). Ecclesiastically, the visible church is falling away rapidly. Sadly, if it were the case that his blessing was evidently upon ourselves we could take comfort from that. However, it appears to be the case within our own churches also that, at the very least, the influence of the Holy Spirit has been withdrawn to such an extent that the lack of power accompanying the proclamation of the word and the accompanying decreasing spiritual fruitfulness in the lives of many professing believers are now all too evident and are a cause for alarm amongst discerning and experienced Christians.

It is particularly here that the problem lies, for when all is said and done, it may well be that there is something among ourselves which is hindering the blessing of the Lord and causing him to frown upon us. And, apart from the serious problems caused by our general worldliness, may the reason not lie partly in our failure to gather together under the Lord's banner in the way in which we should? Is it not a remarkable thing that after

so much ecclesiastical sifting and disturbing at the hand of a chastening God, who has dug around us and fertilised us (Luke 13:8), we appear to have learnt so little and seem to sit content with no less than four Presbyterian denominations professing to hold to the same doctrine, worship and government? It should be as unacceptable to us, as I believe it would have been to our forefathers.

None of us have been unaffected by the events of recent times but if they have not brought us to *self*-examination, what will become of us all? If the goodness of God is (designed) to lead us to repentance, how much more so His displeasure as expressed in his chastisements – which are abroad in all the churches as they are in all the land? It would be a poor response, in the light of all that has gone on in our churches in the last thirty years, to say that the fault must lie entirely with others and not with us.

Also, the people call us to consider it. At least, an increasing number do. It seems to me plain that the *people* of the churches - who are not, like Ministers, side-tracked by issues of property, manses, salaries and pensions - are increasingly aware of the need for a stronger and wider fellowship with those who share their own convictions and spiritual emphasis and that they long for more meaningful corporate Christian fellowship with them. At the same time, and partly for that reason, they are increasingly dissatisfied with a state of perpetual division within Scottish Reformed circles and especially with the little effort being made by their spiritual overseers to heal it. The voice of the people must be heard – especially, when they are people of genuine spiritual conviction, discernment and consistent spiritual life. If it is not, their increased dissatisfaction with divisions which seem to have some grounding in history but little relevance in the present will reveal itself in ways which none of us would desire. It would be a terrible indictment if much of that were to be due to our failure to lead and to show a better way.

Again, our theology demands that we consider it. We are not Independents but Presbyterians, believing in a common doctrine, worship and practice. *Every lawful and scriptural attempt must therefore be made to bring us into line with one another.* We already have the Biblical standard by which this should be done – as expressed in our constitutional documents (the Westminster Standards) which we all share in common – and failing to pursue this goal with those who share our convictions is not right. We are to be ‘of one mind’ and to ‘walk by the same rule’ (1 Cor 1:10, Phil 3:16).

How did we get here?

Who set the agenda?

In attempting to understand how we got to this, it is important to understand that, in most of the cases we are referring to above, men have been separated as a result of agendas set by others – more specifically, agendas which have been set by those who were not in full sympathy with Reformed doctrine, worship and government themselves. The separation amongst like-minded brethren usually arose due to a lack of agreement amongst them as to *how to respond* to these agendas – which were sometimes cleverly disguised and even more cunningly prosecuted. Sometimes, admittedly, the response was one of weakness or confusion – but it is nonetheless important to recognise who the *real* enemy was.

This was the case with respect to accepting the terms of the Revolution Settlement and it was also notably the case in the 19th century Free Church when ‘Constitutionalists’ were split over how to respond to the Declaratory Act, the so-called ‘Relieving Act’ which followed it and the Union which followed that again.

It was a huge disappointment to those who had passed through the ‘Killing Times’ to find that men who seemed to share their convictions ended up accepting what was, in their eyes anyway, a seriously defective Revolution Settlement of the church in 1690. It may be more useful, however, to pursue the second example a little further.

I happen to think that the Free Presbyterian position on the Declaratory Act was the correct one – as did other students in my time in the Free Church of Scotland College! – but whether that meant that it was then justified for both the FP and the post-1900 FC to continue in separation from one another after 1905 is another matter. The blame for the subsequent failure of Constitutionalists to reunite after the repealing of the Declaratory Act in 1905 by the Free Church is laid at the feet of each party by the other. Most disinterested commentators would, perhaps, blame the FP’s for hardening in their attitude in the years between 1892 and 1905. If that was the case, there may have been reasons for it – such as the involvement of former colleagues in processes against them – but it is worth pointing out that the FC itself did not handle the situation all that well either.

Notoriously, when repealing the Declaratory Act in 1905, the Free Church made a very bad mistake in claiming that she had ‘*always adhered*’ to her Confession – that is, that she had adhered to it in the intervening years between the passing of the Act and its repeal (1892-1905). Significantly, the wisdom of inserting this contentious statement was hotly debated within the relevant Free Church committee at the time: it was felt by some Free Church committee members to be unnecessarily provocative towards Free Presbyterians in that it would not contribute to the desired reunion – and so, indeed, it proved to be. In fact, the insistence on including this claim helped to scupper

reunification - but it nonetheless remains sad that, even in the years immediately following, no way forward was found and that the witness remained divided. It was especially sad because, in the years immediately following 1900, there was much interaction between FP's and the FC at 'grass roots' level and it was not unknown for members of one denomination to attend preparatory communion services in the other – but with the failure to reunite, all that unsurprisingly ceased.

However, it is hard to avoid the impression that, later, it seemed to be the case that FP's would work hard to find reasons for remaining separate even if they didn't immediately seem to spring to mind.

All this time, the real enemy – who had instigated the Declaratory movement and prosecuted it with vigour – won the day and divided the Constitutionalist witness. That witness has not been re-united since that time.

There is little point in pursuing this particular point any further at the moment except to highlight one thing: a church which was wrong yesterday can be right today while a church can also be wrong today even if it was right yesterday. The question as to who was right in 1690, 1733, 1746, 1843, 1892, 1900, 1929, 1989 and 2000 (all dates of significance in Scottish church history and all involving at least one of our denominations) is one of importance and interest *but the answer doesn't guarantee the spiritual integrity of any of the churches involved today* – and that includes the integrity of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland! Past faithfulness and success may have stagnated into current faithlessness and failure. Similarly, past faithlessness may have reformed into current faithfulness. We all need to understand that the *present* and the *future* are of greater importance than the *past*. An inability to understand this will undoubtedly hasten our demise.

Who should set the agenda?

Also, this realisation of who was setting the agenda should teach us that, instead of always reacting to agendas for 'change', we should seize the spiritual initiative and try, under God with His grace, guidance and help - without which all will be futile - *to rally once more around the Westminster Standards* as was done in the 17th century (the high-water mark of Scottish Presbyterianism). Instead of reacting to radicals, is it not God's call upon us, as the 'scattered children of John Knox', to be proactive in seeking to gather in a church whose teaching and worship he would heartily recognise?

In other words, is it not time for *a positive Reformed union* - one brought about by a desire to promote Reformed doctrine, worship and government rather than one brought about by a desire to destroy them?

Sadly, history has conditioned us to think negatively and reactively when it comes to the union of churches to the extent that 'unity' and 'union' have almost become unclean words to people from our ecclesiastical background. The reason is not difficult to find: we are all so accustomed to seeing union negatively – due to the unfortunate unions being prosecuted by liberal agendas in the 19th and 20th centuries – that we fail to see it as a positive and spiritual thing if rightly done by the light and the power of the Spirit of God working through the Word. However, there is a great need for those who are committed to Reformation doctrine and practice to set the agenda rather than to merely react to it. A failure to act when the opportunity may be there will forever condemn us as the leaders of God's people – particularly if we made no real effort to try.

What should the agenda be?

Significantly, in order effectively to pursue this union, the answer, as always, lies in the past. There is no need to re-invent the wheel: the work has already been done and the basis for union has already been laid down. We must remember that the purpose of the 17th century Westminster documents (the Confession of Faith, Longer and Shorter Catechisms, Directory of Public Worship and Form of Government) was to *unite* the churches in the United Kingdom in a *genuine religious uniformity*. They were the product of many years of labour and genuine fervent prayer in a time of unparalleled spiritual awakening in Scotland. If these documents – the result themselves of solemn and spiritual covenants – could become the constitutional documents of the Church of Scotland in the 1640's during the Second Reformation, *why can they not become the constitutional documents of a united Reformed church in 2012?*

Why, after all, should the agenda of the Reformed church in Scotland in 2012 be in any way dominated by the intrigues of Robert Rainy or other men dead long ago? This is not to ignore subsequent history – it is merely to avoid being trammelled by it.

There is no Declaratory Act, for example, on the table anymore to weaken our commitment to the Confession. There is no tendency to accommodate Episcopalianism either in our government or in our forms of worship. Could the four churches, then, not sit down in friendly and spiritual conference to see whether they can re-gather around the Westminster Standards as they were adopted? Surely, they could and should provide a natural rallying point for all who adhere to them? Such a re-gathering of the church around these standards might well provide an ecclesiastical home for others who share these convictions outwith these particular denominations.

It should not be forgotten either that all who are wholeheartedly committed to these Standards, and the Biblical truth they express, should long to be in one fellowship with one another. It is no longer good enough – and never really was – to hold tenaciously to

our separate denominational existence while not being entirely sure why we keep others at a distance. If we must be separate, let us at least be sure why we are separate and that it is right to be separate. To this end, surely, it is right to meet in order to discuss these issues? If we all give assent to the same doctrine, worship and government, surely we can meet – if only to be sure we understand one another properly. As a first step, the churches could appoint representatives who would meet in conference to see whether conscientiously held hopes, doubts and fears were justifiable or not.

Admittedly, it may be that some issues will arise from the discussions which will necessitate a continuing separation – but that will require thorough and patient investigation: not in a paper war in newspapers or across denominational magazines but in real meetings with honest and spiritual discussion and with humble and earnest prayer.

It is only fair to say, however, that if such issues arise, and they do indeed prove insurmountable, then an honest separation, with as much mutual respect as is possible, is the best way to continue. Surely, none of the parties involved wants a union in which convictions are buried or stifled and in which issues on which we vow suddenly become open questions. *If there cannot be an honest, Reformed and spiritual union, let there be none at all.*

A Way Forward?

As to a way forward, there are really only two possible options – and the first of these would doubtless be best.

A new church solution

First, it may be possible to seek, with the grace of God, for the four churches concerned, or as many of them as were able to see their way ahead, to unite in the formation of a new denomination – one which perhaps others might join too. Such a denomination, being a new one, could be called, for example, the *Reformed Church of Scotland* and would be distinguished by its commitment to the Westminster Standards. There may, sadly, be the possibility of leaving ‘rumps’ behind – but the need for a stronger positive Reformed witness is nonetheless great and I feel sure that if the leadership of the churches were persuaded of it, the people would be also.

I, for one, would have no difficulty with such a concept and would be glad to see the witness of the existing denominations merge into one. It may, of course, be the case that some may not wish the name of their own particular denomination to 'disappear'. However, it is to be borne in mind that the names of all the churches would still be writ large in history in connection with the particular principles which needed fighting for and protecting at the time. Each one of the churches concerned could make a clear statement regarding their adherence to such principles in the very Act of entering into the new Reformed Church of Scotland, with such statements being held perpetually *in retentis* in the records of the new church. Admittedly, to my knowledge anyway, there is a difficulty here in the APC/FP dispute which will not allow such a process. Right now, I have no answer to that – it may indeed be the case that only three churches could proceed forward at the moment.

The obvious advantage of a new church solution would be that the same level of commitment and sacrifice was being required of all the churches; that the name of the new church would reflect a new beginning more rooted in the original Church of Scotland from which we all came and that there would be no sense of any church having 'devoured' the others.

An existing church solution

Second, it may be possible, with the grace of God, for these churches to merge into one of themselves. Because this would be the less likely option, I have decided to relegate it to the status of an appendix to this paper.

Conclusion

As this is being written, I am not sure where it will be read or by whom. It is my desire, and prayer, that the issues raised in it might find their way onto the agenda of every church court within these four denominations. Clearly, all of the denominations concerned need, at the very least, to have an internal debate regarding the desirability of such a conference with other churches. If any, or all, of the churches decide that there is no point in discussing the matter with the other churches, so be it. But, surely, the discussion must be had internally at least.

I can only close the paper by quoting the words of William Nixon at the General Assembly of the Free Church in 1883, spoken in a speech opposing the proposed introduction of musical instruments into the worship of God. The most significant part, I believe, appears in bold print:

*'If, then, you persist in pressing, and succeed in carrying this motion...the hearts of many that long beat with such love for this church, will increasingly sink within them and the hands that have actively laboured for it will, for the time, fall helpless at her side...And, as the chief refuge left to them, remembering the prayers, labours and sufferings of past generations, and the Lord's providential goodness and gracious love to Scotland hitherto, they will endeavour to work and wait for the time when, **out of the midst of the confusions and upbreakings for which they look, He will gather His faithful out of all the existing churches to build the church of Scotland again upon her old foundations, but in a new and better form, and so perpetuate her still to coming ages.**'*

This paper, then, is written from a twofold conviction. First, that our forefathers of both the Second Reformation and the Disruption, would not have tolerated a situation in which four churches claiming to hold to the same standards continue to remain separate without, at the very least, striving to bring them together on the basis of scripture and, second, that the time spoken of by the man of God, who uttered the words written above nearly 130 years ago, has now arrived. 'Confusion' and 'upbreakings' have abounded. The time is ripe to gather around the banner under which we once rallied.

Love for our churches must never be simply equated with love for God's truth - Indeed, unfashionable as it is to say so, unfurling the banner of truth sometimes necessitates separation from a church we have loved. However, it would be ironic if our love for our denomination – on the ground that it took a stand for the truth – slowly, subtly and imperceptibly, took priority over or even replaced our love for the truths for which these denominations stood in the first place.

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Appendix

As I stated above, and as an alternative to a new church solution, it may be possible, with the grace of God, for these churches to merge into one of themselves. Of course, the thorny question emerges: which one?

For myself, the question would not be important – although if the APC were to require express approval of their position in 1989, that would constitute a problem as, indeed, it would if the FCC required formal acceptance of their reconstitution in 2000. But this kind of impasse is the very thing that we wish to avoid!

I think that the only one of these four churches that could function effectively as a host church is the RP church – but whether there is any advantage to proceeding this way is open to question.

The reasons why it might be able to function in this capacity are as follows:

First of all, the Reformed Presbyterian Church is the smallest of the four churches and, therefore, at least humanly speaking, has most to lose. The influx of just five or six ministers would effectively swamp it as a church! This, however, means that the RP church would be less at risk of appearing to swallow smaller churches up – which is the usual perception when smaller churches unite with larger ones.

There is, of course, a sense in which the Reformed Presbyterian Church would risk losing its 'identity' – but if that identity is something more than what it actually claims to stand for, then it would be no bad thing to lose it. Losing some false kind of perceived 'distinctiveness' in exchange for the more effective propagation of the principles of Reformation doctrine, worship and government is a risk any Reformed church should be willing to take. This is a much more important point than we perhaps realise. After all, it is easy to say to other churches 'you are welcome to join us' but it is not so easy to mean it. *Would all the churches involved - including the RP church - be willing to receive an influx of Ministers of greater number than the church already possesses?*

Second, the RP church has a constitutional position which is, I think, easier to adopt for the other churches. The Basis of Faith and Practice in the RP church is simply *the position of the church during the Second Reformation in the 1640's when all the foundational Westminster documents were adopted by the Church of Scotland*. This would allow the other three churches – which have, since the Disruption, felt a considerable measure of retrospective discomfort with the Revolution Settlement – to fully and formally endorse the attainments of the Second Reformation. I do not mean by that to charge that the other churches are careless of the Second Reformation attainments – for example, in the 'History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland 1893-1970', there is a summary of a discussion in that church, at the Synods of 1909 and 1910, regarding the 'Church's relations to Second Reformation Attainments' (see p115, 116) where the sympathy of the FP's to the position towards that of the RP's is fairly evident. The Synod of 1910 went on to declare their humble judgement that *'the fact that the Recissory Act has been left unrepealed on the Statute Book leaves the Presbyterians of Scotland in a dangerous position, and that effective steps should be taken for its repeal along with all the other pernicious cognate Acts of that period in our history'*. I only mean that such endorsement would be *constitutional*. None of our four churches should be concerned about a clear commitment to the Westminster Standards as they were received by free Scottish General Assemblies in the 1640's.

Finally, for many reasons – often to do with prejudice - it is difficult to cross denominational barriers, even when you feel you should. However, if it was to be done,

then I think men and women of the other three denominations would probably find it easier to join the Reformed Presbyterian Church than any other possible permutation – simply because the RP church has not been involved *in the particular issues which caused division between the others*. This does not mean that the RP church has been free from its own troubles in the past – far from it. What it does mean is that, having stayed outside the Revolution Settlement since 1690, and having remained apart since, it is more ‘neutral’ territory ecclesiastically. Speaking as an ex-Free churchman for a moment, it is probably easier for us all to meet there than it is anywhere else.

However, it needs emphasising that this is not an attempt to ‘sell’ the RP church: I am only stating my belief that, if the churches were to meet in a host from among themselves, I think only the RP church would fit. I could be wrong and, in any case, it would probably be best to look, work and pray for ‘The Reformed Church of Scotland’.