'CONTINUITY IN REACTION TO CHANGE': THE EXAMPLE OF THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

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Introduction

In 1889, looking back at the previous fifty years, Marcus Dods, Professor of New Testament at New College, Edinburgh, made the following observation:

> It might be difficult to lay one's finger on any half-century in the world's history during which changes so rapid, so profound, so fruitful and so permanent have taken place as those which the past generation has seen.... Every department of human thought and activity has felt the touch of the new influences.[1]

Few Churches felt that more than his own, the Free Church of Scotland, and the nineteenth century saw an enormous amount of change being reflected in its doctrine and in its worship. Hymns took their place alongside psalms in public worship, and organs and other musical instruments began to be widely used. A movement grew to qualify the Church's commitment to its creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Evolution became accepted as the most reasonable explanation for the origins of life; and alongside Genesis the rest of the Bible was subjected to critical analysis and the doctrines of biblical inspiration and infallibility were called into question. All of these changes were reflected in what was seen and heard in Free Church services. Public worship frequently included hymns and instrumental music and, more importantly, the sermons preached reflected the changing theological and credal position of the times. If what is said and sung in worship is an expression of corporate faith, it is clear that the corporate faith of the Free Church was changing.

Now while most members of the Free Church of Scotland were able to accept or even actively encourage these changes in the corporate faith of the Church, for others these changes represented a departure from the scriptural basis of their worship. The result, in 1893, was a Second Disruption, during which many thousands of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders left the Free Church.[2] The denomination which this disruption produced – the Free

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1 M. Dods, *Recent Progress in Theology. Inaugural Lecture at New College Edinburgh, 1889* (Edinburgh, 1889), p. 6.

2 See, *e.g.*, J.L. MacLeod, 'The Second Disruption; the Origins of the

Presbyterian Church of Scotland – has remained one of the most 'unchanged' churches in Britain, with a form of worship reflecting a set of beliefs that has not changed at all in the past hundred years. The Free Presbyterians still make exclusive use of psalmody and still allow no instrumental music in public worship. They continue to maintain a total rejection of evolutionary science. Their outlook still reflects the fact that the Church retains the Westminster Confession of Faith, undiluted, as its credal statement. They persist in the belief that the whole Bible is inspired and infallible. The style, the language, and at times even the appearance of a Free Presbyterian service today is nineteenth century, if not older, while alternative forms of worship were recently described by one Free Presbyterian minister as being 'so-called' worship, tantamount to 'offering Christ a *papier mache crown*'.[3] Almost every single one of the distinctive practices and beliefs of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland was in some way under threat in the late nineteenth century; that was a direct cause of their secession, and that is a direct cause of their pugnacious defence of these positions ever since. Therefore for the Free Presbyterians, continuity – absolute, unswerving continuity – has been their *reaction* to change.

Nineteenth-Century Changes in the Free Church: Hymns and Organs

What then were the changes that so convulsed the Free Church of Scotland in the late nineteenth century? The first area to be considered is the introduction of hymns and organs into public worship. This development had taken place in many denominations although it affected the Free Church of Scotland later than the other Scottish Churches. The desire to make these changes was partly in order to address the issue of the quality of worship in Scotland's Churches, but it also reflected a change in theological outlook. Singing only the psalms of the Old Testament seemed no longer to reflect the newer evangelical mood of the age.[4] Despite

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Free Presbyterian Church of 1893', *SBET* vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 5-18. For the divide between Gaels and non-Gaels in the Free Church see J. L. MacLeod, 'The influence of the Highland-Lowland divide on the Free Presbyterian Disruption of 1893', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, vol. 25, part 3 (1995).

3 A. MacPherson, 'Synod Sermon', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (July 1996), p. 69.

4 A. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland*

determined opposition from a minority within the Church, mostly concentrated in the Highlands, the Free Church had accepted the principle of using hymns in public worship by 1872.[5] Ten years later, the Free Church began to look at the introduction of instrumental music (specifically organ music) and although there was once again strong opposition, again concentrated in the Highland region, the Church moved swiftly to sanction the use of organs and in a short time most congregations outside the Highland region contained organs.[6] The Free Church, it seemed, was moving with the times.

Evolution

A second area of change that bitterly convulsed the Free Church in the late-nineteenth century was the acceptance of the theory of evolution. It is symbolic of its importance that Robert Rainy, the great ecclesiastical politician and Principal of the Church's New College in Edinburgh, chose for his inaugural address in 1874 the topic of 'Evolution and Theology'.[7] Rainy was happy to admit that 'Evolution has its own rights' and that

> Evolution is continually going on before our eyes in the perpetual marvel of the reproduction of animal and vegetable life. It would be absurd to suppose that one can draw an arbitrary line, and say that so much of Evolution and no more shall be admitted into our thoughts of the history of things – that so much and no more shall be held to comport with the character and matters of God.[8]

Rainy, then, was one who calmly assessed the claims of science and religion and concluded that there was an indispensable place for them both. Others in the Free Church went further. Marcus Dods' commentary on the book of Genesis had as its opening lines:

> If any one is in search of accurate information regarding the age of this earth, or its relation to the sun, moon and stars, or regarding the order in which plants and animals have appeared upon it, he is referred to recent textbooks in astronomy, geology, and palaeontology. No one for a moment dreams of referring a serious student of these subjects to the

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1843 - 1874 (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 181-90.

5 *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (Hereafter *PDGAFC*), 1872, p. 327.

6 K. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 226-8.

7 R. Rainy, *Evolution and Theology*, (Edinburgh, 1874).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

> Bible as a source of information. It is not the object of the writers of Scripture to impart physical instruction or to enlarge the bounds of scientific knowledge.[9]

Coming from a Free Church minister who was about to be elected to a professorship at the New College, Edinburgh, this was not what the opponents of change wanted to hear. Dods had made his position clear before,[10] and indeed at his own inaugural lecture on being appointed Professor of New Testament at New College in 1889, he referred to 'the universal light shed by the great modern doctrine of Evolution'.[11] Clearly, he did not see evolution as being in any way an attack on, or inconsistent with, Christianity. He was not the only Free Church professor to see evolution as the orthodox scientific position. Henry Drummond said, 'I have always believed that man has descended from the animal creation',[12] while A.B. Bruce stated in his 1897 Gifford lecture series that 'As to the animal nature of man, there is now comparatively little controversy. It is generally admitted that the human body has been evolved.'[13]

To men like Rainy, Dods, Drummond and Bruce, science was not a threat, but was a tool to aid the process of change and development in Scottish theology and worship. More than that, it was an essential tool, one which could only be ignored at the cost of regression and atrophy for the Church and its beliefs. As the world changed, they believed, so the Church had to change. To their opponents, however, evolutionary science was not a useful tool; to them it was yet another of the many changes which they saw as destroying the fabric of their faith. Crucially, the supporters of evolution were professors in the Free Church's own theological colleges, so that it could only be expected that future ministers, and their sermons, were going to reflect these changing views. Change was something to be feared, and more importantly, something to be resisted. Clearly conflict lay ahead.[14]

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9 M. Dods, *The Book of Genesis* (Expositor's Bible Series, London, 1888), p. 1.

10 M. Dods, *The Book of Genesis. With Introduction and Notes* (Handbooks for Bible Classes Series), (Edinburgh, 1882), p. xvii.

11 Dods, *Recent Progress*, p. 17.

12 H. Drummond, *'Temptations. (An address to the students of Amherst College)'*, The British Weekly, 22 June 1893, p. 130.

13 A.B. Bruce, *The Providential Order of the World* (London, 1897), p. 30.

14 For a more detailed analysis of the background see J.L. MacLeod, *The*

Biblical Criticism

The third area of change to be considered is biblical criticism, a movement that has been called 'a typical product of the times' and 'the spirit of a new age'.[15] It reflects perhaps better than anything the changes to the corporate faith which were taking place in the nineteenth century. By its closing years the core assumptions of biblical criticism were finding their way even into the worship of the Free Church of Scotland. For despite its conservative reputation on many issues, it is one of the great ironies of Scottish ecclesiastical history that the Free Church had preaching in its pulpits and teaching in its colleges some of the most eminent and influential biblical critics in Britain. One of them, of course, was William Robertson Smith, who perhaps did most to make the critical movement visible, with his popular and controversial writings in such places as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and his long-running and bitterly-contested heresy trials in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Although ultimately forced out of the Church, Smith had created a situation in which others could soon use his critical positions in their sermons.[16] While he changed the theoretical background, it was others who actually changed the worship. In other words Smith changed what was thought, others changed what was 'said and sung'. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, then, the doctrines of biblical higher criticism were preached with great energy by some of the leading men of the Church, such as A.B. Bruce, Henry Drummond and Marcus Dods. Dods, in fact, once discussed biblical criticism in the following terms:

> We may enter, then, on our study of the New Testament, assured that the accomplished criticism to which it has been subjected during the past generation has only added to its interest, and subtracted nothing from its power, that the fierce light which has beat upon it has only made it seem

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Second Disruption: the Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church (Edinburgh, forthcoming 1999), chapter two.

15 G.N.M. Collins, *'Whose Faith Follow'* (Edinburgh, 1943), p. 59; J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1943), p. 308.

16 Smith's own sermons – albeit rare – were not critical; they were in fact relatively simple and orthodox. R. Reisen, 'Scholarship and piety: the sermons of William Robertson Smith', in W. Johnstone, ed., *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (Sheffield, 1995), pp. 88-9.

> a more real and intelligible book, and that when stripped of the fictitious robes of honour which timorous and unworthy men have thrown over it, it stands out in its native majesty, and its real power is recognized... The New Testament is a mine out of which the gold has not all been brought to the surface, nor all sifted and refined...there remains much to be done, and of a kind which will attract the energies and resources of the most ambitious mind. For the preacher of Christ this study is indispensable and invaluable. It is in the New Testament he can meet with Christ and learn His mind. It is there he can get rid of all that has overlaid the figure of the Lord, and see Him face to face. It is there that he can learn from the lips of Christ Himself the gospel he has to preach; and by living through the same scenes and breathing the same air with Him, come at length to understand His purposes and enter into His Spirit.[17]

Dods' defence of criticism was a classic enunciation of the position of the so-called believing critics, and is symbolic of how large the gulf was between them and those conservatives in the Church who resisted change. The point is that the two groups not only fundamentally disagreed on the methods of criticism, but on the purpose of criticism and the basic validity of the critical approach. As Dods commented at the time of his 'trial' by the Free General Assembly in 1890, wearily if not bitterly, 'no theory of Scripture promulgated at present by me would be at all likely to find acceptance (from my opponents)'.[18] The opponents of change viewed biblical criticism within the Free Church as an attack on Christianity and, given its popularity in the Colleges, as something that was going to affect what was being said in sermons: as one speaker made clear at the General Assembly of 1890, 'their colleges were the schools of the prophets, the nurseries of their future ministers. What was taught there would be reproduced in their pulpits; would, humanly speaking, mould the religious life of their Church.'[19] Again, changes in thought were being reflected in changes in worship.

Revision of Creeds

The final change in the Free Church was the movement to revise their creed, the seventeenth-century Westminster Confession of Faith. There can be little doubt that the Free Church, as founded at the Disruption in 1843,

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17 Dods, *Recent Progress*, pp. 36-7.

18 *PDGAFC*, 1890, 'Special report by College committee with reference to certain writings by Professors Dods and Bruce', p. 31.

19 *PDGAFC*, 1890, p. 179.

was a Church which broadly adhered to the Westminster Confession, but with the passing years things changed. The United Presbyterian Church revised its relationship to the Confession in the form of a Declaratory Act in 1879 and this Act was to be extremely influential and much-copied.[20] The Free Church General Assembly first entertained an Overture on the subject of Confessional revision in 1887, but by the summer of 1889 the mounting hostility to the theology of the Westminster Confession was becoming apparent.[21] Principal David Brown of Aberdeen, for example, used the words 'obnoxious' and 'repulsive'[22] to describe particular details in the Confession, while a year earlier a student for the Free Church ministry had described the Westminster Confession of Faith as obsolete and its framers as 'intellectually babes, and morally diseased...these blunderers and persecutors'.[23] The parts of the Confession which were particularly reviled were those which dealt with the subject of 'double predestination' – a doctrine that was becoming increasingly indigestible for nineteenth-century appetites, particularly those which had got used to the evangelism of Moody and Sankey.[24] Free Church congregations no longer wanted when attending public worship to listen to sermons that reflected what seemed to be an out-dated theology.

After much bitter controversy, the Free Church passed its Declaratory Act on 26 May 1892 by a majority of 346 to 195. The Act sought to ease subscription to the Westminster Confession by qualifying it in various ways – emphasising the importance of the love of God, diluting the

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20 See, *e.g.*, P. Schaff, 'The Revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith', *The Presbyterian Review*, vol. X, no. 40 (October, 1889), p. 535, C. Briggs, 'The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America', *The Presbyterian Review*, vol. X, no. 39 (July, 1889), p. 469. See also J.L. MacLeod, 'Revision of the Westminster Confession. The Free Church of Scotland Declaratory Act of 1892' in L. Duncan and W. Rankin, eds., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Jackson, MS, to be published 1999).

21 *Free Church of Scotland Assembly Papers, No 1*, 1888, pp. 329-46.

22 *PDGAFC*, 1889, p.138.

23 R. Mackintosh, *The Obsoleteness of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, 1888), p. 54.

24 See A. Cheyne, 'Bible and Confession in Scotland: the background to the Robertson Smith Case' in Johnstone, ed., *William Robertson Smith*, pp. 30-31.

Calvinist doctrine of predestination and concluding that 'diversity of opinion is recognized in this Church on such points in the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith'.[25] Since 'the substance of the Reformed Faith' was of course never defined, what this effectively did was to sanction the presence of ministers and elders in the Free Church who openly objected to some of the key aspects of the Confession of Faith. As Douglas Ansdell has said, 'the shock of the Declaratory Act... was that it gave legitimacy to all the errors and flaws of the previous years'.[26] Once again, a significant change had taken place in the Free Church, and once again the out-manoeuvred and out-voted traditionalists had to watch considerable change taking place in the corporate faith of their Church despite all their passionate opposition.

The Free Presbyterian Response to Change

In response to all of these changes, there was bitter division within the Free Church, with the Church splitting dramatically in 1893. The denomination founded by those who left, The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, has been distinct over the past century by maintaining wholly unchanging positions on all of the issues already discussed. As Lachlan MacLeod, Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Synod, put it in 1989, 'we hold on to our positions while the rest of society goes away from [them]'.[27] The Free Presbyterian reaction to change has been unswerving continuity, earning them the title of 'one of the strictest churches in Britain'.[28] Their position is that as changes occur in every other walk of life, the fundamental truths of the Bible never change, and neither should the Church; as 'the whole Bible is a mine of unchanging truth' so the Church should be a mine of unchanging doctrine and practice.[29] While this is reflected in their writing, it is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in their public worship, where the unchanging appearance and content has

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25 *'Act anent Confession of Faith (No. 8 of Class II.)' (Acts of the General Assembly of the Free Church*, p. 479).

26 D. Ansdell, *The People of the Great Faith. The Highland Church 1690-1900* (Stornoway, 1998), p. 169.

27 L. MacLeod, in 'Free Church's key player', *The Greenock Telegraph*, 28 June 1989.

28 G. Paterson, 'Church too pure even for a Lord Chancellor', *Daily Express*, May 26 1989.

29 K. Macleod, 'Changes', *The Young People's Magazine* (December 1996), p. 224.

become a badge of the denomination.

Hymns and Organs

First, their unbending stance can be seen in their rejection of instrumental music and hymns in public worship. The Free Presbyterian position on this issue has never changed, with a call to 'defend and continue this hallowed tradition' being issued as recently as March 1997.[30] In their centenary volume, the following statement was made in a chapter entitled 'Our Enduring Testimony'; 'as for our worship, we do not allow what is of the world or of man's invention to adulterate it; hence no place is given to instrumental music and hymns of human composition.'[31] The Free Presbyterian position in 1999 is the same as it was in 1893. Continuity is seen as the only valid reaction to change, and that continuity goes back much further than just one hundred years:

> If we go to the suffering church in the past and enquire, Why Psalms only? we will hear the French Huguenots, the persecuted Waldenses of the Alps, the suffering Covenanters from Scotland and Ireland, and many others, give their unhesitating answer with one voice, as David said to Ahimelech concerning the sword of Goliath; 'There is none like that; give it me.' Why Psalms only? The answer is clear. There is no substitute.[32]

The Free Presbyterians clearly feel a sense of continuity with the men who founded their denomination one hundred years ago, but their sense of continuity goes much further back than that. In an age of change, that sense of continuity has only grown stronger, and on listening to a precentor leading the singing of the metrical psalms, that sense of continuity is striking. Indeed in many congregations, especially at communion seasons, the precentor will still 'give out the line', singing one line at a time and then being joined by the congregation to sing the line again together, as has been done in the Highlands for generations. It can be a remarkable experience indeed to sit in a Lowland Free Presbyterian Church and listen to a large congregation singing in the old Gaelic style the psalms that their great-grandparents would have sung; same psalm, same tune, same effect. That there is no written liturgy just makes it more

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30 G. Hutton, 'Why Psalms only?', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (March 1997), p. 74.

31 J. Macleod, 'Our enduring testimony', in D.B. MacLeod *et al*, eds., *One Hundred Years of Witness* (Glasgow, 1993), pp. 212-13.

32 G. Hutton, Why Psalms only?, p.115.

remarkable. Despite the lack of a written liturgy, a communion Sabbath will always feature the same psalm at the same point in the service, sung to the same tune. Free Presbyterians seldom change their tune.

Attitude to Scripture

Secondly, in their approach to Scripture, Free Presbyterians have demonstrated no compromise or adjustment in the past one hundred years. One Free Presbyterian writer recently described the Church's 'initial pledge' as being 'to hold unswervingly, and with unremitting vigilance, to that testimony bequeathed to us'.[33] Clearly, continuing to preach the belief that 'the Bible is the Word of God, inspired and infallible, from beginning to end'[34] has been an essential part of that testimony. The attitude of the nineteenth-century Free Church to the Bible is still seen as a primary cause of the Free Presbyterians leaving in 1893. One Free Presbyterian minister preaching in 1996 called the Free Church of 1893 a 'spiritually diseased body' because of its attitude to Scripture. Evolution, he argued, 'has played a strong part in the decline of... [biblical Christianity] and the strengthening of Satan's kingdom', while biblical critics he described as 'the servants of Satan'.[35] These words, or words like them, can be heard during another Free Presbyterian tradition, the New Year's Day Sermon, when the opportunity is taken year after year to spell out the reasons for the Church's separation in 1893, and for its continued separation for over a century.[36]

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33 F. Macdonald, 'Continuing the struggle 1920-1960', in MacLeod, *One Hundred Years of Witness*, p. 108.

34 'Which church?' in *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (July 1996), p. 212.

35 A. McPherson, 'Synod sermon', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (July 1996), p. 201.

36 The New Year's Day lecture was a tradition instituted early in the history of the Free Presbyterian Church – in July, 1898 – by which the service of thanksgiving on the first day of the year (or the second should the first day happen to be a Sabbath) should see the ministers preaching 'on the Church's principles'. This usually took the form of an *apologia* of their actions in 1893, outlining the process by which the Free Church declined from a position of divine favour to being a Church from which departure became necessary. The tradition has continued, virtually unbroken, to the present day. See D. Beaton (ed.), *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1933),

Indeed these words are distinct echoes of the Free Presbyterian position one hundred years earlier. Neil Cameron, one of the Free Presbyterians' founding fathers, referred to critics of the doctrine of biblical infallibility and inerrancy as 'traitors to God and men'.[37] He described evolution as 'an absurd God-dishonouring theory, the product of irreverent imagination, destitute of any foundation in fact, and contrary to the clearest testimony of the Word of God'.[38] A speaker at a Free Presbyterian conference spelled out the modern Free Presbyterian view of the Bible in December 1994:

> There is one Author throughout Scripture, a Divine Author who determined the very words as well as the thoughts. In the fullest possible sense, Scripture is the Word of God. It is God who speaks to us through it.[39]

The level of continuity is again illustrated in this paper by the fact that the speaker actually quoted two nineteenth-century Free Presbyterian ministers, writing in 1896, to support his argument. While in the rest of the Christian world, critical attitudes to Scripture have ebbed and flowed, in the Free Presbyterian Church, it is clear from their sermons that the attitude has remained unadjusted and unaltered. The Bible, then as now, is believed to contain nothing but the word of God, and to be entirely free from error. As others have altered their position on the Bible and its status, the Free Presbyterians' position has remained unchanged.

Westminster Confession of Faith

Finally, the Free Presbyterian attitude to the Westminster Confession of Faith has not undergone any changes in the past century either. As creeds and confessions have become less popular with many denominations and as the Westminster Confession of Faith in particular has come to be seen as outdated and obsolete, the Free Presbyterian Church has clung resolutely to every single aspect of that controversial document. In 1996, the Free Presbyterian Magazine stated that:

A creedless church is an absurdity. The Free Presbyterian Church of

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p.130.

37 D. Beaton, *Memoir, Biographical Sketches, Letters, Lectures and Sermons (English and Gaelic) of the Revd Neil Cameron, Glasgow* (Inverness, 1932), p. 20.

38 'Bruce's new book', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (January 1898), p. 342.

39 K. Watkins, 'The inspiration of Scripture', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (February 1995), p. 46.

> Scotland maintains a wholehearted allegiance to the Westminster Confession of Faith – a confession which, for scripturalness, comprehensiveness, and precise definition, has not been bettered.[40]

One year later the same magazine described the Westminster Confession of Faith as 'the product of the collective learning and wisdom of some of the ablest and most spiritual men in England and Scotland in any generation. They possessed almost unrivalled acumen and judgement.'[41] While most churches that subscribed to the Westminster Confession have changed their terms of subscription or abandoned them altogether in the past hundred years, the Free Presbyterians have not. On the contrary, they have gripped it with unfaltering strength and held it high as a symbol of their identity, quoting it on the opening page of their magazine in both September and October 1998.[42] Continuity on this issue has been one of the Free Presbyterians' most unshakeable emblems, and that has also contributed to their distinctive identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Free Presbyterian Church has remained virtually unchanged over the past century, and one of the major explanations for this is that the circumstances of its birth made such a stance almost inevitable. As a Church that emerged out of a protest against change, it was perhaps inevitable that change became anathema to that Church. As a Church that emerged in defence of the 'old paths', it was perhaps inevitable that it would itself stick closely, almost obsessively, to these old paths. Crucially, this has applied equally to doctrine and practice: not just what is believed, but what is 'said and sung'. If most Christian churches have the choice of continuity or change, both in belief and worship, it is clear that the Free Presbyterians fundamentally have no choice. One writer in their centenary publication described the position when he said, 'The responsibility for adhering faithfully to the testimony raised in 1893 was inherent in the very constitution of the Free Presbyterian Church of

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40 'Which church?', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (July 1996), p. 211.

41 E. Chacko, 'A tribute to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (May 1997), p.144.

42 N. Ross, 'The Golden Key of Prayer', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (September 1998), p. 257; D. Beaton, 'The Westminster Assembly and Romanism', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* (October 1998), p. 289.

Scotland.'[43] Above all else, the modern Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland fears failing to transmit intact the heritage that they believe was transmitted to them by the founding fathers of the Church.

This feeling of reluctance to change in any way the torch that had been handed on has had a marked effect on the Free Presbyterian Church. It has meant that the Free Presbyterians have reacted to changes in belief and worship over the past 106 years with a remarkable level of continuity, and with that continuity has come a very clear and distinctive identity. In part it is a Highland identity, reflecting what Douglas Ansdell calls the 'measure of discontinuity' that exists 'between Highland and Lowland spirituality'.[44] But it is more than that; it has never been a merely Highland identity, and indeed the Free Presbyterians have made their unrelenting antipathy to wider Highland secular culture, including folklore, song, dancing, fiddling and the ceilidh, another part of their distinctive identity.[45] Furthermore, they have always – from the first year of their existence until today – been keen to emphasise their unchanging position in contrast to the shifting positions of other Highland denominations, particularly the Free Church. The implication of many Free Presbyterian statements on the subject is that they have not changed their position *unlike everyone else*; this of course brings problems and conflicts, but it also brings advantages. By stressing absolute continuity and totally rejecting change, the Free Presbyterians have carved themselves a niche unique among modern Protestant churches – even among modern Highland Protestant churches. Ironically, perhaps, it is a niche that today attracts

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43 F. MacDonald, 'Continuing the struggle 1920-1960', in MacLeod, *One Hundred Years of Witness*, p. 78.

44 Ansdell, *People of the Great Faith*, p. 214.

45 It is clear that it is an oversimplification simply to describe Highland Presbyterianism as being hostile to Gaelic culture, or, in Douglas Ansdell's words, to see it as 'a monolithic scourge of Gaelic culture'. (*Ibid*, p.131). This might also be said about the Free Presbyterians who, while critics of much of secular Gaelic culture, have done much to support other parts of it through their continuation of Gaelic services, prayer meetings and psalm-singing, and their respect for such great highland spiritual poets as Dugald Buchanan and Peter Grant. For some, this will have been their only exposure to the Gaelic language, and the Free Presbyterian contribution to the survival of Gaelic over the past hundred years should not be ignored.

attention through the Free Presbyterians' web site.[46] It is a niche that they are unlikely to leave, and are unlikely to share; it is certainly not a niche that is likely to change.

[46] The introduction of the web site was not without controversy, and interesting discussion of this can be found on the site itself, at www.fpchurch.org.uk .