
Movements in the Main-Line Presbyterian Churches in Scotland in the Twentieth Century

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Between 1900 and 1929 there were two major forces in Scottish Presbyterianism, represented by the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church. What happened in these Churches would largely mould the character of Christianity throughout the land for good or ill. In this article we look at some of the major influences in these Churches in the first three decades of the new century and the impact of the 1929 union for the subsequent development of the mainline Scottish Presbyterian Church.

1. Background

At the time of the Church union of 1900 between the Free and United Presbyterian Churches through which the United Free Church of Scotland emerged, the Church of Scotland – the “Established Church” – had (apparently) 1,447 congregations and a communicant membership of 648,476 souls. It was reported that this was a rise of 188,000 since 1875. Such increase in membership could, of course, be accounted for by looser or more nominal requirements for communicant membership, though it may also be accounted for by genuine evangelism, and not least the interest created by the work of Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The Moody/Sankey campaigns, however, arguably contributed to the loosening of attachment to the creedal position of the Churches. In his *The Life of Principal Rainy*, P. C. Simpson states with reference to the influence of the Moody missions of 1874:

I cannot state this more briefly and yet distinctly than by saying that Moody's preaching of a free Gospel to all sinners did more to relieve Scotland generally that is to say, apart from a limited number of select minds, of the old hyper-Calvinistic doctrine of election and of what theologians call a limited atonement and to bring home the sense of the love and grace of God towards all men, than did even the teaching of John Macleod Campbell.¹

This became rather typical of the trend against historic Calvinism in the later years of the nineteenth century. With it much of the robustness in Scottish faith and life evaporated. By the end of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century the concern was less about what was biblical than about what was "acceptable" to the "modern mind".

After the union of the Free and United Presbyterian Churches, the United Free Church emerged with 1,112 congregations and about 490,000 members (Free, 293,396; and UP, 195,596).² By the standards of the end of the twentieth century these numbers are incredibly high. Even the comment that there were 37.5% of the population un-churched in Scotland in 1900 seems incredible a century later. The measure of numerical decline in the matter of Church attendances may be gauged from the fact that in 2002 average attendances in the Church of Scotland amounted to a mere 228,500 of a total population in excess of 5 million.³

¹ P. C. Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy* (2 vols., London, 1909), Vol. 1, p. 408. Simpson's statement is a caricature of historic Calvinism. Scottish Presbyterianism was rarely if ever tainted with *hyper-Calvinism*, involving as it does the notion that the gospel offer is not free and must not be universally proclaimed. Nor is it hyper-Calvinistic to hold to "limited atonement". Calvinism's doctrine of the limitation of the *extent* of the atoning work of Christ to the elect was never considered by Calvinists to be incompatible with a free gospel offer of salvation to all. The atonement is, after all, *either* limited in extent and perfect in efficacy (because the salvation of all for whom Christ died is thereby secured), *or* it is unlimited in extent and therefore limited in efficacy (because all are not saved by it). This "tension" was clearly maintained in the early Free Church by such divines as Thomas Chalmers, Robert S. Candlish and William Cunningham, as well as the profound theologian of the atonement and the Holy Spirit, George Smeaton. John McLeod Campbell (1800-1872) held to a universal redemption and was rightly disciplined by the Church of Scotland on that account in 1831.

² J. R. Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929* (Edinburgh, 1933), p. 56. Fleming's Church histories of Scotland are strongly biased on the side of the liberalising developments in the Presbyterian Churches. However, the two volumes that comprise his history from the Disruption to the Church Union of 1929 contain a vast amount of interesting information and comment.

³ The population in Scotland in 1851 was 2.9m. This had grown to 4.5m by 1900. In 1931 the population was 4.8m, since when there has been modest population growth, mostly

At that point attendances at Roman Catholic Churches amounted to 202,110 but by 2006 attendances in the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland exceeded that of attendances in the Established Church. As an indication of movements in religion and demographic movements affecting Scotland, it is perhaps sufficient to note that in 1851 Roman Catholics accounted for 4.3% of total Church attendances in Scotland, whereas by 2002 the total was 35%.⁴

If this is not related to a loss of the gospel, nothing is. A good argument can be made that the unions of Presbyterian Churches in the twentieth century actually contributed to their decline by so seriously diluting the authority of the Bible and the nature and claims of the gospel. In any generation persecution may slay its thousands. In the case of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland liberalism and nominality in religion have slain their hundreds of thousands.

2. Changes in forms of subscription

The change in the ordination vow to the vague terms implemented by the United Free at the point of the union signalled a serious doctrinal weakness. Although this consequence may not have been intended, in effect everything became indefinite and mutable. A comparison of the terms of subscription according to the 1846 Free Church form and the 1900 United Free Church form indicates the huge shift taken. The Question put to Probationers by the 1846 Act was as follows:

Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith, approved by the General Assemblies of the Church, to be the truths of God, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and do you own the whole doctrine therein contained as the confession of your faith?

By comparison, the Question put to Probationers in the 1900 Act was this:

fuelled by net immigration, with an estimated 5.1m in 2001 and an estimated 5.2m in 2011. In other words, the population of Scotland grew quite modestly through the 20th and into the 21st century, but the number of native Scottish people has actually been in decline, with probably fewer Scots now in Scotland than in 1901.

⁴ In an article by Simon Johnson in the *Daily Telegraph*, on Tuesday 13th September 2011, entitled "Salmond 'must resist Catholic threats' to gay marriage law", the claim was made that there were 800,000 Scottish Roman Catholics.

Do you sincerely own and believe the Doctrine of this Church, set forth in the Confession of Faith approved by Acts of General Synods and Assemblies; do you acknowledge the said doctrine as expressing the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures?

The Formula for subscription in 1846 for all office-bearers stated:

I . . . do hereby declare, that I do sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith to be the truths of God; and I do own the same as the confession of my faith.

By comparison, the Formula for subscription in 1900 for Probationers, Ministers and Elders was:

I . . . do hereby declare that, in the strength of the grace that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, I will constantly maintain and defend the doctrine, worship and government of this church, with the liberty and exclusive spiritual jurisdiction thereof, as expressed in my answers to the questions put to me.

Though this might all be taken as a very slight change in the matter of subscription to the Church's creed, in point of fact it was a sea-change. Take the phrase affirmed: "the Doctrine of this Church." What does that mean? Someone might say, It means what is set forth in the *Confession of Faith*. But does that mean *all* that is set forth in the Confession, or just some parts of it? The shift, made explicit in the Declaratory Articles of both United Presbyterian (1879) and Free (1892) Churches make it clear that *this will be determined by the Church*. The Free Church's Act *anent the Confession of Faith* (1892) closes with the following paragraph:

That while diversity of opinion is recognised in this Church on such points in the Confession as do not enter in to the substance of the Reformed Faith therein set forth, the Church retains full authority to determine, in any case which may arise, what points fall within this description, and thus to guard against any abuse of this liberty to the detriment of sound doctrine, or to the injury of her unity and peace.

The mischief of such a clause lies in the want of definition. What exactly does not enter into "the substance of the Reformed Faith"? What, indeed, is "sound doctrine" as mentioned in the clause? Who determines

these things? The answer is: the Church does. In the Reformation of the sixteenth century the cry was *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone! The new principle implicit in such movements might be called *sola Ecclesia*, the Church alone! The actual words of the Confession of Faith are not revised or amended, but the attachment of office-bearers to them is. It is all very vague and indefinite. The door could hardly be opened more widely to liberal theology and practice. No doubt there was a desire to retain what was “fundamental” (= the substance of the Reformed Faith?). The trouble is, that if anything is changeable, then nothing is “fundamental”. As one daily newspaper perceptively commented:

It is possible, if not eminently probable, that the doctrines of the United Free Church will be in the hands of the younger men. They, if certain signs of the times can be accepted, are interested in other and possibly profounder questions than the maintenance of Protestantism or even the maintenance of “evangelical religion”.⁵

It need hardly be said how true a comment this was, as things turned out. As Kenneth Ross put it: “From differing viewpoints critics agreed that, in contrast to that of the old Free Church, the doctrine of the United Free Church, so far as it was constitutionally stated, was elusive and mutable.”⁶ Such Declaratory Acts and subsequent changes to the Questions and Formula subscribed by Probationers, Ministers and Elders, in the United Free Church, however, blazed the trail for subsequent changes in the Church of Scotland, as we shall see.

3. Loosening of the bonds

The House of Lords’ decision in the Free Church Case in 1904 came as a huge shock to Principal Rainy and the United Free Church. However, they had considerable influence in the corridors of power and in due course a Royal Commission under the Earl of Elgin was appointed essentially to overturn the decision of the House of Lords, from which there was no appeal. The whole business was settled by the resulting Churches (Scotland) Act of 1905 which saw to the distribution of endowments and properties between the Free Church and the United Free. This led to two landmark changes which would seriously change the face of Scottish Presbyterianism thereafter:

⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 1st June 1900.

⁶ Kenneth R. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 284.

1. *Allowance for change in subscription to the Confession in the Established Church.* Quite gratuitously in the 1905 Act there was a clause which applied to the Church of Scotland in relation to its subscription to the *Confession of Faith*. The clause in question read: “The formula of subscription to the Confession of Faith required from ministers and preachers of the Church of Scotland as by law established and from persons appointed to Chairs of Theology in the Scottish Universities and the Principal of Saint Mary’s College, Saint Andrew’s, respectively, shall be such as may be prescribed by Act of the General Assembly of the said Church with the consent of the majority of the presbyteries thereof. The formula at present in use in any case shall be required until a formula in lieu thereof is so prescribed.”⁷ In other words, this clause gave the Church of Scotland a lawful allowance to change its formula of subscription. No doubt this was thought necessary to pre-empt the sort of “wrangling” over properties and endowments involved in the Free Church/United Free Church Case.
2. *The Act Anent Spiritual Independence in the United Free Church.* As a direct result of the House of Lords’ Case (1904) the United Free Church took steps to secure its future against challenges about its creed and faithfulness to its creedal position. This culminated in an Act which was passed in 1906 asserting the Spiritual Independence of the Church. A hugely significant piece of legislation, the *Act Anent Spiritual Independence* signalled a distinct shift in the whole matter of the relationship of the Church to its creedal position.⁸ The first clause asserted the inherent right of the Church to “change, add to, or modify, her constitution and laws, Subordinate Standards, and Church formulas, and to determine and declare what these are”. The second clause in this Act was a “fundamental principle” in relation to any moves for union with other Christian Churches. The third clause invests in the General Assembly the powers of change simply by a unanimous or majority vote, which decisions would be final. The fourth clause relates all such

⁷ *The Churches (Scotland) Act, 1905*, Chapter 12, Section 5, 6.

⁸ Act I, Class I, 1906. Acts of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland.

power to change the constitution and laws of the Church to the holding of the funds and properties of the Church. This all seems plausible and even perfectly right for any Church. However in effect it indicated a fundamental shift towards a *sola ecclesia* position that came to dominate the mainline Churches in Scotland (and beyond) in the twentieth century. The Church would be above the creed and conscientious objectors to doctrinal deviations or constitutional changes would ever after have to like it or lump it.

As with clause 5 in the 1905 *Churches (Scotland) Act*, so with the 1906 *United Free Act anent Spiritual Independence* there were profound doctrinal and constitutional changes in the air. The Churches' constitutions were rendered vague, and sanctions on grounds of heresy became increasingly difficult both to demonstrate and to apply. Whereas previously a person who found himself at odds with the Church's clearly stated position, and clearly formulated form of subscription, would in effect either be disciplined or would voluntarily take his leave of the Church (he being now unsympathetic to its stated position), in the fluid post-1900 position, in which the *sola ecclesia* principle applied, it was the individual who might have a completely unqualified acceptance of the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith who would have to think of his position in the Church. Such a conservative individual might effectively have to take his leave on account of the *liberal* changes, concerning which he could raise no real *constitutional* objection (however biblical he might feel such objections to be).⁹ It was all a matter of a majority of the votes. This was something which became increasingly clear in the course of the twentieth century in the life of the broad Churches and it inevitably served to paralyse their witness. The people increasingly recognised this capitulation to the enlightenment, evolutionary, and humanistic tenor of the times and inevitably detected a real irrelevancy in the Church. It was the precursor of a "soft-centred" religion which would cause neither offence to the worldly philosophy, nor present any serious challenge to the world under the sway of the evil one (1 John 4:19). The Church would, in effect, muzzle itself and in the process lose the gospel truth; and the people would vote with their feet.

⁹ For a brilliant blow-by-blow description of how this principle worked itself out in the Presbyterian Churches in the United States of America in the late 19th and through the 20th centuries, see Gary North's compelling *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, Texas, 1996).

4. Decline from historic orthodoxy

The implications of such changes in the creed at the end of the nineteenth century were very quickly evident in the United Free Church post-1900. There were still some conservatives in the UF Church on the matter of Biblical Criticism. However, they found themselves fighting a losing battle. The case of William Robertson Smith (1877-1881) cast a dark shadow over the UF Church and, indeed, over most of the biblical scholarship in the halls of divinity. There were some conservative Professors or ex-Professors in the Theological Colleges and divinity faculties. John Laidlaw (Systematic Theology, New College) (1832-1906), Thomas Smith (Evangelistic Theology, New College) (1817-1906), and George C. M. Douglas (Old Testament, Trinity, Glasgow) (1826-1904), had all been Professors in the old Free Church and were all relatively conservative men in relation to matters of historical criticism. But they all went into the union. None of the younger men in the old Free Church were of such an inclination. From the old UP Church Theological Hall there was James Orr (1844-1913), whose books were considered conservative. In the Church of Scotland were outstanding conservative anti-critical scholars such as Professor James Robertson (Old Testament, Glasgow University) and W. L. Baxter, a parish minister at Cameron, Fife, whose *Sanctuary and Sacrifice* (1895) was a considerable refutation of Julius Wellhausen, the “inspiration” behind William Robertson Smith.

In general, however, by the beginning of the twentieth century the critical views had won the day. Perhaps the last “Hurrah!” of opposition to the negative criticism was fought in the UF Church in 1901-1902 in efforts made through the Church Courts to bring George Adam Smith (Old Testament, Trinity College, Glasgow) (1856-1942) to book for his volume, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*. This book was based on a series of lectures at Yale University. Given that Smith affirmed the polytheistic nature of Israelite religion, the unhistorical nature of the early chapters of Genesis (contrary to Christ’s understanding of these chapters), the accusation that the patriarchal narratives were “fanciful”, and the naturalistic treatment of Messianic prophecies, there seemed good grounds to question Smith’s doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture.¹⁰ Despite this, the case came to

¹⁰ On George Adam Smith see Iain D. Campbell’s *Fixing the Indemnity* (Paternoster, 2004). Coming from a conservative evangelical scholar this is, in our view, a rather too uncritical assessment of Smith’s position. Campbell seems to buy in to the idea of a “believing criticism” which holds that evangelical believers can hold together evangelical faith

nothing at the UF Assembly of 1902. It was a great disappointment that in that matter James Orr seconded Principal Rainy's motion which effectively exonerated Smith in that Assembly. As Principal John Macleod put it, "in this business a man like him, of whom better was to be expected, was held by many to have virtually sold the pass".¹¹ Thereafter there were no heresy trials, notwithstanding an abundance of heresy taught as scholarship in the divinity halls.

5. Consequences of critical scholarship in the Churches

Scholars like George Adam Smith (and the other Smith – William Robertson Smith – before him) treated the Scriptures like any human production and did not hesitate, according to their subjective assessments, to cut up the text into a thousand pieces.¹² It may be that they did not realise what they were in effect doing. They left a legacy of complete distrust in the Bible as an authoritative, historically reliable record of a divine revelation.¹³ Why should congregations (far less the world) take the Bible seriously after the critics had so mauled it? It devastated the Church in the twentieth century, though the liberal historical critics never seem to have seen this. Wrote one eminent historian from the perspective of the closing years of the twentieth century, referring to the influences of such theological and critical movements of the first quarter of the century:

All the signs are that the Church is unsure of itself, that it has somehow lost its way, so far at least as religious teaching is concerned. Nearly seventy years ago a Report framed by a principal of a Scottish divinity college spoke of "a dim and instinctive theism which is the working faith of perhaps the

and critical views of the Bible which in effect shred the authority of the Bible as a reliable, authoritative, and well-attested historical text. That, however, is just the sort of thinking that sounded the death-knell on a vital Christianity in Scotland and beyond in the twentieth century.

¹¹ John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 2nd edn., 1946), p. 308.

¹² For a useful critique of the "Documentary Hypothesis", see O. T. Allis's *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia, 2nd edn., 1964). In relation, particularly, to William Robertson Smith's views there is an interesting piece, "Refutation of Prof. W. Robertson Smith" in R. L. Dabney's *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (3 vols., Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 [1891-7]), Vol. 1, pp. 399-439.

¹³ For a critical view of historical criticism and its impact in the Church in the 20th century see Eta Linnemann's brilliant exposé, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology and Ideology* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1990).

majority of the youth of this nation” . . . the faith of the saints has been set aside.¹⁴

Significantly and rather shockingly, Gordon Donaldson provides an insight from his own experience into the sort of things taught in Churches in the 1920s:

Before the nineteenth century was out it was becoming commonplace in academic circles that the Fall was unhistorical, the concept of the Atonement an interpretation of Christ’s importance as a moral teacher and neither the Virgin Birth nor the Resurrection a necessary article of faith. Some now seem to think that such ideas were invented by the Bishop of Durham within the last ten years. I heard them all – along with the notion of the Motherhood of God – in a Bible Class held by a Church of Scotland minister in the 1920s.¹⁵

It is little wonder there was a mass evacuation from the Churches with this sort of teaching. Who would take the Christian faith seriously if the teachers of it did not take the Bible seriously? The problem was that the theology of the Enlightenment had displaced the theology of the Reformation. As Donaldson correctly put it, in the process the faith of the saints was put aside.

Much is often said of the scholarly attainments of those who were in the van of the newer criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Scotland and beyond. One reads of “victories” for the “advanced” and “progressive” views in biblical studies and the lustre these shed on the individuals and academic institutions by which they were propagated. In relation to the last decade of the nineteenth century in this connection Kenneth Ross commented that,

Given the force of the spreading naturalism of the late nineteenth century thought, the instinct of faith scarcely seems an adequate defence for the integrity of a supernatural religion. Yet it was the very strength and conviction of their evangelical faith which persuaded [Marcus] Dods and others that their Christianity was impregnable. It blinded them to the fact that the concessions they

¹⁴ G. Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots* (London 1990), p. 140. He is referring to D. S. Cairns, as quoted in A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 179.

¹⁵ Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots*, p. 132.

made broke down the orthodox line of defence so that the essence of faith was exposed to serious danger. They never appreciated the magnitude of what was done in the 1889-1892 period.¹⁶

Exactly what the strength and conviction of the “evangelical faith” of these men was is debatable matter. In a revealing comment, Marcus Dods surmised in a letter to John M. Grant, dated 8th January 1902:

I wish I could live as a spectator through the next generation to see what they are going to make of things. There will be a grand turn up in matters theological, and the churches won't know themselves fifty years hence. It is to be hoped some little rag of faith may be left when all's done. For my own part I am sometimes entirely under water and see no sky at all.¹⁷

The truth is that very little of a “rag of faith” has survived in Scottish Church life. The legacy of the “newer criticism” was far-reaching and destructive to the strength and conviction of evangelical faith, by which alone Christianity can prosper. Apart from the impact of the critical views on the faith of the Church, the deadening effect on vital faith in the critics themselves has rarely been examined.

6. Impact of critical views on the critics

This all must have had a deadening effect on the purveyors of such biblical scholarship. Marcus Dods (1834-1909) had been Professor of Exegetical Theology in succession to the conservative and saintly George Smeaton (1814-1889) at New College, Edinburgh. There were protests about his appointment at the 1890 Free Church General Assembly from Thomas Smith, Andrew Bonar, and John McEwan, among others.¹⁸ The General Assembly in 1890 found that there were no grounds for any process against him though his method and manner of expressing himself were open to criticism.

But such ideas – of Marcus Dods and George Adam Smith, and the other higher and historical critics – had their consequences, not least in relation to the professed faith of the critics themselves. It is sad to read

¹⁶ Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*, pp. 222-3.

¹⁷ M. Dods (ed.), *Later Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.* (London, 1911), p. 67.

¹⁸ See Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*, p. 177ff.

in a letter written by Marcus Dods to John M. Grant on 23rd December 1898, this remarkable admission:

I am a backslider. I used to enjoy prayer, but for years I have found myself dumb. Of course one can always make a prayer, as I do every morning for my class, but prayer in the sense of asking for things has not been in my case a proved force. The things I have chiefly prayed for all my life I have not got. Communion with the highest and consideration of Christ are of course efficacious to some extent; but I pray now not because my own experience gives me any encouragement, but only because of Christ's example and command.¹⁹

This contrasts sharply with a letter Dods wrote to his sister Marcia thirty-six years earlier (5th September 1862) in his days as a probationer of the Church:

I agree with you about wrestling in prayer, and for my own part feel it best to say simply what I desire, and calmly to leave these my desires before Him who can if He will. Nothing has given me anything resembling the peace of God more than this, when it suddenly surrounds you as sunlight that God's knowledge takes up every fraction of your case, and that His love has already been preparing its best result.²⁰

In one of his last letters, to Rev. Henry S. Coffin, dated 1st October 1908, Dods wrote:

I don't get out so much now, as my cough is worse, and the doctors are going to try some new thing as a last resort. If it fails I fear I must be content gradually to fade away. Funnily enough I do not remember to have ever been so irreligious, so little inclined to pray, so cold on the spiritual side, so content to let things slide. I wonder if that is a common experience in sickness. I can't quite understand it.²¹

This is a sad comment from a man of seventy-four years of age and who had been a Christian minister for over fifty years.

¹⁹ *Later Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.*, p. 29.

²⁰ M. Dods (ed.), *Early Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.* (London, 1910), pp. 231-2.

²¹ *Later Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.*, p. 300. Dods died a few months later.

When one thinks of what the critics did and have continued to do one cannot help but think of the solemn words of the Lord Jesus Christ about his Word: "I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18-19). The truth is that the pass had been sold. And where there is no revelation [prophetic word/clear message] the people perish.

7. Movements towards a wider union, 1900-1929²²

It was quite clear that after the resolution of the Free Church case by the *Churches (Scotland) Act* of 1905, the two main Presbyterian Churches in Scotland became interested in exploring the possibility of a union (re-union?) between them. Moves to that effect were "put on hold" during the War (1914-18) but after the closure of hostilities the impetus to such reunion was resumed.

The *Churches (Scotland) Act* of 1905 gave the "green light" to the Church of Scotland in two directions: (1) in the direction of creedal, constitutional change; and (2) in the direction of a wider Church union with what was now the second largest Presbyterian Church in the country, the United Free Church. It was not long after 1905 that the Church of Scotland began to move in both directions. The Church of Scotland was "the church by law established" in Scotland. That was a matter determined by Acts of Parliament, specifically an Act of 1690 which ratified the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as the Church's creedal standard. Obviously a union could only be forged with the United Free Church or any other of the non-established bodies if some changes were made to the legal position of the Established Church.

In some ways the process began with the allowance given to the Church of Scotland in the 1905 Act to change its Formula of Subscription. Not until 1910 did the Assembly agree on a new formula, when the following was adopted:

²² For a blow-by-blow account of the movements for union on the first quarter of the 20th century see Rolf Sjölander's *Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland 1907-1921* (Edinburgh, 1962).

I hereby subscribe to the Confession of Faith, declaring that I accept it as the Confession of this Church, and that I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith therein.

This effectively brought the Church of Scotland into line with the United Free Church in relation to the form of Confessional subscription. The critical matter lay in the phrase “the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith therein”, a phrase which left undefined just exactly what these “fundamental doctrines” were.

In the Church of Scotland Assembly of 1908 an invitation was issued to the UF Church “to confer in a friendly and generous spirit on the present ecclesiastical situation in Scotland, and to consider how a larger measure of Christian fellowship and co-operation could be brought about so as to prepare the way for union for which so many were hoping and praying”.²³ Both Churches appointed large and representative Committees to confer on the matter in 1909 and things went on from there.

By 1914 draft articles for a constitution embodying the spiritual powers inherent in the Church had been drawn up. It wasn't that the discussion of these things was altogether plain sailing. There was a “combination of High Churchmen and very orthodox evangelicals”²⁴ who resisted the moves for constitutional change, the one no doubt because of the threat to the position of the Church as “established by law”, and the other on account of the threat to the doctrinal dilution which was involved in the process. The whole process, however, was overtaken by the events of the Great War (1914-1918) and it was only in 1919 that the matter was actively renewed. In the event the articles as adjusted were more or less unanimously agreed in the Church of Scotland Assembly that year. They were also approved by the United Free Church. It was clear that the constitutional changes in the Established Church were motivated by a move for union between the Churches. The passage in the UF Church, however, was not quite so smooth. There was a group of ministers and elders strongly opposed to anything that remotely smacked of Erastianism. Under the leadership of James Barr there were many dissents at the UF Assembly that year.²⁵

²³ J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (London, 1960), pp. 399-400.

²⁴ Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929*, p. 93.

²⁵ Ironically, this group represented a United Presbyterian faction within the UF Church. Although there had been no dissents in the UP Church on entering the union in 1900,

However, it was clear that the vast majority approved. By the end of the year the Church of Scotland had received approval from the majority of Presbyteries for the Articles and they were consequently sent to Parliament for approval.

8. Constitutional change in the Established Church

Approval for the “Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in matters Spiritual” was formally granted by Parliament in July 1921. This indicated the sort of constitutional and theological shift in the Church of Scotland that had earlier been adopted by the United Free Church. It was another step in the liberalisation of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. There were nine articles in the “Articles Declaratory” approved by Parliament in 1921.²⁶ They were finally enacted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1926.

The details of the nine Articles may be summarised as follows:

1. The first article provides a brief summary of the faith and is given with the affirmation that “the Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon”.
2. The second article concerns the relationship of the Church to its Subordinate Standards, including the *Directory for Public Worship*, the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government* and the *Form of Process*. However, these are to be interpreted or modified thereafter by Acts of General Assembly. That is to say, the “principle” of change is worked into the constitution.
3. The third article affirms historical continuity with the Reformed Church in Scotland and states that the historical continuity is not prejudiced by the articles.

when the union between the UF Church and the Church of Scotland was forged in 1929 the ministers and people who remained out of that union on the UF side were essentially a continuing group of “Voluntaries” of UP background.

²⁶ The details of these Articles can be found in Appendix E of Fleming’s *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929*, pp. 310-12.

4. The fourth article is at the heart of the articles in that it states, affirms, and claims the Church's corporate freedom and spiritual independence in relation to the State.
5. In the fifth article the right is claimed to declare the sense in which the Church understands the Confession and also to modify its teaching as well as add other doctrinal statements. The relationship of office-bearers and members to these standards is to be defined by the Church. In addition, liberty of opinion is to be allowed "in points which do not enter into the substance of the faith".
6. The sixth article defines the separate roles of Church and State and their proper relationship and independence from one another.
7. The seventh article states the obligation to promote union with other Churches without any State interference.
8. The eighth article makes provision for changes in the articles allowing for due breadth of interpretation. The Church by this article is committed to being a "Broad Church" with a fluid and flexible – and it has to be said – indefinite position, albeit one consistent with the first article.
9. The ninth article is simply a legal statement by which the Church ratifies and confirms its new constitution in matters spiritual.

The Articles beg a whole raft of questions and insinuate indefinite fluidity into the Church's position. What are "the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession"? The Church is to be sole judge of this. This is *sola ecclesia*; the Church is now *above* its constitution and Confession rather than under it. It is the triumph of Enlightenment philosophy over Reformation theology. It is the principle of mere authoritarianism in Church courts. And what exactly is "liberty of opinion"; what are its limits? Even Article (3) which states that the Articles are not to be taken as prejudicial to the claim of historical continuity with the Reformed Church in Scotland has a very hollow ring to it. It is as if we are asked not to take these Articles according to the plain meaning of the words, which, on the face of it, affirm significant discontinuity! According to the Articles, the Church's role in future will be a simple *ex cathedra* one, notwithstanding the intent of the framers of the Articles, or perhaps agreeably to their intent.

9. Church union of 1929

The radical change in the Church's constitution in the Articles Declaratory of 1921 was followed up in 1925 with the *Church of Scotland Properties and Endowments Act* by which the Church entered into full and free possession of its properties, and the enactment of the Articles Declaratory the following year. The way was thus cleared for the "wider union" on theologically vague principles between the two largest Presbyterian Churches. This union was approved by the respective Churches in May 1929 and a uniting Assembly was held at an improvised hall in Annandale Street, off Leith Walk on 1st October. An irony in the Assembly in which the union was consummated lies in the fact that the document sealing the union was signed on behalf of the United Free Church by Principal Alexander Martin (New College), retiring Moderator of the United Free Church, using the quill pen which, apparently, had been used by Thomas Chalmers and others in signing the Deed of Demission and Act of Separation at the first Free Church Assembly in the Tanfield Hall, Canonmills, Edinburgh, in May 1843.²⁷ Dr. Joseph Mitchell (Mauchline), as the retiring Moderator of the Church of Scotland, signed on behalf of his Church. Alexander Martin (1857-1946) was the son of the conservative constitutionalist Hugh Martin (1822-1885). Between father and son there was a huge gulf.²⁸ The same could be said of the positions of the Disruption Church and the united Church of Scotland.

The Presbyterian scene in Scotland was now dominated by one mega-Presbyterian body. The standards of evangelical and biblical truth were effectively abandoned, though evangelical faith survived, albeit in the face of growing doctrinal indifference and nominality in Church life.²⁹ The author grew up in Edinburgh in the post-War years. With his family he attended a local Church of Scotland congregation, which in the

²⁷ Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929*, p. 129.

²⁸ It is perhaps not insignificant that almost all Hugh Martin's theological and devotional writings have been reprinted in recent years, whereas the more "progressive" and liberal productions of his son have disappeared into obscurity. The books, in general, that have endured have been those, like Hugh Martin's, which have fed people's souls. The works of modernists and liberals have just not done that, unsurprisingly.

²⁹ In post Second World War years the conservative evangelical element was maintained by such prominent preachers and theologians as William Still (Gilcomston, Aberdeen), James Philip (Holyrood Abbey, Edinburgh), George Philip (Sandyford Henderson, Glasgow), Eric Alexander (Tron, Glasgow), and Sinclair Ferguson (Tron, Glasgow). Ferguson subsequently moved to the USA.

1950s and early 1960s was well attended.³⁰ A noticeable feature of the Church life was a lack of teaching or emphasis on Bible doctrine and personal religion. The necessity of the new birth, repentance for sin, and conversion was not heard, far less the realities of eternal punishment. Family religion was all but unknown. The form of “religion” was formal and nominal. It was only after coming under the evangelical ministry of Rev. James Philip at Holyrood Abbey in the mid-to-late 1960s that the author was confronted by the gospel, and Bible teaching was heard.³¹

The author remembers one occasion, perhaps in the early 1990s, while he was waiting on a railway platform in Elgin he was politely engaged in conversation by a gentleman who represented the Railway Mission. Perhaps it was the “clerical attire” that attracted the mission worker and he wished to know the theology of this clergyman. It turned out that he had known the Church in which the author was brought up and knew his father who had been an elder in that congregation. At any rate, he recounted a conversation with the then minister of the congregation to whom he had gone with a concern he had over the necessity of the “new birth”, which he reckoned from Scripture was a necessity for a person to be a Christian. “Oh,” said the minister – a man of very long standing in the ministry from pre-1929 UF days – “some people believe that, but there are other ways of becoming a Christian. If a person is respectable and Church-going they need have no fear that they are not Christians.” Being respectable and Church-going are no doubt good things, and yet Jesus clearly taught: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:3, 7-8). This teaching, however, had been largely lost in the Churches by the mid-1960s.

³⁰ In the early 1960s there were around 900 members in the congregation in question. However, much of this was “nominal”, as an evening service commonly attended by around 50 testified. The same church closed its doors late in 2009 and was sold off the following year. In the author’s early days there were nine buildings which had been post-1929 Church of Scotland congregations within a mile or so of where he lived. None of them now remain as such, though of the nine one is used by a Brethren Assembly, and one is a Free Presbyterian Church.

³¹ See the author’s tribute, “Rev. James Philip: Some Recollections”, in *Free Church Witness*, July/August 2009, p. 9.

The Formula of the new united Church of Scotland indicated very clearly the broadness and indistinctness of the theological position of that body:

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church.

I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith.

I promise to observe the order of worship and the administration of all the public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church.

In 1931 it was reported that the Church of Scotland had 2,720 congregations and 1,280,620 Church members. It is noteworthy that by the first decade of the twenty-first century the number of congregations in the Church of Scotland had reduced to 1,179 and Church members to 480,000,³² though weekly attendances may be as low as 200,000, as previously noted.

10. United Free Church (Continuing) emerges

As mentioned above, not all ministers and people in the United Free Church were happy to go into the union. There was a continuing United Free Church which refused to enter the union. They were the remnants of those who held to some of the distinctives of the pre-1900 United Presbyterian Church. It was reckoned that at the end of 1929 this body had 106 congregations and a membership of 13,791. It was, however, not theologically conservative. The minority did not go into the union for three principal reasons:

1. *Autonomy*. Historically the United Free Church of Scotland had consistently been opposed to State Establishment of religion, believing it to be a hindrance to the welfare and witness of the Church of Jesus Christ. Even in situations where there was no actual interference with the Church's spiritual autonomy, the threat was thought to be implicit with the State-Church relationship.

³² *Reports to the General Assembly 2008*: Legal Questions Committee Statistical Returns, Appendix IV.

2. *Equality*. The special recognition by the State of one denomination placed the Churches on an unequal footing and was not in the interests of the best inter-Church relations.

3. *Voluntaryism*. Material support should come from the freewill offerings of the members. Where the State for specific purposes, regarded as promoting the welfare of the people, offered material or financial aid to all Churches, without distinction and without injustice to other institutions or interference with the Church's freedom, acceptance of such aid would not be incompatible with the Church's position.

At least the minority were consistent with the old voluntaryism of the United Presbyterian Church in opposing the union. An agreement between the parties obviated the sort of case over properties that followed the union of 1900. However, the "agenda" of the minority was arguably even looser theologically than that of the united Church of Scotland. This is perhaps best indicated by the fact that they were the first Presbyterian body in Scotland to ordain women into the ministry/eldership of the Church. This they enacted in 1935.³³

11. A twentieth century preoccupation in the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland: Ecumenicity

Divisions within the professing Christian Church are no doubt lamentable. There is a responsibility upon all Christians to reflect their true standing as brethren and believers in the Lord Jesus Christ by an outward unity. In a perfect world there would be no divisions. However, it is not a perfect world and divisions do exist and always will exist among professing Churches, even, sadly, those of the same or similar forms of doctrine and Church government. Any Church unions ought only to be arrived at on a right basis of common adherence to the teachings of the Word of God and true loyalty and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ as the sole Head of the Church. Concurrence on doctrine, worship and government is all-important. A definite and fixed creed, and form of adherence to it, is also all-important for real Church unity. Real union can only be found in the detail; otherwise one simply develops a

³³ The information is largely taken from the web-site: <http://www.ufcos.org.uk/hista.htm>. See also the standard history by James Barr, *The United Free Church of Scotland* (London, 1934), for matters of the Church union from a continuing UF perspective.

Church with a multiplicity of factions, especially in a body in which sanctions are impossible on account of the breadth of the creedal position of the Church. Any Church unions crafted on the basis of theological compromise or dilution of truth or the sacrifice of the principles of divine sovereign grace, cannot be honouring to Christ and will not represent real unity in the fully biblical sense.

Writing in 1876 on moves towards Church unions or alliances in the United States of America, the Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Dabney perceptively stated that, “The Protestant world will soon be educated to set inordinate store by that of which God makes least account – formal union; *at the expense* of that which he regards as of extreme value – doctrinal fidelity”.³⁴ The truth of this statement is well illustrated by the history of Protestant Churches through the twentieth century. There was a great outburst of optimism and hope expressed in the famous World Missionary Conference convened at Edinburgh in 1910, the so-called Edinburgh Missionary Conference. No doubt there is good reason to focus on a desire for seeing the expansion of the Christian message to the ends of the earth. The truth was, however, that by that time (1910) already the message had become diffuse doctrinally with a tendency to syncretism by adapting the message to surrounding cultures.³⁵

The situation of the Church in Scotland in the twentieth century reveals a very sorry picture in this respect:

- *Church Union and the mainline denominations.* On the one hand there were major unions which were essentially worked out through compromise of evangelical truth. This marked the unions both in 1900 (Free and United Presbyterian) and 1929 (United Free and Established Church). These unions were carved out on the basis of loosening of ordination vows and the sacrifice of clarity in their creedal positions. The Church was an organic whole but in truth, theologically, was like a

³⁴ Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 2, p. 538.

³⁵ Syncretism is the union (or attempted fusion) of different systems of thought or belief (especially in religion or philosophy). See, for example, the volume by Lian Xi, *The Conversion of the Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932* (Penn State Press, Pennsylvania, 1997), for a telling and illuminating insight into changes in missionary policy and teaching in the period discussed. The title of this book is ironical. Christian missionaries went out to convert the “heathen”, and many, it appears, ended up being “converted” to heathenism.

patchwork quilt, the stitches of which are found to be somewhat worn and frayed.

- *Church union and the smaller denominations.* On the other hand the century witnessed the equally tragic spectacle of smaller conservative confessional Presbyterian and Reformed Churches which failed to come together when they reflected almost identical positions in theology, worship and practice – as well as history. There was a concerted initiative taken by the Free Church towards smaller Presbyterian churches – the Free Presbyterians, and the remnants of the Original Secession and Reformed Presbyterians – in the early/mid 1930s, on the basis of Professor J. Kennedy Cameron’s *A Proposal for a Further Ecclesiastical Union in Scotland* (1930), and discussions with the OS reached the verge of union. Those and later tentative moves, however, sadly never came to fruition. Indeed things were exacerbated towards the end of the century when in 1989 there was a split in the Free Presbyterian Church with about half the ministers leaving that body and forming the Associated Presbyterian Churches. To make matters worse in the last year of the millennium (2000) there was a split in the Free Church.³⁶

All in all this reveals a very sad picture, but one not unconnected with the demise in orthodoxy on the one hand, and an over-concern for the minutiae of practices and principles – and the particulars of history – on the other.

One feature of the century in Scotland, ecclesiastically – and this was a worldwide feature of Church life during the century – was the preoccupation with ecumenicity. It seemed that in a day when there was complete mutability on doctrinal matters and theological issues among the main-line broad Churches, they poured their energies into carving out what was called “organic union”. This great preoccupation, however, did not really achieve union: it simply brought together factions – strange bed-fellows – under the same roof. But that is what “broad” Churches are – and what they do.

³⁶ This led to the formation of the minority Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), a denomination claiming continuity with the Free Church and containing 30 congregations and around 40 ministers (including retired ministers).

12. The power of real Christianity largely lost in Scotland

In the process of the clamour for Church union and broadening of the understanding of the faith in the Churches, to a great extent the pass was sold and the faith seriously undermined. The rot was dishonesty in ordination vows and the concession to worldly enlightenment principles. In this way Churches of the Reformation were transformed into broad, indistinct, and nominal bodies. There is a very moving passage in a volume of Alexander Moody Stuart (1809-1898), one of the outstanding preacher-pastors in the galaxy of orthodox Free Church men of the Disruption era. In writing against the higher critical theories then coming to prominence in the Free Church – he was writing in 1884 – Moody Stuart wrote:

The word of the Lord is pure, and out of this trial will come forth in all its brightness as silver out of the furnace. But, meanwhile, an unutterable calamity may overtake us, for our children may lose the one treasure we are bound to bequeath to them; and for long years they may wander “through dry places seeking rest, and finding none”, before they recover their hold of the Word of Life, and regain their footing on the rock of eternal truth.³⁷

Scotland is still wandering through dry places, albeit some of the smaller bodies still maintain with integrity and doggedness the old-school Reformed religion. But sadly, what Gordon Donaldson wrote in 1990 is all too true:

. . . if the Church, in relation to sin and science, has lost its way so far as moral and religious teaching is concerned, yet, by a curious paradox, some leading churchmen are supremely confident about everything else. They may regard the events of Our Lord’s life and death as no more than metaphors, even to the extent of equating His Resurrection with the political revolution in some faraway country. Yet they dogmatise with easy assurance on what are often called political and social questions but which are usually really economic questions about which skilled economists are in dispute. Thus they ignore the warning given in the seventeenth century that although the Church had “the keys of authority” she had not the “keys of knowledge” and could “in many ways err, especially

³⁷ A. Moody Stuart, *The Bible True to Itself* (London, 1884), p. 187.

when she meddleth with matters which are not within her horizon”, and the warning given in the eighteenth century by an English Bishop . . . that a Christian society should not “meddle with things foreign to their proper business”. And they speak confidently about secular events in any of the seven continents. . . . “Views and statements come thick and fast on every subject from poll tax to pit strike, from apartheid to Armageddon, from Mandela to multilateralism”. Those who seek guidance on faith and morals feel betrayed, while left-wingers who seek ecclesiastical backing for their agitation find it readily.³⁸

13. Conclusion

What was done in Scottish Presbyterian circles in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries set the scene for a sea-change in religious life in Scotland. The old certainties were gone. The old conviction of the authority of the Scriptures as an infallible and inerrant revelation from God, inspired and preserved by the Holy Spirit, was largely gone. The Church had experienced a takeover by alien philosophies and theologies. Historian Thomas Smout writes of how in the inter-war years people began to notice in the prevailing liberalism the “faltering tones of the Church”. He quotes Norman Maclean, well-known minister of St. Cuthbert’s Parish Church, Edinburgh, in the 1920s and ’30s: “The Church gives no answer to the question ‘Where are the dead?’ . . . No wonder pews become increasingly empty.” Comments Smout:

Christianity since the beginning had centred on the life after death. If the Church was vague about it, men reached their own conclusions: if there was a God, He was good: if He was good, He would send you to heaven or at least give you a second chance; if He would give you a second chance, it could not matter tremendously if you were a bit of an agnostic here and now, or didn’t go too regularly to church. God was good. It would all come right in the end.³⁹

This indeed became the prevailing “folk religion” of vast tracts of “Presbyterian Scotland” in the twentieth century. It sums up well the

³⁸ Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots*, p. 142.

³⁹ T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London 1987), p. 195.

consequences of the failure of the Church to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God. Removal of the full authority of Scripture and its clear teachings is like depriving a sick man, gasping for breath, of oxygen. He may survive for a while but it will not be long till he has no breath left in his body.

If the Church will not tolerate the clear teaching of Scripture it loses its whole *raison d'être*. In general terms the Church lost its way and a recovery is still looked for. But a recovery will not be crafted by man, nor by Churches acting independently from the authority of the Word of God. It is only a work of sovereign grace that can restore Presbyterian Scotland (now something of a misnomer) to anything like a Christian force in Scotland and beyond.