

Article

Separatist Presbyterianism in 20th Century Scotland

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Abstract: This essay aims to give an account of separatist Presbyterian denominations in the context of Christianity in Scotland in the 20th century. After a brief introduction, attention is first given to the circumstances in which the denominations concerned were birthed. A second section looks at their current place within the wider Scottish context. In the third section, further attention is paid to the two most recent, late 20th century, divisions, those of 1989 and 2000. Concluding reflections seek to view the scene, thus sketched, through a wider lens and to look to the future with a degree of hope for reconciliation and healing. This paper is indebted to the invaluable insights, particularly in regard to the content of its third section, of the Revd Archie McPhail. Sincere thanks are also due to the Revd Martin Keane, Principal Clerk of the United Free Church, and the Revd David Meredith, Mission Director of the Free Church of Scotland, for their gracious and helpful responses to specific queries about their respective denominations. Any errors of fact or judgement are of course those of the author. In writing on a subject as difficult—and painful—as this, one inevitably brings personal perspectives to bear. Those of this writer have inevitably been formed, at least in part, in the context of an unusual ecclesiastical journey within the territory of three denominations—the Free Presbyterian Church, the Associated Presbyterian Churches and the Church of Scotland. Personal involvement in the history and denominational transfers of recent decades, together with long service as a parish minister and experience as a former Moderator, lend to the paper its distinctive angle of approach.

Keywords: Church; Presbyterian; denomination; division; unity; secularization



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1. Introduction

Presbyterianism is born to division as the sparks fly upwards.

Matthew Arnold

Presbyterians, like bees, have shown a remarkable tendency to “hive off”, a process which has often been accompanied by extreme bitterness and protracted litigation.

R. Warren James

By the early years of the 21st century, Scotland—a country of 5.5 million inhabitants—counted within its borders eight Presbyterian denominations. By far the largest of these is Scotland's national Church, the Church of Scotland (CofS). Each of these denominations, with their diverse histories, stands in continuity with the Reformed Protestant church, whose life in Scotland was organized by John Knox and other leaders of the 16th century Reformation, in accordance with a representative—“Presbyterian”—form of church government, in which presbyters or elders, elected by the people, serve in governing bodies (referred to by the quasi-legal term “courts”).

From its cradle in Scotland, Presbyterianism has spread to many countries around the world. It is a form of church organization that Reformed Protestant Christians have found particularly congenial. The positive contribution of Presbyterian denominations and individuals in the service of the gospel around the world has been incalculable.

A glance at global Presbyterianism, however, reveals one of its most striking characteristics to be a tendency to divide. In the USA, for example, there are twenty-five Presbyterian denominations, while South Korea has no fewer than one hundred.¹ This characteristic

reflects, and may be related to, a similar pattern within the Scottish mother church. It has often been observed that a chart of the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland, particularly since the 18th century, resembles nothing as much as a map of the London Underground. Although the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a few denominational (re)unions, the number of Presbyterian divisions grew markedly in this period.²

2. Denominational Origins and Roots

2.1. *The Free Church of Scotland*

The present Free Church of Scotland (FCS) stands in direct continuity with the Free Church of Scotland that came into existence at the Disruption of 1843. This division was the culmination of a long and bitter controversy in the CofS over the issue of whether the Church itself, as distinct from the civil government, has the authority to control clerical appointments and benefits (“patronage”). A largely evangelical group within the CofS, notable for their insisting on the need for more mission work by the Church in Scotland and overseas, while advocating a national recognition of religion, contended for the right of the Church to be sovereign within its own sphere.

In an event widely viewed as cataclysmic in the history of Scottish Presbyterianism, not least because it foreshadowed further, and equally bitter, divisions to come, over 450 ministers seceded from the CofS in 1843 to form the FCS. A considerable number of evangelicals remained within the CofS, judging the unity of the Church to be of greater importance. Patronage, the immediate cause of the secession, was, in fact, abolished in 1874.

While the 1843 Disruption must be viewed within the context of the massive, Europe-wide, changes in the early 19th century, aimed at granting increased rights and influence to “ordinary” people, it was perceived by many to be at core a spiritual movement, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. There, many “imposed” ministers did not share the spiritual and theological ethos of their congregations, and many felt that their spiritual needs were not being met. Failure of this nature and a perceived abuse of authority would be factors in future Presbyterian splits.

The present Free Church of Scotland (FCS) was formed in 1900 by those in the FCS who remained outside the union created in that year between the FCS and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (UPC). The twenty-seven FCS ministers who declined to enter the union were deeply committed to the full theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. They also held strongly to the establishment principle by which the state was seen as under obligation explicitly to recognize the Christian faith, through its support of a national (Presbyterian) Church. Since, in the latter part of the 19th century, the UPC had developed a more liberal approach to the Bible and theology, and, as supporters of “voluntaryism”, its members were strongly opposed to the notion of a national Church upheld by the state, the union was viewed as a betrayal by those in the FCS who chose to remain outside it. Since the UPC voted unanimously to join the union, this denomination ceased to exist in 1900.

It has been estimated that by 1904, the FCS had some 125 congregations and preaching stations and some 70,000 members, mainly located in the Highlands and Islands and in Gaelic-speaking charges in southern cities.³ Its current membership is around 6000. The denomination is reported to have grown somewhat in recent years. Its centre has moved increasingly to the Lowlands, especially Edinburgh, where significant resources have been devoted to church planting. There is a plan to establish thirty new FCS congregations by 2030.

2.2. *The United Free Church*

The United Free Church (UFC) was the name given to the new denomination formed by the 1900 union. In 1929, the UFC united with the national church to form the present CofS. In the years preceding the 1929 union, there was intense debate around the issues of Establishment, a position to which the CofS was committed, and voluntaryism (the

position which held that every congregation should support its own minister and opposed the notion of a national Church upheld by the state), to which the UFC was committed. A majority in the UFC came to regard the obstacle to union as having been overcome by two parliamentary statutes, the Church of Scotland Act of 1921 and the Church of Scotland (Properties and Endowments) Act of 1925.

Around 14,000 UFC members declined to join the 1929 union and formed the UFC. The UFC was referred to as the United Free Church Continuing for a period of five years.⁴

The post-1929 UFC continued to represent “broad evangelicalism”, embracing within her ranks a wide spectrum of evangelical positions. The UPC Declaratory Act of 1879 and that of the FCS of 1892 continue to be referenced. The “substance of the faith” to which commitment is required of office-bearers continues to be as expressed in that document, with clarification provided in the Statement of Faith agreed by the General Assembly in 1921.⁵

In 1929, all church offices were opened to all members. Two years later, Rev Edith S. Martin, the first woman ordained in a Presbyterian Church in the United Kingdom, was ordained within the UFC. The denomination later became the first Presbyterian Church in the United Kingdom to elect a female Moderator, the Revd Elizabeth B. Barr, in 1960.

Like most of Scotland’s churches, the post-1929 UFC experienced significant growth until the early 1960s. Congregations were predominantly in the central belt of Scotland and the east coast. Smaller groups were formed in the Highlands and Islands, but the problems involved in offering them support during the Second World War meant that few of them were able to continue.⁶

The UFC today has about 2500 members.

2.3. *The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland*

Led by two ministers, Donald Macfarlane and Donald Macdonald, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (FPCS) was formed in 1893 by approximately 14,000 former members and adherents of the FCS of 1843, with congregations located mainly in the Highlands and Islands. The immediate cause of the separation was the passing, at the FCS General Assembly of 1892, of a Declaratory Act, the outcome of a long controversy over the relation of FCS to its subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The separating minority believed that the allowance made in the Act for “diversity of opinion . . . on such points in the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith”, was an opening of the door to theological liberalism within the Church. The separation occurred when an attempt to have the Declaratory Act rescinded at the 1893 FCS General Assembly failed. Unusually in the history of Scottish Presbyterian secession, the FPCS separation hinged on a specifically doctrinal issue.

Probably more than any other Presbyterian Church, the FPCS has maintained a strongly separatist stance in relation to other denominations, believing this to be a necessary condition of the maintenance of its spiritual health and distinctive witness.

Although the post-1900 FCS rescinded the offending Declaratory Act, a closer relationship with this sister body was resolutely opposed by a majority in the FPCS. Over time, changes in the practice of the FCS, which were considered by many in the FPCS detrimental to the witness of a Presbyterian and Reformed Church, further aggravated attitudes and relationships.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the FPCS expanded overseas, as expatriate Scots in sympathy with its position requested ministry and pastoral care. Congregations were formed in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The FPCS appears to have been the first denomination in Scotland to condemn the policy of apartheid in South Africa. Its first missionary in Zimbabwe was an African, and African ministers have served as Moderators of the FPCS Synod (the denomination’s highest court).⁷

The FPCS currently has around 1200 members and adherents in Scotland.

2.4. *The Associated Presbyterian Churches*

At the FPCS meeting of Synod in 1989, deepening tensions within the Church over such issues as attendance at services of other denominations and membership of secular organizations came to a head.

Two of the denomination's most senior and respected office-bearers were, by a majority verdict, the recipients of one of the severest form of FP church discipline. In the one case, the offence was attendance at the funeral service for a Roman Catholic colleague, at which a requiem mass took place. The basic argument of the majority was that the Roman mass is an idolatrous rite and that, therefore, no Protestant Church office-bearer or member should be present at such a service. The minority view at Synod was that, irrespective of the theology of the mass or any ecclesiastical rite, one attends a funeral service not to align oneself with the doctrine of the denomination in which it takes place, but merely to demonstrate respect for the memory of the departed and sympathetic solidarity with their grieving family.

Interestingly, the disciplinary process in one case was initiated by two office-bearers who did not belong to the congregation of the person concerned and who had joined the FPCS in adulthood. They were widely recognized as being determined, with the zeal of converts, to steer the FPCS onto a still more rigorous course. Prior to 1989, as became clear, a considerable number of FPCS office-bearers and members had attended similar funeral services (of friends, colleagues and neighbours) without disciplinary repercussions and while, in most cases at least, sharing the same understanding of the mass as the Synod majority. This, it was argued, was in line with the teaching of chapter 20, "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience", of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the FPCS's subordinate standard.

The imposition of discipline in the other 1989 case related to a meeting of a high-level Highland political committee, at which the chair, a FPCS minister, invited another member of the clergy present to open the meeting with prayer. It was customary for members of the clergy present at these meetings to be invited, in turn, to do so. The problem on this occasion was that the cleric invited was a Roman Catholic priest. The episode was duly reported by someone, and disciplinary proceedings began.

The majority outcome of these cases at the 1989 FPCS Synod distressed many members and office-bearers of the FPC, already dismayed by what appeared to be the increasing heavy-handedness of their more authoritarian and vociferous leaders. Many people felt that they could no longer remain in a denomination where an absence of Christian love and forbearance had undermined relationships and whose dominant leadership insisted on dictating the conscience of its members. Other church members fell into line behind the position of the majority leadership. Some, at least, of those who remained in the post-1989 FPCS subsequently expressed sadness at the manner in which the two disciplined office-bearers had been treated but, for a variety of reasons, felt unable to leave.

Following the tabling of a Protest at the 1989 FPCS Synod and the drawing up of a Deed of Separation, signed by fourteen ministers and about thirty elders, a Presbytery was formed, calling itself the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC). It claimed to represent, as distinct from the majority of the Synod, the FPCS as settled in 1893.

Approximately one-third of FPCS members and adherents in Scotland joined the APC. In Canada, two of the three FPCS congregations attached themselves to the APC. Some office-bearers associated themselves with the APC on the clear understanding that the new body could only represent a holding operation, while a path leading to a degree of healing within fractured Scottish Presbyterianism was earnestly sought.⁸

The APC currently has about 300 members and adherents.

2.5. *The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)*

The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) (FCSC) was formed in 2000, as a direct result of conflict within the FCS. In a manner similar to the position of the APC vis-à-vis the FPCS,

the FCSC claims to represent the true FCS, and it emphasises that the term “Continuing” is merely an administrative convenience for the purpose of distinguishing the two bodies.

A division took place at the FCS Commission of Assembly in January 2000. This was the culmination of a particularly bitter dispute, reflecting growing tensions in the FCS, linked to the acquittal in Edinburgh Sheriff Court, on charges of sexual assault, of a prominent FCS minister, a professor of theology at the FCS College. The sheriff ruled that he had been the victim of a conspiracy. Contrary to a majority view, members of a group known as the Free Church Defence Association (FCDA) believed that there was a constitutional requirement for the office-bearer concerned to be tried in the FCS General Assembly.

In June 1999, the chairman of the group was suspended for contumacy. The FCS General Assembly issued a deadline for the FCDA to disband. When it did not, libels were drawn up against twenty-two ministers, who were subsequently suspended from office.

In January 2000, a number of ministers and elders signed a “Declaration of Reconstitution” pledging themselves to continue the FCS in a manner that was true to its constitution. Legal action on property and central funds, initiated by the FCSC, led to court findings on behalf of the FCS.

The FCSC has at present thirty-four congregations, the majority of which are situated in the Highlands and Islands. Seven are in North America, with one in Northern Ireland. The denomination also has a seminary and demonstration farm in Zambia. It is estimated that the FCSC has currently about 1000 members and adherents.

2.6. *The Reformed Presbyterian Church and the International Presbyterian Church*

Although neither of these denominations came into existence as a result of recent Scottish Presbyterian church division or declination to join a church union, their presence in Scotland should be noted, not least as beneficiaries of late 20th century and early 21st century splits from the CofS.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC), the second oldest Presbyterian Church in Scotland, was formed by some Covenanters who remained apart from the re-established CofS, following the Revolution Settlement of 1690. Its theological position is similar to many other Scottish Presbyterian denominations. Office-bearers subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. While variations in emphasis are found in its congregations, in practice it is among the most conservative of Presbyterian denominations. It maintains a traditional form of worship, including the use of Psalms exclusively for praise.

In 1876, a majority of the RPC joined the FCS. The present RPC is thus a continuing church. Currently, it has five congregations in Scotland, three in the Central Belt, one in the South West, and one in Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides. The RPC congregations in Stornoway (since 2010) and in Glasgow (since 2011) are new. They were formed largely of former FCS office-bearers and members who opposed the permission granted to congregations by the FCS General Assembly of 2010 to make use of hymns and musical instruments in congregational worship.

Although small in Scotland, the sister RPC denominations in the USA and Ireland have, respectively, 100 and 40 congregations.

The International Presbyterian Church was founded by the American evangelical theologian Dr. Francis Schaeffer. A missionary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States, Schaeffer and his wife Edith initiated *L’Abri* (“The Shelter”) in Switzerland, before moving to England. The new church came with them, and the first congregation started in Ealing in 1969.

In addition to the nine congregations in England, four new Scottish congregations were created in recent years by former office-bearers and members of the CofS who disapproved of the direction of the national church, particularly in regard to issues of human sexuality. One of these, Grace Community Church in Kyle of Lochalsh, closed in 2020.

Secessions from the CofS in recent decades have differed from those of earlier centuries in that they have lacked, for the most part, prior consultation and organization. Individuals,

and some congregations, simply left in an uncoordinated manner and dispersed in a variety of ecclesiastical directions.

3. Presbyterian Secessions in Contemporary Context

Particularly since the 1960s, Scottish society and culture have undergone radical change. Since that decade, a culture of consumerism and permissiveness, in an increasingly affluent Scotland, has made the Church appear increasingly irrelevant to a majority of Scots. While the Church of Scotland's membership and social influence were probably at their height in the 1950s, an apparently irreversible decline was about to set in.

Within current scholarship, the "crisis" of the 1960s is generally seen as decisive in respect to the process of secularisation and concomitant religious change. Debate continues, however, on the exact nature of this crisis. In particular, tension exists between "evolutionary" and "revolutionary" analyses and between accounts which lay emphasis on factors internal to the churches and those which view the operation of external forces as of greater significance.

Some scholars who attribute the crisis of the 1960s to changes within the Church situate these developments in a long process of evolution. The Disruption of 1843, in particular, is seen as having contributed significantly to the diminishing influence of the Church in Scotland. As one commentator has put it, "The Disruption severed the connection between the Church of Scotland and Scottish identity, hastened the breakup of the parish state and brought about institutional secularisation, one of the key catalysts for the secularisation of wider society" (Fraser 2021, p. 38). The subsequent removal in Scotland of the administration of key social services from the Church to that of the state was "not the result of atheist philosophies, anti-Christian government policy, or any other external factor, but the disunity and infighting of the Christian Church (Fraser 2021, p. 39)." Such "disunity and infighting" has certainly continued to mark Scottish Presbyterianism, with incalculable consequences for the credibility of Christian witness.⁹ In addition, the same writer argues, by the 1960s, the national church had "abandoned important elements of discipleship, trained its ministers in Divinity Schools where the inspiration of Scripture was questioned, and had adopted a cultural theology that taught that the nation and state could fulfil God's will independently of the Church (Fraser 2021, p. 46)."

A somewhat different account is offered by another scholar who similarly views the cause of the crisis as largely bound up with the inner life of the Church. Hugh McLeod's benchmark study of the 1960s views the crisis of the 1960s in a positive light, as the outcome of reforming and liberalising trends within the churches, over a long period of time. He writes, "I have argued that the religious upheavals of the 1960s have to be seen in the context of much longer term developments in Western societies, including notably the growth of toleration since the seventeenth century, intellectual critiques of Christianity going back to the eighteenth century, movements of political emancipation since 1789, and changes in thinking about ethics generally and sexual ethics especially since about 1890" (McLeod 2007, p. 257). As Callum Brown clarifies, McLeod makes much of the place of ideas developed in intellectual circles both inside and outwith the Church. He finds in McLeod's narrative "an underlying sense of a liberal conspiring over decades to formulate a new Christian society" (Brown 2010, p. 471).

Brown himself argues for a shift in perspective "from ideas-based secularisation to popular-based cultural change". While recognising that "some aspects of change were long term", in this perspective, "we move in most countries that experienced the 'religious crisis' from thinking of evolution towards revolution. The secular change in popular culture looks far more sudden than does the evolution of liberal theology" (Ibid., p. 471). Brown adduces various data which "attest to the pretty comprehensive nature of the collapse of Christian culture in the 1960s" (Brown 2001).

The debate will continue. It seems to the present writer that each of these perspectives contributes something significant to a fully rounded assessment. Brown's emphasis on the

suddenness of the “crisis” and the significance of the socio-economic and cultural forces that emerged in the 1960s themselves deserve to be given full weight.

Whatever view one takes of the nature of the crisis, this process of mass secularisation has led to a situation in which only 7.2% of the Scottish people regularly attend church¹⁰ (Brierley Consultancy 2016). The state of affairs which this statistic represents may be seen as due, at least in part, *both* to the factors highlighted by Brown *and* to the disunity of the wider church in Scotland, not least within its Presbyterian family.

In the difficult environment created in Scotland by the prevailing secularism and pluralism, the separated Presbyterian denominations endeavour to maintain their distinctive character and testimony.

Each holds to the Westminster Confession of Faith as their subordinate doctrinal standard, although the terms under which office-bearers are required to subscribe to it vary.

As regards the holding of office in the Church, with the exception of the UFC, as already noted, each of these denominations admits only males to ordination, believing this to be the scriptural requirement.

Understandings of what is permissible in the practice of worship vary. The FPCS, APC and FCSC are committed to the use of Psalms only in praise, together with the exclusion of accompanying musical instruments. The FPCS insists on the sole use of the Scottish metrical Psalms and the King James Version of the Bible.

Since the FC General Assembly of 2010, FCS congregations have been granted permission to sing hymns, in addition to Psalms, and to make use of musical instruments. This decision was believed by some to have been motivated, in part, by a wish to facilitate the admittance into the FCS, as had been anticipated, of a large number of disaffected CofS congregations. It stirred considerable controversy in the FCS denomination.¹¹ About 80% of FCS congregations now sing a wide variety of hymns, together with Psalms, and make use of a range of musical instruments.

In terms of ecumenical engagement, a variety of stances are represented within this group of denominations. The UFC is a member of the World Council of Churches and of the Scottish Christian Forum, which seeks to strengthen connections between denominations and facilitate joint missional projects. It has held bilateral talks with the CofS, the FCS and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Other denominations have had more limited, although, in their way, significant, ecumenical involvement. The FCS and the FCSC are both members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches and of Affinity. The FCS was one of the founding members of the European Conference of Reformed Churches, is a member of the World Reformed Fellowship and has a close relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia. The FPCS maintains a rigorously separate stance in relation to other denominations. It holds itself to be the sole constitutional heir of the historic CofS. It has some sixteen congregations in other countries, however, including one in Ukraine. Since 1989, the APC has demonstrated an openness to fellowship and cooperation, as appropriate, with other denominations and Christian bodies. It is a member of the World Reformed Fellowship.¹²

In respect to mission and outreach, each of these denominations has made significant contributions, given their size. The FCS is involved with mission work in various parts of the world, including India, Latin America and South Africa, as well as working with south Asians in Glasgow. The FPCS has had a mission in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) since 1904. Church services are held in forty locations. The contribution of their mission in the medical and educational fields has been widely recognized. More recent mission work has been undertaken in Israel, Kenya and Eastern Europe. The FCSC has a seminary and demonstration farm in Zambia.

The UFC has also been active in overseas missions. Medical missions were established in Botswana (then Bechuanaland), in association with the London Missionary Society. This led to the establishment of a hospital at Molepolole, which was eventually taken over (in 1975) by the government of Botswana. The UFC continues an association with the

Church in Botswana and Zambia, and, more recently, a number of Botswana students for the ministry have been trained in Scotland.

4. Two Recent Divisions: 1989 and 2000

It seems appropriate to give some more detailed attention to the two most recent, and therefore less well-known, Scottish Presbyterian divisions: those of the FPCS/APC (1989) and the FCS/FCSC (2000).

4.1. *The Highland Background*

It is an interesting fact that the late 20th century organizational divisions in Scottish Presbyterian churches took place in bodies whose centre of gravity was in the Highlands. Arguably, elements in this Highland background may have contributed to these divisions.

The denominations concerned were close-knit communities, reflecting in this way a strong characteristic of Highland society. The sense of being part of a group leads also to a sense of being different from other groups. This can hinder the ability of people to identify with fellow-Christians of other denominations and result in denominational identity taking the place of one's primary identity as a Christian. It can also hinder the ability of denominations to relate to one another as parts of the Church Catholic.¹³

It is noteworthy that, in the 19th century, there was a widespread perception in the Highlands of being under pressure from an alien culture (the English-speaking Lowlands) and, therefore, of having to defend itself. Cultural defensiveness blended with defensiveness over doctrine and practice. That is seen, for example, in some of John Kennedy's writings, such as *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, and in his excoriating criticism of the Moody and Sankey Mission of 1873-1874. In the preface to the second edition of this work, Kennedy explains: "I was engaged in warding off Lowland blows."¹⁴

The Highland church of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was bi-lingual, with Gaelic as its main language. This undoubtedly contributed to its distinct identity and independent life. Some historians believe the Gaelic language acted as an "insulating mechanism", preserving in this way a characteristically Highland approach to church life. Donald Meek comments that, "The Gaelic cultural zone . . . allowed older doctrinal certainties and traditional perspectives to resist external erosion" (Meek 1996, p. 41).

As Highlanders migrated to Lowland cities, their use of Gaelic declined. That had a two-fold effect. On the one hand, influences external to Highland culture were absorbed. Many second-generation migrants joined English language churches representing a different outlook and practice. The other effect was the opposite of that—a tendency to over-value Highland churches for their comfortable familiarity and social bonds. This tended to lead to resistance to change and the ghettoization of the Church within the wider society. Such clinging to familiar patterns was inevitably matched by a failure of missional planning for the very different, and developing, urban social setting of the 20th century.¹⁵

4.2. *The FPCS/APC Division (1989)*

From the 1970s, a certain polarisation became increasingly manifest in the FPCS. This was given strong impetus by a majority Synod resolution in 1974 to make attendance at church services of other denominations a disciplinary offence. Although this decision was later rescinded, many felt this to be a defining moment for the Church. Two parties, one "reactionary", the other more "progressive", in a manner of speaking, became increasingly evident.

While a commitment to confessional theology continued to mark both sides, this situation revealed conflicting ecclesiological understandings. On one side, it was judged sinful to have communion with any other existing ecclesiastical body, and this line was regularly "pushed" by some in leadership roles. It was a position that arose partly from a view of earlier divisions, as well as from fear of the "other", and was reflected in the miscalling of other denominations, often and deliberately from the pulpit, by some in

influential leadership roles, as a means of justifying separation. This regularly occurred on the Monday of a communion season.¹⁶

At the same time, a mainly younger generation of ministers and members became increasingly burdened by the need for evangelism and outreach in Scottish society, particularly in Lowland cities. They realised that the methods used would need to be adapted to new situations and contexts.

Conflict subsequently arose over para-church activity within the denomination, in particular through what was then the Blythswood Tract Society (now the well-known Blythswood Care charity). This was a grass-roots initiative, not controlled by church courts, whose ethos was outward-looking and missional. The emphasis ran counter to the tendency of influential leaders to focus on denominational uniformity, attention to internal matters and the conservation of existing forms.

A strong emphasis was placed on “faithfulness” in parts of the denomination. On one level, this was clearly unexceptionable. In practice, it blended with cultural defensiveness and ecclesiastical isolationism. The value placed on personal loyalty and respect for authority, which reflected the close Highland social structure, could degenerate into something like a personality cult, involving authoritarian figures. “Faithfulness” would become identified with loyalty to these individuals. Polarisation around personalities was, arguably, a key factor in the divisions of 1989 and 2000.

In the context of such polarisation, with its attendant breakdown in relationships marked by Christian love, particular instances of ecclesiastical discipline were interpreted by some to be “politically” motivated. This is what triggered the division. The new body (APC) maintained the beliefs and practices of the old but, as already noted, adopted a more open stance towards other denominations and a greater evangelistic emphasis.

4.3. *The FCS/FCSC Division (2000)*

In the period prior to the 2000 division, some of the tendencies already highlighted in the FPC became evident in the FCS. There was, for example, distrust of some ministers and ministerial students who did not conform fully, in respect to their dress code or attitude to culture. Uniformity, including required attitudes to culture, including Gaelic culture, was viewed by some as an essential mark of denominational identity. This conflicted with a growing desire within the denomination to engage meaningfully with a rapidly changing society.

The tension created by these differences was complicated by an apparently negative attitude in some quarters towards a prominent FCS minister and theologian. The reasons remain somewhat obscure, but the person’s widely admired theological and preaching ability and penchant for stirring up debate are noteworthy. Subsequent attempts in sections of the media to portray the FCS division as the result of a struggle between theologically conservative and liberal elements in the denomination were completely off the mark.

There was a desire to spread the denomination’s influence beyond the Highlands, apparently for three reasons: the shift of population from the Highlands, the outworking of perceived weakness in the CofS and recollection of the more prominent historical situation of the FCS of 1843. That was seen to require changes, both in financial arrangements (to redistribute resources in favour of ministry and mission outwith the Highlands) and to worship and cultural forms. In some Highland congregations, this rekindled resentment of Lowland influence, especially since the FCS Headquarters and College (renamed, since 2000, as the Edinburgh Theological Seminary) were in Edinburgh.

In the FCS, there was also a growing loss of confidence in traditional forms of worship, both in their theological basis and their perceived potential to turn away potential future worshippers, since people outside the Highland Presbyterian tradition were unlikely to accept the existing form of worship. As already noted, the desire to provide a workable alternative to the CofS in some places was arguably another factor leading to the 2010 changes to worship regulations.

For others, these changes represented a betrayal of the FCS constitution and inheritance. The name of the new (2000) body, the Free Church of Scotland *Continuing* (italics added) indicates the perceived importance of identity and institutional legitimacy, this being part of the post-1843 background.

5. Concluding Reflections

Many issues and a myriad of questions—spiritual, theological, sociological and psychological, among others—are thrown up by this survey of 20th century separatist Presbyterianism. Adequate consideration of them would take us well beyond the remit of this essay.

It needs, of course, to be said that the brokenness of the Body of Christ in Scotland at the end of the 20th century occurs in a far wider context than that of Presbyterianism. According to the 2011 Census, there are over eighty separate denominations and communions in Scotland.¹⁷ Divisions are fairly common within the large number of independent and informal “Christian Fellowships”. Because such churches are, by definition, small and local, those splits generally do not come to public notice. In the Presbyterian context, however, they are particularly and painfully evident and therefore often receive attention from the secularised Western media, always eager to give publicity to disunity between, and within, Churches. These reflections raise only a few of the issues and questions, highlighted by Presbyterian secession in particular, that deserve close and, wherever possible, united consideration as one of the routes forward in the direction of reconciliation and healing.

Firstly, it seems important to recognize and reckon with the fact that the model of Church in terms of which Presbyterian denominations function is that of an institution. This has, in fact, been the dominant model of the Church throughout the Christian centuries. The institutional church has recognized ministers, accepted confessional formulas and prescribed forms of worship and practice. There is a stress on structure and conformity and a tendency to the exercise of top-down authority.

The strengths and weaknesses of this model are apparent in a wide range of Christian institutional traditions, including that of Presbyterianism. Avery Dulles, in his seminal *Models of the Church*, helpfully elucidates some of these. Among the strengths are a firm awareness of continuity with the past, a strong sense of corporate identity and a high degree of loyalty to the organization (Dulles 2002, p. 33ff). The model, however, has a number of serious weaknesses. Firstly, and most seriously, the model “has a comparatively meagre basis in Scripture and in early Church tradition. It can claim support only from a very few New Testament texts, and even these must be interpreted in a particular prescribed way. In point of fact, Scripture does not portray the Church as a single tightly knit society . . . Paul’s models of the Church tend to be more organic, more communitarian, more mystical (Dulles 2002, p. 35).”

One of the major liabilities inherent in this model is the constant risk of lapsing into institutionalism. Conformism, uniformity and loyalty to the institution’s authority structure tend to be lionized above love, fair-mindedness and spiritual vitality. An excessive regard for those in leadership positions can also encourage clerical authoritarianism and a downgrading, in practice, of the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” (Dulles 2002, pp. 35–38).

While none of this is to say that every church operating on this model has necessarily succumbed to these dangers, the risk of doing so is obvious. The danger inherent in this essentially non-biblical model of Church of lapsing into forms of institutionalism, with the attendant danger of creating conditions that produce separation and division, cannot be ignored. Interestingly, within the Presbyterian context, that danger appears to have been anticipated at an early stage, as witnessed, arguably, by the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578), but needed safeguards were not to last.¹⁸

The form of Presbyterianism that prevailed has tended to be a top-down decision-making organization, where orders are given from a General Assembly, Synod, or church administrative staff. That represents a managerial system, and the ethos created has,

arguably, been an important factor in Presbyterian Church divisions in 1893, 1989 and 2000, as also in the less coordinated departure of people from the CofS. There was reaction against what was perceived as a church court exceeding its God-given authority.

It seems clear that a desire for freedom from such ecclesiastical jurisdiction has been a factor in the proliferation of independent churches and fellowships, many of which have been experiencing remarkable growth, in contradistinction from the decline in membership of Presbyterian denominations, among others. A reaction against perceived ecclesiastical institutionalism has also contributed to the phenomenon of the “invisible church”, representing apparently growing numbers of non-church-going Christians who are distancing themselves from any denomination and finding spiritual fellowship and sustenance in other ways. Steve Aisthorpe, who has researched this phenomenon within the context of the Scottish Highlands, believes that, in its light, we should speak less about “decline” and more about “transition”. Aisthorpe is of the view that denominational engagement, in the local context, has much potential for the future direction of the Church in Scotland (Aisthorpe 2016).

Significantly, each of the denominations of which this essay speaks, with one exception, is a member of one or more trans-denominational ecumenical bodies. That fact, in itself, is a hopeful sign. Even if the shared fellowship of these para-church bodies does not lead to tangible, organizational unity, they are well placed to facilitate dialogue and understanding. That will prove a major step forward in a situation which has too frequently represented a dialogue of the deaf.

A sometimes neglected consideration in separatist contexts is the intimate connection between the unity and the mission of the Church in the New Testament. This strong link is unmistakable and emphatic both in the teaching of Jesus and in the Pauline letters.¹⁹ The world must see, not in abstract doctrinal formulations alone, but in the practical, loving fellowship of the Christian community, the life of the age to come, before it will be inclined to believe the gospel. A heightened level of attention to the central importance of love in relationships between fellow-Christians and denominations for the Church’s mission is arguably overdue.²⁰

It seems appropriate to conclude on an eschatological note.²¹ It can be argued that many church divisions in Scotland and beyond are the result of the kind of over-realized eschatology embraced by some in the church in Corinth. Within the long Christian tradition there has been a general consensus that the Nicene marks of the Church (“unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity”) describe what a faithful church should look like. There has never been entire agreement on how this works out in detail—understandably, since the Church is caught up in the eschatological tension of the “already” and the “not yet”.

Augustine helps us to understand the sense in which the Church is holy.²² He recognized that the Church in *via* is unholy in all sorts of ways, not least those communions which are in a hurry to judge others. To be sure, under Christ’s lordship, the Church’s responsibility is to strive constantly to grow in sanctification. Like its unity, however, the Church’s holiness is ultimately located in Christ himself.

The Church’s identity comes from outside of itself, and only in the *eschaton* will its essential marks be fully revealed. Meanwhile, Augustine insisted, always allowing for the appropriate, loving and restorative exercise of church discipline, only God can distinguish between hypocrites and true believers in the Church, which remains “a mixed body” (*corpus permixtum*) until the end of the age. Donatist separatism, rooted in a decidedly over-realised eschatology, was premised on the felt need for the Church to make that distinction fully apparent in the present. For Augustine, they were “locating the identity and holiness of the church in the wrong place—in sinful human beings, rather than in the sinless one, Jesus Christ”.

In the context of the subject we have been addressing, it is salutary to be reminded that the holiness of the Church, like its unity, has “an eschatological texture”, for the Church is always “on the way” to embodying in reality this characteristic that it has in Christ but

will not completely possess until the fullness of the kingdom comes (Plantinga et al. 2010, p. 346).

As Augustine never tired of pointing out, in reference to Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, (Matthew 13: 24–43), any premature endeavour by eager, but themselves sinful, ecclesiastics to extract the tares from among the wheat in the Lord's field is completely forbidden. It represents an arrogant usurpation of the sole prerogative of the Church's one Head and, moreover, does untold damage within the Church itself, for it inevitably leads to the disastrous pulling out of true wheat. The ineluctable and insistent instruction of the Master is, "Let both grow together until the harvest" (Matthew 13: 30).

Above all, in the Church today, as in every age, we cannot be too frequently reminded of the dominical prayer and related asseverations:

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17: 20–21).

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13: 35).

"If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13: 17).

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Notes

- ¹ Beyond the remit of this paper is consideration of the many other divisions that have marked the history of the Church, prior to the 16th century Reformation as well as since then. According to the *Center for the Study of Global Christianity*, the 16th century Reformation explosion resulted in the creation of approximately 45,000 Christian denominations. Of these, over eighty exist in Scotland, according to the 2011 Census. As Arnold's somewhat droll line (above) indicates, however, a fissiparous propensity appears to be an inveterate—some would say pathological—characteristic of Presbyterianism. For an examination of the wider religious and cultural changes in 20th century Scotland which form the backdrop of this study (see Bruce 2014).
- ² In addition to the denominations listed below, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster has a congregation in Gardenstown.
- ³ On the origins and development of the post-1900 FCS, see de S. Cameron (1993, "Free Church of Scotland, post-1900", pp. 338–39). The UPC was the result of the union of the United Secession Church and the Relief Church in 1847. See de S. Cameron (1993, "United Presbyterian Church, 1847–1900", pp. 839–40).
- ⁴ Prior to the union of 1929, the majority were opposed to the minority using the name United Free Church, following the union. Since both sides wished to avoid the kind of legal turmoil that ensued after the 1900 union, it was mutually agreed that, in order to differentiate the post-1929 UFC from the pre-union denomination, the word "Continuing" would be used for a period of five years. The word was dropped in 1934. This gives the term a different connotation from that of its use by the FCSC.
- ⁵ The "Statement of Faith" is online at: <https://www.ufcos.org.uk/about-us/statement-of-faith/> (accessed on 28 April 2022).
- ⁶ For further information on the UFCS, see de S. Cameron (1993, "United Free Church", pp. 838–39).
- ⁷ See de S. Cameron (1993, "Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland", pp. 339–40).
- ⁸ For further information on the APC, see de S. Cameron (1993, "Associated Presbyterian Churches", pp. 37–38). On the cause of the division, see also Bruce (2014, p. 119ff).
- ⁹ A similar pattern emerged in the USA in the movement initiated by J. Gresham Machen following his departure from the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), in 1936. In the context of battling theological liberalism, Machen went on to found a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America, later renamed as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, although many people of conservative Reformed persuasion remained in the PCUSA. It was as if the whistle was blown in 1936 to commence, apparently endless, conservative Reformed infighting. John Frame lists no fewer than twenty-two such controversies between 1936 and the end of the century. These were often marked by bitterness and harshness of exchange. Frame comments: "I have no doubt that Machen and his colleagues were right to reject this [liberal] theology and to fight it. But it is arguable that once the Machenites found themselves in a 'true Presbyterian church' they were unable to moderate their martial impulses. Being in a church without liberals to fight, they turned on one another". John M. Frame, "Machen's Warrior Children", in (Chung 2003). Frame adds, "One slogan of the Machen movement was 'truth before friendship'. We should laud their intention to act according to principle

without compromise. But the biblical balance is ‘speaking the truth in love’ (Eph. 4: 15). We must not speak the truth without thinking of the effect of our formulations on our fellow Christians, even our opponents. That balance was not characteristic of the Machen movement.” Ibid., p. 144.

- 10 It is important to note that membership of the Church of Scotland actually peaked in the 1950s.
- 11 In Glasgow and Stornoway, two new RPC congregations were formed to accommodate former FCS office-bearers and members who were opposed to the changes in the form of worship.
- 12 Indicative of a new attitude to denominationalism within the APC, has been the merging, under varying arrangements, of eight of its congregations with those of other denominations, seven of them with FCS congregations, in contexts where that was deemed appropriate and of benefit to the community. Such grass-roots ecumenism, although limited, in some respects may be seen to point the way forward for other bodies.
- 13 Significantly, in the New Testament, Christian membership is never of the Church, but of Christ. Bonhoeffer expands on this: “One is a brother to another only through Jesus Christ. I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him. This fact, that we are brethren only through Jesus Christ, is of immeasurable significance . . . What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us . . . The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us . . . That dismisses once and for all every clamorous desire for something more. One who wants more than what Christ has established . . . is looking for some extraordinary social experience . . . is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood.” (Bonhoeffer 1954, pp. 15–16). I am indebted to the Revd John Tallach for this reference.
- 14 Kenneth Ross helpfully outlines the controversy between the Highland John Kennedy and the Lowland Horatius Bonar over the Moody Mission. While there were aspects of the Mission which Bonar found objectionable, “he was prepared to lay these aside as insignificant when viewed in proportion to the central matter of the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Kennedy declined to accept this sense of proportion . . . (He was) intent on resisting every innovation.” See (Ross 1991), p. 62. As Ross argues, while Highland and Lowland Reformed evangelicalism came together in the Free Church of 1843, they actually represented very different entities. Highland Calvinism was *sui generis* and reflective of the distinctive culture in which it was embedded. The 1874 dispute between these two Westminster Calvinists marked the increasing separation of the two traditions—the one determined “to maintain intact a particular well-defined religious tradition,” and the other willing “to adopt a more open, eclectic and tolerant approach.” (Ross 1991, p. 61). With regard to the divisions of 1893 and 1900, Ross perceptively comments: “While the establishment of new Highland denominations in 1893 and 1900 occurred ostensibly for ecclesiastical and constitutional reasons, behind these lay the determination to maintain a distinctive *religious* tradition.” (Ross 1991, p. 60). The same issue has been highlighted by James MacLeod in his study of the 1893 division. (MacLeod 2000).
- 15 Cf. “The traditional communal and Gaelic-language culture of the Highlands is in process of being replaced by the metropolitan culture. Nevertheless, there has been comparatively little change in the forms of religious observance in which that spirituality is expressed . . . The difference lies in a greater willingness to engage with society’s needs, as social forms change and to cooperate with other churches. That reflects the fact that church and society are no longer co-extensive. Those findings may mask the degree of change, for there is also an exodus of people from the churches.” (McPhail 1999, p. 2).
- 16 For this reason, the communion Monday (a stated day of thanksgiving) was often referred to in Gaelic, with sad irony, as *Diluain a’ Chàinidh* (“Berating Monday”). A visiting preacher at a FPCS Stornoway communion season, particularly notorious for slandering other Churches, was put in his place by the local minister. “When, on the Monday . . . James MacLeod began quite to surpass himself in unprofitable invective, Gillies acted decisively; he simply stood up and pronounced the benediction.” (MacLeod 2008, p. 245).
- 17 See Fraser (2021, p. 115). “Very often we are competing against each other, rather than cooperating for the blessing of Scotland.” Fraser (2021), *loc. cit.*
- 18 The *Second Book of Discipline*, adopted by the CofS in 1578, with its “intriguing . . . absence of any reference to presbyteries”, seemed to have in mind, and be aiming to prevent, the development of Presbyterian institutionalism. See Macleod (2020, pp. 119–20).
- 19 It doubtless explains, in part, the remarkable fact that in the letters of the New Testament, so many of which were called forth by serious failure in the churches to which they were written, there is no instruction that even the most serious matters were to be dealt with by the orthodox “hiving off” to form a new body. The same absence of instruction is seen in the messages to the seven Churches in Asia in Revelation 2 and 3. Major errors and sins are named, but there is no hint in any of the messages that those “on the right side” should secede to form a “pure” Church. A text beloved of generations of secessionists is 2 Corinthians 6: 17–18: “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” Patently, in context, this text bears on the relationship of Christians to a surrounding pagan society and culture, not on the issue of internal church conflict.
- 20 As Lesslie Newbigin affirmed, “I do not think that a resolute dealing with our divisions will come except in the context of a quite new acceptance on the part of all the Churches of the obligation to bring the Gospel to every creature; nor do I think that the

world will believe that Gospel until it sees more evidence of its power to make us one. These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with another.” (Newbigin 1998, p. 206).

²¹ On the practical, as distinct from speculative, character of Christian eschatology, see John Webster, “Human Identity in a Postmodern Age”, in (Morrison 2007, p. 48f).

²² For Augustine’s handling of the marks of the Church in the context of Donatist separatism, see (Morrison 2001).

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