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The Present Struggle for the Gospel in Scotland, Part 2



A report on the split within the Free Church of Scotland which has seen a remnant withdrawing from what was once the Free Church of Scotland and reconstituting itself as The Free Church of Scotland Continuing.

Speech by Rev. Hugh Ferrier, a retired minister and the most senior minister present at the Commission proceedings.

"Moderator, Fathers and Brethren, we are being prosecuted today on the charge of contumacy, ie disobedience to the courts of the church, a very serious charge indeed. The charge is that the FCDA is pursuing a divisive course from the government and discipline of the Free Church of Scotland, that as an office bearer of the FCDA I have adopted a position that is in violation of my position as an office bearer in the Free Church of Scotland, and that the FCDA has refused to disband. What is the Free Church Defence Association? It is an honourable association set up for the defence of what the Free Church of Scotland stands for. It began as a result of the first union controversy which lasted from 1863 to 1873. The constitutionalists of the time realised that union with the United Presbyterian Church would mean conceding vital principles, so to preserve the true nature of the Free Church they established what they called a Free Church Defence Association under the leadership of Dr James Begg and supported by some of the ablest men of the day such as Hugh Martin, James Gibson, John Kennedy, John Duncan, George Smeaton, the Bonar brothers, and others. Begg also started a monthly magazine called "The Watchword" which carried a robust defence of what the FCDA stood for. The Watchword ran for seven years from April 1866 to July 1873 and is in seven substantial volumes of forceful and constructive argument. In those years although Begg and his party were in a minority and although he was an irritation to Principal Rainy who called him "the evil genius of the Free Church" yet Begg and his friends were never libelled. The Church in those days had the common sense to allow freedom of association and freedom of speech. Again when the FCDA was revived prior to the union of 1900 and a minority refused to be silent on the ecclesiastical issues of the day, all due credit to Rainy he never took measures to silence them.

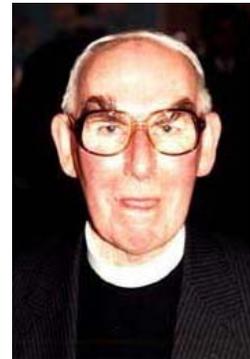
It now appears to be a condition of being a minister of the Free Church that you must not be a member of the FCDA or any other similar association. Are we now creating a new Church? I find this strange! I can belong to the Masonic Movement, take part in ecumenical dialogue with those unsympathetic to the Reformed Faith, or arrange and join in worldly activities, but one thing I am forbidden to do is be a member of the FCDA. Even Mr Macdonald in his Free Concern Newsletter of May 1997 conceded, "There is of course a historical precedent for this. Last century when James Begg and others felt that the Free Church was under threat, they formed the Free Church Defence Association". That is precisely why we today are members of the FCDA. We feel that our Church is under threat from a misguided intolerance. But, it is argued, the General Assembly forbids this organisation be-



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cause it is divisive and the General Assembly must be obeyed. Does this mean that pronouncements made by the Assembly are infallible? Surely not, that would take us down the road to Rome. But, it will be argued, in your Ordination Vows you promised to give obedience to all the judicatories of this church. That is true. That promise was made in all good faith, but only if the judicatories acted within the parameters of the Church's constitution. What is our Constitution? The Constitution is found in our Supreme Standard which is the Word of God, and in our Subordinate Standard which is the Westminster Confession of Faith along with our Questions and Formula. So that when I promise obedience to Church Courts these Courts must operate within these parameters and must not violate the teaching of the Bible, the teaching of the Confession, or the terms of the Formula. Once the Courts of the Church go beyond that they can be imposing human obligations which may be right or wrong.

It must be remembered, however, that these vows are not one-sided and as I am compelled in the transaction to fulfil my duties and promises to my Church, so my Church is compelled in the transaction to uphold the same high ideals. The Church too can be guilty of breaching its own vows. Let me quote to you the way Dr Hugh Martin puts the matter. He is called by Principal John Macleod, "The champion of the old guard of Orthodoxy". In his trenchant style Martin says, "I am thus ordained in terms of an ordination vow. This vow is not an instrument special in my case, not peculiar to me. It is the vow taken also by all my brothers who in this church are exactly my peers. It has been already taken by all the brothers who in this transaction of exacting and accepting my vow represent to me and act the part to me of the church. Not to mention that they are thus bound by the self same vow already, taking into account merely that they exact and I render this vow in my ordination, is it conceivable that speaking of this one ordination merely, I alone become bound by it? Is it merely a pact on my side without being a compact between me and the church? Do I then, come under obligation to the church without the church coming under obligation to me? Who would make an assertion so outrageous? The idea of a vow between creatures: of God binding only one party in the transaction is a sheer paralogism (reasoning beside the point). The vow entails very weighty obligation on my side, and on the side of the church the obligation is as great. The obligation is manifestly reciprocal". Martin concludes his fine assertion on the binding obligation of the vow on the individual as well as on the church. He says, "A majority may prove treacherous to a vow, just as an individual may: nor is it in the power of the multiplication table to settle a question of morals. Our ordination vow taking us bound to our Confession settles that we have a Constitution, clearly enough defines it, renders us answerable to it and pledges the church reciprocally as amenable to it also". (Scottish Theology, pp 324/5).



Rev. Hugh Ferrier

The Church must be careful not to breach her own vows by refusing to discipline when that is necessary. She must deal truthfully and earnestly with any erring brother who departs from the teachings of the Confession of Faith, or who departs from the behavioural standards of God's Word, or who departs from the worship of this Church as practised at the Disruption. It is because I believe in freedom of association, freedom of speech, and the



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administration of true and proper discipline that I stand before this Commission of Assembly."

Mr Ferrier finished with a reference to the higher Assembly he would have to face shortly and of his need to maintain a good conscience before God and men. Then in the immortal words of Martin Luther he concluded by saying, "Here I stand; I can do no other. So help me God".