



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

A 1966 protest with world-wide consequences



Front page of the Newsletter, June 7th 1966.

On Monday evening, 6th June 1966, a band of Christians from the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, perhaps 200-strong, left Ravenhill Free Presbyterian Church on the Ravenhill Road in Belfast. They were going to walk in an orderly fashion to the building in the centre of the city, where the ecumenical Presbyterian Church in Ireland was holding its General Assembly, and in order to protest at the growing apostasy of that denomination and particularly at the presence of a special guest, the personal representative of former IRA leader, Eamonn DeValera.

The route they took was the direct route into the city centre. The group was led by Dr. Ian Paisley, then minister of the Ravenhill church, later called Martyrs Memorial. He was accompanied by the late Rev John Wylie, Revs John Douglas, S B Cooke and Alan Cairns and other ministers including student ministers, James McClelland, James Beggs, William Beattie and Ivan Foster. Full and proper notice of the march had been given to the police and had been accepted by them.

From that night's activities there sprang a court case that resulted in Dr. Ian Paisley, Rev John Wylie and Rev. Ivan Foster being jailed for three months.

From that imprisonment, it can be justifiably stated, there sprang up some 20 new Free Presbyterian congregations and the spread of the witness of that church throughout the six counties of Northern Ireland and further afield. It was a time when the blessing of God accompanied the preaching of the gospel in our churches in a most unusual manner — a manner that those who experienced it do long and pray to see repeated in these days.

To mark the fortieth anniversary of that event, we are reprinting the lead article from "The Revivalist", the official publication of the Free Presbyterian Church, of July-September 1966. The article was written by Rev. Alan Cairns, then minister of Cabra congregation.

**Magistrates who convicted without Evidence
O'Neill placates Lemass but prosecutes Protestants**



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

It is often said that history repeats itself. And recent events in Ulster certainly bear out that axiom. In Acts 16, God's Word gives us an account of the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul in Philippi.

Because of his obedience to the will of God the great apostle was dragged before the magistrates and was sentenced, punished and imprisoned by those gentlemen without any evidence which could justly condemn him. The only evidence which the magistrates heard, and their only grounds for imprisoning him, were the lying slanders and the perjured testimony of ungodly men who were the apostle's bitter opponents.

A glance at the history of the martyrs will show that this scene has been re-enacted many times in the experience of the Church of Christ. And who could examine all the facts of the case made out against our three ministers without realising that this was another occasion when men of God have been victimised by ungodly men and imprisoned without evidence? Only someone whose mind is sold out to the twin evils of popery and ecumenical apostasy. The charge against our ministers was one of unlawful assembly. This was a charge that was never substantiated. It arose out of the events of the night of June 6, when the Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster organised a protest march to the General Assembly of the Irish Presbyterian Church. We marched to demonstrate our loyalty to our Protestant faith and our inveterate opposition to the Irish Presbyterian Church's sell-out to Rome. Forty-eight hours' notice was given to the R.U.C. and the route for the march was sanctioned by the chiefs of police. As is well-known, at Cromac Square we were murderously attacked and assaulted by a group of Republican rebels, and the police evidence is that the Protestants did not retaliate in any way, but remained orderly and law-abiding. Of course, the radio, T.V. and press all sought to give the impression that there was a clash between the two parties, but we have police evidence that our march did not stop to be involved in any breach of the peace.

At length we reached the Assembly Buildings from where we proceeded to the City Hall and back along Howard Street. We marched in this circuit twice without incident, and the third time we approached the Assembly Buildings we were confronted by a rope which had been erected by the police without giving any indication whatever of their intention. They made no request that our parade should be taken along any other route, but simply barred our way on the route they had already prescribed. Our parade was kept on the move and only the action of the police brought it to a halt. The blame, therefore, for a large crowd having congregated in Howard Street, must rest fairly and squarely on the police.

The reason for the erection of the rope was that the Moderator's procession was due to cross Howard Street. But there was no 48 hours' notice given for this procession. The police claim to have received a letter asking for facilities for crossing the road to be afforded, but they could not produce that letter in court. So they barred the way of a lawful and completely legal procession to make way for one which, in the strict sense, was illegal.

Owing to the action of the police, a crowd of about one thousand had gathered as the Irish Presbyterian procession walked across Howard Street. The people knew that the personal representative of De Valera, the I.R.A. murderer, was in that procession, and they booed. When they saw their Church leaders (many of them were Irish Presbyterians) who were running to Rome, they booed. This has been maliciously construed as a personal attack on the Governor and his wife who were in the procession, but there is not a shred of evidence that either Lord or Lady Erskine were mentioned or referred to. The greatest proportion of the crowd were not even aware of their presence. The police evidence was as that there



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

were cries of 'Traitor', 'Popehead', 'No Popery', and 'You should be ashamed of yourself'. And they could not testify that Dr. Paisley or Rev. John Wylie said any of these things. No one was injured at the General Assembly, no one was threatened. The Irish Presbyterian procession went its way unmolested. Our procession was then reformed and made its way back to Ravenhill. This is the unlawful assembly we were supposed to be guilty of.

When the case was brought to court the police evidence was a mass of contradictions.

A detective constable who had sworn out a summons against Councillor James McCarroll and Mr. H. V. Mallon as the two men who had assaulted him after our procession had gone home, took the oath and gave evidence. Dr. Paisley asked him if he knew all the defendants. He replied that he only knew Mr. McCarroll. He did not know Mr. Mallon at all. When asked how then he had been able to swear out a summons against him, the detective constable was speechless.

Another police witness alleged that Rev. Ivan Foster incited the crowd. We ask - 'Incited the crowd to do what?'

A head constable admitted that if we had wanted to break through the rope and any police cordon, we could have done it, for the police had not sufficient numbers there to stop us. We did not seek to attack the police or break through their barrier. Where then, is the evidence of an incited crowd?

Police witnesses could not agree as to where Mr. Wylie was in the crowd, and none of them heard him say anything. And so we could go on and give examples of police contradictions under oath. Perhaps the reason for their contradictory evidence is to be found in the fact that Dr. Paisley got the magistrates to remove all police witnesses from the court and come in one by one to give evidence and then stay in court.

The court denied the defendants the right to call key witnesses in their defence. They ruled that the Governor was above the law, and Lady Erskine's doctor submitted a report that she was not fit to appear. When Dr. Paisley said that the defendants were willing to adjourn until she was fit, it was stated that she would never be well enough to appear. In the case of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Home Affairs, the court ruled that it would decide whether they should appear or not when the time came for them to be called. But the court went back on its decision at the end of the first day, and when counsel for Messrs. O'Neill and McConnell submitted that the P.M. had important business in England the next day the magistrates ruled that these men could give no material evidence and excused them. The B.B. C., however, let the cat out of the bag. The P.M.'s important business in England was to attend a garden party. Ulster has reached a sorry state when a garden party takes precedence over the course of justice.

Since the calling of key witnesses was denied them, the defendants elected to call no witnesses and to make a statement to the court in their own defence. Dr. Paisley made a great statement in his own defence and the magistrates did not answer one point of this defence submission. Nor did they answer any of the points raised in the other defence statements. Sentence was passed that all the defendants, except Mr. Mallon (against whom the case was dismissed), would have to enter into a rule of bail for 2 years or go to jail for 3 months. A fine was also imposed. We have heard of foreign journalists who commented: 'I do not know your country, but the big man is tearing them to ribbons', and 'If justice is to be done, these men must go free.' We know of a lawyer (who has no connection with our Church) who followed up all the evidence and commented that there was nothing to condemn these men.



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

But justice was not done. This is clear from the fact that a Co. Galway Republican was arrested outside the General Assembly on June 6. Mr McCarroll actually saw this man in Queen Street police station, yet he was never charged, and, under oath, police witnesses denied that any such man had ever been brought to Queen Street.

It seems that the authorities are not interested in punishing Republican offenders. They are only interested in framing Protestants who are willing to stand for their heritage.

Many people are wondering, 'Why should this happen in Ulster?' Acts 16 gives the answer in verse 19. There are those in Ulster who are engaged in the devil's business. They have been hatching a diabolical plot, and when they saw that the hope of their gains was gone they framed our three ministers and the other defendants.

There are two parties to this plot. These are the ones who conspired to silence the voice of Protestantism while they continued to sell us out.

First of all there is the Church Party. Dr. Martin and his Clerk went to Stormont and got a pledge that the Free Presbyterians would be brought to boot. Then the Minister of Home Affairs went to the General Assembly and gave an undertaking that we would not protest again. Mr O'Neill now wants us to swallow the story that Mr McConnell meant that it would never happen again in the sense that never again would there be so few police on duty at the General Assembly. What a story! Certainly Mr. Brian Faulkner did not take this meaning out of Mr. McConnell's words.

Evidently the leaders of the W.C.C. in this country cannot stand even legitimate protest, and they are certainly a party to the conspiracy that put three faithful Protestant ministers in jail.

Then there is the Political Party. One could say that when Capt. O'Neill saw that his plot was exposed he and his faithful lackey, Brian McConnell, conspired to silence the voice of loyal Protestantism. Mr. O'Neill does not like to be reminded of his treacherous meeting with Sean Lemass just after he had given his pledge that he would never meet him till he recognised our constitutional position.

The P.M. has asked us to believe that there was no political conspiracy against Dr. Paisley and the others. In fact, he tells us that he did not know there was going to be a court case. He and his Cabinet colleagues did not discuss the matter!

When we told him that the contradictory police evidence pointed to the fact that this certainly was not a police case, but a political one, he simply refused to discuss the court case. It will take a better effort than this from Mr. O'Neill if he is to fool the Protestants of Ulster.

Mr. O'Neill has made his great bid to wipe out the voice of Protestantism. He has signally failed. These things have 'fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel' (Phil. 1:12), and our cause is stronger today than ever before. The cry of Protestants throughout Ulster is 'O'Neill must go', and by God's grace O'NEILL WILL GO. He has foolishly aligned himself alongside of the W.C.C. leaders in Ulster. No doubt this was a step of political expediency. But it will turn out to be a step of political suicide, for the people of Ulster have had their eyes opened to the Romanising tendency of the W.C.C. and are revolting against it. The W.C.C. is quickly crumbling - and Capt. O'Neill is crumbling with it. Both have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind.