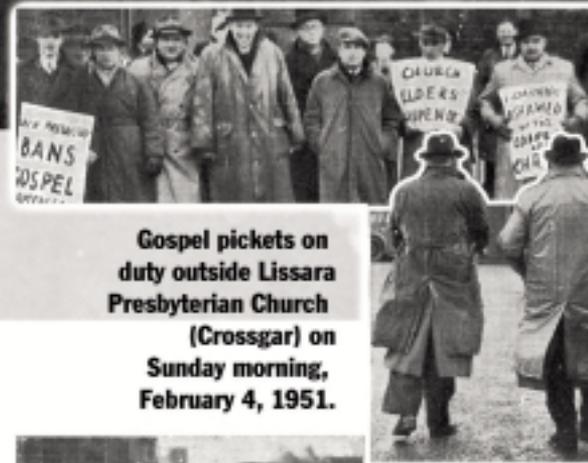


FOR SUCH A TIME:

# The Birth of the Free



Photo at opening of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster on March 17, 1951. Rev. George Stears (front row, second from right) was inducted as the first minister at Crossgar. He is shown with Rev. Ian Paisley and Messrs. J. Morrison, W. Miscampbell, H. J. Adams, G. K. Gibson, W. Emerson, G. Hutton, and J. Gibson.



Gospel pickets on duty outside Lissara Presbyterian Church (Crossgar) on Sunday morning, February 4, 1951.

When the twenty-year-old Ian Paisley was ordained as the minister of Ravenhill Evangelical Mission Church, Belfast, in 1946, few if any of those present could have imagined that they were witnessing the beginning of the most remarkable ministry Ulster would see in the twentieth century. Fresh from his studies at Barry School of Evangelism, Wales, and the Theological Hall of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland, the young Ian Paisley combined an unshakeable adherence to the Protestant Reformed faith with an unquenchable evangelistic zeal. Those twin commitments quickly led him into a lifelong battle with the apostasy that had taken hold of the major Protestant denominations. Within five years of his ordination, Mr. Paisley had to face the responsibility of leading a new denomination with the aim of calling his countrymen back to the Bible. First, however, he had to be divinely prepared.

In the autumn of 1949, Mr. Paisley and three other young men in Ravenhill Evangelical

Church decided to commence an open-air witness in Belfast. Mr. Paisley insisted that before they undertook such a work they must first give themselves to prayer, so they started to hold prayer meetings together. When they met on Friday evening September 30, 1949, they thought they were going to have just another prayer meeting. But the Lord had different plans, for that prayer meeting lasted all the way through Saturday until the Lord's Day morning service and marked a dramatic change in the life and ministry of Ian Paisley. Those present—Ian Paisley, John Douglas, Jim Welch, and Bob Scott—were overwhelmed by three things: the unspeakable holiness of God, the exceeding sinfulness of their own sin, and the glorious assurance that God was about to manifest His power in an unusual way. That very Lord's Day saw the first of a long—and still continuing—move of the Holy Ghost through Dr. Paisley's ministry.



Great gospel campaigns followed and hundreds of men and women came to know Christ as their Saviour. It is understandable that with the evident blessing of God resting on Dr. Paisley's evangelistic labours, a group of Presbyterians who ran a mission hall in Crossgar, County Down, should seek the young evangelist's services. They had to wait for eighteen months before he was free to go in early February 1951. It was to be a gospel campaign like the others Dr. Paisley had been conducting throughout the province. But once again the Lord had a much greater end in view.

# Presbyterian Church

Crossgar was a small village some fifteen miles from Belfast, an unlikely place for the secession from the Irish Presbyterian Church that would soon make an impact on the entire country. The time was ripe for a stand against the increasingly blatant apostasy of Irish Presbyterianism. In 1927 the General Assembly had confirmed the acquittal of an obviously guilty Professor J. E. Davey of heresy charges, sending a clear message that the Presbyterian Church had seriously departed from its biblical moorings. The secession of a number of faithful

As long as Irish Presbyterian evangelicals remained in church membership and were content to find Christian fellowship and to pursue their soul-winning activities in interdenominational mission halls, the drift into apostasy continued virtually unopposed. But with the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church, evangelicals became much more aware of the issues confronting their church, since from the outset, the new church was unashamedly militant in its exposure of and opposition to modernistic and ecumenical apostasy. The Presbyterians of Crossgar led the way, and evangelicals in the rest of the country had to face up to the issues they had raised.

As they considered the large numbers attending Ian Paisley's gospel campaigns in other parts of Ulster, the committee that had invited him to Crossgar realized that their small mission hall would not hold the expected crowds. All of the organizing committee were members of Lissara Presbyterian Church. They decided to ask the Lissara session for the use of the church's lecture hall for the mission services. Since all but one of the mission hall's committee were elders of Lissara there was no difficulty in obtaining unanimous approval of their request. On the day before the mission was due to commence, however, the Presbytery of Down overruled the session and forbade the use of the hall. When two of the elders objected, the Presbytery suspended them. Lissara church was without a minister at the time and it appeared that the Presbytery was seeking to thwart the will of the evangelical majority in the congregation. Some of the elders had previously complained that the Presbytery had illegally altered the congregation's voting list. Now this same body was openly opposing a gospel mission that would almost certainly result in strengthening the evangelical vote in the church. The Presbytery denied such accusations, but the fact remains that it usurped the authority of the elders of the church and forbade them the use of the hall their congregation had built at its own expense.

It came as quite a shock to Presbyterians to know that a Presbytery would ban the preaching of the gospel in a church lecture hall, especially when throughout the land other such halls were constantly in use for dances! The situation fuelled interest in the mission, which, after a public protest against the Presbytery's highhanded action, proceeded as planned in the mission hall.

Almost one hundred people came to Christ during the mission, and there was a spirit of great spiritual joy and power among the people. The contrast between the liberty of the gospel and the dictatorship of Presbyterian apostasy was all too apparent. Many could not in good conscience return to a church that had effectively banned the gospel and suspended elders for no other crime than supporting gospel preaching. Also, the new converts needed a true Bible-believing, Presbyterian church in which to grow in Christ. As Rev. W. P. Nicholson had often said, "You don't find live chickens under a dead hen!" The converts deserved something better than the "dead hen" of apostate Presbyterianism.

The result was the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. Crossgar was the first congregation, followed by Dr. Paisley's church at Ravenhill, which soon joined the new denomination. In a short time others followed. So commenced a Presbyterian church standing unapologetically for the Bible, opposing with all its might the apostasy of modernism and ecumenism, and preaching the gospel with evangelistic fervour. Derided, despised, and often discriminated against, it set its hand to the plough of Christ's service. It has not looked back, and fifty years later the Free Presbyterian Church holds as firmly as ever to the great truths upon which it first took its stand. ■



men in the wake of the Davey acquittal to form the Irish Evangelical Church (now the Evangelical Presbyterian Church) did nothing to slow Irish Presbyterianism's decline. Nor did the attempts of stalwart defenders of the faith such as Rev. John Edgar succeed in reclaiming the church from modernist control. To modernism Irish Presbyterianism added a further betrayal of historic Christianity by becoming (in 1948) a charter member of the World Council of Churches, an organization whose purpose was to unite Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Dr. Alan Cairns is the minister of Faith Free Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, and General Director of Let the Bible Speak.

