

the Full Harvest



*Exposing the ecumenical betrayal
at the General Assembly of the
Irish Presbyterian Church*

Ever since its inception in 1951 the Free Presbyterian Church had been vigorously opposing the ecumenists of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Church of Ireland churches. This did not make Free Presbyterians popular. The modernist members of those denominations despised and ridiculed them while the evangelicals bitterly resented their call for separation from such apostate churches. Many an uncomplimentary word was written and uttered against the “Paisleyites.” The conflict reached its height in 1966.

On June 6, 1966, the annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland held its opening meeting. Lacking access to the public media, the Free

Presbyterian Church had regularly picketed the General Assembly to highlight its apostasy and to raise an awareness of the dangers of ecumenism. On this occasion, some one hundred and fifty Free Presbyterian ministers, elders, deacons, and members set out to walk from Ravenhill Free Presbyterian Church to the General Assembly Buildings, a distance of about one mile. The protest march had police permission and its planned route was the main traffic route into central Belfast.

The Roman Catholic residents of the streets adjacent to Cromac Square, which

lay on our route, had stockpiled scrap metal—including hundreds of bolts used to mount railway lines to wooden sleepers—to hurl at the marchers. It was a murderous, unprovoked attack, which, according to the press and police, the marchers endured without retaliation. The news of the attack quickly spread through nearby Protestant areas with the result that by the time the little parade had passed around the General Assembly Buildings a couple of times, it had grown to some two thousand. As the marchers approached the Assembly Buildings for a third time, the police foolishly threw a cordon across the road, just before the moderator of the Irish

Presbyterian Church and his guests crossed the road in procession to dine in the Presbyterian Hostel. The police thus forced the marchers to stop right at the General Assembly Buildings in time to greet the emergence of Dr. Alfred Martin, the notoriously ecumenical Presbyterian moderator, and his guests. The protesters offered no violence to anyone, though they heartily booed Martin and his most controversial guest, the personal representative of the infamous Irish Republican terrorist, Eamon De Valera, then President of Southern Ireland.

Following an undertaking by the government to the General Assembly that it would never again allow such a demonstration, the authorities decided to issue summonses against Dr. Ian Paisley, Rev. John Wylie, and me (then a licentiate of the Presbytery), along with about a dozen other people. One accusation was that we had participated in an unlawful assembly—despite the evident fact that it was solely due to the action of the police that the protest marchers had been forced to congregate outside the General Assembly in the first place! During our trial on fabricated charges, police witnesses contradicted themselves and at times even failed to identify the individuals against whom they were giving evidence. Despite the evidence, we were all found guilty and fined, on average £40 (about £750 in today's money!) and placed under a rule of bail for two years, the terms of which required us to sign a bond to refrain from any similar activity during the two-year period. The alternative was a three-month jail sentence in Crumlin Road Jail. We felt we could not comply with the terms of the bail bond without compromising our stand for God against ecumenical apostasy. So we prepared for jail.

The jail sentence began on July 20 for Dr. Paisley and the next day for Mr. Wylie and me. The story of the three-month imprisonment cannot be told here. Suffice it to say that it lit a flame in Ulster that resulted in many hundreds of conversions to Christ, in

the formation of new congregations of the Free Presbyterian Church, and in the infliction of a serious blow upon the ecumenical movement, from which it did not recover for many years. During our imprisonment, Free Presbyterian ministers held protest gatherings in Belfast to inform an eager public of the truth behind the jailing of their colleagues. As a result of such gatherings and because of the hundreds who met each evening outside the main prison gate to sing hymns and conduct open-air gospel meetings, the government outlawed gatherings of three people or more for any religious purpose within a radius of eight miles from Belfast. That only drove the protest into the rural heartland of Ulster Protestantism.

On a typical Sabbath day it was common for an advertisement in a provincial weekly newspaper to gather two to three thousand people to a field to hear Free Presbyterian ministers highlight the evils of the day, and urge sinners to repentance and to faith in Christ. Many count such a meeting as the beginning of their pilgrimage to heaven.

On October 23, 1966, a massive crowd of some 25,000 people gathered in a field in the Dundonald hills to welcome our release from prison, despite determined police action to hinder them. Then followed a series of rallies all over the country as people pressed us with invitations to come and speak in their areas. Local believers hired the public auditoriums in the main towns of Ulster where we addressed packed congregations on the issues of ecumenism and separation from apostasy. God gave grace to many hundreds of people to obey Him and separate from the main denominations. Christian mothers and fathers who obeyed the call to separate from apostasy were joined by sons and daughters, newly converted, as a spirit of revival blessing moved across the province. Over the next two to three years, gospel missions conducted by Dr. Paisley and other Free Presbyterian ministers resulted in new congregations in Portadown, Lurgan,

Tandragee, Moneyslane, Kilkeel, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Lisbellaw, Omagh, Hillsborough, Lisburn, Randalstown, Cloughmills, Newtownards, and Bangor. These places in turn gave birth to yet other congregations. Within a short period, the Free Presbyterian Church first doubled, then tripled, its number of congregations.

These new congregations had at their core the cream of believers. The prayer meetings were packed with restored backsliders and zealous new converts. Young and old were filled with revival fire. The prayer meetings were places of the most fervent intercession. Oh, what blessed memories flood our souls when we visit again in our minds those gatherings in wooden halls and tin huts so often mockingly labeled "Paisley's Hen Houses"!

As a result of our imprisonment, God was pleased to confound His enemies, comfort His church, and enlarge His Kingdom. And that enlargement has never ceased, with the result that we have seen a constant addition of new works in Ulster, the Irish Republic, the United Kingdom, Germany, North America, and Australia.

Those who lived through the events of 1966 and the subsequent growth of the Free Church share the experience of the psalmist: "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them. The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad" (Psalm 126:1–3).

May God be pleased to visit us again for, like the Psalmist in Psalm 126:4, our recalling of past blessings prompts us to long and to pray for a fresh visitation—"Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south." ■

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