

Nec Tamen Consumebatur?

Would he have done the same today? It made sense at the time. Fiery persecution and painful strife had marked the declining century, yet the church had survived. The enemies of the now-established Church of Scotland had not consumed her. Perhaps that is why George Mossman, printer to the General Assembly, thought it fitting to print a burning bush on the title page to the *Principal Acts of the General Assembly* in 1691. He was not the first to see the burning bush as an image of the church and to apply the words printed underneath to the church: *Nec Tamen Consumebatur*—‘Yet it was not consumed.’ But would he have done the same today?

Whatever Mossman might do, the Church of Scotland has worked to preserve his legacy and keep the emblem alive, even registering it with the Lord Lyon ‘to safeguard the use of the seal for the Church.’ Safeguarding the church itself has proven more difficult. The symbol of inconsumable life and divine protection now seems to taunt the Scottish

church. What kings and their counsellors could not do with bloody force, the church in Scotland has done bloodlessly, and at her own hand—reduced herself to a charred remnant, outwardly consumed beyond the point of human repair. Three centuries on from the day that Mossman stood in his print shop, more worshippers in Scotland attend Roman Catholic Mass than attend services in the national church. If as many people stop attending Christian worship over the next thirty years as have drifted away over the last three decades, Scotland will boast almost zero church attendance.

Facing such an avalanche of unbelief, apathy, and doctrinal indifference, what should we do? Some may say, 'Nothing. After all, what can we do to stop the slide? The most a struggling denomination can do in such circumstances is to provide the ecclesiastical equivalent of palliative care for its own failing congregations. Let us draw down the blinds and treasure our final moments undisturbed.'

But churches across Scotland know that is not good enough. Together we confess that 'there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will.' We believe that Christ will build his church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In the Associated Presbyterian Churches, we are no more able to reverse decades of decline than any other denomination, but we want to face up to our shared responsibilities. With others, we recognise that our unhealed divisions weaken

the church. As large tracts of Scotland become effectively church-free zones, we find ourselves unable to reach out, not because together we do not have the resources, but because apart we multiply ministries—and not for the extension of Christ’s kingdom. We know that behind the formation or continuation of each denomination lie firm convictions, yet we believe that Scripture and our commitment to the doctrine of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* require us to pursue unity with other Reformed churches.

In this we are not alone. Recently, others have argued that denominations confessing the same faith should work towards the healing of schism. Rev. Kenneth Stewart of Glasgow Reformed Presbyterian Church argues that it is ‘time for a positive Reformed union’ in which four of our Scottish denominations ‘sit down in friendly and spiritual conference to see whether they can re-gather around the Westminster Standards as they were adopted.’ Dr John S. Ross, a former Free Church moderator proposes that his denomination should become a ‘catalyst for coalition...then commit euthanasia’ to form ‘a new church for Scotland’. The Free Presbyterian Church believes that ‘all Spirit-taught, born-again, believers in Christ...ought to be united in one Presbyterian Church’ (website), while the Free Church Continuing requested talks with the Free Presbyterians. Despite all this, breaches remain among Presbyterian denominations subscribing to the Westminster Standards.

In June of this year, the Scottish Presbytery of the Associated Presbyterian Churches met to discuss these matters and decided 'to invite the Reformed churches of Scotland to participate in a forum with the aim of pursuing greater cooperation and unity amongst them'. We took this step not to advance our denomination, but in hope of charitable discussion and united confession that we have sinned with our fathers, and with prayers for the healing of the church. Whether the result is unity between some or all of our denominations, greater cooperation, or even happier coexistence, we do not seek denominational ownership of this endeavour; we hope that it will belong to all Scottish Reformed churches committed to the whole doctrine of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

We have therefore invited representatives of several denominations to attend the first meeting of this forum, to be chaired by Rev. Ian Hamilton of Cambridge Presbyterian Church, on 23 October 2012 in Perth. We hope that all Christians concerned for Scotland's churches and Scotland's people will pray for God to give grace and wisdom to all participants.

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