



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

1966 Imprisonment of three ministers - Its Cause, Circumstances and Consequences

(Lurgan Young People's Fellowship, 4th May 2018)

Thank you for your invitation to speak on the events surrounding the 1966 jailing of three Free Presbyterian ministers. This is the first invitation to speak specifically on this topic that I have received in recent years.

Please note the words of Jeremiah 11:7.

"For I earnestly protested unto your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, rising early and protesting, saying, Obey my voice," Jeremiah 11:7.

The Lord, through His servants, exercises a ministry of protest.

I. The Free Presbyterian Church was called into existence by the Lord to protest.

That is a truth that may have been forgotten by some Free Presbyterians!

There were other evangelical denominations in existence in 1951. However, we may say truthfully that none of them openly contended with the growing threat of liberalism and ecumenism in the mainline denominations.

1948 saw the formation of the World Council of Churches, the objective of which was to undo the work of God in the Protestant Reformation and bring back the "separated brethren", as popery referred to the denominations that claimed to be Protestant.

Dr Ian Paisley, since his ordination and installation as minister of Ravenhill Evangelical Church in 1946, had been increasingly contending against the apostasy of the churches, especially the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

In 1951, he was invited by the Session of Lissara Presbyterian congregation, Crossgar, to conduct a mission. This invitation was overruled by the Down Presbytery which banned the elders of the local congregation from using the church hall for a Gospel mission. That was in January 1951.

Out of that dispute on 17th March was born the first congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. The mission was relocated to the local mission hall and it began with a protest march, led by Rev Ian Paisley and the seceding elders, against the decision to refuse the Presbyterian hall to its own elders.

So our church was born out of protest in order to protest.

1. Protesting against error and sin is the work of God. "For I earnestly protested unto your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, rising early and protesting, saying, Obey my voice," Jeremiah 11:7.

It is evident that "protesting" against disobedience of God is a godly enterprise! "Yet the LORD testified (the same Hebrew word) against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets," 2 Kings 17:13.

2. To bear such a witness is the duty of the people of God to the end of this age. 1 Tim 4:1-6. We are commanded to exercise a ministry of protest against the apostasy, the features of which are highlighted in 2 Tim 3:1-5. See the command to "turn away = shun and avoid" from all engaged in it. That is a direction to every individual Christian. See also Titus 3:10, 2 John 10-11.

To it the very end of this age it is the will of God for His people to separate from ungodliness, Rev 18:1-5.



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3. In the light of this truth, I believe that I can say that the chief characteristic of the witness of the Free Presbyterian Church should be one of 'PROTEST' against the apostasy of today. Maybe you say, Ought it not to be the preaching of the gospel? I reply by pointing you to the words and reasoning of Jude. "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ," Jude 1:3-4. There are times when 'protest' against evil takes precedence over an emphasis upon the evangelistic message. It must be said, however, that a true and proper protest will ever contain the message of the cross for there must not only be a denouncing of the lie but also the announcing of the TRUTH!

II. It was in the exercising of such a witness that on 6th June 1996 the Free Presbyterian Church protested against the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

In pursuit of its ongoing apostasy, the Assembly had invited a representative of Irish President, Eamonn DeValera, one of the leaders of the Easter rebellion of 1916 which led on to years of terrorism and murder, a campaign which continues to this present day!

Of course, the Assembly's agenda that year contained many endorsements of the objectives of ecumenism, against which our protest was directed, but the presence of DeValera's representative and the welcome given to him was most significant.

III. It was the God-honouring character of the protest which stirred the ire of Romanists and Ecumenists on that occasion.

The Romanists of Cromac Square were engaged in riot and the destruction of property before the Free Presbyterian parade had even left the Ravenhill Road! Of course, it was reported in the press that it was provocative placards carried by us that sparked the riots. That was a blatant lie which the press were happy to publish. The anger of the 'establishment' at our protest outside the General Assembly was aroused by the defiance of its endorsement of its ecumenism. The Queen's representative in Northern Ireland at that time, the Governor, was at the General Assembly to give his blessing to the ideals and objectives of ecumenism.

The 'establishment' was furious at the temerity of Free Presbyterians to challenge it. The court case and subsequent guilty verdicts were in retaliation for such 'outrage'! The decision to refuse to sign the order requiring us to submit to a binding over for a period of two years and an undertaking not to engage in such a protest again and the ensuing prison sentence of three months had the very opposite effect to that anticipated. It was felt that such would subdue Ian Paisley and his companions.

However, it didn't but rather it resulted in a mighty stirring throughout Northern Ireland. The imprisonment did more to highlight the spirit of ecumenism and the direction that it was leading the country in than any sermon or magazine article could have done.

IV. It must be emphasised that the stirring in those days was marked by gospel conversions and church-formations.

God moved and sanctified and honoured the stand taken at that time. Never was the Free Presbyterian Church more effective than in the days that followed that protest. This history, though perhaps forgotten, and sadly often this is the result of a deliberate desire by some who find such a history embarrassing, should be remembered! We bring no honour to God when we put away from us the memory of His great mercies in the past.

There are many congregations and hundreds of Christians and their offspring who owe much to God's kindness to us 52 years ago.



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May we be spared from the dreadful indictment of Deuteronomy 32:18. "Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee."

Ivan Foster.

4th May 2018.