

A Brief Defence of Dissociation in the Present Circumstances

By the Session of the Puritan Reformed Church

March 27, 1996

Though false allegations of schism, separatism, and independency will likely attend our decision to dissociate from The _____ Church, the session of Puritan Reformed Church offers this brief defence in support of its action.

Though it is not necessary that a truly constituted church be absolutely pure as to the doctrine taught or embraced, as to the ordinances administered, or the public worship performed, it is, however, necessary that its constitution be founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God and that its constitution reflect the light attained to by the purest of Reformed Churches (for all reformation must be biblical reformation if it is reformation at all, otherwise it is not a reformation but a deformation, cf. Phil. 3:16). Wherefore, to adopt a constitution that corrupts the light of Scripture or the light of reformation is to adopt a false constitution. A false constitution renders a church and its courts unconstitutional. When the Confession of Faith (25:4) speaks of degrees of purity among particular churches within the "catholick church", we believe it designates degrees of purity within truly constituted churches. For example, though the church of Corinth was plagued with division, immorality, and false doctrine promoted by some within the church (and therefore manifested a lesser degree of purity than other truly constituted churches, cf. the church of Smyrna in Rev. 2:8-11), it was, nevertheless, a truly constituted church for it was constituted by apostolic authority (with apostolic doctrine, apostolic worship, apostolic government, and apostolic discipline). Thus, for a church to constitutionally adhere to Arminianism, Dispensationalism, or Charismatic experientialism (false doctrine), singing uninspired hymns or using instrumental music in public praise (false worship), Episcopacy or Independency (false government), or unrestricted communion (false discipline) is to qualify as a constitutionally false church. That is not to say that there are no believers in churches that are not truly constituted (there may be many in some cases). Nor is it to imply that ministers or elders within those churches do not courageously stand for many truths taught in Scripture. It is simply to say that authority to rule in the church must come from Christ, and if a church does not have a constitution of which He approves (as King of His church), then there is no lawful authority to rule or to administer the ordinances on His behalf. Authority to administer the divine ordinances on behalf of Christ flows directly from the King and His constitution. Authority used within His church on any other grounds is an usurped authority. It is tyranny. For this reason, the magistracy and the church (during the Second Reformation) did not recognize the constitutional viability of any other church within the realm of Scotland than the Church of Scotland:

. . . there is no other face of kirk, nor other face of religion, than was presently at that time, by the favour of God, established within this realm: "Which therefore is **ever styled** God's true religion, Christ's true religion, the true and Christian religion, and a perfect religion" (The National Covenant of Scotland, emphases added).

To live in Scotland and yet to be outside the Church of Scotland was to be outside the visible church, for no other church was tolerated or recognized as a constitutionally true church. It was to be excommunicated from a truly constituted church and ministry. An essential term of communion within the Church of Scotland was The National Covenant (and subsequently The Solemn League and Covenant). Concerning the National Covenant as a term of communion note the following historical accounts.

Copies of the Covenant were carried into every corner of the land to be subscribed, and were looked upon as **tests of faith in Christ**. . . . The Presbytery of Kirkcaldy resolved, 1st August 1639, that no '**wilful non-Covenanters should be admitted to the Sacrament**' (James King Hewison, *The Covenanters, A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*, Vol. I, p. 272, emphases added). At length, on 2nd August 1643, the epoch-making Assembly met in the east division of St. Giles' Church, Edinburgh, when Sir Thomas Hope had the unique distinction of sitting as Commissioner, and Henderson, for the third time, filled the Moderator's chair. They began business by enacting that the National Covenant of 1638 should be issued in a little quarto volume, with blank leaves, **to be subscribed in every synod, presbytery, and parish, and that non-subscribers of it should be censured** (Hewison, *The Covenanters*, Vol. I, p. 377, emphases added).

Furthermore, those accounted as having defected from these covenants (the defectors were called "malignants") were censured by the Church of Scotland.

On 12th July [1648], the Assembly met in Edinburgh, George Gillespie being Moderator, approved of the Argyll policy, and condemned the 'unlawful engagement' as sinful and censurable. The Church opposed the Engagement because it violated the Solemn League and Covenant, inasmuch as it proposed the reinstatement of an Episcopal monarch, the formation of a party of Covenanters in alliance with their opponents, and the delegation of power to a government who 'mind not religion.' The Assembly further declared the Engagers to be malignants, non-Covenanters, sectaries, and enemies to the one righteous cause. . . . **The Covenant was to be the sole test of patriotism and of religion**. Other bonds and the toleration of sects were to be avoided like the pest. **Favourers of any other policy were to be excommunicated if unrepentant. Ministers approving of the Engagement were to be deposed**. . . (Hewison, *The Covenanters*, Vol. I, p. 446, emphases added).

In fact, the issue of faithfulness to the covenants actually rent the Church of Scotland into two parties so that the Protesters declared the Assemblies of the Resolutioners (the covenant-breaking party that developed out of the Engagers) to be unconstitutional and pretended Assemblies. The covenants were obvious terms of communion, for Protesters and Resolutioners refused to meet in the same General Assemblies together. Protesters did not recognize the unlawful courts of the Resolutioner Assemblies and would not attend them when cited to appear. Protesters were deposed from the ministry by Resolutioner Assemblies when they refused to recognize their lawful authority to rule on behalf of Christ.

It [the joint General Assembly of Protesters and Resolutioners--PRC] met in St. Andrews on 16th July. . . . Rutherford, and other twenty-one sympathisers, protested against the meeting as **unconstitutional**. . . . There [later at Dundee, where the General Assembly of Protesters, who had separated themselves from the Resolutioners, was now meeting--PRC], on 22nd July [1651--PRC], Rutherford's cogent Protest **declining the Assembly** was read. Balcarres [a Resolutioner-- PRC] in vain demanded that the twenty-two absent Protesters should be reported for civil punishment for their reflections on the King, Parliament, and Church. The Assembly [of Resolutioners--PRC] ordered Presbyteries to deal with them. It was ultimately agreed to cite [James--PRC] Guthrie, Patrick Gillespie, James Simson, James Naismith, and John Menzies. **They did not compear** [i.e. appear at the Resolutioner assembly--PRC]. The [Resolutioner--PRC] Assembly deposed Guthrie, Gillespie, and Simson, suspended Naismith, and referred Menzies to the Commission. After the meeting of the Assembly at St. Andrews, a work was published entitled *A Vindication of the Freedom and Lawfulness of the late Assembly* [by James Wood, a Resolutioner--PRC], etc. This was answered by *The Nullity of the Pretended Assembly at Saint Andrews and Dundee* [signed by 40 Protesters including Rutherford and Guthrie--PRC](Hewison, *The Covenanters*, Vol. II, pp. 34,35, emphases added).

Separate Assemblies of Protesters and Resolutioners met in 1652 and in 1653 in Edinburgh. The Protesters declared the Assembly of the Resolutioners in 1652 to be "unlawful, unfrie, and unjust" (Hewison, *The Covenanters*, Vol. II, p. 43). It is worthy to be noted that the issue between the Protesters and the Resolutioners did not deal at all with the propriety of ministers and members of the Church of Scotland swearing the covenants, but over the issue of faithfulness to the covenants. Both sides upheld the obligation of ministers and members to own the covenants. Furthermore, unfaithfulness to this term of communion (i.e. faithfully maintaining the covenants) on the part of the Resolutioners led the Protesters to separate from their brethren to avoid schism and in order to maintain a truly constituted church. They would not serve with the Resolutioners while they maintained different terms of communion, neither would they serve them the Lord's Supper (e.g. Rutherford refused to serve communion with Blair at St. Andrews; and on another occasion Rutherford and Moncrieff debarred Resolutioners from the table at Scoonie). Such actions can only be defended if the covenants were terms of communion. Were the covenants biblical terms of communion? We testify that they were and still are biblical terms of communion. To affirm otherwise is in effect to charge the faithful covenanters (Protesters) of the Second Reformation with sin and to undermine their covenanted reformation and the biblical presbyterianism they taught and practiced.

Therefore, we must maintain a faithful testimony in defence of this covenanted reformation and presbyterianism as it was taught and practiced by faithful covenanters of the Second Reformation as being biblical and "which therefore is ever styled God's true religion, Christ's true religion, the true and Christian religion, and a perfect religion" (The National Covenant of Scotland, emphases added).

1. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that the covenants and the historical testimony defending those who were faithful to the covenants is a biblical term of communion.

2. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that all churches and assemblies which do not subscribe the moral substance of the covenants have departed from the biblical light attained to by the Second Reformation and are constitutionally false (especially is this true of churches that profess to be presbyterian and which know of the covenants, but yet have refused to own them in their constitutions).

3. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that only those who own the covenants are presbyterians (even the Reformed Church of Holland, and other Reformed Churches in Europe were agreeable to uniting with the Reformed Churches in Scotland, England, and Ireland in a covenanted reformation because they recognized the biblical foundation of the Solemn League and Covenant, cf. William Hetherington, *History Of The Westminster Assembly Of Divines*, pp. 337-339).

4. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that it is not schismatic to dissociate from a constitutionally false church in order to be faithful to a constitutionally true church. It is rather schismatic, sectarian, and unpresbyterian to refuse to subscribe the covenants of the Second Reformation. With Mr. Rutherford we do take our stand:

When the greatest part of a Church maketh defection from the Truth, the lesser part remaining sound, **the greatest part is the Church of Separatists** (Samuel Rutherford, *Due Right Of Presbyteries*, p. 255, emphases added).

5. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that it is a sinful independency to dissociate from a constitutionally true church without going through full judicial process. Again we cite the words of that faithful covenanter, Samuel Rutherford:

There is **no just cause** to leave a less cleane Church (if it be a true Church) and to goe to a purer and cleaner" (Rutherford, *Due Right Of Presbyteries*, p. 255, emphases added).

The qualification which Rutherford adds ("if it be a true Church") is the precise point at issue: Is a professing church a truly constituted church if it does not own the covenants? Our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers did not believe so and neither do we. Let the _____ Church prove that it is a constitutionally true church while refusing to own the covenants as a term of communion, and we will repent of what would then be a sinful separation and immediately unite with it.

6. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that to refuse to subscribe the moral substance of the covenants is to have no part in the covenanted reformation of the seventeenth century. One cannot be neutral in regard to the covenants (whether personally or socially). To seek to remain neutral is in effect to support those who refused to sign the covenants (and were excommunicated from the church) and who undermined the Second Reformation. We stand with another faithful covenanter who reasoned:

It is a moral duty to abjure all the points of Popery, which was done in the national covenant; and **it is a moral duty** to endeavour our own reformation and

the reformation of the church, which was sworn to in both covenants; **it is a moral duty**, to endeavour the reformation of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, which was sworn to in the league and covenant; **it is a moral duty** to purge out all unlawful officers out of God's house, and to endeavour the extirpation of heresy and schism, and whatsoever is contrary to sound doctrine, which was sworn to there also; **it is a moral duty** to do what God had commanded towards superiors, inferiors and equals, which, by the league and covenant, all were bound unto; and, therefore, the covenants are strongly obliging, being more absolute than other covenants, because they bind *et vi materice et vi sanctionis*, --both by reason of the matter and by reason of the oath, **and so are perpetual**, Jer. 1.5. And, therefore, a breach of these must be a greater fault than the breach of such covenants as are about things not morally evil, which only bind *vi sanctionis* [by reason of oath], and so, it is beyond all doubt that the breach of these covenants is a most heinous and crying sin (John Brown of Wamphray, *An Apologetic Relation*, p. 173, emphases added).

7. We do testify with our covenanted and presbyterian forefathers that it is our duty to honor the church of Jesus Christ as our mother who bore us (Ex. 20:12; Gal. 4:26). However, Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is . . . my mother" (Mk. 3:33,35). The church of Jesus Christ as represented by the Church of Scotland and all churches adhering unto her covenanted and presbyterian principles since then are our mother. To presently own the _____ Church as a true constitutional expression of our mother is to disown in the same breath The Church of Scotland at the time of the Second Reformation as a true constitutional expression of our mother. When the constitutions of two churches disagree (one church requiring as a term of communion the sincere owning of the covenants while the other church refusing as a term of communion the sincere owning of the covenants), both cannot be true expressions of our mother. Thus, we are conscientiously compelled to own The Church of Scotland at the time of the Second Reformation as a true expression of our mother, and to disown The _____ Church as being such.

8. We do testify that we are not only bound to adopt these covenants because the true church throughout history is one moral person and what is morally binding on the church in one age is morally binding on the church in a subsequent age, but, furthermore, many of us are bound (by an additional obligation) to adopt these covenants because we are actual bloodline descendants of our covenanted forefathers from Scotland, England, and Ireland who bound all of their succeeding generations to the terms of these covenants.

And finally, being convinced in our minds, and confessing with our mouths, that the present **and succeeding generations in this land are bound to keep the foresaid national oath and subscription inviolable** (The National Covenant, p. 352 in the Free Presbyterian Publications volume of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, emphases added). . . . that we, **and our posterity after us**, may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us (The Solemn League and Covenant, p. 359 in the Free Presbyterian Publications volume of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, emphases added). . . . we shall each one of us, according to our place and interest, endeavour that they [England, Ireland, and Scotland--PRC] may remain conjoined in a firm peace and union **to all posterity** (The Solemn League and Covenant, p. 359 in the Free Presbyterian

Publications volume of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, emphases added).

Those of us who trace our heritage to these covenanted forefathers can in no wise loose ourselves from these covenantal bonds (unless of course these covenants were unlawful and sinful to subscribe in the first place, a suggestion from which we recoil). Nor can we excuse ourselves from the moral and perpetual obligation of these covenants by declaring that though we are natural descendants of the covenanted people of Scotland, England, and Ireland, we no longer live under the national and territorial jurisdiction of Scotland, England, and Ireland. For inasmuch as Israel and Judah were ever morally bound by the covenants their forefathers made even when they were scattered from the national and territorial jurisdiction of Israel into a host of foreign nations, so are we though we be scattered throughout the whole world. We believe the prayers of our natural as well as our spiritual forefathers have now at this time been heard in raising up a covenanting remnant who will follow in the footsteps of the fathers who have already inherited the promises.

For the reasons stated above, we believe that we cannot remain in The _____ Church without incurring God's just discipline for maintaining an unlawful association under unbiblical terms of communion that expressly state: "It is not necessary to take the Covenant of the three kingdoms" ("Organizational Meeting Minutes of the _____ Church", October 1, 1994). Such an action is absolutely necessary, if we are one moral person with the churches who defended the covenants with their lives. Will we say that they shed their blood for something that was not a moral and biblical necessity? Will we in effect side with their persecutors who also believed the covenants to be unnecessary? Will we exclude from our church George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford and all the faithful covenanters of the Second Reformation? Will we be excluded from their church? We cannot do so. We will stand side by side with faithful covenanters like James Guthrie who was put to death for his loyal and unremitting testimony to the covenants.

I do bear my witness to the National Covenant of Scotland, and Solemn League and Covenant betwixt the three kingdoms. These sacred, solemn, public oaths of God, I believe can be loosed or dispensed with by no person, or party, or power, upon earth, but are still binding upon these kingdoms, and will be so forever hereafter. . . . I bear my testimony . . . against the controverted assemblies and the public resolutions. . . . The Covenants, the Covenants, shall yet be Scotland's reviving (John Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, p. 266).

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