"A Church at the Crossroads": The Plenary Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland

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[Revised on December 28, 2010]

After two years of discussion and debate, both oral and written, a Plenary Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland surprised most observers by voting 98-84 to permit uninspired hymns as well as musical instruments in the public worship of God (a General Assembly consists of one-third of the ministers, and an equal number of ruling elders, while a Plenary Assembly consists of *all* the ministers and an equal number of ruling elders). Plenary Assemblies are rare enough in the Free Church – the last one was held in 1843 – but they believed that a decision of this magnitude warranted the whole church gathering together to work through and decide the case.

I was present at the Assembly as fraternal delegate from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but my comments should not be taken as having any official weight. They are simply my own reflections as an observer. My own interest in the case had far less to do with the result than with the process.

Various commentators have claimed that the Free Church chose pragmatism over scriptural principle in this case. The irony is that – given the options before them – the Free Church *actually* chose scriptural principle over pragmatism! Those who pay careful attention to the texts of the Deliverance and the Amendment before the Free Church Assembly will see that the debate was far more principled than some have suggested. Both sides started from biblical principles (one side arguing that scripture requires only inspired praise – the other arguing that scripture gives liberty with respect to hymns and instruments), and both sides appealed to pragmatic considerations. What appears to have decided the Assembly was that the Deliverance took such a pragmatic definition of worship that it would have permitted extra-liturgical anarchy – while the Amendment provided for a principled liberty on a scriptural and confessional foundation. Therefore the result was a triumph of biblical principle.

Throughout the whole process, all parties conducted themselves in a manner befitting servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. The spirit of humility and grace exercised in the debate gladdened my heart. Perhaps two speakers overstated themselves mildly (one on each side of the debate), but it was abundantly evident through the whole course of the debate that these were brethren who sought to dwell together in unity and harmony as they followed the teaching of the scriptures together. Such a spirit bodes well for their chances to survive together through the maelstrom that now threatens to engulf them.

The Process

But how does a church go about making such a change? After all, in order to become a minister in the Free Church of Scotland, a man must vow to "support, maintain, and defend" the present practice of the Free Church (which limited congregational singing to inspired materials). So if all ministers and elders are pledged to support, maintain, and defend the present practice, how can the practice ever change?! The Free Church provides an excellent example for how a church should approach making important changes.

Over the last 50 years a number of ministers and elders became convinced that there was no biblical basis for the "present practice" of the Free Church. Even so, they could still vow to "support, maintain, and defend" such a practice and so all Free Church congregations have avoided singing uninspired materials.

[NOTE: I should note at this point that this is not the same as "exclusive Psalmody" – since the Free Church has always permitted the use of other portions of scripture set to music (e.g., the Scottish paraphrases of 1781). There are some in the Free Church who hold to the exclusive Psalmody position, but even they acknowledged that the church as a whole only forbade uninspired materials of praise.]

Chronology of Key Events before 1900:

1560 The Reformation of the Church of Scotland results in the formation of the General Assembly and a Presbyterian form of government gradually emerges. At this time all churches in Scotland sing Psalms without instrumental accompaniment.

1697 The Barrier Act is passed by the Church of Scotland in order to prevent "sudden alteration or innovation" in the church. This Act (see discussion below) requires all major changes to be submitted to the Presbyteries for their consent.

1781 The Scottish Paraphrases (various scriptural texts paraphrased and set to music) are produced with the blessing of the Church of Scotland.

1843 The "Disruption" of the Church of Scotland results in the formation of the Free Church of Scotland over the issue of "patronage" – whereby the wealthiest members of the church were allowed to select the pastor over the wishes of the congregation and even of the elders (Kirk Session).

1872 The Free Church General Assembly decides to permit hymns in worship.

1883 The Free Church General Assembly decides to permit instruments in worship

Over the years the Free Church had decided that ministers and elders were free to sing uninspired materials when visiting other churches – and had entered into fraternal relations with other churches (the OPC, for instance) that permit hymns and instruments. In recent years a few congregations have developed the practice of singing hymns (either traditional or contemporary) before or after the worship service, and at least one church determined to replace the evening service with a "fellowship meeting" where they could use hymns and instruments.

The present debate resulted when some of those who wanted to tighten up the requirements in the Free Church raised the issue in the Presbytery of Edinburgh and Perth. The matter went to the General Assembly, which referred the question of hymns and instruments to the Board of Trustees, who requested a number of leading scholars in the Free Church to prepare a series of papers on the biblical and historical theology of musical praise. These papers prompted a significant amount of discussion. The 2009 General Assembly proposed the following process:

1) To hold a Plenary Conference (which all ministers and elders would attend) in the summer of 2010 to discuss and debate the question of hymns and instruments.
2) To hold a Plenary General Assembly (including all ministers and an equal number of ruling elders) in the fall of 2010 to debate and decide the question of hymns and instruments.
3) To permit a full and free debate on the question (i.e., no one could be charged with breaking their ordination vows for positions taken during the course of the debate) until the matter was decided.

Because this proposal could significantly alter the Free Church's practice, it was sent down to the presbyteries under the Barrier Act (an Act requiring major changes to be sent down to the presbyteries for approval). Since a majority of the church's eight presbyteries approved of the process, the General Assembly of 2010 concurred, and the process was set in motion. The Plenary Conference was held in Dingwall in August of 2010. All reports agree that the debate was profitable and the discussion fruitful.

The Plenary Assembly: The Options before the House

The moderator, the Rev. David Meredith of Inverness, called the Plenary Assembly to order at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 18, 2010. The only item of business before the Assembly was the report of the Trustees regarding the question of whether to permit hymns and instruments in worship. Since the Free Church requires that all addenda (minor changes that essentially agree with the report) or amendments (major changes that alter the substance of the report) be submitted before the debate begins, this meant that all major amendments had to be presented before the beginning of the Assembly. [*NOTE: one drawback to this procedure is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to amend something from the floor of the Assembly, and the Assembly appears to be limited to the options on the table at the beginning of the day.*]

I will spare my readers the minutiae of parliamentary proceedings, and will focus on the two major options before the Assembly: the "Deliverance" proposed by the Board of Trustees, and the "Amendment" offered by the Rev. Alex J. MacDonald.

The Deliverance:

The Deliverance recommended that the Free Church maintain the status quo – but with the repeal of all legislation that would require officers of the church to support, maintain and defend the present practice (see the 1910 and 1932 acts in the text box). The Deliverance would also make explicit the permission for churches to have "other meetings" besides public worship at which hymns and instruments could be used.

Chronology of Key Events Since 1900

1900 The majority of the Free Church (about 90%) unites with the United Secession Church to form the United Free Church (which will later reunite with the Church of Scotland in 1920)

1904 The minority of the Free Church that remained outside of the United Free Church wins a court case that they *are* the true Free Church, thereby maintaining the rights to the property of the Free Church.

1905 The Free Church General Assembly revokes the decisions to permit hymns and instruments, requiring that only "inspired praise" is permitted (NOTE: this is *not* the same as exclusive Psalmody – since metrical versions of other portions of Scripture are allowed).

1910 The Free Church General Assembly called on presbyteries to do everything in their power to restore "uniformity" in worship by "suppressing and removing all such innovations, should they appear in connection with any of the congregations" in their bounds.

1932 The Free Church General Assembly requires ordained ministers to support, maintain, and defend the "present practice of the Free Church," namely, "to avoid the use in public worship of uninspired materials of praise as also of instrumental worship. Such present practice determines the purity of worship to the maintenance of which the Ordinand pledges himself."

2000 A small group of ministers and churches withdraw from the Free Church over matters of discipline, forming the Free Church Continuing.

2009 After questions had arisen regarding the biblical basis for the Free Church's stance on hymns and instruments, the Free Church General Assembly determined to conduct a discussion of the topic in a "free and open manner in which the expression of views on either side of the debate is permissible until the General Assembly pronounces on the matter." Further the Assembly declared that "this matter be decided at a plenary meeting of the General Assembly in 2010 comprising all ministers with a seat in presbytery and an equal number of elders, subject to approval of presbyteries in accordance with Barrier Act procedure."

2010 The presbyteries voted to hold such a plenary Assembly, and the Free Church General Assembly in May concurred. It also sponsored a plenary Conference in August to debate and discuss the matter.

Mr. Iain K. McLeod reported on behalf of the Board of Trustees. He outlined several reasons why the Board did not favor change:

1) our form of worship has been the same for many years – the onus was on those who wanted change to demonstrate their case;

2) the scriptural argument was not met;

3) we cannot risk alienating the large majority who do not want change;

4) any decision would "oppress" a minority – after all, if a session has three members who want change, and one who does not, then there is a minority who will not get their way;

5) our historic practice has permitted the use of paraphrases of any portion of Scripture, so that those who wish to sing NT songs may do so;

6) instruments were only introduced in the 8th century, so there is no evidence for the apostolic use of instruments.

The stated clerk, the Rev. James McIver seconded the Deliverance (which gave him the right to speak next). He focused on the question of what is *authorized* by God in public worship. "We all agree that it is in *scripture* that we find the answer. But how should the church proceed when there are differences?" It cannot be by personal preference, but because we believe our view to be the biblical one. He suggested that references to musical instruments in the Psalms point forward to the "lips" of the redeemed in the NT. Likewise, he argued that there is no commandment to sing something other than the Psalms. "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs" refers to a body of praise that the church already possessed – and yet we have no evidence for any body of praise other than the Psalms for the first two centuries. "The more I sing the Psalms, the more I delight to sing about Jesus in the Psalms. They are full of the Christ who has suffered, died, and been raised and seated at the right hand of the Father!" He argued that the early church had no uninspired hymnology – and no instruments. [*NOTE: the latter point is unquestionably true – there is no evidence for instrumental accompaniment until the 8th century – but his failure to distinguish between Psalms and responses led to some confusion over the patristic use of uninspired praise. Many in the early church opposed the introduction of uninspired hymns in place of the Psalms, but regularly utilized uninspired responses such as the Gloria Patri, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Kyrie Eleison, etc.*]

At about this point in the discussion a large crowd with a big drum started shouting and singing outside – and the moderator inquired (tongue in cheek) whether these were Mr. Robertson's supporters. The Rev. David Robertson is the most outspoken supporter of the proposed changes. It was something of a surreal experience to listen to a debate about the use of uninspired hymns and instruments with the accompaniment of such raucous "praise" being offered to the modern gods of Edinburgh across the street in what was once called "Assembly Hall" – where the Church of Scotland used to meet (see picture at right). Today it is known as "The Hub" and is a center of Edinburgh's nightlife. [St. Columba's Free Church – where the Free Church Assembly always meets – is at the top of the Royal Mile, a stone's throw from Edinburgh Castle, and an equal distance from St. Giles High Kirk – the mother church of Scotland.]

<u>The Amendment</u>

The Amendment provided a comprehensive alternative to the Deliverance:

1. recognize that there are legitimate differences between brethren on this point;
2. repeal all previous acts with respect to forbidding hymns and instruments;
3. insist that sung praise must be consistent with the Word of God and the whole doctrine of the Confession;
4. require that every service of congregational worship shall include the singing of Psalms (i.e., permission to sing uninspired praise does not mean permission to exclude Psalms!);
5. provide freedom on the question of musical instruments;
6. provide that this freedom be restricted – the minister may not be forced to practice contrary to conscience (so that when a Psalm-singing minister preaches in a hymn-singing church, the church may not sing hymns that day);
7. in the church courts, only unaccompanied Psalms will be sung;
8. erect a committee to provide guidance with respect to materials of praise.

The mover, Rev. Alex J. McDonald, spoke on behalf of his amendment: "Why do I want to see this change? Because the word of God compels me. We embarked on a project to study the Word of God. We asked our sharpest minds to present papers. They did. But we have not really engaged with these papers….No one has

tried to deal with the fact that we have two different positions shown from scripture! The early church found a way to allow Jews and Gentiles to live together as one body with very different practices. In the Free Church we have some who only baptize the children of communicant members, and we have others who baptize all the children of baptized members – and we live together in peace. If we are going to restrict the liberty of our brethren with hymns and instruments, we need to show that from scripture."

With respect to instruments, he argued that many of the Psalms were written to be sung with instruments. "We frequently say that that which is commanded in the Old, and is not revoked in the New, is still in force."

With respect to materials of Praise: "I believe that the Free Church should remain a Psalm-singing church, but I do not believe our liberty should be restricted in the matter of praise. Our sermons and prayers are not verbatim from scripture (we even shun the Lord's Prayer), rather we require that prayers and sermons are consistent with scripture. Likewise, we are not restricted to OT doctrine in prayer and sermon – why so in praise? I know that Christ is in the Psalms, but the full revelation of the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, and the Holy Spirit is not there. The *full* revelation of these is found in the NT." He appealed to Colossians 2, which provides for freedom in feasts and other adiaphora.

With respect to vows he said that they had vowed to uphold the practice of the church (which the General Assembly decides from time to time). If someone becomes convinced that the vow is problematic, then he should seek relief. That was why he had brought this proposed amendment.

As for legal consequences, he said that the Free Church should take a stand for truth, and be prepared to face any difficulty. But he pointed back to the 1904 legal case where the courts decided in favor of the Free Church at a time when the Free Church permitted *hymn-singing* (since it was only in 1905 that hymns were prohibited). Therefore, he argued, this demonstrates that exclusive Psalmody is not required to be the Free Church in the eyes of the law.

He concluded: "I believe that the Free Church stands at a crossroads. Will we continue with a restriction that is contrary to the Word of God. It appears that the Deliverance cannot give good biblical grounds for their position. I appeal to you to give that freedom which is ours under the New Covenant."

The Rev. Neil McMillan spoke as the seconder of Alex McDonald's amendment. "Where are we asked to sing praise to Jesus? In Philippians 2 – so that we confess with our tongues the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. We've had reference to the songs of Revelation 4 and 5 – Christ the creator and the redeemer – the praise of heaven demands that we sing his name. The Psalms do give us some post-incarnational insight, but that does not mean that I should only preach from the Psalms, and neither should it mean that we only sing from the Psalms.

"But there is a bigger picture in view – the story of gospel witness in Scotland. How do we write the next chapter of gospel witness, in order that lost people might be brought into a saving relationship with Jesus?

"Few of us believe that it is sinful to sing hymns with instruments (most are willing to do so in other churches). The fact that the board wants to eliminate the acts of 1910 and 1932 shows that they don't believe it is sinful. If we believe that worship with hymns and instruments is acceptable to God in other churches, then how can we say that it is unacceptable to God in the Free Church? Either we need to say that it is sinful in all circumstances, or else permit it in the Free Church….Those who want to see change have remained in the Free Church for decades – we are in the Free Church, we love the Free Church – we don't want to go anywhere else. We want to serve here. How can we stay together for the work of the gospel in Scotland?"

A speech-by-speech report is available at David Robertson's blog. I will provide instead a thematic review by focusing on various arguments that were made. If I appear to give longer excerpts from the side that argued for

change, that is because only 8 defended the Deliverance, and several of them were quite short, while 13 speeches defended the Amendment.

The Debate: Factors in the Decision

The Biblical Argument – Hymns.

Malcolm Maclean argued that there is only one command in scripture as to what we are to sing: "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" – which Paul equates with the Word of Christ (which he took to mean that they are inspired). We don't have a command to sing anything else apart from inspired material.

Other speakers pointed to passages like Philippians 2 (confessing Christ is Lord) or Revelation 5 (singing to the Lamb) as providing NT warrant for singing the name of Christ. But other speakers went further in discussing the biblical role of sung praise. Iver Martin pointed out that in a song like Psalm 135, "we look back and sing about the works of God in their salvation in clear, explicit terms – and yet if we can only sing the Psalms, then we cannot sing about the cross in clear, explicit terms."

Kenneth Stewart (acknowledged by many as the leading proponent of the biblical arguments behind the Deliverance) argued that the "new song" in Revelation is not a new covenant song, but a new order in the new creation. He argued that since songs of praise are prophetic, they should be restricted to inspired material. As such, the Psalms are the hymnbook of the glorious king. He admitted to some difficulty with singing paraphrases, because the Bible tells me to sing Psalms – and "I am never directed to take other parts of scripture and sing them."

In reply, David Robertson explained that the key to the change in his thinking came from working through Hebrews 9 (how OT worship regulations were in force until "the time of reformation"). "We have got ourselves into a tremendous hole because we are trying to interpret the NT according to OT rules that Hebrews 9 says are no longer in force."

The Biblical Argument – Instruments.

James McIver had argued that instruments were symbolic and passed away with the temple and its sacrifices, but Mr. Matheson asked what they were symbolic of? "What part of Christ's work fulfilled the instruments?" Christ has not fulfilled the praise of God. The praise of God must continue! As for the silence of history, he suggested that history was silent on justification by faith – should Luther therefore have submitted to Rome? Calvin argued that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated every Sunday – and I agree with him on this – but we do not have any church in the Free Church that does this.

Kenneth Stewart replied that if we take the harps of Revelation as a pattern it would result in requiring white robes, incense, and palm branches! The spiritual meaning of the OT temple is fulfilled in the heavenly temple. They symbolize joy, excitement, and energy – which is properly expressed through the unaided human voice singing the Psalms.

Iain Beaton took a somewhat different approach. He argued that David "introduced music, song, and instrument in the worship of the tabernacle *without God telling him to do so*. And yet God did not strike him down." He also argued that if you follow Jewish history, the reason why they stopped using instruments was because they had lost the temple – as a sign of mourning. "Why should we follow their example, when we rejoice over the resurrection of Jesus?" He concluded that we should follow the example of our Lord Jesus, who did not criticize either the Temple (with its instruments) or the synagogue (without instruments), but participated in both.

Free Church History

Not surprisingly there was very little discussion of the precedent for hymn-singing in the Free Church. The 1872 decision that permitted hymns and the 1883 decision that permitted instruments were *very* unpopular in the post-1900 Free Church, so those in favor of change saw little point in referring to them. Those who spoke in favor of the Deliverance made occasional reference to the fact that the Free Church had eliminated hymns and instruments in 1905 – and what new argument now required reconsideration of that decision?

The Unity Option?

There was considerable debate over which route was "the unity option." Some argued that the Assembly should "try to please the majority." As one minister asked, "If so much of the church [over 75%] is happy with the status quo, why change?" Most speakers who defended the Deliverance urged the minority to submit to the practice of their brethren.

But others argued that liberty was the unity option. Roderick Rankin wondered that perhaps the reason why no one had produced the definitive biblical argument was because "scripture does not speak definitively – and so we must give each other liberty in the matter." A couple of speakers appealed to the Confession's chapter on Christian Liberty insisting that God alone is Lord of the conscience (20.2).

James Fraser (the chairman of the Board of Trustees – who opposed the Board's Deliverance) insisted that the Amendment was the unity option. While he commended the Board for articulating the church's historic position so clearly, he pointed out that the Free Church's position was incoherent and perhaps even dishonest, because it permitted churches to have "fellowship meetings" that were identical to worship services. Either the church needed to crack down on the progressives, or else grant the liberty provided by the Amendment. The Deliverance would only perpetuate a disingenuous ambiguity.

On the other hand, ruling elder Chris Redmond of Glasgow expressed his concern for the youth of the church. They will hear that the General Assembly is trying to "accommodate two views of worship. We should not be happy with two! Is God unclear?! I believe that the Board's report is the lesser of two evils. We seem to have a weird position that is based on pragmatism rather than scripture. We confess the name of Jesus when we sing the Psalms because the Lord is my shepherd! I fear subjectivism. I was in the Church of Scotland, and I have seen what happens when subjectivism takes over. I fear that we are trying to accommodate people rather than follow the Word of God."

<u>A Free For All?</u>

Many expressed concern with the Deliverance's fuzzy definition of worship. The Deliverance would permit churches to do whatever they pleased so long as the meeting was not defined as "public worship." As Roderick Rankin pointed out, "The Board would permit two identical services – one with Psalms only and one with hymns and instruments – and so long as it is not called "public worship" it is acceptable." That, in fact, is precisely what David Robertson has done in Dundee. Robertson added that "It is humiliating to play with words and have 'gatherings' rather than worship services. But I cannot maintain, support and defend the current practice." Craig Murray pointed out that under the Deliverance, a church could sing "I did it my way" at a funeral, since it is not considered public worship! He preferred the Amendment's safeguard that all sung praise must be consistent with the scriptures and confession.

One speech that addressed this point from the opposite side came from Roderick Finlayson's addendum, which sought to tighten up the definition of worship to say that "any act of worship must always be offered in the light of the definition of worship stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21, namely that worship consists of any one or any combination of the following: prayer, the reading of Scripture, sound preaching, conscionable hearing, singing of Psalms, and due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments besides religious oaths, vows and solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions." Finlayson wanted to ensure that "at all meetings, worship must always be conducted according to the WCF." He maintained a remarkable consistency in the face of questions – even stating "In a meeting in one's home, it is certainly permissible to sing hymns. But we need to make clear that it is not an act of worship." It is particularly noteworthy that David Robertson *agreed* with Finlayson, and *voted for his addendum*. His church has substituted a "fellowship meeting" for the Sunday evening worship service – following what is permitted in the "status quo" – but he admitted that he felt uncomfortable with such a loose definition of worship and would support the addendum regardless of the outcome on hymns and instruments. And when that addendum came up for a vote, Mr. Robertson's hand went up! The addendum failed, but I was greatly encouraged that even the most "progressive" ministers in the Free Church are seeking to maintain Reformed theology and worship.

<u>Gospel-Witness in Scotland.</u>

There were a couple references to developments in the Church of Scotland, where the ordination of openly gay ministers has led many evangelicals to look for an exit strategy. One speaker feared that the Free Church would sacrifice principle in order to attract the disaffected from the Church of Scotland.

Others pointed out that quite apart from that situation, hundreds, if not thousands, of evangelical Scots have declined to join the Free Church over the years because of their stance on hymnody. Given the decline in membership and attendance in all Christian denominations in Scotland, Iver Martin declared that "Our survival depends in some places upon consolidation. This is not 1900 when everyone went to church. This is 2010 when the church is a thing of the past. Are you going to stand in the way of congregations who, for the good of the gospel, wish to sing NT song? The lesser principle must give way to the greater. The reformed faith in Scotland is the point. Where there is no church, there is no worship – pure or otherwise."

Peter Morrison concurred. "Since World War 2, twenty congregations have vanished or cannot support a minister in Glasgow & Argyll. We need gospel partnerships. We have virtual churches! We have structures, buildings, borrowed sessions, interim moderators – but almost no people! If Christian witness in these areas is to survive, we need to work with hymn singers. And by doing this we could bring Psalm-singing to a wider group."

In reply, several speakers pointed out that if the Free Church practice was scriptural, then we should not worry about what people do.

The Thin End of the Wedge.

The Rev. Allan Macleod argued that the introduction of hymns and instruments was "the thin end of the wedge," that would result in greater innovations until "we split apart in a violent explosion." As a former engineer he reminded the Assembly that "in engineering the simple design lasts," and "if unaccompanied Psalmody was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for us." He feared that within ten years the Free Church would be debating women elders, and concluded that "every church that has gone down this road has gone liberal."

In response, a couple speakers insisted that there was no "moderate" agenda here, and pointed to examples of faithful hymn-singing churches. Indeed, one minister expressed his "apology to our OPC brethren" for the insinuation against their orthodoxy. *[NOTE: I should add that the Rev. Macleod came up to me after the Assembly and very graciously assured me that he had meant to say "most" – not "every" – and that he has very high regard for the OPC. I simply report here what he said on the floor of the Assembly.]*

The Problem of Vows.

Dr. George Coghill pointed out that his vows required him to uphold the current practice of the Free Church. "How could I vote to change a practice that I have vowed to uphold, maintain, and defend?!" *[NOTE: I had hoped that someone would clearly answer him – but sadly, no one did. The Free Church had voted to permit a full and free debate on the subject – a vote that was approved by the presbyteries under the Barrier Act. As such, the Free Church of Scotland (namely, the body that imposed the vow upon him) had explicitly permitted him to reconsider whether this vow was scriptural.]*

The Split of 2000.

In 2000 a small portion of the Free Church of Scotland (FCS) departed over disagreement with how a judicial case was handled. The Free Church Continuing (FCC) then sought to prove in court that they were the "true" Free Church. The courts decided that since the FCS had not altered their doctrine, worship or principles, therefore the FCC had no case, and the FCS was the true Free Church. While this was only mentioned a couple of times during the debate, the influence of the departure of the FCC was notable for two reasons: 1) because some feared that changing the Free Church's practice of worship could open the church up to lawsuits; and 2) because a significant portion of those who were most strongly opposed to hymns and instruments departed in 2000 – thereby opening the door to the possibility of change.

A Voice from Lewis.

Towards the end of the Assembly, the Rev. Dr. Iain D. Campbell rose and said, "Everything I want to say can be summed up by saying that I want to stay in the same church with the previous two speakers [Kenneth Stewart and David Robertson – who exemplified the extremes in the debate]…. Which position safeguards my position on worship? Which one is according to the will of God? I am going to support Alex Macdonald's amendment. Mr. Stewart has showed us why. If we can have 'fellowship meetings' where we sing anything –

then we are in trouble! I can live with both sides – and I cannot disfellowship them. This debate is not about unity, but about uniformity! On what biblical ground do we require uniformity on this point? Many of our young people have learned their catechism and doctrine from us – but they leave our churches because of worship. It is not just a matter of welcoming others in – but keeping our young people."

This speech surprised many because Dr. Campbell had been perceived to be on the side of the Deliverance. Since the outcome hinged on only seven votes (98-84), it is possible that speeches such as this one made a crucial difference.

The Barrier Act 1697

The General Assembly, taking into their consideration the Overture and Act made in the last Assembly concerning innovations, and having heard the report of the several commissioners from Presbyteries to whom the consideration of the same was recommended in order to its being more ripely advised and determined in this Assembly; and considering the frequent practice of former Assemblies of this Church, and that it will mightily conduce to the exact obedience of the Acts of Assemblies, that General Assemblies be very deliberate in making of the same, and that the whole Church have a previous knowledge thereof, and their opinion be had therein, and for preventing any sudden alteration or innovation, or other prejudice to the Church, in either doctrine or worship, or discipline, or government thereof, now happily established; do, therefore, appoint, enact, and declare, that before any General Assembly of this Church shall pass any Acts, which are to be binding Rules and Constitutions to the Church, the same Acts be first proposed as overtures to the Assembly, and, being by them passed as such, be remitted to the consideration of the several Presbyteries of this Church, and their opinions and consent reported by their commissioners to the next General Assembly following, who may then pass the same in Acts, if the more general opinion of the Church thus had agreed thereunto.

The Barrier Act

As soon as the final vote was taken, the stated clerk announced his intention to send the Act down to the presbyteries under the Barrier Act. He made it clear that this was simply the standard procedure, which he must do unless otherwise instructed by the Plenary Assembly.

This prompted considerable debate because the whole point of having a Plenary Assembly had been to fulfill the requirements of the Barrier Act!

The Barrier Act (see text box) was established in order to ensure that no sudden changes were made in the doctrine, worship or government of the church. Under the Barrier Act, any new legislation must be passed by the General Assembly, and then approved by at least half of the presbyteries before it could be enacted by the next General Assembly.

But there is a problem. There are eight presbyteries in the Free Church: two in North America and six in Scotland. Passage under the Barrier Act would require the approval of five presbyteries. The two North American presbyteries have a total of four ministers (this means that less than 5% of the ministers and sessions in the Free Church have 25% of the vote under the Barrier Act). If two Scottish presbyteries joined the two North American presbyteries in voting against the change, then perhaps only 1/3 of the Free Church could thwart the will of the whole church. Therefore the call for a Plenary Assembly was approved under the Barrier Act so that the resulting decision would not need to be submitted to the presbyteries again.

There was some debate, but when Iain McLeod (the representative of the Board of Trustees and mover of the Deliverance) and the Rev. James McIver (the stated clerk and seconder of the Deliverance) said they would be happy if the final decision came that night, the Assembly soon agreed by a large majority (I did not hear the exact numbers) *not* to send the new legislation down under the Barrier Act.

The Way Forward

Whence the Free Church? What will happen as the churches grapple and wrestle with this "brave new world" in which not every Free Church worship service will look exactly alike? It is all well and good for St. Peter's Free Church in Dundee, where David Robertson's congregation and session are already prepared to introduce hymns and instruments (simply by calling their evening "fellowship meeting" a "worship service"), but what about St. Columba's Free Church in Edinburgh? It will no doubt take years (probably generations) before the first hymn is sung in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, but the challenge will be greater in Kilmallie, where a large number of folk from "outwith" the Free Church have come into the congregation in recent years.

Probably the major challenge will be found in the requirement that elders and ministers "support, maintain and defend" the worship practices of the Free Church. Those who are convinced that scripture requires only inspired praise will have to wrestle through the question of whether they can still serve as elders in the Free Church. The supporters of the Amendment have assured them that the principle of liberty permits them to hold their views – but that may not assuage the consciences of all.

Iain McLeod raised a valid point in his concluding comments: "What about the minorities of congregations who object to hymns and instruments?" What will happen when a session decides on a 7-2 vote to introduce hymns? Will we see realignments in the Free Church? If one congregation in Edinburgh adopts hymns and instruments, will there be mass transfers of members and elders who wish to go one way or the other? And what about more remote congregations? Everyone agrees that change should be handled slowly, patiently and with great wisdom. But even so, there will likely be many challenges ahead for our brethren in Scotland.

Already one minister, the Rev. Kenneth Stewart, has indicated that he may resign from the Free Church ministry over the issue. He stated "as I see matters, I am now in a church which requires me to own the new position on worship, to declare that it is founded on the word of God and to assert, maintain and defend it. I must also not attempt in any way to prejudice or subvert it and must follow no divisive course from it. I cannot do any of this. And the church ought not to have required me to do it. Even the church has no right to alter the meaning of my vows without my consent." (His full statement can be found at: http://www.hebrides-news.com/rev_kenneth_stewart_221110.html)

While I greatly sympathize with those in his situation, I would disagree with the idea that an individual has the right to determine the meaning of his ordination vows. The meaning of the vows is determined by the church – otherwise we would permit ministers to mean whatever they wished! The old concept of animus imponentis (the mind of the imposing body) is crucial for understanding the meaning of our ordination vows. I am not permitted my own private interpretation of my vows (one of the great tragedies of modern life is that marriage vows have been surrendered to private interpretation!). So the church *does* have the right to alter the meaning of his vows – otherwise any change would require unanimous consent.

On the other hand, the Free Church may need to deal with the challenge that this change brings to those who conscientiously differ from this decision. Ministers and elders like Mr. Stewart should not walk away from the Free Church until they first seek relief from the church from the dilemma they now face. The Free Church gave the "progressives" permission to speak freely (and vote their conscience) on this matter. How will they now deal with those who disagree with the result? [Update: apparently the Rev. Stewart has decided to remain: http://www.hebrides-news.com/rev-kenneth-stewart-111210.html]

Concluding Remarks

I left for Edinburgh wondering whether the Free Church would take a pragmatic stand or a principled stand. I had feared that those arguing for liberty would take a pragmatic stand – just arguing for change so that they could get more people in their churches. I had assumed that the "conservatives" would take a more principled stance – so it surprised me when the Deliverance and most of its advocates took the pragmatic approach.

The Deliverance failed to articulate clear, biblical principles for how one can distinguish between a "worship service with praying, preaching, and singing" and a "fellowship meeting with praying, preaching, and singing." I don't doubt that those who authored and defended the Deliverance believe the scriptural principles they used in defense of their views – but they lacked a cogent definition of *worship* which would allow for the flexibility they would permit.

In contrast, the Amendment offered a clear biblical rationale from Colossians 2 that scripture provides liberty in matters such as this. When brethren disagree about matters of minor importance, the church can maintain unity, even while surrendering uniformity of practice. Some have expressed the concern that the argument for "liberty" can easily become a "free for all" of permissiveness. But I would agree with the Rev. Derek Lamont, who pointed out that because the Amendment requires that all praise be consistent with scripture and confession, "a free for all is avoided as we remain a Confessional church."

One final thing that became clear in the debate was that the Free Church does not have a clear definition of public worship. The debate has focused so much on the question of inspired vs. uninspired praise that they have not worked through the question "what *is* public worship?" Some argued that it was any meeting opened with a call to worship and closed with a benediction. Others claimed that it was any time that any of the elements of worship are conducted publicly (so that any time prayer is offered publicly, it is an act of public worship). One particularly humorous interchange occurred when one questioner asked where the definition of "public worship" came from. The answer was that the origin of the phrase went back at least to 1781, with the introduction of paraphrases in the Church of Scotland. The questioner then inquired as to whether God started to make a distinction between public worship and other gatherings in 1781! This observer, for one, wished that someone had spoken of worship as a meeting of the Triune God with his covenant people.

If the debates about congregational *praise* result in the Free Church of Scotland thinking more deeply and biblically about *worship*, then this whole exercise will not be in vain. As the Free Church sets itself to the task of bringing the gospel to Scotland, I hope that they will not become so preoccupied with mission that they forget worship. After all, as John Piper has said, "Mission exists because worship doesn't." (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, p2) The whole point of the Free Church's mission to Scotland is so that Scots (of all ethnicities!) might worship the Triune God!

[All photos taken by the author (the last two pictures are St. Peter's Free Church in Dundee, and St. Columba's Free Church in Edinburgh – which also serves as Assembly Hall for the Free Church of Scotland)]