
Conventicles from the First to the Second Reformation in Scotland

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Private meetings (or conventicles) for fellowship and prayer have been a recurrent feature of Scottish Presbyterianism. The vital importance of such spiritual exercises during times of persecution has been universally acknowledged. On occasion, opinions differed as to whether they were advisable or permissible during more settled times. Historians have given limited attention to particular periods such as 1618-1638 in which conventicles became more prominent. While the evidence is scant, it appears that conventicles were a continuous feature of the Scottish Church from the First to the Second Reformation. This conflicts with the assertion sometimes made that conventicles were imported from England and Ireland.

Conventicles could be said to have had their origin in private meetings of the pre-Reformation period. Knox encouraged conventicles on a weekly basis: "I thynke it necessary for the conference of Scriptures, assemblies of brethren be had."¹ These conventicles were informal gatherings distinguished from more formalised congregations or "privy kirks". The latter are described by James Kirk as the "cellular structure" of the "shadowy underground world of the privy kirks".² They involved

¹ D. Laing (ed.), *Works of John Knox* (6 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1846-64), Vol. 4, pp. 137-9.

² James T. Kirk, *Patterns of Reform: continuity and change in the Reformation kirk* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 1-3, 12-15. Vaughan T. Wells notes that the connection with privy kirks and later conventicles is rarely observed, "The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638" (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1997), p. 8.

Church discipline as well as preaching and the sacraments.³ Conventicles could, however, develop into privy kirks.

Alec Ryrie speculates that David Calderwood in *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* implicitly compares the conventicles of the 1620s in Edinburgh with pre-Reformation gatherings. “Calderwood, writing in the 1620s, was no doubt thinking of the organized conventicles of his own day, formed by Scottish Protestants who rejected the perceived papistry of the 1618 Perth Articles.”⁴ Calderwood relates how “the professors of Edinburgh had their privat conventiouns” during 1555. He lists the names of the elders and deacons of Edinburgh’s privy kirk in this connection. It is evident, however, that the “privat conventiouns” were in fact meetings of the privy kirk.⁵

I. DAVID CALDERWOOD AND PRIVATE MEETINGS DURING THE POST-REFORMATION PERIOD

It is not clear in what way private meetings may have continued in an informal manner after the Reformation. There are, however, indications that they continued during the reign of James VI. There were local private meetings for discussion even while the district Exercise became more formal and associated with the courts of the Church. It seems that in St. Andrews divinity students commonly conducted private exercise on the Scriptures in a more informal setting as well as the more formal Exercise outlined in the *First Book of Discipline*. In 1584, Robert Bruce “exercised first privatlie before Mr. James Melvill and Mr. Robert Durie; after that, in the schooles, where the students had their privat exercises before the maisters; thereafter, at the table”.⁶

In 1584, the Black Acts were introduced. In order to enforce them an Act of Uniformity required pastors, teachers and readers to subscribe them, together with an oath of obedience to the bishops and King’s commissioners, in order to retain their office. One of the Acts decreed

³ See Knox’s description, *Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 298-300.

⁴ Alec Ryrie, “Congregations, Conventicles and the Nature of Early Scottish Protestantism”, *Past & Present*, Vol. 191:1 (2006), pp. 45-76 (p. 47). Alec Ryrie disputes the number of privy kirks asserted by Kirk and maintains that Protestantism before 1560 was in a much less formal and structured condition.

⁵ D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* (8 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842-9), Vol. 1, pp. 303-4.

⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 19, 635.

that “all jurisdictiones and judgements, all assembleis and conventiouns not allowed in parliament, are discharged”.⁷ Hewison writes: “The Church was paralysed. Since public meetings and signing of Covenants were forbidden, the disaffected held secret conventicles.”⁸

The following February, “certan articles and injunctions penned by Secretar Matlane were imposed on ministers, to be subscribed by them under paine of the loss of their stipend”. One of these read as follows:

They sail absteane from all factioun, privie preachings by the commoun order in publict or privat places, or anie suche quiett conventicles, thereby to make anie of his Majestie’s subjects conceav that anie persecutioun is used or intended against them; nor sal in anie wise, move them to a mislyking of anie of his proceedings.⁹

Events were to turn against the king’s purpose but the conflict over such meetings would later recur. It was alleged that the riot of 17th December 1596 had originated with a meeting of ministers and others. The ministers, noblemen and burgesses of Edinburgh met in the Little Church of St. Giles. There was a “multitude” present at this particular meeting. At the renewal of the Covenant on 30th March 1596 in the same location, four hundred people were present. Similar numbers were reported at this meeting and “so great was the throng as the ministers could hardly find entrance”.¹⁰

The riot persuaded James VI that legislation was needed to restrain his people.¹¹ In 1597, an Act was passed “for stopping slanderous and seditious preaching”. An order issued accused ministers of making “convocations and conspiracies”. The houses near the Tolbooth in Edinburgh were confiscated by the crown, and ministers ordered thereafter to live in “separate houses”.¹²

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸ J. K. Hewison, *The Covenanters* (2 vols., Glasgow, 1913), Vol. 1, p. 120.

⁹ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 4, pp. 348-50.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 563-4; John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (3 vols., Spottiswoode Society, Edinburgh, 1847-1851), Vol. 3, p. 28; Julian Goodare, “The Scottish Presbyterian Movement in 1596”, *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 45 (2010), pp. 21-48 (p. 28).

¹¹ Goodare maintains that it was not a riot but “an attempted *coup d’état* spread over many days”; see Julian Goodare, “The Attempted Scottish Coup of 1596”, in J. Goodare and A. A. MacDonald (eds.), *Sixteenth-Century Scotland: Essays in Honour of Michael Lynch* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 311-36, where the dubious case for a *coup d’état* is set out in more detail.

¹² Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 5, p. 537.

Julian Goodare believes that “the presbyterian movement” (as he calls it) “was open and not clandestine at this time. The movement organized itself openly around presbyteries and synods, and around *ad hoc* meetings of lay supporters, that could take action in the form of public lobbying”. It is interesting that men such as Calderwood and Robert Bruce were involved with the affairs of the Church in Edinburgh at this time. They would later be closely associated with private meetings.

James was to deal similarly with later events such as the Aberdeen General Assembly of 1605 and private prayer meetings.¹³ Goodare suggests that, “The ministers who were then exiled probably developed a clandestine support network”. Correspondence from such ministers could be passed around and read at private meetings.¹⁴ Certainly James Melville recommended continued private meetings amongst ministers regardless. In a letter of 1608 he speaks of the need to select a moderator from amongst themselves for the meetings.¹⁵ It sounds as though the Exercise was being maintained in a more private context from Presbyteries. This meeting for biblical exposition and discussion gave birth to Presbyteries and it is intriguing to consider that it may have sustained Presbyterians when their regional Church courts were becoming less free or frequent. Goodare is of the opinion that “a fully-fledged movement of ‘conventicles’” was not in place until 1619 but the evidence is scant for an opinion either way.¹⁶

There are isolated examples of regular private meetings before this time, albeit without political intent. During the time of John Welsh in Ayr there is a record of regular private meetings. “Mr. Welsh, together with John Stewart and Hugh Kennedy, his two intimate friends, used to spend the Sabbath afternoon in religious conference and prayer; and to this exercise they invited Mr. Porterfield, which he could not refuse: by which means he was not only diverted from his former sinful practice, but likewise brought to a more watchful and edifying behaviour in his

¹³ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 5, p. 537; Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 109.

¹⁴ Vaughan Wells cites possible examples in making this suggestion. These include the testament of John Welsh and John Forbes in 1606 and Alexander Hume’s *Admonitions . . . by a deing brother* of 1609. He also notes that handwritten copies of Welsh’s prohibited sermons were in circulation, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, pp. 87, 103.

¹⁵ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 6, p. 725.

¹⁶ Goodare, “The Scottish Presbyterian Movement in 1596”, pp. 43-44.

course of life.”¹⁷ Robert Bruce was a lifelong friend of John Welsh and the example of such a prominent minister would encourage the practice amongst others also.

Vaughan Wells maintains that conventicles were being maintained in Edinburgh post-1600. Higher-class women, such as Rachel Arnot, opened their homes for this purpose. Arnot had a unique opportunity. She was the daughter of Sir John Arnot of Birswick, Privy Councillor, Treasurer Depute and Provost of Edinburgh and a “special favourite” of the king.¹⁸ Wells also cites Janet Johnston as one who kept conventicles from the beginning of the century. Johnston was the wife of Sir James Skene, Lord Curriehill, and Lord President of the Court of Session. He points to a manuscript with “an account (probably by Hume) of the ‘conversion of eight learned persons’ [c. 1600]”. He infers that this was connected with conventicles.¹⁹

None of these women, or the conventicles they conducted, ever became the subject of anything more than a cursory investigation, despite the fact that in 1611 the High Commission in Scotland (according to George Gladstaines, then archbishop of St. Andrews) was aware that “the auld melvillian bruide” was still active in Edinburgh.²⁰

II. PRIVATE MEETINGS IN RESPONSE TO THE ARTICLES OF PERTH

It is clear that Samuel Rutherford’s experience of the benefit of private meetings began as a student in Edinburgh. The minister of his home parish, David Calderwood, was in Edinburgh on occasions during the period 1617-19 and was engaged in conducting private meetings. These meetings were connected with opposition to the Articles of Perth of 1618.²¹

¹⁷ W. K. Tweedie (ed.), *Select Biographies* (2 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1845-6), Vol. 1, p. 8.

¹⁸ Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 110.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 192. The manuscript cited is National Library of Scotland, Advocates MSS, 19.3.6.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 54.

²¹ Alexander Henderson mentions earlier conventicles or private meetings in Aberdeen during the General Assembly of 1616. “I was present at these Conferences, at ane Assembly in Aberdeen in 1616.” See Alexander Peterkin (ed.), *Records of the Kirk of Scotland: containing the acts and proceedings of the General Assemblies, from the year 1638 downwards, as authenticated by the clerks of assembly: with notes and historical illustrations, Vol. 1* (Edinburgh, 1838), p. 139.

In 1619, one conforming minister erupted in the pulpit and fulminated against the Presbyterian ministers:

There is some countrie ministers in this toun, and others preaching about, who has stayed here a moneth or thereby. With what consciences they abide from their owne congregations so long, I know not; or what their earand is heir, I cannot tell; for they goe about feasting from house to house, seducing the people; speaking against bishops, and they themselves are popes, for they have an anabaptisticall spirit.²²

In February 1619 the authorities responded to the threat posed by the leaders of such private meetings. “Richard Lawsons, James Cathkine, and Jhone Meane, merchants and burgesses of Edinburgh, and Mr. Patrik Henrisone, reader” were summoned before the Court of High Commission. The latter was the precentor and had absented himself from a Christmas-day service. “The burgesses were accused for not coming to the kirk on Christmas-day, for opening of their booth doores, walking before them in time of sermoun, disswading others from going to the kirk, and reasoning against preaching upon that day.” There was threatening but no punishment as “the Lords of the Highe Commission thought it not expedient to medle with . . . the citizens of Edinburgh, at this time”.²³

John Mein was also a member of the Kirk Session. In the following months controversy continued surrounding the requirement of kneeling at communion. When the matter was discussed at the Kirk Session, Mein was accused of Anabaptist and Brownist views.

“Man, ye will be an Anabaptist,” said Mr. [Patrick] Galloway, in a threatning and disdainfull maner. “I hope in God to keepe myself als long from being an Anabaptist as your self,” said Jhone Meine.²⁴

The following year Mein and other leaders of private meetings were charged with “incouraging troubled ministers when they were cited before the Hie Commission”. The king denounced those who:

out of a peevish humour, in contempt of good order, leave their ordinarie pastors; and following deprived or silenced ministers,

²² Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 7, p. 344.

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 348-9.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 361.

receive of them the Sacrament [and] some who continuallie assist the refractorie ministers in all their disobedience, and spare not to countenance them in all their public doings, yea, even to accompanie them, when they are cited before our Hie Commission, therby encouraging them to stand out against the orders of the church, in contempt of our authoritie.²⁵

David Calderwood records that about the same time the ministers of Edinburgh “inveighed bitterlie against the private meetings of some good Christians in Edinburgh, who conveened to deplore the iniquitie of the time. They called the meetings Privie Conventicles; the conveeners, Brownists, Anabaptists, Shismaticks, Separatists.”²⁶ David Stevenson notes that private meetings were seen as “at least potentially anarchic, a step on the road to separation recalling such sects as the Family of Love, Brownists and Anabaptists – all emotive names calculated to rouse horror as implying religious anarchy”.²⁷

One minister, Thomas Sydserrff (later Bishop of Galloway at the time of Rutherford’s Anwoth ministry), was indignant.

Mr. Thomas Sydserrfe sent to Nicholas Balfour, daughter to umquhile Mr. James Balfour, minister of Edinburgh, to advertise her, that she was to be banished the toun, for interteaning such meetings in her house; and revyled her despytfullie, when she came to conferre with him. The day efter, he inveighed against these private meetings, which he called Conventicles, and said, they had gotten outlandishe ministers, (meaning Mr. Hubert, the Englishe preachour,) who teache that the king sould not be prayed for, becaus he governeth not according to their humours; and that they committed treason who heard them, and revealed not.²⁸

These meetings in Nicholas Balfour’s house were evidently sometimes led by individuals other than ministers. John Livingstone recalls Charles Mowat: “he kepted many a blessed meeting in Nicolas Balfour’s house in Edinburg”.²⁹ Mowat was connected with Archibald

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 433-4.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 449.

²⁷ David Stevenson, “Conventicles in the Kirk, 1619-1637: The Emergence of a Radical Party”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 18 (1972-1974), pp. 99-114 (p. 101).

²⁸ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 7, p. 449.

²⁹ W. K. Tweedie (ed.), *Select Biographies* (2 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1845-6), Vol. 1, p. 346.

Johnston of Wariston through his brother Roger Mowat, who was an advocate.³⁰ Originally from Aberdeenshire, Mowat was in the retinue of the Earl of Buchan at Edinburgh and London.

One of the ministers of Edinburgh that protested against the Articles of Perth was Richard Dickson. He was removed from his charge in 1620 “both for preaching ‘publickly’ at clandestine gatherings” and for distributing the elements to communicants in a seated position.³¹

It also seems evident that private meetings were held during the time of the Parliament of 1621. The Privy Council referred to “privie conventicles and meetings within this burgh” (Edinburgh) in a proclamation at that time. They commanded,

the whole ministers presentlie being in this burghe, except the ordinarie ministers of this burghe, and suche others as upon notorietie of their lawfull adoes heir sail procure a warrand from their ordinarie, and fallying him, from one of the archbishops, to remaine and byde still heir, by open proclamation at the Mercat Crosse of Edinburgh, to remove and depart out of the said burgh within twentle-foure houres next after the said charge. And that they on noe wayes presume to repaire againe therunto during the time of this parliament, under the paine of rebellion.³²

As Julian Goodare notes: “there were meetings during parliament at which criticism of the government programme was voiced, and this may well have drawn on, or been connected with, presbyterian organization.”³³ One of these meetings was hosted by Rachel Arnot, mentioned above, who also concealed Robert Bruce in her house in Edinburgh.³⁴ Presbyterian ministers, who had been ordered to depart from Edinburgh for refusing to observe the Five Articles of Perth, met for fasting and prayer during the day on which these Articles were to be ratified by Parliament – the Black Parliament as it was called.³⁵

³⁰ Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 94.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

³² Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 7, pp. 472-3.

³³ J. Goodare, “The Scottish Parliament of 1621”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 38 (1995), pp. 29-51 (p. 44).

³⁴ Rachel Arnot was the grandmother of Archibald Johnston of Wariston and her house was the Sciennes or “The Scheens”. She died in 1626. See Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 103.

³⁵ James Kirkton, *The Secret and True History of the Kirk of Scotland from the Restoration to the Year 1678* (Edinburgh, 1817), p. 16; Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 105.

John Row records a particular upsurge in private meetings during 1621. His testimony is useful because he was the uncle of William Rig.

At sundrie tymes of this yeare, there were sundrie privie meetings of ministers and other good christians in Edinburgh, setting apart dayes for fasting, praying, and humiliation, crying to God for help in such a needfull tyme; whilk exercises, joyned with handling of scripture, resolveing of questions, cleareing doubts, and tossing of cases of conscience, were verie comfortable, and proved verie edificative to those who were partakers of them, for they grew exceedinglie both in knowledge and grace. Thir meetings the Bishops and their followers (enemies still to the power of godliness, and life of religion) hated to the death; and sundrie ministers of Edinburgh inveighed aganis them, under the name of unlawfull conventicles, candle-light congregations, (because sometimes they continued their exercises for a great part of the night,) persecuting them with odious names of Puritans, Separatists, Brounists, &c.³⁶

Robert Boyd was deprived of his position as Principal of the University of Edinburgh in 1623 due to his opposition to the Articles of Perth. His petition to the Privy Council makes reference to the charge of complicity with “the priuat meetingis and conventicles within Edinburgh”.³⁷ Although his time at Edinburgh University was a mere five months, Boyd must have exerted influence over young men such as Samuel Rutherford. He remained in Edinburgh for a further two years and Row speaks of his popularity. It is significant that those who would later be staunch supporters of private meetings had also been taught by Boyd in Glasgow. These included David Dickson, John Livingstone, and Robert Blair.³⁸ Boyd had associated with such meetings for some time previous to this. In 1619 he had been present with the veteran Robert

³⁶ John Row, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland: From the Year 1558 to August 1637* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842), p. 328.

³⁷ D. Laing (ed.), *Original Letters relating to the Ecclesiastical Affairs of Scotland* (2 vols, Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1851), Vol. 2, p. 751.

³⁸ J. Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 37. W. M. Campbell suggests that Boyd’s time in France may have contributed to encouraging private meetings since these were practiced by the French Huguenots; see William M. Campbell, “Samuel Rutherford: Propagandist and exponent of Scottish Presbyterianism” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1938), p. 10. As this paper is seeking to show, however, the probability is that such meetings had been in continuous operation from the Reformation onwards.

Bruce at such a meeting in Monkland.³⁹ Samuel Rutherford's attendance at private meetings was instrumental in his conversion.⁴⁰ He was certainly the friend of the leaders of conventicles in the burgh of Edinburgh, particularly John Mein, John Fleming, and William Rig.

We know little about the conduct of the meetings. John Livingstone has, however, recorded something of William Rig's prayers at such gatherings.

I have been often with him at privat meetings when he hath prayed, and observed that alwayes he began with most heavie and bitter complaints, and confessions deeper than any that I have heard; and sundry tymes before he ended he expressed unspeakable assureance, and joy, and thanksgiving, but sometimes also he continued and ended just as he began. Once when he had attained to great liberty and access In prayer, some (for trying if he could be put off his byass) motioned that immediatly he should be put to pray again; and being much urged by those that were present, he condescended, but began just in his usuall discouraged strain.⁴¹

In 1624, at the instigation of the ministers of Edinburgh, the Privy Council issued a proclamation "prohibiting all conventicles and private meetings in houses by night".⁴² The proclamation asserted that such meetings were being held during the time of public worship and that they gave themselves the name of congregation. The Edinburgh ministers claimed that "other ministers, speciallie the deprived and silenced, resorted to the toun, and kept private conventicles". These may have been Robert Bruce and David Dickson. Rutherford therefore, had eminent access to some of the foremost ministers of that generation. Calderwood records what actually took place:

A number of godlie Christians conveyed sometimes, when they had occasion of a sound and zealous minister, to stirre them up in these times of defection, and recommendit to God the

³⁹ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 7, p. 394. Robert Blair also speaks of hearing Boyd in public and private, c. 1615. Thomas M'Creie (ed.), *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair: Containing his Autobiography, from 1593 to 1636* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1848), p. 10.

⁴⁰ See M. Vogan, "Samuel Rutherford's Experience and Doctrine of Conversion", *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, Vol. 5 (2015), pp. 35-62 (p. 42).

⁴¹ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 343.

⁴² Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 7, pp. 611-4.

desolate estate of this poore kirk; for the pulpits of Edinburgh soundit all the contrarie way.⁴³

In 1624 Rig, Mein and Fleming were among six Edinburgh burgesses who were summoned before the Privy Council. They were accused of holding a meeting at which the doctrine of the ministers of the city was criticised. This meeting was an annual custom in the town, however. John Dickson was accused of separatism which he denied:

I never separated myself from the kirk, and never thinks to doe. I know there is noe man nor woman living but they are sinfull, nor anie kirk so pure but there are some faults in it. As for my self, I had rather live in the Kirk of Scotland than in anie other kirk.⁴⁴

These men denied that they attended conventicles, strictly defined. John Fleming was questioned by the Lord Chancellor as to whether he had ever been at any of these conventicles. Fleming enquired how the Lord Chancellor would define a conventicle. "It is a private meeting of men and women to a private religious exercise in time of publict sermon," he responded. Fleming said: "I was never at anie privat exercise in time of publict sermon. I have been, I confess, at supper sundrie times with freinds and neighbours; and when we could have the occasion of some honest minister, we used to have the prayer said before or efter supper, a chapter redd, and sometimes some lessons given us upon it." The Chancellor said that he wished the whole town did likewise.⁴⁵

Although the threat of fining and banishment hung over them, they were not sentenced, under the promise of "amendment and a peaceable and quiet behaviour in time coming". The king was unhappy with the leniency showed and sentence was passed to fine severely, imprison, remove from office and banish. He had particular animosity towards William Rig, "the cheefe ringleader of the Nonconformitanes".⁴⁶ Rig was sentenced to be confined in Blackness Castle, where Lady Culross famously reminded him to be thankful "that the darkness of Blackness was not the blackness of darkness".⁴⁷

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 614.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 603.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 620-1.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 618-9.

⁴⁷ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 342.

The events made a deep impression on Rutherford. Fourteen years later he was exiled to Aberdeen. It is worth recalling that John Mein was sentenced to be banished to Elgin and John Hamilton to Aberdeen.⁴⁸ Writing in a letter from Aberdeen, Rutherford revealed that he had prayed and longed at the time to be able to suffer for Christ's sake in a similar way: "Christ hath been keeping something these fourteen years for me, that I have now gotten in my heavy days that I am in for His name's sake."⁴⁹

Vaughan Wells shows that mothers and wives played a significant role in organising private meetings. Noblewomen also sheltered ministers who were either in hiding or in need. Vaughan Wells opines that Calderwood may have secretly returned from exile in 1624. He was being sheltered by Lady Cranston "in a secrete chamber appointed for him". It may be that women were less liable to suspicion and reprisal but they were also well-connected enough to be protected from any proceedings.⁵⁰

III. PRIVATE MEETINGS BEYOND EDINBURGH BETWEEN 1624 AND 1630

John Livingstone records regular private meetings in Lanark from 1624 onwards. Interestingly, it may have been this rather than particular influences from others that gave him a lifelong commitment to the practice.

The first Christian acquaintance and society whereby I got any benefite was with an religious gentleman, William Cuninghame, tutor of Bonintoune, who used to be oft in my father's house.

⁴⁸ Vaughan Wells suggests a relationship of sister and brother between Rutherford's wife, Eupham Hamilton, and John Hamilton. He uses the first of Rutherford's letters which speaks of Hamilton coming to assist his wife in her illness. Hamilton was an apothecary and this is the main reason for his visit. It seems rather a long way to travel for one that may not have been related but there was evidently a bond of friendship. There is no concrete evidence to confirm any blood relationship. Mein's wife was Barbara Hamilton and there may have been a relationship in the extended family but this is not known with any certainty ("The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638", p. 92). It is, however, virtually certain that there would have been some relation within the network of the godly. Rutherford's letters make it clear that he was in constant communication with Edinburgh while in Anwoth.

⁴⁹ A. A. Bonar (ed.), *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1891), Letter 285, p. 528.

⁵⁰ Wells, "The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638", pp. 89, 111.

Severall tymes he and John Wier of Stockbrigs, and Alexander Tennant, James Wier, George Matthie, and David Matthie, who were packmen, would meet in my chamber in Lanerk, where we used to spend some time in conference and prayer.⁵¹

He recalls that he was also “at privat meetings . . . at Carluke, and at the Airds, where Earlstoun then dwelt”. In 1628 there was a public fast across the land in response to the many reasons for humbling themselves before God as a nation. It was said that the Holy Spirit was manifest in great power at that time. The authorities wished the public fast to be in relation to international events but the Presbyterians added to this the state of the Church in Scotland.⁵² No doubt there were many private as well as public meetings at this time, although Livingstone does not make reference to this event.

Between 1627 and 1630 Livingstone preached privately in the house of the Countess and Earl of Wigtown at Cumbernauld. Since their house was six miles from their parish church they proposed this arrangement. Also “severall of their tennents about might come to hear sermon in their house”. Others might come from Torphichen, which was ten or twelve miles away. He should “at least in the winter time preach in the hall of Comernald to the family and such as came”. During this time Livingstone also preached at a number of parish churches and communions.⁵³

Most notable of these was the Shotts communion in June 1630. Private meetings for prayer were multiplied at events such as the Monday service at the Shotts communion in 1630. Livingstone recalls that, “The night before I had been with some Christians, who spent the night in conference and prayer”.⁵⁴ Robert Fleming observes “that *night before*, by most of the Christians there, was spent in *prayer*; so that the *Monday’s work*, as a convincing *return of Prayer* might be discerned”.⁵⁵ Livingstone recalls an identical situation at Holywood in Ulster where the Monday

⁵¹ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, pp. 134, 136.

⁵² W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland . . . to 1841* (Edinburgh, 1842), p. 239.

⁵³ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 137.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵⁵ Robert Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture: Or An essay shewing the exact accomplishment of the word of God, in his works performed and to be performed. For confirming of believers, and convincing atheists of the present time: containing some rare histories of the works and servants of God in the Church of Scotland* (Boston, New England, 1743), p. 394.

service followed all-night private meetings: “both these times I had spent the whole night before in conference and prayer with some Christians, without any more than ordinary preparation.”⁵⁶

Livingstone even tells us one or two details about the events of that night. Apparently most people gathered in a large room in which Lady Culross was staying.⁵⁷

At the communion in the Shotts, in June 1630, when the night after the Sabbath was spent in prayer by a great many Christians, in a large room where her bed was, and in the morning all going apart for their privat devotion, she went into the bed, and drew the curtains, that she might set herself to prayer. William Ridge of Adderny coming into the room, and hearing her have great motion upon her, although she spake not out, he desired her to speak out, saying, that there was none in the room but him and her woman, as at that time there was no other. She did soe, and the door being opened, the room filled full. She continued in prayer, with wonderful assistance, for large three hours’ time.⁵⁸

Livingstone found his way to Ulster, where private meetings were to become a prominent feature of religious practice. Robert Blair speaks of private meetings being maintained in his Ulster parish as early as 1624.⁵⁹ This suggests that the practice was more long-standing, rather than borrowed from Scotland in this period. For a time during the 1620s and early 1630s, persecution was less evident in Ulster compared to Scotland. There was relative freedom for Presbyterian practice. Rather than dispensing with private meetings, this relative freedom appeared to be used to encourage them. Robert Blair and John Livingstone led in this. Livingstone mentions monthly meetings for fellowship at the town of Antrim.⁶⁰

Livingstone also records that sometimes crowds spent the nights of a communion season “in severall companies, sometimes an minister being with them, sometimes themselves alone in conference and prayer”;

⁵⁶ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 194.

⁵⁷ Anna Cunningham, Marchioness of Hamilton, was also there and known to frequent private meetings. See Rosalind K. Marshall, “Cunningham, Anna, marchioness of Hamilton (d. 1647)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, pp. 346-7.

⁵⁹ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 143.

“it is hard to judge whether there as more of the Lord’s presence in the publick or private meetings”.⁶¹ Robert Fleming echoes this:

And then it was sweet and easy for Christians to come thirty or forty miles to the solemn communions which they had, and there continue from the time they came until they returned, without wearying or making use of sleep; yea, but little either meat or drink, and as some of them professed, did not feel the need thereof, but went away most fresh and vigorous their souls so filled with the sense of God.⁶²

In Robert Blair’s own parish it seems that private meetings were escalating to several times per week. He records that by 1632 it had reached this frequency. All kinds of backgrounds and social classes were involved.

They were a praying people for whom I undertook this labour, praying night and day for the liberty of Gospel ordinances. At my house two nights were spent every week; and they that did bear chief burden therein were not above the rank of husbandmen, and yet abounded in the grace and spirit of prayer, as I found by experience after my return, and spent many a night with them in that exercise; and other parts were not short of this, but abounded much more, even those who yet enjoyed the benefits of their own pastors.⁶³

Yet this was the very time at which Blair and Livingstone were being called to account and suspended for “unconformity” in the harvest of 1631. But “the occasion was, that the summer before we had both been in Scotland, and had preached at severall parts, but especially at an communion at the Shotts”. Although Blair and Livingstone were soon restored, the bishops of Scotland informed the king that they “stirred up the people to extasies and enthusianisms”. They were deposed in May 1634. As Livingstone says,

Dureing all that tyme, from May 1632 to May 1634, I stayed at first some while in Killinshie, and not only had some privat meetings

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶² Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*, p. 357.

⁶³ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 93. Andrew Bonar notes that a minister, Mr. Pont, in the diocese of Raphoe in Ulster, was also maintaining private meetings. See *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, p. 557.

in severall places of the paroch, but sundry Sabbaths conveyed with them in the church and prayed; and after one had read a chapter, I spoke thereon. But finding I could not long be suffered so to doe, I went to Scotland.⁶⁴

Meanwhile in Scotland, private meetings were also reaching a greater intensity. Robert Bruce was present at a private meeting in Edinburgh, probably during 1631.

A little before his death, when he was at *Edinburgh*, and through weakness kept his chamber, there was a meeting of divers godly Ministers at that time there, on some special ground of the Church's concernment, who hearing he was in the town came together, and gave him an account of the actings of those times, the Prelates then designing the service book: after which Mr. *Bruce* prayed, and did therein tell over again to the Lord the very substance of their discourse, which was a sad representation of the case of the Church, at which time there was such an *extraordinary MOTION on all present, so sensible a downpouring of the SPIRIT, that they could hardly contain themselves; yea, which was most strange, even some unusual motion on these who were in other parts of the house, not knowing the cause at that very instant. One Mr. Weemes of Lothaker* being then occasionally present, when he went away, said, *O how strange a man is this! for he knocked down the Spirit of God on us all.* This he said because Mr. *Bruce* did divers times *knock with his fingers on the table.* I had this from a worthy Christian Gentleman, in whose mother's house this was.⁶⁵

IV. PRIVATE MEETINGS FROM 1633 TO 1638

The number, frequency, and geographical connectedness of private meetings increased during the years before the revolution of 1638. Samuel Rutherford was using his letters to connect the godly and exhort them to constant prayer in united meetings. His prayer echoed the groanings of those who were pleading with God up and down the land: "Oh, let the King come! Oh, let His kingdom come!" In 1633 he

⁶⁴ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, pp. 146-7.

⁶⁵ Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*, p. 408. It is significant to note that the meeting was held in the house of a noblewoman.

responded quickly to instructions from “some of the worthiest of the ministry in this kingdom”. He had been asked to give information “to such professors in these parts as I know love the beauty of Zion”. Charles I had succeeded in the legislation going through the Scottish Parliament which would further deform the Church of Scotland. Rutherford urged Lady Kenmure to join with a series of private meetings for prayer.

Know, therefore, that the best affected of the ministry have thought it convenient and necessary, at such a time as this, that all who love the truth should join their prayers together, and cry to God with humiliation and fasting.

I am bold to write to you, earnestly desiring you to join with us (so many as in these bounds profess Christ), to wrestle with God, one day of the week, especially the Wednesday, for mercy to this fallen and decayed kirk, and to such as suffer for Christ’s name; and for your own necessities, and the necessities of others who are by covenant engaged in that business. For we have no other armour in these evil times but prayer, now when wrath from the Lord is gone out against this backsliding land. For ye know we can have no true public fasts, neither are the true causes of our humiliation ever laid before the people. . . .

. . . Thus, Madam, hoping that your Ladyship will join with others, that such a work be not slighted, at such a necessary time, when our kirk is at the overturning, I will promise to myself your help, as the Lord in secrecy and prudence shall enable you, that your Ladyship may rejoice with the Lord’s people, when deliverance shall come; for true and sincere humiliation come always speed with God. And when authority, king, court, and churchmen oppose the truth, what other armour have we but prayer and faith? whereby, if we wrestle with Him, there is ground to hope that those who would remove the burdensome stone (Zech. 12:3) out of its place, shall but hurt their back, and the stone shall not be moved, at least not removed.⁶⁶

Livingstone tells us that he returned to Scotland in May 1634, “and as I had done before, went from place to place as I had invitation to preach, or to be at communions, in those places where I had haunted

⁶⁶ *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter 88, p. 156.

before, and in some others”.⁶⁷ He found shelter at the “Dean of Kilmarnock” from Christian Hamilton, Lady Boyd. He recalls a particular experience there.

I doe remember one night in the Dean of Kilmarnock, having been most of the day before in company with some of the people of Stewartoun, who were under rare exercise in their minds.⁶⁸

There were frequent private meetings in a number of locations. Many were in the south-west. Livingstone speaks of “a privat meeting” at the house of Alexander Gordon of Garleuch, where a considerable number of “eminent Christians” gathered.⁶⁹ In particular he was “sometimes in Edinburgh, where there were frequent privat meetings of Christians”.⁷⁰ Wodrow records meetings for prayer in connection with Hugh Kennedy, Provost of Ayr, one of Rutherford’s correspondents.⁷¹

Wells is no doubt correct to surmise that the well-affected noblewomen were funding Livingstone’s activities at this time. In particular, he was frequently in London maintaining connections with Alexander Leighton and other Scottish contacts there. Leighton was keeping conventicles in London.⁷²

Robert Blair soon followed him from Ulster and both were fully engaged in private meetings. Sometimes these involved preaching. Livingstone recorded in his diary a particular Saturday before a communion. On “20 December 1634 I was refreshed at the exercise that Mr. Blair had this night in the house, on Heb. 13, ‘We have an altar’, &c.”.⁷³

In following years Robert Blair took the opportunity of holding numerous private meetings “where some few eminent Christians convened, and spent the time mostly in prayer, with fasting and humiliation of soul”.⁷⁴ Several such meetings were held by Blair at William Rig’s

⁶⁷ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 147.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 344.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷¹ Robert Wodrow, *Analecta or Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences* (4 vols., Maitland Club, Edinburgh, 1842-3), Vol. 2, p. 354.

⁷² Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 119.

⁷³ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 282.

⁷⁴ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 137.

house in Athernie and, in April 1635, Blair stayed at Athernie for a while, going across to Carnock to assist John Row, Rig's uncle, at a communion. The compiler of Robert Blair's *Autobiography* makes comparison with the conventicles being held in his own time (1679):

there were no meetings in the fields, yea, no great and promiscuous meetings in houses, but only private meetings of eminent Christians ordinarily; and when it could be had, they had a minister, one or more, with them as occasion served, but often private Christians convened for prayer and conference.⁷⁵

In his *History*, Andrew Stevenson takes particular note of the year 1635 in increased private meetings.

The power of the clergy being so great, that they carried all before them like an impetuous inundation, the friends of the reformation could do little more but cry unto God under the weight of their oppression, and many meetings of private christians were set up for this purpose through the land, which animated professors with new zeal, strengthened their expiring hopes, and proved a great eye-sore to the bishops. While those who feared the Lord were thus employed, their work and labour of love was not forgotten; their cries brought down mercy to them in a few years after that, and to some of them the Lord vouchsafed divine presages of the near approach thereof.⁷⁶

Another refugee from Ulster was John McLellan who would later be minister of Kirkcudbright. In Ulster he had been a schoolteacher before being licensed to preach by the ministers in County Down. Livingstone records that he was deposed and excommunicated by the bishops. After this McLellan travelled through Tyrone and Donegal preaching at private meetings.⁷⁷ Having been exiled from Ulster, these men brought with them to Scotland the vigorous spirit of the private meetings being held there.

Macinnes argues that this influx of frightened exiles from Ireland "hardened the resolve of the Scottish conventiclors to resist further

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 137-8.

⁷⁶ Andrew Stevenson, *The history of the Church and State of Scotland from the accession of Charles I to the year 1649* (Edinburgh, 1840), pp. 153-4.

⁷⁷ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 331.

liturgical innovations”.⁷⁸ According to Leigh Eric Schmidt, their resolve was strengthened also because of the intensely emotional and personal bonds they developed in revivals and private meetings or what he describes as Presbyterian “awakenings”.⁷⁹

The next year Rutherford was under investigation. It is usually said that this was due to writing against Arminianism.⁸⁰ In large part, it was also in relation to his association with conventicles and defending the practice. Thomas Murray notes that one matter against him was “his keeping of private fasts”.⁸¹ Rutherford’s adversary was the old enemy of conventicles, Thomas Sydserrf, now Bishop of Galloway. It is no surprise that he was determined to suppress them in his diocese. It is important to bear in mind that the Ecclesiastical Canons prepared by four of the bishops (including Sysderff) forbade conventicles. These were published in 1636 but had been some time in preparation and received the royal warrant in May 1635. John Row summarises Canon 18 thus: “All dueties of mutuall edification discharged under the name of Unlawfull Conventicles.”⁸²

Rutherford says that “my opposing of these canons was a special thing that incensed Sydserrf against me”. He is not specific, however, and no doubt this is a reference to opposing the canons in general.⁸³ There is, however, some reason to believe that the issue of conventicles was one of the key matters at stake.

In December 1634 Rutherford writes: “By a strange providence, some of my papers, anent the corruptions of this time, are come to the King’s hand. I know, by the wise and well-affected I shall be censured as not wise nor circumspect enough; but it is ordinary, that that should be a part of the cross of those who suffer for Him.”⁸⁴ Robert Baillie sheds further light on the nature of these papers:

⁷⁸ Allan I. Macinnes, *The British Confederate: Archibald Campbell, Marquess of Argyll, 1607-1661* (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 101-2.

⁷⁹ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, 1989), p. 21.

⁸⁰ David Calderwood arranged for *Exercitationes pro Divina Gratia* to be printed in Holland. See Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 91.

⁸¹ T. Murray, *The Life of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1828), p. 83.

⁸² Row, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, p. 393.

⁸³ *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter 188, p. 343.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, Letter 40, p. 73.

The Register [i.e. Sir John Hay, Clerk Register], dealing to have Mr. Henry Rollocke coadjutor to the blind Bishop of Galloway, did put in the King's hands a treatise written by Rutherford upon Conventicles, or the extent of private men's libertie in publick praying and expounding of Scripture, to be ane argument of that Bishops negligence. All thir things and some moe did provoke them, bot the alleadged cause of their censure wes onlie Conformity.⁸⁵

The implication is that a manuscript treatise was being widely circulated. Presumably this is what Rutherford means about potential criticism for "not being wise nor circumspect enough". Alternatively, it may be that the language referring to the bishops was particularly offensive to Episcopalians.

William Campbell speculates that Sir John Hay, Clerk Register, had probably, through the proceedings against William Dalglish, minister of Kirkmabreck, "become possessed of some of the former's circulating papers". Campbell suggests that Dalglish and Rutherford had been reported to the High Commission for joint activities. Dalglish would be deposed.⁸⁶ Presumably it was much the same treatise that circulated in 1640. Baillie writes: "Mr. Rutherford had in a treatise defended the lawfulness of these meetings in greater numbers and for more purposes than yet we have heard practised."⁸⁷

Not only were such treatises circulating but Rutherford's own letters must have been passed around private meetings. Campbell reckons that the "existence of so many of his own letters witness to the prevalence of this practice. They are to one person, but obviously are to be read to a few well-attuned ears. The early gathering of them into collections shows they were earnestly perused in these small circles he had fostered." This, he believes, explains how well-known and popular the letters became.⁸⁸ Wells maintains that Elizabeth Melville's (Lady Culross) published poem, *Ane Godly Dreame*, would also have been recited at conventicles.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ D. Laing (ed.), *Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie* (3 vols., Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1841-2), Vol. 1, p. 8.

⁸⁶ Campbell, "Samuel Rutherford: Propagandist and exponent of Scottish Presbyterianism", pp. 43-44.

⁸⁷ *Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, Vol. 1, p. 253.

⁸⁸ Campbell, "Samuel Rutherford: Propagandist and exponent of Scottish Presbyterianism", p. 44.

⁸⁹ Wells, "The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638", p. 206.

Livingstone travelled from London to Edinburgh in February 1637 via Irvine, Doune, Loudon, and Lanark, “being at some private meetings every day”.⁹⁰ Marion McNaught was keeping private meetings in Kircudbright, as Livingstone records.⁹¹ The bishop had moved decisively against the circle of the well-affected there, deposing the minister Robert Glendinning, his son who was Provost, and Rutherford’s brother who was schoolmaster there.⁹² Wells speculates that in 1636 McNaught herself may have received a summons.⁹³

In early 1637 Rutherford was writing to others from Aberdeen: “Frequent your meetings for prayer and communion with God: they would be sweet meetings to me.”⁹⁴ Rutherford urged on McNaught as the pressure of events began to build: “Fy, fy; if ye faint now, ye lose a good cause. Double your meetings; cease not for Zion’s sake, and hold not your peace till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.”⁹⁵

I write to you, as my Master liveth, upon the word of my royal King, continue in prayer and in watching, and your glorious deliverance is coming! Christ is not far off. A fig, a straw, for all the bits of clay that are risen against us! Ye shall thresh the mountains, and fan them like chaff (Is. 41:15, 16). If ye slack your hands at your meetings, and your watching to prayer, then it would seem that our Rock hath sold us; but be diligent, and be not discouraged.⁹⁶

Events took their course towards the summer when protests would erupt against the Prayer Book. Most famously this took place on 23rd July 1637 in St. Giles. It is generally accepted that there were private meetings in the capital around that time.⁹⁷ It was a busy time for both Livingstone and Blair in public preaching and private meetings.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 122.

⁹² A. S. Morton, *Galloway and the Covenanters: Or the Struggle for Religious Liberty in the South-West of Scotland* (Paisley, 1914), p. 63.

⁹³ Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, pp. 125-6.

⁹⁴ *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter 97, p. 174.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, Letter 263, p. 487.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, Letter 263, p. 486.

⁹⁷ John Aiton, *The Life and Times of Alexander Henderson: Giving a History of the Second Reformation of the Church of Scotland and of the Covenanters during the reign of Charles I* (Edinburgh, 1836), pp. 167-170; Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, pp. 129-30.

All that summer, 1637, I had as much work in preaching in publick, and exercises in private, as any time before, partly in Lanerk, and partly in the West, and at communions in diverse places, and in the stewartry of Kirkcudbright, and in the Presbytrie of Stranrawer.⁹⁸

The private meetings connected with Blair are most revealing in relation to the geography and the nature of such gatherings.

All this summer Mr. Blair had as much preaching in public, and exercises in private, as ever before, mostly at Irvine, and partly in the country about Irvine, and in Edinburgh. For at this time the bishops were hot upon the chase urging the Service Book upon the ministry. This occasioned many private meetings, and the godly's often speaking one to another (Mal. 3:16) in all the corners of the land, but especially in Edinburgh.⁹⁹

Livingstone plays down the protests at the first reading of the Prayer Book. Instead he points to the petitioning movement later in the summer.

The true rise of that blessed reformation in Scotland began with two petitions against the Service Book, the one from the West, and the other from Fyfe; which mett together at the councill door in Edinburgh, the one not knowing of the other. After that, about the 20th of September, a great many petitions from severall parts were presented against the Service Book. These being delayed by the king, the number of the petitioners and their demands increased.¹⁰⁰

The forty-six supplications of which we are aware were from local Church courts. Others were from “the community”, “the parishioners”, or “the congregation”. It is possible that these were produced through the conventicling network. Laura Stewart comments:

One of the most remarkable of the supplications included the signatures of hundreds of people, many of whom seem to have been of humble origin, and in this respect it clearly presages the 1638 National Covenant.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 158.

⁹⁹ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁰ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 159.

¹⁰¹ Laura A. M. Stewart, “Voices and Voicing in the Scottish Revolution, 1637-51”, in *The Voices of the People: an Online Symposium* – <https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2015/07/20/voices-and-voicing-in-the-scottish-revolution-1637-51/> accessed 18th December 2015.

V. CONCLUSION

1. Private meetings were a continuous feature of the Reformed Church in Scotland

While no doubt lacking in terms of an exhaustive account, this study has sought to demonstrate something of the continuity of conventicling in the Scottish Church. It was not a late import from England, Ulster, France or elsewhere. Laura Stewart summarises well the conclusions available to us in relation to conventicling.

Much has been written of Scottish conventicles, yet questions remain about their social composition, regularity and geographical spread. Although the word would later become associated with large field preachings, it was also applied to smaller gatherings that were more like “evangelical book clubs and dining societies” than revolutionary cells. . . .

Stewart says that “until 1617, family exercises and supper parties with one’s Bible-reading neighbours had been regarded as a complement to church services and were endorsed as such by the authorities”. This may be exaggerated. We have seen that James VI was uncomfortable with private meetings and tried to rein them in during the later sixteenth century as part of his efforts to control the Kirk. It became difficult, however, to define and prohibit such private meetings. Supporters of such meetings were powerful and it was not feasible to proceed against them. Such meetings could easily be simply family worship with extra guests or similarly *ad hoc* occasions for spiritual conference. In the later controversy among covenanters it became similarly difficult to define what was and was not acceptable about such meetings.

These spiritual practices had been encouraged across the spectrum of the early Stuart kirk. Even a conformist minister such as William Wishart of Leith could encourage “spirituall conference” as late as 1633 without hesitation or qualification.¹⁰² King James found it necessary, however, “to brand what was an acceptable and long-established form of Protestant sociability with the terminology of sedition and subversion”. No doubt it was convenient to try to adopt a similar approach as the response to English Separatist Congregationalists.

¹⁰² William Wischart, *An exposition of the Lords prayer. Delivered in two and twenty lectures, at the church of Lieth in Scotland* (London, 1633), p. 125. This is referred to in David G. Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638* (Oxford, 2000), p. 134.

Perhaps this experience also influenced how the royal court understood what was taking place in Scotland. The more that practices were urged upon the Kirk that seemed to take them back to pre-Reformation times, the more obvious became the need to revive pre-Reformation conventicles.

Some of the godly may have come to regard their private gatherings as a self-conscious emulation of the retrospectively presbyterianised “privy kirk”, which had sustained Protestantism in the difficult years of the 1550s.

Conventicles acted as spiritual support groups and strengthened the resolve of those who were determined to reclaim their parish churches. There was obvious sensitivity to the accusation that conventiclors were schismatics, yet these activities clearly drew on the legitimizing traditions of privy kirk and family exercise. This left the authorities in the uncomfortable position of condemning practices that had previously been positively encouraged by the church and which, in the eyes of many, remained a vital component of the Scottish church’s distinctive heritage.¹⁰³

The fact that conventicles increased their popularity in the seventeenth century in comparison to the sixteenth century can be explained by various factors.

Firstly, it took time to reform and evangelise parishes. Spiritual exercise at grass-roots level ordinarily required a generation of diligent pastoral activity. This depended on the availability of exercised ministers in most parishes. This may also explain why the evidence for conventicles in the sixteenth century is more weighted to ministers and students for the ministry.

Secondly, increased literacy as a result of greater educational opportunities took time to develop in conjunction with this. Time was needed for the pastoral work of catechizing and pulpit instruction to bear fruit. To some extent, theological and spiritual literacy also depended upon a reading public. These could then be a spiritually discursive

¹⁰³ Laura A. M. Stewart, “Authority, agency and the reception of the Scottish National Covenant of 1638”, in Robert Armstrong and Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin (eds.), *Insular Christianity: Alternative models of the Church in Britain and Ireland, c. 1570-c. 1700* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 88-106 (pp. 94-95). Laura Stewart has also written of this period in *Urban Politics and British Civil Wars: Edinburgh, 1617-53* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 190-2, 217-18.

public. Conventicles appear to have involved some degree of reading appropriate literature aloud.

Margaret Steele points to evidence that suggests “that, in the early part of the seventeenth century, educated laymen took a more active interest in theological questions that had traditionally been the preserve of the ministry”.

The variety and proliferation of books and tracts dealing with religious subjects and specific topics of theological exposition provides one tangible indicator of their pronounced religious enthusiasm.¹⁰⁴

Steele speaks of a 400% rise in such books between 1600 and 1640. The increase was exponential with the output of the 1630s almost doubling that of the 1620s. These included sermons in Scots such as those by Robert Rollock and poetry such as that of Zachary Boyd as well as Bibles and Psalm books. Neither were the bishops and Arminians slow to make use of the printing press to promote their views. Stewart also notes the factor of literacy. She alludes to another point, the quantity of unpublished material circulating amongst conventicles:

The Perth Articles controversy . . . was a golden opportunity for the godly laity. Never more sure of themselves than in adversity, an entire generation of Presbyterian-inclined biblical literalists bonded through the experience of attending conventicles together, trading illicit pamphlets with one another, and providing refuge for those deprived members of the ministry who had failed to keep their anti-Articles views to themselves. The homes of the lay godly had become spiritual sanctuaries that in some places rivalled, but did not supplant, the parish church.¹⁰⁵

Thirdly, the suppression of free General Assemblies seemed to necessitate some alternative *ad hoc* means of connecting Presbyterians together. During particular times of crisis we can see a developing centre of gravity in Edinburgh where ministers could gather together in private conference and prayer. Persecuted ministers, such as Robert Bruce and

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Steele, “The “Politick Christian”: The Theological Background to the National Covenant”, in John Morrill (ed.), *The Scottish National Covenant in its British Context* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 31-67 (pp. 50-51).

¹⁰⁵ Stewart, “Authority, agency and the reception of the Scottish National Covenant of 1638”, p. 94.

David Calderwood, could be concealed here and continue the work of preaching, instruction, and conference in private settings.

2. The Second Reformation in Scotland was born out of private meetings

At the time, the importance of private meetings in the Presbyterian movement was recognised. John Row gave his opinion of the importance of private meetings for prayer in bringing about the Second Reformation.

But I am sure the years 1637, 1638, &c., in this late blessed work of reformation, whilk hes even given a new life, as it were, to us who were born doun under prelaticall persecution, are the verie return of those fervent prayers uttered and sent up to Heaven at those most profitable edificative meetings, when the publict meetings were, for most part now, corrupted for not a few years.¹⁰⁶

This seems to echo Alexander Henderson, who regarded the Covenanted Work of Reformation as God's answer to such prayers.

And indeed I put no question but there has been many into this land thir by-gane years, who has been like dry gaping earth, wishing and praying earnestly for a deliverance to the kirk of God within this land: and that any deliverance is now begun in this land, it is to be imputed to that, that God has heard these prayers, and is now begun to send ane answer to them.¹⁰⁷

3. Private meetings were meetings for spiritual conversation and prayer rather than "Bible studies"

Such meetings were not "Bible studies" as we think of them. They were not meetings for Bible interpretation but rather application of the Scriptures to experience. They involved prayer and discussion of spiritual things in a practical way. Where necessary there might also be counsel and reproof. It is easy to assume that they involved in-depth discussions of current issues, theological and ecclesiastical points. The evidence, however, all points to spiritual conversation and earnest prayer.

¹⁰⁶ Row, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, p. 328.

¹⁰⁷ R. T. Martin (ed.), *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit addresses by Alexander Henderson* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 229. Henderson expands on the same point in another sermon (p. 331).

In other words, they were meetings with an emphasis on fellowship in prayer and spiritual experience. They had a spiritual rather than an intellectual focus. This must be evident in their connection with communion seasons. The term fellowship has been debased in modern times. To many it simply means Christians being in the company of other Christians, no matter what may be the purpose or activity. The Presbyterians understood it to mean a shared spiritual life as in the biblical sense. There could be a sharing of material necessities as an expression of this but spiritual communion was paramount.

It is interesting to read some of Livingstone's reflections on the benefit that he derived from fellowship with the best-affected people.¹⁰⁸ He was so much committed to it and profited by it that he describes it as a "necessity". He sometimes struggled with keeping in a spiritual frame of heart in company, however.

This necessity that comes upon me (and hath always hitherto been) of being much abroad, although some may find it very profitable for others, yet by it I find for myself my mind goes more out of frame then when I stay at home. Company of God's children refreshes indeed; and seeing I goe when I have the Lord's call to it, it is not my going that has the wyte, but my miscarrying minde.¹⁰⁹

Yet what could they do when it did not seem as though there was a blessing in it? Or how should they best confer for their greatest spiritual profit in fellowship? Livingstone had considered this and had a ready response.

When three or four of us are meeting together, we should make a fire of love to God, and when we want, fetch kindling from heaven. The fire of the Lord's love hath put out the fire of his justice to usward.¹¹⁰

The presence of the Holy Spirit could be particularly evident. James Wood, a resolute Episcopalian, was converted after attending one such meeting of ministers in Fife for prayer and conference. It is said that "generally the Lord at that time countenanced his servants at those

¹⁰⁸ The terms used for Presbyterians by Presbyterians, "best affected" and "well affected", seem to signify more than sincere affection to the cause. They may well also indicate a high exercise of spiritual affections.

¹⁰⁹ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 282.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 284.

meetings with a sensible effusion of the Spirit".¹¹¹ Another Episcopalian, James Guthrie, was also converted under the influence of Samuel Rutherford. This included the prayer meetings that Rutherford organised in St. Andrews.¹¹²

4. Private meetings showed that there was a strong role for private Christians in the Scottish Church

It has sometimes been asserted and assumed that there is and has been little role for the ordinary Church member in Presbyterianism. Meetings for fellowship show that this is not and has not been the case. These may not be the organised activities of the Church but they are a more authentic expression of the life of the body and the communion of saints. Mutual edification is a vital means of grace and the Presbyterians of this era encouraged it. Robert Blair explained how it could edify: "Gifts and graces, examples in others, and experienced in ourselves, may be pinnings, as it were, in a wall, to further, encourage, and advance our faith."¹¹³

Robert Rollock emphasized the need for such spiritual fellowship. Perhaps reflecting the experience of Christians around him in Edinburgh at the time, he said that the godly are drawn to desire to remain on earth to continue to enjoy "the pleasure that they tak in the fellowship of the holy ones".¹¹⁴

Rollock did not perceive it as a threat to his ministerial office:

It is most true, the people may disburdeene the Pastor of many thinges: for euerie one of them shoulde edifie an other, as he preaches & and edifyes in publict: if euerie one of them would edifie others in priuate, they vvoulde releue him of a great burdene. The end of his whole trauailes is to edifie, and if euerie one of you edifie others, yee releue him of a great part of his

¹¹¹ *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit addresses by Alexander Henderson*, p. xxxi.

¹¹² Sometimes there could be defections, however. Livingstone records: "Adam Ballantin, then Bishop of Dunblain, who before time, when he was minister at Falkirk, had shewed great zeal against Episcopacie, and in severall meetings and papers had joynd with honest ministers," *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 333.

¹¹³ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 49.

¹¹⁴ Robert Rollock, *An exposition vpon some select Psalmes of David conteining great store of most excellent and comfortable doctrine, and instruction for all those that (vnder the burthen of sinne) thirst for comfort in Christ Iesus* (Edinburgh, 1600), p. 88. See Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638*, p. 128.

burdene. His office is to builde vp the house of the Lorde, and euerie one of you is bound to take a stone in your armes to lay vpon the building, and euerie one in their own vocation is bounde to helpe vp the building of the house of the Lord by conference communication, and such other meanes.¹¹⁵

Peter Hewat, the Edinburgh minister who suffered deprivation for his protest against royal policy in 1617, referred to the communion of the saints. It was, he said, a sign of communion with the divine head of the Church.¹¹⁶

Historians have recently emphasized the role of the laity in the Scottish kirk.¹¹⁷ Of course, those such as George Gillespie believed that “the distinction of the Clergie & Laity, is Popish and Antichristain”.¹¹⁸

5. Private meetings provided an opportunity for women to support the Presbyterian cause

Again sometimes it is said that opportunities for women to use their gifts in the life of the Presbyterian Church do not exist and did not exist in the past where office-bearers were all male. Private meetings offered a setting outwith the courts and government of the Church in which women could participate. A survey of Rutherford’s correspondents shows the vital place that noblewomen occupied at this time. There was much that they could do to influence others in the cause of Christ. They opened their homes, circulated literature, raised finance and gave of their own resources. In some cases they were able to write spiritually profitable literature from their own experience. Others of lower positions in society were similarly engaged in petitioning and influence as far as they were able.

Laura Stewart summarises: “It was probably women from the upper and middling ranks of society, and especially urban society, who

¹¹⁵ Robert Rollock, *Lectures vpon the first and second Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians: preached by that faithfull seruant of God M. Robert Rollock, some-tyme minister of the Euangell of Iesus Christ, and rector of the Colledge in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1606), p. 33.

¹¹⁶ Peter Hewat, *Three excellent points of Christian doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1621), M2r. Hewat also commends times of peace without trouble when neighbour invites and calls neighbour to “free meetings” without fear and without danger I4r-I4v. See Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638*, p. 128.

¹¹⁷ See Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (Yale, 2002), chapter 8, and Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638*.

¹¹⁸ George Gillespie, *An assertion of the government of the Church of Scotland in the points of ruling-elders and of the authority of presbyteries and synods with a postscript in answer to a treatise lately published against presbyteriall government* (Edinburgh, 1641), p. 3.

invested particularly keenly in these activities.”¹¹⁹ The family connections through marriage were also very close amongst people like John Mein, Richard Dickson, John Livingstone, Robert Blair, and William Rig. Their role was widely accepted so as to be criticised by Episcopalian opponents such as Henry Leslie and Gilbert Burnet. Significantly, Leslie’s criticism of women being permitted “to prattle of matters of divinity” was published in 1637.¹²⁰ Leslie was an Irish bishop and this suggests that women had an influential role in Presbyterian private meetings in Ulster also. John Corbet acknowledged, with some dry wit, the women’s contributions to the Prayer Book riots and conventicles: “Those holy Matrons who wast themselves with Fasting . . . who shew their valour against their adversaries, in beating them and their books out of Gods house.”¹²¹

The spiritual experience and conversation of such women were highly valued; likewise their wrestling in prayer. Marion McNaught was one of the correspondents that Rutherford evidently esteemed most: “Blessed be the Lord! that in God’s mercy I found in this country such a woman, to whom Jesus is dearer than her own heart, when there be so many that cast Christ over their shoulder.”¹²² John Livingstone speaks of “Euphan M’Cullen, a poor woman in the parish of Kinneucher, but rich in faith”, known to receive an answer to her prayers. Robert Blair, Lady Culross and Lady Halhill all sought her company and prayers.¹²³

John Livingstone came to prize greatly the spiritual conversation of his future spouse. This became evident during spiritual conference involving a number of others.

In November 1634, when I was going to the Fryday meeting at Antrum, I forgathered with her and some other going thither, and proponed to them by the way to conferr upon an text, whereon I was to preach the day after at Antrum, wherein I found her conference so judicious and spiritual that I took that for some answer of my prayer to have my mind cleared.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Stewart, “Authority, agency and the reception of the Scottish National Covenant of 1638”, p. 94.

¹²⁰ cf. Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The mind of Samuel Rutherford*, p. 99.

¹²¹ Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638*, p. 157.

¹²² *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter 22, p. 45.

¹²³ *Select Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 339.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 151.

Robert Rollock spoke of how men could be “edified by their onlooking” the life and speech of such women. Indeed they might be “more edified by one worke than by a thousand words: And not onlie are men edified but therby God is glorified . . .”.¹²⁵

Alexander Henderson emphasised that there was an equality in grace and the exercise of it.

Consider that there be two sorts of servants set down here, man-servants and maid-servants; and this is to let us know that both sexes may be confident in God. Not only men may be confident in the power of God, but even women also, who are more frail and feeble. Not only may women mourn to God for wrongs done to them, and have repentance for sin, but they may be confident in God also. And therefore see, in that rehearsal of believers and cloud of witnesses, not only is the faith of men noted and commended by the Spirit of God, but also the faith of women . . . *And therefore we must not judge of grace as we do of nature*; for there may be Christian courage in women as well as in men, albeit courage be not so natural to them: and they may adhere to Christ even when men forsake him.¹²⁶

6. Private meetings provided a classless context for Christian fellowship

We have seen that Livingstone and Blair encouraged all social classes to be present at such meetings. They remark positively rather than negatively on the presence of people from a lower social class at such meetings. Robert Blair records his early experience of the people of Stewarton around 1622.

I preached often to them in time of the college vacation, residing at the house of that famous saint the Lady Robertland, and had much conference with them, and profited more by them than I think they did by me . . . Mr. Robert Boyd . . . came from his house in Carrick to meet with them; and having conferred with them, both men and women, he heartily blessed God for the grace of God in them.

¹²⁵ Robert Rollock, *Five and twentie lectures, upon the last sermon of our Lord* (Edinburgh, 1619), p. 98. See Wells, “The origins of covenanting thought and resistance: c. 1580-1638”, p. 106.

¹²⁶ *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit addresses by Alexander Henderson*, pp. 335-6.

The Countess of Eglinton did much countenance them, and persuaded her noble lord to spare his hunting and hawking some days, to confer with some of them whom she had sent for to that effect. His lordship, after conference with them, protested he never spoke with the like of them; he wondered at the wisdom they manifested in their speech.¹²⁷

As Coffey observes, “‘heart religion’ could be a great leveller”.¹²⁸ Others balked at the idea of mixing social classes together as somehow diminishing social order and stability. This would be one of the motivating factors in later opposition from those such as Henry Guthry. That later controversy, however, is beyond the limits of this present paper.

¹²⁷ *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, p. 19.

¹²⁸ Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The mind of Samuel Rutherford*, p. 102.