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Jesus Christ, King of the Church

James Moir Porteous

James Begg Society, 67 Fford Garnedd Y Felinhell, Gwynedd LL56 4QY; 1999

340 pp. £10.99

James Moir Porteous was a nineteenth-century Scottish Free Churchman who published *The Government of the Kingdom of Christ* in 1872, when he was 50 years old. His book, a classic defence of confessional Presbyterianism, expunged the straw men of various false ecclesiologies—Erastianism, Congregationalism, Quakerism, and, significantly, Brethrenism. Porteous' book has recently been republished as *Jesus Christ, King of the Church* by the James Begg Society, furthering their interest in conservative Scottish Presbyterianism.

Porteous' concentration on (and misrepresentation of) Brethren themes evidences the threat they were thought to pose to nineteenth-century ecclesiastical establishments. His study includes a substantial—and unsympathetic—discussion of Brethren peculiarities. His condemnation begins with faint praise. 'They hold some scriptural truth', he claims, but propagate many errors 'regarding the person of Christ, the moral law, faith repentance, sanctification, prayer, the Holy Spirit, the Sabbath, the Church and ministry, etc.' (p. 125). Then the gloves come off. He quotes with approval one anonymous witness to the effect that the Brethren 'are the worst sect that a Christian man can meet with' and concludes that 'such occasional glimpses of their proceedings are a sufficient refutation of their assertion that they are gathered, guided, and presided over only by the Holy Ghost' (p. 163). They are 'bitter censorious separatists... the most sectarian of all sects', and Porteous suggests that they might even be the 'grievous wolves' of whom the first churches were warned (p. 126). 'They refuse to recognise as Christian any who belong not to their fellowship' (p.128). But their attitude to the historic confessional communions, he implies, betrays their true agenda. 'Some fondness is betrayed for the apostate Church of Rome. Intense hostility is manifested to Reformation Churches' (p. 128).

This type of anti-Brethren polemic developed as something of a hobby-horse among nineteenth century Presbyterian writers. Elsewhere, Porteous would offer his fellow-polemicists an evolution of the genre, publishing *Brethren in the Keelhowes* as a fictional narrative exposing the unscriptural basis and unChristlike practice of Brethren in an imaginary Scottish community. Vernacular dialect was carefully translated for the benefit of English readers! (see Neil Dickson, 'Scottish Brethren, Division and Wholeness, 1838-1916', *Christian Brethren Review*, 41 (1990), p.22).

Jesus Christ, King of the Church is of interest to readers of this journal for its demonstration of the massive impact of Brethren teaching and the consequent Presbyterian attempt to stem the floodtide of transferring loyalties. In his account of Brethren origins—traced to the two Dublin sects founded in the early 1800s by John Walker and Thomas Kelly (mistakenly referred to as 'John' by Porteous)—and in his presentation and analysis of Brethren ecclesiology, Porteous' work fails to engage significantly with his subject. Neither does the new preface to the republished work note the extent to which Brethren understandings of church life have enabled Presbyterians to rediscover the practical implications of a plural eldership (see Iain

Murray, 'The Problem of the 'Eldership' and its Wider Implications', *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, 395-396 (August-September 1996), pp. 36-56). Nevertheless, with the necessity for Porteous to place the upstart Brethren ecclesiology alongside the centuries-old options of Erastianism and Congregationalism, he exposes the extent to which the movement was so rapidly undermining the accepted norms of the Christian church in nineteenth-century Scotland.

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