

CHURCH UNION IN SCOTLAND

by

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While the eighteenth century has been notable for the Ecclesiastical Secessions in Scotland, the nineteenth century has witnessed the movements towards union that have had far reaching consequences in the history of Presbyterianism.

When we consider Church Union in Scotland we are thinking of union among bodies that have adhered in general to the Westminster Confession of Faith. There was a common form of Church Government and a common sacramental basis. The main differences had arisen from conflicting opinions regarding the relationship of Church and State, Patronage and the attitude to the Covenants of the seventeenth century. Church Union in this context presents a contrast to that which receives popular attention in our present century.

THE UNITED SECESSION CHURCH

Prompted by the example of daughter churches in Ireland and Canada the Burgher and Anti-Burgher (New Lights) took steps in 1819 to heal the breach. Representatives from both Synods met and proceeded to draw up a basis of agreement. They worked so harmoniously in joint meetings that in the space of one year a Basis of Union consisting of six articles was ready for the acceptance of the two Synods.

On the 5th September, 1820 these convened at Edinburgh in separate places of worship for the last time. Afterwards the members of each court headed by the Moderator marched to the building where seventy-three years before the Breach had taken place. The Articles forming the Basis of Union were read by the clerks, after which there was a formal declaration of Union on the part of the Moderators and the giving to each other the right hand of fellowship. The church which emerged from this union bore the official designation "The United Secession Synod of the Secession Church."

The United Secession Church opposed connection with the State.

"The Church and the State are entirely distinct, capable of existing without the slightest intrusive interference with the proper province of each, and ought not to so interfere — Erastian supremacy of the State over the Church, and antichristian domination of the Church over the State, and all schemes of connection tending to either, ought to be avoided."

The consummation of the first Secession Union, however, did not achieve complete agreement. The entire Burgher Synod went into the United Secession Church but there was a minority group in the Anti-Burgher Synod who were not satisfied with the Basis of Union. Some six months before the Union was effected nine Anti-Burgher ministers lodged a formal protest against the Basis becoming a deed of Synod. However, the remarkable feature of their tactics was that they allowed themselves to become part of the United Church in the hope that a testimony satisfactory to all parties would be issued. When hope of such action faded the protesting party sev-

ered connection with the United Secession church and constituted themselves a separate body. They adopted the name, "Associate Synod, commonly called "Anti-Burghers". In 1827 this Synod of Protestors merged with the Church of the Old Light Anti-Burghers to form what was called "The Associate Synod of Original Seceders."

THE UNITED ORIGINAL SECEDERS

With these Unions the New Light Burghers and New Light Anti-Burghers had disappeared and there were now the Old Light Anti-Burgher Synod, the United Secession Synod and the Original Secession Synod.

After twenty years of separate existence the Old Light Burghers began to consider the question of Union. In 1819 they appointed a committee to collect information and correspond with any other denominations animated with a similar desire. Their first move was in the direction of the Old Light Anti-Burghers. For fifteen years they searched for a common basis but with no success. The old bone of contention, the Burgess Oath, still stood in the way. Although the requirement of this oath was cast aside in 1819 the stern Anti-Burghers refused to extend the right hand of fellowship to the Burghers until they would pronounce their participation in the Burgess Oath a sin. The negotiations, therefore, broke down and the Old Light Burghers turned their attention to the Church of Scotland to which they acceded in 1839. There was no walking in procession after the final meeting of the Synod in Edinburgh. Synod simply dissolved and their congregations and ministers were received into the Established Church in the areas where they were located. Again a minority refused to enter the Established Church and they united with the original Secession Synod to form the Synod of United Original Seceders. The Moderator of the Original Secession Synod when this union took place was Rev. J. A. Wylie, afterwards Dr. Wylie. From his pen there flowed a stream of publications, among the most famous being the History of Protestantism. Though a small denomination the Original Secession Church made a distinctive contribution to Scottish religion. Their first leader was Dr. Thomas McCrie, the historian, who by his biographies of John Knox and Andrew Melville stirred up a new interest in the Scottish Reformation and the witness of the Covenanters. This had a powerful influence on Chalmers and his friends. In later years Dr. Alexander Smellie belonged to this denomination.

VOLUNTARY CONTROVERSY

While these movements towards Union were taking place there was waging also a mighty battle in the realm of Church-State relationship. There were those who contended for the Establishment principle that there should be national recognition and national support of religion. At the same time a growing number of Church leaders contended for Voluntaryism which meant the entire separation of Church and State. In a sermon entitled 'Ecclesiastical Establishments Considered' the Rev. Andrew Marshall, minister of the United Secession Church, attacked all Establishments as unscriptural, unjust, and destructive of the true mission of the Church. The Church should be maintained, and its mission to the world supported solely by the liberality of its faithful people. Public meetings were held all over the country and in several of the more populous centres Voluntary Church Societies were formed. Religious periodicals and newspapers threw open their

columns to controversialists on both sides. In 1833 an Association in Defence of the Church of Scotland was formed in Glasgow. A periodical called The Church of Scotland Magazine was launched in opposition to The Voluntary Church Magazine.

The Voluntary controversy helped to strengthen contacts between the Relief Church and the United Secession Church. The initiative was taken by the brethren of the Relief who were always ready to welcome those who had "matched with Christ." Beginning with friendly intercourse and exchange of ministers a joint committee was eventually established and a scheme of Union drafted. This was presented to the respective Synods and after some modification was adopted by both Churches. In May, 1847 the two Synods met separately in Edinburgh and at the appointed time the members of both converged upon Tanfield Hall when the Union was consummated. Thus came into being the United Presbyterian Church.

It is interesting to compare the Basis of Union in 1847 with that of 1820 when the United Secession Church came into being. In 1820 Presbytery was "the only form of Church government founded on and agreeable to the Word of God". In 1847 the system is "founded on and agreeable to Scripture". In 1820 public religious covenanting was adopted as "a moral duty, to be practised when circumstances of Providence require it". In 1847 there is no reference to covenanting. An article also appears in 1847 making provision for open communion and a statement about Voluntaryism was also included.

One feature worthy of note is that the Union of the Relief and United Secession Synods left no remnants. There may have been some isolated cases where objection was raised but such were able to find a spiritual home in other denominations.

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were in Scotland the Church of Scotland, the Free Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the Original Secession Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church. All of these churches adhered to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. There was similarity in the form of worship but serious questions still existed regarding the attitude to the Covenants of the seventeenth century and the relationship of Church and State.

FREE CHURCH AND UNION

The Free Church in an Act and Declaration of 1851 claimed to be identified with the Church of Knox, Melville and Henderson, who had been leaders in the Reformation in Scotland. The Scottish Covenants were approved as lawful, laudable, Scriptural and reasonable deeds but any acknowledgment of the perpetual obligation of the Covenants was carefully avoided. This proved to be a bone of contention when proposals for union arose between the Free Church on one hand and the Original Secession Church and the Reformed Presbyterians on the other. When an Overture, requesting the Secession Synod to consider the introduction of negotiations for incorporation with the Free Church on terms honourable to truth and consistent with the principles held by Original Seceders, was presented in 1850 it was felt by the majority that the time was not expedient for such a step.

The question of union between the Secession and Free Church was more

a matter of incorporation. A majority of the Secession Synod recognised the Free Church of Scotland as constitutionally, both by divine and human right, the Church to which the Fathers of the Secession had appealed. The terms put forward by the Seceders were accepted by the Assembly of the Free Church in 1852 and in Tanfield Hall, Edinburgh the Secession representatives were welcomed into the fellowship of the Free Church. However a considerable minority of the Secession Church refused to enter the Free Church and continued to maintain their distinctive Testimony as the Original Secession Synod.

In a similar way the majority of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod entered the Free Church in 1876. The Act of Union made provision for the Reformed Presbyterian Synod to reserve its name and separate existence to deal with matters pertaining to civil rights and property. In so far as the spiritual realm was concerned there was one church but when it concerned the material there were two. Despite this piece of manoeuvring there was a small minority of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod that refused to compromise and though somewhat diminished still exists as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

The most sensational Union of Scottish Churches in the nineteenth century was that of the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church which was consummated in the year 1900. This Union was outstanding because of the controversies leading up to it and the consequences which followed.

As early as 1862 Overtures presented to the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church gave expression to a widespread desire for a movement towards union. A committee was appointed to consider the subject in all its bearings and meet with any committee of the Free Church or any other church interested in such a question. Likewise the Assembly of the Free Church in 1863 decided to appoint a committee to consider the subject of union and confer with the Committee on Union appointed by the United Presbyterian Synod.

When a joint meeting of the two committees was held a programme was drawn up containing the subjects which appeared to require examination and exchange of views. This programme embraced eleven topics, but those which gave rise to the greatest conflict of opinion were (1) The Province of the Civil Magistrate. (2) Some matters of Doctrine. (3) Education. For ten years the controversy raged. There was strong opposition within the Free Church and the questions of Establishment and Voluntaryism were discussed in numerous articles which were published. So strong were the feelings against union that eventually in 1873 it was decided to suspend negotiations rather than cause a disruption within the ranks of the Free Church.

The years that followed this period of controversy witnessed important developments within both churches. Objections were raised to certain points in the Confession of Faith and in order to avoid any changing of the phraseology of the Confession the attitude of each church was stated in a Declaratory Act. In the words of Professor Burleigh: "The Churches had much in common in doctrine, worship and church government. In both the younger generation was in revolt against the Calvinism or hyper-Calvinism of an earlier age, a revolt which found expression in doctrinal Declaratory Acts. A reverent biblical criticism was producing a new attitude towards the Scriptures, and an apologetic and philosophical theology was taking the place of dogmatics."

UNITED FREE CHURCH

In such a climate union negotiations were renewed and in October 1900 the United Presbyterian Church and Free Church united to form the United Free Church. Instead of one church emerging, however, there were actually three. Two ministers and some elders withdrew from the Free Church in 1892 because of their objections to the Declaratory Act. They formed the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In 1900 twenty-five ministers and a considerable body of church members refused to enter the Union. They had protested against the decisions in the Free Church Assembly that had led to Union and now they declared that the majority had withdrawn from the Free Church and they claimed for the minority the right to maintain the existence of the Free Church of Scotland.

To secure recognition for their claim legal proceedings were instigated. Their petition was dismissed in Court of Session and likewise the appeal. It was now taken to the House of Lords where it was heard in 1904 before seven judges. By a majority of five to two the court pronounced in favour of the appellants and they became the legal owners of all the properties belonging to the Free Church prior to the Union. Great difficulties arose in consequence so that an Act of Parliament was passed making provision for the allocation of the disputed properties between the parties concerned.

When the twentieth century opened on the first of January 1901, there were six Presbyterian denominations in Scotland. Union movements had certainly made changes but it had not removed divisions. In 1929 another union took place when the United Free Church entered the Church of Scotland leaving behind a remnant that maintains a separate existence. Later still the Original Secession Church also went over to the Church of Scotland. At the present time there are in Scotland five Presbyterian denominations — the Church of Scotland, United Free Church, Free Church, Free Presbyterian Church and Reformed Presbyterian Church.

As we look at Church Union in Scotland we can see some commendable features. In some cases it meant the removal of certain objections which should never have caused a division of the church in the first place. All the divisions arising from the Burgess Oath make painful reading and one can rejoice when the wounds are healed. It meant also that more effective use could be made of manpower. Dr. Sjolinder points out that in 1881 there were five churches in the parish of Duirinish on the Isle of Skye for a population of 4,319. By 1911 there were ten churches for a population of 3,074. The Church of Scotland had two churches and 33 members while the United Free Churches had ten churches for 59 members. These 92 persons were served by four ministers, whose total salaries amounted to £681. A similar argument is put forth for church union in wider circles today. Where there is not much conviction in doctrine, church government and discipline this argument is valid and union should be effected.

At the same time the history of union in Scotland has also been characterised by a weakening in the testimony of the Church. There has been the strength of numbers but to obtain this strength a price has been paid and one wonders if the loss has not been greater than the gain. At every Union something was dropped which in earlier days had been proclaimed as an element of truth. To move in a greater company there must be silence in some details of a testimony which was accepted as Scriptural. If it were

proved unscriptural then of course it should be dropped but that was not stated when union took place. The liberal trend is seen in the whole Union movement. Gradually as voices become silent there is the departure from the Confessional standards. The foundation becomes weaker and weaker while the superstructure becomes more top heavy.

Church Union in Scotland would surely warn us against the policy of union at any price. Churches adhering to the Reformed Faith should establish close connections and should endeavour to grow together in more intimate fellowship. There should be an examination of differences in the light of the teaching of Scripture. There are things indifferent which should not exercise a divisive influence. At the same time union established at the expense of truth does not strengthen the Church. Our duty is to work for unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that the true Church of the Lord Jesus Christ may be seen contending for the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ.

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