

SCOTTISH ECCLESIASTICAL SECESSIONS

By PRINCIPAL A. BARKLEY

Matthew Arnold once said that "Presbyterianism is born to division as the sparks fly upward." To those brought up in the Presbyterian order such a statement might seem a rather harsh criticism. Whether we are prepared to accept such a dictum or not, the fact remains that in the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland the tendency to separation and disruption has been much in evidence since the Reformation. The 18th century and early years of the 19th century might be said to constitute an era of Secessions while the second half of the 19th century might be regarded as an era of Unions.

Although Scotland is a small country and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was sparsely populated and economically poor, in later centuries its Presbyterianism was to have an expansion which carried it into many lands. When the Reformation had been carried out in Scotland under the leadership of John Knox in 1560 there was to follow for more than a century a period of struggle and at times severe persecution. The Reformed Church in Scotland entered upon a new era in her history at the Revolution Settlement of 1690. The determined absolutism and aggressive Romanism of James II had been rejected by the nation, and the reign of William and Mary brought peace to the troubled Church in Scotland.

The Church of Scotland, established by law, did not embrace all who had been contending for the faith during the years of persecution. A minority refused to enter the established Church. They were known as the Cameronians, and later as Reformed Presbyterians. Their refusal to be incorporated in the Established Church of Scotland was based on several grounds. 1. The Church courts were composed of men against many of whom they had weighty objections. 2. The Assembly submitted tamely to the dictation of civil rulers. 3. The Reformation, in its most advanced state, was abandoned in the Revolution Settlement. 4. The principles on which that settlement was conducted were of a political rather than of a religious character.

The Cameronians or Reformed Presbyterians cannot be regarded as having seceded or withdrawn from the Church of Scotland, because they were never in ecclesiastical union with the Revolution Church. However, the objection they raised to Erastianism was to be repeated by those within the Church of Scotland, and this led to the secessions in the one hundred and fifty years that followed.

CHURCH AND STATE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 18th CENTURY

While the Church of Scotland had escaped from the doctrine of royal supremacy at the Revolution Settlement, it had not escaped from State interference with religion. The union between the Scottish and English Parliaments was effected in 1707. In the new parliament of the United Kingdom the Scottish members were in a minority and were unfamiliar with English parliamentary procedure. Among the representatives there were those who were bitter enemies of the Revolution, the Union and the Church establishment. Despite assurances at the time of Union to respect the position of

the Church of Scotland, Parliament introduced legislation that was to have serious repercussions in Ecclesiastical circles in Scotland.

The first was the Toleration Act of 1712 which was designed 'to prevent the disturbing those of the episcopal communion in Scotland in the exercise of their Religious Worship and in the use of the Liturgy of the Church of England, and for repealing an Act (of the Scottish Parliament) against irregular Baptisms and Marriages' (viz. by Ministers not belonging to the Established Church). With our present concept of Toleration we might regard such an Act highly commendable. But to the Presbyterians in Scotland it was regarded as a blow, aimed at their treasured conception of a National Church, uniform in faith, worship and discipline.

The Act of Toleration was followed in a matter of weeks by the PATRONAGE ACT. Without consulting the Church, Parliament introduced the practice of lay-patronage which gave authority to a certain landed proprietor connected with the parish to nominate a minister when the congregation became vacant. This Act brought endless confusion and was responsible for serious consequences in the history of the Church of Scotland.

Lord Macaulay writes: "The British Legislature violated the articles of union, and made a change in the constitution of the Church of Scotland. From that change has flowed almost all the dissent now existing in Scotland. Year after year the General Assembly protested against the violation, but in vain; and from the Act of 1712 undoubtedly flowed every secession and schism that has taken place in the Church of Scotland."

At first patrons were not in a hurry to exercise their newly recovered right. They knew that, in general, there was a hostile attitude throughout the Church and it was deemed expedient to let sleeping dogs lie, for a time at least. In burghs the Town Council was patron and might be said to represent the people. In many country districts the patron made it the practice of consulting local opinion before making a choice. With the exercise of discretion conflicts were avoided and the peace of the Church maintained.

From the year 1725 onwards there was an increase in the tendency to force congregations to accept ministers whom they did not want. An effort was made by the Assembly of 1731 to remove some of the causes of complaint, but it did not go far enough. It failed to give congregations the right of electing their own ministers.

THE SECESSION OF 1733

The leader who emerged as the champion of the rights of the congregation was Ebenezer Erskine. He was the son of Henry Erskine who was an English non-conformist minister, ejected by the Act of Uniformity, 1662. He studied at the University of Edinburgh and was ordained a minister of the Church of Scotland in 1703. In 1704 he married Alison Turpie and the influence of this devout, God fearing woman gave him what he described as his first real "view of salvation." Ebenezer Erskine was a preacher whose sermons were Biblical and were presented with a warm evangelical enthusiasm. At a Synod in Perth in 1732 he preached from the text, "The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner" (Ps. 118: 22) and took the opportunity of launching an attack upon the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for denying the people their rights and for endangering spiritual freedom. The Synod rebuked him for his attack upon

the supreme court. He appealed to the General Assembly in 1733 and the Assembly agreed with the Synod. He was supported by three ministerial friends, William Wilson of Perth, Alexander Moncrieff of Abernethy and James Fisher of Kinclaven. The four handed in a protest claiming the right to maintain their views and to testify against defections in the Church. The Assembly instructed its Commission to demand a withdrawal of the protest; if they refused, to suspend them from their ministerial function and if need be to proceed to more severe measures. They refused to withdraw with the result that they were suspended and eventually they were declared to be no longer ministers of the Church of Scotland.

On 5th December, 1733, they met at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross and formed the ASSOCIATE PRESBYTERY. Despite the fact that the Church of Scotland in 1734 removed the offending Acts of previous years the Seceders refused to return to the fold. When they published their Judicial Testimony in 1736 they stated the main causes of separation to be: the trend of theology, Church and State, Patronage and the relation of the Church's authority to the individual conscience. "There is a difference," said Erskine, "to be made betwixt the Established Church of Scotland and the Church of Christ in Scotland, for I reckon that the last is in a great measure driven into the wilderness by the first."

The remarkable thing is that although the ministers of the Secession had withdrawn from the National Church they were allowed to retain possession of their Churches, manses and stipends for some years. Not until 1740 were they deposed and the schism finally established.

It is clear from the early statements made by the Secession Church of 1733 that there were grounds for objection to the National Church other than patronage. As a matter of fact there were already two main parties within the Church of Scotland — the Moderates and Evangelicals.

The MODERATES inclined to a formal adherence to the generally accepted system, or to a more liberal position which in some cases amounted to Rationalism. They prided themselves as being broadminded and laid great stress upon culture. In sermons they would deal with subjects such as envy, patience, duties belonging to middle age, idleness, extremes in religion, etc. Among the most famous of their leaders was William Robertson, from 1782 Principal of Edinburgh University.

The EVANGELICAL party included those who were strict in acceptance of the Bible and the confessional standards of the Church. There was a particular emphasis upon the offer of the Gospel. There was also enthusiasm and the note of urgency in their utterances. To the Moderate the Evangelical seemed bigoted, narrow minded, gloomy, over emotional and lacking in appreciation of the cultural developments in the realms of literature and science.

The Seceders who came from the Evangelical party were critical of the spirit of toleration that prevailed. When a charge was raised against Professor John Simson of Glasgow University for his Arminian views and later for teaching Arian heresy he was suspended from teaching. The Evangelicals were deeply disturbed because of such teaching in the Church and they were disappointed when the Assembly did not take more severe measures against the culprit.

The Secession Church attracted many who were discontented with the spiritual food provided by some of the parish ministers. Efforts were made to supply the needs of groups that were formed in many districts throughout Scotland. Students were trained for the ministry and elders found an opportunity of giving special service. In the new Church the elder acquired a position of greater importance and influence than had been assigned to him by the practice of the Church of Scotland.

DIVISIONS IN THE SECESSION CHURCH

The history of this secession of 1733 is remarkable for the number of its divisions. In 1747, after 14 years the Secession Church was divided in two on the question of the lawfulness of taking an oath required of every person clothed with civil authority. The burghess oath as it was called declared that the individual taking it "would defend the religion of his country as by law established." One party held the oath unlawful as approving the abuses of the established Church of Scotland. Another party held that it bound them to defend the Protestant faith against secret and open enemies. The party who felt free to take the oath were termed "Burghers." There were 45 congregations in the Secession Synod when this division took place.

The controversy between these two parties was noted for its bitterness and the Antiburghers went so far as to excommunicate and depose the Erskines and others of the Burgher party. Both these parties were split again by controversies regarding the duty of the civil magistrate in the ecclesiastical sphere. A majority in both Synods denied the right of the civil magistrate to interfere with the Church, and of the Church to accept support from the State. This was the principle of "Voluntaryism" whereby it was asserted that it was "the obligation of members to support and extend by voluntary contribution the ordinances of the Gospel."

Those who contended for the voluntary principle became known as New Lights and those who adhered to the Establishment principle as Old Lights.

In 1799 the Burgher Synod split into two separate bodies — Old Light Burghers and New Light Burghers. In 1806 a similar division took place in the Antiburgher Synod resulting in the Old Light Antiburghers and New Light Antiburghers. The New Light Antiburghers departed furthest from the principles of the first seceders.

THE SECOND SECESSION, 1761

This Secession arose from the refusal of the Presbytery of Dunfermline in the Church of Scotland to induct a minister whose appointment was contrary to the wishes of the congregation.

At the meeting of the General Assembly of the Church in 1752 the Presbytery was ordered to admit the candidate on a certain date and report to the Assembly on the following day. When the appointed day arrived, only three members of the Presbytery were present and six were absent. The General Assembly, in order to assert its authority, decided to make an example of one of the six, who refused to obey its mandate, by deposing him from the ministry. Thomas Gillespie of Carnock (1708-1774) was by a large majority selected for this punishment. He was accordingly deposed from the office of the ministry of the Church of Scotland for contumacy in May, 1752. To this sentence he meekly answered, "I rejoice that to me it is given, in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

When he returned home after his deposition he broke the news to his wife by saying: "I am no longer minister of Carnock;" and her worthy reply was: "Well, if we must beg, I will carry the meal-poke (meal bag)." After preaching to large open-air meetings during the summer he settled in Dunfermline and formed an independent congregation there.

In 1761 he joined Thomas Boston (the younger), independent minister at Jedburgh, in ordaining a minister over the parish of Colinsburgh. On October 22, 1761, these three congregations formed themselves into a Presbytery for the "Relief of Christians deprived of their Church privileges." The Church thus formed was known as the Relief Church or Relief Synod. This Church rapidly grew and was distinguished for its liberal spirit. Unlike the earlier Secession it invited all Christians to its ordinances and in 1794 it sanctioned a hymnbook.

During the early years of the 19th century, there existed a variety of Presbyterian bodies in Scotland.—

1. There was the Established Church of Scotland.
2. The various branches of the 1733 Secession :
 1. Old Light Burgher Synod.
 2. New Light Burgher Synod.
 3. Old Light Antiburgher Synod.
 4. New Light Antiburgher Synod.
3. The Relief Synod.

Outside the turbulent waters there was the Reformed Presbyterian Synod.

THE DISRUPTION, 1843

Latest in origin, but largest and most influential of the Scottish Secessions came that of 1843 which resulted in the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. Unlike previous secessions which began in a comparatively small way, the Free Church came into being on a National scale, and men spoke, not of another secession, but of the "Disruption" of the Established Church.

Before the Disruption, union had taken place between some of the fragments of the Secession of 1733.

The parties that had embraced the New Light views united in 1820 to form the United Secession Church, which had Voluntaryism for a cardinal position.

A minority of New Light Burghers protested against that Union and later united with the Old Light Antiburghers in 1827 as the Original Secession Church.

The majority of the Old Light Burghers gravitated towards the Established Church and finally united with the Church of Scotland in 1839. A minority entered the Original Secession Church in 1842.

Just before the Disruption in 1843 there existed in Scotland:

1. The Church of Scotland.
2. The Relief Synod.
3. The United Secession Church.
4. The Original Secession Church.
5. The Reformed Presbyterian Church.

What events in the Church of Scotland led to the Disruption?

There was the prevalent practice of patronage. Like the previous sessions this constituted the basic cause of developments that led to the historic crisis of 1843.

During the early years of the 19th century there was a revival of interest in evangelism. Instead of the cold moral discourses and polished essays of the Moderate school, there was an increasing number of ministers who proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God in Christ for a perishing world. In the various Secession bodies there was the feeling of independence, and they spread their views regarding the dangerous consequences of State control in the affairs of the Church.

Within the Church of Scotland there developed a struggle for spiritual independence that grew in intensity until it reached the climax in 1843.

Regarding this conflict Dr. Alexander Stewart writes: "By Spiritual Independence the men of the Disruption understood the liberty which is inherent in the Church of Christ to guide her own spiritual affairs in accordance with the will of her Lord as revealed in His Word. Within her own sphere, they held, the Church possessed a freedom which recognized only the restrictions of the Word of God. This freedom was her inalienable heritage, whatever her relation to the State; it was a freedom which a scriptural State connection could never impair. External recognition and support on the part of the State, with its consequent jurisdiction within the realm of temporal affairs, they held to be absolutely consistent with an internal liberty, so unimpeded that it owned no authority but Christ's will within the whole wide range of the spiritual province." (The Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1910).

It was the attempt on the part of the civil authorities to override at pleasure the authority of Church courts that caused the Disruption. By the Veto Act of 1835 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland made it plain that no pastor should be forced upon any congregation contrary to the will of the people. It was not long before this ruling of the General Assembly was put to the test. A candidate by the name of Robert Young was presented to fill the vacancy in the parish of Auchterarder. Only three persons signed the call, while 287 recorded their veto against him. On appeal the matter came before the General Assembly and that body in accordance with the Veto Act instructed the Presbytery to reject Mr. Young. The patron and the presentee therefore took action before the civil courts. In the Law Courts in 1838 eight Judges gave their opinion for the State and five for the Church. The law of the land was thus pronounced to be "that if a man were chosen by a patron neither congregation nor any Court of the Church could hinder his induction, so long as he had the ordinary moral and educational qualifications." The Veto Act was declared contrary to the constitution of the Church of Scotland.

Similar cases occurred and a situation developed in the Church that was intolerable. In 1842 the Church drew up and presented to the Government her famous Claim of Rights which set forth the grievances causing unrest. To this appeal the Government made no immediate response. Toward the end of the year a large gathering assembled in Edinburgh to consider the situation and plan a course of action. The meeting was attended by 465 minis-

ters. They pledged themselves in the event of failure to secure favourable action by the Government, to yield up the civil advantages which they could "no longer hold in consistency with the free and full exercise of their spiritual functions."

In January the reply was received from the Crown and it was unfavourable. Another petition was forwarded to the Government and it was thrown out by a majority of 211 to 76. On the 18th May, 1843 the Assembly met in Edinburgh. The Church was moved as never before. The retiring Moderator, Dr. Welsh preached from the text, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." When the Court had been constituted with prayer the Moderator proceeded to read the Protest against the encroachment by the State upon the spiritual liberties of the Church. When he had finished he laid the document on the table, lifted his hat, turned to the Commissioner, bowed respectfully, and then moved towards the door. He was followed by the most distinguished leader in the Church, Dr. Thomas Chalmers. They were followed by a long line of supporters. Eventually, some 474 ministers joined the protesting assembly and in Tanfield Hall there met on the afternoon of May 18, 1843 the first General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland with Dr. Thomas Chalmers as its Moderator. The Disruption had become an accomplished fact.

Under the leadership of men such as Candlish, Chalmers, Cunningham and Thomas Guthrie the Free Church made remarkable progress. In two years no fewer than 500 Churches were built. A Theological College was established, the famous New College in Edinburgh. There was a zeal for Missionary enterprise. Church extension was pursued in populous centres. In his volume "A Church History of Scotland," Prof. Burleigh writes: "The Church of the Disruption was proud to be evangelical, but it was equally proud to be orthodox in the Calvinist Confessional sense. An unquestioned article of its creed was the supreme authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and morals."

From this survey of the three historic secessions in the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland from 1700 to 1850 there are some points we note in conclusion.

1. The tremendous power of a minority where there is conviction and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the Truth. The men who came out of the Established Church left the security guaranteed by the State and cast themselves upon the security of Christ and the promises of the Word of God. They stood for the sole and Supreme Headship of Christ over His Church. They stood for the authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. In the Bible was found everything needful connected with doctrine, jurisdiction and government. They were not prepared to compromise and although there was sometimes bitterness and unpleasant utterances, there was genuine faith and devotion to the service of the Lord Jesus as King and Lord. When these minority groups began to sacrifice their principles in order to conform to a wider unity there was a genuine loss to the religious life in Scotland.

2. The struggles involved served to arouse the interest not only of leaders, but of the ordinary members throughout the Church. To lend sup-

port to a cause meant that they should be more thoroughly acquainted with that cause. The Secessions in Scotland were outstanding for the work carried out by elders and those who never attained to office in the Church. The congregation was taught from the pulpit, the pupils were taught in schools and the children were taught in the home the great Biblical truths for which they contended. To the Seceders the catechism class was vital for the preservation of the cause. When this became neglected decay set in. Finally the Secession Churches took a stand for spiritual independence that has had its influence throughout the English speaking world. Not only did they take their stand against the interference of the State in the affairs of the Church, but they made their voice heard in protest against the encroachment of the Church of Rome in the nation. To them the Pope was anti christ, and there must be no compromise with the errors of that false Church. They contended with zeal for the Protestant succession to the British Throne. It is not difficult to imagine what would have been the reaction of men like Ebenezer Erskine, Thomas McCrie or Dr. Chalmers to the visits paid to the Vatican by the Queen, Prime Minister and Ecclesiastical leaders in both England and Scotland, that we find in our day.

Are we not inclined to become too complacent, too indifferent and self satisfied in these days of prosperity? For the liberties and privileges we enjoy we owe a great debt to the seceders in Scotland. Let us seek to have a clean grasp of the truths for which they stood and throw ourselves heart and soul into the struggle for the presentation of these truths in our day and generation.

NOTE : We have not touched on theological developments during the years of the Secession movements. The Secessions mostly arose from problems involving Church-State relationship. At the same time there was also considerable controversy in the realm of theology.

Henderson in "The Religious Controversies of Scotland" writes: "For two centuries Scotland has been a home and battlefield of theology There has never been lacking men remarkable for their spiritual genius, interpreters of the mind of God, defenders and expounders of the Word, and masters in the understanding and unfolding of the method of Divine revelation."

For an excellent analysis of the theological developments we commend the volume "Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation," by the late Principal John Macleod.

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