

The Disruption of 1843:
A Principled Sacrifice

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Introduction

The Disruption was a period in the history of the church where an uncommonly large number of men left the church over a matter of principle. Namely, the belief that the intrusion of the civil government into the spiritual self-governing of the church was unbiblical and unjust. This was the result of a long struggle between opposing parties within the Church of Scotland which proved intractable and resulted in the creation of a new church free from direct government intervention. As a result of their unwavering commitment to this principle they suffered deprivation of worldly goods and were presented with a unique opportunity to preach the gospel to the people of the nation.

Historical Context

The Disruption did not take place in a vacuum, but rather was the culmination of a period of struggle between two major parties within the Church of Scotland, and that struggle representative of a longer conflict that had been taking place for the entire history of the Reformation in Scotland. The primary issue of disagreement was that of patronage, namely, the right of the laity by virtue of their civil authority to appoint ministers without reference to the will of the congregation or the session of the churches concerned. This issue was of fundamental importance because it struck at the heart of church government, to be Presbyterian in reference to polity is to oppose patronage. As early as John Knox's First book of Church Discipline this principle had been set forth in Scotland, saying simply "It appertains to the people, and to every several congregation, to elect their minister."¹ This principle is in opposition to the Episcopal form of government practiced in England, wherein ministers are not elected by the congregation but appointed by outside authorities, usually ecclesiastical but sometimes civil. These two systems of church government came into conflict as a result of the drive for ever closer union between the two kingdoms of England and Scotland. The union between the two kingdoms has never been a perfect union, but rather is like a marriage wherein the spouses have separate checking accounts and take separate vacations. For a century they have shared a government and a monarch for longer than that, but each had their own distinct legal systems and, in reference to

¹ "The First Book of Church Discipline," Still Waters Revival Books, http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/bod_ch03.htm#SEC04 (accessed April 19th, 2013)

our topic, form of church government. It could never have been an equal union, because England had a far greater population, meaning that even in the face of united Scottish opposition on any given issue, which was rare, the English could outvote the Scottish in the combined British parliament and their decision would become a binding law. This has particular relevance on the issue of patronage, because the Act of Union of 1707 expressly states that the “Government of the Church by Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, Provincial Synods and General Assemblies...shall Remain and Continue unalterable and that the said Presbyterian Government shall be the only Government of the Church within the Kingdom of Scotland.”² These were part of the terms by which the sovereign nation of Scotland agreed to union with England and yet scarcely four years later the united parliament of Great Britain, which was numerically dominated by the English reasserted the right of patronage and declared that “the presbytery of the respective bounds shall and is hereby obliged to receive and admit in the same manner such qualified person or persons minister or ministers...”³ Though the principle of patronage had been restored legally, the issue did not immediately precipitate a crisis because , in practice, it did not change the way that ministers were being appointed .⁴

There was opposition to Presbyterianism from outside Scotland, but there also conflict within the Kirk itself. By the time of The Ten Years' Conflict which started in 1834 and ended with The Disruption in 1843, the two main parties of the conflict were the Moderates and the Evangelicals. It is always difficult to state unambiguously what different factions stand for, because those factions are made up of men with their own personal and shifting views on various issues. It is fair to say, however, as a general summary, that the Moderates were in favor of patronage and the Evangelicals were opposed to it. Indeed, the two groups had been fighting over this issue and many others for over a hundred years and not always with in a manner that was fitting for Christian men. At the General Assembly of 1730, Moderates passed an act which said that “...reasons of dissent against the determinations of church judicatures, in causes brought

² “Act of Union 1707,” Legislation.gov.uk, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aosp/1707/7/contents> (accessed April 19th, 2013)

³ Archibald John Stephens, *The Statutes Relating to the Ecclesiastical and Eleemosynary Institutions of England, Wales, Ireland, India and the Colonies; With the Decisions Thereon* (London: Harrison and Co., Printers, 1845), 702.

⁴ Robert Buchanan, *The Ten Years' Conflict*, (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1849), 177.

before them, should not be entered in the register...,”⁵ meaning that the minority Evangelical party could not even have their opposition to patronage recorded in the minutes. Indeed the Evangelical, Buchanan, speaks disparagingly of the Moderates when says “...a moderate divine contents himself with a moderate degree of labour in his Master's vineyard.”⁶ By 1834, the Evangelical party had the numerical advantage for the first time in nearly a hundred years. The growth in the Evangelical party was caused by the creation of Chapels of Ease, which were churches created to respond to the exploding population growth of Scotland during the industrial revolution.⁷ At the time, each new parish church had to be created by an act of British parliament, which was understandably slow, but this slowness meant that there were large segments of the population who were not hearing the Gospel preached nor receiving proper pastoral care. The creation of the Chapels of Ease was thus seen as a matter of great necessity. The newly created churches were filled primarily with men who aligned themselves with the Evangelical party. At the General Assembly of 1834 the Chapels of Ease were formally acknowledged and sanctioned by the Church of Scotland, but this was opposed by the Moderates who argued that the church did not have the power to admit men from the Chapels of Ease as ministers without the approval of the civil government.⁸ The same General Assembly also passed the Veto Act which allowed for a congregation to veto any minister appointed by a patron, reasserting the Presbyterian principle that “that no pastor shall be intruded on any congregation contrary to the will of the people.”⁹ At the same time it also asserted a different understanding of the role of the civil government in the affairs of the church. Fundamentally, the two parties disagreed about how to interpret the Westminster Confession of Faith which states that the civil magistrate “...has authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church...and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administrated, and observed...”¹⁰ Both believed in the establishment principle, that there should be a state church, but they disagreed over the extent to which the state should be allowed to interfere in the internal governing of that

⁵ W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Fairly, 1842) 638.

⁶ Robert Buchanan, *The Ten Years' Conflict*, 176.

⁷ W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland*, 697.

⁸ Ibid., 730.

⁹ Ibid., 732.

¹⁰ “Westminster Confession of Faith.” Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics. http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/ (accessed April 26th, 2013)

church. So when the Evangelical party was able to pass the Veto Act, they were making a statement about how the Church of Scotland should be free to govern itself, in opposition to the British Civil law of the time that they viewed as unjustly intruding on the ecclesiastical sphere.

Ten Years Conflict

These disagreements culminated in the period of strife known as the Ten Years' Conflict, which started with the General Assembly of 1834. The impact from passing of the Veto Act was statistically minor, we are told that from 1834-1839 out of 150 vacant parishes only 10 were vetoed.¹¹ Yet not all of those men presented by patrons and then vetoed by the congregation were willing to accept the decision. For example, the case of John Edwards of the Parish of Marnoch, he had served for three years as assistant to the aging parish minister and in that time had become so disliked as to be removed as assistant. Upon the death of the old parish minister, the patron proceeded to put forth Mr. Edwards as his candidate, out of a congregation of nearly three hundred, Hetherington describes the situation thus, "Edwards in a parish where he had previously officiated for three years, and yet could get but one man, an innkeeper, to sign his call..."¹² After much wrangling in purely ecclesiastical channels, Mr. Edwards appealed his case to the civil courts of Scotland who found in his favor, which led to further conflict between the General Assembly, dominated by Evangelicals, who supported the congregations right to veto and the Presbytery of Strathbogie, dominated by Moderates, who supported the patron's right to appoint Mr. Edwards. The Ten Years' Conflict was a period of time wherein several similar cases to that of Mr. Edwards took place, as a protracted battle took place between the Evangelicals and the Moderates was fought in civil and church courts over issues of patronage and the extent to which the state ought to engage in church matters. Chapels of Ease and the Veto Act both serve as rallying points for fundamental issue under debate, namely, the independence of the Kirk in spiritual matters. One who held that the church ought to be free to govern itself on ecclesiastical matters must oppose on principle the interference of the state in the selection of ministers in patronage, or the restriction of evangelism and pastoral care as seen with Chapels of Ease. Thus, in 1842 the General Assembly, still dominated by the Evangelicals and responding to recent decisions against them by the civil courts, passed an act which declared, in part that, while they

¹¹ Robert Buchanan, *The Ten Years' Conflict*, 388.

¹² W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland*, 744.

fully recognize the authority of Scotland's highest court, the Court of Session, in civil matters, they assert and claim as the right of the church to govern itself in ecclesiastical matters.

Acknowledging the likely consequences they assert that the General Assembly

“...cannot, in accordance with the Word of God, the authorized and ratified standards of this Church, and the dictates of their consciences, intrude ministers on reclaiming congregations...and, that, at the risk and hazard of suffering the loss of the secular benefits conferred by the State, and the public advantages of an Establishment, they must, as by God’s grace they will, refuse so to do: for, highly as they estimate these, they cannot put them in competition with the inalienable liberties of a Church of Christ...”¹³

In November of the same year, 427 ministers met in a convocation at Edinburgh and bound themselves to leave the church unless their claim to the independence of the church in spiritual matters was affirmed by the civil court.¹⁴

The Disruption Assembly

All of the strife of the past hundred years generally and the past ten years particularly had come to a head and the final lines in the conflict had been drawn. The Evangelical party was no longer willing to submit to what they viewed as the unjust and improper interference of the civil government in church affairs and they had declared their willingness, in the claim of right, to leave the established church if the spiritual independence of the church was not upheld. The Disruption did not come out of nowhere, the rash act of a few men without thought, but rather was the final deed in a long battle and after years of thought and debate. Thus the General Assembly of 1843 was highly anticipated and indeed it was said that “For some days previously an unprecedented influx of strangers into Edinburgh foreshadowed the approach of some exciting event.”¹⁵ The

¹³ "Claim, Declaration and Protest, Anent the Encroachments of the Court of Session," Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, http://www.fpchurch.org.uk/Beliefs/HistoricalDocuments/ClaimDeclarationProtest1842.php#_ftnref9 (Accessed April 19th, 2013).

¹⁴ Peter Hume Brown, *History of Scotland to the Present Time Volume III* (Cambridge: University Press, 1911), 344.

¹⁵ William Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LLD.* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867), 637

moment had indeed come, and as a result of the civil government's interference in the church's self-government over 400 ministers and even more elders left the assembly in solemn protest.¹⁶ They walked down the street from one meeting hall to another that had been prepared and therein began the proceedings of a new General Assembly, thus forming a new Church in Scotland, the Free Church. The Rev William Chalmers Burns described the scene in this way in his diary:

“I was honoured to join in the solemn procession of ministers, &c, from St. Andrew's Church to the Free Assembly Hall, Canonmills, walking between my father on the one side and Uncle George of Tweedsmuir on the other. This was a scene of which I know not what to say! The opening of the Free Assembly was graciously solemn. Surely the Lord was there.”¹⁷

In enthusiasm and out of the necessity of the great amount of work that was to be done in the formation of a new church, the new General Assembly lasted 12 days, from Thursday May 18th-30th 1843, and each day the hall was filled not just with ministers and elders but with spectators numbering nearly 3000,¹⁸ it is unlikely that in the history of Presbyterianism any General Assembly has ever drawn such a crowd.

Short Term Consequences of the Disruption

The Disruption proceeded in an orderly, Presbyterian fashion, yet this solemn act of protest on the part of the participants was not without deep consequences for the society and for those involved. These men felt bound by conscience and principle to leave behind the established church because of the civil government's intrusion into its government, but this departure was far more than simply a formality, it meant the abandoning of all of the property and finances that were the prerogative of the Church of Scotland. The ministers who joined the Free Church were leaving their homes, as it was a common practice of the Kirk to provide manses, or houses for the parish pastor, as well as their salaries, because as a state church the salaries of the ministers were paid, not directly from the congregation to the minister but from state through the church. Thomas Brown in his work *Annals of the*

¹⁶ Ibid., 640.

¹⁷ Islay Burns, *Memoirs of William Chalmers Burns*, (New York, Robert Carter and Brothers, 1870), 242.

¹⁸ William Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LLD.*, 651.

disruption puts the human suffering poignantly when he says “Only they who have known the quiet happiness of these manses can tell what sadness there was in parting from the old home...”¹⁹ These men were, for the most part, not single men, so these were not soldiers evacuating barracks with no emotional attachment, but rather men who had chosen, on account of principle, to leave behind the homes where they had raised their families and to which it is understandable that they would have a deep emotional connection, it was said of minister upon leaving his manse:

“There was the study, where his soul had been ripening both in heavenly and earthly knowledge...the garden, where, year after year, he had watched the growth of trees planted by his own hand...and the home into which he had brought the beloved wife of his youth, and which had become the home of his children.”²⁰

Some men, because of the politics of the region in which they served, were unable to find suitable housing in the area and either had to travel a great distance or live in far rougher accommodations. It was said of one man that “the only accommodation he could obtain was a hut twelve feet square and six feet high...” with the elements kept out by means of blankets.²¹ It was not simply the minister's personal homes that were lost as a result of the Disruption but the church buildings as well. This kicked off a period of heightened church building activity, as the Free Church tried to meet the pastoral care needs of the people of Scotland, but this did not always proceed smoothly. A major problem was that the very landowners who would have exercised the right of patronage, were those to whom the Free Church must receive permission to build new manses and church buildings. This refusal of sites is what led to ministers living in huts as seen above and congregations being forced to meet in the open air. This was made particularly difficult at times when the weather was less than fair, because there was no protection from wind, rain, snow or cold in an open field.²² Some congregations were forced to meet outside for many years and some pastors were forced to live in hovels for many years.

¹⁹ Thomas, Brown. *Annals of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1893), 132.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

²¹ Ibid., 179.

²² Ibid., 409-410.

Though Disruption Worthies suffered in a worldly sense, not all of the consequences of the Disruption were negative. Any account of the period would be incomplete without a description of the revival that was taking place at the time. The Evangelical party had a great concern for the health of the church and the proper care of the people as evidenced by their tireless work in constructing Chapels of Ease, this drive did not evaporate after they left the established church, but if anything intensified. Their earnestness for the Gospel was shown true and aided by the visible outward sign of their having been willing to suffer indignities for the sake of the Church. In the words of a contemporary historian discussing the immediate impact of the Disruption on religion: “I verily believe there were more souls converted to Christ in that short period of time than in any season since the Reformation, though of triple its duration.”²³ Though the long term consequences are more complicated, in the short term there was both great suffering and great reward.

Conclusion

The Disruption of 1843 was a singular event in the history of the church, where a large number of men committed to a principle, the spiritual independence of the church, were willing and able to raise their voices in protest. Their protest was not simply a foot note in the minutes of the General Assembly, but a deep and personal sacrifice. As a result of walking away from the established church they lost their homes and their salaries, while their congregations were forced to meet in fields without protection from the elements. Yet this faithfulness was rewarded by a spiritual revival accompanying the rapid growth of the Free Church in Scotland. It was an event born of principle and the men involved, both at that moment and in the years to follow, proved themselves by their deeds to be passionately committed to Christ's church.

²³ Ibid., 191.

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