

The 125th Anniversary of the Disruption

This year marks the 125th Anniversary of the "Disruption" which led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. Anniversaries have been used for a host of different purposes. Now, anniversaries, jubilees and the like tend to be artificial things. It is not always easy to get excited about issues which were quite relevant years ago, but seem rather dead now. The anniversary of the Disruption should be of interest to us as this involves a Reformed Church, and in particular the fact that twelve Free Churches are located in Canada.

What is the Disruption all about? In many respects, It was the greatest event in Scottish Church history since the Reformation. The Disruption took place in the same period as the "Afscheiding" of 1834 in the Netherlands. As in the Netherlands, Scotland was experiencing great days of revival. Religion in 1834 was not merely a topic of conversation of Scotland, it was the most vital thing in the lives of the people. Actually, the Scottish revival had taken a greater stronghold on the people than in the same period in the Netherlands. At Kilsyth, well known as the scene of a remarkable revival under the Rev. Mr. Robe in 1742, occurred a similar experience in 1839, when "from July to October the whole community flocked to hear the Word with the deepest earnestness." (1) This movement, which attracted at that time the attention of all Scotland, is described by Dr. Burns as "a sun blink of Gospel light and warmth" and, he adds, "the fact is unquestionable, that the great number of those who have been seriously impressed, at the time referred to, have attached themselves to the Free Church." (2) The Scottish revival movement was not a "lay" movement, but it involved many of the great theologians and ministers Scotland had in those days. Some of these famous men were Chalmers, Cunningham, Candlish, just to name a few. Dr. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was by far the most celebrated Scottish divine of the 19th century. His fame was achieved by preaching, though he was a no mean apologete. His intellect and zeal made a great impact. Dr. William Cunningham (t 1861) was one of the foremost and learned theologians of the Reformed school, one of the greatest theologians Scotland has ever produced. As a writer, he had been in the first ranks of the church. (3) He was a great friend and admirer of Dr. Hodge of Princeton, the theologian who has had such strong influence in American Calvinist circles. Dr. R. S. Candlish (- 1873) was one of the ablest Churchmen in an age in which able Churchmen were not few. He was a wonderful preacher and in his prayers he led his people to the throne of God like the Hebrew prophets of old. He contributed much to the Reformed faith through his articles, lectures, and sermons, though his work on the Atonement is one of the finest and ablest treatments of the subject.

The Disruption involved two main issues. The controversy which raged Scotland for 10 years and which reached its climax in 1843 was essentially concerned with the problem of authority. The particular issues were the ultimacy of **Church** or **State**, or rather **Christ** or **Ceasar**, and the question how "the crown rights of the Redeemer" could be safeguarded. The revivals had brought deep spiritual convictions and a holy jealousy for the glory of Christ as Head over all things. The issues at stake were not merely academic. They touched the very hearts and freedom of the members of the church.

For many years, the congregations of the Established Church, patronized by the State, had very little say in the calling of their pastors. In 1834, the Church resolved to go back to the principle of the Reformation in the calling of the pastors by the congregations themselves. The Veto Act was passed and unacceptable ministers were no longer to be thrust on unwilling congregations. However, this Act was the beginning of the struggle which led to the Disruption of 1843. It was in the fall of 1834 that the important parish of Auchterarder became vacant and Lord Kinnoul, the patron, on the 14th of October, presented to the congregation Mr. Robert Young, a minister of the Gospel. The people had the usual opportunity of testing the proposed minister's qualifications, but their opinions were adverse and only 2 out of a parish population of 3,000 desired him, the others protested against Mr. Young. The Church accordingly decided not to proceed with the ordination, and the patron Lord Kinnoul was requested to make another appointment. However, this was not done. Lord Kinnoul and Mr. Young resolved to carry the case into the Civil Courts, and on March 8, 1835, the sentence of the Court was pronounced adverse to the Church and the majority of the parish population. The court decreed "that in the settlement of pastors the Church must have no regard to the feelings of the congregation. The trials of the presentee must be proceeded with in order to ordination, just as if the refusal of the people had not been given." (4) The case was appealed to the House of Lords, but the sentence of the court was confirmed. The wishes of the congregations were to be considered of no value. The case of Auchterarder was followed by those of Lethendy and Marnoch.

Could the congregations abide with these rulings of court and government? Was the call to the ministry to be treated as a mockery? Was it right to have ministers forced upon congregations who professed to be Reformed? Surely, it was no wonder that a large body of ministers and "lay" men felt that the proceedings described could not be tolerated by a church which confessed Christ as Lord and King. In essence, what the people resisted was the view that " – because the Church was supported from funds handled by the State, therefore the State had the right to take over the government of the Church; to nullify decisions taken in her Presbyteries and even overturn the finds of her supreme Court – the General Assembly." (5)

In 1843, when matters had come to a head, the church made an appeal to Parliament. But the grievance of the church was' thrown out by a majority of 211 against 76, the House refusing even to go through the form of an inquiry. (6) This decision of Parliament made clear their next moves to the dissentients. Dr. Chalmers, with his eloquent voice, aroused the nation into action. His work, and of course that of others, reaped results. On the day before the Disruption, the evangelical party had signed the Protest which one of the leaders was to lay on the table of the Assembly renouncing the Establishment. (7)

The Protest read "We protest that, in the circumstances in which we are placed, it is and shall be lawful for us, and such other Commissioners chosen to the Assembly, appointed to have been this day holden, as may concur with us, to withdraw to a separate place of meeting, for the purpose of taking steps, along with all who adhere to us – maintaining with us the Confession of Faith and Standards of the Church of Scotland as heretofore understood –for separating in an orderly way from the

Establishment, and thereupon adopting such measures as may be competent to us, in humble dependence on God's grace and the aid of the Holy Spirit, for the advancement of His glory, the extension of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, and the administration of the affairs of Christ's house according to His Holy Word; and we now withdraw accordingly, humbly and solemnly acknowledging the hand of the Lord in the things which have come upon us because of our manifold sins, and the sins of this Church and nation, but, at the same time, with an assured conviction that we are not responsible for any consequences that may follow from this, our enforced separation from an Establishment which we loved and prized, through interference with conscience, the dishonour done to Christ's crown, and the rejection of His sole and supreme authority as King in His Church." (8) After the Protest was delivered at the Assembly, the evangelicals left for a previously arranged meeting place, which could accommodate 3,000 people, in one of the suburbs of Edinburgh. A great service was held in the great hall, filled to capacity, and 474 ministers declared with their act of going to the hall that they were no longer a part of the Established Church, forgoing together more than £100,000. – a year in salaries. The Free Church of Scotland was born!

As seen, the Disruption itself was also due to the presence of a body of ministers lacking the conviction that the Church's duty is to obey Christ and to maintain His rights at all costs. There were many who wanted to abide by the status quo. More than 400 ministers were willing to forego the comfort of their manses and the security of their State guaranteed salaries for the honour of Christ, but the tragedy was that a group of ministers rather submitted to an earthly king, the State, than to King Jesus Christ.

The Disruption led to contention in Scotland for 10 years or more. Families were divided, children at school took sides, landowners persecuted the Free Church people. However, the Free Church grew and many were added to the church. Dr. Bonar said, "The ecclesiastical turmoil seemed to elevate, not to depress; to spiritualize, not to secularize." (9) It is remarkable that the Disruption, while directly causing division, was yet the means of healing of former breaches in the ranks of the Presbyterian Church. In 1852, the United Original Seceders cast in their lot with the Free Church. Upwards to 30 congregations were added to the Free Church roll. Again, in 1976, there took place a union with the Reformed Presbyterian, popularly known as the Cameronian Church. (10) In 1900, the Free Church united with the United Presbyterian, whereby the United Free Church was formed. However, a minority, dubbed as the "Wee Frees", remained outside of the union and claimed the name and property of the Free Church. Under the laws of trust this claim was upheld. (11) Our sister church, the Free Church of Scotland is the group which remained outside the union. The reason for this act can be summed up with Lord Alverstone's description of the United Free Church. The United Free Church was "a body which has not only abandoned a fundamental principle of the Church to which they belong, but supports a principle essentially different from that on which the Church (the Free Church) was - founded." (12)

The Free Church claims to be the true successors of the church which in 1843 severed its connection with the State. The moderator of the Free Church states his church's position in these terms. "Indeed it can be more accurately stated that we are that very Church and its history is being perpetuated through us. To be sure, we are shorn of the great numbers and deprived of the popular support which was accorded the Free Church of 1843, but the continuity and identity of a Church is to be assessed, not by the statistics of personnel nor by its geographical spread, but by the identity of the faith proclaimed, the polity developed and the discipline asserted. On this basis indeed our claim goes further back than 1843, for in faith, polity and discipline we endeavour to conform not only to the criteria of the Church of the Reformation, but the Church of the Apostolic age. The Bible, recognized in its entirety, as the inspired Word of God is still our sourcebook in regard to matters of the faith. Our continued separate existence as a denomination is not due to stubbornness or perversity, 'but is the reflection of our understanding of God's Word and what He requires of those who profess to be comprised in His Church. We are not isolationist; we are not impervious to the appeals for outward unity which sound so loudly in our day. But from the foundation of Christ and the Apostles we hope never to be moved and our arms are open to receive and to be received by all who will take their stand here and make, with us, common cause in the evangelization of our country. This is not to claim that we are perfect and free from all blemishes of sectarianism, but the sectarian does not speak with the true voice of our Church which believes in 'the Communion of saints and the Holy Catholic Church.' We would consider that in equity we should be judged, not in terms of temporary and accidental aberrations, but in terms of the one and only Gospel which we preach." (13)

Indeed, the Church of the Disruption lives on not in the Church of Scotland with her evasive and blurred standards – but in the Free Church of Scotland. As an orthodox Reformed community our hearts go out in this time of anniversary to this Church, a member of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. May she continue to abide by her principles to the glory of God.

In recent years, we have heard our churches talk about closer fellowship with other churches. Classis Hamilton of the Chr. Ref. Church sent an overture to the Council of the Christian Reformed Churches in Canada regarding our relationship to the Presbyterian Church of Canada. I wonder what the outcome will be. But, what puzzles me – we seem to do so little to come to closer contact with a church which is so close to us as the Free Church of Scotland. Their loyalties are our loyalties. Their concept of Calvinism is almost identical to ours. There are about 12 Free Churches in Canada. I do hope that in their anniversary year, we may establish closer contact with one another to the glory of Christ, the head of the Church, and for the strengthening of the orthodox Reformed faith.

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Johan D. Tangelder
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