

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

By Schism Rent Asunder: A Study of the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1844

NEIL GREGOR SMITH

THE long controversy over patronage in the Church of Scotland was followed with interest by all groups in the Presbyterian churches in Canada. It was held to be a fundamental principle of Presbyterian procedure that no pastor should be intruded on a parish contrary to the will of the people. With the restoration of patronage in the Church of Scotland in 1712 it was possible for a minister, nominated by the patrons of the parish, to be inducted into a charge contrary to the wishes of the congregation. This situation gave rise to endless difficulties.¹ Many in the Scottish church saw no possibility of relief from the evils of patronage except in seceding from the establishment. As the Scottish controversy approached its climax in 1843 all of the Colonial Presbyterian churches which had ties with the Church of Scotland were disturbed and agitated by the dispute.

The majority of ministers and members of the Presbyterian churches in Canada had come from churches of the old land, and although the issues of the dispute did not directly concern the Canadian churches, it was almost inevitable that repercussions of a division in the Church of Scotland should be felt in Canada. The Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland was, at the moment, in a strong and encouraging position. A union with the Synod of Upper Canada, a group of Secessionist churches, had been consummated in 1840, bringing an addition of seventeen ministers and about ten thousand members to its strength. Congregations were increasing rapidly with the growth of settlements and the influx of immigrants from Scotland and Ireland. New communities were petitioning the presbyteries for the establishing of churches and the supply of religious ordinances. The pleas of religious destitution addressed so often to the churches of the old land, were appeals for more and more ministers to cope with a rapidly expanding field of labour. Queen's College had been established in Kingston to help to meet the ever-increasing demand for ministers. The securing of a proportionate share of the Clergy Reserves had given welcome assistance towards the maintenance of an effective ministry. Altogether the prospects of the Church of Scotland Synod in Canada were bright with promise.

Upon this church, so happily situated, and with such opportunities for expansion, the Free Church controversy cast an ominous shadow. In the disruption of the Canadian church in 1844 passions were aroused which embittered relations between Presbyterian groups for years to come. The

Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas (a group of Secessionist churches which had not entered the union of 1840) and congregations in the Niagara area, where the ties were closer to American Presbyterianism, were not directly involved in the controversy. With these minor exceptions the whole Presbyterian church in Canada became embroiled over the dispute as to how ministers were to be settled in vacant parishes in Scotland. The present paper is an attempt to summarize the course of the disruption of the church in Canada, and to note some of its more obvious causes and consequences.

I

At its meeting in 1840 the Canadian Synod expressed its sympathy with the Church of Scotland in the trials through which it was passing:

Regarding as we always do, with intense and affectionate interest, our native land, and the national church in which we have been blessed, we cannot refrain from expressing our deep sympathy for your beloved Zion in her present state of perplexity and trial. For our brethren and companions' sake we can never cease to say, 'Peace be within thee.' Our hope and prayer is that she shall be brought out of the furnace as gold purified by the fire. With an affection undiminished by distance and long separation, we bear her up in our remembrance before the throne of grace.²

At their meeting in the following year they drafted a petition to the Queen, asking that such measures should be taken as would secure the rights and claims of the Church of Scotland. It was particularly requested "that the wishes of the people may be duly regarded in the settlement of their Ministers, and that the secular courts be restrained from all interference in the spiritual concerns of the Church".³ In 1842 the Synod again expressed its sympathy with the mother church in the struggle she was maintaining "against the encroachments of the Civil power",⁴ and instructed the committee on correspondence to give "unequivocal expression" to the views of the Synod.

When the Synod met in July, 1843, the fateful disruption had already taken place in the Church of Scotland. Nearly five hundred ministers had severed their connection with the establishment to form "The Assembly of the Free Protestant Church of Scotland". The seceders were confident that the true lineaments of the Church of Scotland were to be seen in the actions of the protesting church, and disdainfully observed that in the proceedings of those who remained within the establishment there was nothing "which either the Christian men of the present day regard with any interest, or which posterity will care to know".⁵ Administration for the men who made great sacrifices in going out of the established church in loyalty to their principles was mingled with sorrow that a great national church had been rent asunder.

No official communication from either side had been delivered to the Canadian Synod when its meeting began. On July 7 an overture was presented from the Presbytery of Hamilton embodying a series of resolutions

concerning the state of the Church of Scotland. A committee was appointed to consider the resolutions and bring in a report at a later meeting. On July 11 the committee reported that they could come to no agreement. A motion to defer consideration of the issue until more information was available concerning "the late, unhappy event in the Mother Church" was defeated by a vote of twenty-five to thirteen.

Four resolutions were then presented and discussed. One expressed the wholehearted sympathy of the Synod with the Free Church movement, assuring its sponsors of the Synod's prayers for the success of the "glorious cause" in which they suffered. A second expressed the sympathy of the Synod for the Church of Scotland, and the hope that the breach made in its ranks would speedily be healed. A third simply expressed regret that a division had been made in the Church in Scotland and a desire that such a division should be avoided in Canada. None of these resolutions received the support of the Synod. A fourth resolution, sponsored by Dr. Cook of Quebec and Mr. McGill of Niagara, was a carefully worded statement which attempted to embody the divergent views represented in the Synod. It affirmed the faith of the Synod in the supreme headship of Christ over his church, for which the Free Church was contending. It expressed regret over the encroachments of the State upon the freedom of the church in Scotland. It pointed out that the issue involved in the controversy was one which did not directly affect the church in Canada:

This Synod have yet to record their gratitude to God that He, in His good providence, does not call on them to enter on the discussion or decision for themselves of the practical bearings of those principles in respect to either any infringement of the spiritual independence of this church, or of the privileges of its members, or to the connection which subsists between the Church of Scotland and this Synod.⁶

The connection of the Canadian Synod with the Church of Scotland was one which did not involve the Canadian church in responsibility for the acts of the Church of Scotland. It was concluded that "this Synod do now, as always, recognize the imperious obligation laid on them of seeking the peace and well-being of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, at the expense of any sacrifice save that of consistency and principle".⁷ This resolution, carefully and deliberately framed to avoid a division in the Canadian church, was adopted by a substantial majority (twenty-eight to eleven). Eight of the eleven members voting against the adoption of the resolution recorded their dissent.

When the Synod resumed its deliberations at seven o'clock, the Moderator reported that he had received in the mail that afternoon a communication from Dr. Welsh, Convener of the Colonial Committee of the newly formed Free Church. A similar letter had been sent to all Presbyterian ministers in the British colonies, stating the course followed by the seceding group in Scotland, and urging that Presbyterians throughout the world should proclaim their attachment to the principles for which the Free Church had

contended. The Synod, having heard the communication read, directed the Moderator to acknowledge its receipt, and to forward to Dr. Welsh a copy of the resolution which had been adopted in the afternoon. When the members dispersed to go back to their congregations it was realized that a secession from the Canadian church had been postponed, but was not necessarily averted.

During the following year the line of cleavage between the two groups widened considerably. A group in Montreal reprinted the Free Church *Protest, The Harp on the Willows*, and other Free Church tracts. In Toronto *The Banner* aggressively supported the Free Church. In many of the larger centres meetings were held to acquaint Canadian churchmen with the issues involved in the patronage controversy, and the Free Church deputies were invited to visit Canada. The Colonial Committee of the Free Church let it be known that they were gravely dissatisfied with the position assumed by the Canadian Synod, a position which was, said Dr. Welsh, "equivocal, unsatisfactory, and liable to grave misconstruction".⁸ It was pointed out that by retaining their connection with the Church of Scotland the Synod was partaking of the sins of the establishment. The Free Church party in Scotland expected their sympathizers in Canada to repudiate all connections with the established church, "whose violated constitution they can no longer respect, and whose sinful subservience to the secular powers they must deplore and condemn".⁹

When the Synod met again at Kingston on July 3, 1844, Mr. Clugston, the retiring Moderator, preached the opening sermon from the text in 2 Corinthians 4: 3, "We are troubled on every side". Whatever Mr. Clugston may have said in the course of his sermon he must be credited with having chosen an appropriate text! When the thorny issue of the relation of the Synod to the Church of Scotland came up for discussion Dr. Cook of Quebec attempted to clear the air by presenting a series of propositions on which all parties might agree:

1. The Church of Scotland does exercise no jurisdiction over the Synod of Canada.
2. The Church of Scotland does not claim jurisdiction over the Synod of Canada.
3. The Church of Scotland is not entitled to exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Synod of Canada.
4. The adherents of the Church in this province have ample liberty in the election of their ministers.
5. There has been no interference whatsoever, on the part of the Civil Powers with any of the Ecclesiastical courts.
6. There is not, at present, so far as can be reasonably judged, any prospect of such interference with the Ecclesiastical courts.
7. There is no external or legal let or hindrance to the extension of the Church in this province.
8. Therefore the alleged causes for disruption at home do not exist here.¹⁰

On points 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 there was complete unanimity. Six members dissented from the first proposition, seven from the second, and three from

the third. It will be noted that on five of the eight points, which made plain that there was no necessity for a division of the church in Canada, the members of the Synod expressed unanimous agreement. Having thus decided unanimously that there was no necessity for a disruption in Canada, the Synod proceeded with the business of disruption.

Some of the members of the Synod saw a solution to the whole problem in the dropping of the offending phrase, "in connection with the Church of Scotland", from the official title of the church. It was noted that the phrase was intended as an expression of "filial regard" only. Since its use now occasioned misunderstanding it was believed that it could be dropped without any loss. Others took the position that it was *ultra vires* of the Synod to alter its designation, and that such a change of name would be a breach of faith with the ministers and members who had attached themselves to it. The final deliverance of the Synod was very similar to that agreed to the year previously: that the Canadian church was not directly involved in the dispute which occasioned the division of the church in Scotland; that the Canadian church was independent of all outside ecclesiastical bodies, and that it would receive ministers of all other Presbyterian bodies whose qualifications were otherwise acceptable.

The minority attached to Free Church principles, led by Dr. Bayne of Galt, entered their dissent from this pronouncement of the Synod. The dissent and protest were signed by seventeen ministers,¹¹ who withdrew to form the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. So disruption came to the church in Canada. Numerically the loss to the Church of Scotland Synod was not very severe—twenty-two ministers in all, out of an enrolment of eighty-two. Actually, the division was much more serious than these figures indicate. The quarrel was carried to practically every congregation in Canada; churches were divided and brethren estranged. For the next thirty years the Presbyterian cause in Canada felt the effects of this division of their forces.

II

Behind the action of those who seceded from the Synod to form the Free Church was a tangled web of varied motives. After the secession in the Church of Scotland Norman Macleod wrote in his journal: "Who in the next century will know or understand the ten thousand secret influences, the vanity and pride of some, the love of applause, the fear and terror of others, and above all, the seceding mania, the revolutionary mesmerism, which I have witnessed within these few days."¹² Among Canadian churchmen there was a similar mingling of motives.

First place must be given to a sincere attachment to Free Church principles, to theological insight into the issues involved in the controversy, and the feeling of an obligation to carry their principles to their logical conclusion, separation from an establishment which they judged to be guilty of grave faults.

One point that should be noted is that there was no aversion to a close connection between Church and State on the part of those who seceded. One of the first acts of the Free Church Synod when it met in the autumn of 1844 was to apply for the continuance of the government grants which their ministers had received.¹³ An impetus towards voluntarism was given when their petition was answered with the statement that in the opinion of the Law Officers of the Crown, "said allowances could not be continued on account of the new position in which the Synod stand".¹⁴ *The Presbyterian Magazine*, the publication of the Missionary Presbytery in Canada, scoffed at the time of the disruption in Scotland: "The Seceders believe that the most perfect form of a church is when the people choose their ministers and the State pays them."¹⁵

In addition to loyalty to Free Church principles and zeal for the spiritual independence of the church, there were other factors which played a part in disrupting the Canadian church. The adherents of the Free Church were active in promoting their cause in the colonies. Between 1844 and 1846 at least twenty-three deputies of the Free Church visited Canada, holding meetings, promoting discussion of Free Church principles, criticizing the establishment, and encouraging the formation of Free Church congregations.

The Established Church, confronted with the task of filling a host of vacant parishes, could not send as many deputies to present its case in the colonies, and its cause suffered accordingly. Defenders of the establishment could not muster the crusading zeal displayed by those who were convinced that in contending for the Free Church they were re-fighting the battles of the Covenanters for the crown rights of the Redeemer. One of the Church of Scotland deputies stated that at the meetings he addressed in Canada he always tried to preach the gospel, insisting that to believe this and live it is all in all.

I try to bring men into the Church of Christ, and make the question of the Church of Scotland a secondary matter. In explaining the Church question . . . I avoid all personalities, all attacks, and give full credit to my opponents.¹⁶

In describing his visit to Markham he gave the following account of his message:

The true battle is between Christ and the world—between believers and unbelievers; and that was the battle I have been fighting while preaching. But this painful and profitless combat is between Christian brethren. The Church controversy is a question on non-essentials, on meat and drink. But the "Kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost".¹⁷

Admirable as these sentiments may be, this approach did not win converts, or allay the passions which had been aroused by the inflammatory speeches of the critics of the establishment. In the heat of controversy, courtesy, charity and moderation are not always winning assets.

Many of the Canadian ministers nursed grievances against the system of patronage as it existed in the Church of Scotland. Some of them had taken appointments to Canadian churches because they had failed to obtain a parish at home. This is not necessarily a reflection on their abilities, or zeal, or usefulness in the ministry. The system of settling ministers in parishes was one in which patient merit had sometimes to be very patient before being recognized. It was natural that such ministers should not think very kindly of an establishment which they had been trained to serve, but in which they could find no employment. Some of the Canadian ministers, too, had been reared in Secession churches in the old land. These could not be expected to feel any great attachment towards the Established Synod, nor any great reluctance in severing their ties with it.

Many of the congregations, wearied with long waiting for the settlement of a regular minister, were prepared to adhere to any branch of the Presbyterian church—Secession, Established, or Free—which would provide them with regular services. The decisive factor in every area, in determining the strength of the Free Church or the Established, was the availability of competent ministerial leadership. The Free Church grew more rapidly in succeeding years than the Established¹⁸ because more Free Church ministers were available to supply the needs of vacant congregations. While some of the ministers of the Established church were tempted to return to vacant parishes in Scotland, surplus ministers of the Free Church were available for the supply of pulpits in Canada. One group stated to a Free Church deputy that when they were connected with the establishment they had been supplied with its dregs, and that if they retained their connection with it now, they could expect to receive only the "dregs of the dregs".¹⁹ In localities where the established church could provide adequate ministerial leadership it maintained its old position fairly well.

As we survey the whole course of the disruption in Canada, it would appear that one of the decisive factors in the division was the pressure brought to bear on Canadian churchmen by supporters of the Free Church in Scotland. They apparently believed that it would strengthen their position at home to be able to report the support of the colonial churches. They sought, by all means within their power, to secure that support, and showed little appreciation of the difficulties confronting a colonial church.²⁰

III

Because of the Free Church controversy the forces of Presbyterianism in Canada were divided for thirty-one years, in unseemly rivalry. It is possible that in some communities the rivalry between the two groups was a stimulus on both sides. It is certain that there were losses sustained through duplication of effort during the period of separation, and that wounds were made which healed but slowly. The bitterness engendered in the heat of controversy created ill-will which persisted for years, and in some instances lasted on after the union of 1875. Nearly twenty years after the disruption, a

minister in Central Ontario had to deal firmly with the dissension still existing in his community:

The people of the Free Church when meeting our people going quietly and inoffensively to Church, often offended them by accosting them and saying, "You are going the wrong way; you should come along with us where you would hear the Gospel and get grace," etc. . . . Repeatedly from my pulpit . . . did I tell my people not to interrupt others going to their own Church, whatever that Church might be; that everyone had a right to private judgment and freedom of conscience. . . .²¹

It is highly improbable that the shouting of offensive remarks was confined to one side, or to one community. From such dissension came the hurts men carry with them to their graves. When union was proposed for the severed members of the Presbyterian churches, the opposition came chiefly from supporters of the Established Church who remembered the violent statements made by the seceders at the time of the disruption—statements which they were unable to forget, and which they were reluctant to forgive.²²

Those who championed the cause of the Free Church at the time of the disruption in Canada were primarily concerned with theological consistency. They held strong convictions on the spiritual independence of the church and the headship of Christ, and were prepared to follow their principles to their logical conclusion, at any cost. Those who adhered to the establishment believed that the essential work of the church could be carried on effectively in the church as it was, that with patience grievances might be redressed and errors righted. They were reluctant to have the peace of the Canadian church disturbed in a dispute in which they were not directly concerned. Sacrifices made by "idealists in a hurry" might be the sacrifices of men who were martyrs by mistake.

NOTES

1. For the history of the Free Church controversy in Scotland see Robert Buchanan, *The Ten Years' Conflict*, Edinburgh, 1849, 2v., or (from the point of view of the Established Church) Robert Story, *The Church of Scotland, Past and Present*, v. 3.

2. *Minutes, Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland* (hereafter referred to as C.S.), 1840, Appendix, p. 39.

3. *Minutes, C.S.*, 1841, Appendix, p. 38.

4. *Minutes, C.S.*, 1842, p. 23.

5. *Report of Proceedings of General Assembly, Free Church of Scotland*, 1843, p. 3.

6. *Minutes, C.S.*, 1843, p. 23.

7. *Loc. cit.*

8. Letter of Dr. Welsh, printed in *The Home and Foreign Missionary Record* of the Free Church of Scotland, May, 1844, p. 139.

9. *Loc. cit.*

10. *Minutes, C.S.*, 1844, p. 10.

11. A number of others seceded later, bringing the number withdrawing from the Established Synod to twenty-two.

12. *Memoir of Norman Macleod*, Toronto, 1876, p. 133.

13. *Minutes of Synod of Presbyterian Church of Canada* (hereafter referred to as P.C.), 1844, p. 35.

14. *Minutes, P.C.*, 1845, p. 41.

15. *The Presbyterian Magazine* (edited by William Proudfoot), September, 1843, p. 224.

16. *Memoir of Norman Macleod*, Toronto, 1876, p. 161.

17. *Ibid.*

18. In 1845 the Free Church lists 33 ministers and 53 pastoral charges. In 1859 this had increased to 133 ministers and 166 pastoral charges. The corresponding figures for the Church of Scotland are: 1845, 54 ministers, 73 charges; in 1859, 73 ministers, 84 charges.

19. Report of Mr. Bonar, *Home and Foreign Record of Free Church of Scotland*, November, 1845, p. 240.

20. The Synod of Australia at its meeting in 1844 resolved to maintain a position of neutrality. The following year it identified itself with the Free Church. In 1846 it reversed its decision and identified itself with the Established Church. The Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia allied itself almost unanimously with the Free Church, and the Church of New Brunswick remained in connection with the Church of Scotland. Three ministers withdrew to form a Free Church.

21. Letter of the Rev. John McMurchy in *The Presbyterian*, 1862, p. 300.

22. A number of congregations remained out of the Union of 1875, retaining their connection with the Church of Scotland. The *Presbyterian Handbook* of 1883 states that there were seven ministers and their congregations at that time in connection with the Church of Scotland, as well as two presbyteries in the Synod of Nova Scotia. The difficulty of obtaining ministers ultimately compelled most of these to enter the Presbyterian Church in Canada.