



Christianity in Scotland: Free Church Liberal & Conservative

In 1863 the brilliant linguist A. B. Davidson (1831-1902) became Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at the Free Church theological college in Edinburgh. A very effective teacher he introduced higher criticism of a kind inconsistent with a high view of Scripture. A bachelor, quiet and unassuming, he was never censured by the church, but was extremely influential. His even more brilliant but arrogant student, William Robertson Smith (1846-94), was appointed professor of Hebrew in the Free Church seminary in Aberdeen in 1870, but was soon mired in controversy. Published articles by him in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1875 and 1876 and 1880 resulted in tortuous proceedings against him. No doctrinal error was established by judicial process, but he was removed from his post as an administrative procedure without touching his status as a minister. Strikingly, although his views undermined a high view of Scripture, Smith remained otherwise Calvinistic in his theology. He died while Professor of Arabic in Cambridge. Two other men, Marcus Dods and A. B. Bruce, were acquitted of error by the Free Church Assembly in 1890 by a large majority, although they were rebuked. Professor George Smeaton (1814-89), a fine scholar and the last of the orthodox Disruption-era teachers, had died the year before.

Free Church Declaratory Act, 1892. A Declaratory Act was drafted and brought before the Free Church Assembly of 1891. Opposition was almost entirely from the north-west Highlands where the Gaelic language was still widely used. The Rev. Dr. Robert Rainy endeavoured to conciliate but was now prepared to press on. The Act, in rather similar terms to that of the United Presbyterians, was duly passed into church law in 1892 following Barrier Act procedure on a vote of 346 to 195, with 18 ministers and 17 elders recording their dissent.

Those opposed seem to have differed somewhat among themselves. There was a small number for immediate secession. Two ministers, Donald Macfarlane of Raasay and Donald Macdonald of Sheildaig, took this step and formed the Free Presbyterian Church on 28 July 1893 (discussed below). Some others would ultimately go into the 1900 union with the United Presbyterians. These included the elderly Highlander Murdo MacAskill (1838-1903) of Dingwall, and Melbourne-born R. G. McIntyre (1863-1954) of Maxwelltown near Dumfries. McIntyre would become prominent in New South Wales from 1903. Others held on and made their stand at the time of union in 1900 as they were not obliged to view their own subscription in terms of the changes of 1892.

In far-off Australia, Rev. J. J. Stewart (1852-96), a former editor of *The Signal*, the paper published in the interest of the constitutional party 1882-89, and former assistant to Dr William Balfour of Holyrood Free Church, gave an excellent assessment in his address as moderator of the remnant Free Presbyterian Church of Victoria in May 1893. He criticised the liberals but also criticised conservatives for their lack of an adequate rebuttal of the higher critics. He thought they were characterised by an attitude of mere immobility, rather than endeavours to advance and improve, for example, the version of the psalter, and to find and purify whatever might be good in the forms of rationalism and ritualism then pressing so hard on the church. To revere the memory of good men is right, he said, but to allow their practices or customs to be law for us is popery and idolatry, the extreme of reaction and revolt against prevailing corruptions. Professor Donald Macleod of the Free Church College (now Edinburgh Theological Seminary) put it similarly:

With the Union controversy (1863 onwards) the mood changed. As those who were pro-Union became looser and looser in their attachment to the Confession, those who were opposed became more and more rigid. Calvinist orthodoxy developed a siege mentality,

*isolating itself from ideas which threatened it and offering little welcome to those which might have enriched it. The creativity of the early days had gone, and men were lauded for conserving the past, not for building on it.*¹

Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland

The Free Presbyterians of 1893 emerged as a protest against change and change became anathema to it. In a short time the new church gathered a community including children of perhaps 15-30,000. There were 70 places of worship by 1896. A number of its ablest young ministers moved to the Free Church in 1905 after the continuing Free Church repealed the Declaratory Act legislation and the decisions allowing hymns and instrumental music. The FP Church has continued and made mandatory the use of the King James or Authorised Version of the Bible. It prohibits the use of public transport on the Lord's Day to attend worship, an action one of its ministerial students, the future Professor John Murray (1898-1975) of Westminster Seminary, considered infringed liberty of conscience in going beyond Scripture. Murray himself never used public transport on the Lord's Day, but he withdrew on principle in 1930. In 1945 the FPs laid down the position that protest against a decision of the Synod excludes one from church privileges, certainly an unhistorical position but one which aims to prevent variations from the norm. By the mid 1950's the community was about 6,000. One of its elders was disciplined because he was present, but did not participate, at a funeral mass in 1986 for a judge of Roman Catholic persuasion. The elder, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, the son of a railway signalman, was the British Lord Chancellor 1987-97 and thus the highest legal officer in the United Kingdom. As a result, in 1989 about a third of the ministers and 700 people left and formed the *Associated Presbyterian Churches* to maintain liberty of conscience. Today there are some 350 regular attenders in APC churches, about 9 parishes plus some cooperative work with the Free Church. The FP Church has under 2,000 attending her Scottish services, less than 10% of these being communicant members, plus a few churches in Australia (Grafton and Sydney), New Zealand and Canada, as well as extensive mission work in Zimbabwe.

Free Church of Scotland

On 30 October 1900 a union of the over 1,000 Free Church and the nearly 600 United Presbyterian Church congregations was effected under the name United Free Church of Scotland. Only 26 Free Church ministers (out of more than 1,000) protested and continued the Free Church on the original basis. Although they believed the Declaratory Act to involve a departure from a fundamental constitutional principle, and thus to be beyond the church's lawful power, they had judged the best course differently from the brethren of 1893 and stayed in against the day the issue would be resolved another way. They took legal action and, while, perhaps unsurprisingly, Scottish courts were against them, the House of Lord's judgment in 1904 vindicated their position, much to the consternation of Robert Rainy and the United Free Church. The House of Lords' judgment made clear that that the establishment principle was a fundamental principle of the Free Church of Scotland; that property held in a trust which lacks the power to change fundamental matters is at hazard against a minority dissenting against any such change; and that the Barrier Act did not enable wholesale change but was a procedural device to ensure careful consideration of those matters that are within the power of the church to change.

The initial following of the remnant Free Church was reported in 1901 at around 35,000 if children are allowed for, and there were 260 elders. In 1904 a total of 120 congregations of the remnant Free Church contributed to the Sustentation Fund, only four of these being self-sustaining. The church was awarded the pre-1900 Free Church property but was not in a position to use it all. In 1905 Parliament acted to give the Free Church what she could use effectively at a congregational level, and perhaps 50% overall of the central funds. The United Free Church received the balance. The Free Church in 1903 had 31 ministers; in 1913, 78; and in 1923, 86; so there was real progress, including a significant movement of able ministers from the FP Church in 1905 and 1918.

Rowland S Ward

©2018

www.christianstudylibrary.org

Endnote:

¹ In David F. Wright and Gary F. Badcock (eds.), *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 226.