



Christianity in Scotland: Diversity

The Free Church of Scotland Assembly resolved on official discussions with the United Presbyterians in 1863. However, these collapsed in 1873 on the objection of Free Church conservatives such as Begg in Edinburgh, but particularly Highland ministers and elders. The objectors maintained that the voluntarist views of the United Presbyterians could not be reconciled with the establishment/national recognition principle of the Free Church. Nevertheless, it was clear a large majority wished a union regardless, but was not yet willing to lose the Highland part of the church, which had been so supportive in 1843, in a second disruption. The Free Church contented itself in declaring United Presbyterian ministers were eligible for calls to vacant charges in terms of a Mutual Eligibility Act.

Under Candlish's anointed successor in leadership of the Assembly, Robert Rainy (1826-1906), agitation for disestablishment of the Church of Scotland was renewed with a vote of 397 to 84 in the Free Church Assembly of 1875. This agitation continued until 1886 when the disestablishment campaign lost traction due to the political situation.

Meantime, other troubles afflicted the churches. As the 19th century advanced the impact of the Romantic movement became more and more evident. Emphasis fell on the individual and the subjective, and this coloured the revival movements at Kilsyth in 1839 on the eve of the Disruption, and the Ulster Revival of 1859 which spilled over into Scotland. The organised Scottish evangelistic campaign of D. L. Moody (1837-99) in 1874 was very influential, particularly in the Free Church and in the mission halls and Baptist churches. It was a more emotional and less doctrinal faith. In the main people on the fringes of the church were those converted. Attitudes to the severe simplicity of Scottish worship accelerated acceptance of hymns (1851 in the UPC, 1861 in the ECS and 1872 in the FCS) and instrumental music (ECS 1865, UPC 1872, FCS 1883). The older Calvinism was on the way out and the faith was increasingly viewed in individualistic terms, which exactly suited the direction of the culture. Electoral reform in 1868 gave the vote to all male heads of households.

Union and Diversity

The last half of the 19th century raised other intellectual issues that the Scottish churches generally were ill-prepared to face. In 1839 the Church of Scotland Assembly had resolved that all students of divinity were required to have the study of biblical criticism as part of their course. Lower criticism was the study of the transmission of the text and its variant readings; higher criticism was the study of the literary composition and character of the text, a field where the presuppositions of the critic were particularly crucial. All this is important for those who take the Bible seriously. However, scholars engaged in higher criticism were centred in Germany and included those who applied evolutionary concepts to the development of the Old Testament and the history of Israel, and some who dismissed the miraculous.

In the *Church of Scotland* the Confession of Faith was already viewed in a relaxed way in practice, and there was significant diversity extending even to the absolute idealism, derived from G. W. F. Hegel, of Professor John Caird who taught theology in Glasgow.

In the *United Presbyterian Church* there was also a less strict position. In May 1879 the United Presbyterians passed with virtual unanimity a Declaratory Act which modified subscription to the Confession with qualifying clauses. The Calvinism of the Confession was relaxed and views of the atonement which departed from penal substitution accommodated. It also stated '*liberty of opinion*

is allowed on such points in the Standards, not entering into the substance of the faith' without defining what matters were of this description.

The *Reformed Presbyterian Church* in the year following the Electoral Reform Act of 1832 held that to exercise the vote was to recognise the British constitution and therefore was inconsistent with the position on non-recognition held by the church and binding on members. As more members became eligible to vote pressure was exerted against this position and the requirement of discipline and exclusion from membership was dropped in 1858. In 1863 when the RP church had 46 congregations and nearly 7,000 communicant members, this position received overwhelming support and a minority thereupon protested and withdrew. The majority also dropped the covenanting position in 1872 and joined the Free Church in 1876.

The minority of 1863 consisting of eight congregations, chiefly in the south and west of Scotland, and augmented by four others who declined the 1876 union, had some 15% of the undivided church but entered into slow decline to an effective membership of 150 in 1987. Meanwhile, talks with the Free Church in the 1930s and in 1967 did not result in closer relations although there was by the later date no doctrinal difference as confessional subscription by communicant members had been dropped in 1932, the voting requirement in 1960 and closed communion in 1965.¹

The *Free Church* was a strict subscription body and prided herself on the high standard required of her ministry. A number studied in Germany and some adopted views found there among the higher critics. The question must be asked why the Free Church Fathers did not understand the potential of liberalism and teach students to deal with it more effectively. Self-confidence in her position and attainments seems to be at the root.

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Endnote:

¹ See G.J. Keddie, 'The Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Disruption of 1863' in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vols. 11.2 & 12.1.