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Scottish Presbyterianism

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Despite the secessions of the previous century, based principally on contested rights of patronage, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of the Scottish population—perhaps between 80 and 90 per cent—adhered to the national Church of Scotland (S. Brown, "Belief" 116). The hallmark of the national church persisted to be the Reformed principals of Scripture rightly preached, the sacraments of baptism and communion rightly administered, and discipline maintained by active kirk sessions staffed by the minister and elders. The Kirk, as it was colloquially called, continued to be the principle provider of both primary education and poor relief, based on its status as the established church, which had been upheld in the 1707 Act of Union. However, the massive social changes brought about by industrialization and corresponding urbanization placed enormous strain on the traditional role of parish churches and prompted demands for the building of new churches and the establishment of new parishes (S. Brown, "Thomas Chalmers"). Thomas Chalmers used the newly established parish of St. John's in Glasgow as an experiment to revivify the local parish in its role as primary provider of education and poor relief. He secured the city council's cessation of poor relief in his parish and instead organized ministerial visits to all houses, established a Sunday school, and distributed poor relief through the local church, thus requiring participation in the local parish as a prerequisite to accessing these services (S. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers* 91–151). While the experiment was highly controversial, it did reflect the ambitions of some in the Church of Scotland to maintain the historic centrality of the parish in community life (S. Brown, "Thomas Chalmers"). Victorian churches, particularly those with an evangelical sensibility, restored congregational discipline where it was feared to have lapsed. According to Stewart J.

Brown, "For many Scots, kirk session discipline was linked with the mid-Victorian emphases on self-help, individual respectability and moral improvement" (S. Brown, "Belief" 128). For men such as Chalmers, new, active and engaged parishes were essential for the effective ministry of the Church, and these required like-minded men in the pulpit. They began to be openly defined as "evangelicals" and represented a growing voice in the Church of Scotland calling for changes to be made, a view opposed by the Enlightenment-minded moderates who had held sway over the national church for a century.[1]

In 1834, evangelicals held a majority in the general assembly. Long-standing concerns over patronage led to the passage of the Veto Act, which empowered congregations to block unwanted nominations from heritors, referred to as "non-intrusion." While not securing the positive power to call, the act secured congregational authority over final appointments. A second change in church law, the Chapels Act, enabled chapels of ease to be constituted fully as parish churches, thus giving them the right to representation in higher courts. The erection of chapels of ease resulted from the massive population boom driven by the Industrial Revolution, as did the church extension program Chalmers convened from 1834, which used voluntary contributions to erect new buildings (Chambers). Over the decade that followed, both the Veto and Chapel Acts came to be contested in appeals to secular courts. The cases were driven by men with heritable rights who feared the innovations were infringements on their privileges and that elevating chapels of ease to the status of full-fledged parishes would flood the church's courts with evangelicals. In the case of the Chapels Act, the Court of Session determined that it breached the rights of the historic parishes out of which the new had been carved. The Veto Act also fell in the Court of Session, which declared the General Assembly had acted *ultra vires* in directly infringing upon patrons' rights. The Court of Session further determined that since the Church of Scotland had been established in 1560 by an act of Parliament, the Kirk was in fact a creation of the state and

thus subordinate to secular law. By the 1840s, two factions existed in the national church, termed polemically by Hugh Miller as "missionary" and "anti-missionary" (*The Two Parties*).

At the opening session of the 1843 General Assembly, over 190 ministers and elders walked out of the initial session, declaring it "not to be deemed a free and lawful Assembly ... according to the original and fundamental principles" (Buchanan 2: 487). Reconvening in Canonmills, they signed an "Act of Separation and Deed of Demission" and formed the Free Church of Scotland. In total, more than 450 ministers (162 from extension churches or chapels of ease) and 200 probationers left the Church of Scotland, while 752 ministers remained. More significantly, however, half the lay membership of the Church of Scotland left, in what has come to be known as the Disruption, to establish the Free Church of Scotland. At the root of this action was a rejection of any notion that the church should be subordinate to the state. In leaving the national church, they had to abandon their church buildings, which remained the property of the established church. However, as a result of successful planning over the winter of 1842–43, the new Free Church raised significant sums which allowed 470 new churches to be built in the first year and 700 by 1847. Separate colleges for training ministers were also established in Edinburgh (1843), Aberdeen (1853), and Glasgow (1855). According to Chalmers, one of the leading lights of the new Free Church, "though we quit the Establishment, we go out on the Establishment principle; we quit a vitiated Establishment, but would rejoice in returning to a pure one …. we are advocates for a national recognition and national support of religion—and we are not voluntaries" (qtd. in Hanna 2: 647). Hugh Miller, an influential layman and writer who supported the Free Church, declared: "We have but one Bible and one Confession of faith in our Scottish Establishment, but we have two religions in it; and these, though they bear exactly the same name and speak nearly the same language, are yet fundamentally and vitally

different" (*Letter* 8). Out of the polemic of the Ten Years' Conflict and the Disruption, a vibrant print and literary culture developed, fostered by rival publications and the establishment of (sometimes short-lived) periodicals.

The bifurcation of the national church led to fundamental changes in government policy. The unsustainable load of poor relief on the Kirk prompted reform of the poor laws, while the state took on principle responsibility for education by 1872. By 1851, 32 per cent of Scotland's churchgoing population attended the Church of Scotland, an equal percent the Free Church of Scotland, and 19 per cent the United Presbyterian Church (a union of eighteenth-century Secession churches in 1847). Thus, while over 80 per cent of Scotland's churchgoing population continued to adhere to Presbyterian churches, almost two-thirds were in dissenting Presbyterian denominations and, by the 1870s, advocated disestablishment of the Church of Scotland (C. Brown 45–46; S. Brown, "Belief" 129, 132). Thus Scotland remained overwhelmingly Presbyterian, and theologically Reformed, but bitterly divided over the appropriate relationship between church and state. The increase in church-building boosted seating capacity and new suburban—and increasingly "bourgeois"—congregations in the late-Victorian period built church halls (sometimes as many as five) to support new activities, including sports clubs, the Boys' Brigade (established 1883), self-help societies, temperance groups, sewing circles, literary societies, and the Women's Guild (established 1888). According to Callum Brown, the new suburban churches focused on their own middle-class members and their leisure activities, with missionary endeavours directed toward working-class parts of the city gradually ceasing (129).

In a development fuelled in part by evangelical impulses that the Christian faith should be proclaimed to all, as well as liberalizing tendencies, the stricter aspects of Westminster Calvinism—particularly the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement—gave way to the broadening theological consciences. Whereas all men ordained

to ministry of word and sacrament, as well as elders, had been required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith from 1690 with its emphases on election, reprobation and the indentification of the Pope as antichrist, in the later-Victorian period, Presbyterian denominations began to ease the requirements for subscription, allowing for divergence—namely, the United Presbyterian Church (1879), the Free Church of Scotland (1892), and the Church of Scotland (1910). The personalization of religion also contributed to a relaxing of church discipline and a prioritization of pastoral mediation (S. Brown, "Belief" 128). As well, significant liturgical changes occurred throughout the Victorian period. Metrical Psalm singing and long extempore sermons of the early nineteenth century gave way to organs, hymns, and shorter sermons delivered from notes or scripts. By 1904, nearly 90 per cent of Church of Scotland congregations had organs and over 80 per cent choirs. Church buildings became more decorative and, by mid-century, featured stained-glass windows. According to Stewart J. Brown, all these changes "made the churches more attractive to the polite tastes of the middle-class members who contributed most to the financial support of the church .... grand churches could also have the effect of making working-class Christians feel less comfortable and welcome at Presbyterian Sunday services" ("Belief" 122).

With the diversification of denominations (both Presbyterian and otherwise), a lack of coercive attendance, and significant social dislocation, the Victorian period witnessed a significant rise in voluntaryism (a significant shift in the Free Church from the 1870s) and secularization (Mallon). Yet it has also been argued that church membership likely doubled during the period from 1830 to 1914, fuelled by the proliferation of churches and choice, and the personalization of religion within what Callum Brown has called a "salvation economy" (*Death* ch. 3). Thus the drift of Scottish Protestantism was away from comprehensive membership, strict Westminster Calvinism, and an established national church. In fact, the 1929 reunion of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church (formed by the coming

together of majorities of the Free Church of Scotland and United Presbyterian Church)

occurred on the condition of disestablishment. The cause of the Secession churches and the

Disruption eventually won the day; throughout the Victorian period, Presbyterianism (in

contested forms) continued to define personal and national identities for the majority of

Scots, at home and in many colonial contexts, frequently proving a distinctive Scottish

contribution to the expansion of the British Empire (Wallace). In New Zealand, for instance,

it served as the dominant religious force (Carey 241). Yet at home, Presbyterianism

continued to serve as a marker of inclusion. As anti-Irish Catholic sentiment grew in the

1920s, many argued they did not belong because they were outside the Presbyterian

covenants that defined the nation, whereas Ulster Protestants—and particularly

Presbyterians—had been and could be accommodated (S. Brown "Outside").

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Notes

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[1] The hallmarks of evangelicalism in the Victorian period included an emphasis on conversion, Biblical authority, a crucicentric emphasis on the doctrine of atonement, and social activism. See Bebbington 1–19.