THE DISRUPTION

IT is fitting that *The Evangelical Quarterly* should take notice of the centenary of the Disruption which falls to be remembered by the Scottish Churches this year. It is not my purpose now, nor is it necessary—authoritative pens are engaged upon the task—to retell the story that reached its climax in the dramatic scene of 18th May, 1843. Nor shall I attempt any original interpretation. All I offer is my personal tribute of appreciation.

New and urgent problems have arisen to perplex both Church and State, problems in the relations of Religion and Politics undreamt of a hundred years ago. And to-day our thoughts are engrossed with events fraught with tremendous issues for the nations, for the Church, for Christian civilisation. Nevertheless it is impossible to treat the Disruption issues as no longer relevant or important. They have to do with the permanent and essential nature of the Church. Nor can the Disruption be regarded simply as one example among many of the " fissiparous tendency " of Scottish Presbyterianism (a phrase beloved by its critics of other orders). Still less is it to be dismissed as a peculiarly virulent outbreak of the alleged *perfervidum ingenium Scottorum.*

The word, disruption, has, indeed, an explosive sound in our ears; more violent than, e.g., Secession, Separation or Schism. We are being reminded by the authorities that in the language of the time and in the thought of the responsible leaders it was not held to imply the shattering of the Church of Scotland. It implied, in the polite language of diplomacy, the " denunciation " of its alliance with the State. In the providence of God, as many to-day must believe, it proved impossible for a party even with a majority in the Church Courts to achieve this result in actual fact; God having some better thing in store.

One cannot think of the Disruption without pausing for a moment to pay tribute to the moral grandeur of the thing; the self-sacrifice of upwards of 400 ministers who for a principle left their Churches, manses and stipends; and, not least, the loyal liberality of those who undertook the unwonted burden of supporting the Free Church. We may well look back with reverence on an event which moved contemporary observers

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to admiration for an impressive and unexpected demonstration of the vitality of Christian principles. It is a page of Scottish Church History of which every Scot, whatever his ecclesiastical affiliation, has reason to be proud. Certainly we have seen nothing like it until our own time when we witness the Churches of Europe engaging in an even sterner struggle, and winning once more the world's awed attention.

Further, we must acknowledge with gratitude the infusion of new vigour into the religious life of Scotland. Primarily this is apparent in the Free Church itself, which rapidly realised its programme of nation-wide extension of its ministry and educational system, culminating in three Theological Colleges soon to be world-famous, as also of the missionary enterprise to which it fell heir. But the "Auld Kirk" too, left stunned and seemingly discredited and derelict—a nonentity as Dr. Chalmers said—experienced a revival of energy and effectiveness. This goes far to counterbalance the regrettable legacy of bitterness which it required more than two generations to efface.

It is commonly supposed that the cause of the Disruption was the old grievance of Patronage, but this is an over-simplification. It is true that the Patronage question played a great part in the Ten Years' Conflict. The Law Courts were appealed to in defence of the rights of patrons and their presentees, alleged to have been infringed by illegal action on the part of the Church. Non-intrusion was one of the slogans of the Evangelical party, which made them also the popular party at a time of heated democratic political agitation. But the leaders were slow to denounce patronage as evil in itself. Only towards the end of the struggle did they commit themselves to the demand for the repeal of the iniquitous Act of Queen Anne. If in the eighteenth century patronage had worked in favour of Moderatism, in the nineteenth century, with its changed spirit, it might conceivably work the other way. In fact even with patronage the Evangelicals had acquired a preponderance in most of the Presbyteries and in the General Assembly.

Nevertheless the exercise of patronage was giving rise to much local dissatisfaction with consequent alienation from the Church and increase of Dissent. To remedy this state of affairs it was sought to give congregations some voice in the appointment of their ministers by putting substance into the "Call", a necessary if hitherto merely formal document in connection

with the settlement of ministers. The method adopted was something of a compromise. No attack was made on patronage as such, but congregations were given the power to veto the settlement of any particular presentee. Such a veto would imply, it was hoped, no aspersions on his character, but would be clear evidence that his ministry in that particular parish was unlikely to be fruitful. The Patron could nominate another.

There will be different opinions as to the wisdom of this method, even where the purpose is thoroughly approved. Its legality was immediately challenged, and the simple question of the rights of patrons and presentees opened out into a major theological issue touching the powers of government derived by the Church from Christ, its Divine Head—in other words "The Crown Rights of the Redeemer". The Law Courts decided in effect that the Church of Scotland was simply an Ecclesiastical Establishment, created by Statute and deriving from Statute what limited powers it possessed; in fact no Church at all in the sense of its own Confessional Standards. Such a conception is clearly intolerable for any Reformed Church.

In 1843 the Legislature, obstinately conservative in a restive age, would give no relief. Since then it has given the various freedoms demanded. In 1844 the erection of new parishes *quoad sacra* was regularised. In 1874 patronage was abolished. Finally in 1921 Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual were endorsed by the State. These Articles set forth all that the Church claimed to be its inherent jurisdiction in 1843. Thus was the way made open for the Union of 1929. The question arises—Could not all this have been achieved without Disruption, if only men had had a little more patience? I doubt it. Without the plagues of Egypt would Pharaoh have let the people go? That the Church of Scotland has achieved the status of a Church both national and free, a legal recognition of her right to be what she has always claimed to be, she owes to the testimony in word and sacrificial deeds of the men who "went out" in 1843.

There is another angle from which the Disruption must be viewed if it is to be truly judged. It must be seen against the background of the world-wide religious revival of the first half of the nineteenth century. This revival took various forms, not all of them evangelical in our sense of the word, e.g., the Oxford Movement in the Church of England, which was in part a

reaction against Evangelicalism. In the Reformed Churches strictly so-called a new spirit of enthusiasm and warm personal piety began to challenge the prevailing rationalism. In 1845 Alexandre Vinet and his followers founded a free evangelical Church in the Canton de Vaud, and in 1849 the Union des Églises Évangéliques separated from L'Église Réformée de France. A similar movement took place in Holland in 1839. Scotland therefore did not stand alone but shared in a movement that was universal. In part it was a revival of faith in the fundamental Christian verities which rationalism had obscured. Partly it was a renewed feeling for personal individual religion. Partly it was the eager desire to offer the Gospel as the only remedy for the spiritual destitution that men saw around them. Everywhere there was an upsurge of spiritual life, and everywhere it met the same obstacles, legal and ecclesiastical forms, vested interests, and hostility of those who held unmoved to the old ways. Everywhere the new life finding the old channels too narrow or artificially obstructed must break out and find new channels for itself.

The nineteenth century was characterised by divisions. The twentieth has been repairing them by unions. Not that it merely deplores the divisions and would gladly forget them. On the contrary, it recalls them with reverence and thankfulness, and seeks to understand how by such conflicts the Church has been enabled to enter upon a richer and better heritage, a fuller Christian life, and a nobler vision of its mission on earth.

THE EDITOR.