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THE SECOND DISRUPTION: THE ORIGINS OF THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF 1893

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Introduction

In May 1893, Scotland experienced a Second Disruption when two ministers, Donald Macfarlane of Raasay and Donald Macdonald of Shieldaig, left the Free Church of Scotland. They were followed by a hand-full of students who had been intending to enter the Free Church ministry, as well as a considerable number of Free Church members and adherents. Within a short period of time the new Church which they founded had come to be known as the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.[1] Another Scottish denomination had been born.

There were many reasons why the Free Church, itself the product of the Disruption of 1843,[2] split again in 1893; why a Church which was once 'so happily united that you have no right hand and no left in that place'[3] became one of the most bitterly-divided denominations in the Protestant world. Within the confines of this paper, though, these reasons will be divided into four basic areas. It will commence with a section which emphasises those aspects of the changing world which,

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1 For the background to the Free Presbyterian Disruption of 1893, see James Lachlan MacLeod, 'The Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland' (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1993). The standard accounts of Free Presbyterian history can be found in the following: Donald Beaton, (ed.), *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1893-1933* (Glasgow, 1933); *Memoir, Diary and Remains of the Rev. Donald Macfarlane, Dingwall* (Inverness, 1929); *Memoir, Biographical Sketches, Letters, Lectures and Sermons (English and Gaelic) of the Revd Neil Cameron, Glasgow* (Inverness, 1932); and Donald Macfarlane, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev Donald Macdonald, Sheildaig, Ross-shire* (Dingwall, 1903). The most recent is D. B. MacLeod *et al*, (eds), *One Hundred Years of Witness* (Glasgow, 1993).

2 For changing historical views on the Disruption of 1843, see S. Brown and M. Fry, (eds), *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1993) and Donald Withrington, 'The Disruption: a Century and a Half of Historical Interpretation', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* [hereafter *RSCHS*], 25: 1 (1993), pp. 118-53.

3 Patrick Carnegie Simpson, *Life of Principal Rainy*, 2 vols (London, 1909), 1, p. 166.

directly or indirectly, most affected the Free Churchmen who left at the Free Presbyterian Disruption; the second section will examine the bitter divisions engendered in the Free Church by one of the most significant currents of change in the nineteenth century – biblical criticism; the third section explores the central issue of the division within the Free Church between the Highlands and Lowlands; and the fourth and final section is a survey of the movement towards revision of the Westminster Confession which was to be the official justification for the Free Presbyterian Disruption. But it is with a brief examination of the wider situation which produced the Free Presbyterian Church that this paper commences.

1. The Changing World

On examination of the process by which the Free Church became sufficiently divided for another disruption to take place, it becomes clear that the general air of uncertainty created by the changing world played an important part. One example was the industrialisation and urbanisation of Scotland, which by the late nineteenth century was posing serious questions to churchmen. Many within the Free Church were immensely worried by Scotland's sprawling urban areas, containing some of the worst slums in Europe. But while some Free Churchmen undoubtedly saw themselves as having a divinely ordained duty to do their best to help the poor in their midst,[4] others felt that their duty as a Church was not to involve themselves in political and social issues but to concentrate on the preaching of the gospel.

This was complicated by the fact that the Free Church was, in the Lowlands at any rate, becoming more of a middle class church; S. J. Brown said of the years after 1843 that 'the Free Church became an increasingly middle class body, with a membership proud of their strict work ethic and social status'.[5] When even a relatively enlightened Free Churchman like W. G. Blaikie could express the view that the vast majority of the population were destined to be

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[4] See *e.g.* J. M. E. Ross, *Ross of the Cowcaddens* (London 1905); G. F. Barbour, *Life of Alexander Whyte* (London, 1923); D. H. Bishop, 'Church and Society – a Study of the Social Work and Thought of James Begg, D.D. (1808-1883)...' (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1953), pp. 1-104; S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982), chs. 3-5.

[5] Brown, *Chalmers*, pp. 345-6.

'hewers of wood and drawers of water',[6] and that the churches' role in helping the working classes out of their depressed state was 'to stand by and to shout encouragement to them',[7] it should perhaps not be surprising that the Free Church did not do more to respond to the problems of urbanisation. It is clearly a complex issue but it is evident that the urbanisation of Scotland, with all its attendant social problems, was a vexing backdrop against which the Free Church had to work out its position. Disunity was probably always the most likely consequence.

At the same time the Free Church – a denomination which was proportionally better represented in the north than in the south of Scotland – had to grapple with the many problems faced by its Highland people. The picture was extremely complex, as the combined factors of emigration, Clearances, new technology and economic pressures on both tenants and landlords all contributed to the difficulties in the region. Earlier conflicts in the Highlands over the Clearances – which, whatever their origins,[8] had left a legacy of helplessness and intense resentment throughout the Highlands – gave way in the later part of the century to bitter confrontation over the land laws, the legislation governing land-holding in the Highlands.[9] The church often found itself forced either to get involved or face the consequences of unpopularity. The grim example was the Church of Scotland, which had been all but deserted in the Highlands in 1843 partly as a result of Highland antagonism over the Church's lack of activity at the time of the Clearances.[10]

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6 Quoted in D. C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest. Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945* (New York, 1987), p. 193.

7 D. J Withrington, 'The Churches in Scotland, c.1870 - c.1900: Towards a New Social Conscience?', *RSCHS* 19 (1977), p. 164.

8 'Mass eviction', said T. M. Devine, 'was the culmination of the interplay of powerful demographic, economic and ideological forces' (*The Great Highland Famine. Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh, 1988, p. 189).

9 For the conflict over the Highland land laws see M. Lynch, *Scotland A New History* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 375-7, I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters' War* (Stornoway, 1989) and I. F. Grigor, *Mightier Than A Lord. The Highland Crofters' Struggle For the Land* (Stornoway, 1979).

10 This is certainly the view of James Hunter in his seminal *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976), *e.g.* p. 95.

When it came to the 1880s the religious input to the struggle was much more overt – the Land Laws campaigner Henry George saw the land campaign as 'essentially a religious movement'[11] – and again the churchman had to ask himself if it was possible and, if so, practicable to turn a blind eye to the issue, saying that his 'kingdom was not of this world'. This subject is worthy of a paper in its own right, but what is important to bear in mind here is the existence of this exceedingly controversial issue within the Free Church at exactly the same time as many other church issues were beginning to come under review. When considering the religious conflicts in the Highlands which characterised the latter years of the nineteenth century, it seems almost impossible to ignore the extremely traumatic reconstruction which had racked the region throughout the century. It was, indeed, a time of transition, with conflict all but inevitable and schism an ever-present prospect.

There were naturally many other factors which contributed to the changing world of nineteenth-century Scotland – the decline of traditional sabbatarianism and the increasing Roman Catholic population to name but two. Taken as a whole, the social turbulence of the late nineteenth century threw up profound challenges for churchmen. Highlanders of theologically conservative views found themselves in a rapidly changing world, and this exaggerated the apparent threats posed by change within the Church. Of course this turbulence alone did not produce the Free Presbyterian Disruption, but in varying ways it was transforming the world in which the men who were to form the Free Presbyterian Church lived and worked. In many ways their self-perception as a small group of the righteous facing an alien and hostile world is a direct, if not inevitable, product of the times which moulded them.

2. Biblical Criticism

In an age of change and development, almost every accepted religious theory was being tested in what the Free Church professor Marcus Dods described as the 'crucible' of criticism. People were being confronted with what has been called 'the riddles to which the spirit of a new age was demanding a solution from every thinking man'.[12]

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[11] J. D. Wood, 'Transatlantic Land Reform; America and the Crofters Revolt, 1878-1888', *Scottish Historical Review* 63, (1984), p. 79.

[12] M. Dods, *Recent Progress in Theology. Inaugural Lecture at New College, Edinburgh, 1889* (Edinburgh, 1889), pp. 9-11; J. Strahan, *Andrew Bruce Davidson* (London, 1917), p. 102.

In the memorable words of one moderator of the Free Church General Assembly as he looked back over the developments of the nineteenth century:

> There has been no lack of scrutiny. Every question connected with the Faith has been placed under the microscope; everything sacred, whether book or doctrine, has been called on to show its credentials. Science, philosophy, criticism, history, have each been led forward to take part in the testing process.[13]

In the minds of conservative churchmen in general and of the Free Presbyterian founders in particular, perhaps the intellectual movement which did most to cast doubt on the veracity of 'the Old Paths' during the nineteenth century was biblical criticism. This is not the place to visit the history of biblical criticism,[14] but it is important to understand how the Free Church of Scotland responded to this vital area of nineteenth-century thought. And it is quite evident that the Free Church did not make a unified response to developments in biblical criticism; indeed these different responses produced a lasting bitterness which ultimately contributed to the splitting of the Free Church in 1893.

On one side the Free Church had some of the most celebrated biblical critics in Britain. One such was William Robertson Smith, the brilliant young academic appointed a professor in the Free Church in 1870 at the age of twenty-three, whose writings accepted many of the most far-reaching conclusions of continental (especially German) biblical criticism.[15] While men like A. B. Davidson, Smith's teacher at the New College in Edinburgh, played a vital part, it is widely acknowledged that it was Smith who did most to make the critical movement visible, with his popular writings in such places as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and his much publicised heresy trials in the

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[13] W. R. Taylor, Moderator's Address, *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* [hereafter PDGAFC], 1900, p. 3.

[14] See *e.g.* N. M. de S. Cameron, *Biblical Higher Criticism and the Defence of Infallibilism in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Lewiston, NY, 1987).

[15] The Smith controversy has been much discussed in recent years, but for the most interesting near-contemporary accounts, see J. S. Black and G. W. Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London, 1912) and Simpson, *Rainy*. See also J. H. Brown, 'The Contribution of William Robertson Smith to Old Testament Scholarship, with Special Emphasis on Higher Criticism' (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, Durham NC, 1964).

late 1870s and early 1880s. Smith's role, perhaps, was to take his various mentors' ideas further than they had been taken before from within the pale of a Church which considered itself fairly rigidly Calvinist. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the doctrines of biblical higher criticism had very much 'arrived' in the Free Church of Scotland, where they were preached with vigour by some of the leading men of the Church, such as A. B. Bruce, Henry Drummond and Marcus Dods. Dods, in fact, once described biblical criticism in the following terms:

> Criticism is not a hostile force hovering round the march of the Christian Church, picking off all loosely attached followers and galling the main body; it is rather the highly trained corps of scouts and skirmishers thrown out on all sides to ascertain in what direction it is safe and possible for the Church to advance.[16]

Many others in the Church would have agreed with this view.

The problem for the Free Church, however, was that it also contained within its ranks some of biblical criticism's fiercest adversaries. One of the first Free Presbyterians, Neil Cameron, for example, referred to the men responsible for making 'the absolute infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, as being the Word of God...become a thing of the past' as 'traitors to God and men', while referring to the changes which were taking place in the Free Church as 'this flood which Satan was casting out of his mouth in order to carry [the Free Church] away completely'.[17] Professors Davidson and Dods were two of the principal enemies of all that these conservatives held dear, but Cameron's colleague Donald Beaton did see a distinction:

> [Davidson's] great gifts were used in administering the higher critical poison in small doses. It was done cautiously, but none the less effectively.... Dr Dods was not quite so cautious; he poured out glassfuls where Davidson administered drops, but both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament studies the deadly poison was instilled into the minds of students....[18]

The integrity of Scripture was such a central tenet of the Free Church conservatives that the idea of interfering with it filled them not only

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[16] M. Dods, *The Bible Its Origin and Nature* (Edinburgh, 1905), p. 168. An excellent summary of the controversial aspect of Dods's career is found in S. J. Edwards, 'Marcus Dods: with Special Reference to his Teaching Ministry' (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1960), esp. pp. 108-80.

[17] Beaton (ed.), *Cameron*, p. 20.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

with anger but also with horror. The sermons of many of the early Free Presbyterians were heavily peppered with quotations from Scripture; in some sections of their sermons, every second line is a portion of Scripture, reeling off parts from various books of the Bible to make and prove virtually every point. It is this love of, reverence for and familiarity with the Bible that must be borne in mind when considering the Free Presbyterian opposition to the higher critics. They believed that the Bible was absolutely infallible and verbally inspired and they believed that those who accepted biblical criticism were denying these crucial doctrines.

There can be little doubt that the Free Presbyterian Church's founding fathers viewed higher criticism as a development which denigrated the Bible, and as such something which had brought nothing but shame to the Free Church – shame which would have to be shared by all those who had not separated themselves from the polluted Church. This would seem to be the crucial point and it is worth repeating; the Bible was of such importance to all those who left in 1893 that the perceived attacks upon it from the higher critics were themselves sufficient justification for separation. The Bible meant almost everything to these men, and their whole attitude to the higher critics was shaped by that Bible-centred perspective. Conflict between the biblical critics and their opponents was unavoidable, given the sheer scale of the divide between the opposite ends of the Free Church spectrum on this key issue. The statements of a man like Marcus Dods on the literal integrity of Scripture could hardly have been further from those of Donald Macfarlane or Neil Cameron, despite the fact that all claimed loyalty to the Free Church of the Disruption and all were professedly trying to do God's work in their own way. Dods would have considered himself to be as much a 'believer' as he was a 'critic', but despite the evidence for this, to those who left at the Free Presbyterian Disruption of 1893 the phrase 'believing critic' was a palpable nonsense. Separation seems to have been inevitable.

3. The Highland-Lowland Divide

A third reason why the Free Church split in 1893 was because of the presence of a fault line which had existed within the denomination for decades. During the fifty years between 1843 and 1893 an increasingly obvious divide had come to exist in the Free Church between the Highland and Lowland congregations. On most of the issues which disrupted the unity of the nineteenth-century Free Church, the Highlanders and the Lowlanders were on opposite sides. This was particularly so on issues such as biblical criticism and revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Highlanders tending to be

opposed to ecclesiological or theological change. On the religion of much of the Highland Free Church, with this implacable opposition to religious innovation of any kind, the Southern part of the Church looked with bewilderment, ignorance and exasperation.[19]

At the same time the language of the Highland Free Church, Gaelic, was under sustained attack. From the early modern period onwards, 'both the Gaelic language and its speakers were to be equated with backwardness and incivility'.[20] English rapidly advanced to become, in the words of Charles Withers, 'the language of gentility, of status, and as the medium of progress and the yardstick of cultural acceptability'. 'There has', he said, 'been a particularly long-standing antipathy towards the [Gaelic] language and its culture.'[21] Gaelic came to be perceived as an inferior language, an obstacle to advancement, and the sooner that it was replaced by English then the better it would be for everyone. It has to be stressed that Gaelic was overwhelmingly the language of both the preachers and the congregations who stood out against the new ideas of the young, liberal and Lowland Free Church. The Gaelic language, Highland religion and resistance to theological change tended to be closely tied

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[19] A great deal has been written on the distinctive nature of Highland religion; for contemporary accounts see *e.g.* J. Kennedy, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* (Edinburgh, 1861); A. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North* (Wick, 1896) and *Life of John Kennedy D.D.* (London, 1887); J. Macleod, *By-Paths of Highland Church History* (Edinburgh, 1965); K. Macdonald, *Social and Religious Life in the Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1902); A. T. Innes, 'The Religion of the Highlands', *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, 21 (July, 1872), pp. 413-46. More recent delineations of the distinctions are found in such works as John MacInnes' brilliant *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1951); 'The Origin and Early Development of "The Men"', *RSCHS* 8 (1944), pp. 16-41; 'Religion in Gaelic Society', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 52 (1980-82), pp. 222-42 ; A. I. MacInnes, 'Evangelical Protestantism in the Nineteenth Century Highlands' in G. Walker and T. Gallagher, (eds.), *Sermons and Battle Hymns. Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1990); K. R. Ross, *Church and Creed* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 238-48.

[20] C. W. J. Withers, 'The Scottish Highlands Outlined; An Assessment of the Cartographic Evidence for the Highland-Lowland Boundary', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 98, (1982), p. 143.

[21] C. W. J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland 1698-1891* (Edinburgh, 1984), p.1.

together. It was not a combination on which the Lowland Free Church looked with much relish.

There was, however, an even more sinister side to the divide between the two regions of Scotland. The mid-to-late nineteenth century was a time when racism was rife in the British Isles, having been given the spurious camouflage of pseudo-science. This pseudo-scientific racism created a structure of races which sought to place everyone in their appropriate place in a grand hierarchy. One of the foremost proponents of 'scientific racism' was Robert Knox, whose infamous 1850 work, *The Races of Men*, is accepted as 'one of the most articulate and lucid statements of racism ever to appear'.[22] While it is mainly studied because of its stance on the differences between the White and the Coloured races, it also contains important references to the Celt.

What this book and many other examples of mid-Victorian race theory make clear is that the Celt was considered an inferior being, possessing an inferior culture and speaking an inferior language.[23] It was a view which was widely popularised throughout the nineteenth century, not least by the fashionable Oxford School of historiography of men like William Stubbs, Edward Freeman and John Richard Green, writers whose influence went far beyond academia. By the later part of the nineteenth century most of Britain's leading historians were advocates of what has been called Anglo-Saxonism, stressing the over-riding importance of race, and believing that all that was good in English history was as a result of Teutonic origins.[24]

It can hardly be stressed enough that these views were being put forward by some of the brightest and most progressive minds in Britain – by an intellectual elite. That they had an impact on the liberals in the Lowland Free Church seems to be almost a certainty, and for evidence it is necessary to look no further than their own words. Time and again the leaders of the liberal or progressive side of the Free

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[22] M. Banton, *Race Relations* (London, 1967), pp. 28, 29.

[23] *E.g.* R. Knox, *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations,* 2nd edn (London, 1862), pp. 12, 14-15, 18, 26, 320, 322, 327, *etc.* See also two important books by L. P. Curtis; *Anglo-Saxons and Celts. A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, CT., 1968) and *Apes and Angels. The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot, 1971).

[24] T. F. Gosset, *Race: the History of an Idea in America* (Dallas, 1973), p. 98.

Church resorted to crude racial generalisations to explain away Highland opposition to their plans.

One racial slur, for example, that the Highlanders followed their leaders blindly and unhesitatingly,[25] was repeated frequently by the Lowland Free Church in the later nineteenth century. Norman Walker, in speaking of the Free Presbyterian Disruption of 1893, said that the Highlanders displayed a 'tendency to move in masses...the habit of following leaders [is] a remnant of the old feeling of loyalty to the chiefs'. Indeed, he had even managed to discover that 'individuality is less common in the Highlands than in the Lowlands'.[26] A. T. Innes, a prominent Edinburgh lawyer and Free Church layman, wrote that 'The process of independent thought...is far less popular among serious minds in the North than it is with the corresponding class in the South'.[27] At almost every point of division between the Highland and Lowland viewpoint in the late-nineteenth century Free Church, the disparity was explained in terms of the Highlanders being, in Patrick Carnegie Simpson's words,

> a people impressionable, not always informed, and already, by racial differences of temper and habit, inclined to look strangely and even suspiciously across the Grampians.[28]

Statements such as this would be remarkable if it were not for the fact that they were so common, not only from secular sources but also from religious writers. There are dozens of examples of this kind of language being used by Lowland Free Churchmen. Indeed, taken individually, statements like these from Walker, Simpson and Innes might be explained away as aberrations, or simply as the products of frustration over ecclesiastical opposition from men of perceived lower intellect. But when put alongside one another they rapidly begin to add up to evidence that the racist ideology of the nineteenth century was being used by the Free Church's Lowland intelligentsia when it suited them so to do. Race became the key whenever the Highlanders acted in a way which the Lowlanders in the Free Church could not explain.

That said, it has also to be stated that there was precious little Christian love and brotherly understanding flowing south from the

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[25] See *e.g.* E. Burt, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London*, 2 vols (1754; 5th edn, London, 1818), I, pp. 2-3.

[26] Norman L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1895), p. 132.

[27] Innes, 'Religion of the Highlands', p. 433.

[28] Simpson, *Rainy*, I, p. 441.

Highland part of the Free Church. The Highlanders felt themselves both beleaguered and wronged, facing what they considered to be the virtual tyranny of the majority. This helped to produce what can be called a 'laager mentality'. The situation worried the Highlanders, but they were either unaware or unconcerned that their own attitude, of holding what they had at all costs, was contributing in large measure to the impending rupture in the Free Church. Ultimately, if the price for maintaining the status quo was to be the splitting up of the Free Church of Scotland, it was to them a price worth paying.

Thus it can be seen that the pressures for division in the Free Church were coming from both sides of the Highland Line. This mutual antagonism may not have alone splintered the Free Church, but it has been ignored far too often in the past, and deserves to be given careful consideration, both now and in the future.

4. Revision of The Westminster Confession of Faith

Although the factors already discussed were critical to the Free Presbyterian Disruption, in the eyes of those who took part in it there was one consideration which outweighed all others – the framing and passing of the Declaratory Act, the Act by which the Free Church qualified its commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The conservatives in the Free Church were undeniably extremely gloomy about the developments which were taking place both within and without the Church; crucially, however, the position of the Free Church of Scotland remained *formally* unchanged until 1892. The final and formal act which eventually forced them to make their decision to split the Free Church came with the passing of the Declaratory Act.[29] 'The Declaratory Act', commented one Free Churchman to the General Assembly in 1894, 'had provoked the flower of the Church into secession'.[30]

There can be little doubt that the Free Church of 1843 was a church which broadly adhered to the Westminster Confession; it seems fair to say that in its early years there were relatively few Free Churchmen who would have disagreed radically with Dr Buchanan's claim in the 1843 General Assembly that they were

> teaching the pure doctrines of the Scriptures as embodied in the Confession of Faith.... We do not separate from the Confession of

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[29] 'Introductory', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* 1:1 (May, 1896), p. 3.

[30] McNeilage, in *PDGAFC*, 1894, p. 87.

> Faith, which we do truthfully and assuredly regard as the sound and scriptural exposition of the word of God.[31]

As Kenneth Ross has perceptively observed, although there might have been disagreement among the Disruption Fathers as to what precisely was implied by Confessional subscription, 'it was not pressed, since all were equally warmly attached to the Calvinism of Westminster'.[32]

With the passing years, however, things changed, and by the 1880s movements to revise the Confession were in existence in many parts of the world, including the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Scotland was no exception, with the United Presbyterian Church, in many ways the sister church of the Free Church, passing their Declaratory Act in 1879. Although the movement within the Free Church to revise the Westminster Confession clearly emerged out of a growing disquiet with the doctrines that it contained, it also has to be placed in the context of the growing movement in the Free Church that favoured Union with the United Presbyterian Church. There had been prolonged and determined efforts to secure Union in the 1860s and 1870s, with many of the brightest lights in the Free Church heavily involved.[33] At that time one of the main obstacles to Union had been the fact that the United Presbyterians were Voluntaries while the Free Church was not; in other words, one Church favoured the Establishment principle while the other favoured Disestablishment. Over the course of the 1870s and the 1880s, however, the Free Church, led by Robert Rainy, itself came increasingly to favour Disestablishment, and by the 1890s that subject was no longer a source of serious disagreement between the two denominations.[34] Also by then, as has been seen, the United Presbyterian Church had qualified its terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession, and so a desire on the part of the Free Church to do something similar can be seen in the context of desiring to remove one last key difference between the two Churches in order to facilitate Union. It is perhaps significant that within eight years of the passing of the Free Church Declaratory Act, Union with the United Presbyterian Church took place. The first overture to the Free Church General Assembly on the subject of Confessional revision appeared in 1887; by the summer of 1889, the trickle of overtures regarding the Confession of Faith had been transformed into a deluge. The General Assembly of that year

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31 *PDGAFC*, 1843, pp. 26, 27.
32 Ross, *Church and Creed*, p.196.
33 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-29.
34 *Ibid.*, pp. 119-28.

received no fewer than thirty-three of them. About one third of these were in favour of retaining the present relationship between Church and Confession but, significantly, all of the rest betrayed more or less hostility towards Westminster.[35]

After much discussion and a great deal of contentious debate, the Free Church passed its Declaratory Act on 26 May 1892 by a majority of 346 to 195. The Act sought to make subscription to the Westminster Confession easier by qualifying it in various ways, stressing the centrality of the love of God, playing down some of the implications of the Calvinist doctrine of the divine decrees and wrapping up the whole package by declaring that 'diversity of opinion is recognized in this Church on such points in the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith'.[36]

Those who left the Free Church in 1893 believed that the Declaratory Act fundamentally altered the Church; they believed that 'a modified acceptance of Confessional doctrine' now prevailed in the Church, and that 'in fact a new standard of doctrine has been set up.... This change of standard we hold is an obvious change in the constitution.'[37] Believing as they did that the Free Church was now a different denomination, those who disagreed with the Declaratory Act had few options left. In the words of Neil Cameron,

> When [the liberals] had filled the Church with the flood of heresies, carnality in worship and practice, the infamous Declaratory Act was duly passed into 'a binding law and constitution in the Church.' This meant that all the innovations contained in that Act were to be bound on all who would continue in future fellowship with that Church. We refused to put our necks under this Satanic yoke, so we separated in 1893 in order...to continue the existence of the Free Church of Scotland as that Church was settled in 1843.[38]

The Free Presbyterians, then, believed that dissociation from a flawed denomination was their only scriptural option, and in May 1893, on

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[35] *Free Church of Scotland Assembly Papers, No 1*, 1888, pp. 329-46. For a more detailed analysis of the background see MacLeod, 'Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church', ch. 4.

[36] 'Act anent Confession of Faith (No. 8 of Class II.)' (*Acts of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1889-1893*, p. 479).

[37] 'The Declaratory Act', *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* 1:2 (June, 1896), p. 42.

[38] Cameron, 'New Year's Day Lecture, 1926', in Beaton (ed.), *Cameron*, p. 174.

the ratification of the Act by that year's General Assembly, Donald Macfarlane tabled his protest and severed his connection with the Free Church. Not for the first time in the history of the Scottish church and, sadly, not for the last time, disagreement had led to Disruption.