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UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY

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Among various causes leading to the origin of our Church, we proposed to take notice of two more prominent ones. "The first, considered in last communication, was the head-strong eagerness and growing zeal with which the law of patronage, restored in 1712, was reduced to practice. The second, was the mournful departure from evangelical truth, as taught in the Westminster Standards, till the great majority of the ministers had rejected, and, in many cases, were disposed to ridicule the doctrines of grace. It is to the consideration of this, which is, unquestionably, the strongest ground of Secession, that we now proceed.

The Presbyterian Church, established in Scotland at the Revolution, did not receive the approbation of all Christians. There were those who were called Society-men, or Cameronians, descendants of the Covenanters, who carried their principles to the utmost length during the persecuting period. These regarded the Revolution Church as too Erastian in its constitution, and not only kept themselves apart from its communion, but refused to recognise the civil authorities of the land, because they had not subscribed the national covenant of their ancestors. There was also a party which seemed to occupy a middle position between the Establishment and the Cameronians. They agreed with the latter in considering the Revolution Church as Erastian; but they acknowledged the authority of the civil powers in all civil matters, disclaiming only the official interference of the magistrate in the affairs of the Church. These seem to have had views bearing a resemblance to those of our own Church; and, so far as we know, their numbers were considerable, and included some of the most conscientious and serious persons of that period. We are not, however, to suppose that all who actually joined the Revolution Church approved of the settlement it obtained. There were those, and they were numerous, who were thankful for the relief obtained from persecution—for the restoration of Presbytery—and for the legal abolition of the Prelatic form of Church government; and who, although they had not realized all that they wished or expected, in regard to the liberty and purity of the Church, conceived it their duty to acquiesce in the settlement of religion, in the hope that progress would be made, and that under the new administration there would be no hindrance presented, but every facility given, to confirm the principles, government, and measures of the Church, in all things, to the uttermost standard of scripture. These expectations were fondly cherished by many, even although there were grounds to apprehend the danger of disappointment, and indications, in some quarters, of hostility, both to evangelical truth and to the freedom and independence of the Church of Christ.

In the Revolution-Church itself the seeds of error and corruption were early sown. This was occasioned, in a great measure, although not entirely, by the introduction of so many ministers of the Episcopal order, who not only held unscriptural tenets, but were grossly immoral in their lives. It was also occasioned by many of the laity, men of worldly influence, who had their hands stained with the blood of the saints, being introduced as elders into the Supreme Ecclesiastical Court, and employing their opportunities and means in opposition to the principles and liberties of the Church. Thus not only many of the ministers, but many also of the laity were secret enemies of the Church to which they professed to conform. The consequence was, that the Church of Scotland, as at that time constituted, presented the unseemly aspect of a house divided against itself. The one party is in defended the doctrines of grace, as laid down in the Confession of Faith, and advocated the Church independence of civil authority, and its intrinsic right to regulate its own administrations. The other seemed anxious to corrupt its doctrines, and to bring it more and more under the control of the civil powers. Thus two opposing classes soon appeared, originating what were afterwards designated the orthodox and moderate parties in the Church. The latter at length became dominant, and with a high hand carried out their unconstitutional and arbitrary measures, by which facilities and encouragements were afforded to a course of mournful defection from evangelical truth and order.

It can easily be conceived, that in proportion as the moderate party acquired the ascendancy, the tide of corruption would flow with increas-

ing impetuosity, and that the counsels of the Church would be more and more secularized. The Episcopal Curates, it is true, had brought a corrupting agency into the Church, by which it degenerated both in doctrine and discipline. But they were not the only, or even the principal causes of its backsliding. In general they were too mean and despicable to have influence beyond their own spheres, and the most of them lived in the North-east of Scotland, where Episcopacy had greatly prevailed—"Whereas," says Dr. Struthers, in his History of the Relief Church, "it was about Edinburgh and Glasgow, in Ayrshire and in Galloway, which were famous covenanting districts, that men arose, who were slavish in their political principles, and who defiled and corrupted the pure doctrines of the gospel with Pelagian and Arian tenets. The Revolution-Church was no longer the same popular institution which she once was after she was fairly and fully taken into connection with the state, and supported out of the Treasury. Instead of being a Church protesting against tyrannical Acts of Council, she was now an expecting Church, spreading out her lap for royal favors. She might indeed deceive herself by thinking that she was still as independent as when she sat on her native hills and defied prelate kings attempting to force their liturgy upon her, but insensibly she bowed to the throne that sustained her, and by little and little withdrew from the people, and adopted the obsequious and worldly maxims of the Court. The visits made now and then by the Scottish Clergy to London, on matters connected with their Church, had a most injurious influence upon their Calvinistic principles, and their Presbyterian zeal for popular election and Church purity."

This corruption in doctrine appeared in many of the pulpits of Scotland, and spread insensibly, yet rapidly, over the whole land. The ministers who remained faithful, and those who hubbled and propagated erroneous views, having no congeniality of sentiment and feeling, had little ministerial intercourse, excepting in the meetings of their Presbyteries and higher Courts, and on these occasions their different principles appeared in the ecclesiastical policy which they practised, and thus the line of demarcation between the parties was more and more distinctly drawn; and by the same necessary or unavoidable interviews on ecclesiastical business, they became less disposed for more private intercourse, and hence their meetings together on communion occasions ceased to take place. From these causes the two parties were soon as much severed in ministerial confidence and fellowship, as although they had been actually in different communions. The Church of Scotland was, during this period, one only in name. The two parties were probably more severed in heart and co-operation, than any of the denominations into which it is now divided are from each other. Often in Presbytery meetings incidents occurred, which gave mournful demonstration of the progress of erroneous doctrine, and especially of the growing aversion which was felt to the doctrine of the Cross of Christ. Of this description on example, which speaks volumes on the subject of the Church's sad declension, is given in the diary of Mr. Wilson of Perth. "Our congregations," says he, "are planted with a set of corrupt ministers, who are strangers to the power of godliness, and therefore neither in their doctrine nor walk is there any savour of Christ about them; yea, such are becoming the prevailing party amongst the ministry, and too many of them mockers at the exercise and real experiences of the godly. At the opening of our Synodical meeting at Perth, Mr. Thomas Finlayson, minister at Dunbarrie, preached a very loose general sermon, and not without a sneer and some bitter invectives against serious ministers. 'Some,' said he, 'loved a popular cant, and affected to make grievances in preaching.' This same man, some short time after, when Mr. Moncrieff, of Abernethy, remarked on a young man's discourse, before the Presbytery of Perth, that there was nothing of Christ in it, had the assurance to reply, 'must Christ still be the burden of the song.' Yet the Presbytery took no notice of the scandalous expression—a sad scratch of the spirit that prevails amongst us."

But if that generation presented the wide-spreading errors of Arminianism, and even more glaring departures from the truth as in Jesus, there was a danger that the next would be still more contaminated, unless in the providence of God, some effectual check were given to the rapid current of corruption. For it was found that some who had the solemnly important and responsible duty of training the youth for the holy ministry, were not only grossly erroneous in the views they entertained, but were industriously instilling into the minds of those under their charge the most pernicious principles.