

## Free Church Jubilee.

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## III.

This startling invasion of the autonomy of the Church was followed and emphasized by the Strathbogie case. In 1837, a Mr. Edwards was presented to the living of Marnock, Strathbogie. For excellent reasons he was objected to by the congregation, only one man, and he the tavern-keeper of the parish, signed the call. The settlement therefore was not effected; but Mr. Edwards, appealing to the civil courts, secured in 1839 a decision in his favour. A majority of the Presbytery of Strathbogie were Moderates, and they willingly proceeded to obey the behests of the civil courts and settle Mr. Edwards as pastor of Marnock. The General Assembly was in no mood to tolerate such treason to the law of the Church, and the Commission of Assembly prohibited the Presbytery from taking any steps in the direction of Mr. Edwards' settlement. The Presbytery disregarded this ecclesiastical prohibition, preferring to obey the civil courts. Thereupon the Commission of Assembly suspended the Moderates' majority of the Presbytery from all the functions of the ministerial office. The issue was clear. By their ordination vows those men were bound to obey their ecclesiastical superiors in things ecclesiastical. But they chose to fling such considerations to the winds; and on the memorable 21st January, 1841, the seven suspended ministers, amid a protesting crowd of 2,000 people, in spite of the solemn and tearful departure from the Church of the whole congregation, proceeded to install Mr. Edwards pastor. Need we wonder that the Assembly of 1841, by an overwhelming majority, deposed them from the ministry?

Another phase of this strange Non-Intrusion conflict appeared when, upon the suspension of the Strathbogie ministers, others were sent, and among them many of the foremost ministers of the time, to preach the Gospel and dispense the sacraments to their parishioners, for, like a clap of thunder from a clear sky, came an interdict from the Court of Session forbidding any but the suspended men from discharging ministerial functions in the seven parishes. Here was a straight issue—to preach in obedience to the Church, or to desist in obedience to the State. The history of the apostolic time was repeating itself, and these men proved themselves true successors of the apostles. Guthrie, Duncan and others like-minded put the interdict in their pockets, took all the risks involved, and preached to enthusiastic congregations.

So the conflict broadened and deepened. All Scotland rang with its echoes. Decision followed decision, interdict followed interdict, heavy damages were laid upon the loyal evangelicals for carrying out the will of the Church.

The Assembly of 1842 adopted by a vast majority, the Claim of Right, an appeal to the Queen and government, setting forth the grievances of the Church and claiming constitutional protection of the Church in her spiritual affairs from the encroachments of the State, and asserting that without such recognition and protection of her spiritual rights she could no longer remain an establishment. The only answer was the final decision of the House of Lords in the Auchterarder case, awarding Mr. Young £10,000 from the Presbytery for refusing to ordain him. The situation had surely become intolerable.

In November, 1842, a convocation of the evangelical ministers was held in Edinburgh to consider what should be done. The large number of 474 gathered. Much time was spent in prayer. Frank discussion took place. Practical unanimity was secured. They would stand by the Claim of Right, and if no redress could be secured they would "tender the resignation of those civil advantages which they could no longer hold in consistency with the free and full exercise of their spiritual functions." The die was cast. These men were now a sworn brotherhood, ready to risk all and lose all for their sacred cause. Deputations were sent to stir the hearts of the Scotch people and prepare them for the approaching crisis. Soon all the land was rife with the old spirit of the Covenanters. The appeal to the Government and Parliament ignominiously failed. By a vote of 211 to seventy-six the House of Commons refused to even appoint a committee of enquiry into the grievances of the Church of Scotland. The politicians hoped that a little firmness would give the quietus to the restless Scotch malcontents. No one could believe that the Evangelicals would actually sacrifice their incomes, leave their happy homes and go forth churchless, penniless, degraded, into social ignominy and family distress, merely for the sake of principles which, to shrewd statesmen, seemed too "other-worldly" to act as practical motives with intelligent men of the nineteenth century.

As the Assembly of 1843 approached, curiosity grew keen. Will any come out; and if any, how many? A document issued on the 1st of March, 1843, on behalf of the Moderates, was bold enough to assert that there need be no apprehension of the disruption of the Church. "Its office-bearers, may in some instances be changed and a few of its lay members be withdrawn for a time, but the tempest will soon pass over." They expected a tempest in a teapot, and were surprised by a cyclone. In Edinburgh men said forty might come out. In Holyrood Palace, where the Marquis of Bute had just arrived as royal commissioner, on the evening preceeding the opening of the Assembly, the confident calculation was that between twenty and thirty would secede. And yet, already, on that very day, the protest which had been prepared renouncing the establishment, had been signed by four hundred ministers.

Next day, the memorable 18th of May, 1843, the Assembly was opened in St. Andrew's church, with the usual pomp and circum-

stances of Royal Commission. The Marquis of Bute proceeded from Holyrood to St. Andrew's church, amid the tramp of soldiers and the strains of martial music, and took his seat upon the throne, the Assembly rising to honour him and the State which he represented. Dr. Welsh, the Moderator, led in prayer. Then, amid the awful hush of a solemn expectancy, Dr. Welsh, in clear and deliberate tones, declared that in consequence of certain proceedings affecting the guaranteed rights and liberties of the Church, he must protest against proceeding further. He then read the Protest, which enunciated the principles of Church liberty, rehearsed the violations of these principles by the State, declared the impossibility of proceeding with the Assembly under such circumstances, and claimed the right of the Church to separate from the Establishment. "And we now with law accordingly, humbly and solemnly acknowledging the hand of the Lord in the things which have come upon us because of our manifold sins, and the sins of this Church and nation, but, at the same time, with an assured conviction that we are not responsible for any consequences that may follow from this our enforced separation from an establishment which we loved and prized, through interference with conscience, the dishonour done to Christ's crown, and the rejection of His sole and supreme authority as King in His Church."

Then, laying the protest on the table, the Moderator bowed to the representative of royalty, and moved to the door, followed by Dr. Chalmers and a great procession of the ministers and elders. A shout went up from the crowds on the street as the band of heroes appeared. As they marched steadily down to the hall in Tanfield, near the suburb of Canonmills, which had been prepared for the Assembly of the new Free Church, signs of deep emotion were visible on every side. Hats were lifted and solemn words of encouragement were uttered. Here went a little army of ministers (the number finally mounted to 474) who had boldly renounced their homes and incomes aggregating £103,000 a year, purely for conscience sake. In the throng stood wives and children of these men, rejoicing and yet weeping, for while the deed was heroic, the consequences were formidable.

All Edinburgh was stirred. Lord Jeffrey, when the news was brought to him—"More than four hundred of them are actually out!"—lunged aside his book, sprang to his feet and exclaimed: "I am proud of my country. There is not another country upon earth where such a deed could have been done."

In the hall at Tanfield a vast concourse of eager people had sat awaiting them for hours, and greeted them with mingled acclamations and tears. Dr. Welsh opened the Assembly with prayer. Dr. Chalmers, amid a storm of applause, was elected Moderator. Just as he rose to give out a psalm for singing, a heavy cloud passed by, and amid a burst of sunshine they sang:—

"O send Thy light forth and Thy truth:  
Let them be guides to me."

Fittingly did the scene symbolize the deep relief with which godly men in that Assembly, and far beyond it, hailed the final emancipation of the Church from the intolerable interference of the State.

The first Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland was a scene of much spiritual exultation, and of much wise preparation for the vast enterprises of the future. Here was a great Church, 474 ministers, among them the greatest and most esteemed of modern Scotland, about 2,000 elders and a vast body of sympathizers. But not a church building, nor a house, nor a penny of revenue did this great Church possess. How should order be organized out of this chaos, and a fairer edifice be reared from amid the ruins of the Establishment? A brief answer to this question must be reserved for another article. Meanwhile let me quote a few of Chalmers' noble words at the opening of the Free Assembly, for in such utterances we catch the spirit of the whole movement:—

"Reverend fathers and brethren! it is well that you should have been strengthened by your Master in heaven to make the surrender you have done of everything that is dear to nature, casting aside all your earthly dependence rather than offend conscience. . . . It is well that you have made for the present a clean escape from this condemnation; and that, in the issue of a contest between a sacrifice of principle and a sacrifice of your worldly possessions, you have resolved upon the latter; while to the eye of good sense you are without a provision and a home, embarked upon a wide ocean of uncertainty, save that great and glorious certainty which is apprehended by the eye of faith—that God reigneth, and that He will not forsake the families of the faithful."

The success of the Free Church, for the last fifty years, has been so brilliant that it is hard for us now to appreciate the gloom and uncertainty of the prospect which confronted the noble band of heroes who, on the memorable 18th May, 1843, renounced their earthly all for conscience sake. So long as the first session of the Free Assembly lasted, the enthusiasm of numbers might sustain the courage and hope of each. But to go home to parishes no longer theirs, entirely uncertain what proportion of their people would accompany them in voluntary exile from the parish churches, to lead their families out from the manse, which had been to many of them their happy homes for long, long years—to go forth from assured incomes, from social dignity, from all that had made life comfortable to them and theirs, into a struggle for the support of their families—into an attempt to build churches, manse, schools and colleges of their own—it seemed a sublime fanaticism. As Dr. Blackie says, looking back fifty years: "So far as the eye of sense could guide us, the leap at the disruption was a leap in the dark, into poverty, difficulty and misery." But

"The steps of faith  
Fall on the seeming void, and find  
The rock beneath."  
(To be Continued.)