

## PC History - *The Disruption of 1843 & the Union of 1875*

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[sl] The issue of patronage - who chose the minister - continued to divide the Church of Scotland as it moved into the nineteenth century. The church was divided between moderates<sup>i</sup> and evangelicals<sup>ii</sup> on many issues. It was the evangelical wing which was most influential in the Sunday school movement, and missions, including the providing of ministers to the British colonies through the Glasgow Colonial Society. In 1843, tensions between these groups came to a head and the evangelical wing came to believe that it had no option but to leave the church of Scotland. The resulting division, known as the Disruption, created the Free Church of Scotland.

[sl] The presenting issue of the division in Scotland was again over who had the right, congregation or patron, to settle a minister. While not relevant to the situation in either the Maritimes or the Canadas, the personal connections with many of those who had been active in the Glasgow Colonial Society and had now left to become part of the Free Church of Scotland, created a crisis in British North America. The result was a disruption in the Maritimes and in the Canadas, and the creation of a Free church in sympathy with the Free Church in Scotland.

[sl] In 1860 the Free Church tradition in the Maritimes joined with the Secessionist churches to form the Synod of the Lower Provinces. Six years later this body and the Free Synod in New Brunswick united to form The Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America. The Church of Scotland presbyterians also united across provincial boundaries when in 1868 the Synod of Nova Scotia and the Synod of New Brunswick joined to form the Church of the Maritimes Provinces (in connection with the Church of Scotland).

[sl] In the Canadas, the flow was slightly different. The original secessionist churches (known as the Presbytery of the Canadas) re-united with the Church of Scotland tradition in the 1840. This newly reunited church was divided only three years later by the Disruption. The Free Church was strong in many areas of Upper and Lower Canada, enjoying the support of wealthy merchants and benefactors. Parallel institutions, including theological Colleges (Presbyterian College in Montreal and Knox in Toronto), were founded. In 1861 the Free Church and the London area-Associate Secessionists (known as the Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas) joined together to form the Canada Presbyterian Church.

[sl] At the time of Confederation (1867) there were thus four major branches of Presbyterianism within the new nation. In the Maritime provinces there were the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North American and the Church of the Maritime Provinces in connection with the Church of Scotland. In the Canadas, similar traditions went by the names the Canada Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland. Put simply, each area contained a Free Church/Secessionist stream and a Church of Scotland stream. In 1875 these traditions came together to form the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The union of 1875 was, as you will read in the article by John Johnson<sup>iii</sup>, no easy task. Part of the broader spirit of the ages, which had resulted in not only church but also political unions (such as the creation of Canada in 1867), the various presbyterian denominations still had

to struggle with major differences in custom and doctrine. One of the key decisions was to allow for a compromise, or “liberty of conscience”, on the chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>iv</sup> which addressed the issue of the relationship between church and state. (This issue was not finally resolved until 1956 with the passage of the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation<sup>v</sup>). Pragmatic issues were also points of contention, in particular the number of theological Colleges which the new denomination would have, particularly in Quebec and Ontario. Did the new denomination really need six theological Colleges, particularly given that of the six-- Knox (Toronto - Free); Presbyterian College (Montreal - Free); Morrin (Quebec - Kirk) Queens (Kingston - Kirk); Theological Hall (Halifax - Free); Manitoba College (Winnipeg) --

only two were outside of Central Canada? The difficulty of choosing which colleges should close was too great an obstacle to the various loyalties which each had developed, and the decision was made to maintain all six.

The union of 1875 was primarily lay led, and was intended to make the presbyterian tradition united and stronger in order to face the challenge of the new nation. It’s achievement on June 13, 1875 in Montreal as voices of the former denominations united in singing of Psalm 100 - “All people that on earth do dwell” was remarkable. Still, it is worth pausing to remember that it was achieved only by putting on hold the question of church-state relations, the question which had divided the church (often literally) from the time of the Reformation on.

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<sup>i</sup> The term “moderate” is used, often as a pejorative or put-down, to describe the party in the Church of Scotland in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe those who were content with the state of the church as it existed after the 1690 establishment, in particular the right of patrons to choose the parish minister.

<sup>ii</sup> The term “evangelicals” – at least in 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland – refers to those who stressed the need for a sense of personal conversion among Christians. Less comfortable with the state of the church, in particular the way in which patronage appointments were made, they strove to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing Scotland. The growth of the cities and of industrialization posed new challenges which many of the lay patrons were more than content to ignore. It was the evangelicals who worked with the developing slums and inner cities, who were concerned about providing ministers for settlers in the British colonies, and who took progressive positions on the issues of the day (for example slavery, temperance, poverty). The evangelicals had become the dominant party in the Church of Scotland prior to 1843.

<sup>iii</sup> [link](#) to article by Johnson

<sup>iv</sup> [link](#) to text of this chapter

<sup>v</sup> [link](#) text of this document - *Declaration of Faith*....