

The Free Presbyterian Church and its Constitution

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IN an Appendix to a recently published Life of Principal John Macleod, D.D., of the Free Church College, there is a sketch, from the late Principal's pen, of Mr. Archibald Crawford, Tighnabruaich, under the title of An Argyllshire Worthy. Dr. Macleod, as a former minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, at Kames, of which Mr. Crawford was a worthy member, had much intercourse with Mr. Crawford during the last few years of the life of the latter, and has given us many incidents in his life which, otherwise, would have been forgotten, but one part of it is decidedly coloured by the Principal's own predilections. The book itself, being published by the Free Church Publications Committee, involves them in responsibility for all its statements, including what was written by Principal Macleod during his lifetime, but which he did not see fit to publish. "When referring to the state of matters which followed the passing of the Declaratory Act in the Free Church of Scotland, Dr. Macleod says, "Mr. Crawford knew the Constitution of the Church too well to imagine for a moment that it made provision for such a revolutionary change," as that men" who had given their pledged word to maintain, assert, and defend the whole doctrine of their Church's Confession of Faith" could "release themselves to an indefinite extent from the obligations that they had voluntarily undertaken to honour," and he held that the Free Church in adopting the new legislation embraced in the Declaratory Act "had ceased to be one with the historical Free Church of Scotland." The late Principal says that this was "on the assumption that all Church legislation passed under the Barrier Act of 1697 affected *ipso facto* the Constitution of the Church" and that "it did not face the alternative that if such legislation was out of keeping with the Constitution itself, no amount of attempted alteration was anything else than null and void unless the undertaking given at admission to office, which continued to pledge to the whole doctrine of the Confession, was also altered." He gives Mr. Crawford's conviction as "that the Subordinate Standards were adopted for the very end of attaining an abiding and unchanging witness," and that it was "the reproach of Zion that a man should claim the right to abuse the position secured to him to go back on the word that he had given." The alternative which Principal Macleod supplies seems to be a ready refuge for all Free Churchmen in order to cover the action of the

minority in 1893, when they remained under the Declaratory Act. It is perfectly true that the Constitution of the Free Church, as such, could not be altered by the passing of the Declaratory Act, but the Church's relation to her own Constitution could, and indeed was, altered by that event. The late Rev. James S. Sinclair, commenting on the view expressed by the Law Lords that there was no provision in the Constitution of the Free Church for the alteration of any of its doctrine or principles, says, "The Church in which this alteration was adopted immediately ceased to be the Free Church as settled in 1843; the Free Presbyterians were, therefore, fully justified in renouncing it; and the terms of this judgment by the House of Lords, instead of condemning the course they took, supply strong confirmation of its logical consistency, and uphold our well-grounded claim to be the Free Church of Scotland in direct historical continuity" (Free Presbyterian Magazine, Vol. IX, 204).

The main purpose of the Declaratory Act, as we read from its preamble, was "to remove difficulties and scruples which have been felt by some in reference to the declaration of belief required from persons who receive licence, or are admitted to office in this Church." This meant that it was drawn up in order to afford legal scope within the Church to those who were not prepared to accept the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith at their ordination to office, and to protect those who were already within the Church and who held heretical views. The last paragraph of the Act leaves it to the Church to determine what does, or does not, enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith, and thus the Church which accepted the Declaratory Act set up her own authority, instead of the scripture, as the Supreme Standard, as to what man is to believe concerning God and the duty which God requires of man. Though the Questions and Formula were not changed, anyone who wished could answer these questions and sign the formula in the light of what was in the Declaratory Act, and he had the protection of every court in the Church from the Kirk-session to the General Assembly, and no dissident against the Act, among the minority, could keep such a one out of office. Not only so, but by the law of the Church, as it now stood, these dissidents could be forced to take their share in the ordination or induction to office of such a person. The only straightforward course for such dissidents would have been to act as Mr. Crawford himself, as quoted by Principal Macleod, states should be done: "The Declaratory Act of 1892 altered the terms on which office was hereafter to be held, and so those who meant to preserve intact the witness of the Church and to adhere to the original terms of office were bound to separate

themselves from the party who no longer adhered to the brotherly covenant which had formerly bound the whole body together, and from which they had now departed.”

It was by such a separation that the witness of the Free Church of 1843 was continued in Scotland after the passing of the Declaratory Act of 1892 when those who showed themselves as anti-unionists in 1900 had no separate existence, and when there was no ecclesiastical distinction between them and those to whose “difficulties and scruples” the Declaratory Act afforded the relief which they sought. In other words, after 1893, the witness of the Church of the Disruption was extinguished in Scotland except in the body known as the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The minority which appeared in 1900, in spite of the Relieving Act of 1894, were bound to obey the Courts of the Church in whose communion they were, in anything which required relief to the tender consciences of those who had difficulties and scruples about accepting the terms of the Confession of Faith in the sense in which their forefathers had accepted them. According to Principal Macleod, Mr. Crawford held that the “wording of the authoritative Deed of Separation failed to safeguard the fixity of doctrinal testimony,” and that no subsequent amendments could now deal effectively with a flaw in the foundation document. It may be remarked that the Deed of Separation was never intended as a document to safeguard the fixity of doctrinal testimony. There was no need for it for that purpose, as the Constitution of the Free Church was as fixed as it possibly could be, and as was proved dearly by the House of Lords’ decision, there was no provision in the Constitution itself by which any of its terms could be altered. It was a document, giving reasons for separating from men who had misunderstood the Constitution of the Free Church and endeavoured to foist upon the Church a fluid Constitution instead of a fixed one; and, in the second place, declaring an unqualified adherence to a Constitution, which no man, or body of men, had either the right or the power to alter. The second Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, following the first Presbytery which had been constituted in strict accordance with the laws of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, adopted this document and gave it to the world as setting forth, unreservedly, their adherence to the Constitution of the Free Church of Scotland, and why they separated from a body which had adopted another Constitution.

The document on Creed Subscription, adopted by the Synod in 1904, to which Principal Macleod refers, was not drawn up with the view of correcting any

fault supposed to be in the Deed of Separation, but was framed with an eye to a matter of which the Free Presbyterian Church afterwards had some very painful experience, that is, men changing their attitude to the stand made by the Church, and, in order to draw others into their own way of thinking, use all their influence to propagate their newly adopted views, and thus spoil the peace and harmony of congregations. No one knew better than Principal Macleod that this was the end in view in adopting this document, for he was Moderator of Synod when the document was before that Court, and a member of Synod questioned him "as to whether the Resolution on Creed Subscription altered to any extent the Church's Constitution." That member was assured, presumably by the Moderator, to whom the question was addressed, "that it added nothing to the constitutional obligations already undertaken by office-bearers, and being simply a re-affirmation of the Church's present relation to its standards, was in no sense different from other resolutions of Synod" (*Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. IX. p. 284). In conclusion, one may say that, whatever was true of Principal Macleod or others who left our Church after making a profession of loyalty to the Cause of Christ, Archibald Crawford had no doubt as to his duty in separating from the Declaratory Act Free Church, for he is quoted in the *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. XV. p. 389, as saying, "I have been fighting in the Church for the last thirty years and gained nothing; so, I think it is high time to come out of her. There is nothing to be gained now by staying within her pale. Judgment has indeed befallen her, when she was left to pass such a God-dishonouring Act (Declaratory Act of 1892) into a law of the Church." As he was under no cloud in connection with separating from the Declaratory Act Church, he was under no illusion as to his duty in remaining separate from the present Free Church, for he is mentioned by the late Rev. Neil Cameron in the *Reply to Rev. J. E. Mackay's Pamphlet on Union with the Free Church*, of which Mr. Cameron was joint-author, as having said to him that the truth came to his mind as to our duty towards the present Free Church, "Let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them." These two statements were given to the world, the one forty years ago and the other over thirty years ago, and no one has dared to question them, and we believe that no genuine Free Presbyterian will be carried away with anything said at this time of day that would reflect on the attitude of Mr. Archibald Crawford, or any of the worthies of his generation, to the raising of Christ's banner in connection with the Free Presbyterian Church. Let the present generation follow in their footsteps, for there is as much need of it to-day as then, and in

following them let grace be sought to carry them through to the end. If, as Principal Macleod assures us, that his judgment was entire, and we have no reason to question it, it is rather strange that, after several years of intimate acquaintance with the contending's of the Free Presbyterian Church, Mr. Crawford should make the mistake of supposing that the Deed of Separation' was a document drawn up for the purpose of safeguarding the fixity of doctrinal testimony. No other person who took an active share in the Free Presbyterian movement ever indicated that he held this view attributed to Mr. Crawford, and we have never seen or heard of the view being attributed to Mr. Crawford himself, except in the sketch under review, which would infer that he never communicated his mind to any of those who were eminent witnesses in the Free Presbyterian Church, and who shared his confidence, at least, equally as much as Principal Macleod. Principal Macleod did not make this matter public during his lifetime, and it has been left to the Publications Committee of a Church which has made repeated attempts to quench the witness of the Free Presbyterian Church, to do so. Because of these matters we are warranted in drawing our own conclusions.