

1843 Disruption 3 - What the church achieved

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] Three, the third lecture, the disruption in perspective. 1843 was a long time ago, 150 years to be precise.

The locations of the disruption conflict may seem familiar to many of us. Leaving aside certain factors, George Street doesn't look that different from that today, if you know Edinburgh, and Charlotte Square along the other end hasn't changed much in terms of buildings since 1843. Glasgow's Tron Church is just as it was. But we must never forget that the events of 1843 took place a very long time ago, and in a society very different from ours.

For instance, in 1843, here's a figure I came across that rather startled me, do you know there were only three Roman Catholic chapels in the whole of Glasgow?

I don't know how many there are today, but a few more than three I would guess. And there were only 86 Roman Catholic priests in the whole of Scotland. The massive Irish immigration which has so changed the character of Scotland's cities hadn't then taken place.

[1 : 19] In 1843, to travel from Edinburgh to London meant a stagecoach ride of several days, or a voyage by ship from Leith.

The members of the Free Church Assembly who returned to Glasgow after the historic meetings of the disruption might have returned themselves by stagecoach.

Perhaps, though, they would have travelled by the steamboat which followed the 4th Clyde Canal and was the sort of express way to travel. Or the bolder spirits might have tried the newfangled Edinburgh to Glasgow railway which had five trains a day and cost four shillings third class.

I suspect four shillings was a lot of money in those days. It was a time when there were no national newspapers, no electricity, no state schools, no state health care, no pensions.

It was a strange world far removed from ours. And it was in that strange world that the disruption of 1843 took place.

[2 : 28] The men who walked out of St Andrew's Church and walked down through Edinburgh's new town and formed the Free Church of Scotland were convinced that they could do nothing else.

When Chalmers gave out as moderator that psalm to be sung in the Tanfield Hall, remember I mentioned this last week, O send thy light forth and thy truth.

And as they began to sing, the sun came from behind the clouds and shone through the skylights in the Tanfield Hall. The assembled throng took that as a sign of God's favour.

As the new church not only survived but flourished beyond almost all expectations, the Free Church men saw it as a confirmation of their whole stand.

The dramatic scenes of open-air worship services, the eventual building of hundreds of churches and mansys and schools was an evident sign of God's blessing and approval and confirmed that the disruption had been a good thing.

[3 : 44] But were they right? Was the disruption such a good thing? That's one question I want us to look at this evening as we look in perspective.

And this year, our Free Church of Scotland is celebrating this 150th anniversary in a big way. It's the 150th anniversary of our church.

But the Free Church of last century, well, in 1853, the Free Church of Scotland had 236,477 members and 765 active ministers in congregations spread thickly throughout Scotland.

In 1989, our Free Church had 5,961 members and 92 active ministers in congregations largely confined to the North and West Highlands and Islands and to the big cities with a sizable Highland settlement.

Does our church have any right to celebrate the disruption? That's another question we're going to look at this evening. So that's the agenda for tonight.

[5 : 04] First of all, was the disruption such a good thing? And secondly, does our church have a right to celebrate the disruption?

Firstly then, was the disruption such a good thing? It is a sound maxim, says Alec Vidler in his History of the Church, that no church is ever 100% right in what it does.

It surely goes without saying that not everybody who took part in the disruption was an angel. The Free Church historians themselves record that some of the men who came out at the disruption later were dismissed from the ministry because of various offences, drunkenness, and so on, and showed by their conduct that they were not good men.

But, granted that no individual is perfectly sinless, and that in any group of people there are going to be some who turn out to be force professors, what about the movement itself?

What about the disruption itself? Was it a good thing? I want to list three or four things that are often alleged, and which I think have something to be said for them, as the downside of the disruption.

[6 : 34] The disruption, firstly, guaranteed the breakup of the old Calvinistic society of Scotland.

The disruption guaranteed the breakup of the old Calvinistic society, which had dominated Scottish life for at least 200 years.

You see, up till the beginning of the 19th century, the church was at the centre of parish life. It was the church that provided school and poor relief, as well as, as we saw before, the only entertainment, or what passed for entertainment, that was available.

It was the state that provided the finance for there to be, a minister settled there, and the whole life of the village to a large extent or the parish revolved around the church.

It was, we saw, the great vision and concern of Thomas Chalmers that this state church with its parishes was the only hope for the new burgeoning cities with their masses of impoverished people. Chalmers was thoroughly convinced that this state church was by far the best possible instrument for doing the highest moral and religious service to the people, and it would be an act almost of sacrilege to impair its utility in the smallest degree.

[8 : 05] The whole point of the great church extension campaign of the 1830s, when the evangelicals had become the majority of the Church of Scotland, was to extend this godly commonwealth, extending the church into every last corner of Scotland to relieve the physical and moral degradation that Chalmers saw all around him in the big city.

that had been the great concern and vision of Thomas Chalmers, and it has to be said that the disruption killed that whole vision.

In 1843, Robert Candlish, speaking at that first General Assembly said, Though the church has been driven forth into the wilderness, though it is driven from the halls of the great and the countenance of the state, though it is driven from the church and the churchyard where the bones of their fathers sleep, yet she is in verity the identical church which their fathers founded.

We shall endeavour to send the gospel to all the people in every parish who will hear it, and appoint ministers who shall dispense among them the word and sacraments of the living God.

We have done this because we believe that the church we now belong to is not a sect, but the national church. We have done this because we believe we are still the church of Scotland.

[9 : 48] That was the bold claim of the disruption assembly. We have had to leave the state connection, but this is the church of Scotland free, and it is our vision, it is our purpose, it is our intention to have a church in every parish and to reach the whole people of Scotland in their parishes with the gospel.

It was a bold and a grand vision, but it was doomed to failure. it was unrealistic. With so much money required to fund its own ministers and build new churches, there was no way that the free church could afford to plant enough churches in the new urban metropolises.

The parochial system which Chalmers reckoned essential was lost in the towns and cities at least, if not in the countryside. You know that today. In the country areas, in the island of Lewis for instance, there is a free church in every parish.

And to some extent, the parish system, the idea of an area with a church in the centre, is still there. There is, I think, one famous parish in Lewis back where there isn't even a church in Scotland, there is only the free church.

But in the cities, for, well, since soon after the disruption itself, the parish system has broken down. There is no sense in which the people in a particular area go to the church in that area.

[11:17] People go to the church of their choice. The free church very quickly after the disruption gave up the effort to plant a church in every vicinity and minister to the whole people of that vicinity with the gospel.

And as for the Church of Scotland, with so many of its people and its most dynamic people at that left, the gone, rather, the Church of Scotland no longer had the resources, the energy, or even the moral claim on the government to do that.

The population was growing rapidly. The population of Scotland increased by over 10% in the decade up to 1843. And with an increasing proportion of that population left untouched by Christianity, the disruption spelt the end of Chalmers' lifelong vision.

In 1839, speaking at the General Assembly, Chalmers spoke of the calamity of a disruption. What he meant was that his real enthusiasm was that the Church, the Church organised into parishes, was the only thing that could deal with the moral, physical, and spiritual degradation of the masses. And Chalmers foresaw then that to split the Church would mean the end of that vision. Though Chalmers felt that there was no other option but to lead the Church in the disruption, he spoke the truth when he said that the disruption in that sense would be a calamity.

[12:57] So you see, although strong words could be said, and words that later were to have a central place in another dispute, although it was said that the Free Church still held to the establishment principle.

Though we quit the establishment, we go out on the establishment principle, we quit a vitiated establishment but would rejoice in returning to a pure one. that is, they were saying, we do believe that it is the State's business to encourage and support the preaching of the Gospel, to fund a Christian ministry to its people as the source of all real moral change and good.

The reality was that with the Church fragmented into pieces, there was no prospect of the State funding one particular Church in the future.

It didn't mean that the Free Church immediately abandoned all idea of the godly commonwealth, of influencing and helping the poor and needy. Chalmers worked the last years of his life in the worst slum in Edinburgh, the Westport, to plant a church there, to start a school.

James Begg, another of the great Free Church leaders, led a campaign for better housing for the working classes. And Thomas Guthrie, who we met last week making 107 jokes in his speech at the General Assembly, his great work, apart from being perhaps the most popular preacher after Chalmers in the Church, was to start ragged schools where the children who were too poor or too poorly dressed to go to ordinary schools should be able to go to schools where they would be taught.

[14:44] These things were done, but increasingly, after the disruption, the Free Church is, well, frankly, what we see today, what you might call a gathered church, a church building that draws in a number of Christians who travel more or less distance to come to it, who support their minister and enjoy the gospel.

But that was a very different thing from the godly commonwealth with the church at the centre of parish life. The disruption may not have caused altogether that demise, it may have been inevitable, but certainly the disruption hastened the end of the old Calvinistic society.

The second thing that has to be said is that the disruption left a legacy of divisions, bitterness, and wasted effort. There's something very idyllic about such a scene that was widely publicised at the time, so tranquil, so calm, so reminiscent of the gospels.

And of course, there was much energy released at the disruption. There were areas where there were great works of conversion done.

But at the same time, all was not sweetness and light. There was some degree of healthy rivalry, stimulating one another to good works.

[16:15] Of course, there is such a thing as healthy rivalry. But, with the erection of extra churches, mansys, and schools, there was a degree of unhealthy rivalry as well.

Our church is bigger than yours. And with so many churches being built, remember there were also several other Presbyterian denominations that had broken away from the Church of Scotland before.

There were small towns that had four, five, or even six different Presbyterian churches in them. Each teaching the Westminster Confession, each preaching, perhaps essentially the same gospel, but in somewhat deadly rivalry.

There's a story told of a Church of Scotland minister, who went visiting in his parish, knocked on the door, and the village tailor answered the door.

I am a free churchman, said the tailor. I can't receive an Erastian minister. That's an Erastian of someone who, the doctrine that the state is in charge of the church.

[17:27] So this good free churchman says, I can't receive an Erastian minister. But if you are to visit as a gentleman, you can come in. The minister replies, I am obliged to you for being so very civil.

But when I visit as a gentleman, I don't visit tailors. So that's a little glimpse of the spirit of the age. I don't know who was more to blame for that little interchange.

And then there's the famous anecdote of the visitor saying, looking at all the churches in a small town, there must be a great deal of religious zeal in this town.

There are so many churches. It's no religious zeal. It's just cussedness of temper, said the local man. Well, certainly there was a measure, all too much of bitterness.

When the people were forced, as we read last week, to worship for months and even for years in the open air, when people lost their jobs because they went to the wrong church.

[18:34] church, you know, if they were house servants or farm labourers, might well be dismissed for going to the wrong church. There was a sad and deadening degree of bitterness and rivalry.

By the way, I feel that something that we who know the Highlands and love the Highlands need to be especially wary of. In one sense, the Highlands were spared that last century because, for the simple reason, virtually the entire population was in the free church.

Of the population of Lewis, which at one point was about 23,000, I think, I read the statistic, there were only 456 people who weren't connected with the free church.

So you didn't have this problem. The older Presbyterian dissenting churches hadn't touched the Highlands. The Highlands, until 1900 or 1893, were virtually united.

It was in the rest of Scotland that you had small towns with four or five competing Presbyterian churches. And I believe that it's no coincidence that a hundred years after that, those areas are some of the deadest and most resistant to the gospel that you could find.

[19:51] The application or the warning for our Highland areas is that today there are four Presbyterian churches in some of the villages in the Highlands. Does that mean that the legacy of such division is going to be terrible spiritual deadness for a century to come?

That's the warning. Another problem with the disruption, and we're looking just at the downside here, was that the disruption was a distraction from other crucial issues.

If you know your history of the 19th century, you'll know that it was a time of great change in the world of thought. It was the time when secularism came sweeping in, Germany, through the philosophy of people like Schleiermacher and Kant, and right across Europe, there was a tremendous flood tide of new philosophy, new rejecting the Bible theology, and of course, very soon to come, Darwinism and the whole claims that science contradicted the Bible.

And one of the downsides of the disruption is that good men, great men like Chalmers, Candlish, Cunningham, spent so much time and energy concentrating on the issues of this church struggle, that they, the church as a whole, was not prepared for the storm of secularism and unbelief that was about to break upon them.

It was perhaps inevitable in the situation that the church was forced to devote its attention to its own needs and its efforts.

[21:43] William Cunningham, perhaps the greatest teaching theologian of the free church, he spent months and months traveling to America, raising funds for the free church. He couldn't spend that time writing and preparing and reading up on the latest errors that were sweeping in.

And I believe, if you know something of the history of the free church, the tragedy is that towards the end of the 19th century, the free church was the church that became most quickly liberal in its theology, and that was most quickly overtaken by modernism and unbelief.

And I don't think that's a coincidence. I think one very real factor is that the church was so tied up, inevitably, in sorting out its business, that it neglected the attacks from outside.

There's perhaps a warning here. It's not, you know, all these things, that's not necessarily to blame the men, but it is to observe a sad side effect, and it is a warning to us.

We tend to get absorbed in one battle at a time, and that certainly was a danger. And another one that I feel needs to be mentioned, though it may not seem to you such a big one, apart from the

word being a big one, I would say one other downside of the disruption was that it led to the bureaucratisation of Presbyterianism.

[23 : 12] That's a lovely word, isn't it? Bureaucratisation. The General Assembly had been in existence since 1560. Presbyterians meet every year in a General Assembly.

But the disruption did something absolutely fundamental to Scottish Presbyterianism. It centralised the finances of the church. Up to the disruption, the ministers, as I've said, were paid by the state. It was nothing. The church collections went for the relief of the poor in the parish. There were no central funds at all, apart from a special fund that had recently been started to support foreign missions and things like church extension.

But church funds were dealt with at the local level. The dissenting churches, the secession Presbyterian churches, they were congregational in my finances. If you wanted to have a church, if you wanted to have a minister, you had to raise the money yourself and pay them locally.

Thomas Chalmers, with his great organisation of the Sustentation Fund, remember we looked at that last week, the great central fund that people paid their pennies into every week through their local collector, and it was all pooled in Edinburgh, and then each minister who was accepted into the fund was given a guaranteed income.

[24 : 30] That did wonders in quickly enabling the church to have 700 and something ministers. But it had a very real downside.

And that was that it meant that the committees that administered that fund, the central committees, they were committees of the General Assembly, quickly became the most important bodies in the church.

Assembly committees, says one historian, assembly committees, held power over the lower church courts as never before, and their secretaries became not servants of the church, but men of power. It's something of a paradox that the free church which came into existence because of the rights of the local congregation to call its minister, unwittingly, but inevitably, became the church of centralised management.

The free church assembly, and I would say that this holds true today just as much if not more, the free church assembly was always the scene of much oratory.

[25 : 42] But as bureaucracy increased, it ceased to be the place where decisions were made, and assumed more the character of a party congress, at which the activists were drilled in the policy already determined at headquarters.

That is that by centralising funds, and setting up a committee structure to administer those funds, you create, whatever the theory is, you create a real power centre which dominates the church. And that certainly is a true picture of our General Assembly. The real decisions about the church today are made in the committees. And that means they're made, not even by the whole committee, which meets just two or three times a year, but by the small group of people, the executive of the committee, the secretaries, he calls them here.

That is a direct result of the destruction. And I have to say, as a Presbyterian, that I think it's a bad result. I love Thomas Chalmers, but I'm afraid he was to blame for that.

It also has to be said, that same historian, I've lost his quote, where was it? No, never mind, he's gone forever. But he did say that one problem with the sustentation fund, and this strikes a bell, this rings a bell, rather, today, right from the very beginning, the sustentation fund meant that the free church was struggling to support congregations that were not really viable.

[27 : 12] It was struggling to pay for ministers from central funds who couldn't be supported by their local people. And the church, for all its success, had a real struggle.

And I don't know what your, you know, what conclusions you draw from that, what action you decide on, but it's, again, a comment on the disruption church, which is very relevant today.

Well, those are some of the problems that one can face up to, and we have to face up to the fact that things are not perfect. Certainly the disruption hastened the end. The disruption of the old parish system and the influence of the church on the whole community.

It was directly because they were competing church schools in so many parishes that the government in the 1870s stepped in and nationalised the schools.

We have state-controlled schools rather than church-controlled schools today in Scotland and in England too, precisely because of the rivalry between different denominations. The disruption certainly fostered that denominational bitterness and it distracted the church from other issues and

it led to too much centralisation and bureaucracy.

[28 : 32] If all this was so, does it mean that the disruption was a bad thing that should have been avoided at all costs? Could the disruption have been avoided?

Well, you can't rewrite history, can you? I think, looking back, we can see the disruption as a classic instance of a dispute between two parties, each zealous for their cause, but each really failing to listen to the other one and to understand what really concerned the other one.

The church side looked at the government and it was a very reactionary government in those days, but the church side looked at them and said, these are just like the people who persecuted the covenanters.

These are people who are trying to tyrannise the church of Jesus Christ. There was an element of truth in that. But the church didn't look at the government and say, these men are scared of revolution.

These men are struggling with the problems of near revolution in Ireland. These are men, Duke of Wellington was in government through much of that period. These are men who fought against the French and the French Revolution.

[29 : 53] They are seeing us as potential revolutionaries. But it's so hard when you get into a dispute to really stop and see what the other side is like.

The government did see the church as budding revolutionaries. They saw what they wanted to see. They were convinced that if there was a disruption, it would be just a few hotheads.

Remember the man who said he would eat every minister over the number of 40 who left the church of Scotland. government and Dr. Guthrie said even a South Sea cannibal never performed such a feat.

But the government was misled by people saying things like that. That was what it wanted to hear. It didn't want to have a big crisis on its hands. So it's interesting if you ever deal with sort of conflict analysis and peacemaking, to look at a conflict like the disruption and say that so often somebody is saying this but the other side are hearing something different.

It's also true that disunity among Christians made the disruption more likely. One of the reasons the government stood firm against the Free Church Party or the Evangelical Party was that there was a bitter dispute I haven't touched on this but there was a bitter dispute between the Church of Scotland in the 1830s and the Secession Church, the dissenting Presbyterians.

[31 : 25] And there had been real conflict between them. And those other, those dissenting Presbyterians were egging the government on saying don't give them don't give the Church money to plant new churches.

We can build churches. And the disputes between Christians certainly made the conflict more complicated and harder to resolve.

But when all is said and done it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the disruption was unavoidable given the reactionary nature of that government and the whole mood of society in those days.

When all allowance is made for people failing to stop and think about the other side when all allowance is made for complicating factors it is very hard to see how the Church could have done anything other than stand firm once the government started making the claims it did.

Once the Church gets into a position where it dismisses a minister from his charge for drunkenness and immorality and is told by the magistrate's court down the road that it must reinstate that minister because the magistrate's court has ruled that the Church has no power to discipline him.

[32 : 45] Then the Church is in a situation where it either stands firm for Christian liberty and the biblical government of the Church or it bows its neck to every sort of dishonour and spiritual discredit.

Tragic though some of the results of the disruption were imperfect though the conduct of the controversy was it is very hard to see any way in which the disruption could be avoided and I think the thing that I would argue and plead to say that this was not a hasty division this was not a petty split-making mentality is exactly that sort of quote that I gave you from Chalmers a while ago just four years before the disruption well into the controversy between Church and State there's the great leader of the Church saying the calamity of the disruption these were not men who were looking for an excuse to have a bust-up these were men who were reluctantly forced into a position where for all its sad consequences they could see no other honourable or biblical action.

OK, was the disruption such a good thing? Well, we've seen that it wasn't a perfect thing had its downside but that it is hard to see how it could have been avoided.

Next question Who should really celebrate the disruption? Now, the disruption, as I've said was a powerful, social, historical event somebody has said no other country has ever produced anything quite like the Free Church of Scotland you could take that either way, couldn't you?

but it was, in many ways the unique result of all sorts of major and powerful forces stirring up in the midst of a religious renewal and in many ways it's a ridiculous question to say, well, are we in the position they were in then?

[35 : 06] the world has changed the situation has changed the questions have changed and in that sense it's just playing with history to ask such a question but yet, we are the Free Church of Scotland and it's a question that we have to ask I must say at this point that I feel extremely inhibited because of my imminent departure from this congregation and from the presbytery don't get me wrong I'm still, I still, I'm told have the status of a Free Church minister but were I to be continuing as minister and continuing in the presbytery frankly, I would be a lot more blunt and a lot more provocative in what I want to say in this point what I am going to do though is rather just put up a case study and leave it for you to draw your own conclusions what I'm going to say is this that the church that can celebrate the disruption will be a church which does this this and this and I'm not going to say whether or not or how far I believe that our church does or is capable of doing these things but it seems to me that's the best I can do in the strange circumstances first of all a negative a church which is truly in line with the disruption church a church that can rightly celebrate the disruption will be wary of a distorted triumphalist backward looking view of history one old Christian said it is time we were making history instead of talking about it it is time we were making history instead of talking about it and it's a well known fact that it's a sign of decay in any organisation church or business or whatever if that organisation is always looking back and harking back to the good old days if your best days are behind you you're in trouble and the church of Jesus Christ is a church whose best days are yet to come so let's be wary why do we spend so much effort looking at the disruption is it because the church is rather frightened to face the future and doesn't much like facing up to the present but only feels happy lingering over the past let me give you a challenging instance of that some of you bought you all bought you all should have bought the free church disruption calendar for 1993 here there is a picture

I'm sorry it doesn't come out well on black and white of by far the most beautiful part of Scotland well actually it's just down the road from the most beautiful part of Scotland Lok Sunat in Argyllshire and there we're told that the problem of sight refusal in the Arden-American peninsula was overcome by the floating church of Stompil there it is in the bottom we saw that last week this iron church on a floating pontoon was constructed on the Clyde and towed to a mooring in this part of Lok Sunat shown in the photograph it holds 750 persons the size of the floating congregations was easily assessed apparently the vessel sank one inch for each hundred people aboard very nice beautiful place very moving little story nowhere though does it tell us that just up the way here from Ardnastang Bay there is a large free church that would seat about 700 people last Sunday that church had two people in it and a minister stands at the other end of the building it's longer than this church and takes the service as best he can the church in Strontian is reduced to that now I'm not saying that on the calendar it should say there's still a free church in Strontian but it's pretty miserable but do our free church people know the situation of the free church congregation in Strontian do they know that there is a church there today and it's in such a poor situation do we know that there is a young minister struggling to minister to three churches over a large scattered area having to do the heart breaking task of preparing sermons to preach to two people in a vast empty building now the church that rightly celebrates the disruption won't turn its back on the harsh realities of today it won't engage in studying history as a way of avoiding the problems that face us now one writer who knows the free church well put it like this recently it seems strange that the disruption is almost the only thing that does get regular commemoration is there nothing in the history of the denomination since that date that ought also to be recalled not to speak of things before 1843 the impression is at least sometimes given that anniversaries of 1843 give us the opportunity to say that small as we are we and we alone are standing where the disruption fathers stood in some senses that may be true but it is an over simplification for instance and this same writer goes on to mention this sometimes said spoken as if right we stand for exactly what the disruption fathers stood for and our testimony is what theirs was but for instance the question of the

content of public worship is often raised in this connection

I'm quoting the same writer but do free church people know that exclusive psalmody was not the position of the church in 1843 it would appear that very few of the leaders of that date held to that view without much research at all it can be readily seen that John Duncan did not he praises the influence of Luther's hymns and the reformation Robert Candlish did not Candlish says that the use of either all hymns or all psalms are both extreme positions William Cunningham the great theologian of the disruption sang a hymn on his deathbed and so on as we know the law of the church has changed since 1843 with the result that the hymns of the best free church hymn writers McShane Boner and Ross Cousin etc.

can be sung almost anywhere in the world today except in the free church there's a nice provocative thing to say but it's a warning I don't want to get into that particular discussion but I give you that as two illustrations the situation in Strontian and the matter of content of worship to say we have to be careful it's so easy to say we're the free church they were the free church look at these wonderful men that proves that we're right and everything we stand for is what they stood for the church that rightly celebrates a great event in history is not should not must not distort triumphalize such an event let's get on to be positive then the church that can rightly celebrate the disruption is one that will be very generous very sorry very jealous of anything that intrudes on Christ's rule in his church through the

[43 : 28] Bible if there's one thing that the disruption was all about it was the church refusing to be bound by the laws and the courts of the state the free church men said Jesus Christ rules his church he rules it through the Bible and the words of the Westminster Confession he has ordained the government by church officers not subordinate to the civil magistrate the free church says an Anglican writer set a noble example to all Christians who attach sovereign importance to the church's integrity and independence in the ordering of its life and mission and we should and do rejoice that that lesson has been largely learnt in Scotland the church of Scotland today has as one of its basic articles a long one church articles are always long but let me reread you a little bit of it this church as part of the universal church wherein the Lord Jesus

Christ has appointed a government in the hands of church officers receives from him its divine king and head and from him alone the right and power subject to no civil authority to legislate and to adjudicate finally in all matters of doctrine worship government and discipline in the church including the right to determine all questions concerning membership and office in the church the constitution and membership of its courts the mode of election of its office bearers and so on even though the civil authority recognises the government this government the authority recognises the government this government of the church that in no way takes away the character effects the character authority recognises the government this government of the church that in no way takes away the character effects the character that this government and jurisdiction is derived from Christ alone so what it's saying is whether or not the government or the courts recognise it and accept it we insist it is a fundamental doctrine of the church that the church is governed by the church courts that Christ has laid down in his will that is disruption doctrine since 1929 incorporated in the basic standards of the church of Scotland indeed there's an act of parliament

I think of 1921 recognising the independence of the church of Scotland from all oversight by Westminster and by the courts that lead right up to the house of lords the government in 1921 under Lloyd George passed an act which recognised that they had no authority over the church of Scotland at all that in the matter of church state relationship is the position that the free church fathers fought for and the church that is worthy of the disruption will be alert to that alert to every form of state interference if there were such a conflict today perhaps it would have to do with political correctness there was an article in a magazine I saw last week which said that in Australia a church magazine is threatened with being banned from publishing because New South Wales is passing legislation which makes it a criminal offence to say anything derogatory of homosexuals and this church magazine had an article in which it said homosexuality was a sin and was an offence to God now the state there may ban the church from publishing such claims such assertions what is the church to do in such a situation we would say would we not that that is biblical truth it is part of the morality that Jesus Christ the king and head of his church has laid down in America our friends in Westminster seminary were faced by the attempt by state educational bodies to force them to have women admitted to the course of training for the preaching ministry and

Westminster seminary resisted that they were pressurized to appoint women to their governing body a body which had always been staffed by ministers and elders of Presbyterian churches and Westminster and Westminster seminary had to stand up for that and say that they were prepared to abandon the official recognition of their academic status and so on and all that that might involve in terms of grants and so on rather than be pressurized by the state this whole area of political correctness is one where the church may well come into conflict with the state in our generation anything that seems to be you know the great shibboleths of today's society homophobic sexist or racist can be denounced and sued the church may well have to insist that in its discipline and government the appointment of its officers the disciplining of its members the proclamation of its truth it must obey God rather than men sometimes that conflict may come much closer to home [49 : 41] I had a letter just yesterday from Ian Glover one of our missionaries in South Africa ministering among the Korsa people in the Transkai and he said this we have we have a discipline matter which has arisen in one of our churches in connection with the continuing political situation here in some ways Ian didn't know I was giving these lectures in some ways the principles of the disruption are being actualized here as one local residence association has attempted to interfere in congregational business with the threat to burn the church down if we go ahead and discipline somebody it'll burn before we give way sadly it seems that some of the members may have been involved in the threat the people seem to be very taken aback when I announce that the building will burn before the session is influenced from outside but the church does come under pressure they're in that sort of situation from vigilante groups or residence associations political factions to compromise to toe their line and it's good to have Ian saying the church will burn before they give way the church is ruled by Christ through the Bible and the church that is an heir of the disruption will be very jealous of that notice that there are two sides there it is

Christ who rules through the Bible sadly it has to be said that some who make great play of the church's independence from state control want the church to be ruled by the whim of modern theologians etc they do not want to be ruled by Christ and the Bible we do not claim and the disruption men did not claim that the church was independent of the Bible the church cannot be ruled by the state because it is ruled by Jesus Christ and he rules it through his word but the church if it really is heir of the disruption will be ruled by Christ through the Bible not by the state not by the mood of society nor by the traditions of men the church is captive to the word of God here I stand I can do no other said that famous disruption divine Martin

Luther so the church will be very alert and jealous on that point and I believe don't claim to be a prophet but I do believe that that is going to be an extremely relevant issue for you all in the days ahead second positive point here the church that can rightly celebrate the disruption the church which is truly in line with the original free church will be a church that is extremely positive in its dealings with other evangelical Christians and in its pursuit of evangelical unity the writer I quoted earlier made this point think for example of McShane's refusal to allow unscriptural barriers with respect to episcopal brethren who were unsound on church government he would have fellowship with episcopalians or of John Duncan's famous aphorism

I am first a Christian next a Catholic universal Christian then a Calvinist fourth a Peter Baptist and fifth a Presbyterian I cannot reverse that order there are priorities there George Smith one of the leaders of the free church missionary movement wrote the life of Alexander Duff the great free church pioneer missionary but he also wrote the life of Henry Martin a church of England missionary and William Carey a Baptist missionary these men had large hearts they were up to the eyes in work for their own church they were firm in their commitment to their own church but it did not make them blinkered it did not make them whatever the equivalent of little Englanders is it did not make them narrow William

Cunningham we've mentioned several times as one of the great theologians of that time William Cunningham was a great teacher in the free church college it's a great college but when one of his students asked him if he could do a session in Princeton in America studying under Charles Hodge and have that session count towards his free church training Cunningham said that's a very difficult question I'll have to think about that you see my difficulty is whether one session with Dr.

[54 : 53] Hodge should not count as two sessions in the free church college there's the very opposite of a narrowness and a sectarianism Thomas Chalmers you can read in this little book of his great enthusiasm for missionary work and when he was a professor in St.

Andrews he led the students missionary society there and every week they met and Chalmers read to them accounts of all the missionary societies that he could get information on he read to them about the Moravians work in South Africa and in Greenland he read and enthused with them and raised support for all sorts of different organisations and churches Robert Murray McShane I've already mentioned was a man whose fame was in all the churches and whose heart was toward all the churches there was a large spirit interestingly this desire for unity was a strongly theological one the free church college new college had that marvellous faculty many of whose books have been published by the banner of truth and their theology was lapped up by churches and Christians all over the world and is still being lapped up they weren't only writing for their own people they weren't blinkered theirs was a large hearted Calvinism that touched chords around the world I tried to count the number of books that the banner of truth was published or republished that were written by those early free church divines I made it at least 26 26 banner publications from that period there was a great outpouring of a large hearted biblical theology and there was a great willingness to be involved with others that famous quote of Chalmers when he said who cares for the free church compared to the Christian good of Scotland was given in the context of a meeting of the newly formed evangelical alliance in which the free church or many of its ministers came together with evangelical ministers of many other denominations people this week

I mentioned that there were deputations from Switzerland France Holland America Canada who poured in to the free church assembly year after year and the free church sent deputies to all sorts of places around the world the church that is akin to the disruption church will have a large heart for the worldwide cause of Christ and lastly the church that can rightly celebrate the disruption will be energetically active and innovative in the cause of biblical evangelism and biblical social ministry the church that rightly celebrates success that's us that's where we are that church will be energetically active and innovative in the cause of biblical evangelism and biblical social ministry we've touched on this many times the great vision and concern to reach people with the gospel we've seen that it was limited by the resources and by the tragic necessity of division but there was an amazing outpouring

I don't know how many people these days read the life of Alexander Duff but the growth the development the vision of the free church mission in India was enormous Duff went out to India he was faced with virtually a whole continent of heathenism and what he did he started a school his idea was to train a whole school full of Indians in Christianity and all biblical learning so that he would have a whole class to send out and preach the gospel perhaps one of the best places for you to read about this is in Ian Murray's little book The Puritan Hope and if you read that book I defy you not to be enthused with the vision and the boldness of these men they didn't despise going and sitting in a hut and talking to one person about Jesus Christ but their vision was that the whole of the subcontinent should be influenced for

[59 : 38] Christ and it was no coincidence that when David Livingstone opened up the centre of Africa and discovered Lake Nyassa and wanted to have Christian missionary work set up there that it was to the free church that he came Livingstone was a Scottish congregationalist wasn't a Presbyterian at all but he came to the free church and said you're the people to go and plant the gospel in that dark centre of Africa what a tribute to the vision and the dynamism that the free church displayed and I use the word innovative there I don't know if you realise how many innovations we owe or the things that we have are innovations that we owe to those early men you know the way in most of the churches in Scotland the larger congregations now when it comes to communion time instead of doing something like we do you know coming up and sitting around the table people sit in pews and the elders come and the bread and wine are passed around the pews it was Thomas

Chalmers who started that in Glasgow so great were the crowds that attended his church that it was taking all day and half the night to serve communion at the table up the front he was actually disciplined for heresy by some people for celebrating communion in an unorthodox way and the case went right up to the general assembly before it was dismissed that's now become the normal practice in our larger churches did you know that deacons were rediscovered by Thomas Chalmers and the free church one of the first things that the free church did 1846 was to pass an act reinstating the office of deacon in the congregation it had fallen into neglect it had been abandoned by the church in Scotland for a hundred years or more the free church because it was trying to reach the poor and so on in many places recognised the need for deacons we've seen the

floating church there's an element of lateral thinking if that's the right word landowner refuses a site nowhere to meet let's build a church float it round there there's bold thinking so to say launching forth the sustentation fund may have had those unfortunate side effects that I spoke of earlier but it was an amazing innovation that Chalmers thought out and worked out and others with him and then too there were other things that showed this spirit in 1859 there was a great revival in Scotland and one of the features of that revival was the ministry of lay preachers there was a man who was a butcher a flesher who was converted and he stood up and preached and a prize fighter a boxer was converted and he stood up and preached and among the lay preachers was a man called Brownlow North who was a relative of an English prime minister so the English aristocracy now there were Presbyterian churches in Scotland who said this is unreformed laymen should not preach this is sinful it is against all Presbyterian order free church didn't say that no less a theologian and sound divine than William Cunningham was the moderator of the assembly in 1859 Brownlow North was brought to the assembly and the general assembly listened to accounts from him and from many ministers in whose parishes he preached of people being converted and the assembly recognized him as an evangelist and thanked God for his ministry there's a freshness and a boldness and innovativeness in the 1850s I read somewhere somebody invented a way of producing paraffin from coal and as a result of that there there was an upsurge of mining coal mine those days of course paraffin was essential for lamps and lights and many new coal mines were opened the free church within five or six years had raised a fund of 50,000 pounds in order to send missionaries to those new mining communities the free church was in the vanguard they were alert to new things happening they took action and they made sure that where there were opportunities for the gospel they did it some of the old ones Mrs Mclean in our own congregation can tell you how as a girl she used to go following the herring fleet and young girls would go and there's hundreds of herring boats were going to places like Wick or Lowestoft and Yarmouth and land their fish and the girls would be there to gut them and to pack them in boxes it was the free church that decided to set apart ministers to follow the herring fleet so that wherever these young people went for that work there would be somebody to preach the gospel to them so there was a free church in Yarmouth and Lowestoft during the herring season the church was evangelistically active and it was innovative it was eager to reach men and women with the gospel by all means service according to the needs of the day let me give you a quote from David Brown who was one of the Disruption Divines a banner of truth author and was many many years later moderator of the general assembly listen to him to give now my own private opinion an opinion however of half a century's duration my judgment is that in everything vital nothing must be yielded but everything held fast even to the death but in things not vital things that in no degree affect the essentials of our faith and worship our true wisdom will be from time to time to make some partial adjustments the church that will do this I venture to say supposing it otherwise sound will live on but the church which insists on upholding every usage and every procedure from former days even though they have nothing to recommend them but their antiquity has in it I fear the seeds of decay there speaks one of the Disruption Divines okay can we celebrate do you want to celebrate the Disruption and say that's us amen well do it and praise God for the Disruption and for these giants in the land don't idolize them don't overlook the spots and blemishes on the bright sun of their achievement for the Lord don't assume that everything they did and said was right they were but men at best but follow them in being very jealous for the rule of Christ in the church by the scriptures be very zealous for for the largest widest possible coherence of biblical evangelical Christians in the great work of the gospel and be eager and urgent in every possible way to evangelize to spread the glorious knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ can we celebrate the Disruption today it's up to us to see that we can I don't want you to go away saying John Nichols said we've got no business celebrating the Disruption we've just heard knocking the free church I'm not saying that remember that even if you take the gloomiest possible view of our present situation remember those letters to the churches we read at the beginning even the church at Laodicea Jesus says repent I'm standing at the door I will come in and suck with you we're not looking at these things and challenging ourselves on these things to depress us and to write off the church we're saying that these are the things that even if we're doing them rightly we still need to be on our guard even if we're doing them 80 percent we need to do them a hundred percent and even if we fail to do them at all by God's grace we can repent and the church can change and do again our first works perhaps the last word though must be that in all the activity and planning and innovation of the great events of the Disruption there were there was at center the urgent preaching

of jesus christ exemplified in that famous silhouette of charmers and there was the warm piety and love for jesus exemplified in the life and writings of robert murray mcshane may we be given grace to be followers of them who through their faith and patience endured and inherited eternal life let's just close with prayer and then if you do want to ask any questions we'll come to those heavenly father it's much easier to look at events in the past without relating them to the present and it's so hard for us because we all have our own prejudices and hobby horses and our own angles on things it's very hard for us to give a balanced view and we ask forgiveness if anything in tonight's talk has been unfair or distorted or misleading we pray though lord god that what we see of your working in the past the successes yes and the failures of men may serve by your goodness to shake us up that we may be like them and even excel them in the service of jesus christ lord revive your work among us may scotland and all of britain hear the unadulterated gospel may it see a lively powerful evangelizing church and may all the glory be yours forevermore amen well now that's the end of the disruption do you have any questions perhaps you've got questions on things we've touched on tonight perhaps you've got you've had something that you've been longing to hear about through these three lectures and here we are at the end and it hasn't even been mentioned and you want to raise it as a question or a comment yes yeah yeah

[71 : 27] yeah yeah right that's right the question is if the disruption destroyed the parish system which obviously contributed to was there any alternative and i think the answer would be no it's one of the tragedies of this fallen world that almost no action that we take is going to have all good consequences you know there are there are sad side effects if you ask to apportion blame for the disruption say well look that was a tragedy and i know i don't think he's written it anywhere but somebody who knew professor john murray well said that murray had said to him one day in conversation that he thought the disruption was the greatest tragedy in scottish church history and i think it would be for this very reason that it it meant that from then on the church was out of the mainstream of scottish life if that is a sad and an evil effect then blame if we're if we're to apportion blame must lie largely with the government you know because it's interesting that some of these historians who write about the disruption are by no means sympathetic to the government of the government.

and they've been to the government after they've been to the government after they've been to the government after they've been to the government and say that the government was mainly to blame and that it wasn't the church's fault so you know i i think because of the attitude of the government they were forced into a position where they they couldn't but go forward even though as charmers had said there was in that sense it was a calamity.

yes yes yes it's an interesting one yeah somebody else at this david yes would there be a case for reinstating free church schools um yeah you touched me on a sore point there um i'm not a sore point but i i'm i always go around in circles on the subject of christian schools um i'm not sure i would be particularly eager to see free church schools in the present situation if that meant they were controlled by free church presbyteries and so on i'm not sure that would be altogether a good thing but i do think that i think what you have in holland for instance is christian schools that are not actually under the control of the church as such but which are controlled by people who are controlled by people who are all in the church and so they are christian schools but they're not necessarily church schools so i would i would certainly be in favour of christian schools and it would be lovely to have something like the schools they had then any more questions yes yes yes right yeah it's interesting there was one item i had in my notes which i left out you may have thought i said everything that could possibly be said and more but i i did have a note there about the present things in the church of england the question is is there a parallel between the disruption and present events in the church of england it certainly touches on the same issue um in that uh... the church of england um in that uh... the church of england there are voices in the church of england increasingly being raised against the state controlled nature of the church of england there was a report this week or debate this week suggesting that bishops or deans or whatever should not be appointed by the prime minister but by the church and uh...

uh... that touches on very much the same sort of issue as in the disruption the difference of course is that by law uh... the church of england is nothing more than a branch of the state it is totally under state control there is no doubt as to the legal position of the church of england the whole disruption debate took place because scottish law had given the church a different status a different claim or three of the variety of other environmental to the law allowed the pe drove oahu normally for

herman had Her Euchrell and Camp and courts dominated by judges trained in English law treated the Church of Scotland as if it had the same place as the Church of England.

They tried to impose the Church of England situation on the Church of Scotland. Personally, I think on that narrow issue, it would be all to the good if the Church of England broke away from state control.

[77 : 29] The irony of the present situation is that state control of the Church of England is a restraining factor on some of the errors and abuses that abound.

But that's a whole new area. It's a fascinating question, and I do think that as you listen and read about the things that are being said in the Church of England at the moment, and it'll intensify as it gets nearer to the time when Parliament is being asked to finalise this law on women priests, you will hear many things that have echoes of the disruption controversy.

But we're here to sort out the Free Church of Scotland. I can't cope with the Church of England in one night. Thank you, though, for the question. It's a good one. Any other questions? Derek? Derek? Right. Right. Right.

Well, there speaks the... There speaks the clerk of the Presbyterian Association in England. The question was, from my reading, what would be the reaction of the disruption divines to a Presbyterian church in England?

[78 : 54] Actually, the disruption did have an impact on England. There were congregations of the Church of Scotland here in England. There was a man called James Hamilton, who was a minister of Regent Square Church of Scotland in London.

And he quit the Church of Scotland over the disruption, at the disruption. And there was a disruption in the Presbytery of London, the Church of Scotland's Presbytery in London.

What happened, though, was that those congregations of the Church of Scotland in England, which left in 1843, quickly merged with other Presbyterian congregations in England, some from other Scottish churches, some old English Presbyterian congregations that had survived right down from Puritan times.

And eventually, well, initially, they formed the Presbyterian Church in England. And in 1870-something, they merged with another lot to form the Presbyterian Church of England.

In the 1870s, there was talk of a merger in Scotland between two or three, three of the Presbyterian Church, including the Free Church. Those discussions, which came to nothing, or came to very little in the end, actually included the Presbyterians in England.

[80 : 13] And the ambition was to unite the Free Church of Scotland, the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Reform Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church in England, into one Presbyterian Church of Great Britain.

As I say, it failed, but it's an intriguing might-have-been in history. So I think, I would say, in answer to your question, that it's interesting that they didn't try to have a Free Church of Scotland in England.

They did, but they did encourage, and they took a lively interest in a growth of English Presbyterianism. That's another, that's another, is that a sufficiently abstruse answer to your abstruse question?

Good. Anybody like to have the last question? Ross. Yeah, I'm quite on. Sorry, what?

The guys who started off the Free Church. I think, yeah, it's a good question, and in a way, it's sort of one that's perhaps been in the background of everything.

[81 : 33] I'm tempted to say they'd think we were very young, because they'd be about 170 on average. But seriously, though, I think, let's be honest, you would get a variety of views.

There were men around it, the disruption, who didn't particularly like Thomas Chalmers, thought he was a bit dodgy on certain things, you know.

There were others who thought that Chalmers was a bit too conservative on things. In any church, you get a range of opinions. What I've tried to do is to sort of distill the sort of essence of the movement.

I think, you know, let's be blunt, they would recognise that the church as we know it today is a segment of the old Free Church.

Even in 1843, and in the years afterwards, you come across in the writings of these men a recognition that the Highlands were different from the rest of Scotland. I came across one writer, it was in Thomas Guthrie's life, talking about the differences between a Celtic and a Teutonic sort of

religion.

[82 : 44] By Teutonic, he meant Anglo-Saxon, in other words, the Lowlanders, you know. And by Celtic, he meant Gaelic, the Highlands. They recognised then that there were different, there were different, different attitudes, different moods, different cultures there in Scotland.

And one of the reasons why they had the General Assembly in Inverness in 1845 was to make the point of showing the Highlanders, who by and large had come Free Church, that they weren't neglected or taken for granted.

And they went up there to do it. But it was almost, you know, it was going to almost to a foreign country to show them, we're one with you. And I think they would look at us and say, yes, you know, the present Free Church is recognisably the Highland Free Church of 1843.

And they might then say, where's the rest? But that's more a factor of subsequent history. But I hope too, I hope too, that they would recognise in the Free Church today, many ministries and activities and much ethos that they would feel really at home with.

I certainly feel that as far as the doctrine that we hold and the gospel that we hold to, they would be one with us. They were evangelical Calvinists as we are, no question there.

[84 : 15] I think they would encourage us to be bolder, perhaps, in some of our outreach. They might encourage us to have more faith in the possibility of the church to be more effective than we imagine it can be.

And they might say, you know, we didn't think, we wondered how we would survive the disruption and look what happened to us. Why don't you be a bit bolder and a bit more aggressive with the gospel and see what God will do in your day?

So, I think that's perhaps what they would say to us. Thanks, Russ. That was a good question to finish with. And with that, we complete the disruption until 2043.

Wouldn't it be fascinating, actually, to come back and to celebrate the bicentenary of the disruption and to have a progress report? Okay.

Mr. Thank you.