

A Scottish Congregationalism

by Alan Paterson [posted with his permission]

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A quick flick through the index of almost any History of Scotland is not likely to lead to a rich harvest of information on Congregationalism in Scotland. We have not shouted loudly from the pages of Scottish history, nor have we ever been accused of dominating it. We did however grow out of it.

The Congregational Union of Scotland was founded in 1812 during a turbulent period in Scottish History. If we are to understand how we came about, we have to take account of what went before and what was contemporary.

The Covenanters

Scotland's Reformation was confused, messy and complex. It emerged during forty years of struggling regency, and involved deposing the queen. From 1567 the reformation was decidedly Calvinist and a parish system was in place with 'Kirk Sessions' and 'General Assembly' established in the vocabulary. In 1603 when the monarchy moved to London James VI & I had an ambitious vision of ruling a United Kingdom, cemented by a united hierarchical church. 1638 saw a revolt in Scotland. This was the *National Covenant*, which demanded the reversal of the king's attempts to impose bishops with an Anglican prayer book. The Bishops Wars followed and eventually there were wars in three nations. In 1643, the losing, English Government Forces got aid from a Scottish Covenanter Army by signing the *Solemn League and Covenant* and committing to establish a Calvinist Church throughout the kingdoms. Here was a vision for the Church controlling the State. The Kirk's response to a remote and insensitive monarch was to become more totalitarian and less tolerant of debate, and Covenanter banners in the 1640's read "*Jesus and No Quarter*". Cromwell's New Model Army did attempt to hard-sell Congregationalism to Scotland during its eight-year occupation, but it barely survived the Restoration.

Splintering from the Kirk

In 1638 the Kirk's General Assembly had expelled bishops. The 1660 Restoration reinstated Episcopacy and made the King head of the Church of Scotland. A hard core of dissenters held out, armed rebellions were suppressed in 1669 and 1679, fines were imposed for failure to attend church, and preaching at field conventicles became a capital offence. The Revolution of 1689 placed William of Orange on the throne and created a theoretical toleration for all but Roman Catholics. Those who picked up the mantle of the Covenanters were the Cameronians, who still wanted a church that was national, presbyterian and guaranteed by the monarch. They were the zealous, uncompromising covenanters. After 1690 The Cameronian Societies became a separate church and in 1743 adopted the title 'Reformed Presbyterians'.

The Act of Union 1707

By 1707, civil wars, the Darien disaster, famine and plague, had left Scotland too poor militarily and commercially to survive an on-going trade-war with England. The Scots succumbed to pressure for the union of the two parliaments. The Act of Union guaranteed the retention of the Scots' Church and Burghs fore by the Legal and Educational Systems, and at the same time the English Parliament secured both its Northern border and the Scots' adherence to the Act of Succession. A series of Jacobite Rebellions culminating in 1745 had calamitous consequences for the Highlands. The '45 in spite of the advance to

Derby was effectively another Scottish civil war, however, essentially these conflicts were more about monarchy than religion.

John Glas and Robert Sandeman – first shoots of a native Congregationalism

By the beginning of the 18th Century questioning the concept of a national church was still controversial, but no longer fatal.

John Glas was a Kirk minister. In 1729 he wrote that there was no New Testament authority for national Christianity, for the *National Covenant* or for the *Solemn League and Covenant*, nor was there any place for state involvement in the church. Thereafter he concluded that the Church should comprise gathered churches of those with a personal experience of saving grace who chose to separate from the world. By 1725 Glas had established a separate congregation, celebrating communion monthly– later weekly – unlike the Kirk’s practise annually. In 1726 he publicly denounced the covenants, and in 1730 was deposed. He founded other churches in Dundee and Perth, where Robert Sandeman joined him becoming an elder in 1744. Sandeman took Glas’s teaching to London and New England.

The Glasites were attempting to recreate the primitive church. Communion was eventually celebrated weekly, there was a plurality of pastors and mutual exhortation was normal. They practiced love feasts and footwashing and required unanimity of views, with dissenters shut out from communion. They rigorously abstained from certain food, disapproved of lotteries and deemed the accumulation of wealth unscriptural. They had their own hymnal, some verses by Glas himself. Ultimately Glasite churches existed in thirteen Scottish towns. Glas died in 1773, but his writing remained influential.

Presbyterian Schism – Secession church & Relief Church

The Scots had inherited from Calvin a vision of a holy state and Godly nation and across the fabric of Scottish life there was crossover between civil authorities and church courts. The right of local landowners to nominate ministers to parishes was highly contentious and caused two breakaway Presbyterian churches. In 1733 those who adhered to the old covenanting tradition formed the Associate Presbytery, generally called the Secession Church, which eventually subdivided into four churches. They harked back to the intolerance of the Seventeenth Century. In 1761 a further reaction to patronage created the Relief Presbytery. It had no covenanter sentiments and was not dogmatically attached to the national church vision.

Old Scots Independents

Influenced by the writing of John Glas, James Smith and Robert Ferrier left the Kirk and set up an independent congregation in 1768. They found no scriptural authority for Presbyterianism or the civil establishment of religion. They practised a plurality of pastors, weekly communion and the welcoming of new members by public confession of faith, the right hand of fellowship and the kiss of charity. They taught Calvinist predestination and believed that only elders (pastors) should be responsible for discipline. They held that “Every single congregation, united in the faith, hope and obedience of the Gospel was independent of every other congregation, and having Christ at their head they were complete in themselves.” History has called them the ‘Old Scots Independents’. In Glasgow in the same year, a second congregation formed from a group seceding from the Relief Church. This group consulted Smith and Ferrier and eventually Ferrier came to Glasgow as a joint elder with David Dale from the Glasgow group. Two years later Ferrier joined the Glasite church and Dale remained sole pastor till his death in 1806. The Old Scots Independents’ churches were never big or numerous. They had a tendency towards schism, and

the rise of the Old Scotch Baptists attracted many seeking to recreate the primitive church. They had no purpose beyond their own needs and many whom they might have attracted were eventually drawn to the Haldanite Revival as the century turned.

The Bereans

A third movement seeking to re-establish the early church were the Bereans who took their name from the people of Berea (Acts 17: 11) who 'listened to the message with great eagerness and every day searched the scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true.' The movement began in 1773 with John Barclay, a Kirk minister who formed a church at Sauchieburn. Other congregations followed and by 1778 there were at least ten Berean congregations in Scotland and several in England. They held that Old Testament prophecies, particularly the Psalms, applied to Christ alone and denied the private interpretation of any scripture prophecy. They never called baptism or communion sacraments, but believed infant baptism to be a divine ordinance and a Christian substitute for Jewish circumcision. Barclay was a prolific if not gifted versifier.

All three of the early indigenous versions of Scottish congregationalism, the Glasites, the Old Scots Independents and the Bereans were primarily attempts to recreate the primitive church. Each rejected Presbyterianism or any parochial system as unscriptural, and believed in the voluntary, gathered church. Each practised the autonomy of the congregation and rejected the Kirk's minimal communion practise. All three introduced hymnody and held to Calvinist predestination. While all three pursued serious study of the scriptures, none placed any emphasis on an educated clergy or on mission and evangelism.

In the first half of the 18th Century the Kirk was fairly evenly divided between Moderates and Evangelicals, but superior management by the Moderates enabled them to control the General Assembly and the church itself. With a major influence on appointments in the universities, they set a tone, which was socially and politically conservative, but theologically and culturally liberal. The Covenanting tradition was divided by a growing schismatic tendency that weakened the Evangelical cause. In the 1770's John Wesley acknowledged that he had little success in Scotland because the Scots were more moved by doctrinal argument than by oratory alone. "The knew too much," he said, "Therefore they could learn nothing." New thinking was developing in many fields and the Scots had an endless appetite for debate.

Scottish Enlightenment

In the 18th Century, a Scottish Enlightenment contributed hugely to the European Enlightenment. John Knox's Book of Discipline had held a vision of a school in every parish, and although incomplete at this time, Europe's first public education system since classical times was paying off. Here was an era when philosophy, the arts, the sciences, architecture, political economy and law all made great strides forward. It was also a century when the population of Scotland doubled and its national revenue rose by a factor of fifty. Here the thoughts, ideas and works of men like David Hume, Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, Adam Ferguson, James Hutton and others were being debated, tested and judged. Soon the universities grew, specialised teaching became the norm and Latin ceased to be the teaching medium. The very nature of humanity was being debated.

The Highlands

A strong tribal element remained in Highland culture with Chiefs regarded as holding territories on behalf of their clans. There was also a strong military tradition, cattle-raiding was endemic and mercenaries had

regularly joined in Irish and European conflicts. Swathes of the Highlands were not reached by reformation. Stewart monarchs had taken various steps to tame the Highlands, particularly James VI anticipating a United Kingdom. A royal charter in 1709 established *The Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge* [SSPCK] to spread the reformed faith in the Highlands. The SSPCK banned Gaelic in its schools and promoted Anglicisation to subjugate the Highlands. Arguments continue as to how much the '45 Rebellion was a Highland uprising but certainly the Gaelic world – the Highlands – received the brunt of the punishment. Foreby immediate local reprisals, a package of legislation ensued, designed to break the tie between chief and clan and destabilize that culture, which had dared to frighten middle England, panic London and shooogle the throne itself.

Samuel Johnson, in his *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, wrote, "Their chiefs being now deprived of their jurisdiction, have already lost much of their influence; and as they gradually degenerate from patriarchal rulers to rapacious landlords, they will divest themselves of what little remains." 1792, *The Year of the Sheep* marked the beginning of the long Highland Clearances that lasted well over a century.

Revolution and the Rights of Man

1799 saw the last Emancipation Act for Scotland whereby colliers and salters ceased to be the property of their employers, and the last vestiges of serfdom in Scotland were finally abolished. The emancipation arose from a dire need to recruit manpower in an age when the British war effort needed a growing iron industry. Human rights were, however, in the air. The anti-slavery campaign began 1787. The American revolutionaries' slogan, 'No taxation without representation' struck a cord. Initially the French Revolution was welcomed as the fall of a despotic monarch. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) had encouraged the American Revolution and in England in 1791 he published *'The Rights of Man'*, waving all claims to copywrite. In Paine's view, governments that took no stock of natural rights were tyrannous. The government banned his book and charged him with seditious libel. He fled to France. When he died the European sales of the 'Rights of Man had passed 1,500,000 copies. Fears of radical rebellion were rife. Formed in 1792 'The Friends of the People in Scotland' was a popular movement of citizens agitating for extended franchise. The propertied classes, panicking, and fearing revolution, formed organisations to counter them and employed spies to watch and infiltrate the radicals. In 1793 the revenue authorities investigated the loyalty of Robert Burns (then employed as an excise officer) and he had quickly to off-load his copy of *'The Rights of Man'* to his friendly, neighbourhood blacksmith. In the background a more shadowy organisation, *The United Scotsmen*, was contemplating the feasibility of insurrection. Frequent rumours of plots left the ruling classes defensive, tense and suspicious.

An era of change

In the 1790's the population of Scotland was still coming to terms with a series of fundamental shifts in its consciousness.

The ancient nation was subsumed in another nation state.

The Jacobite rebellions and their aftermath had stirred all the ambiguities of Civil War,

The Government was distant and the monarch was Hanoverian,

The Americans had seized independence, and in France the Jacobins had seized power. Rationalism and the enlightenment were changing the old order,

The Highland Clearances were underway.

The agrarian and industrial revolutions created dramatic population shifts.

Radicals were raising the social temperature in the growing towns while fear of revolution gripped the landed and merchant classes.

The Kirk of the Covenant now spoke with various competing voices
People's lives were bereft of the old framework of certainties.

The Haldane Brothers & mission

Around 1794 the brothers Robert and James Haldane underwent deep and transforming religious experiences. They were scions of a leading Perthshire family. Robert was a captain in the Royal Navy before resigning in 1783. James had risen to captain in the East India Company's merchant fleet before he resigned. Robert had been influenced by the rational analysis of the enlightenment. Like many others he was originally inspired by the French Revolution and opposed to the French War. No radical, but a man with confidence in his own convictions, he disturbed the political and religious establishment. Robert voiced the views of the Clapham Sect in Scotland, an evangelical group mainly of Anglicans who feared the effects of radical atheism on society. James Bogue influenced both brothers. Bogue was a Berwickshire man, trained for the Church of Scotland ministry, who moved south, becoming minister of a Congregational church in Gosport. There he established a seminary to train men for ministry and for foreign mission. Bogue's whole emphasis was on mission. He engaged in regular preaching tours and was regarded as the father of the London Missionary Society, for whom he trained about 115 men. He also helped found the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society.

In 1796 Robert Haldane sold the greater part of his estate in order to fund a mission to Bengal. Among the team he intended taking with him were David Bogue and Greville Ewing who was then Assistant at Lady Glenorchy's chapel and co-editor of the 'Missionary Magazine'. The East India Company blocked their attempts. In the same year James Haldane accompanied Charles Simeon, an Anglican evangelist, on a preaching tour of the Highlands. In 1797 James Haldane began preaching and went north on a preaching tour with two companions. The Haldane brothers, with others, set up "The Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home" (the S.P.G.H.) in 1798. Its object was to disseminate religious knowledge in Scotland, particularly in the more destitute parts. Robert and James contributed over £70,000 to evangelical work and the establishment of Congregational and later Baptist churches in Scotland between 1798 and 1810. The Haldanes used lay as well as ordained preachers and utilised lay catechists. They became heavily involved in the movement to set up Sunday Schools for adults as well as children, and many of the society's tours, preaching to destitute areas, headed north. In Highland history the S.P.G.H. holds a special place for its readiness to use Gaelic-speakers as preachers and catechists and to distribute Gaelic tracts while the Establishment was bent on the destruction of Gaelic culture, and when the SSPCK was still trying to eradicate the language. Three leading figures, in Highland, Gaelic history, have lauded the S.P.G.H. Highland society was already seriously destabilised by the aftermath of the '45, the destruction of the clans, the departure of the Tacksmen, emigration, mass evictions and the chiefs' transformation into landlords. Many of the churches the S.P.G.H. helped to found were short lived as the erosion of Gaelic culture and depopulation of the Highlands ground on into the second half of the 20th Century.

An ideal that became congregationalism

The Haldane brothers attempted a form of evangelism not specific to any church, hoping this would spare them the power contests they saw in the courts of the Kirk. Deemed suspect by the establishment, they were excluded from Presbyterian pulpits. At first they had set up their own non-denominational, evangelical preaching stations but having opened the first, the Circus in Edinburgh, it became apparent that some kind of structure was necessary. They adopted a Congregational model. The Circus opened in 1798 and the first preacher was Rowland Hill. Hill had been denied priest's orders in the Church of

England and had eventually built his own free chapel, Surrey Chapel, in London operating a Congregational format. He was also a founder of the Religious Tract Society and a promoter of both the British and Foreign Bible Society and the London Missionary Society, interests he shared with David Bogue and Robert Haldane.

The architect of Scottish Congregationalism

Because the Brothers Haldane were the substantial funders of this lively and rapidly spreading movement they influenced much of its policy and direction, but it had other, able leaders among whom Greville Ewing was outstanding. Ewing had a life-long commitment to mission. He had been a Church of Scotland minister in Edinburgh, in a privately funded evangelical chapel outwith the courts of the Church of Scotland and where the ministers were elected by the congregation. Ewing withdrew from the Kirk in 1798 rejecting 'the Divine Right of Presbytery.' He drafted the rules of government of the movement's first Congregational Church – constituted in 1799 – and was himself inducted to the new Glasgow Tabernacle later the same year. By 1807 eighty-five churches had been formed on the congregational plan and nearly three hundred men had been trained for ministry. 1807 is significant because this was when the Haldanes began advocating a plurality of pastors in the churches, along with mutual exhortation and the exercise of discipline in the course of Sunday Worship. They transferred the training of ministers to England and began to question the validity of infant baptism. Absorbing the teaching of Glas and Sandeman they were adopting the minutiae of what they believed to be the practice of the primitive church. In 1808 the brothers became Baptists, and a schism took place in which continuing Congregational churches found that the Haldanes foreclosed on all outstanding loans, and repossessed all the buildings they had funded.

Theological Academy & Congregational Union of Scotland

Greville Ewing had already played a part in the early training for ministry and now gave more leadership to the struggling churches. In 1808 he produced a paper for the churches about their responsibility for the training of ministry. In 1811 the foundation of the Glasgow Theological Academy replaced the patronage of the Haldanes. Fifty-five churches formed the Congregational Union in 1812 with the twin aims of church aid and home mission.

I did say that the Congregational Union of Scotland was born in turbulent times.

- 1 A schism had occurred among the churches planted by the S.P.G.H.
- 2 The Highland Clearances were ongoing.
- 3 Radical agitation was continuing.
- 4 In England the Luddites were active from 1811-1817 with over 35 deaths.
- 5 In 1812 an irate bankrupt killed the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval.
- 6 The Napoleonic wars continued with Napoleon's ill-fated march on Moscow, and Wellington's victory at Salamanca.
- 7 The U.S. declared war on Britain in the War of 1812
- 8 Unrest was looming that would lead to 'the Peterloo Massacre', the Cato Street conspiracy, and the Scottish Radical Insurrection of 1820.

But by 1824 the Congregational Union had seventy-two member churches, and that figure soon rose to nearly a hundred.

Calvinism Questioned

As the nineteenth century progressed there was a marked shift in economic and electoral power and a growing assertiveness among the new skilled and semiskilled classes. Until now no one among the dissidents or the national church had seriously questioned the Westminster Confession or Catechism. The drive towards evangelising the unchurched had loosened the appeal of the Covenants. While the disruption of 1843 was coming to the boil in the Kirk, questions were being asked of Calvinism by James Morison in the United Secession Church and by John Kirk in the Congregational Union,. Both these men were accused of Arminianism, and indeed moved steadily to adopting Universalist doctrine. In 1841 James Morison was expelled from the Secession Church and in 1843 four former Secession Church congregations founded the Evangelical Union. In the Congregational Union the controversy over John Kirk's views lead to a number of students being expelled from their ministerial training and nine disassociated Congregational churches became member churches of the Evangelical Union in 1845.

The Evangelical Union

Before its inception, the Evangelical Union had established its own Theological Academy and by the end of its fifty-three years of separate existence it had ninety member churches. Formed by those who had suffered for their theology and their consciences, the Evangelical Union affirmed the freedom of conscience and autonomy of local churches. At the same time it lead the move away from hard-line Calvinism and while it issued a Doctrinal Declaration in 1858 to explain its position to other bodies, it never required of its membership any credal affirmation. In the social climate of its day, the Evangelical Union was at the forefront of the temperance movement and many of its churches prohibited from membership anyone who worked in the licensed trade. Given the alcohol-related problems of the age, this stance was more about social concern than any killjoy authoritarianism and other churches and church-leaders eventually followed their stance. Initially attacked and belittled for its departure from Calvinism and its prohibition stance, the Evangelical Union gradually won respect and respectability in Scottish Church life – demonstrated in 1882 by Glasgow University conferring a Doctorate of Divinity on James Morison. On his Jubilee in 1893 James Morison was presented with a bound address containing apologies as well as appreciation, and signed by nearly 2,000 members of the United Presbyterian Church, the successor body to the United Secession Church that had removed him.

Two Unions become one

From 1843 until 1896 Scotland had two unions of voluntary, independent churches with similar standards for membership, and a similar aversion to creeds. At first they were alienated by differences over predestination but, as decades of more liberal theology came in, the small print of Calvinism lost much of its importance to both bodies. Union was first mooted informally 1867, negotiations began in 1892 leading to the Uniting Assembly of October 1896.

Other Unions

After the EU and the CU formally united on 1st January 1897, other church unions in Scotland followed. In 1900 the United Presbyterian Church [itself a union between the Secession Church and the Relief Church] joined with the Free Church to form the United Free Church of Scotland with over 1,100 churches and nearly ½ a million members. In 1929 the major part of this body was re-united with the Church of Scotland.

Re-assessment

In 1929 the CUS considered union with Congregationalists in England and Wales and there were a number of successful, joint meetings. The rebuttal offered was that Scottish Congregationalism, in both the branches that had united in 1896, was "born of Presbyterianism and native to the soil". Nevertheless two world wars, a depression and General Strike, coupled with growing religious scepticism and continuing emigration made the 20th century a difficult time for all the churches.

A denomination that grew out of mission

District Councils had been formed in the 1870's, and throughout the first half of the 20th Century the Union had been evolving a committee structure, and a central administration to meet the demands of a more bureaucratic state. The Union had assumed its place among the Scottish denominations, supporting the formation of the Scottish Churches Council, established in 1928. It had taken steps to ensure and control tight standards for ordination. In Scotland, Congregationalism was not a Reformation heritage sealed by the blood of martyrs and demanding an appropriate loyalty to the past. It was a pragmatic choice, adopting a method and style that permitted a freer response to the movement of the Spirit. It saw its special gifts as freedom and flexibility to respond readily to the spiritual needs of the time. It was born of mission.

The gifts of Scottish Congregationalism to ecumenism and the wider church

London Missionary Society to council for World Mission

The denomination consistently played its part in the London Missionary Society and its subsequent incarnations, giving financially and sending a stream of missionaries abroad. Exact figures have been hard to get, but David Livingstone and Eric Liddell are the most famous. Morningside church has a roll honouring 44 missionaries sent out between 1893 and 1958, and I can remember 11 from the CUS in my lifetime before reciprocal mission superseded 'sending missionaries'.

Women in the Congregational Union of Scotland

In 1928 the Rev Vera Finlay, married name Kenmuir, became the first woman ordained to the ministry in the C.U.S. She was Scotland's first woman minister, and in 1951 she became the first of six women to become president of the denomination. When the Kirk ordained its first woman minister in 1969 the Congregational Union of Scotland had ordained nine.

Multilateral church conversations in Scotland

The Multilateral church conversations in Scotland began in the mid 60's and met for nearly 30 years with a Congregationalist Secretary throughout. John Wylie was the last of five and served for nearly twenty years. The secretary was responsible for minutes, communications, organising meetings and publications. At its height it comprised seven denominations with observers from the Catholic Church and the British Council of Churches (ultimately CTBI). Although the Conversations never led to any organic union, they clarified that there were few theological obstacles to union, and paved the way for the 'Not strangers but Pilgrims' process. Perhaps the most significant document to come out of 'the Multies' was the *Mutual Recognition of Membership and Ministry* by four of the partners.

Christian Aid (Scotland),

At one point the entire advocacy staff of Christian Aid in Scotland was drawn from the Congregational Union of Scotland. Earnest Cairnduff had been with Christian Aid in Scotland since the early 70's, Tony

Ashcroft joined in the mid 70's and John Wylie in 1980. Until about 1985 Christian Aid in Scotland was virtually run by Congregationalists.

Religious Broadcasting

We produced two renowned figures for religious broadcasting. Dr Nelson Gray was Executive producer for Religious Programmes with Scottish Television from 1967 until 1988. Meanwhile Rev James Dey, who had been a producer of religious programmes with BBC Scotland for nine years, became head of Religious Programmes with BBC Scotland from 1971-1973, followed by a three-year spell as Head of Religious Programmes for the BBC in London.

Local Ecumenism

The CUS was a founder member of the Livingston Ecumenical Project (now the Livingston Ecumenical Parish). Over the years ecumenical partnerships followed at Grahamston, Paisley, Morningside and Augustine. This is not a huge number, but for the size of the CUS and the ecumenical climate in Scotland at the time it was not unremarkable.

As a relatively young denomination in Scotland, unencumbered by structures we were flexible, lively and capable of innovation, and as a middle-of-the-road denomination few saw us as a threat so, more than our size would suggest, we were able to contribute to the life of Christ's Church in Scotland. In all the unity discussions we held we were able to offer the Church Meeting as our gift – not a business meeting, but *'the church, meeting prayerfully to determine the mind of Christ'*, a restoration of theology to the people. At our best we offered an affirmation of church members within the household of God and the empowerment of the laity – the whole people of God in the Church's mission.

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