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Should We Leave Liberal Denominations?

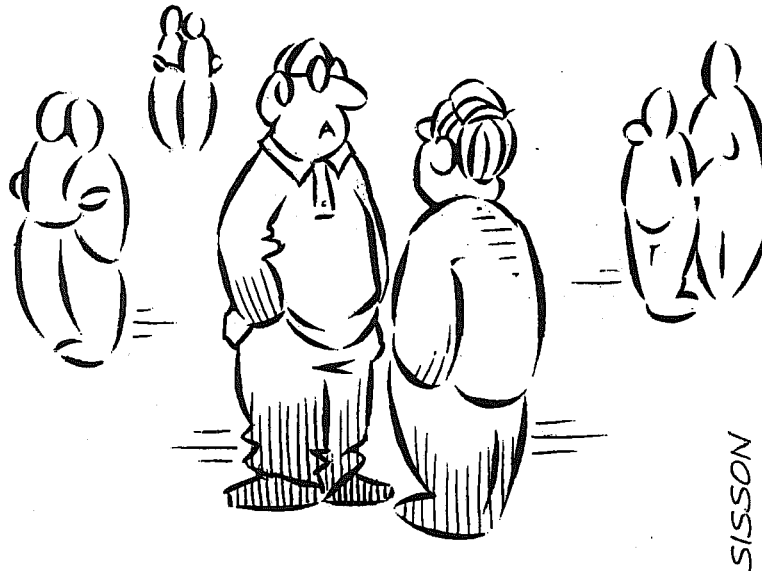


Andrew T. B. McGowan

INTRODUCTION

As a Church of Scotland minister, I am part of what some of my Reformed friends call "a mixed denomination," although my understanding of Scripture is that every denomination is mixed until the Day of Judgement! It is certainly true that my denomination has many members and ministers who are not evangelical and some who are passionately opposed to evangelicalism.¹ The Church established by John Knox and others in 1560 has certainly moved a considerable distance from her moorings. What should Reformed Evangelicals do in such a situation? Historically, there have been two options: either we continue to hold to our principles within the denomination until we win or are put out (the Great Ejection of 1663) or we take the decision that it is impossible to remain (the Disruption of 1843).

It seems to me that Secession (or schism) is a very serious matter indeed and that those who call upon fellow Reformed Evangelicals to leave their denominations have often treated the matter too lightly and have sometimes refused to see the complexity of the issues involved. In some cases, these "purists" have even refused to have any further fellowship with those who refused to leave. Those of us who have chosen



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to remain within mainstream denominations in order to work for reformation deserve more respect.

In this article I want to explore the issue of Secession, both from a theological and a practical perspective. In order to provide an historical focus for the discussion, I shall use, as a case study, the late Rev. Thomas Boston (1676-1732) and the First Secession (1733). I will argue my case in three parts. First, for reasons which will become apparent later, I want to give a brief outline of the First Secession from the Church of Scotland, which took place in 1733, paying particular attention to the events which led up to the actual crisis. Second, I want to consider the position of Thomas Boston, one of the most significant ministers who ever served the Church of Scotland. Then, third, I intend to ask what lessons can be learned for today.

THE FIRST SECESSION

Andrew Thomson, in his *Historical Sketch of the Origin of the Secession Church*², argues that the Secession of 1733 was the direct result of various decisions which were taken soon after the Revolution-settlement of 1690. In particular, he mentions the pressure put upon the General Assembly by King William to admit into the Church of Scotland "on easy terms" the Episcopalian clergy who had previously been opposed to Presbyterianism and the covenants. The Assembly initially resisted this suggestion but ultimately agreed. For Thomson, this was the beginning of the end. He sums up his argument in this way:

Two parties from this time appeared in the church, the one preaching the doctrines of her Confessions and discharging with assiduity the duties of the pastorate; the other latitudinarian in doctrine and earthly in spirit—the one guarding with anxiety the liberty and independence of the church, against the dictation of civil power; the other seeking the favour of the court and pliant to its wishes. This latter party by degrees became dominant in the counsels of the church, and under their malign influence we have now to follow the church in her various steps of degradation and defection, until wounded consciences

found relief, and the people's liberties an asylum, in the First Secession.³

The events which followed in the next forty-five years would seem to support this view, although one might want to argue that the establishment majority which finally forced the Secession were not entirely drawn from the remnants of the dissenting Episcopalian clergy and their successors.

The departure from the terms of the Revolution-settlement began in earnest when Queen Anne came to power. Almost immediately, she dissolved the General Assembly in mid-session while it was discussing an act which declared Christ to be the sole Head of the church. This was followed in 1712 by the passing of two acts: the *Oath of Abjuration* and the *Law of Patronage*. The first of these was ostensibly an oath of allegiance to the crown but, in fact, it involved acceptance of a number of things, not least that the monarch should always be an Episcopalian. This divided the ministers into those who were prepared to take the oath (jurors) and those who refused (non-jurors). Heavy penalties were exacted upon the non-jurors. The *Law of Patronage* removed the right of a congregation to call a minister, which had been enshrined in the Revolution-settlement, and instead gave to the Patron of the parish the right to present a candidate to a vacant charge.

This attack on the ecclesiastical rights of the people provided good evidence that the Church was moving away from the position held in 1690 on a number of issues. It soon became apparent that there had also been a gradual and subtle change in the theological position of the Church. The failure to remove Professor Simson from his chair in 1717 when his heretical views became known, in contrast to the firm and decisive action taken against the *Marrowmen* between 1720-1722, taught the Evangelicals a lesson, namely, that the Church was now more likely to take action against them than against those who denied the cardinal doctrines of the faith.

Meanwhile the deteriorating situation created by the *Law of Patronage* came to a head in 1730. Over the years since 1712 there had been many ministers foisted upon unwilling con-

gregations. In such cases, ministers who disagreed with such settlements would make their protest at the General Assembly and dissent from the action taken. In 1730, however, the Assembly ruled that henceforth such dissent would neither be permitted nor recorded. This astonishing denial of the rights of presbyters was only a foretaste of the action which would later be taken against Ebenezer Erskine and his associates.

There were, of course, patrons who did not take up their right to present a nominee to a vacant charge. In such cases, the congregation was free to choose a minister without interference. In 1731, however, even this was challenged. The Assembly had before it an act which, if passed, would mean that when a patron did not take up his right to present a candidate to a vacant charge, this right would pass to the heritors and elders of the parish. This act was sent down to the presbyteries for discussion under the equivalent of the modern "Barrier Act." When the report was given at the next Assembly, it transpired that only six presbyteries were in favor of the act; twelve would vote for it if significant and material changes were made, thirty-one presbyteries were entirely against it and eighteen expressed no opinion. Thomson describes what happened:

But the ruling party in the Assembly were not to be outdone. In the face of a standing law of the church, they contended that the reports of inferior courts, were only to be regarded as opinions which the Assembly might either receive or reject; and by a mode of ingenious calculation, which even honourable men of the world would have spurned, it was insisted that even supposing the reports of presbyteries were allowed to decide the case, the majority were in their favour, since eighteen who had not reported might fairly be reckoned as approving, and this gave them the numerical preponderance.⁴

The appalling arrogance of the ruling party within the Church was made even more apparent when some presbyters went to the bar of Assembly to register their protest and dissent. This protest and dissent was neither received nor recorded!

The key event, which brought all of this to a head, was a sermon. Ebenezer Erskine had been moderator of the Synod of Stirling and Perth. As was the custom, when his time as moderator was over, he was invited to preach the sermon at the opening session of the next Synod. This was at Perth on October 18, 1732. He preached on Psalm 118:22. In the course of this sermon he spoke out against the act which gave heritors and elders the right to present a minister to a vacant charge if the patron declined to do so. Among other things, he said this:

I can find no warrant from the word of God to confer the spiritual privileges of his house upon the rich beyond the poor: whereas, by this Act, the man with the gold ring and gay clothing, is preferred unto the man with the vile raiment and poor attire.⁵

When the Synod met for business in the afternoon it was moved and agreed that Mr Erskine be investigated because of his remarks. A committee was entrusted with the task and, unlike normal presbyterian committees, reported the very next day! They had been unable to get Erskine to admit any fault but they pointed to a number of passages in his sermon which they took to be objectionable. After three days of debate the Synod agreed that he be censured. Erskine protested, appealed to the Assembly and left, arguing that proceedings should be ceased pending appeal to the higher court.

The Synod assembled again at Stirling in April 1733. When they tried to censure Erskine for his persistent refusal to repent of his earlier statements he protested, made a statement reaffirming the truth of what he had said at Perth, and withdrew. The General Assembly met in Edinburgh on May 3, 1733. Erskine was called to the bar and was rebuked and admonished. He and three others produced a statement of protest and asked that they be permitted to read it to the Assembly. This was refused. They laid it on the table and left.

In the providence of God, however, the paper fell off the table and it was picked up by the Rev. James Naismith. He declared himself to be scandalized that these four ministers

should deny the authority of the General Assembly in such a flagrant manner and vehemently urged that the Assembly should take action against the insult which had been done to it. He read the protest to the Assembly and the officer was instructed to find the four men and order them to appear at the bar of Assembly the next day, which they duly did.

They were invited to meet with a committee appointed for the purpose of examining them. This committee reported back that they refused to change their views. The Assembly, without allowing those at the bar to speak, ordered them to appear before the Commission of Assembly in August to "express sorrow for their conduct and retract their protest."⁶ Failure to do so, would mean that they would be suspended from the ministry. Continued intransigence thereafter would mean an even more severe penalty.

In August, many representations were laid on the table, but they were not read. The four ministers had themselves prepared papers but they were told that these would not be read either. They were simply required to answer one question as to whether or not they adhered to their former views. After hours of argument, when Erskine refused to give a verbal answer, his paper was reluctantly read.

The Commission duly suspended them from the exercise of all ministerial functions. They responded by saying that they would not recognize this. When they were called to appear before the Commission in November they reaffirmed their position. By the casting vote of the moderator the Commission agreed to proceed to a higher censure. A committee was charged with the responsibility of meeting with the four. Erskine and the others remained firm. Finally, on November 16, 1733, the Commission of the General Assembly passed sentence in the following terms:

The Commission of the General Assembly did, and hereby do, loose the relation of Mr Ebenezer Erskine, minister at Stirling, Mr William Wilson minister at Perth, Mr Alexander Moncrieff minister at Abernethy, and Mr James Fisher minister at Kinclaven, to their said respective charges; and do declare them

no longer ministers of this church; and do prohibit all ministers of this church to employ them, or any of them, in any ministerial function. And the Commission do declare the churches of the said Mr Erskine, Mr Wilson, Mr Moncrieff, and Mr Fisher, vacant, from and after the date of this sentence.⁷

The four ministers then issued their famous declaration of Secession. They were very careful to state that they were not seceding from the Church of Scotland so much as from the "prevailing party" within the Church. They also affirmed their right to carry out ministerial functions. Finally they appealed to what they called "the first free, faithful, and reforming General Assembly of the Church of Scotland."

And so the first Secession of 1733 took place.

THOMAS BOSTON

Let us now turn to a consideration of the position of Thomas Boston, who died in 1732 before this Secession took place. Would he have accepted the censure of the Assembly and remained within the denomination or would he have joined the Secession?

It is always difficult to ask a hypothetical question of a historical figure, but in this instance there is some evidence which might help us to reach a conclusion. There is, first of all, his involvement in the Professor Simson case, mentioned above. The Church had been aware of the grave concern which some had expressed concerning Simson's theological views, but had refused to do anything when the matter was raised some years earlier. The Assembly was finally forced to take action, however, because of the clearly heretical views which Simson was propounding. In 1729, it duly decided to remove him from his chair but not to depose him from the ministry. Boston dissented from the decision but found that no one stood with him. The Moderator and others asked him not to divide the Church and to withdraw his dissent. In his diary he records a meeting which followed:

As soon as I could, I got to my chamber, to consider my now

difficult situation; and in a little time after was sent for to meet with some ministers. When I came, I found Mr Hog, and the two Erskines, and, I suppose, some other. They began to speak of their adhering to my dissent. I thought this too precipitant, judging they should first of all have considered what was expedient for me to do in my present situation; and that the proper way for them, not being members, was, in case of my insisting, to declare their adherence after, by a writing under their hand, to be tacked to it in case of publication. So I was going away, that I might consider alone what was proper for me; but was kept; and several other ministers of the party against Mr Simson came in, with Mr Charles Erskine and the Colonel. They began to direct their discourse to me, and some of them spoke with a keenness very uneasy to me.⁸

It seems to me that this conversation reveals a man who was very determined to do the right thing but was rather afraid that this group of men would allow their enthusiasm to run away with them and lead them into rash and premature action. He goes on to say in his diary that he informed all present that he had not called the meeting but was invited to it. The clear implication being that he did not want to be part of any group planning concerted action on this issue.

The second matter which I think is helpful in seeking to determine what Boston might have done in respect to the Secession, concerns his conduct throughout the *Marrow* controversy. At no point is there any suggestion that Boston ever considered leaving the Church of Scotland. He was a man who was ready and able to protest, but always as a minister of the Church of Scotland. Even when the *Marrow* was condemned in 1720 (and by consequence his own theology) he remained within. In my experience, those who today advocate Secession from what they call "mixed denominations" would be appalled if the theology of an Evangelical was condemned by the supreme court of his Church and yet he chose to remain within the denomination.

So far the evidence has been based on an interpretation of historical events and I recognize that not everyone will share my judgment of these events. There is, however, a sermon

which has some bearing on Boston's views on schism, and the sermon itself has an interesting history. It is a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:10 titled, "The Evil and Danger of Schism," and is found in Boston's *Works*.⁹ He tells us in his *Memoirs*¹⁰ that this sermon was preached on December 12, 1708, and he gives the circumstances in which it was preached: "Upon public reading of the act of the commission of the General Assembly, against Mr John Macmillan and Mr John Macneill, the two preachers of the separation." The sermon is strongly against schism. He begins by pointing out the sinfulness of the divisions which existed in the Church at Corinth and expounds his text. He then draws out several doctrinal points and expounds these. The substance of these points is as follows:

1. Schism and division are evil.
2. Christians ought to beware of schism.
3. Where schism comes into a church it brings bitterness and strife.
4. It is possible to heal a breach which has divided a church.
5. It is the duty of all church members to work for the unity of the Church and to cure schism.
6. It is the duty of schismatics to "take their own place in the body again."

He pursues the matter at some length, showing the various schisms and divisions which are described in Scripture followed by some references to subsequent Church history. It is interesting that he regards Luther as a man raised up by God to bring reformation, whereas he regards the Anabaptists as schismatics, arguing that they had no good reason to break away from the Lutheran Church.

It has to be remembered that in this sermon Boston was dealing with a specific problem. John Macmillan and his Cameronian followers had refused to submit to the king and parliament because they had not subscribed to the covenants. Macmillan and others withdrew from communion with the established Church because it had accepted this situation.

Macmillan was a Church of Scotland minister until by due process he was deposed. It was on the occasion of reading out the Act of Parliament proclaiming the deposition that this sermon was preached. Because of this context, the remainder of the sermon is concerned to demonstrate that there is nothing in the National Covenant nor the Solemn League and Covenant nor in the Westminster Standards which justified Macmillan's schism from the Church.

It is difficult to read this sermon and at the same time believe that Boston would himself have taken part in a schism from the established Church.

Boston goes on to say that this sermon was subsequently transcribed and handed out and "was of some use for a time." In other words, written as it was to meet a particular situation in the Church, it was found to be useful to others who were concerned about the controversy. In 1738, however, after Boston had died and after the first Secession had taken place, the sermon was published for the first time. There are copies of the sermon in the National Library of Scotland and also in the New College library. It seems highly likely that it was published by those who were opposed to the Secession in order to persuade people that Boston would never have joined the Secession and so neither should they! The sermon obviously caused some consternation among the supporters of the Secession to the extent that some people denied that the sermon was genuine and questioned whether it had been written by Boston at all.

The result of this was that when the sermon was republished in 1753 it contained a preface written by Boston's son, also called Thomas and also a minister of the Church of Scotland. In this preface to the second edition, he noted that some people had denied his father's authorship of the sermon and he affirmed that the sermon had indeed been written by his father, pointing out that he possessed the original hand-written version. Boston Junior was clearly a vehement opponent of the Secession and expresses surprise at the suggestion that his father would have been in favor of it. He writes:

It surprised me to find, that several people give it out, with

great assurance, that, had he been living in our world, he had long ere now left the establish'd church, because of her corruptions. How they came by this *spirit of divination*, I shall not pretend to say. Mean time, the following sermon seems to be no great evidence of what they assert.¹¹

He then describes an incident when some people who had not left the established Church but were deeply unhappy with their own ministers, asked Boston to baptize their children. Boston Junior concludes, "This he would by no means consent to do; because he thought it a breach on the peace and order of the Church, and a cruel weakening of the hands of his fellow-servants." Boston Junior goes on to castigate the Secession in very strong terms, underlining the points made against schism by his father in the sermon. He also testifies to his opinion that there was a lack of love and of a godly Christian spirit among the Secessionists when he writes,

Oh how pitiable is the case of the poor people, who have their heads and hands filled with Acts, Declarations and Testimonies, about Church-government, Patronages, Burger-oaths, &c. while their hearts are filled with pride and self-conceit, and with envy and bitterness against all but these of their own party!¹²

To try and decide what Boston himself would have done is very difficult. I am inclined to believe that he would not have seceded, on the basis of this sermon together with the evidence from his *Memoirs* in which we find portrayed a man who always stood firm on theological matters, even when he was alone, but who at the same time always went out of his way to seek the peace and harmony of the Church.

APPLICATION

I want us now to see what we can learn from all of this for the church today. There are two preliminary points which ought to be made:

The Actions of the General Assembly

One of the most striking elements in the story concerns the General Assembly. From 1690 until 1733 the Assembly

gradually became more and more dominant, taking more and more power away from congregations, ministers and presbyteries. Eventually, acts passed by the General Assembly became more important than Scripture. When you consider that Erskine was disciplined and ultimately deposed because he preached, not against a cardinal doctrine but against an Act of the General Assembly, the scandal of the situation is immediately evident. Andrew Thomson, on this very point, made a wise and perceptive comment: "It is one of the surest marks of a corrupt church when ecclesiastical offences are visited with greater severity than doctrinal errors or immoral acts."¹³

There have been instances in our own day where Presbyterian churches have acted as if their own rules and regulations were a higher authority than Scripture. Hence there are ministers in Presbyterian churches who have publicly denied (in their books) some of the cardinal doctrines of the faith and yet are lauded as scholars and men of distinction; whereas there are other ministers, in the same denominations, who have questioned the Church's teaching, for example, on women's ordination and have been subjected to the full weight of Church censure and discipline.

Schism as a Last Resort

It is quite clear that Erskine and the others, after they had laid their protest on the table at the Assembly in May 1733 had no intention of leaving the established Church. They were quite prepared to continue their dissent from within the Church. This is an important point because there are many Evangelicals today who see schism as a first and not a last resort. Such people, if they fall out with their minister or the elders of their church, simply form a new church! Schism is a serious and deeply regrettable action which must only be taken when all else has failed and every alternative channel explored.

THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Having said this, when is schism justified? More particularly, when should I, as a Church of Scotland minister, consid-

er schism? My response would be that schism is justified whenever the judgment is reached that a church has departed from the true faith and is not recoverable. I want to stress this element of not being recoverable. There is no such thing as a perfect church and every denomination is, in some sense, a mixed denomination. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that some churches have become so degenerate that they are no longer true churches, but it also says that. "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error."¹⁴ Anyone who suggests that we should immediately leave a congregation or a denomination because there are sins and errors within it, has neither studied Paul's letters (especially the letters to Corinth) properly nor understood the Confession. Part of our theological affirmation concerning the nature of the Church is that it should not only be reformed but always reforming. It is a process, not an event, because the Church is made up of sinners. I must, therefore, ask the question: "Given the current condition of the Church of Scotland, is it recoverable?"

In my own view, the denomination is recoverable and I believe that those of us who are Reformed should refuse to walk away from the Church of our fathers. Instead, we should work and pray to recover it. This is the policy which many of us have pursued for a number of years and at present we see no reason to change direction, although we recognize that there are serious questions to be answered. For example, by staying within the denomination are we acting as witnesses to the truth, or are we being unfaithful to our Lord and to the very Bible which we have been licensed to preach? By staying within are we fatally compromised or are we the vanguard for the recovery of gospel truth and the reaffirmation of the doctrines of grace? What have we to learn from the sad history of other denominations throughout the world affected by the twin scourges of liberalism and pluralism?

The Church of Scotland was born at the Scottish Reformation of 1560 and established as a confessional, Presbyterian denomination. The first confession to be adopted was the Scots Confession, this being replaced in 1647 by the West-

minster Confession of Faith. This Reformed (or Calvinistic) heritage remained largely intact in Scotland, with very few deviations, until the nineteenth century. Since then, however, the Church of Scotland has been influenced by many different theologies, particularly Arminianism and liberalism. Today only a minority of ministers hold to the core Calvinistic theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith, despite the fact that affirmation of the doctrines contained in the Confession remain part of the ordination vows. In addition, most members of the Church of Scotland appear to have little knowledge of, and little interest in, the history of the Kirk and the great struggles which took place to retain its independence, its Presbyterian polity and its Calvinistic theology. The fact that many advocated the abandonment of Presbyterianism at the 2003 General Assembly, in favor of a larger, united Episcopal denomination with an undefined theology, demonstrates how far we have moved from our roots in the Scottish Reformation. Those of us who believe that Reformed theology and Presbyterian polity are founded solidly on the Scriptures must, therefore, be gravely concerned at the current state of the Kirk.

In response to a request from the then editor, I published "An Evangelical Manifesto," in the August 2002 issue of the Church of Scotland magazine, *Life & Work*. The response to this article indicated a groundswell of support for the idea that evangelicals within the Church of Scotland should, in a more organized manner, seek to return the denomination to its biblical and theological roots. Since that article appeared, numerous conversations have taken place with friends and colleagues as to the best vehicle for the delivery of this objective.

What we urgently require is a body which will act as a coordinating mechanism for the delivery of a number of objectives. For example, it will seek to provide a focus for evangelical ministers and elders to meet together and work together for the Reformation of the Kirk; promote a biblical and Reformed position in debates at Kirk Session, Presbytery and General Assembly, by careful planning and organization; pro-

vide a platform for individuals to speak and write, not least by enabling those with specific gifts to become recognized by the media as spokespersons for the Reformed evangelical community within the Kirk; engage in public and private debate and dialogue with those who are opposed to the historic position of the Kirk; persuade elders (both teaching and ruling) as to the importance of Reformed theology and Presbyterian practice; publish such papers and books as will promote the objectives of the institute; educate and inform members of the Kirk (and their children) as to the history and heritage of the Kirk and its biblical and theological roots.

Many evangelicals have left the Church of Scotland over the years, believing that the influence of liberal theology has been so damaging that the Church could not be reformed. In my view, we owe it to future generations, not least to our own children, to seek to bring the Church of Scotland back to what it should be, namely, an evangelical Presbyterian Church. This will be an uphill task and may well take more time than some of us have left but the alternative—to abandon the Kirk—would not only be a dreadful legacy to those who come after us, it would also be an abandonment of the legacy of those who have gone before us.

Author

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Notes

1. As I have found to my cost in some of the published responses to my monthly column in the national church magazine, *Life & Work*.
2. Andrew Thomson, *Historical Sketch of the Origin of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton & Co., 1848).
3. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 5-6.
4. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 39.
5. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 49.
6. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 60.
7. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 69-70.

8. G. H. Morrison, editor, *Memoirs of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 417.
9. Samuel McMillan, editor, *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston* (London: William Tegg & Co., 1853), Volume 7, 593ff.
10. Morrison, editor, *Memoirs of Thomas Boston*, 225.
11. (T. Lumisden and Company, Edinburgh, 1738), iv.
12. The truly fascinating element in this story, however, is that a third edition of the sermon was published three years later in 1756. This edition is identical to the second edition in every respect except one. On the title page, where it says that there is a preface by Boston's son, it adds the words, "now separate from the established church," because Thomas Boston junior changed his mind on this whole matter of Secession and became one of the founders of the Relief Church!
13. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 53.
14. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, section 5.