

“I Thought Myself a Sound Presbyterian”

John Glas’s Break from The Church of Scotland

This young man seems to be Independent in his principles, and against all pouver in spiritual Societys beyond a single congregation. . . . He is not for any Society, and can bear no contradiction, without running to hights. It’s designed by smooth methods to keep him quiet.

—Robert Wodrow, *Analecta*

On 17 October 1727, John Glas waited anxiously, steeling himself as he prepared to stand before the Synod of Angus and Mearns to answer the charges of heterodoxy levied against him. The thirty-two-year-old minister of the Church of Scotland¹ had grown increasingly impatient with the weight of Presbyterian authority, particularly the synods, which exercised powers he thought bore marks of worldliness and clerical despotism. Individual churches, he averred, had gradually lost the ability to govern their own affairs, being forced to submit proposals even on minor decisions to local presbyteries for approval on matters having little or nothing to do with church doctrine. He criticized the Presbyterian establishment from his pulpit, and published critical polemics charging its leaders with corruption. He defiantly rebuffed a preliminary examination, and the matter shifted to the Presbytery of Dundee, which demanded that he renounce his opinions and reaffirm his Confession of Faith and the Formula. He stood his ground, and the presbytery suspended him from preaching until the matter could be decided by the Synod of Dundee, which stripped Glas of his license to preach; this penalty was ratified in 1730 by a Commission of the General Assembly sitting in Edinburgh. The result was the creation of a new Christian sect, the influence of which radiated throughout Britain and to America for over two hundred years.

The controversy into which John Glas threw himself concerned Presbyterian church polity and its relationship to secular authority, as defined by covenants made between the church and the monarchy after

the Scottish Reformation in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In order to understand fully the origins and later development of Glasite doctrine and church organization, it is necessary first to summarize the origin of the Covenants in the milieu of Reformation-era Scotland, and how issues spawned by them intermittently threatened the stability of the church establishment and led to various schismatic movements, of which John Glas's was but one of many. However, the vast majority of these movements' influence never extended beyond Scotland, and in some cases not beyond certain regions, while the Glasites² spread throughout southern Scotland and far beyond. It would be quite impossible to understand the genesis of the Glasite movement, and its theological underpinnings, without first encompassing the Scottish Reformation, particularly in the context of the stormy relationship between Scotland and England.

REFORMATIONS RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL

Scotland was touched by Martin Luther's reform movement not long after Luther had posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517. The Scottish parliament, anxious to prevent Lutheranism's spread beyond England, passed laws banning the printing and possession of books by Luther or otherwise propagating Lutheran doctrines. King James V (r. 1513–1542), while cognizant of the need for reform within the Catholic Church, nonetheless feared for the stability of his country, resolving to keep militant antiauthoritarian radicalism at bay. Rather, he quietly encouraged dissent and warned Scottish bishops that, if they disagreed on the necessity of moderate reform, he would send them to England to be dealt with by his uncle, King Henry VIII. However, one critic, Patrick Hamilton, a priest from St. Andrews, believed that more sweeping changes were needed, and his preaching against the Church made it impossible for him to remain in Scotland safely. He left in 1527 for Germany, where he conferred, returning to Scotland the next year. He was promptly arrested and convicted of heresy by Cardinal David Beaton, Archbishop of St. Andrews, and burned at the stake. The sudden death of King James V in 1542 made his infant daughter, Mary, queen of Scotland. The Catholic factions moved quickly to tie Scotland diplomatically to France while the Protestants urged reconciliation with "the auld enemy" England in order to complete the process of reformation. The reformers were split into two competing factions: a moderate wing that took the gradualist approach that James had embraced, and a radical wing under the leadership of John Knox (1505–1572). This

unstable situation worsened with the assassination of Archbishop Beaton by the radicals and their occupation of his castle in 1546. French troops stormed the castle, dispersed the radicals, and captured Knox. The moderates pushed their agenda through a series of Provincial Councils, resulting in the nobles signing the First Covenant in 1557 and taking Scotland’s first step toward establishing Protestantism. Then progress stalled as a 1559 council at Edinburgh failed to reach an agreement between the clergy, nobility, and the gentry over the election of bishops and the appointment of parish priests. Knox, who had been released and made his way to Geneva to study at the feet of John Calvin, was summoned by the reforming nobles and returned to Scotland.³

On his arrival, there was a long-expected confrontation with Mary of Guise and her government. She issued a preemptive proclamation banning anyone from preaching or administering the sacrament without a bishop’s authority. The extreme reformers ignored this and soon afterwards Knox was scheduled to preach in St. John’s, Perth. Once his sermon was completed, a priest prepared to say Mass. This caused a riot in the congregation, opening a floodgate of iconoclastic fury that Knox failed to prevent, and which drowned southern Scotland in waves of destruction that damaged or ruined churches and monasteries. When French interference again loomed on the horizon, Knox negotiated with the English government to secure its support, and in October 1559 he approved of the lords of his party suspending their allegiance to the regent queen. Mary’s death in June 1560 opened the way to a cessation of hostilities and an agreement leaving the settlement of ecclesiastical questions to the Scottish estates, rather than to the throne. John Knox and the party of reformers, called the Lords of the Congregation, drew up a petition proposing the abolition of Roman Catholic doctrine, the restoration of purity of worship and discipline, and the transfer of ecclesiastical revenues to the support of the ministry, the promotion of education, and the relief of the poor. This document, called *The Confession of Faith Professed and Believed by the Protestants within the Realm of Scotland* (more commonly known as *The Confession*), was presented to the Scottish parliament and ratified on 17 August 1560. Soon afterwards, Knox and three other ministers drew up a plan of ecclesiastical government, known as the *First Booke of Discipline*, which was approved by the General Assembly and subscribed to by a majority of the members of the Privy Council. As codified in the *Booke*, authority rested not with individual clergymen, but with conciliar bodies called presbyteries with the prerogative of assembling synods to handle issues pertaining to church discipline and doctrine. Thus was Presbyterianism established. When Mary Queen of Scots, widowed by the untimely death

of King Francis II in 1560, arrived from France to assume her crown, she pledged to leave Protestantism undisturbed. An incredulous Knox stubbornly defied Mary's authority and thundered against her religious hypocrisy, as well as French influence in Scottish affairs. Mary was forced to abdicate the throne in 1567 in favor of her young son, the future James VI, before becoming the ultimately doomed prisoner of her cousin Queen Elizabeth I of England. All the acts of 1560 were then confirmed, establishing Presbyterianism as the state church, though it would not be codified fully until the ratification of a *Second Booke of Discipline* (1581) in 1592. This set the Scottish Church on a firm Calvinist foundation.⁴

King James VI, however, on his ascension to the English throne as James I in 1603, maintained the validity of episcopacy in church government in a campaign to bring the churches of England and Scotland into uniformity with each other. He was determined to rid Scotland of the radical "fiery spirited men in the ministry" who "fed themselves with the hope to become *Tribuni plebes*" by preaching "that all Kings and Princes were naturally enemies to the liberty of the church." Initially James had acquiesced to the moderate Presbyterians and left their system undisturbed, but after 1595 he took control of the General Assembly, successfully manipulating church affairs remotely for five years, but in 1600 his attempts to subordinate the church to the assembly were frustrated by an inability to influence his hand-picked commissioners. He then resorted to the course of action he preferred in the first place, the reestablishment of episcopacy. The tentative reintroduction of bishops who shared authority with the presbyteries went much more smoothly than might have been expected, primarily because the nobility generally supported episcopacy. Weary of conflict and instability, some Presbyterians grudgingly accepted the new order while a small minority continued to resist. James acted forcefully to punish recalcitrant clergy and compelled the creation of estates for the bishops. Nevertheless, the constant undercurrent of resistance and criticism among elements within the clergy and the laity forestalled anything more than an uneasy truce with the presence of episcopacy, and sustained internal debates over the issues of church government and its relationship to secular authority. When King Charles I and his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, attempted to introduce the *Book of Common Prayer* into church practice in 1634, a firestorm of popular and clerical protest led to the total rejection of episcopacy. This was conclusively stated and confirmed by a mass subscription to *The Confession of Faith of the Church of Scotland*, better known as the National Covenant, which was drafted in 1638 and signed by over 300,000 Scots the following year.⁵

When the English Civil War broke out in 1642 between the Royalists who supported the Stuart sovereign, and the Puritans led by Oliver Cromwell, the latter sought Scottish military and political assistance. The Scots agreed, but only after the English pledged to reform their church along the lines of that in Scotland. Desperate for their support, the Puritan-dominated English parliament agreed and a “Solemn League and Covenant” was passed by a Convention of Estates in 1643. With the defeat of the Royalist forces and the surrender of the king in 1646, the Puritans proceeded to ignore their end of the Solemn League and Covenant, and further shocked the Scots by executing Charles I in 1649 and establishing the Cromwellian Protectorate. Here marks the emergence of the radical Presbyterian faction known as the Covenanters, who affirmed their respect for legitimate authority by agreeing to endorse Charles Stuart’s claim to his father’s throne and that of Scotland on the condition that he subscribe to the National Covenant, which he did in 1651. He was duly crowned “King of the Scots” at Scone that same year. Cromwell responded by invading Scotland, which was subdued by 1652, and while England and Scotland were tenuously united, the Church of Scotland remained riven by factionalism between rival General Assemblies and synods divided between supporters and opponents of Charles Stuart, and between ministers who wished to separate church and state and those who argued in favor of state-sponsored Presbyterianism. Attempts by Cromwell’s government to reestablish the unity of the Church of Scotland between 1653 and 1659 were signally unsuccessful, and when it became clear that the Restoration was going to happen, the future Charles II would be sure to remember who his friends and his enemies had been.⁶

When Charles II finally ascended the English throne in the Restoration of 1660, he indicated a desire to mediate a healing of the divisions in the Scottish Church, but only as a delaying tactic while he consolidated his authority in England. It was well known that he advocated episcopacy, however, and anxiety among the Covenanters ran high. The nobility, whose authority had been compromised during the Interregnum, embraced the Restoration and sought to subordinate the National Church to the Scottish parliament via Charles II. At the first meeting of Parliament on 1 January 1661, an act was passed requiring the members to swear an Oath of Allegiance that contained a clause stating that “I acknowledge my said Sovereane only Supream Governour of this Kingdome over all persons and in all causes.” This raised the thorny issue of the role of the king in church affairs, heightened by the passage of an act that illegalized the making of leagues without royal permission, as well as an act that annulled the Convention of Estates in

1643 that had passed the Solemn League and Covenant. It was then decided that renewal of the Solemn League and Covenant could not happen without royal permission. This was followed by Charles II's annulling his subscription to the National Covenant and attempting to restore episcopacy in Scotland by revoking all legislation passed by the Scottish parliament between 1640 and 1660. The outraged Covenanters rebelled, left the established church, and resorted to "conventicles" in the countryside, with their ministers preaching in the open air. Armed rebellion soon followed, especially in the southwest of Scotland and in Ayrshire. Between 1661 and 1688, it is estimated that 18,000 died both in battles and persecution, creating a succession of martyrs and lasting bitterness. Eventually some degree of order was restored in 1690, after the accession of William of Orange and Queen Mary to the English throne. Even so, some extreme Covenanters, known as Cameronians, followers of Richard Cameron who disliked William of Orange because he had refused to sign the Covenant, continued to object despite King William's passing the Act of Settlement in 1690 through Parliament which secured the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.⁷

The publication of John Locke's *Letters Concerning Toleration* in 1689, coupled with William and Mary's passing the Act of Toleration through Parliament that same year, gave encouragement to schismatic movements that justified themselves on the basis of a new wave of religious freedom. James Hogg of Carnock rejoiced that

The heavy yoke of persecution by a chain of wonders was now taken off, and hereby many were inclined to easy courses; and an excessive aversion from what they apprehended might be irritating, and bring us into trouble, proved a snare . . . [O]ur settlement was in a weak and infant state, and our adversaries were many and strong; hence, such methods were thought advisable, that we might not too much provoke them.

Few in Scotland expected the relative stability to last, as tensions between the various religious factions continued to build underneath the placid surface of the first several years of the Revolution Settlement. When the Act of Union was passed in 1707 formally uniting the kingdoms of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, outrage and violence erupted throughout Scotland, with rioting in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dumfries. The "democratic hierarchy" of Presbyterianism was somewhat undermined by the reintroduction of patronage by the English parliament in 1712 as a means to eliminate Jacobitism and reinforce episcopacy in the selection of clergy to fill pulpit vacancies, but, despite the General Assembly's objections the power of the presbyteries was never seriously

compromised. The Scottish clergy were required to swear an Oath of Abjuration that same year that compelled them to “support, maintain, and defend the succession of the Crown . . . as settled by the English Parliament,” and at least one-third refused to take the oath, mainly in the north and west of the country. A flood of petitions inundated the Scottish parliament protesting the union, coming mostly from the southwest, and several presbyteries accused the commission of “national perjury” for endorsing the union with a nation that had broken the covenants. One radical Presbyterian faction led by John Hepburn of Galloway, the Hebronites, condemned England as “a Nation deeply Guilty of many National Abominations, who have openly Broke and Burnt their Covenant with GOD and League with US.”⁸

The Act of Union recognized the coexistence of the separate Churches of England and Scotland, the former catholic and Arminian, the latter Calvinistic and Presbyterian. The dissolution of the Scottish parliament resulted in local government being conducted through parish kirks that constituted the lowest level of the National Church, which functioned through a system of church courts. These began with the local congregational kirk-session made up of the minister and the lay elders, progressed upward through the presbytery consisting of regional representative elders and ministers, continued on through the synod representing several presbyteries, and culminated in the national General Assembly. The church courts were intended to be representative, based on popular election, with the General Assembly fulfilling the role of a supreme court. However, the Presbyterians of southeastern Scotland, under the influence of Anglicans in northern England, gravitated toward a policy of moderation in religious practice that tended toward Arminianism and the abandonment of traditionally Scottish practices and doctrines in the National Church. A direct result of English efforts to extend its influence into Scotland after the Act of Union, “Moderatism,” as this movement was called, constituted the next great controversy in the Church of Scotland as orthodox Presbyterian clerics sought out and accused those who exhibited symptoms of “moderate” beliefs. John Simson, a highly regarded Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, was brought before the General Assembly in 1714 for preaching Arminianism, but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. He would be hauled up again in 1736, this time for propagating Arianism. This “damnable heresy,” his opponents alleged, had been exported into Scotland by “pretended Protestants in neighbouring nations,” and the assembly convicted him, though punishing him only with a written reprimand and a short suspension. In the wake of Simson’s acquittal on the first charge, Thomas Boston of Simprin, a town in Berwickshire, in the

Borderlands, distributed among a circle of his friends and ministerial colleagues an old evangelical and traditionalist work, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London, 1645), which had been reprinted by Hogg, one of Boston's friends, in 1718.⁹

Composed of a hodgepodge of Reformation theology from Luther and Calvin to the Puritan theologian Richard Hooker, though essentially Calvinist, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* asserted the gospels' power to offer salvation to the distressed sinner, and lead such a one to Christ. Written in the form of an allegorical dialogue, much of it hints at universal redemption. Boston declared that on first reading the book it was "a light which the Lord had seasonably struck up to me in my darkness." In his sermon, "Christ Gifted to Sinners," Boston stated that Christ offered salvation "not to the elect only but to sinners indefinitely . . . sinners of the race of Adam without exception, whatever they have been, whatever they are." It was eagerly read by anti-Moderates, who submitted the book to the General Assembly in 1720, but when that body rejected it as "Antinomian," Boston, Ebenezer Erskine of Stirling, and his brother Ralph Erskine of Dunfermline—who became known as the "Marrow Men"—defended the book and condemned the assembly in the most vociferous terms. They withdrew from the Synod of Perth and Stirling to form an "Associate Presbytery" in 1733, which by 1737 became known as the "Secession church." The General Assembly formally deposed the Seceders from the church in 1740. The Moderates identified with the landed gentry of Anglicized southern Scotland who embraced the Enlightenment and rational Christianity, whereas the evangelical Secession Church gained wide popular support as well as that of the ecclesiological descendants of the Covenanters, who by the eighteenth century called themselves "Reformed" Presbyterians.¹⁰

Southern Scotland in the early eighteenth century was rife with religious tension and open conflict over the Covenants, Presbyterian doctrines and practices, pressures toward Anglicization, and Anglican Church influence, and it was in this milieu that John Glas was educated and spent his formative years in the pulpit. The controversy in which he became embroiled was not in itself a particularly unique phenomenon. His was but one of several schismatic movements assailing the Presbyterian Establishment at the time, but the Glasites became something very different. Glas never saw himself as a radical in the mold of a Richard Cameron or a John Hepburn. His break from the Scottish Church began over the most trivial of matters, but escalated into a major argument over issues of authority between ministers, presbyteries, synods, and the state. Attacked by colleagues with whom he had personality conflicts,

and charged by church authorities he thought unwilling to allow his self-defense, Glas found himself pushed gradually and inexorably away from Presbyterianism and into a radical independency.

THE RELUCTANT RADICAL

Alexander Glas, Presbyterian minister to the parish of Auchtermuchty in County Fife, and his wife Christian celebrated the birth of their only son, John, in September 1695. Five years later Alexander accepted a pastorate in Kinclaven, and there John received his elementary education before going on to attend the grammar school in Perth, where he studied Latin and Greek, at which he excelled. Bookish and spiritually disposed, the young boy believed that he was destined to become a minister, having come from a long line of clergymen beginning with his great-grandfather William Glas, who had been a favorite of King James VI. He enrolled at St. Leonard's College at the University of St. Andrews, receiving his Master of Arts degree in May 1713. He continued his education at the University of Edinburgh, where he studied philosophy and theology, and it was there that he developed an immediate distaste for the secularism that had been gaining in popularity at European universities influenced by Enlightenment philosophy.

Raised by his father in accordance with stern Calvinist orthodoxy, John's early disposition and intellectual focus made him a natural candidate for the ministry. However, holding the pastoral office in the highest regard, he doubted his talents and believed himself inadequately prepared to take on a minister's duties. He was also plagued by a deep sense of spiritual uncertainty. While his studies had confirmed his belief in the doctrines of the Scottish Church, his feelings of spiritual and intellectual inadequacy restrained him from pursuing a ministerial career. His friends and several well-respected figures in the church encouraged him to seek the ministry, and take the "trials" as a licentiate. He continued to dither, however. "My uneasiness in all respects," he later wrote, "was evident to me, and I was therefore truly averse from it." His friends maintained their encouragement, and Glas underwent the trials administered by the Presbytery of Dunkeld, receiving his probationary license on 20 May 1718. According to Robert Wodrow, who chronicled this early phase of Glas's career as part of a larger history of the Scottish clergy, Alexander Glas disapproved of his son's apparently lackluster performance in the trials. Nine months later John was called to succeed Hugh Maxwell as pastor to the church and parish at Tealing, and was

appointed to the post by the Presbytery of Dundee on 4 March 1719, formally receiving ordination two days later.¹¹

Tealing was in 1719 and remains a disparate parish measuring three miles long and two miles wide, lying on the south side of the Seidlaw (or Sidlaw) Hills approximately five miles from Dundee. At the time Glas assumed his duties, the population of the parish numbered between seven hundred and eight hundred people settled in the hamlets of Churchton, Newbigging, Balkello, and Todhills. Setting aside his earlier doubts, Glas entered his new position in hopes of proving himself a faithful minister of the Church of Scotland and a worthy successor to his paternal line's glittering clerical reputation. Spiritual religion had long been declining in early eighteenth-century Scotland, and what interest it did elicit manifested itself in concern for the externals of religion, the maintenance of the Covenants and the Establishment, the security of the Presbyterian polity, and the rights of the people as opposed to patronage, rather than evangelical zeal and the pursuit of spiritual culture. Glas closely followed these issues, and considered himself an orthodox Presbyterian and supporter of the National Church, believing that Presbyterianism was more in accord with the New Testament than either episcopacy or independency. Glas began his ministry with a determination to make the Word of God his sole rule of conduct, and it never occurred to him that adherence to such a rule could ever bring him into collision with the laws and standards of the church.¹²

Glas immediately noticed the underdeveloped spiritual condition of his parish, due to the advanced politicization of Presbyterianism. He also confronted substantial hostility against the National Church, principally from those who held to Cameronian theology, and these Covenanters gave him the most trouble. They exhibited a frosty suspiciousness of him, attending his sermons not out of any genuine desire for religious edification, but to confirm their prejudices and discover the new minister's doctrinal inconsistencies. Establishment ministers who demonstrated the greatest zeal in maintaining the binding obligation of the Covenants attained for themselves some popularity, but Glas did not manifest such fervor and was consequently regarded as lukewarm on matters of critical magnitude. His main concern was the spiritual well-being of his parishioners, whom he had heard described as "an ignorant and ungodly people"; an assessment he reluctantly concurred with and blamed on the inadequacy of his predecessor. When queried as to his apparent refusal to preach against episcopacy, he averred that "if they were once Christians, it were then perhaps time to speak of that." Through special sermons and private catechizing he attempted to educate his parishioners in the truths of the Christian faith as he understood

them. He began a course of evening lectures on issues pertaining to the Shorter Catechism, which in their turn prompted him to much introspection. This led him to reevaluate his conception of his faith and the ministry as necessarily depending on a simple reliance on the example of Christ.¹³

This resonates with a movement then gaining prominence in central Europe known as Pietism. Rooted in a rejection of the steady influence of scientific rationalism in Protestant theology that encouraged the reconciliation of faith with reason, Pietism reasserted the mystical spirituality of the Christian religion and insisted that faith superseded reason, and that Christians embrace those aspects of religion that seemed most irrational. Groups of Pietists sought to recapture the flavor and core ecclesiology of first-century Christianity, gravitating toward higher and higher levels of mysticism and millenarianism as they established experimental communities grounded in strict spiritual egalitarianism. A parallel movement looking back to a medieval mysticism, sectarian groups called *collegia*—mainly of Anabaptists—gathered to indulge in free prophecy, apocalypticism, and an ecstatic form of *imitatio Christi* that bordered on perfectionism. The mysticism of the Collegiants fed into a movement that came to be known as theosophy, innovated by Valentine Weigel (1533–1588), who emphasized the indwelling of the Spirit of God in the heart of the believer to the extent that he argued on behalf of an almost literal unity between God and the individual at the highest level of religious experience. In what would become a characteristic of Pietism, Weigel exhorted “true” Christians to put off worldly concerns in absolute surrender to God and the cultivation of the spiritual life. Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), a devotee of Weigel, distressed by the outbreak and viciousness of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), declared the argument between reason and revelation to be a dead letter, when true life could only be discovered in the “vital piety” of the heart that calmed the spirits of a people traumatized by the experience of war. Certain pockets of persecuted English Puritans likewise found refuge in a form of Pietism, the greatest expounders of which were Lewis Bayly (c.1575–1631) and Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), who variously exhorted Christians to devote themselves entirely to living their lives in as faithful an *imitatio Christi* as could be humanly possible. The culmination of English Pietism came with Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667), whose books *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650) and its sequel *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651) argued that the ideal Christian life (and death) is and must be beautiful, the essence of which “was sweetness, reasonableness, and implicit trust in a good God of whom all creation speaks to the devout spirit.” In Germany, Philipp Jakob Spener

(1635–1705) and his disciple August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) harnessed the individualism and populism of the Reformation to campaign for spiritual regeneration and social justice, innovating an activist form of Protestantism at Halle.¹⁴

Given the inhospitable environment into which he assumed his duties, it comes as no surprise that Glas's preaching originally met with little positive response—so little, in fact, that he began to question the wisdom of his entering the ministry. The Cameronian faction in his church continued to impede his efforts, and constituted a perennial source of disciplinary problems. Cases of chastisement were numerous, and some parishioners openly begrudged his sternness. Determined to make a favorable impression, he began to succeed through the intensity of his preaching, his personal character, and ministerial compassion. His growing fame and reputation as a preacher gradually silenced his critics, and won some of them to his side. People from neighboring parishes began traveling to hear his sermons, and on occasions when he journeyed to more distant places to assist fellow ministers, the churches would be filled with people who came specifically to hear him. Despite his rising reputation, the Cameronians remained a thorn in his side, and Glas “resolved, if possible, to be at the bottom of this controversy.” This led him to a deep consideration of Question 26 of the Shorter Catechism, “How doth Christ execute the office of a king?” The result would change his ministry and his life.¹⁵

He came to the conclusion that the kingdom of Christ is essentially a spiritual one, and must be completely independent of state authority and control, as well as of the support of secular government. He declared that he “had done with national covenanting,” and his preaching and catechizing revealed this new perspective, which set him at even greater odds with the Cameronian faction, and made many others uncomfortable. It was not his intention to spark controversy, and it would have remained purely a local matter were it not for another contentious episode. James Traill, the minister at Montrose, subscribed to a public donation to construct a proposed Episcopal church there. The Covenanters stridently denounced him as a defector to the Episcopalian cause, and charged before the presbytery of encouraging malevolent elements seeking to build what they considered a “synagogue of Satan.” The Covenanters made a great deal of hay out of the issue, and at a synod John Willison, minister at Dundee, and James Goodsir, minister at Monikie, pressed the issue in a manner that strongly favored the Covenanters. The presbytery attempted to prevent a threatened mass defection to the Cameronians by appealing to the General Assembly for a renewal of the Covenants. At this critical moment Glas was called to

assist James Kerr of Dun at a sacrament in his parish, where he took the opportunity of urging the people “to submit to their Minister and strengthen his Hands,” so anxious was he to avoid further controversy and preserve the unity of the church.¹⁶

The movement toward secession was forestalled by the death in 1723 of John Hepburn, the ardent Covenanter who had come into conflict with both ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and whose Hebronite faction maintained a doctrinal position very similar to that of the Cameronians. However, in 1725, the presbytery required its members to sign the Formula of 1711, which bound subscribers to that document as a confession of their own faith, and was meant to reassert the authority of the presbyteries and synods of the Church of Scotland. Francis Archibald, the minister at Guthrie and a Cameronian sympathizer, refused to sign and submitted a paper listing the deviations of the church from the Covenants. A petition was drafted and circulated at Angus and Mearns supporting the option of secession. Glas harbored grave concerns about a movement that he considered “the most effectual way to ruin the interest of the gospel in this country.” He resolved to speak his mind on the controversy, declaring that “[I] thought myself bound no longer to forbear, and reckoned it my duty to give the people, as far as I had access, some information upon that point; even as I myself had been taught.”¹⁷

His thinking about the nature and constitution of the church subsequently underwent further refinement as a result of the Covenanter crisis. Stemming from a belief in the essential spirituality of the church, he came to the conclusion that such an institution must be composed of true believers who possessed a real experience of saving grace, who, in compliance with the will of Christ, felt an inevitable compulsion to separate themselves from the world. These happened to be the ecclesiological principles of the English Independents—the Congregationalists—who upheld the necessary establishment of “gathered churches” composed of “visible saints” as separate from “mixed” congregations. Alexander Glas, as he lay dying, confided to John that he had always thought his son an Independent at heart, and predicted that, like Ishmael, “his hand would be against every man, and every man’s hand against him.” Thomas Black, John’s father-in-law, likewise advised him that “he was fighting in vain, for what he aimed at never would or could take place.” John’s reply was that if he could find a dozen shepherds at the foot of “Seidla-hill [sic]” to join with him that he would be contented. While some counseled Glas to keep his views to himself and not risk censure or the official revocation of his ministry, his wife Catherine and a handful of his parishioners encouraged him to stand by his principles and be unafraid to express them. He formed a fellowship—an *ecclesiola*—of approxi-

mately a hundred like-minded individuals from within his church and from other parishes on 13 July 1725. They “agreed to join together in Christian profession, to follow Christ the Lord, as the righteousness of his people, and to walk together in brotherly love, and in the duties of it, in subjection to Mr. Glas, as their overseer in the Lord.” They also pledged to observe the sacrament of the Eucharist once every month. At their next meeting on 12 August the principle set down in Matthew 18 was adopted to punish offenses, and in December they established a fund for the relief of impoverished members. Later they decided to hold weekly meetings for prayer and mutual exhortation that eventually evolved into formal worship services. Though Glas did not think that he had formed a church within his church—a charge his opponents began to hurl at him with venomous abandon—it was the beginning of the Glasite movement.¹⁸

That he had strayed dangerously close to independency was certainly not lost on Glas himself, and this impelled him to study the differences between the Independents and Presbyterians. It gradually dawned on him that his doctrinal beliefs lay with the former and no longer with the latter. He made little effort to hide this fact, as evidenced by increasing and very public conflicts with several of his colleagues. At a fast-day service near Dundee, James Goodsir firmly upheld the Covenants, and in private conversation with John Willison, Glas complained about the highly political tone of the sermon. In his own sermon the following day he considered “the mistaken notion of the nature of Christ’s kingdom, as if it were of this world, and came with observation, and as if his servants were to fight for him, taking him by force to make him king.” Later at Dundee he declared that the setting up of any covenant other than Christ’s promoted factional divisions among God’s people. This sermon certainly appeared to some to be an attack on the Covenants, particularly by Willison, who soon proposed to Glas that the issue should be discussed in writing.¹⁹

Francis Archibald, a minister at Guthrie in the Presbytery of Arbroath, was at this time leaning toward Cameronian beliefs as a result of the presbytery’s requiring him to sign the Formula of 1711, which he refused to do, and in December 1725 he wrote to Glas asking for a further explanation of his views on the Covenants. Glas’s reply began the controversy for which he was hauled before the ecclesiastical courts, and indeed it was so explosive that his friends persuaded him not to send it, but to invite Archibald to a private meeting to discuss the issues raised in it. They could not come to terms of agreement, and in the meantime the letter was circulated privately among a small circle of friends. During the winter of 1725–1726, Willison informed Glas that he was willing to

ignore the question of the Covenants if Glas would support him on other issues, to which Glas retorted that he was not going to be drawn into cliques and factions within the church. Willison became vehemently antipathetic to Glas, making dark intimations and harshly critical remarks about him, even to some of Glas's close friends. Intramural politics so outraged Glas, a fury exacerbated by continued overtures promising to overlook his doctrinal nonconformities, that he resolved to expound upon the subject of the Covenants in a sermon delivered at the Strathmartine parish church on 6 August 1726. He proceeded to speak of Christ in his threefold role as prophet, priest, and king, reminding his audience that Christ's kingdom was a spiritual one and not of this world, meaning that secular governments have no authority to govern in religious affairs anymore than church bodies have authority to rule in secular affairs. He proclaimed his unwavering loyalty to the witness of the apostles who had insisted on the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom against the “Judaisers” who advocated on behalf of a temporal kingdom. However, referring to the early church leaders, he added “as far as they contended for any such national covenants as whereby Christ's kingdom should be of this world, his Church and the world mingled together, and his people who are of the truth, and hear his voice, divided from one another, and such as he hath not appointed under the New Testament, but set aside; so far they were not enlightened.”²⁰

Willison proceeded to the pulpit upon the completion of Glas's sermon. He adamantly avowed his support for the National Covenant, which he depicted as “the glory of Scotland,” the product of an effusion of God's Spirit upon all people; that it was for the Covenants the martyrs had fought, suffered, and sacrificed their lives. He went on to lament that the martyrs were obviously so lightly esteemed, and not just by certain laymen, but by certain Church of Scotland clergy as well. Any opposition to the Covenants, Willison averred, constituted opposition to the National Church and a national confession of faith. He concluded his sermon with “an exhortation to pray for a revival of God's work through a renewal of the Covenants.” Due to Willison's broadcasting of his antagonism to Glas, people from all around Strathmartine parish packed the church to hear the combatants duel, and they were not disappointed. Willison had pushed Glas into a spotlight, even if he did not have to put much effort into doing so, since Glas had become increasingly dogmatic and pugnacious in his self-defense and justification of his opinions.²¹

The Presbytery of Dundee met precisely one month after the sermons at Strathmartine, and Willison presided over the opening of the proceedings there, taking the opportunity to reprove those in the church who

were dissatisfied with the Covenants and had introduced novel doctrines. National covenanting, he averred, is sanctioned in both the Old and New Testaments, though he chose to defer to the judgment of church authorities on the issue. Willison made clear to everyone in attendance his intention to advertise before the presbytery the controversy that had pitted himself against Glas the previous month, and when Glas was called to offer his opinions, he bristled at the thinly veiled references to himself in Willison's address. Once the ordinary business of the presbytery had been concluded, Willison and Glas were invited to elaborate upon their positions in greater detail. Willison referenced an Act of Assembly requiring the expulsion of those who spoke against the Covenants. However, he suggested magnanimously that Glas might only merit censure rather than a humiliating deposition. Glas's reply noted that by charging him with opposition to church doctrine Willison had mentioned the National Covenant without reference to the equally binding Solemn League and Covenant, and that if Willison ignored the obligation of the latter, he too was guilty of opposition to the church. Challenged to declare himself on this point before the presbytery, Willison refused on the grounds that he was under no obligation to answer Glas's question, and that the presbytery should act in a judicial capacity. This was refused; the consensus among the presbyters was that the matter should go before the judicatories, after which Glas accounted for his doctrines espoused at Strathmartine, thus sparking a heated exchange between him and Willison. Glas decided that friendly, or at least rational, discussion was no longer possible with Willison, and the latter stormed out of the meeting along with his supporters.²²

Ministers throughout southeastern Scotland began aligning themselves along pro- and anti-Glas lines, with his opponents waging a campaign to discredit him and call into doubt his Presbyterian orthodoxy. Here Willison and Goodsir stood at the forefront, baiting Glas into a war of words over the nature and authority of the Covenants. The presbytery ordered Glas to hold his peace on the issue in the hope that the controversy would either sort itself out or simply fade away, but Glas refused to keep silent, and publicly defended his preaching as neither contrary to the gospels nor inconsistent with the principles of the Establishment. He also rejected the order of silence, which he argued gave his enemies free rein to libel him and destroy his ministry without recourse to self-defense. Willison contended that Glas had started the controversy and accused him of perpetuating it to his advantage—in essence, running a smear campaign against Willison and his supporters—while Glas laid the blame solely on Willison. The presbytery resolved in

November 1726 to use “smooth methods” to “keep him [Glas] quiet.” They were not destined to be successful.²³

James Adams, minister of Kinnaird in Gowrie, addressed twenty-six queries on the issue of the Covenants to Glas in a pamphlet published in early 1727, which received by way of reply three anonymous letters of which Glas was the suspected author. While Glas admitted that he was familiar with Adams’s queries, he disavowed authorship of the letters, and believed that their author was not in fact a minister in the Church of Scotland. Concerned that a stranger had volunteered to speak for him, Glas replied directly to Adams in a series of sixty-three counter queries.²⁴ This exchange came to the attention of the presbytery of Dundee, and Willison supplied the body with a copy of one of the letters Glas had written to Francis Archibald that argued that the Covenants were incompatible with the nature of Christ’s kingdom. Willison insisted that Glas represented merely the tip of a dangerous iceberg of anti-Establishment sentiment, and that the church could suffer devastating schisms if the dissidents were not dealt with quickly through official action. The Synod of Dundee, meeting at Arbroath in April 1727, proved itself reluctant to force its ministers to sign new confessions of faith that reaffirmed the Covenants, preferring to see the controversy as a minor one involving principally two quarrelling ministers and their small bands of supporters. The synod solicited Archibald for his thoughts on the matter, and he confirmed that disaffection with the National Church had led to separatist movements, and that he agreed with Glas’s criticisms of the Covenants, though both he and Glas professed not to be nascent schismatics. Glas formally addressed the synod after Archibald, and suggested that the Covenants be clarified through redefinition. Did they entail only the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, or did they also include the Confession of Faith and the Formula of 1711? Also, what exactly was the relationship of the church to the government, and was any such relationship in conformity with the dictates of the gospels? Glas’s questions served to bring more ministers critical of the Covenants out into the open, and there ensued a flurry of pamphlet- and letter-writing on the subject between the dissidents and the defenders of the Covenants. The latter began accusing Glas of adhering to independency, and Willison published a book, *The Afflicted Man’s Companion* (1728), which in its preface impugned Glas and his supporters (though not by name) as “breaking down the excellent forms of our reformation, viz. our covenants, confessions, and [the] magistrate’s power, &c.” Glas and his clerical supporters often addressed the controversy in their sermons,

further identifying themselves in contrast to their opponents, with an inevitable hardening of positions. At this point, church leaders began to scrutinize Glas and call him to account for his apparent dissident opinions.²⁵

ARGUMENT AND JUDGMENT

The Synod of Angus and Mearns, meeting at Montrose in October 1727, set out to investigate those ministers suspected of expressing views contrary to the purity of church doctrine. A committee requested Glas's presence and informed him that various rumors of his heterodoxy had been swirling about him, most of which Glas managed to dismiss. The committee then examined him with regard to his teaching and ministry, asking him whether or not he had argued that "the covenant of grace was substantially or essentially different under the Old Testament and under the New." He refused to answer on the grounds that the questions were ignorantly put, and when the committee members rebuked him for his reticence, he offered that he would gladly answer any relevant questions. He further announced that he was not ashamed of his principles and had prepared himself to defend them to whatever degree necessary. Convinced that he had no intention of answering their questions satisfactorily, the committee suggested that the synod instruct the Presbytery of Dundee to "make strict inquiry concerning the deportment of the said Mr. Glas," and if there existed sufficient grounds "to proceed against him," then it should apply to the Commission of the General Assembly for counsel, and then report to the next synod at Brechin in April 1728 "until the said affair be absolutely finished." Glas opined that he considered the investigation a personal slander, but that he expected to be exonerated in due course.²⁶

On 26 March 1728 the presbytery of Dundee, acting on the advice of a subcommittee of the Commission of the General Assembly, cited John Glas and required him to subscribe his adherence to the Confession of Faith and the Formula of 1711, and to renounce publicly in writing the errors of which he had been accused. "I am not careful to answer you in that matter, let the consequences be what they will," he began, but "if I were made sensible of any errors that I have vented or taught, I would reckon it my honour judicially to renounce them, but until that be, I must be excused from renouncing them." He went on to declare that while his faith was contained in the Confession, he would not subscribe for two reasons. He argued that the Formula required him to affirm that the government of the National Church by church sessions, presbyteries,

provincial synods, and general assemblies is founded on biblical precedent, whereas his study of the scriptures led him to conclude that the Presbyterian order as then defined lacked the warrant of divine authority, though at the same time he did not disclaim the legal establishment, “seeing, as he takes it, that establishment does not settle [the constitution of the National Church] upon the foundation of the word of God.” His second justification for his refusal to subscribe he based on the Confession, which acknowledges the authority of the civil magistrate in the maintenance of church order and doctrine and the suppression of heresies and abuses, with power to call and to attend synods for that purpose, none of which was sanctioned by the New Testament. Therefore, he insisted, the magistrate has no authority over the kingdom of Christ, which is spiritual and not temporal. He did, however, express his openness to conviction from the gospels on these matters.²⁷

The Presbytery of Dundee then read out the formal list of charges of doctrinal error against Glas and called him to answer them, to which he replied that the time for his statement would come only after the court had examined his accusers. He added that he had publicly doubted that the Formula had the sanction of Christ as a test of admission to the ministry. A report was prepared by the presbytery and presented to the synod at Brechin in April 1728, and the synod prepared a list of twenty-six queries for Glas to answer in time for the synod’s next session. Although the questions are quite comprehensive and must have taken considerable time to compose, Glas was only given a few hours to prepare his answers. They were intended to bring the whole controversy to a head, and to force Glas to state his position clearly and unequivocally. The queries related to matters such as the power of the civil magistrate within the sphere of religion, the use of the secular arm in the defense of the church, the inherent nature of the church, the biblical sanction for national covenanting, the place and authority of the local congregation, the membership of the church, the qualifications for admission to Communion, and the religious education of children. They left absolutely no room for ambiguity or equivocation, and Glas’s answers were just as clear, forming the solid foundation of what became Glasite and Sandemanian doctrine.²⁸

Glas maintained that as the kingdom of Christ was not of this world, the civil magistrate as such had no authority in the Church; that the kingdom of Christ could not be advanced by earthly power or defended by arms or civil sanctions; that the Covenants had no warrant in either the Old or the New Testaments, and that the first Christian churches were congregational churches; that the members of the visible church