

Having reached, in this imperfect sketch of our Church's history, the actual constitution of our first Ecclesiastical Court, I feel that I cannot do better than give a striking quotation from Dr. Thomson's narrative, which has reference to this period, and the justness and eloquence of his remarks will excuse the length of the extract:—

"A glance," says he, "at this important document" (namely the last protestation of the Four Brethren) "may serve to correct more than one popular mis-take that has been allowed to obtain extensive credence, and in so far to diminish, in general opinion, the value of the steps which these servants of God now felt themselves constrained to take. Thousands suppose that patronage was the sole grievance in which the Secession originated, whereas it is distinctly referred in this authoritative document, to a lengthened course of defection, both in doctrine and government, such as we have endeavoured in the preceding pages to trace,—a defection rendered in-sufferable, at length, by the closing up of every constitutional channel by which faithful testimony might be maintained against it, and its corrupting current stemmed and dried up. The Four Brethren seceded, as they themselves express it, 'for many mighty reasons.'

"Nor will any one, who conscientiously acquaints himself with the real facts of the case, ever be guilty of the bold injustice of associating Ebenezer Erskine and his friends, with those dreaming schismatics who aspire after a state of ecclesiastical perfection, perhaps not attainable on earth, or with those troublesome sectaries, who mistake the spirit of division for the spirit of purity, whose pertinacious zeal is generally proportioned to the insignificance of the object for which they contend, and who would withdraw the churches from their high vocation, to wonder at them while they sit at their chosen and congenial exercise of 'weighing atoms and dividing straws.' Ebenezer Erskine and his associates were not sectaries, but reformers. They separated from a degenerate Church to carry on a work of reformation without her, when every constitutional means of promoting that work within her pale, had been wrested from their hands. They disobeyed their ecclesiastical rulers, when obedience to them would have been dishonour to Christ. The alternatives set before them were unfaithful silence or expulsion; and they nobly, and instantly, preferred the latter. If they are condemned, it is only on principles which would condemn the Reformers and Puritans—principles that would raze the very foundations of Protestantism, and overwhelm the bulwarks of religious liberty.

"Looking back upon the moment when these Four Brethren walked forth from the presence of that Court which had so rashly and wickedly condemned and expelled them, we can almost imagine their feelings to have resembled those of Calvin, when banished from his native land.—'I am driven forth,' said he, 'out of my native land. Every step to its borders costs me tears. But since the truth may not dwell in France, neither can I. Her destiny is mine.' Not that they did not gladly own that there were dear brethren, whom they had left behind them, who loved the truth; this is owned in the words of their protest, which not more attests their fidelity than their charity. But the prevailing character of the rulers in the Church was different, as had been proved by their measures, and therefore it was that they had 'come out from among them and been separate.'

"There is considerable danger of our not forming a sufficiently high estimate of the self-denial and the faith manifested in the movement which we are now describing. To judge of it aright, we must look at it, not from the midst of present scenes and modern sentiments, but from amid the scenes and sentiments of the age in which it took place. Then, that which in our day would stand little above an act of common-place virtue, will be seen to rise at once to the dignity of high moral heroism. The Seceders were venturing upon what, in Scotland at least, was an untried experiment, whose consequences to themselves they could not possibly forecast. There was a mysterious grandeur, too, around the National Church, in the eyes of the multitudes in those times, which all its defection and corruption had not sufficed to dispel, while every thing like separation was confounded in the minds of indiscriminating thousands with schism. They beheld the men of power and rank joining with those who sat in the high places of ecclesiastical authority in frowning upon their conduct, nor could they be sure that these would not speedily invoke upon them the vengeance of the civil power. Their movement, moreover,

whatever might be its moral grandeur, wanted that external magnitude which tends to awaken sympathy and to impress with awe: nor had that enlightened public opinion yet been called into being and elevated to power, which, in our own day, is the grand court of appeal from the decisions of tyranny and injustice, and which, sooner or later, reverses them all. Yet amid the frowns of power, and with the consciousness of weakness, surrounded with all the difficulties of an untried experiment, uncheered by the loud and universal voice of popular acclaim, and with no earthly prospect seemingly before them but that of reproach and want, did these Four Brethren, believing that they heard the voice of God, and that he had given them a commission to discharge, and a testimony to bear,—'Go forth, like Abraham, not knowing whither they went.'—Who would be ashamed of such a noble ancestry!"

After the constitution of the Associate Presbytery, and prior to the General Assembly of 1734, the Four Brethren held several meetings; but these were chiefly for prayer and conference. They did nothing judicially, lest they might indicate an intention or desire to remain separate.—For, notwithstanding the severe and arbitrary measures which were pursued against them, their hearts were not alienated from their original connections. In anticipating this meeting of the Assembly, they were perplexed and agitated between hope and fear. Though they had no wish for a final separation, yet, from the determined spirit which had been so recently manifested, by the prevailing party, to put down everything like faithful and conscientious resistance to growing evils, they had some reason to apprehend that their separation might be permanent. They were not without hopes, however, that the ensuing Assembly, perceiving the effect of the precipitancy of the last, and of its Commission, and also the danger of being more seriously rent, to which the Church was exposed, might be led to adopt such a course as would satisfy those who were aggrieved, and render the continuance of Secession unnecessary. The ministers, also, who viewed the conduct of the Assembly in the same light, but had not joined these four, used all their influence to endeavour to heal the division.

In the meantime, the Associate Presbytery proceeded to prepare a Draught of an extra-judicial testimony, with a view to justify the course they had taken, by exhibiting the state of the National Church, the circumstances in which they were themselves placed, and the necessity they were laid under to act as they did.

The constitution of the Associate Presbytery, and the preparation of this first testimony, were, however, contemplated as but temporary arrangements. The Four Brethren anxiously hoped for an honourable opening to return into fellowship with the Establishment. It would have been to the credit of the National Judicatories, had these hopes been realised. But it was wisely ordered otherwise by the Head of the Church, who, as would now seem, had in mercy resolved, that they and their numerous successors, in their free and scriptural position, would be the chief instruments, honoured to preserve, revive, and promote, evangelical truth in their native country, and in sending it into the distant regions of the earth.

The Assembly of 1734, repealed a number of offensive acts which had been passed in former years. "The acts respecting the planting of vacant churches, and the act which discharged the recording of reasons of dissent, were repealed; a deed of the commission, erecting a sub-commission to receive the trials, and proceed to the ordination of a Presbyter, while both the parish and the presbytery, under whose jurisdiction the parish was situated, opposed the settlement—was reversed; and two acts were passed, the one explanatory of the deed of last Assembly, in the case of Mr. Erskine, concerning ministerial freedom; and the other empowering the Synod of Perth and Stirling, to unite the Four Brethren to the communion of the Church, and to restore them to their respective charges." (Testimony of the United Secession Church.)

But as the Four Brethren had embarked in a great cause, which they were unwilling to defeat, they had good reason for caution, notwithstanding these decisions. They were contending for the interests of religion. They had been suspended from the exercise of their ministry, and loosed from their charges, for faithfulness to their sacred trust, and zeal for evangelical purity. The course they were now to adopt, involved matters of the highest importance, and was felt to be attended with solemn responsibility. They had been advocating the cause of that Church, from whose judicatories they had been expelled—they had been