

FREE CHURCH

On Wednesday, 26th, the Disestablishment question came up for consideration. The discussion was introduced by Principal Rainy in a very long and able speech, which he closed by moving to the following effect:

"That the Free Church, in conformity with the Claim of Right, has constantly denied the right of the Church now established to the position and the historical inheritance of the National Scottish Church. That in the present circumstances of Presbyterian denominations in Scotland, the possession by one of them of the exceptional position and privileges of an Established Church is most unjust, and thoroughly unreasonable. That the termination of the existing connection between Church and State in Scotland, with due regard to life interests, and leaving the Church now established to carry on its important work by the Christian zeal of its members, would remove a great obstacle to the religious well-being of the country, and to the prospect of a harmonious and flourishing Presbyterianism in Scotland. That, in present circumstances, the funds set free ought to be employed in objects connected with the welfare of the community, and among these are an improved and completed system of education, in conformity with the convictions of the people of Scotland. That the time has come at which the justice and necessity of these steps ought to be resolutely pressed upon the Scottish community, and ought to be firmly maintained and asserted by the office bearers and members of this Church. That the same claim, on the same grounds of justice and necessity, ought to be by this Church placed before Parliament; and, therefore, that a petition be prepared for presentation to both Houses of Parliament in conformity with the first four of the foregoing resolutions, and praying that steps be taken to do right and justice in the premises."

Sir Henry Moncreiff, on the other hand, proposed—

"That the Assembly, while denying the right of the Church now established to the position and historical inheritance of the Scottish National Church, do not see their way, in present circumstances, to petition Parliament on the subject, or to take any action regarding Disestablishment."

This was also duly seconded.

Afterwards there was a motion, by Dr. McGregor, to petition Parliament to appoint a commission of inquiry as to the condition of the Established Church of Scotland and the number of its adherents. The debate throughout was very keen, being substantially carried on the anti and pro-establishment line. When the vote came between Sir H. Moncreiff's amendment and that of Dr. McGregor for a Parliamentary commission, 57 voted for the former and 75 for the latter. Dr. McGregor's proposal was then put as the amendment in opposition to Dr. Rainy's motion, when 91 voted for it as against 417 in favour of Dr. Rainy's, and consequently in support of Disestablishment. This is a very strong vote, and when it is remembered that the motion in the U. P. Synod, by Principal Cairns, in favour of Disestablishment was carried with only one dissenting voice, it will be seen how strong the current runs in this direction, both in the Free and U. P. Churches.

In the evening of the same day it was reported that a Chalmers Lectureship had been founded by Mr. Macfie, of Airds, giving £5,000 for the purpose. The first lecturer on the foundation was at the same time announced, viz., Sir H. Moncreiff—subject, "The Headship of Christ."

The Irish deputies were also heard, and the report on the Highlands received and discussed.

Thursday, 27th May, the Robertson-Smith case came up and, as was to have been expected, caused a very large amount of excitement. How great that excitement was may be judged of from the fact that ladies began to assemble in that section of the hall set apart for them as early as half-past six a.m., and that by a little after nine a.m. every part of the house allotted to the public was crammed to suffocation. The ministers' and students' galleries were also densely packed fully half an hour before the Assembly met, and the part reserved for members of Assembly was also quite filled shortly after nine o'clock. The demonstrations of approval or the reverse given to the more prominent members of the Assembly as they entered the hall were of the most pronounced and secular description, cheers being abundant, and groans and hisses not by any means wanting. The theological students were especially excited, and shewed their zeal for truth and righteousness in the manner usual to rollicking boys rather than to thoughtful Christian men. As a sign of the times, as far as these young hopefuls were concerned, Principal Rainy was, on his entrance, pretty generally hissed from the students' gallery. Of course Professor Smith was enthusiastically cheered by the same young gentlemen.

When the Moderator took the chair, every sitting and standing place was more than fully occupied,

and in a short time after the usual preliminaries, the Smith case was called.

There was at first a considerably lengthened discussion over the question as to the stage at which Professor Smith should be allowed to address the Assembly. Some were anxious that he should be heard after the discussion and immediately before the mover of the first motion replied. But this was finally disposed of by the very reasonable objection that it would be absurd to allow a party at the bar to review all the arguments and pleadings of his judges, and that this plan would necessitate the whole case being gone over again by those who might be anxious to meet the professor's arguments and objections. The result was that the professor declined to speak at all, and almost immediately left the House, though he returned by-and-by and listened to part of the debate from the audience gallery occupied by ministers and members.

The Assembly then proceeded to consider the motions of which notice had been given. Sir Henry Moncreiff proposed his motion, which was to the effect of stopping the process at its present stage, in consequence of the anxiety and alarm excited by the discussions in the case, and for other reasons, find "that Professor Smith has so lost the confidence of the Church that he cannot with advantage retain his chair, and must cease to hold it, a committee being appointed to arrange such matters as might in the circumstances arise. He admitted at starting that the motion was peculiar—an admission at once received with an answering shout from the gallery—but the question was whether the circumstances were not sufficiently extraordinary and peculiar to warrant the adoption of that motion. He was quite prepared to go on with probation if he were not sensible that their doing that might involve them in questions that would protract the case further, and that would keep it before the court for another year. The idea of this motion had not originated with him, but he had taken it up because he had been made fully aware of two things—that some persons who had hitherto rather seemed to lean to Professor Smith's side of the case, so far as not to agree with the conclusions which had been arrived at by the previous Assemblies were now disposed towards some adjustment of the kind which the motion recommended, and also because he had become aware of the great prevailing desire on the part of those who had supported these decisions of the Assembly that the case should be brought to a close in the present year. He wished also to say that if the case had gone to probation and the charge had been proved—as he believed it could be proved—he would not have proposed any further sentence except to exclude Professor Smith from the chair. He took this ground because he had long maintained that the charge against Professor Smith as it had been found relevant was not the same thing as a charge of directly or even constructively denying the fundamental doctrine of the Church—the doctrine of inspiration or any other—but the charge of maintaining publicly the opinion respecting a book of Scripture, or a portion of a book of Scripture, which, in the judgment of the Church, could not be logically reconciled with the doctrine of the Standards. This was not the same thing as if they had convicted him of denying the doctrine of the Standards, and therefore the judgment to be pronounced in such circumstances ought not to be the same as it would have been in the other case. Sir Henry having thus shewn that the course he proposed was open to the Church, proceeded to argue that the alarm and anxiety prevailing in the Church was of such a kind, and was so increasingly prevalent as to justify the conviction that Professor Smith could not look for the confidence of the Church in the conduct of his chair. He shewed that this anxiety had prevailed from the beginning, and that nothing of Professor Smith's subsequent pleadings had allayed the alarm. With respect to the personal part of the question relating to Professor Smith's office, he said the temporalities were not now in question—the only subject before the House was whether, in the circumstances, he was to continue to exercise the spiritual functions in the Church of Christ, for the right arrangement of which the Church was responsible to its Great Head. So far as temporalities were concerned, the question was relegated to the committee which the motion proposed. Sir Henry spoke for nearly an hour. He was followed by Dr. Adam, who spoke as one who has not been in favour of the relevancy of the libel. He desired the Assem-

bly, however, to remember that the position which he and others had taken up, had been consistent with anxiety and alarm as to the tendency of Professor Smith's views, and that anxiety and alarm had been from the first expressed, and was contained in the motions which had been defeated in successive Assemblies. He repudiated, with emphasis, the statement that this anxiety and alarm had been the result of clamour. It was a delusion to suppose that the alarm and anxiety were decreasing. These statements were challenged by cries of "No" on the one side, and supported by cheers on the other. Another interruption of Dr. Adam's speech attended the statement that, in the dealing of the committee about compensation with Professor Smith there would be no "higgling." This was received with cries of "Oh," which were not altogether appeased by the modified form of the statement that there would be no disposition to act in anything but the most liberal and generous spirit.

Dr. Laidlaw moved a different resolution, which also agreed to drop the libel, but guarding the Free Church, by declaring that the views of criticism held by Professor Smith were not the views of the Church, nevertheless, in respect that his opinions were not of such a character that they could be declared as condemned by the Standards, and in view of his great ability and usefulness, resolve to repon him in his office. He did not deny the abstract right of the Church to take the course proposed with respect to a professor who had lost the confidence of the Church. But they were in this peculiar position, that it was proposed to take this course at a time when they were in the thick of the case. He found no relief in this proposition, but, on the contrary, looking along the line of the future, it increased present perplexities, and raised new ones. How were they to contemplate the initiation of judicial processes if they were to learn from this painful instance that such processes might be broken off in the supreme court, and that a person under libel be set aside from his office without any conclusion being come to? How were they to regard the status of professors if this strange method of procedure was to be peculiarly applicable to them? Would not such a method of procedure raise a danger that it would tempt their people to listen to those who insinuated that some form of legal bondage—some kind of State-regulated discipline—might be preferable to such freedom. But he did not desire Professor Smith to come out with a verdict of "Not proven." He did not accept his theory of Deuteronomy. He desired a distinct declaration that Professor Smith's views were not the views of the Free Church. But, while he condemned the views, he desired to save the Professor to the Church in a chair where he would be eminently useful. The deprivation of Professor Smith would not stamp out his views, whereas, if they reponed him with such a declaration as he proposed, an admonition to attend to his valuable linguistic studies and spiritual exegesis of the Old Testament, which he was so well fitted to illustrate, they should have a better chance of seeing these questions relegated to the subordinate place of dull un-eminence which really belonged to them. Dr. Laidlaw's motion was seconded by Professor McGregor, who held that Sir Henry Moncreiff was proposing a wrong thing, to change the law of the Church, and to dogmatize about a thing which no Church in the world had ever even appointed a committee to inquire into.

Dr. Begg followed with a motion that the court should now proceed to probation in the case. He held the course proposed by Sir Henry Moncreiff to be unprecedented, and injurious to the interests alike of professors and ministers, whose rights to a fair trial it suspended in a way that might make of Presbyterianism an instrument of intolerable tyranny. He also objected to the abrupt and summary ending of the case, inasmuch as it did not protect the rights of the people; inasmuch as it left the question undecided whether Professor Smith was to be entitled, as a member of the Church, to promulgate the views for which he had been deposed as a professor. Dr. Begg's speech was attended with the unusual accompaniment of approving cheers from the students' gallery—a favour which was not extended to a vigorous, but unduly long-winded oration, with which Mr. Wood, Aberdeen, seconded his motion.

Dr. Beith appeared in support of a motion to restore Professor Smith with an admonition. He craved that his son, Mr. Gilbert Beith, might be allowed to read his statement. This was granted. The