

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

While the other Presbyterian Churches have been more or less disturbed by unhappy dissensions, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland met on the 23rd of May last in peace and quietness. "There was no stirring question likely to come before it," was the common remark. "Stir" in Scotland, in the ecclesiastical sphere, unhappily always means conflict. The love of fighting is strongly engrained in the national character; and there was no prospect of a fight, it seemed as if a sort of dulness must necessarily characterise the proceedings of the Assembly. Well, happily, there was no embittered contention of any kind, and yet there was no lack of interest. Seldom perhaps has a General Assembly been more interesting.

There was even two prolonged and excellent debates—the one upon the subject of the *Elder's Formula of Subscription to the Confession of Faith*; the other upon the report of the Committee on *Union with other Churches*. The speaking on both sides of these debates was good and to the point; and the position of the Church has been advanced by these discussions. It has become apparent that the question of the *Elder's Subscription is mainly a practical one*,—that there are many intelligent elders as well as ministers interested in its settlement on a simpler basis than the present one; and that such a settlement is not hopeless if parties will only look at the question by itself, apart from general issues supposed to be involved on one side or the other. There can be nothing more becoming in a Church—more evidently a token of its healthiness and vitality—than its *equanimity* in free questions of this kind in the light of reasonable and open discussion:—to do this without compulsion, because circumstances have changed, and a new class of difficulties and influences surround the Church than those which surround it when the present Formula of Subscription were prepared. This power of adapting itself to the course of events and the atmosphere of opinion surrounding it,—of revising or modifying what was done by the legislative power of the General Assembly in the earlier part of last century,—is an

inherent element of the Church's life. It may or may not be advisable to make any change. This is a subject for fair discussion. But it would argue little for the living faith of the Church to recognise that there was anything fixed or unalterable in the traditions and regulations transmitted from the General Assemblies of a former age. There was much good done by these Assemblies; and what they did in such a matter is not to be lightly disturbed. But it is always the business of the Church to deal with new difficulties, and not to allow mere traditional obstacles—originally designed to meet difficulties which have quite disappeared—to affect in any way its national usefulness. More, of course, we argue for neither side, but only for the Power of the Church—which none denies—to deal with with such a question in the manner which seems the most wise and most fitted to broaden and extend its national work—and so to avail itself of the service of all who are willing to render it service.

In the question of union the Church did well to maintain its attitude of friendly co-operation, especially with the other Presbyterian Churches around it. It may be that these Churches do not heartily reciprocate this attitude. They have said, or majorities have said for them, that they will not have Presbyterian union on terms which the Church of Scotland can never consent to. As if Scotland had not already had enough of ecclesiastical disturbances, they can only see their way to a fraternal embrace after another conflict and overthrow. They have no wish to injure the Church!—only to liberate it—to cut the rotten prop of the State away from it, and set it free like themselves! This is very fine talk, but it can hardly deceive even those who have got accustomed to it. The Church of Scotland is what it is because of its connection with the State. The principle of national religion which it represents is vital to it. Its spiritual powers would remain; its property might increase, if it were cut away from its present alliance with the State. All this goes without saying it. But the Church disestablished would no longer be the Church of the Reformation or of the Revolution. It would simply be a