

UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY.

BY THE REV. DR. FERRIER, CALEDONIA.

In the circumstances we have described respecting the deplorable condition of the country in a moral and religious view, it will not appear wonderful that one of the distinguished fathers of the Synod—the Rev. Alexander Moncrieff—one of the four Brethren, should have come forward with a proposal to petition the Sovereign to interpose his Royal authority in endeavouring, by legal enactments, to stem this flood of corruption, and to redress the grievances of which the Synod complained. This venerable minister, it appears, was like many of that age, and some of the present, still under the influence of intolerant principles. This excellent father of our Church was a gentleman of rank, and seems to have held those high-toned political principles which were common among persons of his station, and these were tinged with the religious prejudices of the age.

The subject to be introduced will throw some light on the views of this Synod, or rather, on the different views entertained by its members, as to the duty of the civil magistrate in matters of religion.

Mr. Moncrieff introduced into the Synod, at its meeting in April, 1759, a proposal to consider, “If it is a called-for duty to lay before the King, our grievances concerning the present state of religion in these lands, together with a dutiful and suitable petition for redress of the same.” This proposal was accompanied by a paper containing reasons in support of the affirmative side of the question. This document lay on the Synod’s table till their meeting in October, that year, when it was agreed that the matter should be set aside as at present inexpedient.

Mr. Gibb was the chief opponent of Mr. Moncrieff’s proposal—maintaining that it was not competent for them, as an ecclesiastical Court, to petition the King on such a subject. He afterwards published his sentiments in his Display, from which we quote the following:—

“We ought to sigh and cry for public and prevailing abominations. But we may not arrogate that what men owe to God and their own consciences, about the purging of these abominations, is a thing which they owe to us as a redress of our grievances. Whenever we should hear of any profane or illegal usages taking place in any cities of Britain and Ireland, or in any families that we have no inspection of, we might as well take upon us to call these things our grievances; and might go to claim a reformation of them from the magistrates of these cities, or the masters of these families, as a thing which is due to us—a redress of our grievances.

“We have no account of the Lord’s prophets, under the Old Testament, ever going to deal particularly with the rulers, except when they had a particular, immediate, and extraordinary mission from the Lord to do so; or were some way called upon by these rulers. They dealt with the rulers, in the way of delivering a message to them from the Lord; but never in a way of representation and petition about the Lord’s work.

“The step now proposed seems to be unscriptural, or to have no countenance from any precepts or examples of the Lord’s word. The Scripture enjoins us to obey the civil powers in all things lawful, to honor them, to pay them tribute, and to pray for them, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. But no precept appears to be in the Scripture for any other or higher sphere of duty towards them, in the case of such as have providentially no immediate communication with them.

“If there could be a time for any such application to civil powers as is now proposed, it would seem to have been in the first period of the Gospel, when