

The question on which we are now to vote was carried on in both branches of the Synod at the same time. It had shades of difference in the two bodies, though in general features it was the same, and it terminated in a similar manner in each body by the separation of a small minority from each. In the General Associate Synod the question was taken up more extensively, as we shall find, and led to a more decided change of opinion, and brought into clearer view subsequent results. But in the Associate Synod it was conducted sufficiently far to lay the foundation for future consequences when the two bodies would be happily blended.

The subject was introduced into the Associate Synod, on the 12th of May, 1795, by the Rev John Fraser, of Andoverbury, in the following document:—

"The Representation and Petition of the subscriber humbly sheweth

"That a concern for the interests of pure and unadulterated religion, and for the prosperity of the ecclesiastical society with which he stands connected, prompts him to trouble this court with a declaration of his mind concerning some of our religious sentiments, and to solicit a necessary reform.

"It is a great mystery that the Gospel is hitherto preserved among us in its purity. The doctrine of free grace, reigning through the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the eternal life of men, in consonance with all other fundamental truths revealed in the oracles of God, is, I hope, a doctrine cordially believed, and explicitly preached, by all the ministers belonging to this Synod; and in their great honour, no Socinian, Arminian, or Neonomian error repugnant to it, have ever been tolerated by them. But we profess adherence not only to fundamental truth, but also to many other doctrines of inferior importance. Among these are the power of the civil magistrate in regard to religion, and the perpetual obligation of our public national covenants upon posterity. The former is expressly asserted in the 23rd chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith; and the second question of the Formula, I apprehend, allows us not to differ from that Confession in the smallest jot or tittle of doctrine contained in it; for the words of it are,—Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith; and do you acknowledge the said Confession as the confession of your faith? The obligation of our Covenants is also the subject of the fourth question of said Formula; the words of which are, 'Do you own and acknowledge the perpetual obligation of the National Covenant, and of the Solemn League and Covenant?' At our license and ordination, we solemnly professed to hold these principles, and this profession is renewed as often as we concur in licensing and ordaining others; for we demand their assent to the questions of the Formula, as a test of their orthodoxy, and of their holding the same principles with ourselves.

"But it is a fact well known to us all, that, many years ago, a pamphlet was published against the Antiburghers, bearing the name of a late respectable member of this court, and containing the following doctrines:—That all legal establishments of religion are improper and unwarrantable; and that our covenants are obligatory upon posterity, materially considered, but have no obligation upon us, entirely of the same nature with their obligation on those who swore them. Since the publication of that pamphlet, it has been read by many of us; and there is reason to think its principles have been adopted, not only by private Christians in our own communion, but also by some members of Synod; which I mention, not to the discredit of any of them; for it is possible they imbibed such opinions without advertent to their inconsistency with our Confession of Faith and Formula; and I know that some young brethren, sensible of this inconsistency, have acted so honestly as to refuse an unlimited assent to the questions of the Formula, declaring themselves to be of those sentiments. The Synod, also, with all the Presbyteries and members composing it, have always borne with such brethren, and we live in the closest fellowship with them, without making any distinction between them and other brethren, which tolerant spirit I do not absolutely condemn. But, since we are disposed to exercise such forbearance, and since we all seem now sensible, that the principles of the abovementioned pamphlet accord not with our Confession of Faith and Formula, I think it highly necessary that the Formula should be altered, and rendered more consistent with the sentiments of all our ministers, elders, probationers, and students.—

What a pity it is, that the smallest consistency should exist between the sentiments of any of us, and our solemn profession, when our principles and professions are in the main in consonance to the sacred matters of truth! If, then, the profession of a church ought perfectly to harmonize with her real principles, and nothing, either essential or circumstantial, should be professed, which is in a false balance.

"May it therefore please this revered Synod to apply a proper remedy against the present corruption; and, by that means relieve us, and other brethren, from the propriety and usefulness it gives us. That he who holds the seven stars in his right hand, and walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, may be graciously present with this revered court, to direct them in this momentous affair, and that truth and peace may ever prevail among the members of this Synod, to the praise of their affectionate brother, and humble servant.

"JOHN FRASER."

This representation and petition was read to him on the table (the next meeting of Synod Messrs Fletcher, of Bridge-st. Tullis, and Porteous, of Orwell, craved to have it marked in the minutes that they disapproved of the Synod receiving such a paper, and that it should have been read only extra-parochially.

At next meeting of Synod, which was in September, 1795, Mr. Fraser's Representation occasioned a long discussion, after which it was moved, "That a Committee be appointed to review the questions in the Formula, betwixt this and next meeting of Synod, and bring in an overture for uniting the members of this court in their sentiments respecting the power given in our Confession of Faith to the civil magistrate, in matters of religion, and respecting the obligation of our National Covenants upon posterity; and that said Committee inform themselves of what scriptures are contained on these subjects; and in the meantime, that the Presbyteries be allowed to exercise forbearance at license and ordination, with respect to the articles abovementioned; it being always understood that said forbearance shall not preclude this Synod from adhering to the Formula, as it now stands, if they shall judge proper."

It was moved in amendment, that the last part of the motion, from the words, "and in the meantime," be omitted. The original motion was however carried by a great majority. From this decision Messrs. William Kidson, senior, and William Willis dissented. The latter afterwards withdrew his dissent, and craved to have it remarked, that in his opinion the law should have effect while it existed. The following persons were appointed a Committee for the purpose mentioned in the resolution, viz: Messrs. John Dick, Moderator; Daniel Walker, John Halfpenny, David Greig, William Taylor, Andrew Lathian, Robert Jeffrey, James Dewar, William Kidson, senior, George Lawson, James Hall, James Poddie, Thomas Porteous, James Husband, John Fraser, David Hepburn, Michael Gilliland, and William Fletcher, ministers, with fourteen elders.

The committee met at Edinburgh, on the 20th October, 1795. The several questions of the Formula were read over, and each considered by itself. Several alterations were agreed to, some of them but verbal. The conversation, as might be expected, turned chiefly on the second and fourth questions. To the second, requiring an approbation of the whole doctrine of the Confession, an objection was made on the ground that the Confession gave more power to the Magistrate than was sanctioned by the Scriptures. The same objection was made to the fourth question. A long debate ensued when it was moved,—"That the said doctrine of our Confession, respecting the Magistrate's power, and of our Covenants, be made a matter of forbearance." Another motion was made, "That they should proceed to explain without voting forbearance." When the vote was taken the first of the motions carried. After this, the Committee drew up the following Overture, which they agreed to recommend to the Synod to be passed into an act:—

"The Associate Synod hereby declare their attachment to the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Catechisms Larger and Shorter, which were adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in the year 1647 and 1648; at the same time, hereby declaring, that although they wish to fear God, and honour the King, and consider subjection to the powers that are as an important duty incumbent on all men, yet as the power respecting religion ascribed to the civil magistrate in said Confession and Larger Catechism,