

Original Articles.

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UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY.

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It appears, that during the reign of William III., certain laws were enacted affecting the Roman Catholics in Great Britain. Every Popish priest who presumed to exercise his office, and every person of this religion who undertook the charge of youth, was liable to perpetual imprisonment. In general, Roman Catholics were incapable of purchasing estates, or receiving them by inheritance, without taking oaths inconsistent with their religion. Some of these severe statutes, indeed, were scarcely ever enforced, yet had been allowed to remain as a dead letter on the statute book.

But, in 1778, it was proposed to introduce a bill to Parliament to repeal those intolerant, although almost obsolete, laws. This, however, produced great alarm, especially throughout Scotland. The General Assembly took up the matter, and it was moved that their commission be instructed to watch over the interests of the Protestant religion; and, should it be necessary, to call an extraordinary meeting to take such steps as might be deemed expedient. The subject occasioned keen discussion in the Assembly. Principal Robertson, whose influence was then great, opposed the motion, and it was rejected. He denied that the Protestant religion was in any danger from the proposed alteration of the laws against Papists, which he regarded as "sanguinary and cruel," and such as nothing but the times in which they were passed could justify.

Some of the Synods connected with the Establishment took up the subject, and passed strong resolutions condemnatory of the bill. The Anti-Burgher Synod lifted up their testimony against it, and the Burgher Synod joined in the general movement. The latter prepared and published a warning against Popery, on this occasion; a quotation or two from which will exhibit the views and feelings of the godly ministers of this Church at this period; and, in particular, will afford proof that they had not followed out, practically at least, the liberal sentiments long ago expressed by the Associate Presbytery, in their answers to Mr. Nairn's reasons of protest.

"Some of the agents," they say, "of the man of sin, expelled his own territories, for seditious practices, by the kings who have given him power, have hid themselves in our Protestant islands; and being possessed of all that subtily and craftiness which enables the deceiver to impose upon the ignorant and the weak, industriously watch every opportunity of creeping into houses, and leading captive silly women, laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Your weakness on this side is not imaginary, your danger is real and great. At this alarming juncture of time, when it is generally allowed that popery is advancing with large strides into the nation, that numerous converts are brought into the communion of the Church of Rome, we durst not be silent; but, animated with zeal for sound doctrine, and simplicity of worship, discipline, and manners, we judged ourselves peculiarly called upon, as ministers of the Gospel, to make the most vigorous opposition in our power to the encroaching evil, by attempting a seasonable and close application of scripture truths, for manifesting to the judgment the true state and condition of the Roman Catholic Church, which glories in her shame, in teaching the doctrines and commandments of men. It is no secret that there is a great number of emissaries of the Church of Rome, disguised in Scotland; and, should they be allowed, supported, and countenanced in the public exercises of their religion, by a legal toleration among us, who can tell what harvest a clergy so numerous, so subtle, and so well furnished with arguments to work on vulgar, uneducated, and unprincipled minds, may be able to make in a country now, through the prevalence of infidelity, ignorance, luxury and venality, so much despoiled of all religion, and feeling the want of it? And, when their numbers and powers are increased, can we doubt but they will recover the spirit of their religion, and act accordingly?"

To us these fears would seem to be groundless: and, at any rate, the toleration of the Popish religion was not the way to increase the likelihood of their being realized. Our predecessors in the Church were much in the dark at this period. With all the light which had been thrown on

the true nature of the office of the civil magistrate by the Associate Presbytery, it had not reached a practical result in this later generation. The principles of intolerance and persecution are evidently maintained in the quotations just given.

These laws against the Papists have been long repealed, and yet what injury has been sustained in Scotland, or any other country, by permitting every individual to worship God according to his own conscience? Human nature takes long to learn even by experience. The principles of Knox and his co-adjutors, in suppressing by pains and penalties the exercise of the Catholic worship, are not only unjust but impolitic. In Ireland, where Popery has been so long and so much opposed by civil disabilities, it has prevailed, whereas where it is tolerated, or, as we dislike the word, where men of that religion, of whom we express our unqualified condemnation, are unmolested, and allowed to conduct their worship wherever and in whatever manner they please, it will be found in the long run that error is shaken, if not destroyed, and that truth prevails. It appears that up till nearly the very opening of the New Light controversy, the antiquated notions concerning the magistrate's power predominated. It was, to some extent, as in the natural world, where the thickest darkness is said immediately to precede the earliest dawn of day.

In Ireland, this branch of the Secession continued to prosper. A new Presbytery was formed in 1777, making three in this country, which were all still in subordination to the Synod in Scotland. But at this time the Irish petitioned to be erected into a Synod by themselves. Their request was favourably entertained; and, to preserve a friendly intercourse between the Synods in Scotland and Ireland, the following proposals were made:—

1. A deputation of two members to be sent every year, alternately, from the one Synod to the other.
2. The Students of Divinity connected with both Synods to be trained up under the same Theological Professor appointed by the Synod in Scotland.
3. Those portions of the minutes of each Synod, referring to matters of importance, to be transmitted from one Synod to the other for brotherly review.
3. Should one Synod intend to pass an act of general and lasting concern, it shall be remitted, in the form of an overture, to the other, for their friendly remarks, before it be finally adopted.
5. Both Synods to meet in a General Synod, once every seven years, or oftener if necessary, and every third time in Ireland.

These proposals were agreed to by the Irish brethren; and their Synod was appointed to hold its first meeting in Monaghan, on the 20th October, 1779, and the first General Meeting of both Synods was to be held in Glasgow, on the first Tuesday of May, 1786. This meeting was held at the time appointed, but it does not appear that the Irish brethren attended, and it is doubtful whether any general meeting of the two Synods ever took place.

In the year 1782, there was a proposal from some of the congregations under the inspection of this Synod, to endeavour to form a union with the other branch of the Secession. Several petitions were transmitted to the Supreme Court on this subject: The proposal was considered in a committee of the whole house. But the movement was premature. The Lords time had not yet arrived.

On the same occasion, too, an overture was presented by the Presbytery of Glasgow, praying for some alteration on a few questions in the formula, to render it more simple. This was done after a transmission to the different Presbyteries. But it is worthy of notice, and to us seems surprising, that the change sought and made had not the slightest connection with the power of the civil magistrate in matters of religion. On this subject still all were silent.

But, in May 1784, a preacher of the name of David Hepburn addressed the Synod by letter, expressing his scruples concerning the doctrine of the Confession on the head of civil magistracy, and, in the meantime, declining to take further appointments. "The Synod agreed to withhold appointments from him, and enjoined the Presbytery of Dunfermline to deal with him, in order to reclaim him from his mistakes." Whatever might be the sentiments of individuals of this Synod, yet, as a body, they were, at this period, probably almost as far behind in scriptural views, on this head, as the Free Church in our own day. But, whilst they were far more excusable when we think of the prevailing opinions and prejudices of their times, they seem also to have had much more candour and charity, for it appears that Mr. Hepburn had soon been so far satisfied as to accept of appointments, and, shortly afterwards, to be ordained to the Holy Ministry.