

to proceed to it, but they prudently waived it as they found that the procedure of their brethren was everywhere spoken against. They did, however, what was nearly equivalent, and what some have even thought a greater stretch of authority—they passed an Act of Nullity, whereby the Anti-Burghers were not, indeed, excommunicated, but whereby the brethren on the other side pretended to annul them altogether.

Yet, notwithstanding all the severities on each side, and all the reproaches and opposition of their common foes, both parties survived and both prospered; and assuming denominational characters somewhat different, each diligently and faithfully did the work which Providence seemed to have in view.

Whilst those two bodies were alike in holding the great doctrines of grace, it must be allowed that the Anti-Burghers were more stern and severe in their discipline, held more stringent and exclusive views, and retained more conformity in their sentiments and actions to the Original Associate Synod. And it must be allowed that the Burghers manifested greater christian forbearance, were less sensitive about mere circumstantialia, and were more disposed to cherish and cultivate a brotherly feeling towards other denominations. The more liberal policy of the Burghers, and the more uncompromising zeal of the Anti-Burghers, with the fidelity of each body to its convictions, formed elements which were to be at length happily blended, and which were calculated to give a better tone of feeling, and a better spirit of action to a Church in which they would again be happily incorporated. What might be thought rather lax in the one was elevated; and what was too stringent in the other was softened down. The ingredients were to be prepared during their separation for an amalgamation that would be thorough, and by which both would be refreshed and stimulated to new and higher activities.

This breach, however, was a mournful occurrence, and was deplored on both sides. It separated, in many instances, those who had been chief friends. In not a few cases it divided families, and in every part of the country those who had been accustomed to associate for public worship, or private christian fellowship, were severed from each other. In many cases those who had been familiar friends were seen to linger in their latest interviews, reasoning the points of difference, devising ways and means for healing the breach, and manifesting a foreboding unwillingness to part. Thus especially, were the long evenings of the summer of 1747 spent by persons on the different sides, meeting between their respective residences, walking in the fields or on the highways, going backward and forward with each other in earnest conversation, and under deep concern and sorrow—with painful regrets, yet with anxious hopes. Such meetings and partings continued till time diminished their frequency, and till parties by degrees fell into their respective ranks, and at length those who, in many cases, had been christian associates, and even confidential friends, stood as much aloof from each other as though they had been utter strangers.

But, distressing as this event was, it seems, in the wise and gracious providence of God, to have been intended and over-ruled for good. The great success of the Secession cause, the multitude of its congregations, rising up in every quarter of the land, and the popularity of the ministers among the people at large, had already awakened the jealousy and excited the malice of enemies. The proud agents of corruption in the Established Church, were concocting measures with the evil powers to put down by force this rapidly growing denomination. Persecution for conscience sake was actually planned and ready to be set on foot, when the strife in the Secession camp suggested to their enemies that it was unnecessary to agitate, as soon the contentions of Seceders themselves, would do the work of destruction which they were so anxious to accomplish by other means. There was, indeed, cause of alarm on the part of the Established Church by the rapid increase of the Secession. Even before their strife arose, and when the Associate Ministers were harmoniously prosecuting their great work as messengers of Christ, and were attracting the notice of all around, and gaining the hearts of multitudes, an influential minister of the Establishment was accustomed to remark of the Secession, that "if a wedge of their own timber did not split them, they would soon be the dominant Church in Scotland." Be this as it may, the division was over-ruled for good. We shall not endeavour to determine whether the Secession would have spread more rapidly if the division had not taken place. Different opinions have been entertained on

this question. But if without the division it had spread,—if the Anti-Burghers had not made the stand they did—if the swearing of the Burgess Oath had been only made a matter of forbearance—if this question had not divided them, what would the Secession have been? It is not unlikely that it would have been strong numerically, and a flourishing and influential denomination, but without having nearly so much of moral strength. It might have been a denomination spread over the whole country, like the present Free Church, and something like what they pretend to of the character of a new National Church, as a rival to the old; but like them, too, it would have been found clinging to the root of anti-christian error and corruption, by upholding the principle of a civil Establishment of religion, and, perhaps, like some of them, would have anxiously looked forward to a time when government support would be given.

By the spirit of rivalry which it created, the division, we are inclined to think, was the means of quickening the parties, of extending their respective spheres and multiplying their congregations, and of giving to each that denominational character which was best suited to answer the purposes which Divine Providence contemplated by the separation.

But the greatest benefit arising from the division, remains to be noticed, and it was very long in being fully developed. The Burgess Oath question was a small matter in itself, but it was the key to open up a hidden system of scriptural progress for the Church. As has been well expressed, this controversy was the turning point of civil and religious liberty in Scotland. For supposing the two parties had remained together, supposing the Anti-Burghers had not made their determined stand for what they considered truth and duty, and that the swearing of the Burgess Oath had been made a matter of forbearance, it is more than probable that the whole Secession would have rested like the Establishment on the Revolution Settlement; and that the infusion of christian light would have been prevented, and the impulse been wanting to that christian progress by which the re-united denomination has been since fortified and prospered. The condemnation of the Burgess Oath was in perfect consistency, not only with the renovation of the Covenants, but with the views of our own times, when not Anti-burghers alone, but Burghers also, though on different grounds, would refuse such an oath—when not one intelligent and conscientious individual in the whole United Presbyterian Church could consistently swear any oath of a religious kind to a civil magistrate; or, in other words, could not submit to a religious test to qualify for civil privilege or office of any description.—Thus the Anti-Burghers, who were generally reckoned the most rigid of the parties, were the very instruments, under God, in bringing good out of evil, by turning the scale to the side of enlightened liberal procedure, and breaking down those barriers to necessary and valuable advancement in scriptural reformation, which the Established Church of Scotland had erected against itself, and against those who receive, without exception, their antiquated and intolerant views respecting the power of the civil magistrate in matters of religion.

With the light of our own times we can therefore see the hand of God permitting strife and division in the Associate Synod, with a view to important results: and we can view the actual breach as a burst for religious freedom, to which the clear and scriptural views of the distinction between Church and State, and other high attainments of our own age, may, in a great measure, be traced.

But although God in his providence overruled this mournful division for good, yet that can by no means justify or excuse those who were the Agents for bringing it about. There was much sinful mismanagement in the whole process. Both parties felt this, and by both it was deplored. Some efforts were made to heal the breach; but the parties were too keenly committed to their respective views, and contemplated movements, to prevent these from proving abortive.

After Mr. Mair and his friends had retired, the brethren remaining, staggered and distressed, proceeded to no business, but simply appointed a meeting to be held next day for prayer and humiliation: and, these exercises being over, they appointed a day of fasting and humiliation to be observed by their congregations, and then adjourned to meet at Stirling in the month of June.

The brethren who had retired, met next day, according to appointment, and had several meetings during that week and the following.