

THE Home and Foreign Record

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF THE LOWER PROVINCES.

MARCH, 1868.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

The Presbyterian system of Church Government and Discipline has triumphantly passed through many a severe ordeal; and we venture to assert that it has never yet failed where it has had a fair and faithful trial. It has stood the rage of centuries of persecution amid the valleys of the Alps.—It has been tried in Scotland and elsewhere as a National Establishment and at least for a time the most beneficent results attended the experiment. It has flourished amid the poverty and obloquy that once were inseparable from Dissent. It is not disorganized by Republicanism and extreme Democracy. It is not altogether dead even in the chill embrace of Erastianism and under the blighting shadows of arbitrary power. It provides at once for the fullest liberty and the most perfect order: for the rights of the individual and for the authority, the purity and the unity of the whole Church. There is no proud usurping Pope to issue lordly commands to Christ's heritage; nor is irresponsible power left in the hands of an ecclesiastical oligarchy. The individual member, however humble, is safe from the tyranny of an unreasoning majority, for he has the right of appeal to higher tribunals and to dispassionate judges.

In the Kirk Session, which is our first or lowest court, the minister presides as permanent Moderator; he is first among his peers; and the Elders have each and all an equal voice with him in bearing rule in Christ's house. Minister and elders are elected by the people. In the second court,

the Presbytery, there is an equal number of Ministers and Ruling Elders—ordinarily one minister and one elder from each congregation included in the Presbytery. Three settled congregations may form a Presbytery but the number included may be indefinitely large. We have known Presbyteries numbering from fifty to one hundred ministers. In this country we have Presbyteries varying from three to twenty-five congregations. Whenever there is serious trouble in a congregation the advice of the Presbytery is asked. Wrongs are rectified, and justice dealt out with impartial hand.

A Synod consists of three or more Presbyteries, and here again the Ministers and Ruling Elders are in equal numbers. It is usual in large churches to have a General Council or Assembly, the highest court of appeal in church matters.

Now let us suppose by way of illustration that a minister has rendered himself liable to discipline. His accusers are bound to bring his case first of all, not before the Session, not before the Church members, but before his peers, the Ministers and Elders in Presbytery assembled. The Presbytery then proceed as they see cause. The minister is among his peers to be judged calmly and righteously, uninfluenced by popular passions. His judges give their decision, and should the minister or his accusers, or any member of the court, be dissatisfied with it, each party has the right to appeal to the Synod. Now when the case comes before the Synod none of the parties engaged in it so far can vote on it. They can speak, they can plead, and explain, they