

THE AUSTRALIAN DECLARATORY STATEMENT

Introduction

In this Unit you are introduced to the Declaratory Statement of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

In 1901 the various colonial Presbyterian Churches united to form the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Their union was formed on a Scheme of Union adopted on what is now a memorable day in Australian Presbyterianism – the 24th of July. (You might like to make that an annual day of prayer for the denomination.)

The 1901 Scheme of Union contains a Preamble, a Basis of Union and the Articles of Agreement. The heart of the 1901 Scheme is the Basis of Union, which declares the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of the following “declaratory statement” to be the “subordinate standard” of the church. Because the Declaratory Statement forms a signature part of the church’s doctrinal standards it deserves detailed consideration.

The text of key portions of the Basis of Union follows.

Note: Here and hereafter, the letters, “DS”, will be used to refer to the sections *within* the Declaratory Statement which is itself Section II of the Basis of Union. Other references to 1901 Basis of Union will be signified by “BU”.

1. Text

I The supreme standard of the united church shall be the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

II The subordinate standard of the united church shall be the Westminster Confession of Faith read in the light of the following declaratory statement:

1. That in regard to the doctrine of redemption as taught in the subordinate standard, and in consistency therewith, the love of God to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the free offer of salvation to men without distinction on

the basis of Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice, are regarded by this church as vital to the Christian faith. And inasmuch as the Christian faith rests upon and the Christian consciousness takes hold of certain objective supernatural historic facts, especially the incarnation the atoning life and death and the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and His bestowment of the Holy Spirit, this church regards those whom it admits to the office of the holy ministry as pledged to give a chief place in their teaching to these cardinal facts and to the message of redemption implied and manifested in them.

2. *That the doctrine of God's eternal decree, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, as held and defined in the Confession of Faith, chapter 111, section 1, where it is expressly stated that according to this doctrine, 'neither is God the author of sin nor is violence offered to the will of the creature nor is liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established', and further that the said doctrine is held in connection and harmony with the truth – that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, that He has provided a salvation sufficient for all and adapted to all and offered to all in the gospel, and that every hearer of the Gospel is responsible for his dealing with the free and unrestricted offer of eternal life.*

3. *That, while none are saved except through the mediation of Christ and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, who worketh when and where and how it pleaseth him, while the duty of sending the gospel to the heathen who are sunk in ignorance, sin and misery is imperative, and while the outward and ordinary means for those capable of salvation being called by the Word are the ordinances of the Gospel, in accepting the subordinate standard it is not required to be held that any who die in infancy are lost or that God may not extend His grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means as may seem good in his sight.*

4. *That in holding and teaching according to the Confession of faith, the corruption of man's nature as fallen, this church also maintains that there remain tokens of man's greatness as created in the image of God, that he possesses a knowledge of God and of duty – that he is responsible for compliance with the moral law and the call of the Gospel, and that although unable without the aid of the Holy Spirit to return to God unto salvation he is yet capable of affections and actions which are of themselves virtuous and praiseworthy.*

5. *That liberty of opinion is allowed on matters in the subordinate not essential to the doctrine therein taught, the church guarding against the abuse of this liberty to the injury of its duty and peace.*

6. *That with regard to the doctrine of the civil magistrate and his authority and duty in the sphere of religion as taught in the subordinate standard the church holds that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head over the church, 'and Head over all things of the church, which is His body'. It disclaims accordingly intolerant or persecuting principles and does not consider its office-bearers in subscribing the Confession as committed to any principle inconsistent with the liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement, declaring in the words of the confession that 'God alone is Lord of the conscience'.*

2. Background

The pre-1901 union negotiations led Australian Presbyterians to examine their doctrinal standards. However, they faced a vastly different intellectual and theological climate from the Westminster divines. To a significant extent, that changes climate resulted from developments in philosophy, theology and Biblical scholarship which emerged in Europe, affected the Scottish church and through it, reached Australia.

Reformation certainties The theological debates of the Reformation and immediate post-Reformation era were founded on the premises that God is knowable and that certainty could be had in theology. They were also founded on a high view of revelation, that is, that God has spoken in Scripture and the business of humans is to subject their minds to His Word.

New uncertainties All of those premises were fast disappearing in the lead up to 1901. The so-called Enlightenment, or age of reason, of the eighteenth century saw an almost unbounded confidence in the powers of human reason to discover truth by itself. Concurrently, there was a lessened confidence that God has spoken and can be known with clarity.

Philosophically, this uncertainty was expressed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant held that humans could not know things in *themselves* but only as they appeared through the human mind's constraints of space and time. As a consequence, Kant held a low view of the possibility of any certain knowledge of divinity, for it dealt with the non-spatial and temporal. Kant thought that he did Christianity a favour in pointing this out, for it left room for faith (seen here as an opposite of knowledge) and the godly life.

As a consequence of doubts on the possibilities of knowledge of the divine, theology took a nosedive in self-confidence. Typical of the new mood of theologians was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768- 1834) who is often described as the founder of liberal Protestantism. Schleiermacher, who saw feelings of “absolute dependence” as the heart of true piety, understood theology as the “religious self consciousness”. With that one stroke, there became as many theologies as there were people who professed to be Christians. Further, because theology was such an individual matter, different theologies were no longer in conflict- just equally valuable statements of how different people saw things.

With regard to Biblical studies, Enlightenment confidence in the power of the human mind was soon extended to criticism of the Biblical text. Scholar soon presumed to discern the genuine Scripture within the pages of the Bible.

Many saw the bible itself as the product of the early church leaders trying to “improve” on the message of Jesus. For example, some picked up Hegel’s dialect of “thesis, antithesis and synthesis” to suggest that early Catholic Christianity was the synthesis which developed from the dialectic between the Pauline thesis and the Petrine antithesis. Thus the Bible was seen as the church’s creation, not the Word of God. Working from this viewpoint, the old liberal scholars sought to strip back the layers of human encrustation to find God’s message.

Such strivings were particularly apparent with respect to attempts to rediscover the real Jesus of history. A major work of this kind was the 1835 Life of Jesus by Strauss. Despite starting with the assumption that all the supernatural elements in the Gospels were later additions, Strauss wrote a “natural” life of Jesus which is many many pages longer than the emasculated Gospel text he saw as original. Writing at the end of the century, Albert Schweitzer reviewed wreckage of nineteenth century Biblical scholarship and correctly analysed it as product of scholars uncritically reflecting the spirits of their signs. Sadly Schweitzer, a brilliant and compassionate man, fell into the same trap in his own work. The Quest for the Historical Jesus here he offered a largely ethical reinterpretation of Jesus’ message. Further details on late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century Biblical studies are available in Neill, The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961.

For many, the publication (in 1859) of Darwin’s Origin of the Species represents the high point of apostasy in nineteenth century intellectual life. Certainly Darwin attracted much attention and was probably responsible for much popular discussion and doubt on the truthfulness of the Bible. However,

his work is best seen as a symptom and product of forces already well established. Having chosen to assert itself over the Bible, the human mind had long set the scene for the increased skepticism towards traditional beliefs that was now unleashed.

Impact on Australian Presbyterians Although slow in reaching Australian Presbyterianism, the new currents in Biblical and theological studies were well in evidence by the 1880s, that is, by the lead up to the 1901 union. For example, the 1894 Moderatorial address in NSW referred to the traditional view of the verbal inspiration of scripture as: "...the ally, the vantage ground and the trenchant weapon of the infidel. It has banned enquiry and 'Loved darkness rather than light'. It has cramped the energies of the Church checked her development and growth, and made the faith of many only a wretched half faith."

Evidence suggests that the NSW Church was more open to the new trends, although it was in the more conservative Victoria that the only significant doctrinal controversy of the period occurred. Some researchers attribute this colonial difference to the presence in Victoria of more ministers with a conservative Free Church background, in contrast to the more theologically relaxed Church of the Scotland influenced in NSW.

The Strong case. In 1875 Charles Strong was inducted as Minister of Scots Church Melbourne the most prestigious Presbyterian Church in Victoria. Strong came from the theologically liberal wing of the Church of the Scotland, has been strongly influenced by Hegelian philosophy and had been offered a pulpit in the Unitarian Church. In the pulpit, Strong used traditional Christian language, but there was a growing unease among some Victorian Presbyterians (by the late 1870s) as to the clarity of his hold on traditional and essential doctrines.

An article on the atonement in the October 1880 issue of the Victorian Review helped turn this unease into suspicions which came before the Presbytery of Melbourne in April 1881. The topic of the atonement was already sensitive among Presbyterians due to the case, in Scotland earlier in the century, of John McLeod Campbell. McLeod Campbell was believed by many to have weakened the Bible's teaching on Jesus bearing punishment for sin as a substitute for guilty humanity. The Presbytery expressed concern over the negative character of Strong's view and his failure to mention the divine personage and mediatorial role of Jesus Christ and the supernaturally given revelation. The Presbytery further urged Strong to make certain "essential facts" prominent in future utterances, namely: "the incarnation, the atoning life and death and the

resurrection and ascension of our Lord”. The words used by the Presbytery are identical to those in the second sentence of DS (i).

Later in 1881, a further debate erupted when a prominent elder of Scots Melbourne (J.C. Stewarts, who was the Church’s Law Agent and later, Lord Mayor of Melbourne) wrote against the Confession. Strong, who had announced his intent to resign from the Presbyterian ministry, was again before his Presbytery in connection with his failure to rebuke what were assessed as the deviant remarks of justice Higginbotham at a public meeting chaired by Strong. Strong submitted his resignation to Presbytery which referred the whole matter to the November 1881 Assembly. There, Strong was formally deposed from the Presbyterian ministry. Subsequently, supporters of Strong established The Australian Church in Melbourne and enticed him to be their minister.

The Strong case was highly significant in the pre-union negotiations. To many Victorian Presbyterians, Strong epitomized the dangers of drifting with contemporary scholarship and hardened their existing conservatism. The November 1881 Victorian Assembly appointed a committee to draft a declaratory act which would express the church’s mind on particular points of doctrine raised through the Strong case. That Act (adopted 1882) embodied certain statements from the Presbytery of Melbourne decisions regarding Strong, although its general trend was to establish a “liberal evangelism” which could accommodate figures trend was to establish a “liberal evangelicalism” which could accommodate figures such as Andrew Harper. A moderately liberal theological teacher who upheld supernatural Christianity but who also embraced the new trend in Biblical criticism.

Preparations for church union In 1886 a Federal Assembly was formed to draw the various colonial Presbyterian churches closer together. Through a series of protracted negotiations with colonial bodies, the Federal Assembly drew up the 1901 Scheme of Union which included the Declaratory Statement contained in the Basis of Union.

The final text of the Statement reflected the actual wording and sentiments of the 1879 United Presbyterian Church of Scotland Declaratory Statement, that of the Free Church in 1892 Victorian Statement. Of these three documents, the first two were designed to relax the strictness with which ministers and elders were required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession, while (as we have seen) the third was designed to preserve supernatural Christianity whilst also relaxing the doctrinal demands made on office bearers.

A confused context The theological context in which the 1901 Declaratory Statement was produced and adopted was thus a confused one. On the other hand, new waves of scholarship led the Presbyterian Churches in Australia (as with others world wide) to seek relaxation of past strict subscription and adherence to the Westminster Confession. On the other hand, reaction against the radical views of Strong led the Victorian Church, in particular, to seek safeguards to the faith. It is perhaps fair to say that the 1901 Statement, like its Victorian predecessor, was designed to exclude the like of Strong whilst making room for such as Harper.

From that confused context, and the confused literacy sources of the 1901 Statement came the documents whose contents continue to confuse the Church today!