
Professor James MacGregor: Theological and Practical Writings, 1868-1881

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE: James MacGregor was born in Callander, Perthshire, in 1830. He studied at New College under William Cunningham, 1851-1855, and went into the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland, serving in Barry (1856-1861) and Paisley (1861-1868) before being elected to the Chair of Systematic Theology at New College in succession to Professor James Buchanan. He served in that important Chair for 13 years through turbulent times in the Free Church. In 1976 the present writer discussed MacGregor's position in the case of William Robertson Smith (see *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1, January-March 1976, pp. 27-39).

MacGregor and his family emigrated from Scotland in 1881 to the South Island of New Zealand where he ministered at Oamaru until the time of his death in 1894. It was said that even amidst his pastoral and preaching duties he kept abreast of theological debates and became, in the words of Ian Breward, "in his time, the best-known Presbyterian theologian in Australasia".

Though a somewhat independent spirit, throughout his whole ministry he maintained a conservative evangelical position. In this article we address Professor MacGregor's theological writings in the period of his Professorate.

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In the period of his Professorship James MacGregor was extremely busy with his pen.¹ As the century wore on the Churches were deluged by issues arising from both the physical and social sciences. As a consequence tensions arose within the Churches, especially in relation to the authority of Scripture and, consequently, the matter of Creed subscription. There were movements for change from the old order. From the conservative evangelical perspective the final quarter of the century was marked by declension in theological and biblical studies. Clearly, however, there were issues which were difficult to address, not least in the areas of Biblical Criticism, Darwinism, and social change in the wake of growing industrialisation and urbanisation. Pressures arose in the Church to accommodate to new ideas. In many areas there tended to be wholesale modification and even capitulation of conservative and traditional positions in the face of the onslaught, which arguably left a bitter legacy to the twentieth century of a Church greatly diminished in credibility and power.

James MacGregor was aware of the major issues. This is reflected in his writings. A feature of his writing in his period at New College was that he was not afraid to tackle crucial and controversial issues. In the midst of the Union controversy in the Free Church, involving a proposal for union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church (1863-1872), MacGregor came out on the anti-union side, not least on account of his conviction that the churches were not one on the matter of the doctrine of the Atonement. In that connection he wrote a masterly 76 page booklet entitled *The Question of Principle now raised in the Free Church specially regarding the Atonement*.² MacGregor's conviction that there was a problem on the question of the Atonement arose from a controversy within the Secession Churches in the 1840s. He saw the issue as being one of Amyraldism. Amyraldism had arisen in France out of the teachings of Moise Amyraldus, or Amyraut (1596-1664), of Saumur, who

¹ In *Disruption and Diversity* (Edinburgh, 1996), the authoritative history of theological training in Edinburgh between 1846 and 1996, George Newlands, in the chapter on "Divinity and Dogmatics", comments that "James MacGregor appears to have written little" (p. 123). The reality is, however, that Professor MacGregor was one of the most prolific writers in the Church of his day, though it is true that no major books came from his pen in the time of his Professorate. He did, however, produce a massive trilogy of books on Apologetics whilst in New Zealand: *The Apology of the Christian Religion*, Edinburgh, 1891, 544pp; *The Revelation and the Record*, Edinburgh, 1893, xii+265pp; *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, ii+370pp.

² James MacGregor, *The Question of Principle now raised in the Free Church specially regarding the Atonement*, Edinburgh, 1870, 76pp.

reacted to the position of the Canons of Dordt (1618-19) on the question of the divine decrees in relation to the Atoning work of Christ. In terms of the decrees of God Amyraldians maintained that consequent upon the permission of the Fall, God decreed the gift of His Son to render the salvation of all men possible. Seeing that man did not have the moral ability to believe savingly in Christ, by another decree God determined to give *special* grace to a certain number – the elect – to secure their salvation. By this understanding the Amyraldians were able to maintain, as they believed, the consistency of the universal gospel call to all without discrimination, with the limited application or destination to the elect only. In their view of things it could therefore be said to the sinner, “Christ has died for you and desires to save you”. The problem was that the death of Christ for all, in their scheme, was “hypothetical”. The Amyraldian could not say that Christ’s atoning death actually secured the salvation of any; something, clearly, that undermined its efficacy and therefore devalued its purpose. “The notion of any substitution of Christ,” argues MacGregor, “that does not infallibly secure by purchase the salvation of all for whom He died, is deeply dishonouring to the person and work of the adorable Substitute.”³ Furthermore, implying as it does changeableness in the divine decrees, these views must undermine the believer’s assurance, “for that assurance is ultimately founded on the truth, that all God’s purposes are unchanging and effectual, and that no sinner can ever perish for whom Christ gave His life in the cross. The assurance, therefore, is fatally undermined by the notion, that there *is* a changeable or ineffectual purpose of God, and that many of those for whom Christ gave His life shall nevertheless fall into death eternal.”⁴ The Amyraldian scheme, argues MacGregor, does not really deal effectively with the issue of the harmony of particular election and the universal gospel call. He puts it this way: “Your notion, of a general purpose of God (as distinguished from that special purpose about which you and I are agreed), permits you, you tell me, to say to every sinner, ‘God loves *thee*, or intends or desires to save thee’. But at the same time it binds you, if you will be in this matter an honest man, to go on to say, further: ‘*Yet*, I cannot tell whether He loves thee *so as* to secure thy salvation, or *so that*, once knowing that He loves thee, thou shalt know at the same time that thy salvation is infallibly secure.

³ *ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 55.

For aught that I can tell thee, regarding what I call His love to thee, He may have sovereignly ordained thee to thy deserved doom of everlasting death.’

“Your notion, again, of a general substitution of Christ in His death (as distinguished from that special substitution regarding which you and I are agreed), enables you, you tell me, to say to every sinner, ‘Christ died for *thee*’. But at the same time it binds you in Christian honour to add: ‘Nevertheless, I cannot tell thee whether He has or has not really redeemed thy soul from death. If thou believe not now, thou art under condemnation now: the clouds of God’s wrath brood over thee unremoved; the lightning curses of His law pursue thee through life; and, though Christ have in some sense died for thee, yet, for aught that I can tell, He may, even in dying, have been purposely leaving thee to death eternal.’”⁵

How, then, does the Calvinism of the “old school” address this matter of the free offer of the gospel in the context of election and particular redemption? MacGregor puts it beautifully: “I cannot tell thee whether God loves thee as He loves His own, nor whether Christ has died for thee, as He surely has died for all the elect: that can be known by men only when Christ lives in thee, and thou lovest God and man. Nor can I explain to thee *how* the free invitation of the gracious gospel to all may be harmonized with the sovereign particularism of grace in election and redemption. There is a mystery here too vast for my narrow and shallow comprehension. Here I have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. But this I can tell thee, for this is what God has told me in His word: His love, with which He loves His own, is freely offered to thee as thy life. The all-sufficient fullness of His Christ is freely offered to thee as a ‘way’ to life in His love. The bosom of that love which is life is wide open to thee as the sky. The arms of that love are stretched out far to thee from the cross. The voice of that love cries, Come, to thee, in the Spirit, through the Bride. And if only thou hear, thy soul shall live. Only give thyself over, a lost sinner, into the arms and bosom of that freely-offered love, and that love of God shall be thy portion, and the righteousness of Christ shall be thy white raiment, and the Spirit of Christ shall be thy new and true life, and thou shalt be saved, for ever and ever.”⁶

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

In his pamphlet MacGregor effectively expounds the “old school” Calvinistic view of the sincere or *bona fide* gospel offer by way of an “aside”:

(1) *As to the Gospel Offer and Call*, MacGregor maintains that the Calvinism of the old school does not seek to explain how a sincere invitation to all men may be harmonised with the doctrine or fact of the election and redemption of only some. He uses the analogy of the sincere address of the Ten Commandments to all, though God gives the ability to keep them only to some. So, in relation to the gospel call, “the old school men, though confessedly unable to give a *rationale* or explanation of the fact, yet affirm the fact itself, that God sincerely invites all sinners to believe and be saved”.⁷

(2) *In relation to the disposition of God*, MacGregor maintains that there is a “Divine complacency in man’s well being and well-doing”.⁸ Whilst maintaining that there is no such thing in God as a saving purpose, intention, or desire, that does not infallibly determine salvation, the old school nonetheless held that there is in God a “certain complacency or delight in man’s holiness and happiness; such that He is really pleased when men obey His law, and really displeased when they obey not”. And MacGregor goes as far as to say this: “He sincerely mourns over the misery of the unbelieving impenitent as lost, while sincerely rejoicing over the blessedness of the penitent believers as saved.”⁹

(3) *As to aspects of redemption that Christ’s death achieved*, MacGregor again affirms that there is no substitution or suretyship of Christ but for the elect. Nevertheless, old school Calvinists maintained that God’s redeeming grace had certain implications for all men indiscriminately. MacGregor mentions three things: (a) God’s redeeming grace in Christ secures for all a season of suspended judgement and of offered mercy; (b) It provides, further, a fullness of saving merit, amply sufficient for the salvation of all; and (c) the Atoning sacrifice gives an open way by which God comes with free salvation to man, and men are freely invited to go for that free salvation to God.¹⁰

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

In dealing with the all-sufficiency of grace, MacGregor denies that it is the basis for the offer in the sense of constituting a *warrant* to sinners to appropriate Christ, or ministers in their invitations to sinners. “The fact of there being abundant provision in a certain house does not warrant a hungry stranger in entering and feasting.” “That abundance,” he maintains, “can of itself serve only as a *motive* to enter, or *encouragement* to enter.”¹¹ What serves as a *warrant* then? “The only thing that can really serve as a true warrant is an invitation or permission from the owner of the house.”¹² “In like manner, we say, the all-sufficiency of grace in Christ does not of itself constitute a true warrant to us, who ‘were afar off’, in taking Him and His riches of grace to ourselves. Our only true warrant in this act of faith, is the permission or invitation of God in His Word.”¹³

In applying this all to the question of relations with the United Presbyterians, MacGregor, in his understanding of the position of the United Presbyterian Church in relation to the extent of the Atonement, suggested that “there is some reason to suppose that Amyraldism, or un-Calvinistic universalism, with reference to the Atonement, is *tolerated* in her pulpit by the United Presbyterian Church”.¹⁴ On the other hand he maintained that “there is much reason to believe that Amyraldism is excluded from the pulpit of the Free Church by her law; or, in other words, that it is condemned, expressly and directly, by the *Westminster Confession*”.¹⁵

In the popular family paper, *The Christian Treasury*, MacGregor contributed in 1872 two series of articles on Creation and Providence. More weighty were his contributions to such a prestigious periodical as *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, in which, especially in the late 1870s, he discussed such issues as the age of the Pentateuch, revision of the *Westminster Confession*, the doctrine of Creation, the Resurrection of Jesus, and the nature of divine inspiration, besides such practical, yet no less crucial matters, as the place of children in the Church.

His one major book in this period was a modest *Handbook* on Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which first appeared in 1879. This was the first in a projected series produced under the editorship, initially, of Alexander

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 60.

Whyte and Marcus Dods. On the whole the series was well-conceived and many of the volumes remained in print right up to the 1960s. The books produced were a mixture of Commentaries – or Bible studies – and historical or theological works. They were intended for “Bible Classes and Private Students”, but they are rather more academic than popular. MacGregor’s *Galatians* was the first of the series. A brief volume of 127 pages, the introduction and notes are sound and helpful. It seems that the publisher, Messrs T. & T. Clark, tended to print sheets of the volumes of this series which were only bound as and when required, a thousand at a time. In one notice of this book of MacGregor’s it is described as “Tenth Thousand”. The present writer actually obtained the last available bound copy from the offices of T. & T. Clark, 38 George Street, Edinburgh, in March 1968! MacGregor was later, from New Zealand, to contribute a two-volume work on *Exodus* (1889) in the same series. He also prepared a manuscript on *Immanuelism, the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*. In one place this was said to be “Now in the Publisher’s hands”.¹⁶ The volume, however, for some reason, never did see the light of day.

At about the time of the outbreak of the issues in Biblical Criticism raised by William Robertson Smith, MacGregor contributed an article in the April 1877 issue of *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* on “The Age of the Pentateuch, with special reference to Revelation and Inspiration”. This had been first given as an address to a Free Church Clerical Association in Edinburgh on 15th January 1877.¹⁷ Whilst he states that technically, or theologically, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was not a Church dogma, MacGregor nevertheless in his article makes a strong case for just that: the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. He makes his own position clear at the outset:

My present opinion is, that in the only sense felt important by intelligent advocates of the view that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the writer of the Pentateuch was Moses; and that this will come to be the settled conviction of the people of God when they have gone through the process of real ascertainment.¹⁸

¹⁶ On the fly-leaf of his 1890 pamphlet, *Presbyterians on Trial by their Principles*. This was also referred to in an obituary notice in the *Christian Outlook* on 20th October 1894.

¹⁷ James MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics*, Edinburgh, 1894, 339.

¹⁸ James MacGregor, “Age of the Pentateuch, with Special Reference to Revelation and Inspiration”, *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. C, April 1877, 257. That this remained his firm opinion is clear from his later volume on *Exodus, Part I*, Edinburgh, 1889, pp. 57-63.

There are some *prima facie* reasons for the presumption of Mosaic authorship, according to MacGregor. On the one hand there is clear testimony in the Bible itself which presupposes this, and none which suggest a post-Mosaic authorship. There is also the presumption arising from the traditional widespread belief of the Church. Denials of Mosaic authorship only derived from the past 200 years or so. MacGregor refutes arguments arising from supposed sources, whether or not Moses could write, and the Hebrew style of the books. But he is particularly concerned to state the positive reasons for accepting Mosaic authorship: (1) The first five books are just such as you would expect from the hand of Moses. Their structure indicates just such a context. MacGregor explains: "They look back to Egypt as of 'yesterday', and look round on the Sinaitic peninsula as of 'to-day'; and, to the last, look forward to Canaan as of 'tomorrow'."¹⁹ (2) "The *literature and history of Israel after Moses* appear to be at least consistent with, if not demand, the supposition that the Pentateuchal scriptures and institutions are Mosaic in their origin."²⁰ This is evident, believes MacGregor, in the subsequent references in the Old Testament canon to the "Law", the "Book of the Law", and the "Law of Moses", terms invariably referring to the Pentateuch. (3) Then there is *the testimony of Christ Himself*. "There is hardly a noteworthy incident recorded in the five books down to the death of Moses that is not referred to by our Lord in such a way as to attest its reality."²¹

MacGregor did believe that enquiry into such an issue as Pentateuchal authorship was to be encouraged. He did feel, however, that this would only serve to bring out the fallacies of the critical positions. For example, writes MacGregor, to those who accept the inspiration of Scripture as God's Word, "it will appear in the last degree unlikely that God in Christ should have so spoken as *in effect* to mislead men about the human authorship of the Pentateuch."²² Furthermore, they "will regard as incredible the suggestion that God should have moved any one but Moses to write a book so ostensibly Mosaic as Deuteronomy. The supposition that the Pentateuchal institutions are in large measure post-Mosaic will in like manner appear quite incredible."²³ MacGregor deals

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 267.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 268.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 269.

²² *ibid.*, p. 271.

²³ *ibid.*

severely with the notion that Deuteronomy was to be considered as the production of a personator of Moses. The idea that he was not the author of Deuteronomy would not deceive the people of God in subsequent ages. The people would know the quasi-Moses was not the real Moses. They would not likely receive the production of a personator of Moses. "What is more likely is," says MacGregor, "that they would stone the personator as profane."²⁴ After all, "it is inconceivable that *God* should have inspired or authorised any man to put on *the false face* of the supposed impersonation, if not for the purpose, to the effect, of leading many following generations to believe what is not true – that Moses said and did what he really did not say or do".²⁵

MacGregor perceptively goes on to speak about the impact of evolutionism in influencing Biblical interpretation. The problem in this case is the influence of the "anti-supernaturalistic and infidel". There is an obvious distaste for the supernatural in such evolutionism, so that "supernatural communication to man, except in a measure infinitesimally small, would involve a violence to the nature of man's mind as rational".²⁶ This MacGregor cannot accept. He firmly believed that the permission and encouragement by the Church of friendly discussion would lead brethren "to recognise theoretically what they know in their own heart's experience, that the Bible does not record a series of illusive representations of ideas; that what it records is a historical proceeding of the living God towards the redemption of mankind".²⁷ He did not calculate, however, on the willingness of such "brethren" to accept the "anti-supernaturalistic and infidel" approach, which would consequently leave a sad legacy of a denial of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

Another issue which James MacGregor addressed was that of creedal subscription. Again it was in the columns of *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* that he made his contribution in this area. The issue was in the air mainly on account of the moves being made in the United Presbyterian Church to adopt a Declaratory Act by which the terms of Confessional subscription might effectively be modified in specific areas of Confessional teaching. No doubt there were also those

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 271-2.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 273.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 274.

in the Free Church who felt such “relief” was necessary from supposedly harsher aspects of Confessional teaching. Change was in the air. MacGregor begins his discussion on creedal subscription by asserting the legitimacy of a Church revising or replacing its creed. It is obviously important that there be honesty in such a thing and that a Church should not retain a creed or confession it does not believe. Instead of being a *bonâ fide* confession of its faith it could become a “*malâ fide* concealment of incoherency or dubitation.” MacGregor’s position is that “It is to the good cause a great calamity if a church lapse from the belief of Christian truths once ascertained and professed. But a continued profession of adherence to articles of faith no longer believed would be, not an alleviation, but an aggravation, of the calamity.”²⁸ He is aware that tensions may exist within Churches on account of different types of theological thinking within the Church. With reference to the Free Church he makes the remarkable statement that, “There are two types of theological thinking in our church – liberal and conservative – as there always must be in any church of living men”.²⁹ Presumably he means by this a sort of spectrum within the fairly narrow confines of the Confessional Church. Unfortunately, in the Free Church the liberal element prevailed and the denomination experienced a marked theological downgrade by the end of the century. In terms of the Confessional position MacGregor was aware, however, that there was diversity in the Church, from those who would have absolutely no change at any price, and those who would be happy with significant qualifications of the standards.

Some seemed to believe that the *Westminster Confession* was too elaborate and that there would be an enlargement of freedom expected in changes in the form of confessional statements. The sort of change envisaged, by most who desired change, would not be in the direction of enlargement, but the opposite – shortening and simplifying. But MacGregor points out that such shortening would not necessarily involve enlarged freedoms. He shows that the reverse might be the case, for where there is something abbreviated and indefinite in form there could well be all sorts of arguments about the precise meaning of words, or doctrines believed and standards to be maintained. “The fact that a short

²⁸ James MacGregor, “On Revision of the Westminster Confession”, *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. CII, October 1877, p. 693.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 694.

and simple creed,” says MacGregor, “so short and simple as to be confessedly elliptical, tends towards despotism, has not, I think, been sufficiently recognised in recent discussions, although individuals have found that their ministerial freedom is most effectively shielded by an elaborate confession – a confession so elaborate that the church does not feel bound, nor free, to go beyond its express articulations for purposes of discipline. I therefore give to the fact the emphasis of iteration.”³⁰ However, the restraint on ministerial freedom itself is not constituted by the *form* of the confession, but the *substance* of the faith it confesses. “To be a Christian church – this faith of hers must always operate as a restraint upon freedom, both of communion and of ministration.”³¹

What limits may be suggested for just how elaborate a confession might be in a church? Proper criteria are required. MacGregor suggests two things: (1) In terms of *Administration* a church must have a common understanding about certain things affecting its life. There will be things which must go into a confession though they may not be of the substance of Christian faith. MacGregor uses the example of the practice of infant baptism in a paedobaptist church. Confessing this does not require us to believe that the anti-paedobaptists are non-Christian. It is simply saying, this is our understanding of the teaching of Scripture and therefore an anti-paedobaptist cannot be a minister or office-bearer in our church. The work and administration of a church cannot go on without such positions being clear. Then, (2) in terms of *Attainments* there is the point that taking the wider view there is the profession of those things which over time and history God’s church has come to “attain” by way of doctrine and practice and government. MacGregor mentions as examples the doctrine of justification by faith as an “attainment” of Protestant Christendom. In addition there are the doctrines of man’s inability and sovereign grace, and even the question of the church’s spiritual independence. A church, in other words, will have an eye to what has been *attained* in doctrinal understanding from the past.

These two things together, maintains MacGregor, “will suffice as a regulative test of the legitimacy of detailed articulations in a church’s confession of her faith”.³² On the basis of this (he says), “I think that we ought to retain the *Westminster Confession* as the confession of our common

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 700.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 700-1.

³² *ibid.*, p. 702.

faith. I so think because I regard it as a superlatively good statement of what is commonly believed among us, and because it would be extremely difficult, perhaps practically impossible, to get another confession half so good that would be the received symbol, the visible connecting bond of that great Presbyterian empire on which the sun never sets, now visibly and sensibly connected by means of the venerable symbol of Westminster.”³³ It is the case that retention of the *Confession* tends greatly towards deep, and wide, and strong theological thinking on the part of the churches holding to it. Would any proposed replacement be as good, or be so respected? That is not at all likely. To throw away such a confessional statement is, therefore, to throw away a very real advantage.

MacGregor goes on to consider some specific areas where objections were commonly raised:

(1) In relation to the *six days of creation*, he points out that the reference in the *Confession* is simply a Bible statement. He tends, however, in this article,³⁴ and his later article on “The Christian Doctrine of Creation”,³⁵ to be happy with an “accommodation” to long ages or epochs as represented by the “days”. In relation to “the theory that the ‘days’ of creation are epochs, of great and indefinite extent”, he states in one article that “the present writer may be allowed to mention that this theory was embraced by him before he had given any serious attention to the relative ascertainments of geologic science”.³⁶ This was, however, a common approach then in the face of the “assured results of modern science”, which, they believed, required great quantities of time applied to the commonly received “geological column”. In the early Free Church, even before the Darwinian era, such influential men as Thomas Chalmers and Hugh Miller advanced the idea of the necessity of great ages in earth’s history. In many ways this was a crux, and the tendency to accommodate to secular science in this area tended to undermine in the public eye the credibility of the plain Biblical account of creation *ex nihilo*. It is true that MacGregor in one place says that “Christians . . . while giving interested attention to the processes and results of science, ought not to be quick to take alarm on account of these. ‘He that

³³ *ibid.*, p. 703.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 706.

³⁵ James MacGregor, “The Christian Doctrine of Creation”, *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. CVI, October 1878, pp. 724-751.

³⁶ “The Christian Doctrine of Creation. III.” *The Christian Treasury*, Edinburgh, 1872, 399.

believeth shall not make haste.”³⁷ Though he was cautious in being dogmatic on the question of the understanding of Genesis 1, and certainly wished to stress the supernaturalism of the work of Creation, MacGregor was inclined to accept a “continuous creation” theory in which creation is represented as “proceeding through an ascending series of stages, and terminating in the Creator’s rest”.³⁸ All the theorising on how to understand Genesis 1 in the light of science, however, tended to give little weight to the plain meaning of the text of Genesis. After all, why was so much time necessary? Would there not be an “appearance of age”? Once the “geological column” was accepted, within the framework of uniformitarian science and consequent long ages of death and decay before man came on the scene, how could it be said in relation, for example, to the work of the “six days” that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31)?³⁹ And how could any concession to evolutionary development be squared with the distinctness of man as a being specially formed in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28)?

(2) In relation to the questions raised about whether *infant damnation* was taught in the *Confession* with reference to “elect infants dying in infancy”,⁴⁰ MacGregor argues that the *Confession* simply teaches that in such a case – as well as in the case of “other elect persons, who are incapable of being called by the outward ministry of the word”,⁴¹ that is to say those among the heathen and mentally ill – any who may be saved will be saved by sovereign grace according to the electing purpose of God. The *Confession* speaks prudently, without stating either that all infants dying in infancy are necessarily lost or that none are.⁴² Similarly in the case of “others”. However, as MacGregor points out, with reference to the way salvation is wrought in every case: “the theological interest of the divines here lies in asserting that the only source of

³⁷ James MacGregor, “The Christian Doctrine of Creation”, *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. CVI, October 1878, p. 750.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 747. See also p. 748, and p. 750 where he says that this view “is most likely to prove the correct one”.

³⁹ For an excellent modern conservative approach to the straightforward understanding of the days in Genesis 1, see Douglas F. Kelly’s *Creation and Change. Genesis 1:1 – 2:4 in the light of changing scientific paradigms*, Fearn, 1997. See also Jonathan Sarfati’s refutation of “Progressive Creationism”, *Refuting Compromise*, Green Forest, AR, 2004.

⁴⁰ *Confession of Faith*, X:3.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² James MacGregor, “On the Revision of the Westminster Confession”, pp. 706-7.



James MacGregor and Mrs Grace MacGregor with their first three children (William, Georgina and Duncan), Paisley, 1862.

salvation is God's grace, and that the only legal ground of it is His righteousness in Christ. Hence, they oppose the suggestion that 'virtuous' heathens can be saved by their virtues, that they have been elected on account of those virtues foreseen, or justified on the ground of those virtues realised."⁴³

(3) In relation to *reprobation* objections were made that the *Confession* taught this and that it was harsh and incompatible with God's love. The word, of course, did not appear in the *Confession*, but the truth was there, namely, that the non-elect have been "ordained . . . to dishonour and wrath for their sin".⁴⁴ MacGregor argues against denials or scruples about reprobation on three grounds: (a) Apart from an unacceptable universalism, it is a

fact; there is an abandonment of some to wrath and dishonour on account of sin. (b) What God does in time, He must have planned to do from eternity. (c) Once an election is recognised, it must be admitted that the non-elect must be doomed on account of their sin. "No real Calvinist can have any difficulty," MacGregor maintains, "in accepting the confessional statement regarding the destiny of the non-elect as doomed to death eternal for their sins."⁴⁵

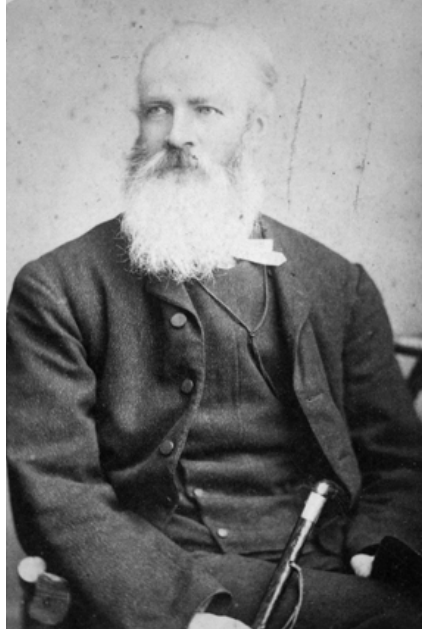
Supposing the *Confession* should be retained, the question arises as to the manner in which it is to be retained. James MacGregor would wish it to be retained "pure and simple". At the same time he says that he has a measure of sympathy with the rescission of some parts, such as what the Americans did in relation to the Civil Magistrate. He is not altogether averse to the suggestion for declaratory Acts, but only "in so far as these

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 708. Cf. *Confession of Faith*, X:4.

⁴⁴ *Confession of Faith*, III:7.

⁴⁵ James MacGregor, "On the Revision of the Westminster Confession," p. 708.

declaratory acts mean, not interpretation, but effective super-session".⁴⁶ He does not like the suggestion that there should be a lesser creed for elders and deacons. On the one hand it suggests the unfortunate presumption of a want of mental or spiritual ability to grasp the *Confession* on their part, something such office bearers might resent, especially as seemingly placing them on a lower ecclesiastical level. That would not be healthy for a church. MacGregor does not like, either, any idea of relaxing the form of subscription. Rather than subscribing the "whole doctrine" of the *Confession* some apparently thought it would be easier to simply subscribe the "substance" or "system" of the



James MacGregor at 60 (c. 1890).

Confession.⁴⁷ But why should an honest man scruple about the whole doctrine if he can hold the substance or system? MacGregor, however, is suspicious that "those vague expressions ["system" or "substance"] are liable to most formidable abuse".⁴⁸ His conclusion is that what is intended by the prescribed form of adherence should be provided for "by a form which admits no misapprehension".⁴⁹

MacGregor also counters the suggestion that there should be a short and simple creed in place of the more detailed one. Such documents could not, however, effectively serve the purposes of a Church's confession. For how could they really show what all the ministers are bound to teach on behalf of the Church, when the statements would be so attenuated and inexplicit? No, there is a great advantage in having a confession as detailed as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and retaining it more or less just as it is. Whatever the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 709.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 711.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

disadvantages may be, “those greater advantages, secured in part by having a non-scriptural form of sound words, are secured most completely by having a form as nearly as possible unchanging”.⁵⁰

James MacGregor’s contributions to theological literature in this period were nothing if they were not thought-provoking. There was originality about much of his work. At the same time there is little obvious “interaction with contemporary scholarship”. No doubt such interaction is necessary, though it may also have the effect of quickly dating works. Yet it is clear that MacGregor did make himself familiar with contemporary scholarship – the extent of his reading is evident especially in his last volume on *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics* (1894). However, he tended to *write* simply according to his considered convictions on whatever issue he tackled. In addition, there is no mistaking his conservative bent. He frequently wrote for *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, probably the premier *Review* in Britain at that time on the evangelical side. Between 1868 and his departure for New Zealand in 1881 he contributed no fewer than eleven major articles amounting to some 270 pages. His distinctly conservative and Calvinistic perspective is clear from his articles on “The Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement” (February 1871), “Dr William Cunningham” (October 1871), and “Dr Charles Hodge and the Princeton School” (July 1874). In fact these were extended book reviews respectively of Dr Hugh Martin’s work on the *Atonement*, the *Biography* of Dr Cunningham by James Mackenzie and Robert Rainy, and the monumental three-volume *Systematic Theology* by Charles Hodge, which was completed in 1873. MacGregor was obviously very much in the same school as Cunningham and Hodge, whose books he used in his own classes. Besides this there is his “Nature of the Divine Inspiration of Scripture” (April 1880) in which he deals among other things with difficulties of apparent inaccuracies in Scripture. MacGregor deals with these in a competent and orthodox way. He would take them up later in his volume, *The Revelation and the Record*, which finally appeared in 1893.

James MacGregor’s writings on the whole showed him to be a competent conservative theologian with a concern for the issues that were thrusting themselves upon the Church in that era. They still make profitable reading. It is a pity that his projected book on the *Person of*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 713.

Christ never saw the light of day and is now “lost”, for it may well have been the book of popular and abiding appeal which was somehow lacking from his later published works, excellent as they were.

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Professor MacGregor's published writings, 1868-1881

1. “The Competency of Theological System.” Lecture delivered on entering upon the duties of the chair (of Systematic Theology) in the New College, Edinburgh. 1868. 8pp.
2. Professor MacGregor on Hymns. *The Watchword*. August 2, 1869, pp. 210-215.
3. *The Question of Principle now raised in the Free Church specially regarding the Atonement*. Edinburgh: John Maclaren. 1870. 76pp.
4. *Professor MacGregor's Speech: including A Reply to Criticism of His Pamphlet on the Question of Principle now raised in the Free Church specially regarding the Atonement*. Edinburgh: Duncan Grant. [1870?]. 47pp.
5. “The Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement.” *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XX, No. LXXV, February 1871, pp. 110-135.
6. “Dr. William Cunningham.” *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XX, No. LXXVII, October 1871, pp. 752-792.
7. *The Union Committee's New Proposal*. Edinburgh: John Maclaren. 1872. 16pp.
8. “The Christian Doctrine of Creation – I.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 265-268.
9. “The Christian Doctrine of Creation – II.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 349-353.
10. “The Christian Doctrine of Creation – III.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 397-400.
11. “The Christian Doctrine of Providence – I.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 444-448.
12. “The Christian Doctrine of Providence – II.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 495-497.
13. “The Christian Doctrine of Providence – III.” *The Christian Treasury*, 1872, pp. 505-508.

14. *The Question of Church Property*. With an Appendix. No. VI. Issued by the Scottish Disestablishment Association. (1874?). 8pp.
15. "India Missions: Their Difficulty and Prospects", *The Family Treasury*, 1874, pp. 680-684.
16. "Dr. Charles Hodge and the Princeton School." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXIII, No. LXXXIX, July 1874, pp. 456-469.
17. "The Place of Man Theologically Considered." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXIV, No. XCI, January 1875, pp. 113-137.
18. *Steidheachadh na H-Eaglais an Stat: Gu H-Araidh a Thaobh Na Gaidhealtachd*. Dun-Eidinn: Maclaubhrainn & Macnibhinn. 1875. 15pp.
19. *Notes on the Disestablishment Question, Specially in Relation to the Highlands*. Edinburgh: Maclaren & Macniven. 1875. 11pp.
20. *Disestablishment and the Highlands*. Edinburgh: Maclaren & Macniven. 1875. 12pp.
21. "Servum Arbitrium." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXIV, No. XCIV; October 1875, pp. 621-644.
22. "Age of the Pentateuch, with Special Reference to Revelation and Inspiration." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXVI, No. C, April 1877, pp. 254-274.
23. "On Revision of the Westminster Confession." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXVI, No. CII, October 1877, pp. 692-713.
24. "Church Membership of Infants: Practical Aspects." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXVII, No. CIV, April 1878, pp. 301-327.
25. "The Christian Doctrine of Creation." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXVII, No. CVI, October 1878, pp. 724-751.
26. "Reordination of Romish Priests", *The Catholic Presbyterian*. Vol. 1. No. XI (April), January-June 1879, p. 317.
27. "The Transition from Philosophy to Theology." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXVIII, No. CIX, July 1879, pp. 501-520. (Inaugural Lecture, delivered in the New College, Edinburgh, 6th Nov. 1878.)
28. *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*. With Introduction and Notes. (Handbooks for Bible Classes and Private Students.) Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1879. 127pp.

29. "Nature of the Divine Inspiration of Scripture." *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. Vol. XXIX, No. CXII, April 1880, pp. 201-219.
30. "The Apostolic Commission: A Sermon," in *Modern Scottish Pulpit*. Sermons by Ministers of Various Denominations. Vol. II., Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1880, pp. 176-190.
31. "Rev. John Bruce, D.D., Free St. Andrew's, Edinburgh." In *Disruption Worthies – A Memorial of 1843*. Edinburgh: Thomas C. Jack. 1881, pp. 79-86.
32. "Doctrinal Position of the Cumberland Presbyterians, U.S." *The Catholic Presbyterian*. Vol. V No. XI (February), January-June, 1881, p. 152.
33. "The Resurrection of Jesus: As a Doctrine and as a Fact." In a volume entitled *Revealed Religion*. No details of original publication, pp. 113-130.

