A STRICT CONSTITUTIONALIST: EXPLAINING THE ECCENTRICITY OF THE FREE CHURCH THEOLOGIAN JAMES MACGREGOR (1829-1894)

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Abstract

This article explains the independent outlook of James MacGregor (1829–1894), a Free Church theologian of great importance to both Scottish and New Zealand Presbyterianism. Scholars often describe MacGregor as "eccentric" because, despite being a conservative, he did not always side with conservatives in ecclesial disputes. For example, although he took a dim view of progressive theological trends, he himself was open to a revision of the Westminster Standards of Faith. Scholars have until now described rather than explained MacGregor's independent streak. This article argues that MacGregor, as a son of the 1843 Disruption, believed that overbearing clergy and party struggles continually menace the Church's authentic voice. He considered the Westminster Standards a bulwark against the tyranny of partisan minorities, and he insisted that everyone – including his fellow conservatives – follow them to the letter. In doing so, he transcended the polarised conservative-progressive divide.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I argue that the independent streak of the Free Church theologian James MacGregor (1829–1894) stemmed, above all, from his strong feelings about church government. In so doing, I explain MacGregor's apparent inconsistency on certain theological points, which has fascinated and perplexed scholars in Scotland and New Zealand for many years. Such an explanation is vital because, as Ian Breward cogently states, MacGregor was one of the nineteenth century's "most notable Calvinist theologians."[1] Born in Perthshire in 1829, he was licensed in 1855 and became professor of systematic theology at the Free Church's New College, Edinburgh, from 1868 to 1881. He then immigrated to New Zealand, where he became a minister of the Synod of Otago and Southland, whose identity was overwhelmingly Free Church. There, he served as minister of Columba Church, Oamaru, from 1882 until his death in 1894. In both countries, MacGregor was very active in ecclesial affairs. As a theologian, his reputation stretched even further. For example, the American titan Benjamin B. Warfield regarded him as a first-class theologian.[2]

Above all, I explain MacGregor's seemingly incongruous position on two famous heresy controversies. On the one hand, when William Salmond provoked uproar in the Synod of Otago and Southland for denying orthodox Calvinist soteriology, MacGregor wanted him condemned for heresy and expelled from the ministry. However, a decade earlier, MacGregor acted differently in the Robertson Smith

[1] Ian Breward, "1871–1901: Clamant Needs, Determined Battlers," in *Presbyterians in Aotearoa, 1840–1990*, ed. Dennis McEldowney (Wellington: Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1990), 53.
[2] John W. Keddie, *James McGregor: Preacher, Theologian and Defender of the Faith* (n.p.: JWK Books, 2016), 13.

Case. A leading Free Church biblical scholar, William Robertson Smith, had authored two publications that subjected Scripture to higher criticism. He cast doubt on many long-held convictions about the Bible, such as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and did not even emphasise Scripture's inspired character. Numerous conservatives wanted him prosecuted for heresy, yet MacGregor, despite acknowledging that the publications were problematic, defended Smith's orthodoxy and his freedom to apply the methods of higher criticism to Scripture.

Numerous scholars have mentioned MacGregor's independent streak, though none have satisfactorily explained it. In the Scottish context, conservative voices have been paramount. In his classic work of Scottish theology, the Free Church scholar John MacLeod describes MacGregor as "brilliant, though erratic."[3] In more recent years, John W. Keddie, another Free Church scholar, has concurred that MacGregor was somewhat "erratic."[4] In the New Zealand context, liberal voices have been more common, though their assessment of MacGregor is virtually the same. The historian Ian Breward remarks that MacGregor was a "formidable, but somewhat eccentric Calvinist."[5] The historian Peter Matheson reaches the same conclusion, albeit using more neutral language. He notes that MacGregor was "a conservative, but in no way a bigot."[6]

Until now, only Keddie has attempted an in-depth explanation of MacGregor's apparent inconsistency. He did so in his 2016 self-published biography of MacGregor, a synthesis of decades of research, and to this day the only monograph about this noteworthy theologian. Although Keddie's research is helpful in many respects, his unabashedly conservative perspective means that his analysis sometimes lacks nuance. Keddie champions MacGregor as a lion of Free Church orthodoxy while arguing that he had his weaknesses. Keddie attributes the latter to MacGregor's personality and to the times in which he lived. They caused him to adopt the common-sense philosophy so popular in nineteenth-century Scotland, which made him too tolerant of progressive attempts to explain and defend the faith rationalistically.[7] In addition, Keddie notes, MacGregor could not foresee the extent to which progressives would exploit the language of traditional theology to obscure the implications of their heretical ideas.[8]

I agree with Keddie that MacGregor was a man of his time and therefore could not foresee future trends. However, Keddie's analysis is insufficient to explain the apparent contradiction of a generally conservative theologian sometimes acting in what seemed to be a less-than-rigid conservative manner. When discussing the Robertson Smith Case in particular, he is reduced to bemoaning MacGregor's "schizoid" behaviour (note that I discuss Keddie's interpretation of the case in more depth in a later

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[3] John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: The Knox Press and Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 302.
[4] Keddie, *James McGregor*, 84.
[5] Ian Breward, "Lloyd Geering and James MacGregor: Two New Zealand Apologists," in *Faith in an Age of Turmoil: Essays in Honour of Lloyd Geering*, ed. James Veitch (London: Oriental University Press, 1990), 193.
[6] Peter Matheson, "The Reception of Calvin and Calvinism in New Zealand: A Preliminary Trawl," in *Calvin, The Man and the Legacy*, eds. Murray Rae, Peter Matheson, and Brett Knowles (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2014), 178.
[7] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 49, 108–109.
[8] *ibid*., 97–98.

section).[9] This epithet is problematic because MacGregor, a cogent thinker, prized intellectual consistency. As he noted in 1870, "I believe that a series of confessed inconsistencies, regarding matters of grave importance, ought to make a man's judgment distrusted."[10] Either MacGregor fell far short of his own standards, or there is a coherent leading principle in his theology, and especially his participation in ecclesial controversies, that scholars have yet to highlight.

I believe that I have identified such a principle. Although scholars have remarked on MacGregor's early life, none has adequately elucidated that as a child of the Disruption of 1843, he embraced a romantic view of Scottish church history in which the faithful majority were repeatedly menaced by overbearing clerics and partisan agitators. I explain the relevant history in the next section; here, a brief overview of his thinking is given for clarity. He believed that because of their opportunism and doggedness, these dastardly characters had often gained control of the ecclesiastical machinery. Fortified by the Holy Spirit, the faithful – the true members of Christ's Church – were never destroyed. Nevertheless, a hostile church leadership obstructed the spread of the Gospel both within and outside the Church. Hence the significance of the Disruption: it marked the liberation of Scottish Presbyterianism from a tyrannical clique.

MacGregor believed that the Church was always at risk of falling under such tyrannical leadership. To ensure that the faithful majority would stay in control and keep the Church on the straight and narrow, he became a stickler for constitutional process. Although clearly a conservative, he condemned partisan loyalties for fostering an atmosphere of animosity unconducive to constructive discussion: "I never belonged to any party in a church, and I hope I never shall."[11] Instead, he aspired to an unbiased perspective, carefully considering the evidence in light of the Church's doctrinal bedrocks, the Scriptures (the font of doctrine) and the Westminster Standards (which regulate ecclesial life, most notably by denoting the core doctrines and the correct interpretation of Scripture).

For MacGregor, the Westminster Standards are not comprehensive works of theology. Nor do they stipulate everything that he, as a conservative, would prefer his coreligionists to believe and do. Rather, they are a minimalist outline of the core doctrines that one must profess to be considered an orthodox Presbyterian. As he noted in 1888, the Confession's purpose was not "*exposition* of *all* Scripture truth, but *guarded statement*, of that system" (note that in this article, all emphases within quotations are MacGregor's).[12] To be most effective, "Such a guarded statement ought to have in [it] as *few* things as possible … For anything beyond that would tend to narrow *sectarianism*."[13] MacGregor championed the Westminster Confession, above all, as a "masterly" example of such a concise, incisive confessional statement.[14]

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[9] *ibid*., 104.
[10] James MacGregor, *A Question of Principle Now Raised in the Free Church Specially Regarding the Atonement* (Edinburgh: John MacLaren, 1870), 12.
[11] James MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth: Under Shield of a Constitution, of Government and of Doctrine, in Accordance with the Word of God* (Dunedin and Wellington: New Zealand, Bible, Tract, and Book Depot, 1888), 5.
[12] *ibid*., 57.
[13] *ibid.*
[14] James MacGregor, *Presbyterians on Trial by their Principles* (Dunedin: Munro, Hutchison & Co., 1890), 29.

MacGregor believed that theological disagreement is possible, and that orthodox Presbyterians can be mistaken on one or more issues without wandering into heresy. The latter concept, he thought, only covers precepts that render impossible a full and sincere adherence to the Westminster Standards. Much of his theological career was spent elucidating and defending this nuanced perspective; his pedantic and relentless adherence to it explains his so-called eccentricity.

Having summarised MacGregor's views and traced them to his interpretation of Scottish Presbyterian history, it is time now to discuss the latter in greater depth.

A CHILD OF THE DISRUPTION

It is no exaggeration to say that MacGregor's life and work took place in the shadow of the 1843 Disruption. This event, one of the most significant of nineteenth-century Scotland, saw many Evangelical office-bearers and laypeople split from the Established Church of Scotland to form the Free Church of Scotland. They separated as a matter of principle.[15] Evangelicals were distinguished by their intense religiosity. They upheld the concept of a national church and avowed that the state should safeguard its interests. Yet, they believed that because Christ alone is the head of the Church, the state has no authority to interfere in ecclesial affairs. Since the early 1700s, the British state had violated this principle by controlling the appointment and provision of clergy. The Evangelicals proclaimed that congregations should have the right to choose their own ministers, for only then could the people's voice be heard. They were especially concerned because more latitudinarian church leaders, aptly known as the "Moderates," were acquiescing in this state policy and exploiting it to restrain Evangelical influence. By walking out of the Established Church, Free Church members faced intense hardships. Ministers lost incomes and manses; laypeople lost access to their parish churches. Many services initially had to be held outside or in disused buildings, where congregations shivered amid the cold and damp.

Owing to the scale and suffering of the Disruption, the Free Church loudly justified its separation and its claim to be the authentic established church. Its apologias, while eloquent, often exaggerated and romanticised. Free Church leaders lambasted the Moderate leadership as a devious minority who, through a manipulation of the church courts, had been undermining the Church's theological integrity since the late seventeenth century. They were blamed for having sidelined the Covenanters, the religious radicals who had so stalwartly upheld Presbyterian principles against Episcopalian kings and nobles in the 1600s, and whom the Evangelicals regarded as their spiritual forebears. Regarding the Free Church's claim to be the authentic national church, numbers were essential. Only a sizable minority of ministers joined the Free Church in 1843: of the 1195 ministers enclosed and unendowed, only 474 left.[16] However, the leaders

[15] For historical background, see Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry, eds., *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

[16] James MacGregor, *Three Smooth Stones from the Brook: Or, A Brief Exhibition of the Case of Mr James Lamont, The Case of the Free Church of Scotland, and the Case of the Church Established in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1853), 18.

proclaimed that they had taken the bulk of the wider Church with them. They dismissed the official Established Church as a shrunken husk doomed to collapse under the weight of its now-top-heavy Moderate leadership.[17]

The truth is more complex. Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch have ascertained that on the eve of the Disruption, only eighteen of the Church's seventy-eight presbyteries had a majority in favour of the Evangelical party.[18] Had the Disruption Fathers in the General Assembly chosen to rely on the ecclesial machinery to achieve their goals, sending declarations of protest to the presbyteries for consideration rather than walking out, their numerical weakness would have been embarrassingly revealed. The strength of Evangelicalism and the audacity of the split ensured that the Disruption Fathers took up to half the laity – including the vast majority of Highlanders – with them. The Established Church, however, was not a spent force. Drummond and Bulloch illustrate that the Established Church worked hard to recuperate its loses and "steadily grew in numbers and vitality" during the rest of the century.[19] The Free Church became dominant in the Highlands, but nationally it was just one denomination among many. This sense of competition made it increasingly sectarian.[20]

Moreover, Free Church criticisms of the Moderates' influence over the Church often overlooked the fact that most Scottish Presbyterians in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries supported them.[21] Their ascension to power had been paved by the disenchantment of many Presbyterians with the interminable religious conflicts of Tudor and Stuart periods. The stubbornness and militancy of the Covenanters, which so exemplified the spirit of these conflicts, was an anathema to many of these later generations.

Despite the historical dubiousness of the triumphalist Free Church perspective, James MacGregor imbibed it wholesale. Like so many Gaelic Highlanders, his family took part in the Disruption. MacGregor was an adolescent at the time; memories of his congregation's early hardships were seared into his memory.[22] A pious youth, he trained for the ministry at New College, Edinburgh, from 1847 to 1855, where he was educated by the cream of the Disruption leadership. MacGregor's first publication, completed while still a student, reflects his intense loyalty to the Free Church tradition. It rebuked James Lamont, an ex-Free Churchman who, ten years after the Disruption, proclaimed that the Established Church was the true national church and that the Free Church was merely a narrow-minded sect. MacGregor wholeheartedly defended the Free Church. One of his most significant arguments, which would become a trademark of his writing, focused on sincerity of confessional allegiance. Lamont confessed to being deceived – and,

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[17] Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland, 1843–1874* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 8.
[18] Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688–1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1973), 250.
[19] Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland*, 33.
[20] *ibid.*
[21] Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church*, 9–12, 65–68.
[22] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 18–19.

indeed, wanting to be deceived – by Disruption ministers whom he respected. His time in the Free Church, in other words, had been spent in doubt. MacGregor seized upon this confession and held it up as evidence that Lamont had never been "a genuine Free Churchman," that he was a dishonest and confused character whose cogitations cannot be trusted.[23]

Regarding the facts themselves, MacGregor upheld the Free Church's separation as valid and necessary. In doing so, he articulated another argument that would become a hallmark of his thinking: the danger of non-Evangelical minorities taking control of the ecclesiastical machinery and using it to tyrannise Evangelicals. MacGregor attacked Moderatism as utterly corrupt: "A Moderate is, in religion, a cold formalist; and in church politics, a slave to the aristocracy and … a tyrant to the Christian people."[24] The Evangelical party, he contended, had tried to restrain overbearing clergy by allowing Evangelical congregations the freedom to choose their pastors. However, "these acts were *strenuously opposed* by the Moderate minority."[25]

MacGregor conceded that Moderates retained a slender majority of ministers in 1843.[26] Yet, he was adamant that most ruling elders in Scotland sided with the Free Church – ruling elders being those office-bearers who co-ordinate with ministers (the teaching elders) to maintain doctrine and worship. Because no reliable figures had been compiled at the time, he used the vote of ruling elders regarding an 1842 debate about Moderatism as evidence: of the 351 elders who made their opinions known, 241 sided with the Evangelical party.[27] This point is crucial because MacGregor believed that ruling elders, being less exposed to the unhealthy theological currents and authoritarian predilections that affect so many ministers, are more reflective of lay opinion and act as "the natural check upon the power of the clergy."[28] MacGregor used the ruling elders' testimony as evidence that most laypeople also supported the Free Church, leading to the conclusion that "*the Disruption Church is in the right, and is the true Church of Scotland*."[29]

This approach to church history and governance remained constant throughout his career. For example, the MacGregor archives – which are mostly irrelevant for the purposes of this article, since they are little more than drafts of publications and miscellaneous correspondence – contain a rare gem: an unpublished monograph on Thomas Chalmers, the greatest Disruption Father. In this work, which is undated, MacGregor dismissed the Moderates as tyrannical heretics: "They were simply the antichristian section of the Scottish Church."[30] These sentiments are echoed in his agitations within the Synod of Otago and Southland in the last years of his life. At the 1888 Synod, he protested against the Dunedin Presbytery's overture to begin a discussion on the Westminster Confession's relevance as a doctrinal standard in the

[23] MacGregor, *Three Smooth Stones*, 3.
[24] *ibid*., 9.
[25] *ibid*., 6.
[26] *ibid*., 18.
[27] *ibid*., 19.
[28] *ibid*., 7.
[29] *ibid*., 11.
[30] James MacGregor, unpublished monograph, "Nil Desperandum – Thomas Chalmers," n.d., James MacGregor Papers, Presbyterian Research Centre (Archives), Knox College, Dunedin, New Zealand, 3/60, DA 3/6, 23.

modern age. MacGregor compared the Dunedin Presbytery, the most progressive of the Synod, to Scottish Moderatism. MacGregor complained that the Moderates had plunged Scottish Presbyterianism into a "dark age" of "tyranny."[31] He then accused the Dunedin Presbytery of being worse than the Moderates because while the latter simply sidelined the Confession, Dunedin progressives were formally questioning its authority.[32]

He noted that there was a constitutionally appropriate way to go about confessional revision. In his words, "Christianity is a belief. Believers are essentially the Church. A particular Church is the community of professed believers."[33] According to this definition, each generation of office-bearers is a "trustee" of the Church's doctrine and practice.[34] Confessional revision is possible because as theologians hone their craft and as Christians find themselves facing new challenges, existing confessional statements might be found lacking to some degree. However, because confessional revision has a bearing on the Church's constitution, only overwhelming agreement among faithful office-bearers and laypeople could set a revision process in motion. The process would have to be lengthy and cautious, involving a select committee of reliable believers formulating specific suggestions and then submitting them to the wider Church for consideration. Specificity was integral to prevent an unbridled free-for-all on the Standards and a descent into heresy.

MacGregor believed that substantial agreement within the Church was integral before any changes could be accepted. He believed that such agreement would ensure orthodoxy, since God imparts to the true faithful – well represented among the ranks of office-bearers and ordinary church members – the instinct to judge between orthodoxy and heresy. His favourite biblical text to support this perspective was Exodus 18:21, where Jethro testifies to the God-given ability of the faithful to judge correctly: "Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness" (KJV).[35] Another key passage was John 7:17: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine" (KJV). When "Jethro's judges" – MacGregor's later shorthand for these stalwarts – are allowed to deliberate freely, the Church will invariably make the right decisions.[36] The role of professional theologians should be restricted to the imparting of specialised knowledge, such as "historical matters of fact," that would contextualise the issues at hand.[37]

Instead, the 1888 Synod witnessed a tiny minority of progressives questioning the Confession's status in an impromptu and broad manner. MacGregor considered this approach reckless and unwarranted. He had detected little desire for change among southern Presbyterians, many of whom were scandalised by the

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[31] MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, 25.
[32] *ibid.*
[33] *ibid.*, 9.
[34] *ibid.*, 8.
[35] James MacGregor, *The Day of Salvation (2. Cor. vi., 2) Obscured in a Recent Pamphlet on 'The Reign of Grace'* (Dunedin and Oamaru: New Zealand Bible, Tract, and Book Depot and Andrew Fraser, 1888), 9.
[36] *ibid.*, 10.
[37] *ibid.*

overture. He was also concerned that the overture's broad scope lacked the requisite safeguards to begin a constructive revision process.[38] MacGregor proclaimed that if the overture were passed, it would represent a tiny minority's "usurpation" of "the doctrinal and governmental constitution of the Church."[39] A motion to ignore the overture, spearheaded by MacGregor, lost by fifty-six to fifty; the Synod subsequently formed a committee to investigate the possibility of revision.[40] However, he consoled himself by noting that the margin was narrow and that the ruling elders supported him thirty-six to twenty – proof, in his mind, that laypeople were on his side. He blamed his defeat on the votes of the dubious Dunedin Presbytery, whose size and strategic location (official business was often conducted in Dunedin, the largest city in the Synod's jurisdiction) meant that its members had a disproportionately large voice.

Of course, not all Free Church stalwarts expressed Free Church principles in the same way. MacGregor's distinctiveness when compared to many other conservative Free Church theologians was his unyielding belief that constitutional process is essential for restraining tyrannical minorities. It separated him from many of his conservative colleagues, such as the New College exegete George Smeaton, whom Keddie praises for being more belligerent than MacGregor.[41] As discussed in detail below, whereas these persons were liable to press for charges of heresy even when one could argue that the accused had not technically violated the Standards, MacGregor was likely to reject this approach as constitutionally illegitimate.

How MacGregor developed this perspective is an open question; there is insufficient source material to explain its origins fully. Scripture was essential in shaping his belief that the common people can identify and safeguard orthodoxy. The most important factor regarding his concern about constitutional protections against tyranny was undoubtedly ecclesial history.[42] Nevertheless, other influences included British constitutional history and the literature of antiquity, both of which stress the dangers of tyranny, and the former of which is distinguished by its focus on constitutional safeguards against it.[43]

Having established MacGregor's general theological outlook, it is time now to discuss his role in noteworthy ecclesial controversies in the mid- and late 1800s. Although the Robertson Smith and Salmond Cases are the most famous, they were undertaken when MacGregor was already an eminent theologian. To highlight the constancy of his theological outlook, it is important to discuss two earlier controversies in which he was involved: the 1860s–1870s union debates in Scotland and the 1859 Glasgow College Case.

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[38] MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, 6–7.
[39] *ibid.*, 25, 6.
[40] *ibid.*, 69.
[41] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 106–107, 110.
[42] His knowledge of church history is especially reflected in MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*.
[43] For an example of British historical influence, see *ibid.*, 11. For an example of the influence of antiquity, see James MacGregor, *The Apology of the Christian Religion: Historically Regarded with Reference to Supernatural Revelation and Redemption* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 41–42. For further testimony of his interest in, and knowledge of, the literature of antiquity, see Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 77.

EARLY EXAMPLES: THE GLASGOW COLLEGE AND UNION CONTROVERSIES

MacGregor played a prominent role in union debates in Scotland between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church (UPC). In the 1860s and early 1870s, the Free Church debated the possibility of union with the UPC, which was the third-largest church in Scotland after the Established and Free Churches. There was considerable disagreement in the Free Church because the UPC had a reputation for theological progressivism. Many conservatives in the Free Church were appalled at the prospect of union, perceiving significant theological differences, though more moderate members favoured it despite this factor. MacGregor highlighted that the "scandal" of Christian disunity meant that proposals should be "fairly considered."[44]

However, he was troubled by some pro-unionists' inattentiveness to doctrinal disagreements. To protect the Free Church's Evangelical witness during unity talks, he stressed that strict constitutional processes were integral. In 1870, having recently become the professor of systematic theology at New College, he published a tract outlining his ideas. He noted that church union affects the Free Church's constitution, "the foundation of her being and action."[45] Consequently, he wanted the reports of the Union Committee sent to the presbyteries for consideration, where Jethro's judges could make their voices heard. He feared that if discussions were left in the hands of the Union Committee, a minority of overzealous ecumenists might initiate union without sufficient forethought.[46] The Church's Evangelical witness could be compromised; prudent conservatives might be obliged to secede in good conscience. In line with his belief that theologians and ministers should clarify the issues for Jethro's judges rather than dictate to them, MacGregor's tract sought to elucidate the issues at stake.

MacGregor stated that unity between the Free Church and the UPC could only take place if they were one in doctrine.[47] He noted that the Union Committee conceded a "reasonable doubt" on this point, and he highlighted the Atonement as an example.[48] The Free Church adhered to the Westminster Confession's Calvinistic understanding of this doctrine: Christ died only for the elect because God, before he created the cosmos, predestined some humans to salvation and foreordained others to damnation.[49] In contrast, the UPC's position was murky.[50] Formed in 1847 as a merger of the Relief and United Secession Churches, the latter had tolerated the growth of Amyraldism, the idea that Christ had died on the cross for all people rather than just the elect. Because the UPC had not clarified its position on the Atonement, MacGregor concluded that "There is some reason to suppose that Amyraldism … is *tolerated* in her pulpit

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[44] MacGregor, *A Question of Principle*, 32, 5.
[45] *ibid*., 6.
[46] *ibid*., 7.
[47] *ibid*., 23
[48] *ibid*., 18.
[49] Westminster Confession, Chap. 3.
[50] For a superb account of the Scottish Voluntarist tradition's drift into progressivism, see Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990).

by the United Presbyterian Church."[51] Consequently, he deemed union with the UPC unacceptable at present.

In 1872, the Free Church's General Assembly, seeking to maintain unity within the Church, voted against the prospect of union. Instead, it promoted a more modest Mutual Eligibility scheme with the UPC that would allow ministers, after appropriate vetting, to serve in each other's churches. MacGregor wholeheartedly supported the scheme, writing a whole pamphlet on the topic.[52] Keddie sees MacGregor's position here as evidence of his eccentricity, since many other conservatives, such as Smeaton, opposed it for fears that it would lead to doctrinal laxity within the Free Church.[53] Yet, Keddie does not emphasise that MacGregor's judgment was in concordance with his theological outlook. The Mutual Eligibility scheme, he believed, would further inter-denominational co-operation without compromising the Church's constitution because Jethro's judges would ensure that only UP ministers who were doctrinally orthodox would be accepted by Free Church congregations.

As noted earlier, MacGregor regarded the Westminster Standards as the doctrinal heart of the Free Church constitution. His careful interpretation of them is illustrated in the Glasgow College Case. The 1859 General Assembly considered a dispute between James Gibson, professor of systematic theology at the Free Church's Glasgow College, and several of his students. Gibson accused his students, who upheld the possibility of natural theology, of downplaying the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity. As member of the General Assembly of 1859, MacGregor – then a young parish minister – published a tract clarifying the issues at stake.

MacGregor stressed that he entered the fray not as a partisan seeking to stoke controversy, but as a dutiful Free Churchman seeking to elucidate Calvinist orthodoxy.[54] He acknowledged Gibson's erudition, that total depravity is taught by the Confession, and that it has a crucial place in Free Church theology. Yet, he faulted Gibson's interpretation of this doctrine as overzealous given that the Confession contains references to the legitimacy of natural theology. For example, "The light of nature sheweth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might."[55] Of course, as a Calvinist, MacGregor avowed that Divine Revelation is the central means by which humanity learns about God, since humans are fallen and unable fully to perceive the actuality of Natural Revelation. The Westminster Confession's lack of detail about Natural Revelation testifies to its ancillary nature in Reformed theology. Nevertheless, because the Confession does affirm natural theology,

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[51] MacGregor, *A Question of Principle*, 59.
[52] James MacGregor, *The Union Committee's New Proposal* (Edinburgh: John MacLaren, 1872).
[53] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 61.
[54] James MacGregor, *A Vindication of Natural Theology, On Grounds of Reason, Scripture, and Orthodoxy; With Special Reference to the Glasgow College Case, and the Recent Publications of Professor Gibson*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh and Glasgow: Andrew Elliot and David Bryce, 1859), 5.
[55] *ibid*., 54; Westminster Confession, Chap. 21, Sec. 1.

however fleetingly, "it forms an article of *our* faith."[56] Thus, rather than repudiating natural theology wholesale, Gibson should be teaching his students to view Natural Revelation as subordinate to Divine Revelation, as the Larger Catechism concisely puts it: "The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but his word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation."[57] In the end, Gibson acknowledged his overzealousness, citing MacGregor's arguments as persuasive.[58]

In both these early cases, MacGregor illustrated his nuanced approach. The Westminster Standards were the doctrinal heart of Free Church witness. Church courts were obliged to follow them to the letter. Constitutional process was designed to neutralise partisanship within the Church, and MacGregor wrote to reinforce the fact that party divisions were unhelpful when considering weighty matters of doctrine. Although he adopted a conservative stance in both controversies, he explicitly denied being part of any party, basing his judgements instead on the Church's doctrinal standards.

Having established MacGregor's general theological outlook, complete with examples, it is time now to discuss his approach to the infamous Robertson Smith and Salmond Cases.

THE ROBINSON SMITH CASE

The Robertson Smith Case of the late 1870s and early 1880s, like the Disruption, was a pivotal event in modern Scottish religious history.[59] In 1870, William Robertson Smith became the professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at the Free Church College, Aberdeen. He was a scholar of astonishing ability, being only in his mid-twenties, and his future in the Free Church seemed bright. However, Smith was a proponent of modern biblical criticism, and in 1875 he published an entry on the Bible in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* stating, among other things, that Moses had not written the Pentateuch and that higher criticism had dispensed with much biblical prophecy.[60] Many conservatives regarded the article as an attack on the divinely inspired character of Scripture, endorsed by the Westminster Confession, and wanted him prosecuted for heresy.[61] At the 1880 General Assembly, more moderate voices prevailed: by a narrow majority of seven, it mildly censured him for uttering statements contrary to Free Church doctrine.[62] Shortly afterwards, Smith published another incendiary entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, this one on Hebrew language and literature, which stoked up the controversy all over again. At the 1881 General Assembly, Smith received a somewhat more serious censure: by a significant majority, it deprived him of his professorship because he could not be relied on to teach Free Church orthodoxy.[63] This ruling still fell far

[56] MacGregor, *A Vindication*, 3.
[57] *ibid.*, 54; Larger Catechism, Question 2.
[58] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 49.
[59] Bernhard Maier, *William Robertson Smith: His Life, his Work and his Times* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 150–186.
[60] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 89.
[61] Westminster Confession, Chap. 1.
[62] Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 182.
[63] *ibid.*

short of what most conservatives wanted, since it neither expelled Smith from the ministry nor formally charged him for heresy.

MacGregor sided with those who believed that Smith – one of his former students – deserved only a mild censure. For the 1880 General Assembly, MacGregor wrote a motion that his colleague John Laidlaw presented.[64] Ultimately, a different motion undergirded the mild censure passed that year, though MacGregor's and Laidlaw's was very similar in substance to it. MacGregor argued for an "admonition" because the publications were not of the standard of a Free Church professor.[65] Nevertheless, he emphasised that "they do not directly contradict the doctrine of the Confession" and so Smith should not be prosecuted for heresy.[66] In an 1876 article written at the beginning of the controversy, MacGregor wrote that Smith's claims were "not theological, but archaeological."[67] As long as one acknowledged the Bible as "the divine record of the divine revelation," as the Westminster Confession requires, it was "theologically unimportant" how it came into existence, since the Confession has little to say on the matter.[68] Higher criticism was therefore permissible and, from an antiquarian perspective, rather interesting. In addition, MacGregor knew from personal experience that his former student was an orthodox Calvinist.

The only problem, from MacGregor's perspective, was that Smith did not make his orthodoxy clear in his two suspect publications. Rather than affirming the theological truth of Scripture and the inability of historical criticism to undermine it, Smith seemed only to summarise the opinions of iconoclastic higher critics, which did not do justice to the inspired text. "With your great gifts and peculiar opportunity," he wrote to Smith, "I think we are entitled to expect more from you than keen appreciation and assimilation of what others have said."[69] In hindsight, we know that Smith, despite his brash writing style, was not wholly to blame: the draft of his Bible entry contained an introduction that affirmed this point, but for some reason the publishers eliminated it.[70]

It is here that Keddie complains about MacGregor's "schizoid" attitude towards modern biblical criticism.[71] One can certainly disagree with MacGregor's approach. However, it must be emphasised that it flowed logically from his overall theology. Keddie does not make clear that MacGregor had formulated his perspective on this subject long before the Robertson Smith Case. In 1864, while still a parish minister, he published a small book on the inspiration of Scripture. It aimed to clarify the truthfulness of Scripture in light of modern biblical criticism. As in the 1859 Glasgow College Case, MacGregor grounded his argument on a plain reading of the Westminster Standards. The Confession states that Scripture is divinely inspired and contains the doctrines necessary for salvation.[72] For MacGregor, therefore, avowing this point is

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[64] MacGregor, *Freedom in the Truth*, 21.
[65] Cited in Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 87.
[66] Cited in *ibid.*
[67] Cited in *ibid.*, 105.
[68] Cited in *ibid.*
[69] Cited in Maier, *William Robertson Smith*, 152.
[70] *ibid.*, 151.
[71] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 104.
[72] Westminster Confession, Chap. 1.

essential. He cited 2 Timothy 3:16 to reinforce his argument: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (KJV).[73] Nevertheless, because the Confession does not stipulate in all respects how Scripture came to be, Presbyterians can in good faith hold variant views on the subject. For example, he regarded it as entirely possible, as higher critics alleged, that many parts of the Bible said to be written by well-known persons had been compiled from the long-lost writings of more obscure and perhaps controversial persons. Even if this proposition were proven beyond doubt, MacGregor believed that the inspired character of Scripture transcended its historical origins: "All this does not in the least affect the question of inspiration" because the Bible in its current form is the Word of God.[74] "*He* speaks to us in the Bible all through, He is the real author of every sentence of it."[75]

As Keddie points out, MacGregor was traditionalist in his own interpretation of Scripture.[76] His trilogy of apologetics, written near the end of his life, defended the integrity of Scripture and attacked the higher criticism of scholars such as David Friedrich Strauss, Ernest Renan, and Ferdinand Christian Baur.[77] Yet, MacGregor's personal interpretation is beside the point, since his overriding goal in the Robertson Smith Case – as in other ecclesial disputes – was to clarify official doctrine. For him, there was nothing inconsistent in defending Smith while also disagreeing with the latter's methods of biblical analysis, since Smith, despite not always articulating his orthodoxy as well as MacGregor desired, was working within the parameters of the Westminster Standards. As he noted in a work written shortly before his death, he had "constantly" defended Robertson Smith "on the view that his critical opinions … might be held, sincerely though mistakenly, by one believing, as he professed to believe, the Confessional (Westminster) doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture."[78] In MacGregor's view, those who wanted Smith prosecuted were an overzealous minority whose bellicosity risked contradicting and undermining the Westminster Standards they claimed to uphold – just as Gibson had done in the Glasgow College Case two decades earlier.

To reiterate, MacGregor's views on biblical inspiration were grounded in his careful reading of the Westminster Standards. Because Smith did not negate them, MacGregor was more charitable towards him than many conservatives, even though he personally disagreed with him. Yet, only a few years later, when a similarly bitter theological controversy arose in New Zealand, MacGregor took a hard line against the innovative scholar who stood at its centre. It is to this next controversy that we now turn.

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[73] James MacGregor, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Its Nature and Extent* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1864), 11.
[74] *ibid.*, 22.
[75] *ibid.*
[76] Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 110–113.
[77] MacGregor, *The Apology*; James MacGregor, *The Revelation and the Record: Essays on Matters of Previous Question in the Proof of Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1893); James MacGregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics: New Testament and Post-Apostolic* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894).
[78] MacGregor, *Studies*, 335.

THE SALMOND CASE

MacGregor reacted differently in New Zealand because, in his mind, the originator of the controversy, William Salmond, had abandoned the Westminster Standards. Salmond was a Scottish theologian of UP background who had immigrated to New Zealand in 1876 to become a professor in the Synod of Otago and Southland's Theological Hall. In 1886, he assumed the chair of mental and moral philosophy at the University of Otago. In 1888, Salmond published *The Reign of Grace*, a soteriological discourse that criticised the Westminster Confession's teaching that God foreordained some people to eternal damnation.[79] Salmond had long been uncomfortable with this belief: according to him, it denied God's goodness and mercy. Salmond suggested, as the book's subtitle makes clear, the possibility of "salvation for all men in this life, or in the life to come."[80] As the religious scholar Simon A. Wood remarks, Salmond's deviation from Calvinist orthodoxy earned him harsh criticism from both prominent conservatives, who insisted on fidelity to the Confession on principle, and prominent progressives, who regarded Salmond's arguments against the Confession as reckless and flimsy in this instance.[81]

Unlike in the Robertson Smith Case, Salmond had explicitly repudiated a core Free Church doctrine. Consequently, in a pamphlet published shortly after *The Reign of Grace*, MacGregor decried Salmond's "assault upon the confessional doctrine of his Church" as heretical.[82] Echoing his criticisms of James Lamont in the 1850s, MacGregor lambasted Salmond for ministering under false pretences and threatening the Synod's Evangelical witness. As a minister and theologian of the Synod, Salmond was obliged to adhere to and teach the Westminster Standards. Even though the Otago chair was technically not under the Synod's jurisdiction, the latter had secured it for him on the reasonable assumption that he was an orthodox Calvinist. Instead, he had privately disbelieved for many years and now declared his unbelief openly – all while accepting the "office, and dignity, and emoluments" of a Synod clergyman.[83] No amount of honest to God rhetoric – to use the phrase of Bishop John A. T. Robinson, a doubting clergyman of a later generation – could hide the fact that Salmond had "systematically deceived the churches, and made a comfortable living by so doing."[84] MacGregor believed that because Salmond was unrepentant, the Synod had a duty to condemn him for heresy and sever him from its ministry. MacGregor argued this point at the 1888 Synod. However, more liberal figures, especially from the Dunedin Presbytery, advocated a moderate approach that merely declared Salmond's views as contrary to church doctrine – a course of action, in MacGregor's view, that is applicable only to cases where the Standards are not directly challenged (for

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[79] William Salmond, *The Reign of Grace: A Discussion of the Question of the Possibility of Salvation for All Men in this Life, or in the Life to Come*, 5th ed. (Dunedin: Jas. Horsburgh, 1888).
[80] *ibid.*
[81] Simon A. Wood, "The Reign of Grace: Liberalism and Heresy in the New World," *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 535–560.
[82] MacGregor, *The Day of Salvation*, 3.
[83] *ibid.*, 6.
[84] *ibid.*

example, the Robertson Smith Case). A motion supported by MacGregor to expel Salmond was defeated by a vote of nineteen to ten.[85]

MacGregor believed that the Synod's inadequate response to the Salmond Case ensured the growth of doctrinal laxity in the Synod, notably in the Dunedin Presbytery. Particularly indicative was the latter's questioning of the Confession's status – at the same 1888 Synod that failed to expel Salmond – and the way that the Synod handled it. As noted earlier, MacGregor believed that confessional revision, while possible, must be a slow, cautious process. In the wake of the Salmond Case, the atmosphere in the Church was not conducive to healthy discussion.[86] The power of the Dunedin Presbytery meant that progressivism would taint the proceedings.

Appointed to the committee for revision in 1888 and 1889, he found his worst fears confirmed. Despite his agitations, the committee – dominated by the dubious Dunedin Presbytery – was poorly equipped to consider weighty theological matters and ended up deferring to developments in Scotland, where the United Presbyterians had recently passed a Declaratory Act qualifying their adherence to the Confession.[87] The wider church membership, which MacGregor believed was fortified with doctrinally orthodox judges of Jethro, was inadequately consulted. MacGregor found this situation intolerable. The stagnation of the committee was undermining the Synod's doctrinal witness, which had already been imperilled by the Salmond Case.[88] To make matters worse, the growth of progressivism suggested that any decisions that were made would likely be unorthodox.

MacGregor resigned from the committee and, in 1890, published a tract advocating how he thought matters should have proceeded: persons "understood to be distinctly friends of the Confession" should have dominated the committee, which would have proactively considered the matter and offered suggestions for the wider Church to ponder.[89] Jethro's judges would have vetted suggested revisions for orthodoxy, and any beneficial changes would have been solemnly approved by a substantial majority of the Synod.

Here, we see a reflection once again of MacGregor's Free Church romanticism: his absolute trust in Jethro's judges seems to have blinded him to the fact that by the 1890s, Free Church stalwarts were a distinct minority in Otago and Southland.[90] In 1893, hearing that the Free Church of Scotland had passed a Declaratory Act a year earlier – proof that the Mother Country was also affected by progressive developments – the Synod meekly followed suit. In 1897, three years after MacGregor's death, the Synod voted overwhelmingly to merge with the rather progressively inclined Presbyterian Church of New Zealand

[85] Wood, "The Reign of Grace," 559.
[86] MacGregor, *Presbyterians on Trial*, 5.
[87] *ibid*., 6–9.
[88] *ibid*., 5.
[89] *ibid*., 10.
[90] For further discussion, see Martin George Holmes, "Assessing the First World War's Spiritual Impact on Scottish Presbyterianism in the Diaspora: The Case of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand," *Scottish Church History* 52, no. 2 (October 2023): 138–140.

(popularly known as the "Northern Church"). Despite his underestimation of the strength of Free Church Presbyterianism in southern New Zealand, it is significant that his own theological views remained firm even at the end of his life. The constancy of MacGregor's thinking suggests that had he been alive in 1897, he would have argued against union to preserve the integrity of his Church's constitution, just as he had done in Scotland in the 1870s.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have highlighted that a coherent leading principle guided MacGregor's participation in ecclesiastical disputes. In doing so, I provide a corrective to Keddie's monograph. Although admirable in many respects, Keddie's book holds MacGregor to the partisan conservative standards of himself and of MacGregor's contemporaries such as George Smeaton. I have shown that this approach is unhelpful because MacGregor, though personally conservative, decried party divisions as harmful to the Church. His understanding of Scottish church history made him suspicious of partisan minorities imposing their views on the majority. He therefore emphasised constitutional process as a means of restraining tyranny. He carefully studied the doctrinal standards of the Free Church to elucidate official doctrine and practice, holding that erroneous ideas should only be considered heretical if they expressly violated the Westminster Standards; to go beyond this rubric would allow sectarian minorities to run roughshod over the wider Church. This independent approach helps explain his participation in ecclesial controversies from his student days until his last years. Above all, it helps explain what might at first appear his contradictory positions taken in the Robertson Smith and Salmond Cases: he defended the former and condemned the latter based on their fidelity to the core doctrines of the Westminster Standards.

In addition to clarifying this theological point, my article is important because, despite MacGregor's colossal influence in nineteenth-century Scotland and New Zealand, very little research exists about him. I have tried to show in this article that he was a vibrant, prolific, and wide-ranging theologian. Indeed, his interests were so vast that the publications cited represent only a significant fraction of his output.[91] I hope that this study will inspire further work on MacGregor and help fill a glaring gap in the study of nineteenth-century Scottish and New Zealand Presbyterianism.

[91] For a comprehensive bibliography of MacGregor's works, see Keddie, *James MacGregor*, 201–208.