
Why did the Free Church of Scotland alter its subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1892?

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1. Introduction

The Westminster Confession of Faith has long been the theological banner of the Scottish Presbyterian Churches, enriching their doctrine in times of spiritual prosperity and defending it in times of heterodoxy.¹ Having been adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647 it enjoyed fourteen years of uninterrupted use before it was condemned after the Restoration of Charles II by the infamous Rescissory Act of 1661. However, after twenty-nine years of religious persecution, it was restored to its position as the theological statement of the national Church in 1690 following William and Mary's Revolution.

In 1711 a rigid system of subscription to the Confession was drawn up to be signed by all office-bearers of the Church. This strict subscription was intended to guard the Church, not only against episcopal innovation from within, but also against theological heterodoxy prevalent at the time in the form of Antinomianism, Arminianism, and Socinianism. It was this theological document, therefore, that was continually referred to throughout the theological crises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the Marrow controversy of the eighteenth century and the Atonement controversy of the nineteenth century being well-known examples.

1. This paper originated as a dissertation submitted for the B.Th. Degree at the Edinburgh Theological Seminary in April 2016.

Although it is arguable that the Free Church of Scotland had qualified her adherence to the Confession with regards to the civil magistrate in 1846,² the first major departure from the standards came in 1879 when the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland introduced a Declaratory Act which, among other things, declared that those who subscribed to the Confession would have liberty of opinion on those doctrines ‘not entering into the substance of the faith.’³

In 1892 the General Assembly of the Free Church adopted her own Declaratory Act, similar to that of the United Presbyterian Church. In six clauses, the Church clarified her position with regards to her standard, showing where liberty of opinion was to be allowed. The sixth clause specified that theological liberty was to be allowed on those matters which ‘do not enter into the substance of the Reformed faith.’⁴ The General Assembly of the Church was designated the judge of what that definition included.

Kenneth Ross argues that there were those in the Free Church who had become dissatisfied with full subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith long before the Declaratory Act controversy broke out.⁵ However, the first formal mention of such a movement in the General Assembly of the Church was in 1887 when overtures were sent by the Synod of Glenelg and the Presbytery of Lochcarron demanding that there be repercussions for one of the Professors of Divinity belonging to the Church who had ‘in his Presbytery moved an overture to the Assembly with the view of making alteration in the Confession of Faith.’⁶ P. Carnegie Simpson, Principal Rainy’s biographer, reveals that the accusation was aimed at ‘Professor [James] Candlish ... who in 1887 brought it up in the Presbytery of Glasgow.’⁷ A. B. Bruce, professor of Apologetics and New

2. It was on the basis of this ‘Declaratory Act’ that the Aberdeenshire Free Presbytery of Ellon, in its overture to the 1889 General Assembly, justified making further declaratory statements on the Church’s subordinate standard.

3. See Appendix 1, Article 7. Ian Hamilton has dealt with this subject in detail in his book *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2010), pp. 137-164.

4. See Appendix 2, Article 6.

5. K. R. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland: The Free Church Case, 1900-1904, and its Origins* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 197.

6. *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1887* (Edinburgh: The Assembly Arrangements Committee, 1887), p. 211 (hereinafter *PDGAFC*, with year).

7. P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy* (2 vols., London, 1909), Vol. 2, p. 121.

Testament Exegesis at the Free Church College in Glasgow, had also heavily criticised the Confession in a book called the *Kingdom of God*.⁸ By a large majority the court decided that the motions were not suitable.

When the General Assembly met the following year, two very different overtures came before the court. The Presbytery of Cupar's overture desired that the Assembly

appoint a committee to see whether anything could be done to define more clearly the relation of the Church and her office-bearers to the Confession, because differences of opinion existed ... and because that uncertainty was productive of various evils, hindering promising students going forward to the ministry...⁹

A second overture came from the Presbytery of Dalkeith and was similar to that of Cupar but argued

on the ground that creeds, confessions, and articles of belief, being uninspired, were liable to error, that fresh light had been increasingly thrown on the meaning of the Divine word since the Westminster Standards were drawn up, and that it was right and requisite that the written standards and living faith of the Church should be in fullest harmony.¹⁰

As nobody rose to move either of the overtures, they were departed from. However, it was evident that a desire for change was brewing in certain parts of the Church. This desire found its form in the twenty-one overtures which reached the General Assembly in 1889 from Presbyteries who requested that the present situation with regards to confessional subscription be reviewed.¹¹

Although it could be argued that what united those who entered the Free Church at the Disruption of 1843 was their stance against Erastianism more than doctrine, it is yet evident from the *Act Anent Questions and Formula*¹² passed in 1846 that the Disruption Church was also united on her doctrine and confessional stance.¹³ How then, in the

8. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*, p. 198.

9. *PDG AFC, 1888*, p. 220.

10. *Ibid.*

11. See Appendix 3 for a full list of the overtures.

12. *Act XII, 1846*, of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. *Act Anent Questions and Formula* (Edinburgh: John Greig, 1847), p. 27.

13. Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, p. 165.

space of only forty-six years, did the Free Church move from a position of rigid confessionalism to one of undefined qualification? James Lachlan Macleod, in his book *The Second Disruption*, has traced the attitude behind the Declaratory Act of 1892 through nineteenth-century society and has majored on the changes in thought within and without the Church, coupled with the widening gap between Highland and Lowland Christianity.¹⁴ Ian Hamilton, in his book *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, has traced its adoption through the slow decline in adherence to the distinctive tenets of Calvinism, especially in the Scottish Secession churches.¹⁵ It is with an eye to movements in that Church, Hamilton suggests, that the Free Church decided to follow the same course. Kenneth R. Ross, in his book *Church and Creed in Scotland*, has majored on the general use and understanding of the Westminster Confession in the Free Church up until this point and he suggests that 'the writing was on the wall' for decades before 1892.¹⁶ It is evident that the reasons for the Free Church's change in position are numerous and diverse.

There is undoubtedly much to be gained from a study of the changes which affected both Church and society in nineteenth-century Scotland and the effect which these changes had on the doctrinal position of the Free Church. However, arguably the most accurate way to assess the reasons for the adoption of the Declaratory Act of 1892 is to study the speeches of those who supported the act during the General Assemblies of 1889 to 1892. This paper will, therefore, beginning with an analysis of the overtures which reached the 1889 General Assembly, move on to concentrate on the recurring arguments that were put forth on the Assembly floor in the speeches of those who favoured change during these years. Although the study will move chronologically through each year's General Assembly, each individual year's speeches will generally be looked at analytically rather than chronologically in order to ensure coherence.

2. The Overtures to the General Assembly of 1889

The General Assembly of 1889 received thirty-three overtures anent the Confession of Faith; twenty-one supported a change to the current position whereas twelve demanded that the General Assembly maintain the status

14. J. L. Macleod, *The Second Disruption* (East Lothian, 2000).

15. Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, pp. 165-198.

16. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*, pp. 194-199.

quo.¹⁷ The overtures which desired a change in the Church's position on confessional subscription, when gathered together, put forward around thirteen reasons, some of which were more commonly asserted than others. Eleven overtures stated that 'the current feeling in the Church' demanded that the Church review its current position concerning subscription. The Synod of Fife argued on these grounds when they said that 'many earnest members of our Church have expressed a desire for such a revision of our relation to the Confession of Faith'¹⁸ and the Presbytery of Dumfries used similar language when they suggested that a 'wide-spread feeling exists in the Church that the time has come for inquiry into this matter.'¹⁹ Although it is without doubt that a good proportion of the Church's membership and office-bearers were exercised by this question, it is difficult to explain, as William Balfour argued in his speech to the 1889 General Assembly, why only twenty out of seventy-three Presbyteries had sent overtures to that effect to the General Assembly.²⁰ Six overtures further stated, on the basis that the feeling in the Church was that the position of the Confession should be reviewed, that the current Confession did not express the 'living faith' of the Church.²¹

Eight overtures argued that it was the right and duty of the Church to revise their Confession according to the Church's understanding of the truth. This is clearly manifested in the overture of the Presbytery of Brechin which stated that 'it belongs to the Church, which is subject to the Word of God as her only rule of faith, to revise her subordinate standard of doctrine, when the circumstances of the time seem urgently to call for it.'²² Interestingly, this was accepted by the conservatives throughout the years of debate as is evident from the overture from the Synod of Sutherland and Caithness which, although arguing against any change to the Church's position, 'recognised the abstract right of the Church to revise its subordinate standards in circumstances of peculiar urgency, so

17. *Assembly Papers, 1889* (Edinburgh: The Assembly Arrangements Committee, 1889), pp. 329-347. See Appendix 3 for a list of the Synods/Presbyteries and their respective overtures.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

20. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 133.

21. *Assembly Papers, 1889*, p. 335.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

as to adapt them to the special exigencies of the times.²³ However, what the conservatives did not agree on was the accusation that the terminology of the Confession was misleading and even inaccurate in places. Variations of this argument were used in six of the overtures which desired change. The Presbytery of Garioch, for example, desired that 'something might be done towards making the Confession a more accurate exponent of the teaching of the supreme standard.'²⁴ With more of a view towards simplifying the Confession in order to remove difficulties and scruples, the Presbytery of Alford argued that the Confession was 'couched in terms too purely theological for the requirements of the laity.'²⁵

It is evident, however, that doctrinal purity was not at the heart of many of the overtures. A common incentive for change seemed to be the desire to conform to the pattern of other Churches, probably with a view to opening up subscription to those men who were hindered from taking office, and with a view to those Churches which were similar to the Free Church in many ways but were unable to unite because of their different subscriptions to the Confession. The Presbytery of Auchterarder, for example, argued for change on the basis that 'this desire has been met in other Presbyterian Churches, with which this Church is in most intimate relations of fellowship.'²⁶ The Presbytery of Edinburgh argued more directly when they spoke of 'the present formula' having the 'effect of preventing many loyal and faithful men from accepting office.'²⁷ The practice of other Churches, and especially the Free Church's desire to come into closer harmony with them, would become an important factor in the subsequent debates.

Apart from the main arguments highlighted above, the overtures also presented more minor arguments, most of which would be expanded on in some capacity in the subsequent speeches. Those ranged from the progress of Biblical study and the necessary implications of new light received in the two hundred and fifty years since the Confession was written, to arguments that the Free Church had already introduced a declaratory statement in 1846 when they declared their understanding of

23. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

the Confession's position on the role of the civil magistrate.²⁸ Interestingly, the Presbytery of Alford put forward one unique reason for change, which would receive no attention throughout the rest of the debate, and that was that the Confession gave 'too little prominence to the doctrine of the Divine Fatherhood.'²⁹

Aside from the content of the overtures, it is also interesting to note the geography of those which favoured change. The lack of any support from the Synods or Presbyteries of the Highlands and Islands is conspicuous. In Aberdeenshire, however, the Presbyteries were almost unanimous in their desire for change, with seven Presbyteries from the Synod of Aberdeen sending overtures to that end. This is perhaps less surprising in light of the assertion that what had caused the Aberdeen congregations to join the Free Church in 1843 was not necessarily their adherence to the Confession, nor even their aversion to Erastianism, but rather a desire on the part of the professional classes within the churches to become elders; something which had hitherto been monopolised by the landed gentry.³⁰ Although the Presbyteries in the central belt were nowhere near unanimous in their desire for change, they also had a strong representation favouring change in the form of overtures from one Synod and five Presbyteries. The rest of the overtures for change came from three Presbyteries in the Lothians, three in Greater Glasgow and Ayrshire, and two in Dumfries and Galloway. Although there are slight similarities found in some of the desires put forward and language used by Presbyteries in the same region, there is little evidence to suggest that there was a well-organised move by those who desired change to put forward a united front, at this stage anyway.

Although this study is not concerned, primarily, with the arguments of the conservatives, it is interesting to note the geography and the reasons of the overtures to the 1889 General Assembly from those Synods and Presbyteries which argued against change. Their geography is not complicated: all twelve overtures came from Synods or Presbyteries from north of the Highland line. It is notable that three overtures came from Synods – compared to only one Synod which favoured change – adding weight to the argument that the majority of the Church did not desire

28. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 333. There is perhaps a link here with the theology of John McLeod Campbell who had been deposed for his view on the atonement in 1831.

30. A. A. Maclaren, *Religion and Social Class: Disruption Years in Aberdeen* (London, 1974), *passim*.

change. The almost unanimous stance of the Highland churches is not irrelevant when it is remembered that the Highlands and Islands made up a not insignificant proportion of the late nineteenth-century Free Church.³¹ Despite their strong stance throughout the debate however, it could be argued that they were largely ignored by their Lowland counterparts.

James L. Macleod argues that one of the main factors behind this was a form of racism, propagated by the infamous Robert Knox, which argued that the Highlanders (the Celts) were of an inferior race to the Lowlanders (the Saxons). An example of their racism, Macleod argues, was that 'the charge that Highlanders were either unable or unwilling to change with the times was a favourite approach of the Lowland liberals.'³² John Macleod, in his book *Banner in the West*, picks up on this strand of thought when he writes that

Rainy and his intimates seem to have been genuinely incapable of grasping that their Highlands brethren were not only well informed, theologically acute and perfectly capable of grasping the precise issues at stake, but that they were endowed even with normal intelligence.³³

Whether racism was a factor in the Declaratory Act debate or not, it is evident from the subsequent Assembly speeches that those who spoke on behalf of the Highlands received little support, and in some instances, little respect.

Although there were many reasons put forward in the overtures which desired that that the General Assembly maintain the status quo, some were more prominent than others. Ten overtures argued on the basis that any change in the current position of the Church would almost definitely disrupt the subsequent harmony of the Church. The Synod of Glenelg argued that, if the Church were to change her position on the Confession, 'such a step shall, without fail, rend and ruin the Church',³⁴ and the Presbytery of Breadalbane similarly argued that 'such

31. When Dr McLauchlan delivered the Report of the Committee for the Highlands and Islands at the Free Church General Assembly in 1874, he stated that the Gaelic language 'was still the language of the homes, the hearts, and the religion of nearly 300,000 of the people of this country, of whom the great mass belonged to the Free Church'; see *PDG AFC, 1874*, p. 130.

32. J. L. Macleod, *The Second Disruption*, p. 142.

33. John Macleod, *Banner in the West: A Spiritual History of Lewis and Harris* (Edinburgh, 2008), pp. 191-192.

34. *Assembly Papers, 1889*, p. 330.

alterations, if made, are sure to cause deep divisions in the Church.³⁵ Some Presbyteries, such as that of Dornoch, argued that this danger was enhanced by ‘the unrest which prevails, and the indefiniteness of theological belief characteristic of the times.’³⁶ The fact that eminent Highlanders were unhappy with the writings of many of their Lowland colleagues, especially men like A. B. Bruce and Marcus Dods who now held college chairs, was no secret.

The second primary reason against change, included in six of the twelve overtures, was that the Church could not do so without office-bearers breaching their ordination vows in which they had vowed to ‘assert, maintain and defend’³⁷ the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Presbytery of Inverness declared this simply by saying

whereas all the minsters, professors, and elders of this Church have solemnly declared that they own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the said Confession to be in harmony with the Word of God, that it is the confession of their faith, and that they will assert, maintain, and defend the same...³⁸

Having solemnly vowed before God and men at their ordination that they would remain faithful to the whole doctrine of the Confession, it was argued that any office-bearer who sought to change the Church’s relationship to that document was in breach of the solemn vows which he had taken. This, in itself, was understood to be a clear and unassailable argument for preserving the Church’s current relationship with its Confession. It was argued that the conduct of those ministers who sought to alter this relationship was ‘sufficiently alarming, especially in an age replete with uncertainty, doubt, and infidelity.’³⁹

The overtures which came to the 1889 General Assembly laid the groundwork for much of what would constitute the Declaratory Act debates. They also provide an important insight into what people were thinking locally, at Presbytery level, and the difference of opinion which was apparent in different parts of the country. The battle for the future of

35. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

37. *The Subordinate Standards and Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1933), p. 374.

38. *Assembly Papers, 1889*, p. 341.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

the Westminster Confession, however, would be fought in the subsequent speeches on the Assembly floor.

3. The General Assembly of 1889

In response to the thirty-three overtures regarding the Westminster Confession of Faith which came to the General Assembly of the Free Church on Thursday 30th May 1889, seven motions were put forward from the floor for the consideration of the commissioners. Out of the meetings of Assembly which dealt with the question of confessional subscription, the meeting of 1889 was the most important in terms of giving insight into why the Church desired change. This is because, whereas the speeches in the latter Assemblies dealt primarily with the terms and practicalities of the proposed Declaratory Act itself, the speeches in the first Assembly dealt more generally with the reasons for which a change in the current practice was required.

William Balfour⁴⁰ was the first speaker, moving that the Assembly pass from the overtures altogether as ‘no adequate reason had been substantiated, or even alleged, for adopting such a course of action as has been suggested.’⁴¹ His motion was seconded by his first cousin, Andrew Inglis.⁴² The first motion in favour of altering the Church’s subscription came from Principal David Brown of Aberdeen⁴³ and was seconded by Dr John Adam, formerly of Wellpark, Glasgow.⁴⁴ Further motions were

40. Balfour was the first minister of Holyrood Free Church in Edinburgh in 1849 and remained there until his death in 1895.

41. *PDG AFC, 1889*, pp. 132-133.

42. Andrew Inglis was the minister of Dudhope Free Church in Dundee. His mother was William Balfour’s aunt on his father’s side.

43. David Brown was a Disruption Father who had grown in prominence in the Church through his writings and his professorship and subsequent principalship in the Free Church College in Aberdeen. It is notable that his ministerial experience was not restricted to that of the Free Church; he began his career as assistant to Edward Irving in London and remained there for two years until, disturbed by Irving’s views on the gifts of the Spirit, he returned to Scotland after a year and a half. His literary merits, ranging from New Testament commentaries to biographies, were rewarded when he was conferred with a DD by the College of Princeton, New Jersey in the 1850s. See J. A. Wylie (ed.), *Disruption Worthies* (Edinburgh, 1881), pp. 74-78.

44. Dr John Adam retired in 1875. Ewing says that he was ‘a lucid and effective public speaker, an accomplished debater, and he possessed a thorough knowledge of Church law.’ In November of the year following the 1889 Assembly, Dr Adam was hit by a ‘lorry’ and,

put forward by Alexander Forbes of Drumblade, James Smith of Tarland, Thomas Murray of Midmar, Alexander Orrock Johnston of Westbourne, Glasgow, and Professor A. B. Bruce of New College, Edinburgh. All motions, excepting those of Balfour and Forbes, proposed that the Church move in the direction of altering her Confession.

After much debate and deliberation, it was agreed that the motion of Principal David Brown of Aberdeen most suitably expressed the mind of those who desired change.⁴⁵ His motion, in highlighting the importance of dealing with a question which had been raised by so many Presbyteries, called for a committee to be appointed to advise the Church on how it was to act in light of the overtures. Principal Brown's motion carried comfortably over that of William Balfour by 413 votes to 130.⁴⁶

Principal Brown based his reasoning for revising the Church's confessional position on his understanding that 'the Westminster divines committed two great mistakes in drawing up the Confession.'⁴⁷ The first of these mistakes was that they had 'put more into the Confession than they were warranted – more than should be required of them as a test of office.'⁴⁸ To illustrate this point he questioned why somebody being admitted into office had to have a theological position on the salvation of infants. Brown understood that the fact that Chapter 10:3 of the Westminster Confession referred to 'elect infants' implied 'that there were infants who were not elected and not saved.'⁴⁹ Although this view was answered by William Balfour when he gave his reply to the discussion,⁵⁰ Brown held to the

three weeks later, he died from his injuries. See W. Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1914), Vol. 1, p. 77.

45. Brown's motion was phrased thus: 'The General Assembly, having taken up the overtures regarding the Confession of Faith, and recognising alike the importance and difficulty of the question thus raised and the indications of a present call to deal with it, hereby resolve to appoint a committee to consider carefully what action it is advisable for the Church to take, so as to meet the difficulties and relieve the scruples referred to in so large a number of overtures – it being always understood, that this Church can contemplate the adoption of no change which shall not be consistent with a cordial and steadfast adherence to the great doctrines of the Confession' (*PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 137).

46. *Ibid*, p. 154.

47. *Ibid*, p. 137.

48. *Ibid*.

49. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 138.

50. *Ibid*, p. 153.

principle that he was being asked to subscribe to things on which the Bible itself was not clear and which should, therefore, allow liberty of conscience. Dr Walter C. Smith, speaking later in the afternoon, expressed the same mind when he argued that:

In the ecclesiastical symbol there should be nothing but the briefest possible statement of the essentials of the Christian faith ... He ventured to think that the Confession, without charging it with any error, might be greatly improved by simply dropping out a very considerable portion of it.⁵¹

It is evident that many understood the Confession to be overly prescriptive on secondary matters which were unclear in the Scriptures. The Free Church, it was argued, should not require her office-bearers to conform to the minute understandings of the Westminster divines. James Smith of Tarland argued similarly when he declared that ‘he would agree to have a much shorter Confession. The Confession had too much head and too little heart. It was far too logical, cold, and destitute of warmth, light and vigour.’ Although Brown and the two Smiths were arguing for the same thing – a shorter, less detailed Confession – it is evident that James Smith of Tarland put far more emphasis on the theological and spiritual inadequacies of the Confession than his colleagues.⁵²

Brown suggested that the Confession’s second great mistake was that it had ‘reversed the order in which divine truth was conveyed to them in the Holy Scriptures. It adopted the logical and not the lateral method of conveying divine truth.’ He, therefore, suggested that the doctrines of the Confession often had a different complexion to that of the Bible, with details being added for the sake of logical completion rather than because they were expressly laid down in Scripture.⁵³

Dr Walter C. Smith expanded on this by arguing that ‘there were many other things which were in the Confession only because of the idea that they must have a complete logical system, but for which there was no distinct scriptural authority at all.’⁵⁴ The argument and necessary implication was that the modern Church was less focused on logic. Where Scripture was silent, it was argued, it was important that the Church respect these silences.

51. Ibid, p. 152.

52. Ibid, p. 143.

53. Ibid, p. 138.

54. Ibid, p. 152.

The principle which directed the Westminster divines in preparing the Confession was their understanding that truth was evident in the Scriptures, not only where expressly set out, but also where it could be understood ‘by necessary consequence’.⁵⁵ On these grounds, the divines, admittedly, used a systematic approach rather than a strictly *biblical* approach. As a result, they did not intend to issue proof-texts with the Confession; these were added later by request of Parliament.⁵⁶ It was this logical form of theology, unpopular by the end of the nineteenth century in Scotland, which was being challenged by Brown and others.

The younger ministers in the Church took particular issue with a theological statement which used the systematic approach. It was the young of the Church whom Thomas B. Kilpatrick of Aberdeen⁵⁷ claimed to represent when he said that

they no longer stood at the side of the Confession; they had moved ahead of it in the stream of time and God’s Providence. What was their theological position? They believed in the absolute supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ, but they were adherents of no existing system of theology.⁵⁸

Kilpatrick’s position was, in essence, a manifestation of a ‘no creed but Jesus’ theology. Many of the young ministers and laity, it was asserted, preferred not to be bound in the way in which their forefathers had been. They believed that creeds and confessions were more often barriers to finding truth than they were aids. In short, for a Church to demand that office-bearers swear allegiance to anything other than Jesus himself was both unhelpful and unbiblical. James Smith of Tarland followed this line of thought when he declared that ‘all Confessions were necessary evils, as they had arisen out of controversy.’⁵⁹ As well as a movement against the method of the Confession, therefore, it is evident that there was a definite movement towards anti-confessionalism in general.

Dr Adam of Glasgow seconded Principal Brown’s motion and argued with more aggression and persuasion. He opened his argument

55. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1:6.

56. S. B. Ferguson, ‘Westminster Assembly and Documents’, in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 865.

57. Kilpatrick was a student at the time and would be inducted to the charge of Kirriemuir South in Angus, under the new legislation, in 1894.

58. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 149.

59. *Ibid*, p. 143.

by stressing that ‘to oppose all change, reasonable and unreasonable; to shut their eyes to the signs and to close their ears to the calls of the times in which they lived ... was not truly conservative.’⁶⁰ The fact that twenty-one Presbyteries, he argued, had sent overtures to the General Assembly on this subject was something that could not be ignored. The ‘calls of the times in which they lived’ demanded that the Church move forward and revise her doctrinal position.

This was further emphasised in Dr Walter C. Smith’s speech when he said that

He had heard it stated that, though he would not answer for the truth of it, that there were ministers and elders in their Church who had signed the formula without even having read the Confession. He had heard of some who had carefully avoided reading it because they thought that if they did they could never be brought to sign the formula at all.⁶¹

This statement, coming from one who supported change, was a stark reminder that the theological mind of many in the Church was distinctly different from the theological mind of the Westminster divines.

Dr Adam’s second argument was based on the antiquity of the Confession. Although he stressed his admiration of the document, he laid great emphasis on the fact that they were living in a different era to that of the mid-seventeenth century. His argumentation is worth quoting at length:

By the very fact that it was so venerable, was it not reasonable to suppose it might not quite as exactly be adapted to the wants and the convictions of this later period? What changes have taken place in the interval since the framing of the Confession? Their food, their dress, their houses, were not the same ... Everything about them had undergone a certain amount of change. But, they said, was that applicable to divine truth? ... In a certain sense it was true that it was unchangeable, and in another and important sense it was not really true. Did God not teach the Church by the discipline of His providence? As time rolled on did He not bring out fresh aspects of His own precious truth?⁶²

The applause of the house after this part of the speech was a strong indicator that Dr Adam had considerable support in his views. Two important things are evident. First, Dr Adam argued that, because society had changed to such an

60. Ibid, p. 139.

61. Ibid, p. 152.

62. Ibid, p. 139.

extent since the drawing up of the Confession, it was only to be expected that their doctrinal statement would not be entirely suitable. In short, the antiquity of the Confession made it unsuitable for modern use. This line of reasoning was continued by James Smith of Tarland who said that ‘just as in ordinary navigation so in theological navigation, a chart 200 or 300 years old was not likely to be up to the mark.’⁶³ Smith highlighted the assumed inadequacies in the Confession by arguing that the ‘Popish and Arminian controversies’ of the seventeenth century forced the Westminster divines to make unhelpful and unbiblical statements and distinctions.⁶⁴ Men like Adam and Smith were aware that the Free Church now lived in a different age with different challenges. In their minds, a different age required a different approach.

Dr Adam went on to argue that God continues to reveal new things to his Church in providence. Therefore, it followed that the Church of the late nineteenth century would have more light on doctrinal issues than that of the seventeenth. As an example of this way of thinking, Principal Brown cited the Confessional doctrine of the civil magistrate as an example of a teaching which could no longer be accepted. Although the General Assembly had, in 1846, declared that they did not believe the Confession to be promoting persecuting principles, Brown did not agree with this understanding. On the contrary, he suggested that, if the Free Church was to be true to this position, then they would expect ‘agnostics, atheists, deists ... to be apprehended by the civil magistrate.’⁶⁵ Brown went on to say that ‘they had now come to a time when a new principle prevailed – a time when religious toleration was so powerful that they could not resist it, and were obliged to yield to it.’⁶⁶ Brown seemed to suggest that, although the principle concerning the civil magistrate may have been acceptable and true in the seventeenth century, in their day they were obliged to accept a principle of toleration. Therefore, he may have inadvertently suggested that truth for one generation could differ from truth for another generation.

The teaching of the evolutionary nature of theology seems to have held much sway in the Free Church of the late nineteenth century. That the modern Church should have greater clarity than that of 250 years previous was a logical progression of this understanding. There was certainly a feeling on the part of the conservatives in the General Assembly that men

63. Ibid, p. 143.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid, p. 138.

66. Ibid.

were suggesting that God was revealing new things to his people. William Balfour tried to counter this thinking when he stated that ‘Truth does not change with the times.’⁶⁷ This sort of reasoning, however, was not surprising in light of the general belief, largely accelerated by the writings of John Henry Newman, that God would continue to reveal new things to his Church in every age.⁶⁸ The esteem in which Newman was held by many of the major figures in the Free Church is attested by the fact that the revered Alexander Whyte of Free St. George’s had not one but two portraits of him up on the wall of his study.⁶⁹ A further example of how the Free Church had accepted that the Church’s doctrine must continually evolve is seen in that Henry Drummond, a Professor in the Free Church College in Glasgow and one of the leaders of the New Evangelists,⁷⁰ gave lectures to that effect which were published under the title *The Ascent of Man* in 1895.⁷¹

As a further reason for the inadequacy of the Confession, Dr Walter C. Smith suggested that the sovereignty of God was given more prominence than the love of God, and perhaps even overshadowed it.⁷² The doctrines of predestination, election, and limited atonement were teachings which were not given a great amount of discussion during the evangelistic campaigns of the New Evangelicals, perhaps best illustrated in the preaching of D. L. Moody’s campaigns of 1873-74. Drummond and Bulloch rightly observed that ‘the revival associated with D. L. Moody had no effect on [Scottish] theology’ but ‘merely reflected a change within in.’⁷³ God, it was suggested, had a general love for all mankind and it was on the basis of this

67. Ibid, p. 134.

68. In the Cunningham Lectures of 1873, Principal Rainy argued that ‘fresh views of the Scripture teaching on important points may be attained by the Church under the influence of a progressive discipline.’ He went on to argue that it was ‘reasonable ... to acknowledge the force of the argument urged by Newman in the *Apologia* and elsewhere.’ See R. Rainy, *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1874), p. 375. It is therefore evident that, although William Cunningham had challenged Newman’s interpretation in an article in the *North British Review* in 1846, Rainy on the other hand could concur with many of Newman’s conclusions.

69. J. L. Macleod, *The Second Disruption*, p. 30.

70. K. R. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland*, p. 155.

71. H. Drummond, *The Lowell Lectures on the Ascent of Man* (London, 1904).

72. *PDG AFC*, 1889, p. 152.

73. A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 78.

love that sinners were invited to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. This led to the distinctive tenets of Calvinism, as set down in the Confession, being at odds with the common way in which people had been led to understand the nature of Christ's redemptive work during these popular missions.

Balfour was very aware of the decline in traditional Calvinist thinking and the desire of many to be rid of it altogether when he made the accusation that 'the real thing that lay at the root of this agitation was ... hostility to the Calvinism of the Confession.'⁷⁴ Although there were supporters of change who saw the importance of guarding the Calvinistic doctrines of the Confession, there were also many who knew that Balfour had well understood their position. Later in the afternoon, Sheriff Cowan of Paisley would put forward the view that

the doctrine of predestination was a repulsive doctrine which kept back many who were attracted by the offer of universal salvation which was to be found in the Bible. It was ... the opinion of the laity of the Church that the time had now come for considering these matters.⁷⁵

Although this aggressive language shocked many in both the pro and anti-change camps, it is evident from the applause after his speech that this view was representative of a fair proportion of the General Assembly.

The argument that the Confession was not in harmony with the living faith of the Church would be used throughout the Declaratory Act debate.⁷⁶ In this first Assembly in which the Confession was debated at length, phrases referring to the living or present faith of the church were used in the motions of both A. Orrock Johnson⁷⁷ and A. B. Bruce.⁷⁸ The Church, it was alleged, simply did not hold to Westminster doctrines anymore; it was not the confession of her faith. Having received new light on a range of different questions, it was time to move on and declare afresh what the Church believed.⁷⁹

74. *Ibid*, p. 135.

75. *Ibid*, p. 150.

76. Of the twenty-one overtures requesting the General Assembly to alter the Church's subscription to her subordinate standard, six of them cited as a reason for change that it no longer represented 'the living faith' of the Church whereas nine cited that it was 'the feeling' of many in the Church that it was time to change.

77. *PDG AFC*, 1889, p. 147.

78. *Ibid*, p. 148.

79. Despite the confidence with which those who desired change argued for revision,

There were also external influences which held sway throughout the debates. Dr Adam reminded the Assembly that many other Churches had faced the same questions as the Free Church now faced, and had acted. He reminded the house that ‘There was hardly a Church, if there were one, holding to the Westminster Confession that had not found it necessary to a lesser or greater extent to qualify its adherence to the Confession.’⁸⁰ As a contemporary example of this he suggested that nobody ‘could read the explanatory statement of the U.P. Church without the very highest admiration.’⁸¹

The Free Church’s awareness of what other Churches were doing was an important factor.⁸² The United Presbyterian Church, the main subject of the Union Controversy of 1863-73, had altered her adherence to the Westminster Confession in 1879. Therefore, should the Free Church desire to re-open union negotiations, it was necessary that the two Churches have general agreement on their relation to the Confession.⁸³

A. Orrock Johnston of Glasgow brought another reason for change to the attention of the Assembly when he reminded them that ‘there were men outside the ministry of the Church who were eager to enter upon her ministry who felt themselves debarred from it.’⁸⁴ The assumption was that, if the Free Church was to grow and to continue to train ministers, something had to be done about the present confessional position. By adhering to a position which the laity and prospective ministerial candidates understood to be inconsistent with their own faith, the Church was, arguably, stifling its own growth.

The Thursday afternoon debate on the Church’s relationship to the Westminster Confession of Faith brought to the surface issues which had,

however, there seemed to be a general acceptance in the Assembly that a new Confession would not be the best way forward. Professor A. B. Bruce openly admitted that ‘the present was not a creed-making age.’ In the midst of the praise of the theological understanding of the modern Church, this was a stark admission. *Ibid*, p. 149.

80. *Ibid*, p. 139.

81. *Ibid*, p. 140.

82. P. Carnegie Simpson says that the Free Church, ‘being slow to move in the matter’, was ‘indeed taunted for not taking a step which no outsider questioned she might take.’ See P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 2, p. 120.

83. It is noteworthy that the 1889 Free Church General Assembly saw motions put forward to renew closer negotiations with the United Presbyterian Church in order to facilitate union sooner rather than later. See *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 125.

84. *Ibid*, p. 147.

arguably, been simmering in the Free Church for many years. Ministers, elders, and laymen had long had grievances with their confessional subscription and they were now getting the opportunity to do something about it. In putting forward their case, they used four main arguments.

First, it was argued that the methodology of the Confession was unsuitable. Because it was too detailed, it bound its subscribers to doctrines which many felt were unclear, unnecessary, and even unbiblical. Because the Westminster divines were overly scholastic and logical in their presentation, they had ordered their material according to logic rather than the biblical pattern. The younger ministers, represented by Thomas B. Kilpatrick of Aberdeen, used this reasoning to argue against confessionalism generally, stating that their loyalty was to Jesus Christ and not to any system of doctrine.

Secondly, it was argued that there was a general desire for change in the Church, represented by the twenty-one overtures sent to the General Assembly to that effect.⁸⁵ It was argued that it would be 'a rude slap in the face to many Presbyteries'⁸⁶ for the Assembly to ignore the question altogether. There were many in the Church who could not call the Confession the confession of their own faith and, on this basis, it was argued that for a Church to have a doctrinal standard which was 'out of step' with the understanding of its people was a paradox.

Thirdly, the antiquity of the Confession was put forward as a reason for the Church to reconsider its doctrinal position. Although the Confession was to be respected for what it was in the seventeenth century, the Free Church was now coming to the end of the nineteenth century and there were evident changes, not only in life and society, but in Church and theology too. This growing feeling was closely related to the argument that the Church received new light from God on his Word as time went on. It was believed that it was God's practice, in his providence, to reveal new things to his people and, therefore, for the Free Church of 1889 to hold to a Confession which was almost 250 years old was understood as a denial of this commonly held principle.

The fourth reason for change was that the Free Church was aware of what was going on outside of its own denomination. Other Churches,

85. A fact that seemed to be greatly neglected during the 1889 debate was that the General Assembly had also received twelve overtures which opposed change to the Church's subordinate standard; three from Synods and nine from Presbyteries. See Appendix 3.

86. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 143.

in Scotland and worldwide, had successfully altered their positions on the Confession without great difficulty⁸⁷ and this had offered greater liberty to people to join them and also to promote unity. For the Free Church, it was of great importance to be in line with the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland which had changed its position ten years previous and with which many desired to unite. The current confessional position also had repercussions for those ministers who wished to join them but could not because their consciences would not allow them to subscribe.

The fact that a subject, which did not seem to create enough interest for anybody to rise to move either of the two overtures put forward at the General Assembly of 1887, had now commanded the attention of twenty Presbyteries and one Synod cannot be a coincidence. It is likely that those who desired change had chosen their timing very carefully and had ensured that they said what needed to be said in order to ensure that the Church moved on this subject while the iron was hot. Although it cannot be proved that there was correspondence between Presbyteries, there is evidence that the main proponents of change had met in the house of Walter C. Smith in Edinburgh to discuss how best to proceed.⁸⁸ This element of collaboration was evident in the readiness of men to speak in favour of change on the day, along with the command which they seemed to have of their subject.

87. David S. Adam of Banchory-Ternan drew attention to moves recently made in the English Presbyterian Church, highly respected within the Free Church of Scotland, to renew its creed. *Ibid*, p. 144.

88. A. T. Innes chronicles this meeting – which included Dr Walter C. Smith, Professor A. B. Bruce, Professor Lindsay, Professor James Candlish, Dr Marcus Dods and Dr Ross Taylor – in his book *Chapters of Reminiscence*. It is also interesting to note that, according to Innes, the men at this meeting felt that it was best to move towards credal revision while Rainy was out of the country – he was in Australia in holiday and missed the 1889 Assembly. The reason for this was that none of the men were ‘really intimate with him’ and, therefore, felt that it would be ‘hopeless to go to him direct’ with their concerns and desires. If, however, they could get the General Assembly to move on the matter while he was away, they would ‘force his hand’ into doing something about it. See A. T. Innes, *Chapters of Reminiscence* (London, 1913), pp. 220-223. This is corroborated by Carnegie Simpson in his biography where he writes that ‘the chief restraining influence, discouraging the Free Church from entering on this matter, was ... Principal Rainy himself,’ (*Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 2, p. 119). In the light of the criticism that Rainy received concerning his subsequent influence over the passing of the Declaratory Act in 1892, it is interesting to note that he did not initiate it, neither did those who did initiate it think that they would receive his support in the matter unless he was forced into a corner.

4. The General Assemblies of 1890-91

The report of the newly formed Confession of Faith Committee, delivered on Friday 30th May 1890, was important for two reasons. First, the Committee summarised their reasons for considering a new formula of subscription into the following three statements:

1. Particular statements in the Confession thought by some to require explanation, qualification, or withdrawal.
2. In the opinion of some, the Confession should be brought into more perfect harmony with the living faith of the Church, by laying more emphasis on some doctrines, and less on others.
3. In the opinion of some the Confession, viewed as a test, is too long and complicated as a document.⁸⁹

Although this list is far briefer than what the speeches in the 1889 Assembly would have indicated, it is clear that most, if not all, of the grievances brought up the previous year could be categorised under these headings.

Secondly, the report was important in that it set out the way forward which the Committee expected to recommend at the next Assembly, i.e. a Declaratory Act.⁹⁰ Although there had been many opinions hitherto as to the best way to ease the consciences of those who had issues with the Confession, it was clear from here on in that the majority were in favour of a Declaratory Act, as indicated by the applause in the Assembly following the statement of Dr Adam, the joint-Convener, to that end.⁹¹

The 1890 Assembly, however, did not produce much by way of discussion. Dr Adam, the joint-convener of the Committee, said that the Committee's report was 'entirely of an interim and preliminary kind'⁹² and, for that reason, 'he hoped it would not lead ... to discussion of any length on that occasion.'⁹³ Dr Adam's hope was realised, the discussion barely taking up six pages in the record of the Proceedings and Debates at that year's Assembly.

89. *Reports to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, May 1890* (Edinburgh: The Assembly Arrangements Committee, 1890), No. XLII, p. 2 (hereinafter *RG AFC*, with year).

90. *PDG AFC, 1890*, pp. 196-197.

91. Interestingly, when the Declaratory Act was passed into the legislation of the Church in 1892, it was clear that many felt that it had not gone far enough.

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*

Discussion was resumed a year later on Tuesday 26th May 1891 when Principal Rainy submitted the report of the Committee on the Confession of Faith to the General Assembly. The findings of the Committee were that the Church should adopt a Declaratory Act, similar to that of the United Presbyterian Church, which would 'remove difficulties and scruples which have been felt by some in reference to the declaration of belief required from persons who receive licence or are admitted to office in this Church.'⁹⁴ In six articles, the Declaratory Act declared the Church's position on the love of God, the free offer of the gospel, the duty to believe, the nature of man, persecuting principles, and the provision of liberty on such points as did not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith.⁹⁵ The Church reserved the right to decide what that 'substance' included. Although there were deliberations over whether a statement on Holy Scripture should be included, the Committee decided that this was not necessary.⁹⁶

It is very evident from the proceedings of the Assembly of 1891 that Principal Rainy had the support of the majority of the House, even before the speeches were heard. The dearth of discussion on a subject which many people understood to be of the utmost importance is astounding. This is partly explained by Rainy's assertion that the Declaratory Act 'had not done very much'⁹⁷ and, therefore, was not worthy of too much of the Assembly's time. However, there is evidence that the lack of discussion is explained by the fact that people were generally happy with Rainy's motion and fully supported the change. The lack of interest among many as to any motion to the contrary was evident when, before Murdoch MacAskill of Dingwall – the leader of the conservatives – was half way through his speech in support of a counter-motion, Major Macleod of Dalkeith, referring to a large number of members leaving the hall, complained that he 'cannot hear hardly a word here with the noise of the people.'⁹⁸ This feeling of impatience was compounded by cries of 'vote' from the Assembly before anybody apart from the two movers and the two seconders had had a chance to speak.⁹⁹ It came as no surprise when Rainy's motion defeated that of MacAskill by a landslide of 428 to 66.

94. *PDG AFC, 1891*, pp. 75-76.

95. Appendix 2.

96. *RG AFC, 1891*, No. XXXIX, p. 2.

97. *PDG AFC, 1891*, p. 78.

98. *Ibid*, p. 86.

99. *Ibid*, p. 91.

Perhaps the confidence of the Assembly in the Committee's motion was bolstered by their confidence in its mover, Principal Rainy. Although the nineteenth-century Free Church did not have bishops, yet there was a tendency for unofficial leaders to emerge. This was especially evident in the figure of Thomas Chalmers and less so in Robert Candlish. However, it was never more apparent than in the figure of Robert Rainy. Kenneth R. Ross says that

in his own Church the Principal was loved and revered and followed in a manner almost unexampled in the history of Presbyterianism. His influence owed much to towering intellectual stature, perhaps more to the rare and deep spirituality to which all who knew him bore witness.¹⁰⁰

Rainy had an unparalleled ability to know the mind of the Church in a matter and then to negotiate the way forward in order to satisfy the majority and pacify the minority. This statesmanship was evident during the impassioned William Robertson Smith controversy ten years previous and it would be just as marked in the Declaratory Act controversy. It is because of Rainy's influential leadership and ability to sway his followers that his speeches are especially important in understanding how the Free Church came to alter its subscription to the Westminster Confession.

Having been absent from the heated General Assembly of 1889, Rainy had the advantage of moving the recommendation of the Committee without having to enter fully into the debates which concerned the Confession itself. He took the view that the General Assembly had decided that they wanted to modify their doctrinal position and he was simply fulfilling the desire of that Assembly. Rainy's outlook was that he 'did not mean to occupy the time of the Assembly by general remarks on the relation of Churches to their Confessions.'¹⁰¹ For that reason, he spent most of his time speaking on the practical issues which faced the Committee and the Assembly with regard to the proposed Act. When Rainy did speak about his views on confessional subscription, he was only repeating what had been said in previous years; he did not bring any new arguments into the discussion. This repetition would become a theme throughout the campaign, making it very evident that the real battle was fought during the initial discussions in 1889.

Rainy's own view concerning the Church's relationship to its doctrinal standard, however, was quite clear when he spoke of

100. K. R. Ross, 'Rainy, Robert', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p. 690.

101. *Ibid*, p. 77.

the importance of their not allowing Confessions to become bonds of slavery; their not allowing Confessions to occupy the place that belonged to the Word of God alone; their not allowing themselves to be led to forget the respect that was due to the reasonable liberty of judgment to those who were united to them in the service of the same Lord.¹⁰²

In this short excerpt of his speech, Rainy made three important points. First, it was argued that the Church was not to be bound slavishly to her Confession but had a right and duty to ensure that it reflected the Church's living faith. Robert Howie,¹⁰³ being Rainy's seconder, made the same argument when he declared that 'a living Church should have opportunities of anew declaring her present convictions' as creeds are liable to become 'very effete' if they are not regularly compared and reviewed in light of the present understanding of the Church.¹⁰⁴

Secondly, Rainy reminded the people that their Confession was subordinate to Scripture. This was a position which the most steadfast constitutionalist would not have denied. However, by stating it in this context, Rainy was implying that, because the Church's allegiance was to Scripture rather than to the Confession, it was reasonable for her to make changes to her Confession in order to bring it more into line with Scripture.

Thirdly, Rainy reminded people of the respect they must give, and the liberty that they must allow, to those within and without their Church who desired to serve the same Lord and yet were unable to do so in the Free Church because of the confessional yoke which was put upon them. With allusions to the twentieth chapter of the Confession which speaks of liberty of conscience, Rainy sought to persuade the Assembly of the profitability of having a wider door which would allow those of slightly different theological and practical persuasions to work with them. Whereas doctrines such as the Trinity were non-negotiable, the identity of the Antichrist was not so important. This argumentation was a continuation of what Principal Brown had identified two years previously; that it was not right that office-bearers should have to agree with the Westminster divines on every minute point of theology. As long as their differences did

102. Ibid, p. 77.

103. Robert Howie was the minister of St Mary's Free Church in Govan and, for a time, was the Convener of the Assembly's Home Mission Committee.

104. Ibid, p. 84.

not enter into the substance of the faith then it was right that the Church should tolerate them.

Principal Rainy's biographer described him as 'the maker of the Union' of 1900.¹⁰⁵ It is, therefore, unsurprising that his speech should make reference to the movements of other Churches with regards to confessional subscription. In justifying the method of adopting a Declaratory Act as being most suitable for the purposes of the Free Church, he made reference to the similar Act which had been adopted by the United Presbyterian Church twelve years previously.¹⁰⁶ With great skill and tact, Rainy assured the Assembly that, far from being revolutionaries, the Free Church had taken longer to deliberate over this subject than the majority of other Churches had.¹⁰⁷ They were not trying to be unique, neither were they trying to lead the way in theological development; they had simply considered the matter and, to their credit, they had come to the same conclusion as many of their contemporaries. This was surely an evidence that they were on safe ground and were not moving into unknown territory. It is not unlikely that this shrewd argumentation would have persuaded many of those who were unsure of how to vote.

In explaining the Declaratory Act, Principal Rainy made statements which showed that he did not feel that the current Confession was as clear as was desirable. When speaking of the interface between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the gospel, he argued that, although it was clear that divine sovereignty in salvation did not abrogate human responsibility, it was often understood that way by those who read the Confession.¹⁰⁸ For that reason, it was felt necessary to define

105. P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 2, p. 255.

106. Appendix 1.

107. Rainy argued that the Free Church 'were one of the last, though not absolutely the last, of the Presbyterian Churches to move in this direction, and certainly they had not outrun any of those who had gone before them. They had not pretended to anything brilliant or original. They could not claim credit for that; and if they had any merit at all, it was that they had been led to a conclusion which was fortified by the adherence of those other Churches to which he had referred' (*PDG AFC*, 1891, p. 79).

108. Rainy on the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility: 'However capable they were of being explained and understood by those who were familiar with the discussions at the time when the Confession originated, [they] did often fall with a painful significance on the ears of the readers ... and it was very desirable that there should be an authoritative statement that was fitted to guard against misunderstanding of these expressions,' (*Ibid*).

the Confession's teaching on the subject in order to make it absolutely clear to those who struggled with it. Howie spoke more definitely on this subject when he argued that, 'in an age of mission,'¹⁰⁹ it was imperative that the Church have a clear, uncompromising declaration of the free offer of the gospel and the obligations that that placed on Church and people alike. In the minds of Rainy, Howie, and their followers, the Confession was simply not clear enough on this subject for the modern missionary Church.

Similarly, although Rainy fully acquiesced in the Confession's position on 'The Fall of Man, Sin, and the Punishment thereof',¹¹⁰ yet he felt that 'the doctrine of the total corruption and depravity of human nature as fallen was very strongly stated,'¹¹¹ so much so that, in Rainy's view, it did not take into account the 'surviving tokens of God's goodness' in man.¹¹² Again, it is evident that Rainy was not content with the Confession's presentation of one of the key doctrines of the Bible.

Howie argued that the Committee's desire was to 'emphasise certain important Bible truths ... to give a little more proportion to the teaching of the Word of God.'¹¹³ The Confession did not, with suitable perspicuity for the current generation, express the doctrines which were so necessary to be understood in order to further the work of the Church. In the seventeenth century, the Westminster divines had emphasised the aspects of doctrine which were important to emphasise at that time. However, although the doctrines themselves had not changed in the previous 250 years, these doctrines were expressed disproportionately for the needs and circumstances of the late nineteenth-century Church. For that reason, a Declaratory Act was necessary.

109. Howie argued that the Church needed to 'give a clear utterance as to her convictions about the duty of sending the gospel to every creature, and he believed that the statements they had made in the proposed Declaratory Act ... only made more prominent in an age of missions what needed to be stated, and could be stated truthfully on the authority of the Word of God,' (Ibid, p. 85).

110. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 6.

111. *PDG AFC, 1891*, p. 80.

112. Interestingly, in backing up this view, Rainy referred the Assembly to the preaching of the venerable Thomas Chalmers who would often impress upon his hearers the gospel responsibility which fell upon men who were 'honourable, and virtuous, and praiseworthy' (Ibid, p. 81).

113. Ibid, p. 84.

5. The General Assembly of 1892

On Thursday 16th May 1892, Principal Rainy moved that the Free Church adopt a Declaratory Act.¹¹⁴ Having been sent down to Presbyteries through the Barrier Act at the previous Assembly, the proposed Declaratory Act was approved by fifty-four Presbyteries and disapproved by twenty-three.¹¹⁵ Rainy was now moving that, as Presbyteries had voted in favour of the adoption of this Act, the Assembly should pass it into legislation in the Church. Murdoch MacAskill¹¹⁶ moved that the Assembly pass from adopting the Act altogether whereas John McEwan¹¹⁷ moved that the Act be sent to Presbyteries again with a view to making it more acceptable to the whole Church. McEwan's motion defeated MacAskill's by 220 to 104 and then Rainy's motion defeated McEwan's by 346 to 195, therefore passing the Declaratory Act into the legislation of the Free Church.

Most of the speeches in the 1892 Assembly dealt with the intricacies of the Declaratory Act itself, as well as the practicalities of adopting it into the Church. As well as that, there was lengthy discussion on the counter-motions and the topic of Scripture, neither of which are immediately relevant as part of this study. However, some of the speeches shed extra light on the arguments that were put forward by those who favoured change.

While defending his motion, Principal Rainy's first argument was that the times in which the Church was living demanded that it should not stand still. He contended that

there is no doubt that we are passing through times which, to a certain extent, exercise the wisdom and thoughtfulness of the Churches. There is no doubt that in some respects the present is a time of transition – of lively movement in the mental world ... and no Church that is a living Church – that seeks to deal in a living way with the men and the thought of its

114. Rainy's motion was worded thus: 'The General Assembly, finding that the overture of a Declaratory Act anent the Confession of Faith has obtained the requisite approbation from the Presbyteries of the Church, pass the same as a Declaratory Act, with consent of Presbyteries,' (*PDG AFC, 1892*, p. 147).

115. *Ibid*, p. 152.

116. Murdoch MacAskill was Dr John Kennedy's successor as the minister of Dingwall Free Church. Although he was leader of the conservative element of the Church at this time, he did not join the Free Presbyterians in their stance in 1893 and neither did he remain outside the Union in 1900.

117. John McEwan was the minister in Knox's Church in Edinburgh and was the convener of the Education Committee of the Free Church for a number of years.

time can escape from a certain participation in the common conditions of human thought as they exist in our time.¹¹⁸

As in previous years, the justification for the Church to alter her relationship to her doctrinal standards was based on the fact that the Church was ‘a living Church.’ Since the Disruption of 1843 the Scottish Churches had discovered ‘Higher Criticism’ and were coming to terms with what that meant for the traditional faith of the Kirk, especially with regards to her relationship with Scripture. It is notable that, only two days before the motion to review the Church’s relationship to the Confession was put forward in 1889, Marcus Dods, a known proponent of Higher Critical views, was voted to succeed the late Professor George Smeaton as the Professor of New Testament Exegesis at New College.¹¹⁹ The fact that the majority of the Assembly, having heard serious doctrinal allegations made against Dods,¹²⁰ had yet chosen him to be the most suitable candidate for this position gives an insight into the way in which its commissioners viewed the Church’s relationship with Scripture and, presumably, also with her Confession.¹²¹ Many feared that ‘the new Biblical Criticism must mean the end of the old Calvinism.’¹²²

It is also evident that after Charles Darwin’s work, *On the Origin of Species*, was published in 1859, the teaching of Evolution took on a more popularised and accessible form which caused the Church, as never before, to scrutinise her beliefs and pre-conceptions concerning the natural world. The late nineteenth century also experienced a changing society, the barriers between the classes being broken down in a way in which they had not been for generations. Without a doubt, Rainy’s description of the present as ‘a time of transition’ was accurate.

Rainy’s argument was that the Church could not afford to be silent during a time in which its people’s traditional perceptions were changing and questions were emerging on time-honoured teachings. In order for the

118. Ibid, p. 147.

119. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 89.

120. Ibid, pp. 73-89.

121. It is notable that ‘Higher Critical’ scholarship entered Scotland, not initially through the Church of Scotland or the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, but through the Free Church of Scotland. Within the Free Church’s colleges this was most apparent in the teachings of A. B. Davidson, W. Robertson Smith, A. B. Bruce, Marcus Dods, and G. A. Smith.

122. Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900*, pp. 75-76.

Church to be able to speak effectively to the present generation, she had to review her teachings and, therefore, her doctrinal statement.

During his speech the previous year, Rainy had argued that the door had to be widened in order to tolerate office-bearers who had different views on the non-essentials. In 1892 he developed this argument by stating that

a sense steals into the minds of men of the necessity, while endeavouring to maintain fidelity to the truth, of exercising a certain degree of mutual toleration and forbearance, within limits doubtless, but within wider limits than at a previous stage might have been thought to be necessary ... believing that we are labouring for the same end, under the same master, and with the same fundamental convictions.¹²³

Although there was a time when the Church could afford to require all of her office-bearers to adhere to the whole doctrine of the Confession, that time, according to Rainy, had now passed. The doctrinal views held within the Scottish Churches, especially on secondary issues, were wider than they had ever been. If the Church was going to have as powerful an influence on society as she had done in former generations, it was necessary that she widen her doors to allow men into her communion who were of the same mind on the fundamental doctrines, even if they differed on secondary issues. By easing people's consciences as to their subscription to the Confession, the Church would be 'winning a great many men – men who are really at one with us in heart – who might otherwise have been in danger of being thrown into a relation of antagonism to our Confession and to all confessions.'¹²⁴ For the Church to deprive such men of office was understood to be unreasonable in a day which cried out for unity.

Rainy claimed that the proposed Declaratory Act would achieve this desired unity by leaving 'every one free to interpret the Confession in his own fashion, so long as he does not come into collision with the very terms of the Confession itself.'¹²⁵ In taking this stance, however, Rainy laid himself open to the charge that he had made unity his priority to the detriment of doctrinal truth. With an eye to the union of 1900, and perhaps even to the distant union of 1929, this was perhaps inevitable. However, it is clear that what was being undermined was the traditional role of the Confession itself as the new legislation meant that the application of its

123. *PDG AFC, 1892*, p. 147.

124. *Ibid*, p. 148.

125. *Ibid*, p. 153.

doctrines was left to one's own conscience. Kenneth R. Ross remarks that Rainy

considered the Declaratory Act of 1892 to be a minor confessional adjustment when, in fact, it marked the tidal change as the FC moved from dogmatic Calvinism to liberal Evangelicalism. Characteristically, the Act appeared conservative, but was devised to give a long rope to those who were straying from Reformed Theology.¹²⁶

Ross has pin-pointed the dramatic theological change in the Free Church as having happened when the Declaratory Act was passed. Although it is evident that many of both the Free Church's clergy and laity had begun to distance themselves from a dogmatic Calvinism before now, it is difficult to argue that the passing of this legislation did not seal the deal. It is noteworthy that it was a desire for greater unity with believers with different views which brought this change about.¹²⁷

In arguing that it was the Church's right and duty to review her Confession in light of her current understanding of the Scriptures, Rainy contended that it was necessary to make plain that the Church 'occupies a living relation to the documents on which it rests, and whose authority it professes to maintain – showing that it has a present mind as to the construction which it sees it its duty to put on its Confession.'¹²⁸ A Church with a living faith, it was argued, must have the ability to review her Confession in order to ensure that it was not just a historical document with limited present function but a document which exemplified the current thinking of the Church on doctrine. Rainy argued that it was only by ensuring that this current thinking was known and put into practice that the Church could avoid her Confession becoming 'a mere tradition of the past' and could make sure that it continued to be 'a duty and obligation connected with the present.'¹²⁹

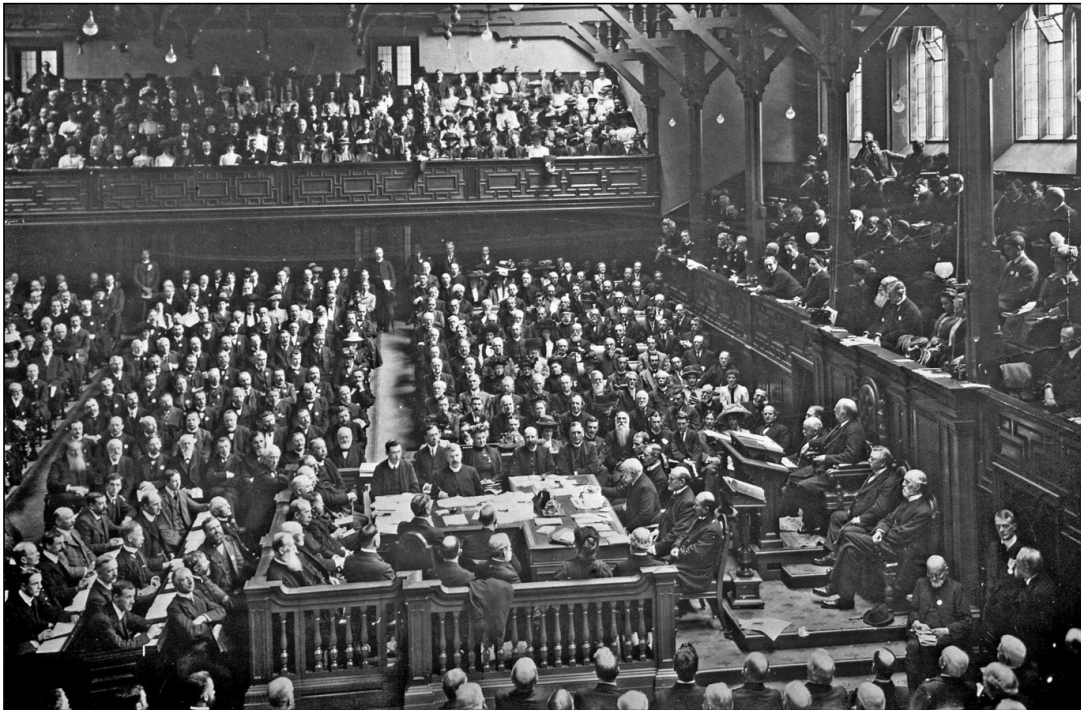
Over the course of the four Assemblies, the arguments promulgated at the initial debate of 1889 had gained substance and momentum. The result was that, three years after Principal David Brown's first motion

126. K. R. Ross, 'Rainy, Robert', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p. 690.

127. Apart from a few short criticisms of the Confession's language in 1891, there is no real evidence that Rainy did not whole-heartedly subscribe to confession doctrine himself. It seems that it was his desire to ease the consciences of others, with a view to the Union of 1900, which was his main motivation for supporting a Declaratory Act.

128. *PDG AFC, 1892*, p. 148.

129. *Ibid.*



The World Missionary Conference meeting in the General Assembly Hall, New College, in 1910.

in 1889, the Declaratory Act had gained acceptance in the Free Church General Assembly and was passed into its legislation.¹³⁰ Although there was a small minority within the Assembly who fought unwaveringly against this adoption of this Act, yet the large majority of the Assembly fully supported it.

6. Conclusion

Although a large majority of the Assembly concurred in the adoption of the Declaratory Act, it is evident that there was a palpable disappointment and anger in many parts of the Church.¹³¹ There is no doubt that a sizeable proportion of the Church understood the Declaratory Act controversy to be of great importance and, conceivably, of great danger to the Church.¹³²

130. See Appendix 4 for a timeline from 1889-92.

131. At the General Assembly of 1892, Kenneth Macdonald of Applecross said that ‘the Declaratory Act has convulsed the Church from one end to the other. Respected fathers and brethren have been thrown into great alarm. Many of our members tremble as if the Ark of God were in danger of falling into the hands of the Philistines’ (Ibid., p. 170). It is interesting that this was the same language used by Dr James Begg twelve years earlier during the Robertson Smith Controversy.

132. Mr Campbell, an elder in Greenock, rose to remind the 1892 General Assembly that ‘they had not had such an important matter before them since the Disruption,’ (Ibid.).

It was this dissension, especially evident in the Highlands, which caused Murdoch MacAskill to marvel that ‘Dr Rainy had allowed all this misery to fall upon the Church.’¹³³

The opposition to the Declaratory Act had been led, mainly, by Murdoch MacAskill and William Balfour.¹³⁴ Although not arguing for the infallibility of the Confession – as is evident from the 1889 overtures against change,¹³⁵ they did argue for its sufficiency as a theological standard, believing that it truly stated the doctrines of the Bible. The rigidity and conservative nature of the Confession was particularly precious to the conservatives in days when such valued doctrines as the inerrancy and authority of Scripture and the nature and extent of the atonement were openly questioned. It was the attacks on these doctrines which led the conservative, and mostly Highland, minority to cling more firmly than ever to the whole substance of the Confession. However, as well as arguing for the sufficiency of the Confession itself, the conservatives believed that those who sought to implement any change in the Church’s relationship to it were in breach of their ordination vows and therefore liable to be censured.¹³⁶

It is also evident that the conservatives believed that the introduction of a Declaratory Act would destroy the peace of the Church and end up in schism.¹³⁷ This fear was realised when, in 1893, two ministers followed by a handful of students and around twenty thousand, mostly Highland based, members and adherents left the Free Church and formed what would come

133. Ibid., p. 162.

134. Ian Hamilton says that ‘although Balfour’s tone was generally calm, that could not have been said of MacAskill who had the “ability to make enemies with his every utterance”’ Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, p. 196.

135. Appendix 3.

136. Each minister had answered the following question in the affirmative at his ordination in order to gain entry into office in the Church: ‘Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith, approved by former General Assemblies of this Church, to be founded upon the Word of God; and do you acknowledge the same as the confession of your faith; and will you firmly and constantly adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power assert, maintain, and defend the same, and the purity of worship as presently practised in this Church?’ (*Subordinate Standards and Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland*, p. 374).

137. It is notable that nine out of the twelve overtures against change cited the peace of the Church as a reason for the Assembly not to alter the Church’s confessional subscription. See Appendix 3.

to be known as the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.¹³⁸ The majority of Highlanders remained in the Free Church temporarily but were never content with the Church's new relation to the Confession until, having refused to join the Union in 1900, they revoked the Declaratory Act in 1905.

Why, then, did the Free Church allow this controversy to happen? What were their main reasons for pursuing such a course when it was evident from the beginning that it would cause division? From the speeches given in the General Assemblies of the Free Church between the years of 1889 and 1892, there were five clear, recurring arguments put forward by the supporters of confessional revision.

First, it was argued that the form of the Confession was unsuitable in that it was too long and too detailed for the Church to require all her office-bearers to subscribe to it without qualification. Furthermore, it was argued that it was too scholastic in its character, taking the logical method of setting down truth as opposed to the 'biblical' method. The Confession's teaching on things like the Antichrist and the salvation of infants was simply understood to be overly-prescriptive and these, therefore, should be left to people's personal consciences. The Church, it was argued, had an obligation to make it easier for people to take office who might disagree with her on minor issues while agreeing on the major issues. Full subscription to the Confession was considered a barrier to the realisation of this goal.

Secondly, it was argued that the Westminster Confession no longer represented the 'living faith' of the Church. As a result, it was the mind of a sizeable proportion of the Church – represented by the twenty-one overtures in 1889 and the majority of commissioners' votes throughout the controversy – to alter the Church's relationship with her Confession. In order for the Confession to be brought into line with the Church's 'living faith', it was necessary that more emphasis be laid on some doctrines, and less on others so as more to fully represent how the Church understood the truth.

Evidently the Church's view on certain doctrines was changing. Speaking of this period of Scottish Church history Drummond and Bulloch declared that 'the reign of Calvinism had ended.'¹³⁹ William Balfour was evidently aware of this when, in 1889, he said that 'the real thing that

138. John Macleod speculates that 'if several of the Highland eminences had "come out" in 1893 – or even one, like Gustavus Aird in Creich or John Noble in Lairg – there would have been a Free Presbyterian landslide' (John Macleod, *Banner in the West*, p. 205) Although this cannot be proved, it is an interesting, and perhaps likely, conjecture.

139. Drummond, and Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900*, p. 216.

lay at the root of this agitation was ... hostility to the Calvinism of the Confession.¹⁴⁰ His accusation was given credence when Sheriff Cowan provocatively called predestination 'a repulsive doctrine',¹⁴¹ and suggested that he expressed the mind of many who had now come to understand the salvific love of God in a more general way, expressed towards all of mankind in the gospel. Although the Declaratory Act itself did not technically make any such claims, yet it gave credibility to this understanding by emphasising the love of God in the gospel at the expense of his sovereignty. The 'New Evangelists' had persuaded the laity, and increasingly the office-bearers, of the Church south of the Highlands that their Confession did not suitably emphasise the love of God in the gospel and was, therefore, a barrier to people coming to faith.

Another doctrine which was questioned was the doctrine of man, Rainy suggesting that the Confession was overly negative in its portrayal. While the rest of the modern world was developing new ideas concerning the evolution and continual development of man, prompted by Darwin's evolutionary theories, the Confession maintained an uncompromising stance on human depravity. This prompted the Confession of Faith Committee to state in their Declaratory Act that, although they continued to hold to the Confession's position of the corruption of man, yet there 'remain tokens of his greatness as created in the image of God.'¹⁴² The changing mind of the nation in the context in which the Free Church was ministering at the end of the nineteenth century was being reflected in the Church.

Fourthly, those who could better articulate their change in position argued that it was only natural that the Church should receive new light on the truth which would enable her, with greater theological clarity, to understand and systematise the Scriptures. After all, it was generally believed that the Lord, in his providence, revealed new elements and nuances of his truth to his Church through the ages. For that reason, however commendable the Westminster Confession was as a theological document in its own day, it was considered nonsensical for a Church which had enjoyed 250 years of theological progression to give unqualified adherence to it.

Finally, it is also evident that the desire for union with other churches, the United Presbyterian Church being the most obvious example, was a major factor in the adoption of the Declaratory Act. The United

140. *PDG AFC, 1889*, p. 152.

141. *Ibid*, p. 150.

142. Appendix 1, Article 4.

Presbyterian Church had adopted a similar act in 1879 and, should the Free Church not have acted similarly, it would have rendered the Union of 1900 impossible.¹⁴³ The fact that Principal Rainy was the architect of both the Declaratory Act and the Union was not without significance as he successfully led the Church to a position in which union, in the eyes of many, was but a necessary consequence.

APPENDIX 1

DECLARATORY ACT OF THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND (1879)

Whereas the formula in which the Subordinate Standards of this Church are accepted requires assent to them as exhibition of the sense in which the Scriptures are understood: Whereas these Standards, being of human composition, are necessarily imperfect, and the Church has already allowed exception to be taken to their teaching or supposed teaching on one important subject: And whereas there are other subjects in regard to which it has been found desirable to set forth more fully and clearly the view which the Synod takes of the teaching of the Holy Scripture:

Therefore the Synod hereby declares as follows:

1. That in regard to the doctrine of redemption as taught in the Standards, and in consistency therewith, the love of God to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the free offer of salvation to men without distinction on the ground of Christ's perfect sacrifice, are matters which have been and continue to be regarded by this Church as vital in the system of Gospel truth, and to which due prominence ought ever to be given.
2. That the doctrine of the divine decrees, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, is held in connection and harmony with the truth that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, and that He has provided a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and offered to all in the Gospel; and also with the responsibility of every man for his dealing with the free and unrestricted offer of eternal life.

143. Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, p. 197.

3. That the doctrine of man's total depravity, and of his loss of 'all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation', is not held as implying such a condition of man's nature as would affect his responsibility under the law of God and the Gospel of Christ, or that he does not experience the strivings and restraining influences of the Spirit of God, or that he cannot perform actions in any sense good; although actions which do not spring from a renewed heart are not spiritually good or holy – such as accompany salvation.
4. That while none are saved except through the mediation of Christ, and by the grace of His Holy Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how it pleaseth Him; while the duty of sending the Gospel to the heathen, who are sunk in ignorance, sin, and misery, is clear and imperative; and while the outward and ordinary means of salvation for those capable of being called by the Word are the ordinances of the Gospel: in accepting the Standards, it is not required to be held that any who die in infancy are lost, or that God may not extend His grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means, as it may seem good in His sight.
5. That in regard to the doctrine of the Civil Magistrate, and his authority and duty in the spheres of religion, as taught in the Standards, this Church holds that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, and 'Head over all things to the Church which is His body;' disapproves of all compulsory or persecuting and intolerant principles in religion; and declares, as hitherto, that she does not require approval of anything in her Standards that teaches, or may be supposed to teach, such principles.
6. That Christ has laid it as a permanent and universal obligation upon His Church, at once to maintain her own ordinances, and to 'preach the Gospel to every creature;' and has ordained that His people provide by their free-will offerings for the fulfilment of this obligation.
7. That, in accordance with the practice hitherto observed in this Church, liberty of opinion is allowed on such points in the Standards, not entering into the substance of the faith, as the interpretation of the 'six days' in the Mosaic account of the creation: the Church guarding against the abuse of this liberty to the injury of its unity and peace.

APPENDIX 2

DECLARATORY ACT OF THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND (1892)

Whereas it is expedient to remove difficulties and scruples which have been felt by some in reference to the declaration of belief required from persons who receive licence or are admitted to office in this Church, the General Assembly, with consent of Presbyteries, declare as follows:

1. That, in holding and teaching, according to the Confession, the Divine purpose of grace towards those who are saved, and the execution of that purpose in time, this Church most earnestly proclaims, as standing in the forefront of the revelation of Grace, the love of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to sinners of mankind, manifested especially in the Father's gift of the Son to be the Saviour of the world, in the coming of the Son to offer Himself a propitiation for sin, and in the striving of the Holy Spirit with men to bring them to repentance.
2. That this Church also holds that all who hear the Gospel are warranted and required to believe to the saving of their souls; and that in the case of such as do not believe, but perish in their sins, the issue is due to their own rejection of the Gospel call. That this Church does not teach, and does not regard the Confession as teaching, the foreordination of men to death irrespective of their own sin.
3. That it is the duty of those who believe, and one end of their calling by God, to make known the Gospel to all men everywhere for the obedience of faith. And that while the Gospel is the ordinary means of salvation for those to whom it is made known, yet it does not follow, nor is the Confession to be held as teaching, that any who die in infancy are lost, or that God may not extend His mercy, for Christ's sake, and by His Holy Spirit, to those who are beyond the reach of these means, as it may seem good to Him, according to the riches of His grace.
4. That, in holding and teaching, according to the Confession of Faith, the corruption of man's whole nature as fallen, this Church also maintains that there remain tokens of his greatness as created in the image of God; that he possesses a knowledge

of God and of duty; that he is responsible for compliance with the moral law and with the Gospel; and that, although unable without the aid of the Holy Spirit to return to God, he is yet capable of affections and actions which in themselves are virtuous and praiseworthy.

5. That this Church disclaims intolerant or persecuting principles, and does not consider her office-bearers, in subscribing the Confession, committed to any principles inconsistent with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment.
6. That while diversity of opinion is recognised in this Church on such points in the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith therein set forth, the Church retains full authority to determine, in any case which may arise, what points fall within this description, and thus to guard against any abuse of this liberty to the detriment of sound doctrine, or to the injury of her unity and peace.

APPENDIX 3

ANALYSIS OF THE OVERTURES TO THE 1889 GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND REASONS CITED FOR OR AGAINST CHANGE

Overtures in Alphabetical Order

Synods

Fife – living faith of Church

Glenelg – against; ordination vows

Moray – against; principal part of subordinate standards

Sutherland and Caithness – against; excellence of Confession, ordination vows, peace

Presbyteries

Aberdeen – different stress required on truth, other Churches, feeling of Church

Abertaff – against; endless change

Alford – theological terminology (laity), Divine Fatherhood

- Auchterarder – questions on Confession, other Churches
- Breadalbane – against; peace
- Brechin – duty to revise, progress of biblical study (love, free offer, Spirit), feeling of Church
- Chanonry – against; changes not specified, unsettlement in doctrine, peace
- Cupar – living faith, other Churches, difficulties with laity
- Dalkeith – duty to revise, un-essentials in Confession, progress of Biblical study
- Dornoch – against; excellence of Confession, ordination vows, peace, Church's testimony
- Dumfries – progress of biblical study, 250 years old, feeling of Church
- Dundee – doubts as to suitability/sufficiency, danger of doubts being expressed without action from the Church
- Edinburgh – living faith, duty to revise, prevents men accepting office
- Ellon – difficult stress required on truth, other churches, FC DA 1846, feeling of Church
- Garioch – subordinate standard subject to change, 250 years old, accuracy
- Glasgow – duty to revise, feeling of Church, suitability
- Greenock – right to revise, feeling of Church, prevents men accepting office
- Inverness – against; constitution, ordination vows, peace, common consent
- Irvine – duty to revise, living faith, feeling of Church
- Islay – against; no good reason provided, peace
- Kincardine O'Neil – duty to revise, feeling of the Church
- Kirkcaldy – feeling of Church, 250 years old, other Churches
- Kirkcudbright – feeling of Church, living faith
- Linlithgow – feeling of Church, ease existing difficulties
- Lochcarron – against; ordination vows, peace
- St Andrews – consciences of people
- Skye – against; unchanging truth, ordination vows, current restlessness of doctrine, no good reason provided, peace
- Turriff – living faith, different stress required on truth
- Uist – against; acknowledged subordinate standard, no unscriptural doctrine in past, peace

Overtures Divided by For and Against Change

In Favour of Change (21)

- Synod of Fife – feeling of the Church, living faith (C,T&F)
- Aberdeen – different stress required on truth, other Churches, feeling of Church (G)
- Alford – theological terminology (laity), Divine Fatherhood (G)
- Auchterarder – questions on Confession, other Churches (C,T&F)
- Brechin – duty to revise, progress of Biblical study (love, free offer, Spirit), feeling of Church (G)
- Cupar – living faith, other Churches, difficulties with laity (C,T&F)
- Dalkeith – duty to revise, un-essentials in Confession, progress of biblical study (L)
- Dumfries – progress of biblical study, 250 years old, feeling of Church (D&G)
- Dundee – doubts as to suitability/sufficiency, danger of doubts being expressed without action from the Church (C,T&F)
- Edinburgh – living faith, duty to revise, prevents men accepting office (L)
- Ellon – difficult stress required on truth, other Churches, FC DA 1846, feeling of Church (G)
- Garioch – subordinate standard subject to change, 250 years old, accuracy (G)
- Glasgow – duty to revise, feeling of Church, suitability (G,S,A&A)
- Greenock – duty to revise, feeling of Church, prevents men accepting office (G,S,A&A)
- Irvine – duty to revise, living faith, feeling of Church (G,S,A&A)
- Kincardine O’Neil – duty to revise, feeling of the Church (G)
- Kirkcaldy – feeling of Church, 250 years old, other Churches (C,T&F)
- Kirkcudbright – feeling of Church, living faith (D&G)
- Linlithgow – feeling of Church, ease existing difficulties (L)
- St Andrews – consciences of people (C,T&F)
- Turriff – living faith, different stress required on truth (G)

Against Change (12)

Synod of Glenelg – against; ordination vows (H&I)

Synod of Moray – against; principal part of subordinate standards (H&I)

Synod of Sutherland and Caithness – against; excellence of Confession, ordination vows, peace (H&I)

Abertaff – against; endless change (H&I)

Breadalbane – against; peace (C,T&F)

Chanonry – against; changes not specified, unsettlement in doctrine, peace (H&I)

Dornoch – against; excellence of Confession, ordination vows, peace, Church's testimony (H&I)

Inverness – against; constitution, ordination vows, peace, common consent (H&I)

Islay – against; no good reason, peace (G,S,A&A)

Lochcarron – against; ordination vows, peace (H&I)

Skye – against; unchanging truth, ordination vows, current restlessness of doctrine, no reason, peace (H&I)

Uist – against; acknowledged subordinate standard, no unscriptural doctrine in past, peace (H&I)

(C,T&F) – Central

(D&G) – Dumfries & Galloway

(G,S,A&A) – Glasgow, Strathclyde, Ayrshire & Argyll

(G) – Grampian

(H&I) – Highlands & Islands

(L) – The Lothians

Reasons Cited in Overtures (For Change)

Feeling of Church – Synod of Fife, Aberdeen, Dumfries, Ellon, Glasgow, Greenock, Irvine, Kincardine O'Neil, Kirkcaldy, Kirkcudbright, Linlithgow (11)

Right/Duty to Revise – Brechin, Dalkeith, Edinburgh, Garioch, Glasgow, Greenock, Irvine, Kincardine O'Neil (8)

Living Faith – Synod of Fife, Cupar, Edinburgh, Irvine, Kirkcudbright, Turriff (6)

Accuracy/Terminology (Laity: questions/scruples) – Alford,
Auchterarder, Cupar, Garioch, Linlithgow, St Andrews (6)

Other Churches – Aberdeen, Auchterarder, Cupar, Ellon, Kirkcaldy (5)

Different Stress Required – Aberdeen, Ellon, Turriff (3)

Progress of Biblical Study – Brechin, Dalkeith, Dumfries (3)

Antiquity – Dumfries, Garioch, Kirkcaldy (3)

Suitability/Sufficiency – Dundee, Glasgow (2)

Prevents Men Accepting Office – Edinburgh, Greenock (2)

Divine Fatherhood – Alford (1)

Non-Essentials Contained – Dalkeith (1)

Danger of Not Dealing with Doubts – Dundee (1)

Free Church Declaratory Act 1846 – Ellon (1)

Reason Cited for Change (by Region)

(C,T&F) – Central, Tayside & Fife

Living Faith – 2

Other Churches – 3

Feeling of the Church – 2

Accuracy/Terminology (Laity: questions/scruples) – 3

Antiquity – 1

Suitability/Sufficiency – 1

Danger of Not Dealing with Doubts - 1

(D&G) – Dumfries & Galloway

Living Faith – 1

Feeling of the Church – 2

Progress of Biblical Study – 1

Antiquity - 1

(G,S,A&A) – Glasgow, Strathclyde, Ayrshire & Argyll

Living Faith – 1

Feeling of the Church – 3

Right/Duty to Revise – 3

Suitability/Sufficiency – 1

Prevents Men Accepting Office – 1

(G) – Grampian

Living Faith – 1

Different Stress Required – 3

Other Churches – 2

Feeling of the Church – 3

Divine Fatherhood - 1

Accuracy/Terminology (Laity: questions/scruples) – 2

Right/Duty to Revise – 3

Progress of Biblical Study – 1

Antiquity – 1

Free Church Declaratory Act 1846 - 1

(L) – The Lothians

Living Faith – 1

Feeling of the Church – 1

Right/Duty to Revise – 2

Progress of Biblical Study – 1

Non-Essentials Contained – 1

Prevents Men Accepting Office - 1

Reasons Cited in Overtures (Against Change)

Breach of Ordination Vows – Synod of Glenelg, Synod of Sutherland & Caithness, Dornoch, Inverness, Lochcarron, Skye (6)

Subordinate Standard/Constitutional – Synod of Moray, Inverness, Uist (3)

Excellence of Confession – Synod of Sutherland & Caithness, Dornoch (2)

Peace – Synod of Glenelg, Synod of Sutherland & Caithness, Breadalbane, Chanonry, Dornoch, Inverness, Islay, Lochcarron, Skye, Uist (10)

Endless Change – Abertaff (1)

Level of Change Unspecified – Chanonry (1)

Current Unsettlement in Doctrine – Chanonry, Skye (2)

The Church's Testimony – Dornoch (1)

No Good Reason for Change Specified – Islay, Skye (2)

Lack of Common Consent – Inverness (1)

Truth is Unchanging – Skye (1)

No Unscriptural Doctrines Historically – Uist (1)

APPENDIX 4

DECLARATORY ACT TIMELINE: 1889-1892

1889

- The GA is presented with overtures regarding the WCF by 21 Presbyteries.
- After great debate, the Assembly agree to create a Committee, headed by Dr Adam and Principal Rainy, which will look at this question in greater detail and report back to next year's Assembly.
- Principal Brown's motion: 413; William Balfour's motion: 130.

1890

- Dr Adam presents the Committee's report to the Assembly stating that they are still at the preliminary stages and have not made any great progress as yet.
- He indicates that it is the mind of the Committee to recommend a Declaratory Act rather than a new confession or change of the formula.

1891

- Principal Rainy presents the Committee's report to the Assembly as Dr Adam has died.
- His motion is that the Assembly adopt a six-part Declaratory Act which deals with the following subjects: the love of God, the gospel call, the fall of man, persecuting principles, what liberty of opinion is allowed on, the Church as the judge of controversy, etc.
- There is great impatience in the Assembly which means that there is little discussion before the Act is voted through.
- Both Murdoch MacAskill and William Balfour speak strongly against the Act.
- Rainy's motion: 428; MacAskill's motion: 66.

- The Act is sent to Presbyteries for their approval under the Barrier Act.

1892

- Presbyteries vote to adopt the Declaratory Act by 54 to 23.
- Principal Rainy moves that the GA pass the Act into Church law.
- McEwan moves that the Act be sent to Presbyteries again so that there can be more discussion and alteration of the Act in order to make it more acceptable.
- MacAskill moves that the GA pass from the Act altogether.
- Mr W. Ferguson of Kinmundy (elder) moved that the GA drop off the last two clauses of the Act and then pass it into legislation; he rescinded his motion before the vote.
- McEwan's motion defeated MacAskill's by 220 to 104.
- Rainy's motion defeated McEwan's by 346 to 195, therefore passing the Declaratory Act into Free Church legislation.