

## LIBERTY OF OPINION

The 1901 Act included a Declaratory Statement to reaffirm the Presbyterian understanding of basic doctrines of the Westminster Confession. This included Clause 5 below.

### THE SCHEME OF UNION

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

Procurator F Maxwell Bradshaw's Opinion of the Scope of this Clause is as 10 below.

10. This section is frequently misinterpreted on the assumption that it confers far greater liberty than is in fact the case. It is a loose paraphrase of section 3 of the Victorian Act of 1882. The corresponding United Presbyterian provision was with respect to "points not entering into the substance of the faith", while the Free Church gave liberty of opinion on points in the Confession of Faith "as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith therein set forth". The Australian provision gives liberty "on matters. .. not essential to the doctrine therein taught", meaning it would appear by "doctrine" the "system of doctrine", the expression used in the Victorian Act. Otherwise the section is virtually meaningless; for unless "doctrine" is read as suggested, the "doctrine" must surely mean the whole teaching of the Confession, and it would be hard to find "matters in the subordinate standard" not essential to the *whole* teaching it contains.

The test of what does not enter into the substance of the faith has a certain vagueness about it, and in its United Presbyterian form gives no indication of its meaning. Does this mean, say, what is in the Nicene Creed, or is it the substance of the Protestant faith, or again the Reformed Faith? On the other hand what is included in the "system of doctrine" as an essential part thereof, because of the interlocked self-consistent doctrinal position of the Confession of Faith, is much more definite. Two other points should be noted. First, what is granted is liberty of opinion not liberty of expression. It is to relieve the tender conscience not to authorise the proclamation of teaching contrary to the Confession of Faith. Secondly, the section does not relieve the courts of the Church from maintaining the whole doctrine of the Confession. What is stated in the subordinate standard is part of the law of the Church, and there is nothing in section 5 of the Declaratory Statement to justify a church court in not adhering to the whole doctrine of the Confession as part of the general body of the law of the Church binding upon it.

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