

In 1993, a guilty verdict was brought down against a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Australia following a charge of

"... making public statements which are inconsistent with Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith ..."

The case received considerable publicity in the press and exposed raw wounds within the church, seriously dividing and weakening it. For many people it seemed that the church had compromised some of its most basic principles, especially those that related to liberty of opinion in personal faith, as well as the long-held and highly-valued intellectual tradition of the church.

As ministers and elders sign a common declaration when they are ordained, the charge and conviction was seen as a potential threat to members in both groups.

The Basis of Union.

There has never been anything in the law of the Presbyterian Church that makes a particular view of the scriptures obligatory among ministers and elders. Indeed a range of views has been common, even accepted as normal, for generations. It follows that unless there is a law about something, there cannot be a charge to answer on the matter.

On the subject of the scriptures, the Basis of Union 1901, the foundation document of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, simply states

"The Supreme Standard of the united church shall be the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments"

The Declaratory Statement in the Basis of Union which explains matters relating to the subordinate standard of the church, the Westminster Confession of Faith, says, among other things,

" 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."

The Response of the Church Membership

The loss of academic and personal religious freedom within the church is a matter of considerable concern among many church members.

Firstly they resent the patronising view that they should only be allowed to hear "approved" doctrine and that they are not capable of telling the difference between truth and error.

Secondly they are fearful that strategies aimed at suppressing one person in the church can be used equally effectively against others.

Thirdly they are distressed that moves to make the church more relevant in modern times have been frustrated by the intrusion of a new form of narrow, isolationist thinking.

The Scriptures

The greatest concern among church members relates to the imposition of a particular view of the scriptures on the whole church. The conviction of Dr Peter Cameron in 1993 holds an implied threat to all ministers and elders whose views don't conform to "orthodox" opinion as it may be held at the time.

It is worth looking at a range of views commonly held on the holy scriptures.

One view, closely associated with Fundamentalism, is that the Bible is an accurate historical record of God's dealings with humankind, and, consistently from cover to cover, sets forth God's will for the world. Its contents are seen as being divinely revealed to the writers. To adherents of this view, the Bible itself *is* the Word of God and is inerrant and infallible in every detail.

To others this perception of the scriptures is unacceptable, perhaps even idolatrous. They see it as diminishing the Living Christ and belittling the Bible, giving it the status, at best, of a handbook of instructions and laws, or, at worst, a book of spells and incantations.

These people prefer to understand the Bible as

a diverse record of human experiences, perceptions and understandings of God, miraculously preserved over time in order to speak to us today. They see it as containing oral traditions, prophesies, poetry, stories & other literature, eyewitness accounts and second-hand reports, exhortations, historical records and commentaries. For people who hold this view, the Word of God *is what is revealed* inwardly from the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit.

The perceptions of many people, including ministers and elders, lie somewhere between these two schools of thought. It should not be overlooked also that individuals change and develop in their opinions as they mature and the views they hold in five years time may be very different from their current positions.

However there is much in common between the two fairly divergent views, raising the question *why can't they co-exist within the church?*

They have been able to do so in the past, although not always comfortably. Both views acknowledge the Bible's miraculous preservation over time. Both recognise that spiritual perception depends on the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. Both look to the Bible as the source of authority. Both see the Living Christ as the central focus of the Bible and the ultimate revelation of God.

It must further be asked *Is a single view of Scripture possible in a church with such a diverse membership, and even if it is, is it desirable? What benefits can be gained from such an attitude? What place exists for dissenters?*

The Westminster Confession of Faith

The Subordinate Standard of faith in our church, the Westminster Confession of Faith, does not resolve this problem, although it begins significantly with a chapter on the Holy Scriptures.

It sets out the reasons for their existence and lists the documents which comprise them. It clearly states the divine origins of the scriptures'

authority and declares the role of the Holy Spirit as the witness to its truth. The Confession proclaims the completeness of the scriptures, together with the Holy Spirit, as the rule of faith and life at all levels of education and life. It requires that the scriptures be available to all in the common languages .

Most significantly the Confession declares the infallible rule of interpretation of the scriptures to be their harmony with the rest of scripture, and concludes,

X. The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentences we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scriptures.

In the light of all this, the key question is *Can a particular view of the Scriptures ever be regarded as heretical?*

It is difficult to see how this can be so, even allowing for the fact that it is possible to have some peculiar and far-fetched theories on scriptural origins, content, and interpretations. The stumbling block for people who answer yes to this question is the fact that the Scriptures are the **Supreme** Standard of faith and life in our church.

The moment that someone or something ... church council, factional pressure group or statement of faith ... decrees what is to be the approved approach to the Bible, the latter ceases to be the Supreme Standard. It becomes a subordinate standard.

It follows then that heresies, where they exist, can only be found in the conclusions drawn from the scriptures.

The Future

Majority groups which are in a position to dominate the church will have to accept that the Bible should be allowed to speak to each person individually. Even those that we call the clergy must be allowed to develop their faith as

individuals, openly sharing their views and exposing them to the honest scrutiny of others.

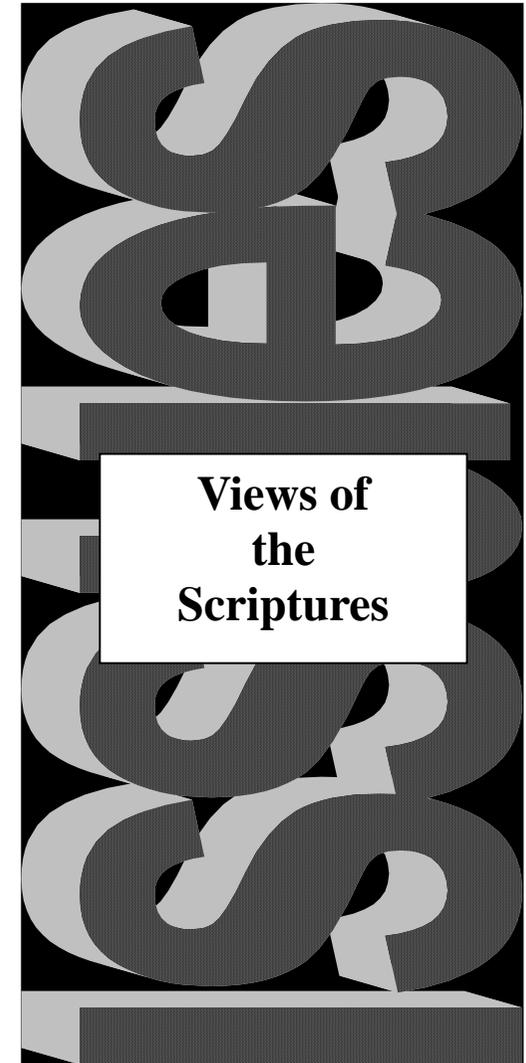
The core of Protestant thinking, and arguably of Christianity as a whole, is the view that each individual forms his or her personal relationship with the Living Christ. Each of us grows in understanding and faith in a unique way, based on our personal experiences.

Wrestling with the meaning of the scriptures is part of this spiritual growth.

“ ... Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God, because in the Bible alone I find God drawing near to man in Jesus Christ, and declaring to us, in Him, His will for our salvation. And this record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to my soul”

Professor William RobertsonSmith

Presbyterian Fellowship Issues Paper No 1



**The
Presbyterian
Fellowship**

