

Oamaru's Most Famous Theologian: James MacGregor and his Battle for Biblical Authority.

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Referred to in his lifetime as 'among the most learned and accomplished theologians of his day'¹ and lauded at his death as an 'intellectual prince of the church,'² James MacGregor (1829-1894) of Oamaru has much to say about biblical authority. As one of our 'most notable theologians'³ MacGregor understood how vital it was to have a clear doctrine of revelation and inspiration.

Most of us have never heard of James MacGregor. In any historical survey of NZ Presbyterianism MacGregor has until recently been largely ignored. Nevertheless, he appears in the 1880's as a voice against any downgrading of the authority of Scripture.

James MacGregor was the first minister at Columba Presbyterian Church in Oamaru, serving from its founding in 1883 until his death in Oamaru in 1894. Before coming to New Zealand, MacGregor had been a minister in the Free Church of Scotland and a professor of systematic theology.

Over his lifetime MacGregor wrote a short systematic theology⁴, tracts,⁵ and journal articles⁶ on theological topics as well as small commentaries on *Exodus*⁷ and *Galatians*.⁸ While minister in Oamaru he published a three-volume series on apologetics⁹.

But MacGregor was more than simply a pastor-scholar and teacher, he was a fearless defender of supernatural revelation and divine inspiration.

¹ Reviewer, "Presbyterians on Trial by Their Principles," *Otago Daily Times*, 21 October 1890.

² 'Death of the Rev. James Macgregor, D.D.', North Otago Times, 9 October 1894. An Auckland obituary says that he was the 'author of many widely known theological textbooks', 'Obituary-MacGregor', Auckland Star, 8 October 1894, 4.

³ Ian Breward, "MacGregor, James," *Te Ara - the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, 1993, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2m8/macgregor-james/>. Accessed: 29/11/2021.

⁴ James MacGregor, *Christian Doctrine: A Text-Book for Youth* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 15 Princes Street, Edinburgh, 1861).

⁵ James MacGregor, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Its Nature and Extent*, Theological Tract No. 1 (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1864).

⁶ James MacGregor, "The Age of the Pentateuch with Special Reference to Revelation and Inspiration," *Br. Foreign Evang. Rev. Q. Rec. Christ. Lit.* 26.C (1877): 254-74.

⁷ James MacGregor, *Exodus with Introduction, Commentary and Special Notes, Etc.*, vol. 1 of *Handbooks for Bible Classes and Private Students* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1889).

⁸ James MacGregor, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia with Introduction and Notes, Etc.*, Handbooks for Bible Classes and Private Students (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1879).

⁹ James MacGregor, *The Apology of the Christian Religion: Historically Regarded with Reference to Supernatural Revelation and Redemption* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891). This was followed by *The Revelation and the Record* (1893), and *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics* (1894)

Supernatural revelation

Following Calvin, MacGregor taught that for us to know God, he must first reveal himself. As Psalm 19 indicates, the two ways by which God does this are through creation and Scripture - or general revelation and special (MacGregor called these natural and preternatural religion)¹⁰. Natural revelation on its own simply leaves us 'without excuse' (Romans 1:21), making it necessary to have a redemptive revelation from God.

Therefore, MacGregor wrote: *'But we need, besides, a preternatural revelation. The light of nature does not suffice to give us such a knowledge of God as will enable us fully to glorify and enjoy Him.'*¹¹ For MacGregor a divinely superintended revelation occurs in the Scriptures, which conveys to us the Word of God. Scripture reveals the Person of God, his will, and redemption in Christ.¹²

MacGregor's emphasis on supernaturalism in Christianity was in part a reaction to a growing aversion amongst Christian scholars of his day to the miraculous in Christianity. From the 1850's, certain leaders within his church, the Free Church of Scotland, had been at the forefront of attempts to accommodate rationalism and critical approaches to the Scriptures into the faith. The result was a subtle denial that a personal Triune God stood at the spiritual centre of Christianity. It became the fashion to speak of the rationality and social acceptability of the Christian faith.

Like his colleagues Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921) and J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) in America, MacGregor opposed this drift away from divine revelation and inspiration because he saw that it was in essence a denial of biblical Christianity. In fact, thirty-years after MacGregor died, Machen would label a rejection of supernatural revelation as the hallmark of liberalism, something he labelled a completely different religion.¹³

Divine inspiration

MacGregor, following his predecessor, James Bannerman, understood the connection between revelation and biblical authority via biblical inspiration. In other words, if the Bible is the church's supreme authoritative standard, then it must be reliable. To be reliable it must be given by God through its human authors as his revelation of himself and his acts to a fallen humanity.

¹⁰ It should be noted that describing general revelation as 'natural' is disputed. Herman Bavinck prefers to label both as supernatural.

¹¹ MacGregor, *Christian Doctrine*.1.

¹² MacGregor, *Christian Doctrine*.3.

¹³ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, Reprint. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1985).79

MacGregor argued that God has supernaturally revealed himself by directly inspiring the biblical writers. In a tract 'The Inspiration of Scripture', he wrote: *'So when a scripture is said to be "theopneust," God-inspired, or " given by inspiration of God," the meaning is, that the word is God's, that it is filled and informed by His Spirit, that it expresses His mind, His thought, or feeling, or desire, or will; so that He speaks in the word, what the Scripture says is said by Him. If these words are then written down, they remain that person's words still.'*¹⁴

In this statement James MacGregor is clarifying two central ideas of inspiration: *Firstly*, Scripture is the creative output of God's mind by his Spirit to the degree that what the Bible says is said by God. *Secondly*, however, he is rejecting any notion of mechanical dictation. As the Spirit 'carried' (1 Peter 1:21) the Biblical authors, their personalities remained intact. In fact, as he will later argue, rather than a having their humanity 'superseded' by the Spirit's activity in writing Scripture, they instead experience the completion of 'God-given freedom in the individual'¹⁵ and thereby become more complete as human beings.

Conclusion

James MacGregor's body awaits the resurrection in Oamaru's Old Cemetery, but his "battle for the Bible" goes on. At Grace Theological College we serve churches that are committed to the same high view of Scripture as that which James MacGregor fought for in the late 1800's.

In many ways, it could be argued that this is a fundamental doctrine. Belief in supernatural revelation and divine inspiration is a 'line in the sand' that once crossed inevitably leads to other doubts about core theological doctrines. Denial of inspiration creates the slippery slope of departure from the true faith.

Inevitably, it produces compromise on a growing list of vital ethical issues confronting the church. For example, the current debate within the church over same-sex marriage is in many ways a symptom of and price we pay for denying divine revelation and inspiration. It undermines the foundation on which our common faith is built. This foundation of the writings of 'the apostles and prophets' (Ephesians 2:20) keeps the entirety of our faith secure.

¹⁴ MacGregor, *The Inspiration of Scripture*.4

¹⁵ James MacGregor, *The Revelation and the Record: Essays on Matters of Previous Question in the Proof of Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893).95

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