

**THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF
FAITH AND THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES
OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: THE
LEGAL, MORAL, AND RELIGIOUS
ASPECTS OF SUBSCRIPTION TO THEM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649732517

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England:
The Legal, Moral, and Religious Aspects of Subscription to Them by James Donaldson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BY
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LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON
NEW YORK AND BOMBAY

1905

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PREFACE

IN the case of the Free Church of Scotland Appeals, which came before the House of Lords 1903-4, the judges stated their opinion that Churches must adhere strictly to the creeds which they profess in the sense which the framers of the creeds attached to the words of these creeds. The application of this opinion to established Churches is simple. The laws of the country fix the creeds which are to be believed, and determine the formula of adhesion to the creeds and to the ritual of the Churches which each priest or minister has to subscribe or assent to. In the first chapters of my book I have brought before my readers the principal Articles of the Creeds of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, and I ask them to study these and consider whether it is reasonable to expect that cultivated men can subscribe these Articles as articles of their own faith. I have not attempted to discuss

the subjects fully, but simply to supply materials for thought.

The case of the United Free Church is not so clear. That Church claims that it has acquired the right to alter the dogmas of its creed, and to determine the measure of adhesion which is to be demanded of its ministers and elders. It also maintains that those who bequeathed or presented sums of money to the Church did so on the express understanding that the General Assembly was to be the final arbiter of all theological questions that might arise. The Church was advised by the lawyers whom it consulted that it had secured the objects at which it aimed by the legal provisions which it had made. The judges who discussed this question differed widely from each other, and the law of the case may be considered doubtful. But the lawyers of the United Free Church argued that, even supposing it had been an established Church, there was no proof that it had deviated from its creed. The moral and religious aspects of subscription by the United Free Church do not therefore properly come within the scope of my book. The Minority Free Church also affirmed that it had not deviated from the creed. I believe that both Churches have, in

fact, deviated from the Confession of Faith; that especially the United Free Church has given ample proof that many of its teachers are men of wide culture possessed with an ardent desire to reach the truth, and animated by the belief that it is only the truth that will make both learned and unlearned free. The same spirit does not seem to animate the Minority Free Church, and therefore there has not been much progress. But men in these days cannot altogether resist the movements of thought that are ever taking place, and if a committee of cultured theologians had been appointed to inquire into the state of matters, they would have found that a considerable number of the members of that Church did not understand the Articles of their creed, and that all had in some way or other deviated from it. I have therefore drawn attention to some of their beliefs. The men who framed the Confession of Faith were men of wide culture and great earnestness, and if they had been alive in the present day they would no doubt have rejected three-fourths of the special doctrines of the Minority Free Church.

I have felt a difficulty in knowing how to designate the various bodies concerned in the case. I have divided the Free Church of 1843 to 1900 into the

Majority Free Church and the Minority Free Church. The name of the Majority Free Church after 1900 is the United Free Church, but what name the Scotch people will attach to the Minority Free Church no one can tell, nor can anyone predict whether it will exist at all.

There is a difficulty also with the designation of the judges. They are known as the House of Lords, but some of the members of the House of Lords, who are not members of the legal profession, have expressed an anxiety that it should be clearly understood that the great majority of peers have had nothing to do with the decision. Only some of the legal peers are concerned in it.

I have had also to speak of the "higher criticism." Higher criticism is an unfortunate term. It means merely literary and historical criticism. Such criticism is applicable to every literature, and has been carried on in every age. It is part, for instance, of higher criticism to affirm that Moses is the author of the Pentateuch, but most men in the present day regard this as bad higher criticism. In the same way it may be deemed geological criticism to say that the world was made in six days, but most geologists consider this as erroneous criticism