

HERESY AT NORTHCOTE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH: HECTOR FERGUSON AND SWEDENBORGIAN TEACHING IN THE 1890s*

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EMMANUEL SWEDENBORG

Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a remarkable Swedish nobleman and scientist, who made many contributions to knowledge, particularly in metallurgy and biology. He spent the last 27 years of his life pursuing theological interests, producing 30 volumes averaging some 300,000 words each during this period. Swedenborg was the father of the psychic tradition in religion, the tradition that focuses on communication/association with beings or powers beyond the physically observable realm. His first claimed communication from the spirit world was in 1743. He claimed to receive his revelations from Jesus Christ, and to talk with people in the spirit world who had lived on other planets. But he preached no sermons nor formed a church himself, remaining attached to the Lutheran Church. The circulation of his writings has produced the *New Church* and also impacted other religious bodies.

Swedenborg thought of much of the Old Testament together with the four Gospels and the Book of Revelation as peculiarly the word of God since they had an internal or spiritual meaning. The surface meaning corresponded to the natural world and the inner meaning to the life of the spirit. Swedenborg believed that God had created humans to live simultaneously in the physical world and the spiritual world. After physical death people realise the existence of their immortal spiritual bodies, which have co-existed with their physical bodies during their earthly life. Depending on their choices in this life they proceed to heaven or hell. These are more or less replicas of this life – the one permeated by good and the other by evil. We choose our own destiny. There is no resurrection of the physical body and of course no bodily return of Christ at the close of the age. The Second Coming of Christ is not physical but occurred in 1757. It is the new understanding given through Swedenborg's writings which ushers in a new era. It involves universal judgement in the sense of the remaking of the religious beliefs of the world, the passing away of former things, and the descent of the New Jerusalem to earth as the tabernacle of God.

Swedenborg did not accept the doctrine of the Trinity – one God in three persons. Rather, he taught that Jesus was alone God. He taught a kind of modalistic trinity, a trinity of person rather than persons: the term Father describes Jesus' soul, the term Son describes his body and the term Holy Spirit describes his activity. All prayer is addressed to the Lord Jehovah Jesus but not *through* Jesus, since we have no need of a mediator. According to Swedenborg, the story of Adam and Eve is a spiritual picture of our turning away from God. Satan as such does not exist. Jesus' mission was to conquer the forces of evil, which he did by his death and resurrection. His death did not atone for sin but provided an opportunity for people to reject sinfulness and progress along the path of love and faith in Jesus Christ. The three essentials are the divinity of the Lord as described, the holiness of the Word (the Scriptures having an inner sense), and the life of charity.

Following Swedenborg's death in London in 1772, a society was established to circulate his writings (1782), and a church organization was developed by his followers (1787). This body was called the *Church of the New Jerusalem*.

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Swedenborg's social standing and the interests of the time produced a small but influential body, which has declined from its peak in the 19th century, although there are groups in several African countries. There is little organised following in Sweden but perhaps 40 centres in the UK and a larger number in the USA. There have always been those influenced by his writings who have remained in mainstream churches. A famous example is Rev John Clowes (1743-81), Rector of St John's Church of England in Manchester. He was opposed to forming a new organization but translated much of Swedenborg's work and wrote many expositions. He was the means by which the New Church was well established in Lancashire. Even today half the UK members of the New Church are from this area. The following throughout the world is certainly not more than 50,000 and may be much less if the true position in parts of Africa was more clear.

In Australia there are two groups: the *Conference of the New Church* has 5 churches and a membership of about 200, a little less than in the 1890s. The *General Church of the New Jerusalem* emphasises Swedenborg's writings as a third inspired testament, and has a single congregation at Hurstville in Sydney. It may be of interest to note that George Marchant (1857-1941) of Queensland – the founder of the once well-known soft-drink company Marchants Limited – was a major financial backer of the New Church in Australia. Three New Churchmen were successively appointed Surveyor General in South Australia, including G.W.Goyder, who surveyed the famous rainfall line in 1865, and who also chose and surveyed the site of Darwin.

THE NEW CHURCH IN MELBOURNE

A New Church Society was formed in Melbourne in 1853. A building was erected in Albert Street, East Melbourne (cnr. Morrison Lane) in 1872, and still stands as part of the Eye and Ear Hospital complex. Incidentally, the architect was Lloyd R. Taylor, who also designed South Yarra Presbyterian Church, where we meet today, and the Free Presbyterian Church, East St Kilda of which I was the sixth and last minister. Taylor was in fact a New Churchman, although not a member of the Society.¹ The Melbourne Church, although usually having well under 60 attenders, was active in spreading Swedenborg's writings. Advertisements in the press and direct circulation to clergy occurred in 1876, 1877 and 1889, and house to house canvassing occurred 1870-80. ² Rev J.J.Thornton of England, formerly a Congregational minister, was minister from 1878-1893. Then a long vacancy ensued which was not filled until 1925.

A PRECURSER TO HECTOR FERGUSON: GEORGE BATES 1888

On the 10 January 1888 the PCV Presbytery of Seymour licensed **George Bates** who had recently returned from studies in London. On the ship out he had met William Newman, an active member of the New Church in Sydney. As Bates began preaching for the Presbyterian Church he found himself adopting the Swedenborgian viewpoint. He reported to his Presbytery that he was out of sympathy with the doctrinal position of the Presbyterian Church, and was duly suspended 5 June 1888. He forthwith joined the Melbourne New Church Society, where he became choirmaster and occasional preacher, relinquishing the title 'Reverend'.³ It appears that when Mr Thornton resigned and sailed for England with his ill wife 22 April 1893, Bates seems to have had second thoughts. He applied for restoration of his status on 3 October 1893. The Presbytery referred the matter to the General Assembly, which refused the application on 23 November 1893.

¹ I A Robinson, *A History of the New Church in Australia 1832-1980* (Hawthorn, 1980) 49.

² *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 57. His first doctrinal sermons for the New Church were preached 12 August 1888.

THE FERGUSON BROTHERS 1889-1892

Meanwhile two ministerial brothers arrived in Australia in October 1889. They were children of Hector Munro Ferguson and Mary nee Carswell, who appear to have been of some social standing.⁴ **Samuel Hector Ferguson** (always called Hector) was the older by about eight years, and was born on Islay in the Southern Hebrides about 1852.⁵ He was an ordained minister of the United Presbyterian Church, and had served Queensferry 1882-89.

The United Presbyterian branch of Scottish Presbyterianism was less committed to the old Calvinism than the Established or Free churches.⁶ A prominent UP minister, Fergus Ferguson (1832-1911) – not related to our subject as far as I know – was found guilty in 1878 of heresy because of his views of the atonement, justification, human sin, the intermediate state and the destiny of unbelievers. However, the punishment was ‘an affectionate and solemn admonition’. He went on to receive a doctorate from the University of Glasgow (1885) and died in honour, despite continuing to maintain and publish his distinctive views. The UP Synod regularised the ethical dilemma of convicting for breach of its standards, while not truly punishing the breach, by passing a Declaratory Act in 1879. It was designed to provide relief from the definite Calvinism of the Westminster Confession. This Act had been anticipated at the 1878 Synod, and was passed with general unanimity. Interestingly, Ferguson’s defence of Rev David Macrae in 1879 did not stop Macrae’s deposition for denial of eternal punishment, even though Macrae said nothing in substance not held by Ferguson. Possibly this was to placate conservatives given that Macrae was open in his criticism of the Westminster Standards, whereas Ferguson had been constrained to express his views in a fashion not so openly hostile to the Confession’s language.⁷ At any rate, the 1879 legislation removed commitment to a defined body of truth replacing it with commitment to an undefined ‘substance of the faith’.

Theological change was in the air, of course. Here in Victoria at the time of the Strong case a purported Declaratory Act was drawn up and approved by the Assembly in 1882. I say ‘purported’ both because it was not a true declaration of the existing legal position but a modification, and because it was not formally adopted, professedly because discussions concerning a federal union were in progress. It certainly showed that the mind of the church was not concerned for close adherence to the details, if only a Christ-focussed supernaturalism was held. In significant aspects the 1882 Act drew on the wording of the UP Act of 1879 but was not as open in its language.⁸

Back in Scotland and in the stricter Free Church, the impact of negative Biblical criticism was also felt. William Robertson Smith was removed from his chair in

⁴ *Vide* marriage certificate for S.H.Ferguson and Mary Simpson at Arbroath, 31 March 1885. In the obituary for S.H.Ferguson in *The Leader*, 18 December 1909 it is said that his father was Principal of Port Ellen Grammar School, Islay, but on the 1885 marriage certificate his father is described as an architect and builder.

⁵ A birth record for either brother has not been located, but a 1917 death record for Andrew Fergus Ferguson gives his age as 56. The age on the marriage record for Hector corresponds with the age on his death certificate. The ages on the *Index of Inward Passenger Lists for British and Foreign Ports 1852-1899* for 1889 and 1893 are inconsistent both with each other and the actual age of Hector as per the marriage certificate.

⁶ The standard survey is Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinistic Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh 1990), who sees a slow and disputed process reaching its peak in 1879.

⁷ Cf. Ian Hamilton, *ibid.*, 145, 165.

⁸ See the text and discussion in R.S.Ward, *The Bush Still Burns* (Wantirna 1989) 276-281.

1881. Marcus Dods and A.B. Bruce were acquitted in 1890 but were still rebuked. The Free Church drew up a purported Declaratory Act in 1892, which was intended to provide relief. It was a bit more cautiously expressed than the UP Act of 1879, and was only passed after strong opposition (approved by 54 presbyteries and disapproved by 23 presbyteries).

So Hector Ferguson came to Australia from a rather liberal Presbyterian tradition. He gave supply to Chalmers' Church, East Melbourne where he was inducted 21 November 1890. It should be noted that Chalmers' Church, founded by Adam Cairns of the Free Church, was then in decline, losing out to the newer Cairns Memorial Church nearby and to removals to the new suburbs.⁹ Hector did not remain long as he tendered his resignation on the grounds of his wife's ill health. It was accepted and certificate granted by the Presbytery of Melbourne North on 3 May 1892.¹⁰

Hector's brother, **Andrew Fergus Ferguson**, commonly called Fergus, was apparently unmarried. He had completed one session at the UP Hall and two sessions at the Evangelical Union Hall. He had served at Arbroath from 1884 and seems to have been ordained in 1888, although, as he officiated at his brother's wedding at Arbroath in 1885, he may have been ordained earlier. He is not to be confused with the Rev Dr Fergus Ferguson discussed above, nor the prominent EU minister Rev Dr Fergus Ferguson (1824-97) who wrote the history of the Evangelical Union.

The Evangelical Union had been formed two days before the Disruption of the Established Church in 1843 by James Morison and others who had adopted Arminian views of human nature and the atonement, an intellectualist or Sandemanian view of faith, a Congregational view of church polity, and a Bible-only, anti-creed mentality. The EU grew from 13 churches to 90 by the time it merged with the Congregational Union in 1896. So Fergus belonged to an explicitly non-Calvinistic denomination impacted through Morison with the teaching of Charles Finney.

Fergus applied for status to the Presbytery of Melbourne North, which transmitted his application *simpliciter* 5 November 1889. Two weeks later the General Assembly received him subject to satisfactory completion of 12 months service under the Home Mission Committee. In due time Fergus received two calls. That from South Yarra had insufficient proportion of the membership signing and was put aside by the Presbytery. Another from Caulfield, signed by 33 members and 22 adherents and promising a stipend of £300, was accepted, and he was inducted 15 June 1891. However, he resigned with effect 2 May 1892 to return to Europe, and was presented with a travelling rug by the appreciative congregation.¹¹

THE BROTHERS RETURN 1893

Thus far the Ferguson brothers are seen to be close – coming to Australia together and returning home together after what seemed a brief but uneventful time in Victoria. But there is more... They returned to Victoria together in February 1893, and both appear on the PCV Home Mission Committee preaching list in *The Presbyterian Monthly* for October 1893.

⁹ See my article on Cairns in R.S. Ward (ed), *Presbyterian Leaders in Nineteenth Century Australia* (Wantirna 1993) 55-69. Chalmers' Church was closed in 1896. Its name is perpetuated in Chalmers' Church, Auburn, at least one of its founding members having belonged to the East Melbourne church.

¹⁰ The PCV Presbytery of Melbourne South minutes 1892-1911 are lost. The date has been gleaned from the report in *The Presbyterian Monthly*.

¹¹ *The Presbyterian Monthly*

In December 1893 Hector Ferguson was appointed to the Northcote parish, which was in a low state after its separation from Heidelberg and a dispute over the manse. Ferguson was about 40 years old, and is described as a 'powerful' and 'dramatic' preacher.¹² Hitherto 'a scanty band of worshippers'¹³ had met for service in the Town Hall. Ferguson drew in many more people, the Town Hall was soon crowded, and a new church building, extended during the course of building and seated for 300, was speedily erected. Ferguson was inducted 19 June 1894, and the new building was opened the same month. A Sunday school building was subsequently added. The cause continued very well attended¹⁴ under popular preaching until January 1899 when Melbourne publisher George Robertson published Ferguson's 188 page book *Spiritual Law through the Natural World*.¹⁵ Although Swedenborg was not mentioned the views expressed in the book's nine chapters on subjects such as Atonement, Justification by Faith, the Trinity and the Resurrection were essentially those of the New Church.

Meanwhile Fergus Ferguson was inducted to Donald on 30 January 1895. He seems to have had a personality not unlike his brother judging from the 'dramatic recital' he gave to an appreciative audience at Maryborough in May 1897. However, his ministry was short. Poor health and stipend difficulties are noted in the Presbytery of Maryborough record as behind his resignation on 28 October 1897. However, some other factors were at work. A fondness for ardent spirits leading to more than one occasion of drunkenness at Donald is noted in a subsequent court case in 1910. There was also a somewhat mysterious anonymous letter for which he had had to apologise.¹⁶ So he was without charge when the controversy surrounding his brother arose. He sided with him and so left the PCV ministry.¹⁷

THE HERESY CASE¹⁸

The teaching of Hector Ferguson was first raised in a formal way on 7 March 1899 by Rev D.S.McEachran in the Presbytery of Melbourne North. The occasion was the publication of the book already mentioned. It is dated 1899 on the title page. A copy in the Sate Library of Victoria is stamped as received 1 February 1899, so it was earlier that year that the book was released. The brief introduction refers only to help gained from material available to all. Swedenborg is nowhere mentioned.

¹² *Jubilee Souvenir of Northcote Presbyterian Church 1869-70 – 1919-20*,

¹³ *The Leader*, 11 March 1899.

¹⁴ There were 60 members and 10 adherents in 1893 according to the *Jubilee Souvenir*. The statistics published every second year with the *Assembly Reports* indicate communicants at Northcote increased from 100 to 150 and attendance from 250 to 600 between 30.9.1894 and 30.9.1898, but the usual qualification concerning accuracy must be made.

¹⁵ Robertson was founder of the firm of George Robertson & Co. (later Robertson & Mullens, not to be confused with Angus and Robertson), and donated the earth closets for the Melbourne New Church in 1873, *vide* I.A.Robinson, *op.cit.*, 49. The title of Ferguson's book seeks to capitalise on Henry Drummond's immensely popular *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (London 1883) which sought to harmonise Darwinism and Christian teaching.

¹⁶ *The Leader*, 19 February, 1910.

¹⁷ *The Leader*, *ibid.*

¹⁸ As far as I know no scholarly discussion of the case has appeared in print. It is referred to in Andrew Lemon, *The Northcote Side of the River* (North Melbourne 1983) 134-135, but the nature of the heresy is not described, Swedenborg is not mentioned and it is erroneously stated that 'Ferguson's accusers were intemperate in their accusations' so increasing press interest. Heresy commonly attracts interest whenever a person adopts views seriously at variance with what the ordinary man considers the person concerned is pledged to, and the church takes action. It is the scandal and notoriety that draws the interest even when the press is on the side of the heretic.

In a letter dated 11 January 1899 to *Morning Light*, the leading English Swedenborgian magazine, Ferguson stated that he had preached Swedenborgian doctrines for seven years, without however referring to their source, lest his hearers be prejudiced against them. This would take us back to early 1892. If he has not mistaken his dates it thus appears Ferguson held Swedenborgian views prior to resigning Chalmers' Church in May 1892. At any rate, it seems eminently logical to suppose his contact with the New Church began during his brief ministry in East Melbourne, matured while he was in the United Kingdom, and characterised his Northcote ministry from its commencement.¹⁹ The Melbourne New Church was but 250 metres from Chalmers' Church.

Ferguson's same letter, which was not known of in Australia until after the case had been decided, refers to the reception of his teachings:

It is within the mark to say that an overwhelming majority of my hearers have heartily received them. It may be that a large section [of my hearers] have not been indoctrined with so-called Orthodox teaching, and the new truth was more easily accepted. But the other section at first experienced some little difficulty dislodging preconceived notions. Afterward, however, they emerged triumphantly from darkness into light.

He adds:

It seems now to be well known, not only by my own congregation, but by the whole Church, that I am a New Churchman.²⁰

The Northcote *Leader* reported of Ferguson's ministry at the time questions were raised:

Mr Ferguson may not have preached in strict accordance with the standards of his church – that is, he did not follow them when they would not stand the light of truth and reason as revealed in the Scriptures – but that he preached with great acceptance is shown by the growth and prosperity of the church through a period of severest depression and the intense loyalty of his congregation to him...²¹

These quotations suggest that the concern of the church at large was only raised when Ferguson's views were reduced to printed form where their departure from the position of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria could be easily seen by the public and could not be ignored. It was, of course, one thing for deviation from strict adherence to the Westminster Confession to occur; this had been practised in, for instance, the reception of Rev William Matthew in November 1881,²² and recognised as allowable in the Declaratory Act of 1882. It was quite another thing for the fundamental doctrines emphasised in that Act to be assailed as they were in *Spiritual Law through the Natural World*.

Mr McEachran, who had advised Ferguson of his proposed course of action, raised the complaint and proposed an enquiry by a committee who would examine the

¹⁹ Contact with the New Church in Scotland seems unlikely. For a review of its modest operations there see, A. Macwhirter, 'The Church of the New Jerusalem in Scotland' in *Records of the Scottish Church Historical Society* 12 [1954] 202-219.

²⁰ Copies of *Morning Light* are not currently available in Melbourne, but the letter was reprinted in the *Donald Times* and quoted from there in *The Presbyterian Monthly*, 1 June 1899, 186.

²¹ *The Leader*, March 11, 1899. The Age report of a congregational meeting suggests that withdrawal from the PCV was something considered as a possibility for some months, *The Age*, 10 March, 1899, p. 6, col 1.

²² Matthew had been a schismatic and a member of the Presbyterian Synod of Victoria which repudiated the 'metaphysical' theology of the Westminster Confession in favour of a simple statement of evangelical belief; cf. my comments in R.S.Ward (ed), *Presbyterian Leaders in Nineteenth Century Australia* (Wantirna 1993) 80.

book, confer with Mr Ferguson and report to the Presbytery meeting in April. Rev John Mathew was Convener of the Committee. Rev Alexander Stewart of Essendon seconded the motion and was supported by Dr Rentoul, who was even then known as 'Fighting Larry'. He severely criticised Ferguson's ability.²³ After Ferguson had been heard in reply the motion was carried unanimously.

From all accounts McEachran spoke clearly and was heard with respect by the presbytery and the many members of the Northcote congregation who were present. One striking aspect of his address, as reported in the press, had McEachran, a conservative evangelical, refuting Ferguson's rejection of the Trinity by asserting that such rejection was as ridiculous as claiming that Queen Victoria could not at the same time be the widow of Prince Albert, the Empress of India and the Queen of England.²⁴ This illustrates a form of modalism not Nicene trinitarianism, although there is no record of anyone making that point.²⁵ Dr Rentoul's remarks were regarded as 'venomous, personal' and 'an utterly uncalled for onslaught'²⁶, and were responded to by Ferguson in the letter columns of the *Age*. Indeed, the charge of heresy received top billing in the daily papers. Ferguson himself told the presbytery that he regarded his responsibility as not only to the presbytery but also to the congregation, and in the event of a conflict his duty to the latter would prevail. He stated that he had believed the Standards of the Church when he subscribed them, except for his view of the Trinity, which was the same then as it now was. But he had gained new light. If he was asked now to sign the Confession he could not do it. He had ascertained that his congregation would go with him if he were deposed.

Indeed, two nights later only 10 people in the well filled church building opposed supporting the minister.²⁷ Ferguson stated that

he had never in the slightest degree tried to make a member of the church follow him. He had already indicated that if the congregation would stand by him he would most certainly stand by them. (Cheers.) Mr Campbell thought he should resign now. That was a sentiment which was indulged in by agnostics and atheists. If every man who found his opinion had slightly changed left the association in which he had found himself there would have been no reformation. (Hear, hear.) When a man discovered the truth he should be faithful to it. If he discovered it was not the truth he had a right to his opinion. (applause.) He had a responsibility to God and the truth, and he would not resign. If there were going to be any injustice done it would be done by those who put him out. (hear, hear.) He would hold on, and any such movement would be made justly and honourably. (Cheers.)²⁸

The Presbytery met again on Tuesday 4 April and received the report of its Committee. It was 50 closely written foolscap pages²⁹ and was presented by Rev John Mathew who took over an hour to read it. Ferguson spoke for an equal length in reply. Some concession was made by Ferguson in regard to the eternal Sonship of Christ, but otherwise the Presbytery required abandonment of the

²³ *The Age*, 10 March 1899, p. 6, col. 1.

²⁴ *The Age*, 8 March 1899, p. 7.

²⁵ Ferguson was to claim publicly (*The Leader*, 18 March 1899) that, at his conference with the Committee of Presbytery on Monday 13 March 1899, Dr Marshall of Scots Church was 'entirely at one with him in his views regarding the Trinity', which may suggest forms of modalism were not uncommon in the PCV at the time.

²⁶ *The Leader*, March 11, 1899.

²⁷ *The Age*, 10 March 1899, p. 6, col. 2.

²⁸ *The Age*, 10 March, 1899, p. 6, col. 2.

²⁹ This document has not been located.

distinctive views on the Trinity, Resurrection, Atonement and Justification. Ferguson refused and left the meeting. In his absence he was suspended pending the preparation of a libel. Mr McEachran and Mr Mathew were appointed to prosecute it. Rev D McKenzie of Collingwood was appointed Interim-Moderator and Rev S.G.McLaren of Presbyterian Ladies College was appointed to preach at Northcote on the following Lord's Day morning, his subject being Justification by Faith.

At the usual Wednesday night meeting in the Northcote church the next day, Ferguson considered he could still preach as he had not received any (formal) notice of his suspension, and in any case had been unfairly treated since he had not been given an opportunity to speak prior to the decision being passed.³⁰ He is being somewhat disingenuous here, since he admitted the substance of the case. The following Lord's Day was to be the Sunday School Anniversary, but the Interim-Moderator declined to allow the arrangements to continue. It was therefore agreed to meet in the Town Hall for the services on the next Lord's Day. So on 9 April there were two meetings. The Town Hall was well filled in the morning and overflowing in the evening. The services in the church were nowhere near so numerous. A similar situation occurred the next Sunday when Mr McLaren spoke in the morning on the Resurrection of the body, making special reference to Swedenborg's character and teaching. Ferguson responded to this address the following Lord's Day evening at the Town Hall service with an address boldly entitled, 'Rev McLaren's Resurrection Theory refuted'.³¹

Something of the pressure Ferguson was feeling is evident from his letter published in the *Age* on 7 April, 1899.

In a criminal court the meanest criminal at the bar, even when he has been proved guilty, will be asked if he has anything to urge before sentence is pronounced. But no such sweet reasonableness obtains in this court [Presbytery], which professes allegiance to the gentle Saviour. The immoral doctrines in which it believes give the true explanation of all the acrimony and invective which hold such a prominent place in all Presbyterian disputes.

He added:

The press has frequently referred to the incongruity of "eating the bread of the presbytery while controverting its tenets." That, however is not my position. The Presbytery pays me nothing and never did. My congregation remunerates me, and it is pleased to do it. The presbytery looks after its own interests in demanding the congregation pay up all rates, so-called, and collections ordered by the General Assembly. In all else the congregation is treated like a class of children, who do not know what kind of doctrinal food is good for them and must take what is prescribed. Time was when that kind of regime would be tolerated, but that time is past.

He concluded with a cutting criticism:

The Presbyterian Church at this moment holds a unique position. It is going to depose me for doing that which the Presbyterian Church itself has done. The Presbyterian Church, in its constitution as a church, contracted with the State on the doctrinal foundation of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and pledged itself by Act of Parliament in that confession. In the year 1882, that church set aside three of the doctrines contained in the Confession of Faith, thereby breaking its contract with the State. It follows therefore, that inasmuch as the Presbyterian Church has deposed itself and forfeited the lands granted by the State under the original constitution, it cannot in justice depose me. I am only following the

³⁰ *The Leader*, 8 April, 1899.

³¹ *The Leader*, 22 April 1899, advertisement for service.

example of the church in setting aside four doctrines in addition to the three which the church set aside.

As I have discussed elsewhere,³² the Act of 1882 was approved but not formally adopted. From a legal viewpoint there was no constitutional change, no change in the contract with the State. But from a moral and practical viewpoint there certainly was, even though, in the common manner of such ecclesiastical pronouncements, there is no unambiguous contradiction of the Confession. Ferguson presumably considered the three doctrines modified in 1882 were the doctrine of the divine decrees so as to allow an Arminian construction, the doctrine of redemption so as to allow the salvation of those beyond the reach of ordinary means, and the affirmation of liberty on matters not essential to the system of doctrine so establishing some doctrines as essential and others not. Whatever may be thought of these matters, they are not to be compared in weight or significance to the four doctrines Ferguson denied, which indeed are essential to the system of doctrine, and which the church, in its debate over Charles Strong's teaching in 1881/83, insisted upon, and which Ferguson had 'pledged to profess, defend and teach' in its integrity.

The Presbytery met again on Thursday 18 April when members must have known of the deliberations of the General Conference of the New Church in Adelaide. The Conference had passed the following resolution proposed by Mr W.F.Keen³³:

The New Church in Australia, now in session, having had brought under its notice the book, 'Spiritual Law through the Natural World,' by the Rev Hector S. Ferguson, Presbyterian minister of Melbourne, desires to record its appreciation of its publication, its teaching being largely on the lines of that of our own Church.

This finding appeared in the Melbourne papers, but the whole debate leading to it appeared in the *Adelaide Advertiser* for 4 April 1899, and was reproduced in *The Presbyterian Monthly* of the PCV for May 1899. The issues discussed included Ferguson's propriety in omitting any reference to Swedenborg and stating only, 'The author gladly acknowledges the help received from those sources which are readily available to all', and the propriety of holding a position as a minister of the Presbyterian Church while teaching and publishing other than Presbyterian doctrines. Mr George Marchant was the only delegate to vote against the resolution as he considered Ferguson's actions not quite honourable:

He would ask them to place themselves in the position of the Presbyterian body, and suppose that a minister had taken office in their communion, and having taken charge of a large congregation, had used his position to undermine the faith which they all held dear...If Mr Ferguson made an avowal of his adherence to the doctrines of the New Church and left the Presbyterian body, he would be glad to give him a grip of the hand and a warm welcome. As it was, he could not but disapprove of his action.³⁴

Hence, the removal from the proposal of an expression of sympathy for Ferguson 'in his present trying ordeal' was not enough to secure Marchant's support.

³² *The Bush Still Burns*, 276-281. Note the citation from *The Free Churchman* (NSW) for June 1882: 'It [the Declaratory Act] appears to have been composed with a design to soothe opponents, as well as to satisfy friends. Quite possibly, the Act will be ignorantly applauded by one section of the public, as if it were a solid exposition of the great doctrine, and a vindication of it against the exceptions of a sceptical and irreligious critics. Another section will see it as a triumph for those very critics and their criticisms, and will read the Act as a surrender of the Westminster doctrine. Practically, we believe, the latter will prove to be in the right.'

³³ When 'The New Church in Australia' was incorporated in 1888, three of the original subscribers were Messrs Keen, Swift and Speed, and one of the witnesses Mr Hast(e)well. A wit remarked that the church should make excellent progress. See I.A.Robinson, op. cit., 169.

³⁴ *The Presbyterian Monthly*, 1 May 1899, p. 160.

At the Presbytery meeting on 18 April, again in the presence of a large number of Ferguson's admirers, largely ladies, Ferguson acknowledged that he had ignored the suspension. He was warned that further disobedience would lead to him being dealt with for aggravated contumacy. 'He was allowed to proceed and stated that he would not obey the Presbytery and deliberately defied it. He thereupon left the court.'³⁵ So reads the minute, but the press report provides an insight into the unfolding drama:

Mr Ferguson was permitted to resume his remarks in the presence of his supporters. Subsequent severe criticism upon himself and his book, however, caused Mr Ferguson to make a dramatic exit from the assembly, with the declaration that he would not remain to hear 'blasphemy' spoken, and on his departure he was accompanied by the major portion of the audience.³⁶

Rev Alex Yule and others were in favour of immediate deposition, which, in the circumstances, I would consider to have been a lawful course. Others, such as Dr Alexander Marshall and Rev Alex Hardie urged that Presbytery proceed with the libel. This was also a proper course. The four points in the libel concerning the Resurrection, the Trinity, the Atonement, and Justification by Faith, were unanimously found relevant, and the libel ordered to be served for answer on 11 May.

At the meeting of Presbytery on 4 May it was reported that the libel had been served, and also that by letter dated 21 April Ferguson tendered his resignation as a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. On Thursday 20 April, Ferguson and his supporters had met and it had been agreed that he should send in his resignation as a minister of the PCV since Ferguson thought the battle had gone far enough, his supporters thought this the course to follow in the interests of peace, and he himself might avoid the further charge of aggravated contumacy for continuing to preach while under suspension.³⁷ All the office-bearers and the great bulk of the congregation followed him, and services of the 'Independent Presbyterian Church' continued in the Town Hall. Those who remained loyal to the original congregation numbered but 20 on the following Sunday.³⁸

The Presbytery correctly refused to accept a letter of resignation from someone against whom a judicial process had begun, and cited him a second time to appear at a Presbytery meeting to be held on 30 May 1899. On that date, Ferguson not appearing, the Presbytery resolved unanimously to depose him for aggravated contumacy and heresy. So ended Hector Ferguson's connection with the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.

The Northcote Presbyterian congregation continued to be supplied by the Presbytery, and Rev William Goyen (1861-1951) was inducted 15 May 1900. Goyen was the Primitive Methodist minister at Eaglehawk who had recently come over to the Presbyterian Church. This was not because he had embraced Calvinism, and his theology remained Arminian in orientation. Goyen served Northcote for two years, the number of communicants rising from 50 to 77, then Bulla for six years and Albert Park for five, before being appointed Director of Sabbath Schools and Director of the Presbyterian Board of Religious Education in 1914. He held these influential positions for some 20 years.

³⁵ MSS Minutes of the Presbytery of Melbourne North, 221.

³⁶ *The Age*, 19 April 1899.

³⁷ *The Leader*, 22 April 1899.

³⁸ *Jubilee Souvenir...*, op. cit.

FERGUSON AND THE INDEPENDENT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 1899-1909

So far as one can see there was no formal contact between Ferguson and the New Church after the heresy case, and earlier contacts are unclear. And there was no growth in the New Church as a result of the publicity about Swedenborg's teaching. In fact the Melbourne New Church entered upon a period of steady decline from average attendances of 48 in 1899 to 20 in 1923, lacking a minister all these years. Perhaps Ferguson was too much an individualist to join an existing organization.

As noted, Ferguson had commenced separate services in the Town Hall on 22 April 1899 and continued to draw a strong following. However, in May 1900 he resolved to return to the UK for some reason not now recorded. At a congregational meeting on 10 May the congregation endorsed the action of the session and board of management in accepting with regret the minister's resignation. The congregation also resolved by a substantial majority:

That the congregation of the Independent Presbyterian Church disband at the expiration of the Rev Hector Ferguson's ministrations.³⁹

The final services on 1 June were crowded, and in the evening many could not find standing room. After the service those who wished services to continue were invited to stay behind and about 150 did so. It was decided to continue the services with a Rev John Reid to preach the following week. I have not been able to trace any details about Reid. The change of heart may have been prompted by the possibility of securing a minister. The next month there was a welcome for Rev John McNair, a Canadian who had arrived on a visit about two months earlier but had decided to stay. I imagine he was a Presbyterian but lack details at present. At any rate there seems no doubt he continued in the line established by Ferguson, although it must be doubted if he could be as acceptable. McNair's last advertised service was 14 March 1903. I have not noted a farewell. Thereafter there were several who shared preaching including Ferguson's brother (21 June) and a Rev L. Williams (5 July).

At the presbytery of Melbourne North on 5 March 1901 it was reported that Hector Ferguson was seeking admission to the Lancashire Congregational Union. Lancashire was and is the region where the strength of the British New Church movement lies. I do not know the result of his application. The next we hear of him is that he writes from Farnworth near Manchester in Lancashire to the Northcote *Leader* concerning his 'marvellous magnetic cures' of which accounts had already appeared in the Melbourne daily papers:

I have developed a wonderful power of healing all manner of disease, and almost without exception the cures are permanent. The people are flocking from far and near to be healed, and very few are disappointed.⁴⁰

He had been interviewed by the London *Daily Mail*, and the London *Light*.

At some subsequent point Ferguson decided to return - obviously his work in England had some limitations - and his plan was to settle in South Melbourne. However, letters from some of the Northcote people had reached him at the Cape indicating difficulties they were facing. At any rate, the Northcote Independent Presbyterian Church had 'refused to amalgamate with another church' a few weeks before Hector Ferguson arrived in Northcote in August.⁴¹ Reading between the lines it appears that Rev A.F. Ferguson had been conducting services in Collingwood or the vicinity as an Independent Presbyterian Church, and I assume that he had proposed that the Northcote people amalgamate with his church. He had preached for them on 21 June 1903, but they had declined a union, and the

³⁹ *The Leader*, 12 May, 1900.

⁴⁰ *The Leader*, 1 November 1902.

⁴¹ *The Leader*, 15 August, 1903.

Church Committee approached Hector Ferguson to accept the pastorate once more. He reacted positively, the congregation elected him on 9 August 1903, and he formally accepted at a well-attended welcome function on 12 August. And so Hector Ferguson's work continued and with outward success until his death after a short illness on 14 December 1909.

There are references to healing and hypnotism in these latter years – for example, a lecture on hypnotism in December 1904, but these do not seem to have the prominence that his activities in England might have suggested. Such themes were of considerable interest in the community, and so were issues like Christian Science and Spiritualism, which affected people interested in Swedenborg's teaching.⁴² These were also the days of healing ministries, of John Alexander Dowie and of early Pentecostalism, days when the exotic flourished at one end and liberal and social gospel thought at another, with the middle ground increasingly marginalised. Perhaps Ferguson had matured a bit. At any rate an address given by one of the church members, W.P.Sinclair, at an *In Memoriam* service reflects the Swedenborgian approach to life and death without the more flamboyant emphases.⁴³ His funeral was conducted by Rev R.W.Rock of Northcote Presbyterian Church, and by Hector's brother, Fergus, and the burial was in the Boroondara Cemetery. He left a widow and two young children.⁴⁴ His wife Mary was sometimes called Myra, perhaps to distinguish her from Hector's sister Mary, who lived with them.

FERGUSON MEMORIAL CHURCH 1909-1912

After Ferguson's death, Mr W.P.Sinclair and other members, including Messrs Timmins and Bredin, conducted the services of "Ferguson Memorial Church" in the modest Campbell Grove Hall, which was purchased, and a group took care of the temporal needs of the bereaved family. The Ferguson Memorial Church continued for three years with the hall renovated early in 1912. But the time came when the mission of the church was regarded as fulfilled, and the last service, led by Mr Bredin, was held on 15th December 1912. The following day was the closing social evening. The building had been sold, presentations, including £40 to Mrs Ferguson, were made, and so the congregation ceased.

Rev A. Fergus Ferguson seems to have survived as minister of an Independent Presbyterian Church through marriage fees rather than a significant following.⁴⁵ Perhaps hoping to gain his brother's followers he began a service in Albert Hall, Clifton Hill on 9 January 1910 using Alexander's Hymns. He did not long continue it but reverted to his earlier location nearer the city. This might be thought understandable as there was clearly ill-feeling. In February 1910, Fergus' sister Mary, who lived in the Hector Ferguson household, took legal action against her brother's widow for possession of a hand-painted table, draught screen and framed group photo. Fergus also claimed a gold watch. Evidence included a purported testamentary letter in the sister's handwriting allowing her also to stay in the home as long as she wished, but the widow claimed the signature was forged. Hector's widow refuted the various claims on the goods, Fergus' known character gave him no credibility, and the action was dismissed with costs of

⁴² I.A.Robinson, *op.cit.*, 112.

⁴³ *The Leader*, 25 December 1909. The thrust of the address fits a Swedenborgian pattern, even if there are some aspects that appear out of line, possibly due to the reporter.

⁴⁴ The birth of one has been located – Hector Claud Paris Ferguson, born at Northcote in 1897. He died at St Kilda, Melbourne in 1974. A death record for his mother has not been found.

⁴⁵ For example, on 14 April 1906 three marriages were solemnised by him at 448 Queen Street, Melbourne. All involved widows, all were from outside Melbourne and all had as witnesses James and Annie Holt.

£3.⁴⁶ We began with Hector Ferguson at Chalmers' Church some 250 metres from the Melbourne New Church. We end with Fergus Ferguson, whose address (in 1910) was 3 Victoria Parade (cnr Smith Street), Collingwood - ironically enough, some 250 metres from the Melbourne New Church. He died in Melbourne in 1917 aged 56, and his sister died at Donald in 1923 aged 71.

CONCLUSION

The case of Hector Ferguson gives significant insight into the state of Presbyterianism at the time. It continues to challenge us in our understanding of what it is to be a creedal church. I am far from saying that strict subscription to a Confession is a guarantee of spiritual prosperity. The Church of Scotland during the reign of the Moderates c.1770-1820 was nominally at least a strict subscription church, but it was often cold and formal. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, is and always has been a strict-subscription church, but that has not guaranteed outward progress. However, clear-cut subscription to doctrinal statements by ministers and office-bearers is certainly not without great importance. 'Guard the sacred deposit', said Paul to Timothy. But churches have often been unwilling to do this, even on matters where scripture is plain enough.

I doubt we have come to grips with the place and function of a Confession of Faith in a Christian Church in our time. The framers of the Westminster Confession never intended their work to decide every issue. It was, after all, a consensus, and dealt with all the major doctrines. So there will be areas where different opinions on subsidiary/undefined issues will be held by those who are intelligent and genuine strict subscribers. That needs to be clearly recognised.

But what about the content in a Confession? The liberty of opinion clauses that became common in many Presbyterian bodies around 1900 were framed in a context where there was dissatisfaction with major doctrines like the atonement and God's decrees, even Scripture itself. To grant an undefined liberty of opinion (and logically therefore liberty of expression also) in matters not essential, without defining the essentials unambiguously, is to invite a broadening of teaching beyond the limits of Scripture. Is it being loyal to Christ the only Head of the Church? Yet in rightly strongly objecting to such a procedure as replacing a definite creed with a fluctuating one, we must be careful not to advance a confessionalism which undercuts the supremacy of Scripture and thus denies our Confession!

Yes, we need a strict subscription, yet always the recognition that if anything is found apparently repugnant to the Word of God we will give satisfaction from that Word or amend the confession to make it conform to Scripture.⁴⁷ Of course the future orthodoxy of a Church will not be secured simply by fine trust deeds or formulas of subscription, but by godly men who know, live and teach the Word of God.

Also, while checks against hasty or ill-considered action are good, the Christian Church must always be free to obey her Lord in entering into a wider expression of visible unity in agreement with the Word of God, where that possibility presents itself. A restatement in clear form of the subscription formulas, and the precise obligations of subscribers, could be a means of aiding avoidance of future

⁴⁶ *The Leader*, 19 February 1910 records the case in detail. It was heard in the Northcote court on 14 February.

⁴⁷ This provision was expressly stated by the framers of the *Scots Confession* in 1560.

problems as well as bringing the scattered pieces of the Presbyterian Church together.⁴⁸

Melbourne,
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⁴⁸ I have offered some ideas along this line in two articles in *The Presbyterian Banner* [PCEA magazine], March 2001 and June 2001; reprinted in *Lux Mundi* [Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) magazine], March 2002 and June 2002. On the theory and history of creedal subscription see my extended chapter in J.L.Duncan (ed), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Fearn: Mentor, 2005).