

The Declaratory Act of 1892

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THE Declaratory Act of 1892 is a subject very familiar to most of our readers, and one that was handled at considerable length some years ago in the first volume of this Magazine. There have also appeared since that time several articles in more or less degree bearing upon the subject. But it would appear from some circumstances that have lately come under our notice that an occasional exposition of the character of the Act and our Church's attitude towards it in these columns is still necessary for the instruction of people both within and without the Church. Such may also be fitted to be useful to new readers of the Magazine both at home and abroad.

It need hardly be said that it was the passing of this Declaratory Act into law by the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, with the consent of a majority of Presbyteries, that occasioned the separation of the Rev. D. Macfarlane, the Rev. D. Macdonald and others in 1892, and led to the formation of the present body known as the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. We shall briefly state in the present article some things, first, in regard to the Act itself; and, secondly, in regard to the attitude assumed by our Church towards it and the body that adopted it.

First, let us notice some things in regard to the Declaratory Act itself:

(1.) *Its doctrinal character.* The preamble to the Act affirms that it was drawn up with a view to relieve the difficulties and scruples felt by some in regard to the form of belief to be subscribed on entrance to the Church. The only persons known in this connection as having these difficulties and scruples were such as expressed objections to certain important doctrines in the Confession of Faith—doctrines, for example, of a decidedly Calvinistic, and we may add, Scriptural character. The Act was evidently framed to suit persons to whom the doctrines of the Confession were distasteful. After the preamble, the Act proceeds to declare, in the name of the Church, that certain views about the love of God, the atonement, the work of the Spirit and other very important points were maintained as true by the Church, and that in consistency with the Confession of Faith. Now, we hold that these views themselves were highly unsound, being of an Arminian, semi-Pelagian, Voluntary, Popish, and Rationalistic character, while it was utterly false and misleading to declare that

they were in harmony with the teaching of the Confession. In our opinion nothing was fitter to do more evil in the present day than the emission of such an Act as this of 1892. What was really required to meet the difficulties and scruples of the age was a faithful, loving exhibition and well-reasoned defence of the whole counsel of God as set forth in the Scriptures. But instead of this the Church, by the decision of its majorities, surrendered the doctrines of the faith to the clamant demands of unbelief, and became the expositor and supporter of the errors of an unscriptural system that has been very palatable to the carnal mind in all eyes.

(2.) *Its legal standing.* The Act was passed, according to the terms of the Barrier Act, and thus became “a binding law and constitution” in the Church. The Barrier Act provides against hasty legislation. It provides against any resolution of Assembly being made a binding law and constitution in the Church without the consent of a majority of the Presbyteries. The resolution must first be sent down from the Assembly to the Presbyteries, must be approved of by a majority of them, and then again finally adopted by the Assembly. This procedure was observed and followed in the case of the Declaratory Act. A number of ministers certainly recorded dissents against the passing of the Act, but they (with the exception of two) continued members of the body that adopted it, and so were bound to respect the Act as an Act of the Church. Some of those who thus remained tried to protest against the Act in the following manner, but failed. One probationer at his ordination intimated that he answered the Questions and signed the Formula without any reference to the Declaratory Act, but the Presbytery refused to record his statement. Another got a statement to the same effect recorded by the Presbytery, but the Assembly ordered that it should be deleted.

In 1894 the Assembly passed an explanatory Act, to the effect that the Declaratory Act of 1892 was designed to lay no new burden on the consciences of any within the Church, but only to relieve the difficulties of some who were now at liberty to sign the Confession of Faith in view of the Declaratory Act. But this Act of 1894 in no wise altered the situation; it was only fitted to blind office-bearers in general as to their responsibilities. In the case. Was it no new burden on the consciences of faithful office-bearers that the Church as a Church should have, unfurled a banner for error and not for truth; should have attempted to relieve them of solemn vows to maintain in their Church capacity the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith; should have opened the door for persons of erroneous views, at the same time still requiring them to make

what was to them a dishonest confession, in their answers to the Questions and their signing of the Formula, that they believed the whole doctrine of the Confession, and were resolved to maintain and defend it? Was it no new burden on the consciences of faithful office-bearers that they had now no ability whatever to prevent men of unsound principles from entering the Church, but were bound to admit them, and that with the sanction of the Church itself? Where such a state of things obtained, the Free Church of 1843 had ceased to exist.

As it was constantly asserted that the Declaratory Act was only a relief-giving Act to some, and not binding upon all, many people who were too easily deceived got into confusion on the subject. It is true that the Act was not obligatory in the sense that every person within the pale of the Church was bound to accept its provisions for himself; but it is equally true that the Act was, and continued to be, obligatory upon every person within the pale of the Church, in the sense that he was bound to recognise and respect the liberty of his neighbour to accept these provisions and make all the use of them he chose to make. In this latter sense every person that continued in the Church after the Act was passed was under the Act, in spite of all dissents.

A change took place in 1900, when a minority refused to enter along with the majority into union with the United Presbyterians, and so to form the United Free Church. This minority claims to represent the Free Church of 1843, but it will require to do more than it has yet done to remove past obnoxious legislation before it can be anything else than the Free Church of 1900, which was not in any real sense the original Free Church. It is vain, therefore, for any belonging to this body to say that they are not, and were never, under the Declaratory Act in any sense, when they continued in the Church after the Act was passed. What is the meaning, then, of their efforts towards the repeal of an Act which they say they were never under?

Secondly, let us observe the attitude assumed by the representatives of our Church towards the Declaratory Act and the body that adopted it. Our ministers not merely dissented from the adoption of this Act, as others had done, but protested against it in the strongest possible form; they ceased to recognise any longer the courts of the Church which passed the Act and after petition refused to rescind it. We held, and still hold, that the courts of a body which adopted an Act of such an erroneous character ceased to represent the Free Church of Scotland as settled in 1843. We felt that it was not enough for

the fulfilment of solemn vows, for the satisfaction of conscience, or for the honour of the Church of God and the glory of Christ in the world that we should remain in fellowship with a body that had pulled down the banner of Christ's truth from her citadel and had unfurled: the banner, of God-dishonouring error. A dissenting minority within this communion had no public testimony as a Church for the truth. Free Presbyterians, on the other hand, by the step of separation and the formation of a distinct body maintained a public testimony as a Church for the doctrines and principles of the Free Church of Scotland. We therefore claim and that justly—in no boastful or self-righteous spirit—to be the direct representatives of the Church of Scotland Free, while others we consider, so far as they have yet gone, have more of the name than the reality of the Free Church.

It seems rather strange that, notwithstanding the fact that our Church took up the definite position described, some parties are still affirming that we are as much under the Declaratory Act as those who refused to go into the United Church in 1900. They affirm that the Free Presbyterians did not form themselves into a distinct body until 1893, a year after the Declaratory Act was passed, and that they did not then repeal the Declaratory Act. Quite true; they did not repeal the Act—it was never on their statute-book; but they renounced it, and the body calling itself the Free Church of Scotland that adopted it. The very coming into existence as a distinct body of the Free Presbyterian Church was bound up with the complete renunciation of the Declaratory Act. This is clearly seen in our Deed of Separation. It is absolutely absurd then to insinuate that we are still under the Declaratory Act, or that we require to repeal it. As already shown, our Church did not regard the body which adopted the Act as any longer the Free Church, so that in separating from it we did not separate from the Free Church; we only perpetuated the Free Church as settled in 1843 in a distinct organisation. The introduction of the word “Presbyterian” into the title of the Church, as we have pointed out more than once in these columns, was made solely for the purpose of indicating that we were distinct from the larger body still calling itself the Free Church, and therefore it did not imply the adoption of any new principles.

We trust we have shown in a satisfactory manner how our Church stands in regard to the Declaratory Act. There were undoubtedly errors and innovations in the Free Church before this Act was passed, and the presence of these was a great trial to those persons who were faithful to the truth. As long, however, as the errors and innovations were not justified by any Act in which the

responsibility of the whole Church was involved they felt at liberty to remain, but no sooner was an Act of this character adopted than they considered themselves bound in conscience to separate. Thus it came to pass that the introduction of the Declaratory Act was the expulsion of those who form the Free Presbyterian Church. Division is not desirable for its own sake, but division is sometimes desirable for the truths sake. Free Presbyterians separated in 1893 from a backsliding body, in order that they might be united in the truth, and that union has proved itself to be, in spite of occasional troubles, eminently sweet and profitable. Let us continue to maintain the truth “in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus,” and to seek the extension of Christ’s kingdom in our own and other lands. May His glory fill the whole earth!