
A Warning from Australia: Orthodoxy and Heresy

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Introduction

In the New Testament there are warnings from the Lord Jesus concerning the coming of false prophets (Mt 7:15,24:11,24; Mk 13:22), which were later repeated by his apostles (Gal 1:6-9; 2 Cor 11:12-15; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Jn 4:1).

The existence of false teaching in New Testament times is also known from other sources. There were Judaizers, Docetists, Ebionites and probably Gnostics, for example, who were spreading wrong doctrines in the early days of the Church.

The New Testament not only gives warnings but also urges action against false teachers (1 Tim 1:3,4; Titus 1:10,11, 3:9-11; 2 Jn 9-11; Jude 3,4). The notion of an orthodox faith revealed from heaven and to be guarded (1 Tim 6:20,21; 2 Tim 1:13,14) has been generally understood throughout the history of the Church, even though the application of this faith has sometimes been less than reputable.

However, in 1934 Walter Bauer published a German work which appeared in English in 1971 as **ORTHODOXY AND HERESY IN EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY**¹. Since then the notion of 'heresy' as accurately describing theologically deviant movements has been strongly contested. For Bauer the early Church scene was characterised by diverse theological views which battled for ascendancy. The winners of the battle won the accolade of 'orthodoxy'. Indeed, in some cases, argued Bauer, the original expressions of Christianity would later be judged to be heretical. This theory has muddied the waters of theological perspective and many are now uncertain of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy altogether. Further, the idea of 'liberty of conscience', always a prominent idea in nonconformity, has been recycled to justify heresy and the Church's toleration of heresy within high office.

The validity and usefulness of confessions of faith are necessarily undermined by this thinking. "Does not freedom of theological enquiry and investigation render such formulations only provisional - of limited significance and of less authority?" it is asked. The answer to the question has profound implications both for the teaching office of the Church and for the future of the whole Church.

Bauer's hypothesis was an expression of a trend of thought which had been abroad for at least a century. Faced with the onslaught of the Enlightenment on revealed religion F D E Schleiermacher (1763-1834) attempted to recover its former influence for religion. But in his defence Schleiermacher repudiated any fixed doctrinal basis as the foundation of Christianity and instead he took experience - the human feeling of absolute dependence - as his foundation. Objectivity was replaced by subjectivity. Schleiermacher separated religion and theology; denying that doctrines and dogmas are religion, he said "They are not necessary for religion itself, scarcely even for communicating religion." (quoted in **THE LION CONCISE BOOK OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**, T Lane, p 171). Here is the germ of the whole school of liberal theology, which is still being felt today, although its

zenith is probably now past.

In Scotland the instances of Thomas Erskine (1788-1870), John Mcleod Campbell (1800-1872) and Edward Irving (1792-1834) illustrate this movement which sought its theological basis in the *inner life*. Campbell was deposed in 1831 and Irving in 1833, showing that at this stage Presbyterians still held the concept of required orthodoxy, subscription to the Westminster Confession was required and deviation was dealt with. In 1881 W Robertson Smith, (1846-1894), Professor at Aberdeen, was condemned for holding and expressing Higher Critical views in an article on 'Bible' in the 1875 edition of the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA*. Smith accepted critical theories emanating from Germany but also professed hearty agreement with the Westminster Confession. He was very surprised at the furore his views produced.

Higher criticism was gaining ground across the world and undermining historic views of the Bible. In Australia the major impact was towards the end of the nineteenth century. The case of Charles Strong in Melbourne was a foretaste of what was to come. Because of his liberal views and contumacy Strong lost his post in 1883. The turbulence of the case resulted in the framing of a *Declaratory Act* to help the consciences of some who scrupled at some details in the Westminster Confession, as for example, the creation in six days. Others, such as Andrew Harper, then at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Victoria, had also accepted critical views but opted for a process of gradual change. In 1888 Harper became a member of the faculty at Ormond College to teach Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis. In 1902 he moved to St Andrews College in Sydney. It was chiefly Harper who championed the appointment of Angus in 1914, as he recognised in him a man of ability and a kindred mind, as he thought.

Other influences slowly affecting the churches at this time were the **evolutionary theory** of Darwin and the **dialectical philosophy** and theology of G F W Hegel.

The general trend is illustrated by two events. In 1870 the Baptist Union of New South Wales (NSW hereafter) was formed. In order to comprehend all Baptist churches the basis of union was deliberately formulated without any adequate doctrinal tests. Calvinist, Arminian and any others were thus included. Union was desired as the supreme objective. In 1894 the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in NSW, Rev George MacInnes, gave an address entitled *The death of the verbal inspiration theory*. In it he said (p 238):

It has been the ally, the vantage ground and the trenchant weapon of the infidel. It has banned enquiry, and 'loved darkness rather than light.' It has narrowed, perverted and bewildered theology. It has cramped the energies of the Church, checked her development and growth, and made the faith of many only a wretched half-faith. It has turned many to indifference or to unbelief, who but for it would have believed and followed Christ. The greatest gain from the disappearance of the 'Verbal Code of Rules' theory is that Christ is thereby restored to His proper place and authority...³

Both MacInnes and Harper were active in the Theological Hall and were moving the Church quietly towards an acceptance of the new critical ideas. Thus the scene was set for the appearance of **Samuel Angus**.

Personal History

Angus was born on August 27th 1881 in Ulster to parents of orthodox Presbyterian faith. As was common then, his father was a strong disciplinarian and, being a practical farmer, he had little understanding of his son's scholarly gifts and aspirations. It seems the relationship between them was not good. Perhaps personal animosity was a factor in

Angus' theology later. Emilson remarks significantly (p 47):

There can be little doubt that, over time, Angus came to associate the presence and memory of his estranged father with that of a passionless Punisher, akin to the vengeful Calvinist God he later rejected.⁴

Angus was educated at Collegiate School, Ballymena for 4 years from the age of 12. In 1899 he went to Queen's College, Galway, a secular institution, where religious discussion in lectures was prohibited. The Professor of Greek, Darcy Wentworth Thompson, greatly impressed Angus with his independence of thought, his enthusiasm and his demands for excellence from his students. Angus graduated BA with 1st class honours in ancient classics in 1902 and in 1903 he achieved the MA. At this period Angus was involved with the Student Christian Movement (SCM), which was in process of adapting to the changing theological climate, accepting the liberal ethos. In 1903 Angus went to Princeton, attending both the Seminary under the great B B Warfield and the University under Woodrow Wilson, future President of the USA. At the University was A F West, a Latin scholar of reputation, who interested Angus in North African Christianity. In 1904 Angus received the MA(hons) and in 1906 a doctorate for researches into Augustine's CITY OF GOD. But there was tension between Seminary and University because of alleged unorthodoxy in the University. Angus swayed in allegiance towards the University, which, in view of the future, is significant. The attitude of his fellow-students at the Seminary, Emilson describes (p 60):

These, having chosen the Seminary as a haven of orthodoxy and having wholeheartedly embraced its spiritual culture, adopted the policy of loving hostility towards the offender, praying for his conversion. Their response is not atypical of other equally conservative theological students, at the time, and since.⁴

Years later, A C Gaebelein, an American fundamentalist, wrote (p 265):

In reading this defence (Christianity and dogma) one feels that the Professor has never had a true Christian experience, that he does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as his own personal Saviour. Perhaps this is the trouble with many of these men - they were never born again and hence they have not the Holy Spirit.⁵

This time at Princeton was a crisis period for Angus. His ordination was deferred. He found most help through an understanding of Platonism, where he found a rationalism, honesty and practical emphasis, as an alternative to the dogmatic Christianity which he had known and was in process of rejecting. Subsequently Angus had neither much interest nor expertise in theology *per se*.

In 1906 he had what seems to have been a nervous breakdown. From 1906 to 1910 he held a post-doctoral research fellowship with some lecturing duties at Hartford Theological Seminary. During this period he married Katherine Walker Duryea, a widow active in philanthropic circles. He also spent a semester at Marburg, where he was influenced by Adolf Deissman. From 1910-1915 he was based in Edinburgh where the intellectual climate was much to his liking. Also at this time he spent some months in Berlin, where Adolf von Harnack was a major influence. Angus became more interested in history than philology, his previous discipline, and simultaneously antipathetic towards theologians and all dogmatic systems. There was also a short pastorate in Algiers and some publications. He contributed to the INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BIBLE ENCYCLOPAEDIA, and for Duckworths wrote THE ENVIRONMENT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY (1915).

As a rising star in the academic religious circles, he was seeking a teaching post. This came with the call in 1914 to Sydney, upon the recommendation of a Committee set up to identify suitable men.

Early Days in NSW

On March 2nd 1915 Angus was ordained and inducted as Professor of New Testament exegesis and Historical Theology. In this event Angus owned and accepted the Westminster Confession and Declaratory Act as a statement of his faith. From what we know of his earlier history this cannot have been without mental reservation or equivocation. In 1933 he stated to the Sydney Presbytery Committee (Ward, p 349):

My conscience does not accuse me of any violation of my vows. I appeal to the Supreme Standard as of greater importance than the Subordinate Standard. There is none of my teaching which is not found in Scripture, and there is none of it which is not in accord with the teaching of Jesus . . . Presuming that the only essential in a doctrine is its truth, I have not transgressed the liberty of interpretation allowed even in the Subordinate Standard.³

Ward goes on to comment:

This extract shows both the subtlety of liberalism and a quite improper position. A Presbyterian Church is a creedal church precisely so as to avoid the promulgation of erroneous doctrine under the guise of professions of loyalty to the Scriptures or to the 'spirit of Jesus'.³

Certainly the Confession to which he subscribed represented what Angus now opposed and the Presbyterianism which now employed him. But concern over Angus' teaching did not appear until 1923.

As a teacher, Angus adopted the Socratic method of dialogue in order to elucidate the truth. He was not overly concerned to complete the syllabus, had a rather disordered lecturing style, discouraged the taking of notes, preferring to train his students to think for themselves. He presupposed New Testament Greek in his students and was very demanding of them. Naturally, he concentrated on the more able students and others were left floundering. Occasional provocation, sarcasm, and even aggression towards his students were not unknown.

Angus himself found Australia sadly lacking in intellectual stimulus. In June 1916 he formed with others, mainly theological teachers, a theological club called, provocatively, *The Heretics*. Meeting monthly, they discussed theological works and issues. Here Angus found stimulus and kindred spirits.

In public Angus was very guarded in what he said. He avoided contentious issues if possible, or else gave opinions more conservative than those which his students and other 'heretics' heard. Moves towards union of the denominations were mooted in those days and Angus opposed them, in opposition to his faculty colleagues A Harper and R G Macintyre.

Macintyre provoked a stir with the publication in 1920 of *THE OTHER SIDE OF DEATH*, which presented a form of conditional immortality. In 1921 John Edwards, close friend of Angus, and Moderator of the NSW Assembly gave an address entitled *Theological Reconstruction: A Plea for Freedom*. In it he rejected the authority of the Bible, Church and Confessions in favour of freedom of conscience and reason. In his paper Edwards openly acknowledged his debt to Angus. It was A Harper who, through letters, took issue with Edwards. Seemingly becoming more conservative in his old age (now 80). Harper

wrote (p 125):

Is it possible to say that the difference between Mr. Edwards' theology and the theology of the Church is merely a matter of expression? At every point they touch in common, they seem to me to differ profoundly. Their conceptions of God and man and the world are different. Their thoughts of sin and salvation are not the same.⁴

The direction in which the wind was blowing in the Theological Hall thus began to appear indirectly, and for the first time with respect to Angus.

Beliefs

The writings of Angus provide the evidence required. Emilson (pp 138-141) contains in full Angus' pamphlet *Faith in God through Jesus* published in 1923. In this we find Angus teaching:

No statement of Christian faith can properly insist on demanding more than Jesus asked men to believe. The framers of all the historic creeds have been so absorbed in dogmatic conceptions and actuated by controversial interests that they have overlooked this obvious condition. Their yoke has been burdensome . . .⁴

For Angus there was authority only in the teachings and *spirit* of Jesus. The 'schematization' or 'explanation' of matters is rejected as invalid.

. . . religion unites; theology divides. Hence in a declaration of faith, experience should have right of way over speculation, which has a rightful place in philosophy and theology . . . The truths affirmed should be capable of confirmation by an immediate appeal by *every* Christian to daily experience, rather than by a process of argumentation for which only specialists are qualified, or by a *majority* decision of a church assembly. The experience of life in Christ must be primary.⁴

The influence of Schleiermacher appears and, with it, the difference of perspective from historic evangelicalism. It is generally admitted that experience is an element in Christianity but to make it the basis of Christianity is to take a different path, leading to another religion. For Angus following Jesus' example was more important than holding any dogma. He put it thus:

(Jesus) never insisted as a condition of fellowship on any dogmatic theory of atonement by vicarious sacrifice, but He tolerated no ambiguity in the demand that self-sacrifice should be written large in the lives of His followers.⁴

This position naturally led to a rejection of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy.

"There should be no damnatory clauses, nor threats of excommunication on grounds of **dogmatic** differences under the one divine lordship." Statements of faith should be inclusive not exclusive, not demarcating between right and wrong, nor between Christian and non-Christian, he thought. In the statement of faith which concludes Angus' pamphlet there is no mention of Scripture, atonement or justification. Though sin is mentioned there is no biblical concept of sin. With respect to man he is "by his nature a child of the Heavenly Father". As is often the case it is what is not stated, as much as what is stated, that gives cause for concern. Overall, the statement is clearly liberal in its theology. It is radically incompatible with the Basis of Union. **For Angus the centre of Christianity was not, as for the apostle Paul, Christ and Him crucified but Christlikeness.**

In the Westminster Society lecture for 1987⁶ Peter Barnes analyses Angus' theology as explained in TRUTH AND TRADITION (Angus and Robertson Sydney, 1934):

1 Repudiation of the God of Calvinism. "I can make no truce with the vindictive and arbitrary God of our historic Confession." (p 100) Are there perhaps echoes of the

relationship with his father here?

- 2 Rejection of the deity of Jesus Christ; the Gospels do not present Him as God, he argued, for He prayed, was tempted and was conscious of falling short of His own ideals.
- 3 Denial of any atonement by propitiation or expiation. To argue this Angus had to reject Mark 10:45 as not from Jesus, but as 'part of the hyper-Paulinism of Mark'. "The very thought that God would require the violent death of Jesus Himself as a sin-offering before forgiveness could be granted would have been repulsive to the mind of Jesus, as it is to our minds today" (p 12).
- 4 Denial of the virgin birth (p 55), the bodily resurrection (p 103) and the fall of man as historical (pp 86,87).
- 5 Denial of the reality of Satan ("a superstition" p 123), judgement and hell ("imaginary evils" p 106).

Such liberal theology as this had its zenith in the early decades of the twentieth century and was opposed vehemently by, amongst others, 'fundamentalists'. Sometimes theirs was an ill-informed opposition. An erudite opponent of liberalism was J Gresham Machen. His book **CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM** gives this perspective:

. . . the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. . . called 'modernism' or 'liberalism'. Both names are unsatisfactory . . . manifold as are the forms in which the movement appears, the root of the movement is one; the many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism - that is, the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity (p 2).⁷

Later Machen summarises the differences:

It (modernism) differs from Christianity in its view of God, of man, of the seat of authority and of the way of salvation. And it differs from Christianity not only in theology but in the whole of life (p 178).⁷

Angus himself recognised the radical differences. Ward (p 348) quotes from **TRUTH AND TRADITION** (p 138) to this effect:

If Presbyterianism is a religious legalism consisting of the letter of the Confession and based on the legislation of the Declaratory statement, as my opponents contend, then I emphatically repudiate such authoritarian religion and the Church cannot do better than expel me forthwith. . .³

But we are ahead of the sequence of events at this point, and we need to return to 1923 to consider the progress of events in what has been called *The Angus Affair*.

The Angus Affair

1923

Angus spoke to an SCM conference on *The Bible* and a summary of his paper was printed in the *Daily Telegraph* on January 9th. Controversy followed through the pages of the subsequent editions. At this time Angus printed *Faith in God through Jesus* (at which we have looked) in his own defence. However, despite all the controversy no concerted action was taken against Angus at this time.

1923-32

Angus spent some time overseas, and received 3 doctorates, from Belfast, Glasgow and Belfast again. He was also writing. In 1925 he published *THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS AND CHRISTIANITY* and in 1929 *THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD*. In the latter, Angus claimed that Christianity had been transformed into a mystery religion. R G Macintyre, Professor at the Theological Hall, reviewed the book in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on November 9th and stated it was 'a polemic, pure and simple, against sacramental religion'. Some think Macintyre's purpose was rather to caution Angus publicly against imprudent expression of views which were in other contexts quite acceptable, than to lead a campaign against Angus. It was indiscretion rather than heresy which concerned Macintyre. In 1931 J Ward Harrison of Botany Methodist Church issued a series of pamphlets in reaction against Angus. In 1932 and 1933 the Methodist Conference debated the continuance of Methodist students in the United Course of theology, of which Angus was a teacher. In 1933 they withdrew their students but they returned in 1937.

In May 1932 Joseph Fulton petitioned the NSW Assembly alleging heretical teaching in the Theological Hall. The petition was not well-worded and R G Macintyre found it easy to gain support for his motion:

that the Assembly reaffirms the adherence of this Church to the doctrines of the evangelical faith as laid down in the Basis of Union (1901), and expects all its Ministers and Teachers in their preaching and teaching to conform thereto, giving chief place to the doctrines of Redemption which the Church has declared to be vital to the Christian faith. (p 140)⁴

This significant stance disclosed the reluctance of Presbyterians to apply the necessary actions to people like Angus within the Church. Emilson comments:

For many Assembly members, and for Macintyre in particular, the issue at hand was not so much a matter of orthodoxy as of correct behaviour. If Dr. Angus could maintain a suitable measure of discretion within and outside Assembly, the implication was there, he need expect little opposition from the Assembly. (p 191)⁴

The whole issue was considered too divisive and too distracting. Financial difficulties, and the losing battle with secularism in society, were considered the important issues, not to be neglected for matters like this.

1932-33

In March 1932 J T H Kerr began his course at the Theological Hall. He was an elder at the Ashfield congregation, with 325 communicant members, and Robert McGowan as Minister. McGowan was trained at Ormond College and ordained in 1899. He had been at Ashfield 25 years and in 1932 had completed a term as Moderator of the NSW Assembly. Kerr passed transcripts of Angus' lectures to McGowan and made no secret of it. McGowan was quite familiar with Angus' theological position and found nothing new in it. He was quite widely read. The transcripts convinced him that action was necessary. He preached to his own people warning of the dangers, wrote to the newspapers, and overtured the NSW Assembly through the Presbytery of Sydney. At the May assembly of 1933 McGowan withdrew his overture, because of recent bereavement and threat of civil action if he proceeded. Some criticised him for this apparent cowardice. A report from a Committee of the Sydney Presbytery which had met with Angus was conciliatory. David Flockhart and R G Macintyre easily won the Assembly's support for a motion that accepted

Angus' assurance of adherence to the doctrine of the Church and expressed confidence that Angus did not hold views contrary to the faith of the Church. In his public statement Angus presented a very good image which swayed many. The vote was 245:19. Seven members appealed to the General Assembly of Australia (GAA) and McGowan gave reasons occupying several pages in the Proceedings.

In September 1933 the GAA met in Melbourne and found that a case for formal investigation had been demonstrated. The matter was remitted to the Presbytery of Sydney with provision for a Judicial Commission of GAA to adjudicate, should there be appeals to the NSW Assembly and beyond.

1934

Angus was suffering severe mental and physical strain by this time. In March he met with men in a Preliminary Enquiry and he was in aggressive mood. After four meetings Committee members were bewildered and frustrated by Angus' evasiveness and the evident contempt he held for at least some of them. At the Presbytery meeting in April there was a mixed attitude amongst members. Angus took the opportunity to turn on his charm and gave a display of his 'graciousness' and 'spirituality'.

In the same month Angus published TRUTH AND TRADITION. It was, as we have noted, an assault on Biblical truths. It shocked many and alienated some who had previously been sympathetic towards Angus.

In May the NSW Assembly met in a crisis atmosphere. The Moderator, Joseph Lundie, urged restraint, and Angus appeared to be penitent and wished to be free of controversy. R G Macintyre urged the Assembly to declare Angus' teaching contrary to those of the Church. However, unusually, Macintyre did not have his way, the Assembly voting by 174:83 to affirm that the Declaratory Act was wide enough to encompass Angus. McGowan appealed to the Judicial Commission, after his motion to proceed against Angus by judicial process was defeated by 154:79. The Judicial Commission considered the evidence and the situation, and found substantially in favour of Angus. It also reaffirmed the Church's commitment to the historic faith. This was surely a strange and erroneous judgement. McGowan and others dissented. Immediately afterwards Angus entered hospital for surgery; in November his wife Katherine died after a long illness. No doubt it was a time of great sorrow and trauma for Angus.

1936

When Angus resumed teaching again in March 1936 he was informed by McGowan and A J Carter that they intended to take up again the investigation of his teaching.

Notice of the situation was being taken overseas. For example, New Zealand Presbyterians decided their students would no longer attend St Andrews College because of the teaching of Angus. Andrew Harper, now retired in Scotland, had made known his distress caused by the publication of TRUTH AND TRADITION.

So the case returned to the Presbytery of Sydney, then to State Assembly, and then to GAA.

The GAA met in Sydney in September 1936. Before it were some notices of motion and a petition signed by 111 ministers and about 250 elders from all the States except NSW. This petition stated:

1. That deep concern exists in our minds and in the minds of our faithful people caused by the widespread publication of the teaching of Professor S Angus, of Sydney, and

particularly set out in his book "Truth and Tradition" a book which in our view is a denial of the Supreme and Subordinate Standards of this Church which every teacher is pledged to "assert, maintain, and defend . . ."

Accordingly we petition the Venerable the General Assembly to take such decisive action as will vindicate our position as a Church holding the common Christian faith in Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven and was made man and by His death and resurrection secured forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all believers (p 191).⁸

Amongst notices of motion were those of Geo Tulloch ("to proceed against Professor Angus by judicial process with libel. ") Minute 25, and F A Hagenauer seeking obedience and teaching according to the Basis of Union (Minute 18). R G Macintyre, influential as ever, was moving for peace and unity whilst affirming adherence to the faith (Minute 68). A D Marchant was for recognition of diversity in theology and an exhortation to get back to its 'real business' of 'teaching, preaching and practice of vital religion' (Minute 70). A compromise was reached (Minute 87) which encompassed much of the content of earlier notices of motion. It affirmed the essential doctrines in question and instructed Assemblies, Presbyteries and Ministers to obey:

. . . the doctrine of Redemption is essential to the faith and must be taught as set forth in the Subordinate Standard, and laid down in the Declaratory Statement unless and until altered in the prescribed manner (Minute 87 para 6).

Angus' attention was drawn to this and it was resolved no further action was necessary "unless it be disobeyed hereafter."

In his Moderator's address to the Assembly in Western Australia on Tuesday May 12th 1936 George Tulloch had expressed the views of many:

Every Professor and Minister, declares at his Ordination, on oath before God and men, that he adheres to (the Confession in the light of the Declaratory Act) and vows that he will "assert, maintain, and defend" these truths which are vital to the inner life of the Church. It is evident, however, that of recent years there has been a great and rapid weakening, on the fundamental facts of the faith. . . This is, without doubt, an absolutely dishonest position. The Church cannot be responsible for the doubts which may arise in the minds of her teachers on the great and vital doctrines of the faith. But surely, the teacher, if he is honest, must consider his position.

If any Minister of the Church finds that he can no longer adhere to his solemn Ordination Vow, he is duty bound to resign his commission. . .

We do not deny the liberty which is the right of every man to hold divergent views on matters of secondary importance; but on the vital facts of the Gospel and supreme loyalty to the Deity of Christ, as the King and Head of the Church, there can be no divergence within the Church.⁹

This view is undoubtedly correct. That it was not upheld at the GAA indicates confusion of thought in some minds, personal dishonesty of this kind in others, and lack of resolution, perhaps, in some. At this distance, certainty is impossible but that the GAA failed in its duty to Christ and the gospel cannot be doubted.

1939

In early 1939 Angus published ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY and by it caused the opposition to his teaching to flare up again. Three petitions were sent to the GAA meeting in Melbourne in September. These were from F A Hagenauer, 26 Ministers & other Elders

in Victoria, and from R J H McGowan (a quotation appears in the Appendix). Open disobedience to the injunction of the 1936 GAA was alleged, and the request was for such teaching contrary to the Basis of Union to be terminated.

War had, by the time of the GAA, broken out, and so Hagenauer gave notice of motion that in view of the war “. . . no disciplinary action be taken against Dr Angus for this disobedience, but that he is hereby most solemnly enjoined that the Laws of the Church must be kept, and that henceforth he must obey the specific instructions of the General Assembly (BB 1936 Min 87) . . .” (10 Minute 20)

A R McVittie wanted to postpone all consideration until the next meeting of the Assembly. George Tulloch gave notice he would move “. . . he be, and is hereby, suspended from office in the Church until the next meetings of this General Assembly. . .” (Minute 22), this until proof of complete change of view by Angus be forthcoming, and the two offending books be withdrawn.

H Perkins gave notice of motion to refer the matter to the Committee on the attitude of the Church to her Creed. Amongst reasons offered were: “Dr Angus does not stand alone in this matter but represents a large body of devoted Ministers and Church members. . .” Perkins had no doubt Angus was loyal “to the faith of his Church as he interprets it” (Minute 54).

In the Third Sederunt sitting the 3 petitions were received; of the notices of motion McVittie’s motion was put first, and then amended to read:

That consideration of these Petitions and all matters anent the teachings and writings of Dr. Angus be postponed till the next meeting of this Assembly (Minutes 72,73).

There was a division and the motion passed 154:100 with names recorded; Tulloch and some others dissented (Minutes 79,80).

It is noteworthy that Angus himself was rather contemptuous of the cowardice of the GAA in failing to deal with the matter. In a letter of January 1940 he wrote:

What you term the twentieth century heresy hunt came to an ignoble postponement in September. Heaven knows what the trembling Church would have done without the excuse of the European War to reprieve the culprit until 1942. The Church displayed no courage, courage being evidently the quality of heresy. Macintyre, openly neutral, worked hard behind the scenes ‘to stop Angus denying the vital doctrines of the Church’ (p 263)⁴

Shortly afterwards Angus suffered a stroke and was off work until March 1941. There were petitions to the 1942 Assembly but the war crisis and sympathy for Angus, still in poor health, brought about a unanimous resolution to pass from ‘all communications dealing in any way whatsoever with the case of Dr. Angus’ without prejudice to the rights of the parties.

On November 17th 1943 Samuel Angus died of cancer.

Angus and heresy

Far from being the dawn of a new enlightened day, the liberalism of Angus was, in his day, showing signs of decline, chiefly through the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and others. Liberalism has proved to be barren, contributing rather to the decline than to the upbuilding of Christian Churches.

Angus was never formally charged and tried for heresy, though there is ample evidence to require this procedure. The thought world of the day, illustrated by Bauer’s work noted earlier, is one factor which probably influenced matters. No doubt also, the prosecution

of a heresy charge is distasteful work to the minister of the gospel, whose heart is in preaching Christ and him crucified. The political skills of Angus' friends in the Church courts may also be a factor, together with a lack of such skills in those wishing to deal with Angus according to due legal process.

Loyalty to Christ and the gospel requires that men like Angus are fairly tried. Parker (p 285) draws attention to the parallel with the case of J Gresham Machen, an evangelical prosecuted at the same period in the USA. He argues:

... the Australian conservatives lacked any outstanding spokesman who could handle the intellectual issues and meet figures such as Angus on his own ground.⁵

This judgement may be questioned. Though there was no theological teacher of conservative views equipped with similar training to Angus, it is doubtful whether this is necessary. Angus was not controversial because of his intellect, but because of his repudiation of the Basis of Union. Men of lesser intellectual gifts were more than capable of discerning Angus' heresy. McGowan, for example, lectured part-time at Croydon Bible College, and Emilson describes him as (p 197): "An 'Ormond' man, ... a clergyman with a wide knowledge of Church history, he found little that was new in Angus' theology".⁴ Ward (p 347) thinks that the Procurators of the time lacked a deep grasp of the Presbyterian Constitution and that there was generally considerable ignorance of proper procedure. It seems that Presbyterians feared a divisive heresy trial and some thought tolerance and comprehensiveness were necessary. Ward gives an eight point procedure to be followed in such cases (pp 346, 337). The sequence is, firstly, friendly remonstrance, then attention to the level of understanding of those making allegations; then consideration of the seriousness or otherwise of the matter alleged. Further, the minister is entitled to demand a libel to be drawn up before speaking to co-presbyters, though this might not be best policy. Fifthly, a libel is to be properly written, signed by the prosecutors and listing witnesses and relevant documents. The grounds of libel Ward suggests are chiefly the life or doctrine of the minister, or the need of the presbytery to vindicate itself from prejudicial reports. If this stage is reached, the accused is to be summoned to appear, with ample notice. At the presbytery meeting the presbytery may refer the case to a higher court if this is believed to be expedient.

What we can learn from this

1. There were many in the Church who put peace, comprehensiveness, tolerance and unity above everything. It seems their only rule of faith and practice was expediency. At the time of the 1939 GAA the Keswick Quarterly commented:

To shrink from outward controversy, when doing so involves a betrayal of the Truth and a compromise with falsehood, is a shame of which no true man of God should be guilty. Rather than allow the present blot to remain on the Presbyterian Church of Australia, let all members of the body of Christ pray that God in His infinite mercy will work for us by cleansing the Church, and freeing us from the incubus of sin that now lies upon us. (p 277)⁵

The conclusion of Keswick Quarterly was that the Presbyterian Church failed 'to contend earnestly for the faith' and was culpable for retaining 'at the very centre of their denominational work' one who denied the faith of his Church (p 278).⁵

Certainly Angus was not alone in his views within the Church, John Edwards and Prof Kenneth Edward, for example, also held like opinions. How many others were there? Perhaps the answer to this would go far to explain why Macintyre sought only silence

or discretion from Angus. However this may be, the observation seems irresistible, that when expediency gains the upper hand in the thinking of the courts of the Church, the Church is on a slippery slope hurtling downwards from historic Christianity. In the case of the Presbyterian Church it appears that, in God's mercy, the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977 has rescued her from total apostasy.

2. The political manoeuvrings and prevarications in the various courts of the Church appear to have prolonged and exacerbated Angus' personal sufferings and his decline in health. The machinations of his friends may have been, in fact, as unhelpful to Angus, as they were to the cause of justice and truth.
3. The failure of the Church to proceed judicially against Angus, as Macintyre and others wanted in 1934, must have appeared incomprehensible to intelligent observers of the religious scene. The newspapers became cynical, as the cartoons printed in *Emilson* between pages 118 and 119 show. The Church appears to have played into the hands of her enemies.
4. The NSW Church was paralysed for about a decade. Membership data illustrate this. In 1931 there were 34,483 communicant members. This fell to 29,329 by 1936 (p 350)³, but recovered by the end of the decade. A just decision reached in proper procedure, without undue delay, may not have been so damaging, and would have been more to the honour of the Church.
5. The fact that the Declaratory Act was used as a reason for inaction against Angus should be pondered. No doubt it was a misuse, but it may be that this misuse could be somehow avoided in future. Speculation about that is not appropriate in this article.
6. Theological teachers are in crucial positions in the Church. Their influence for good or ill can be enormous. They are inevitably influential in shaping the thinking and attitudes of generations of students, who become ministers. The long-term health of the Church depends considerably upon having men in her theological halls who are committed to the doctrines of the Church. Angus had many students in NSW who defended him strongly, thinking they 'knew him', despite the plainest evidence of heresy. Doubtless they could no longer discern truth and heresy and so personal affection became the predominating factor.
7. Angus was not the cause of problems in Presbyterianism at the time. He was a symptom of the disease which had sprung up in Germany and sprouted in Australia in the last decades of the nineteenth century. MacInnes' address in 1894 was the first clear signal in NSW Presbyterianism and it attacked the very basis of Christianity - the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. As P Barnes put it (p 6):
The lesson should be plain enough - once biblical inerrancy is denied, it will only be a generation or two before there are profound theological, spiritual and moral aberrations in the church.⁶

Appendix

A petition of 26 ministers and other elders of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria to the General Assembly of Australia in 1939 was based on the following quotations from Angus' book, *ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY*:

Dr Angus did affirm that Christian faith has too long been based on "alleged historic facts of debatable historicity . . . such as the Virgin Birth, the physical Resurrection of Jesus", and did further state "that Christian faith has too long been confounded with certain dogmatic interpretations of . . . 'alleged historic facts such as theories of

propitiatory atonement”.

“Similarly, the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus is not the disputed and disputable ‘fact’ of an empty grave and a physical raising, but that Christ’s Spirit still moves the souls of men.”

“Hence Jesus’ views of reconciliation with God through repentance and love on our part, and the love of the Father on the other, are slowly winning against the cruder conceptions of a God who ‘set forth Jesus to be a propitiation in his blood’, to reconcile the world.”

“Further, deeper reflection upon ethical values and the nature of personality has made it impossible to accept vicarious acquittal by the sufferings even of Jesus.”

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Unfortunately I had no access to Angus’ writings and have had to rely heavily on secondary sources. These are, however, first class and have provided all the necessary information.

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Inerrancy must be maintained. To drop it will leave one immediately with less than a whole Holy Bible, and less than a whole divine-human Saviour and Lord. What it leaves us with will itself diminish, and sooner than we think. The church will have neither the Christ of God nor the Word of God. This is no strife about words to no profit. The inerrancy of Scripture is an integral part of the pattern of sound words (ie health-giving and health-preserving) which we are to hold fast and of the delivered faith for which we are to agonize.

Hywel R Jones, BEC Conference, 1977
