

# THE BASICS OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

James MacGregor

Edited and with a  
biographical introduction by  
John W. Keddle



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# BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Rev. John W. Keddie

James MacGregor's book on Christian Doctrine is a little gem. Though it is largely unknown today, it is a theological classic, one of the very best books of its type to come out of the churches in Scotland in the 19th century. Originally published as *Christian Doctrine: A Text-Book for Youth*,<sup>1</sup> it was a modest bestseller in its day, going through 12 printings of 1,000 copies each from its first publication in 1861 until its last reprinting in 1874. It was produced as a systematic treatment of Christian doctrine particularly for young people. The author, James MacGregor (1830–1894), was a gifted and faithful theologian of Calvinistic persuasion.

## **A masterful work on doctrine**

This book on Christian doctrine was the first fruits of MacGregor's work in the ministry of the Free Church of

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<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh, 1861, 164pp.

Scotland. It was during his first charge in the Free Church at Barry (Angus, Scotland), in which he ministered between 1857 and 1861, that this book first saw the light of day. It shows all the hallmarks of his justly revered teaching at New College, Edinburgh, where MacGregor studied under such outstanding theologians as William Cunningham and James Buchanan. In what we have here we can almost hear the sound of the teaching of these men. The happy occasion of its reprinting after so many years brings us in touch not only with the theological skill of the author, but also the quality of the theological teaching he received at the feet of the justly famous early Senatus of New College.

### **A notable commendation**

When it first appeared in 1861 *Christian Doctrine* was well received. One commendation is particularly noteworthy:

We have pleasure in calling the attention of ministers and teachers of Bible classes to the admirable text-book of *Christian Doctrine* recently published by Mr Elliot.<sup>2</sup> In the comprehensiveness of its plan, the precision of its statements, and the fullness and appropriateness of its scriptural

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the publisher, Andrew Elliot of 15 Princes Street, Edinburgh.

proofs, it seems to us to be far superior to any work of the kind with which we are acquainted.

(Signed) Robert S. Candlish, D.D., Edinburgh;

John Robson, D.D., Glasgow;

William Cunningham, D.D., Edinburgh;

James Begg, D.D., Edinburgh;

Andrew Thomson, D.D., Edinburgh;

Julius Wood, D.D., Dumfries.

The signatories to this commendation were all prominent ministers in the Free Church of Scotland or the Untied Presbyterian Church. Two were Professors at New College, four had served as Moderators of the Free Church of Scotland, and all were highly respected authors in their own right.

A book notice in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* of 1861 by George Smeaton described it as 'a most admirable manual for those who wish to be introduced into a systematic view of divine truth in a condensed form, and also for those who have occasion to instruct others in the Christian system.'

### **MacGregor's early days (1830-1851)**

As to the author, James MacGregor was a man of humble origins. He one of a large family born to Duncan and Helen MacGregor in Callander, near the Trossachs in

Perthshire. Born in 1830,<sup>3</sup> James was one of at least 10 children and was a native Gaelic speaker. His father was a builder in the town, then a quiet Highland village. Educated there in the local church Day School (after 1843 in the Free Church Day School), James clearly had great ambitions as, unusually for the day and area, he went up to Edinburgh University as a 17 year old in 1847. He was an extremely bright student, graduating Master of Arts (also uncommon for those days) in 1851 and, feeling a call from the Lord to enter the gospel ministry, went up

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<sup>3</sup> This date has been disputed. Official birth records indicate that twins, Duncan Macpherson and James, were born to Duncan and Helen MacGregor in Callander on 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1829 (Old Parish Records, 336/00 030 0016, Callander). However, on James MacGregor's marriage certificate dated 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1857, his age is given as 27, which implies that the birth year was 1830. Furthermore, on his gravestone in Omaru cemetery his age at death on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1894 is given as 64, which again implies an 1830 birth year. Although there is strong *prima facie* evidence for 1829, it may just be that the birth record was written in 1830 and recorded the 6<sup>th</sup> January birth as 1829 instead of 1830. It is clear that James MacGregor believed he was born in 1830 and not 1829, a belief taken up as being the true birth year in other official publications, such as the *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland 1843–1900* (1913) and Hugh Watt's history of *New College, Edinburgh* (1946). It must just remain an enigma.

## PREFACE

This little work is intended to serve as a manual for grown-up young men and women, heads of families, and teachers of youth; to occupy a middle position between elementary catechisms on the one hand, and elaborate theological systems on the other. It would have been inconsistent with its plan to indulge in any private speculations of my own. My purpose and endeavour have been, suppressing mere personal, denominational, or national peculiarities, to prepare a short and simple exposition of the evangelical faith of orthodox Christians.

— James MacGregor, 1861



## EDITOR'S NOTE

The editing of James MacGregor's book on *Christian Doctrine* has been slight. It has extended largely to organising all the chapters consecutively rather than being divided into various 'Parts' as in the original. Besides this the only changes have been changing all the various textual references from roman to the more common arabic numerals and substituting a few words here and there to replace archaic words by more contemporary equivalents.

Thanks are due to Dr Catherine Hyde for her conscientious work in carefully checking and proof-reading the text.

It is the editor's prayer that the Lord might be pleased to bless this re-publication of *Christian Doctrine* to young and old in the encouragement of a sound Biblical understanding of the truths of the Christian faith, as was the intention of the author himself.

JWK

# THE SCRIPTURES

## Their Divinity, Inspiration, Place, and Use

### **1. Every human being is bound to be a theologian**

For theology is the knowledge of God. And this knowledge we must have, in order that we may achieve our chief end — live the life for which we are made. ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever;’ and we can neither give him the glory, nor be blessed in the view and enjoyment of his glory, unless we know him (John 18:3).

### **2. Within our reach there is a natural theology**

The constitution of man, and the general works of creation and providence, constitute a natural revelation of God, a book of nature, in which everyone may read

the truth that God is, and that he is to be worshipped and served. So far, we may derive a knowledge of God from 'the light of nature' (Romans 1:19–20).

### **3. But we need, besides, a special revelation**

The light of nature does not suffice to give us such a knowledge of God as will enable us fully to glorify and enjoy him. It shows us *that* God is; it fails to show *who* he is, to make us acquainted with his person (Acts 17:23; Luke 10: 22). To some extent, it shows us *what* he is, in the attributes of his nature; it fails to show us what we supremely need to know, the saving attribute of his grace (1 Corinthians 1:21). To some extent, it shows us what he would have us to do, teaching us the moral law; but it fails to assure us that this is *all* that he would have us to do, even as men; and it utterly fails to show us what we must do, as lost sinners, in order to be saved (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Again, even what it does show, it shows but dimly, and we are but little disposed to see. So we need a special revelation, even in order to keep clear and strong upon our minds the knowledge that may be derived from the natural revelation, as we need the sunlight in order to learn the time as marked on the face of a watch. Thus, the need of a special revelation is apparent from the nature of the case. It is further apparent from experience. While individuals here and there have claimed that the light of

nature is a sufficient guide, all nations have declared that it is not. All religions are founded on the profession of a supernatural revelation. All the heathen religions profess to have been originally revealed from heaven. And in making this false profession, they have shown at least the universal feeling of the need of such a revelation, over and above the light of nature. That the need is real is shown by the following statement and reasons.

#### **4. A special revelation is made by the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments**

These Scriptures, or 'writings,' were composed and published at intervals, extending from about 1,400 years before Christ to 100 after. Those which were written before his coming are called the Old Testament Scriptures; those which were written after his coming are called the Scriptures of the New Testament. They are usually all bound up in one volume, called 'The Bible,' or 'book.' And they have obtained their name of '*the* Scriptures,' '*the* Bible,' 'the Holy Scriptures,' 'the Holy Bible,' because they convey to us the Word of God; they make a supernatural revelation of God and his will.

That they do so, appears from such reasons as the following:

### **Human needs, and the mercy of God**

Human beings have always felt the need of such a revelation. Such a revelation is plainly needed in order that lost man may be saved. Such a revelation was to be expected, from the mercy of God, his manifest forbearance and long-suffering goodness to mankind. But though the Mohammedan and pagan religions claim to be founded on such a revelation, their claims are demonstrably false. The expectation, therefore, is disappointed — the great need of man is not provided for, the only hope of man is lost — unless such a revelation be made in the Bible (Acts 4:12).

### **The history of the Bible in the world**

From the beginning, the Bible has always been opposed, calumniated, persecuted with mortal violence, by every false religion, by the world's kingdoms, by wicked men, by the manifest malice of the devil. If it had been false, if its claims to a divine origin had been unfounded, if it had not been the Word of God, the gates of hell would have prevailed against it; long before now, like the supposed revelations of Mohammed and the heathens, it would have perished from the earth, or been a laughing-stock to the well-informed.

### **The testimony of the people of God**

A child may be trusted to know his father's voice, to recognise his handwriting and style. The people of God

may be expected to know the Word of their heavenly Father. One may be deceived, and another, and another, on this, or that, or that other point, of subordinate importance. But it is impossible that the whole family of God's children on earth, in all lands and all times, should have been deceived on a point on which depends their very life. Now the people of God, in all lands and all times, have recognised the Bible as God's Word: the more pure, enlightened, Godlike the church has been, the more abundantly she has honoured the Bible, the more unreservedly she has committed her life to its guidance, staked her life on the truth of its being a divine revelation.

### **The testimony of the Bible writers**

A good man will rarely tell a lie, even for his own advantage. The most abandoned villain will not lie, to his own manifest disadvantage. Now, the Bible writers were not one, but many. They were, as a class, the best, and wisest, and holiest men that have ever lived on earth. In uttering their testimony, they knew that they had every evil to expect that the wrath of men can inflict. They knew that, while thus provoking the miseries of the present life, they had nothing to expect in the life to come but the wrath of God, if their testimony was untrue; and that that wrath would be redoubled if the false witness was rendered upon oath, or in the name of Jehovah.