

The Presbyterian Church of Australia was formed from a union of the various state Presbyterian Churches in 1901, the same year that the states formed the Commonwealth of Australia..

The constitutional and legal framework for that union is contained in a document called the Scheme of Union. This Scheme is in two distinct parts, each covering a different area.

1. The Articles of Agreement.

These articles set out the administrative structures of the new church.

They state, among other things, how membership of the General Assembly of Australia is determined, and how this court organises itself when acting in its legislative and judicial roles.

They state that the GAA is supreme on matters of doctrine, worship, discipline, missions at home and overseas, training of students for the ministry, the reception of ministers from other churches, Christian Education and the national journal of the church.

The Articles of Agreement can be amended by a simple majority of the state assemblies and presbyteries. This has been done on several occasions and has usually involved sending the changes down to presbyteries under the Barrier Act. However, this is not a requirement.

2. The Basis of Union

These articles set out the **doctrinal** basis for the union of the churches and they may be

amended only by a three fifths majority of the GAA and the presbyteries and a majority of the state assemblies.

The first article states that the Supreme Standard of the Church "*shall be the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*".

The second article states that the Subordinate Standard of the church "*shall be the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of the ... declaratory statement ...*"

The declaratory statement is particularly significant and consists of six paragraphs, explaining the Westminster Confession on the matters of redemption, predestination, death in infancy, man's fallen nature, the role of the civil authorities and liberty of conscience.

Paragraph 1 in the declaratory statement makes it very clear what issues are to be regarded as being essential to the faith, although it doesn't indicate how the doctrines listed are to be understood.

1. That in regard to the doctrine of redemption as taught in the subordinate standard, and in consistency therewith, the love of God to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the free offer of salvation to men without distinction on the grounds of Christ's all sufficient sacrifice, are regarded by this Church as vital to the Christian faith. And inasmuch as the Christian faith rests upon, and the Christian consciousness takes hold of, certain objective historical facts, especially the incarnation, the atoning life and death, and the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and His bestowment of His Holy Spirit, this Church regards

those whom it admits to the Holy Ministry as pledged to give a chief place in their teaching to these cardinal facts, and to the message of redemption and reconciliation implied and manifested in them.

Basis of Union, Clause II "Declaratory Statement"

Of particular significance is the provision in the Basis of Union covering changes made to the doctrinal foundations of the church.

On any change being made in the Basis of Union in accordance with Section III, if any congregation thereupon refuses to acquiesce in the change and determines to adhere to the original basis of union, the General Assembly is empowered - (1) to allow such congregation to retain all its congregational property; or (2) to deal in such other way with the said property as to the assembly may seem just an equitable.

Basis of Union, Clause II "Declaratory Statement"

Congregations refusing to agree to the change may be entitled to withdraw from the church holding certain rights in regard to property. There is uncertainty in the wording but when the last change was made to the Basis of Union, to enable the formation of the Uniting Church in 1976, congregations with only 30% electing not to go into union were entitled to retain all their congregational property.

On the issue of conscience and freedom of opinion, the Basis gives a lot of room to move . Furthermore it repudiates a mean-spirited attitude towards the intrusion of Church and State on this right.

5. That liberty of opinion is allowed on matters in the subordinate standard not essential to the doctrine therein taught, the Church guarding against the abuse of this liberty to the injury of its unity and peace.

6. That with regard to the doctrine of the civil magistrate and his authority and duty in the sphere of religion, as taught in the subordinate standard the church holds that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, "and Head over all things of the Church, which is His body." It disclaims, accordingly, intolerant or persecuting principles and does not consider its office-bearers, in subscribing to the Confession, as committed to any principles inconsistent with the liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement, declaring in the words of the Confession that "God alone is Lord of the conscience".

Basis of Union, Clause II "Declaratory Statement"

The phrase "not essential to the doctrine therein taught" has caused some puzzled expressions in the past. It can best be explained as a question. If a particular point of doctrine was removed, would it undermine the integrity of the rest of the church's teaching?

It should be noted that full authority to decide what doctrines are essential to the faith rests with the church itself. Arguably any widening of the range of vital doctrines could work against peace and harmony in the church as much as a move to narrow that range.

Contained in the Basis of Union is the wording of the formula to be signed by ministers and elders on their ordination.

I own and accept the Subordinate Standard of this Church, with the explanations given in the articles contained in the declaratory statement, as an exhibition of the sense in which I understand the Holy Scriptures, and as a confession of my faith. I further own the purity of the worship practised in this Church, and the Presbyterian government thereof to be founded on the Word of God, and agreeable thereto; and I promise that through the Grace of God I shall firmly and constantly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall in my station assert, maintain and defend the doctrine, worship and government of the Church.

Basis of Union, Clause II "Declaratory Statement"

The Scheme of Union is in effect the constitution of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. As such it sets out the organizational structure of the church as well as defining the rights and responsibilities of those who are its members and office-bearers.

It should serve to unite Presbyterians in the love of Christ. It should bind them together in fellowship. It should enable them to grow together in the faith, to serve God better and to witness before the world to the working of His Spirit in their lives.



The Presbyterian Fellowship

Understanding
the
Presbyterian Church

The Basis of Union

