James Gibb’s Heresy Trial, 1890

The three decades from 1880 to 1910 saw an epidemic of heresy trials infect the Protestant churches of the English-speaking world. In 1881 a Scot, William Robertson Smith, was deposed from his professorial chair for his measured support of Wellhausen.¹ By the mid-1880s Charles Strong, the able and erudite minister of Scots Church, Melbourne, had been hounded from the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. His objections to a penal substitutionary explanation of the atonement had made him heretic.² In 1890 two of Scotland’s ablest biblical scholars, Marcus Dods and A.B. Bruce, were tried and acquitted.³ One year later, Charles Augustus Briggs, Professor of Hebrew at Union Seminary (New York), an exponent of higher criticism, was suspended following his inaugural lecture. He was finally deposed in 1893.⁴

These bitter ecclesiastical trials were part of a desperate search for theological certitude by clergy and laity profoundly threatened by strong seas that lashed the church, and by rotting timber beneath the Ark’s water-line. The heresy trials of this period took place in a weltwärts between an age of authoritarian dogmatism and the dawning of an accommodation by theologians with the new challenging scientific method. Under attack from secularism, Darwinism, the new historical-critical method of biblical study, and by German theological revisionism, it is scarcely surprising that frightened ecclesiastical leaders reacted to threat by thrusting out those they believed to be traitors to their cause.

New Zealand did not escape this outbreak of heresy-hunting. The two most notable ‘heretics’ to appear before New Zealand ecclesiastical courts were William Salmond and James Gibb. This paper concerns itself specifically with Gibb’s trial. However, Salmond’s trial set the scene for Gibb’s

¹Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). This biblical scholar and orientalist employed the techniques of scientific historical criticism to uncover several layers of tradition in Old Testament and New Testament writings. He effectively challenged both the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the apostolic authorship of the gospels.
²Charles Strong (1844-1942), Minister of Scots Church (Melbourne) and founder of the creedless Australian Church. See C.R. Badger, The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church, Melbourne, 1971.
provocative courting of a heresy charge and because of this some preliminary attention must be given the former case.\textsuperscript{5}

In 1888 Salmond, then Professor of Mental and Moral Science at the University of Otago, and previously Professor of Theology to the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland, was accused of ‘universalism’ and ‘Arminianism’ before the Presbytery of Dunedin.\textsuperscript{6} His crime was the publication of a slender volume entitled \textit{The Reign of Grace}, wherein he challenged the doctrine of double predestination upheld by the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Longer and Shorter Catechism, his denomination’s doctrinal summa.\textsuperscript{7} Double predestination was a theological idea popularized by John Calvin in the seventeenth century. Calvin argued that God’s will is that some will be elected to everlasting bliss but that others are condemned by God to everlasting damnation. Cautiously and tentatively, Salmond allowed the possibility that God’s love might well allow an opportunity after death for repentance and salvation. The Presbytery responded by judging his pamphlet ‘capable of unsettling the minds of the faithful...and calculated to bring controversy and schism to the Church’.\textsuperscript{8}

Salmond’s trial and the Presbytery’s verdict of ‘guilty’ form the backdrop to the Gibb heresy trial of two years later. Salmond had attempted to face questions set by F.D.E. Schleiermacher, R.W. Emerson, D.F. Strauss and B. Bauer.\textsuperscript{9} He was concerned at the growing impatience with the Confession’s harsh seventeenth-century legalistic Calvinism, expressed by questioning laymen. No longer reliant on the church for his income, and from the security of a secular university’s chair, Salmond challenged Calvinist confessionalism and a provincialist narrowness hardened by separation from overseas theological debate. He was found guilty, but the church had no way of punishing him.

James Gibb was a parish minister, dependent upon the church for his living. He was responsible to the Presbytery of Dunedin for his parish and he was under that Presbytery’s discipline. In 1890, after only four years in New Zealand, Gibb deliberately challenged the Presbyterian Church of Otago and


\textsuperscript{6}The epithet ‘Arminian’ was loosely applied to any who held that God’s saving grace was extended to all men, in opposition to the Calvinist view that salvation was for the elect. Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch Reformed theologian.

\textsuperscript{7}The Westminster documents described were the fruit of the Westminster Assembly, appointed by the Long Parliament to bring the English Church into conformity with Presbyterian order and doctrine. Although the Assembly began in 1642 with an attempt to reform the Thirty-Nine Articles, the appearance of the Solemn League of the Covenant brought a demand for a more radical formula, the Westminster Confession. The two catechisms were approved by Parliament in 1646 and were adopted by the Church of Scotland as useful didactic aids.

\textsuperscript{8}\textit{Proceedings of the Synod of Otago and Southland} (4 July 1888), Dunedin, 1888.

\textsuperscript{9}These revisionist theologians forced confessionalists to reappraise the biblical evidence for their long-held beliefs. Their impact is carefully discussed in B.M.G. Reardon, \textit{Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century}, Cambridge, 1966.
Southland by attacking the Westminster Documents. He was placed on trial for heresy.

Gibb had been inducted as minister of the First Church of Otago, that province’s most prestigious Presbyterian charge, in January 1886. He was later to gain eminence as the founding father of New Zealand’s national Presbyterian church – the man who in 1901 welded together the ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ churches of the colony. Later he became Moderator, a pioneer of church social services, a founder of church schools, a social crusader and lobbyist recognized as dangerous by R.J. Seddon, J. Ward and W.F. Massey, and, in his old age, a pacifist. In 1890 Gibb was a handsome, erudite, ambitious and able thirty-three year old pastor, whose theology was already slightly suspect in the eyes of several of the province’s ‘old identities’ who resented his easy passage to ecclesiastical eminence. This ready dislike of ‘the new iniquities’, an Otago description for ‘new chums’ who had not borne the heat of pioneering, made itself known to Gibb in 1887 when he supported the introduction of an organ into First Church. He was accused of reintroducing a corruption purged from Protestantism at the time of the Reformation. Provocative, almost pugnacious, Gibb offended again in 1887 by arguing, in a sermon, that Christ, and not the Ten Commandments, should be the rule for Christian living. He charged that ‘the Ten Commandments were given to a rude people in a rude age’. His language was misunderstood and his sentiment offended.

At Salmond’s trial in 1888 Gibb was more circumspect. He argued that Salmond had not explicitly taught Universalism, but had merely raised as a theological possibility that God might save all the repentant. He attempted, astutely, to move the Presbytery of Dunedin away from a debate on Salmond’s theology to an assessment of Salmond’s wisdom in publishing his views. With less cunning he reminded the Presbytery that it was in no position to impose a penalty on a man who was not reliant upon it for his stipend.

Gibb’s caution and mediation were regarded as guile by Salmond’s accusers. When, as part of his attempt to have the case dismissed, he phrased a careful challenge to the Confession’s doctrine of eternal punishment, he marked himself out for future harassment. On this occasion, Gibb informed the Presbytery that ‘he was firmly persuaded that the doctrine of the eternity of future punishment did not belong to the substance of the faith’ and ‘he believed the time would come when it would not be regarded as indispensable to entrance to the ministry that a man should accept the doctrine of future retribution in the sense... set forth in the Confession of Faith’.

In June 1890 Gibb’s enemies, and a number of Calvinist Confessionalists who reluctantly agreed to suppress an insidious heresy, arrived at their moment of reckoning with Gibb. On 4 June one of his elders, A.C. Begg, a


12 Otago Daily Times, 5 July 1888.

13 ibid.
city politician later to enter Parliament, accused Gibb of heresy before the Presbytery of Dunedin.

Begg complained that Gibb, in a sermon preached on 25 May, had attacked the doctrine of election. Begg, who must have taken a pencil and paper to church, submitted that ‘The Reverend James Gibb...made use of language to the following effect — “My very soul revolts against the sentiment of the doctrine of election as set forth in the standards of the Church, the Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism. Viz: — ‘God having out of his mere good pleasure from all eternity elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a convenant of grace etc.’”

In preferring his charge Begg admitted that Gibb’s comment was not the major point of his sermon. Begg argued, however, that Gibb’s offence was made more serious by the fact that the doctrine attacked was the same set forth for catechetical instruction for the church's young that Sunday.

Gibb had offended by directly challenging the doctrine of double predestination. As had Salmond in 1888, so Gibb in 1890 attacked the proposition that before time, and without reference to innocence, guilt or character, God had decreed some souls to eternal life and others to eternal death.

What defence did Gibb offer? Gibb read the offending sermon to his judges and submitted that it was a pastor’s duty to take his congregation into his confidence in his attempt to find answers to the mysteries of God’s ways with men. He expressed regret for not explaining his objection to the Catechism’s answer at greater length, and with more clarity, and he suggested that had he spent more time on this small section of the sermon his congregation would have found that it was the harshness of the words ‘mere good pleasure’ that he found offensive.

As Gibb warmed to his own defence he became less cautious and transferred his attack from the Shorter Catechism to the Westminster Confession itself. Mounting a romantic defiance, perhaps modelled on Luther’s plea before the Imperial Diet, or that of Knox before Mary, Queen of Scots, he declared: ‘The confessional statement as to preterition [the condemnation of the non-elect] as to the damnation of all heathen, and of all save elect infants, was a caricature of God’s truth...and fully sensible to the gravity of his words he affirmed...he would sooner go forth from the church and earn his living how he might than teach his people what he held to be a lie.’

Gibb informed the members of Presbytery that he had recently come to question and then reject this doctrine that had been instilled in him as a boy and at theological college. He did not confide that he and his wife in facing the deaths of three infant children had come to believe that God’s love must

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14 Minutes of the Presbytery of Dunedin, 4 June 1890 (Knox College, Dunedin, autograph original).
15 The Shorter Catechism, Question Twenty: Q: ‘Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?’
16 Otago Daily Times, 19 June 1890.
extend well beyond the limits suggested in the Confession. Gibb then launched an attack on the textbook used to explain the Confession's doctrine to theological students — A.A. Hodge's *Exposition of the Confession*.

Hodge, whose father Charles initiated the conservative 'Princeton theology', was a reactionary Calvinist who was determined to maintain the stark divisions of the seventeenth-century Confession. In attacking Hodge Gibb offended many ministers who had digested the explanations of *Exposition of the Confession* without much thought.\(^\text{17}\)

Five hours of debate followed. A powerful cabal of conservatives hastened to support Begg. The foundation minister of the neighbouring Knox church, the aged D.M. Stuart, added his weight to Gibb's accusers. A.M. Finlayson, a theological conservative who was later to oppose the union of the colony's two Presbyterian churches, and James Ryley, an Otago-educated minister with a rural parish, were fierce supporters of Begg's charge.\(^\text{18}\) Begg and the three ministers demanded that Gibb be found guilty, in that he had publicly denied the authority of the legal foundation document of the Otago church.

In allowing the debate to move from the specific charge to discussion of the Confession's authority the plaintiffs allowed Gibb an opportunity to expand his defence. He was well aware that a growing number of Otago and Southland Presbyterians longed to be freed from the cold grasp of the *Westminster Confession*, and that several Kirk Sessions (local parish courts) and Presbyteries had already asked that a declaratory act be legislated by the Synod. The Presbyterian Church of Victoria had already passed such an act, to allow liberty of opinion on minor theological issues, and some southern New Zealanders hoped to soon achieve the same relief.\(^\text{19}\)

This expansion of Gibb's trial into a debate over the merits and demerits of the Confession won important spokesmen to Gibb's defence. His first supporter needed no encouragement to speak for Gibb's acquittal. Rutherford Waddell, the eloquent Irish minister of Dunedin's St Andrew's parish, was Gibb's earliest friend in Otago.\(^\text{20}\) Waddell piquantly argued that Gibb's only crime was to have made public views discreetly held in private by many members of Presbytery. Gibb's second defender was an unexpected ally. William Will, one of the founding fathers of the Otago settlement, who had previously paid a key part in Salmond's prosecution, addressed the court as a

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\(^{17}\) Gibb had previously attacked Hodge in First Church sermons. On 24 May 1887 a minister's widow, Jane Cameron, wrote to complain 'in your sermons you spoke so disparagingly of Dr Hodge — one of God's wisest and most faithful servants.' Jane Cameron to Gibb, 24 May 1887, James Gibb Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

\(^{18}\) D.M. Stuart was the most notable of the three. Later Moderator of the Otago and Southland Synod and Chancellor of the University of Otago, Stuart became Knox Church's first minister in 1860. A D.D. of the University of St Andrews was conferred upon him in 1872.

\(^{19}\) The Presbyterian General Assembly of Victoria passed a declaratory act in 1883. Badger, p.88, makes the point that the act 'was almost as ambiguous as the Confession itself'.

strong supporter of Gibb's stand. Will contended that the Confession had never been intended to be a test of orthodoxy and that the Westminster Assembly had specifically invited the Confession's readers to test the veracity of their statements against scripture. He further insisted that Presbyterians were duty bound to assail the Confession wherever it contradicted scripture, and that anyone who attempted to use the Confession as a final test of orthodoxy was in fact contradicting the Confession. Will's new-found radicalism so upset the Presbytery that the Moderator intervened and ordered him to resume his seat.

Will's conversion to the revisionist course prompted several of the uncommitted presbyters to throw in their lot with Gibb. However, not all the uncommitted were made resolute by Will's example. The church's acting-Professor of Biblical Studies, Michael Watt, and the Professor of Theology, John Dunlop, contended themselves with a proposal that the Presbytery 'dismiss the case with an expression of regret that Mr Gibb should have allowed himself inadvertently to have put construction on the language of the Shorter Catechism that it does not warrant'. The Synod's two professional theological teachers seemed anxious to placate the conservatives.

Gibb was acquitted by sixteen votes to six. A majority of Dunedin's elders could not bring themselves to find the minister of First Church guilty and most of the Presbytery's ministers were convinced that the time had come to redefine the Confession's authority.

However, a small band of recusants — A.M. Finlayson, J. Ryley, and the Free Church of Scotland minister of Kaikorai parish, R.R.M. Sutherland — were appalled that a minister had denounced the doctrine of the Confession, had reaffirmed his heresy and escaped scot-free. They appealed to the church's supreme court, the Synod of Otago and Southland.

The Southern Church's synod had refused to review the Dunedin Presbytery's finding in the Salmond case but it showed no reluctance in bringing Gibb to its bar. On 31 October 1890 it not only retried Gibb but it also reversed the Presbytery's decision.

Gibb's fate was clear even before the votes were counted. In the two years between the Salmond trial and Gibb's trial the synod had debated a motion from Southland Presbytery demanding an urgent decision as to the scriptural warranty of the doctrines of the Confession of Faith. Gibb's trial was pre-empted by the trying of the Confession itself. The Confession's supporters made a good case for the status quo. A.H. Stobo appealed to synod members not to meddle with the Confession that had been British presbyterianism's flag for two hundred years. He moved that 'the synod...resolve and declare that...the Confessional Calvinism of the doctrinal system ought to be maintained unimpaired in its integrity in the constitution

William Will (1830 c. – 1912), second minister of the Otago settlement, arrived in Otago in 1854.

Minutes of the Presbytery of Dunedin, 18 June 1890. Otago Daily Times, 1 November 1890.

These three played a significant part later in the Presbyterian Church Union debate. See Barber, 'The Church Defence Society'.
of this church'. Even so, Stobo carried his motion by a slender majority of fifty-five votes against forty-nine. Twenty-five ministers supported his motion, while thirty-four opposed it. Fifteen elders dissented but thirty elders rallied to the Confession. The synod's laity, mainly rural elders, had rallied against a threat to their provincial church. This Confessionalist victory jeopardized Gibb's chances of acquittal.

Gibb's situation on 31 October 1890 was made even more precarious by the precise nature of his case — an appeal against a Presbytery decision. As the Presbytery of Dunedin was also before the bar of the Synod, defending its previous judgement, its members had speaking rights as defendants, but no voting rights. Gibb was thus deprived of the votes of the most liberal elders in the church, and of the votes of many liberal ministers.

The appellants were led by Finlayson who insisted that the church's constitution was at stake. Professor Watt opposed Finlayson, appealed for a judgment of charity and pleaded: 'The Church...ought not to be a Court of Inquisition to sit upon every divergence from strict orthodoxy, and to bind the one charged with heterodoxy down to its defence, and so stereotype the error in his mind.' Gibb's accusers had requested that an inquisitorial committee be formed to identify Gibb's errors, point by point, at its leisure. Watt's plea carried weight and the Synod refused to establish this inquisition. Instead it proceeded to immediate judgment, and by forty-three votes to nineteen it sustained the appeal, reversed the decision of the Presbytery, regretted that Gibb had used language inconsistent with his oath of induction and let the matter end.

Gibb had been found guilty of heresy; again, as with Salmond, the Presbyterians of Otago and Southland were uncertain how to punish the convicted heretic. This irresolution allowed Gibb to continue taking part in the Synod's debates and to vote as if nothing had happened. The Synod, embarrassed at having found guilty the minister of its leading charge, let the impenitent heretic continue on his way.

Given the verdict it is hardly strange that 'Juryman' wrote to the Otago Daily Times complaining that the church's supreme court did not seem to understand that 'when a judge reviews a magistrate's decision and finds against the malefactor he does not then let him go free and unpunished'. Watt's plea, Gibb's popularity and status, and the growing uncertainty over authority, persuaded the Synod that the matter was best quickly forgotten.

Gibb's heresy trial soon faded from Otago memory. As minister of First Church he built a more positive reputation as an advocate of Church union, a supporter of bible-in-schools, as an evangelical and anti-Catholic leader, and as a political lobbyist. The Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland could not escape quite so easily from the grasp of the Westminster standards. Otago Presbyterians had long looked to Britain for guidance in matters of theology.

25 Otago Daily Times, 1 November 1890.
26 Proceedings of the Synod of Otago and Southland, 1890, p.21.
27 Otago Daily Times, 4 November 1890.
and for a solution to their doctrinal problems. This reliance on the churches who mothered their settlement agrees very well with Walter Houghton’s contention that the average Victorian Briton was ‘more likely to defer to the opinion of his elders and betters than think out the problem on his own’.25

This respect for Scottish Church authority in part explains the Synod’s refusal to submit a declaratory act to the subordinate courts of its church before 1893. The Otago ecclesiastical infant awaited advice from its Free Church of Scotland mother. Another explanation is that some of the leading ultra-confessionalists believed that if the revisionists were delayed often enough they might go away.

Mother finally provided the lead long awaited. In 1893 the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland passed a declaratory act. This act began with an affirmation of God’s love, proceeded to deny that the Confession taught the fore-ordination of men to eternal death, disavowed the view that those who died in infancy were damned, allowed that God’s saving love might extend beyond his church, and established that the courts of the church should determine all moot theological points.29 (By this last decree the contemporary church replaced the seventeenth-century Presbyterians in the definition of doctrine.)

The Synod responded promptly to this lead and in mid-1893 passed down the Scottish act to its subordinate ecclesiastical courts — presbyteries and kirk sessions — for comment and approval. Favourable replies were returned and on 3 November 1893 the Synod, by a majority of ninety votes to fifteen, adopted the Scottish declaratory act.30 Gibb and Salmond’s heresies now became permitted opinion within the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland.

The heresy-hunters now found themselves left a small and angry minority in a church unwilling to consider that the Scottish Free Church might be wrong. Believing themselves betrayed the minority appealed from the Free Church of Scotland of 1893 to the Church of Scotland of 1649. They argued that in 1649 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland had adopted the Westminster documents as the definitive standards of presbyterianism. Subsequently, other English-speaking Presbyterian churches, and their colonial offspring, had made the Confession and Catechisms their digest of doctrine. The Otago recusants protested that the foundation documents of presbyterianism had been illegally set aside. They objected also to the introduction of Arminian interpretations of the atonement and sanctification into a purportedly Calvinistic church. A further complaint was offered against the provision allowing a bare majority of a contemporary court to decide theological truth and error.

Only seven synodsmen submitted written protests. Although the objectors were few their case worried the majority who feared that they might take to law their argument that the property donated in trust to a church with a

29The Scottish Act is published in full in the Proceedings of Synod, 1892, p.53.
30Synod, 1893, p.23.
particular theological constitution belonged only to those church members who remained true to the foundation constitution. Two years later, in 1895, the minority sought legal opinion and the legal firm of Chapman and MacGregor advised them that their claims were well-founded in law. However, the Synod responded by publishing a devastating assay of the legal rights possessed by the Synod, in an opinion obtained from Robert Stout, and the minority thought it unwise to take their challenge to court.\(^{31}\)

Gibb's trial and condemnation, together with the passing of a declaratory act by the southern church, are episodes in the history of developing catholicity with the New Zealand presbyterianism. The Gibb trial is one of a number of heresy cases brought to judgment in thirty years of Presbyterian theological turbulence, from 1880 to 1910. To what degree did the Gibb incident conform to the general pattern?

At first sight Gibb's trial appears to conform to the regular order of pan-presbyterian conflict over theological certitude. His accusers take the witness stand as archetypal reactionaries anxious to silence a challenge to their doctrinal system. Their zeal reflects a common confessionalist belief that the finely-balanced Westminster scheme would collapse if even the smallest dogma was displaced. Gibb's accusers were as close-minded in their devotion to their epistemology as were the opponents of Briggs, Dods, Smith and Strong.

Fear, rising from a loss of religious certitude, was a coefficient in the several trials of this tri-decade. The accusers were not alone in their fears. Gibb, with his American, Australian and Scottish counterparts, feared that personal and pastoral integrity would be jeopardized if truth was silenced by demands for conformity. Owen Chadwick's point that 'churches are institutions concerned with truth, not concerned with truth only, but still concerned with truth'\(^{32}\) can be applied to Gibb's situation. When a doctrine was shown to no longer be well-founded he fearfully and regretfully dismissed it, and faced the equally frightening task of finding a new formula sufficient to express for his parishioners the mystery earlier theologians had grappled with to meet the needs of the church in their time.

Yet another similarity is to be found in the Presbyterian affiliation of all the accused. There were Anglican trials in this period, but these were mainly in response to Puseyism, and centred about ritual and liturgies rather than authority. Baptist disputes usually ended with the condemned minister moving to another congregation. The autonomous nature of Baptist church order made theological discipline difficult, almost impossible. The most adequate explanations for the explosion of heresy-hunting within the Presbyterian camp attend to the denomination's system of ecclesiastical government, and to the intellectual calibre of its ministry and laity. The Presbyterian system of church government provided a set of church

\(^{31}\) The Chapman and MacGregor opinions were published in the *Star* (Dunedin), 7 August 1897. Stout's opinion was published in the *Otago Daily Times*, 24 August 1897. Sir Robert Stout was later to become Chief Justice of New Zealand.

committees from the parish session to the national assembly, wherein disciplinary questions and theological disputes were checked and counter-checked. Since the establishment of Calvin’s school for preachers in Geneva, Presbyterians had insisted on a tertiary education for their ministers, and had attempted to relate doctrine to new developments in secular learning. Presbyterian clergy, with their intensive drive for intellectual respectability for their doctrines, were far more likely to come to grief with conservatives within their churches, than any other denominational clerics. Revisionists always ran the risk of attack from disturbed conservatives.

This conformity to pattern is not absolute, however. The Gibb case and the trial of Strong differ from the pan-presbyterian pattern in one particular. Elsewhere the accusers were parish ministers and the defendants were professional academics. In the cases of Gibb and Strong the positions were reversed. Gibb and Strong, the accused, were both parish ministers. The ‘fighting professors’ of Melbourne, who harried Strong from the Victorian church, were more confessionalist and more determined heretic-baiters, than their Otago colleagues. Dunlop and Watt were more cautious than intent on prosecution. Nevertheless, they asserted that Gibb had committed an error and they spoke in mitigation of an offence, not in defence of doctrinal revision or liberty of theological opinion.

What explanation can be given for this reversal of roles between parish ministers and theological professors? Dunlop and Watt’s stance can be defended on the argument that professors of theology and Old Testament were expected to teach orthodoxy. The Synod of 1889 had decided that the Westminster documents still stood as the definitive articles of southern New Zealand presbyterianism. If the professors had denied the synod judgment they could well have placed themselves in double jeopardy; they would have challenged the theology of the Church of the reformation and of the living church at one and the same time.

Pastoral expediency may well have been an additional factor in determining Dunlop and Watt to tread carefully. In Scotland academic theologians lived in a world apart from the parish ministers. Their situation in Otago was quite different. A more egalitarian society required that they take note of consensus theology and refrain from dogmatizing from above. By insisting that Gibb was guilty in that he had denied a Westminster doctrine substantiated by the Synod, they assured themselves of a continuing and heightened role in the Synod’s life, and the church’s doctrinal revision. Had they taken a different tack and supported Gibb’s case, they would have isolated themselves. On the other hand, the professors’ argument for leniency allowed an opportunity for an explanation of revisionist viewpoints on predestination. Their assumption of a teaching role within the Synod allowed them further to prepare elders, and even some ministers, for a future declaratory act; while their demand for a ‘judgment of charity’ assured the

33 Murdoch MacDonald and J.L. Rentoul of Ormond Theological College, Melbourne. They were known as ‘the fighting professors’ — a tribute to their persistent heresy hunting. See Badger, passim.
faithful that the church’s theological students were in the hands of men as saintly as they were doctrinally safe.

To this point in the argument the professors appear as worldly-wise as Gibb seems naive. To think thus of Gibb is to do an injustice to a clever ecclesiastical politician. It is unlikely that he inserted the offending criticism of the Catechism into his sermon without first counting the cost of his action. He had an advantage over his brother ministers in Otago in that he had been intimately involved in the Strong heresy trial in Melbourne. It seems likely that Gibb had decided that the decision of the previous Synod regarding the Westminster standards must not be taken as final, and that a test case might well move the Synod to think again about a declaratory act. Gibb may have reasoned that given the church’s refusal to penalize Salmond that there was little risk of his being deposed. His safety was heightened by the fact that he had been ordained in Victoria where a declaratory act defended him from accusation on the point he wished to raise. Gibb argued that he could not be expected to endure less theological liberty in Otago than the liberty he had contracted with the church at his ordination. Further, Gibb was on friendly terms with Dunlop and Watt and knew that they shared many of his revisionist views. Breward makes plain that Dunlop ‘as a theological student reacted against the strict Calvinism of his professors’. Watt was known to apply biblical higher-critical studies to his exegetical old testament teaching. Gibb informed the Synod that he had discussed his views with Dunlop. He may well have assumed that the two professors would intervene to protect him, as indeed they did.

But why did Gibb choose to mount his attack in 1890? During his four years as minister of First Church he had concentrated on a pastoral ministry, centring his work on an intensive visitation of his flock. Gibb had soon discovered that numbers of his congregation were deeply worried by the implications of the Westminster decree on predestination. Those who had, as he had, lost infant children, were particularly upset by the possibility that their innocent progeny were damned. Further, Dunedin was New Zealand’s intellectual mecca in the 1890s and academics and students alike were repelled by the ultra-Calvinist dogma. Pastorally, Gibb had everything to gain if he publicly attacked an objectionable doctrine and remained minister of First Church. Salmond had succeeded in his sortie and had not been unfrocked as a punishment for his published volley. Gibb had the benefit of Salmond’s experience, and of the impact of Salmond’s The Reign of Grace, a pamphlet that had sold over six thousand copies. Given developments within the Scottish church ethos that moved the Free Church of Scotland closer to a declaratory act, and given Gibb’s pastoral role and the Otago demand for theological certitude that took cognizance of overseas theological revision, 1890 was a timely year for Gibb to mount his attacks. Gibb’s determination to face the church with an outdated dogma was defensible on

the argument already presented by Salmond in 1888, when he insisted that: ‘To face the question of creed revision and reconstruction is rapidly becoming a clamant duty, and the task cannot be much longer postponed without the risk of ecclesiastical demoralisation.’

The Gibb heresy trial was a minor convulsion, soon forgotten by the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland. However, it was not without a lasting impact. The increased church membership, new zeal for home and overseas missions and fresh interest in social justice of the twenty years that followed the passing of the declaratory act were to some extent promoted by a less inhibitive theological ethos. The winds of doctrinal revision had blown away the mustiness of an antiquated confessional formula and many Otago Presbyterians breathed more freely.

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