
Ralph Erskine (1685-1752)

by Roy Middleton

Ralph Erskine was born on the 15 March 1685 at Monilaws in Northumberland; he was the sixth son of the Rev. Henry Erskine (1624-1696), by his second wife Margaret Halcro. His father was one of those ministers that were ejected from the Church of England in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity. After a period of imprisonment on the Bass Rock he settled at Monilaws in 1684, where Ralph was born. At the declaration of Toleration in 1687 he accepted a call to the parish of Whitsome, near Berwick; there under his preaching the eleven year old Thomas Boston was converted. When dying he summoned his wife and five of his children to his deathbed, and took from each of them engagements to personal religion. Twenty years later Ralph recalled with gratitude 'the Lord's drawing out of his heart toward him at his father's death'.

Ralph Erskine entered Edinburgh University in November 1699 and graduated Master of Arts in 1704. In childhood he was the subject of strong religious impressions. As a young man he valued the religious conversation of his godly sister in law Alison Turple (d. 1720), who married his brother Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754) in the year Ralph graduated. It was overhearing a conversation between Ralph and his wife on 'the deep things of God' that Ebenezer was converted. After graduating Ralph became a tutor with the family of Colonel John Erskine of Culross. In June 1709 he was licensed by the Dunfermline Presbytery and in 1711 ordained to a charge in Dunfermline. So successful was his early ministry that the church was soon crowded and thousands attended his communion seasons.

Ralph Erskine had not long been a minister of the Gospel before he became involved in controversies that would have a lasting influence on the ecclesiastical history of Scotland. Along with his brother he refused to take the Oath of Abjuration that flowed from the Toleration Act of 1712, because of its Episcopalian overtones. They, together with Thomas Boston, took part in the controversy flowing from the republication of Edward Fisher's book, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, and in the heresy case against John Simson, the Glasgow divinity professor.

In 1732 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed an Act relating to the calling of ministers to vacant churches where the patron had failed to nominate a presentee. The Act ignored the voice of the congregation and placed the task in the hands of local landowners. In October 1732 it fell to Ebenezer Erskine, as moderator, to preach at the opening of the Synod of Perth and Stirling. Choosing as his text, 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner', he referred to the existing condition of the Church: 'I can find no warrant from the Word of God to confer the spiritual privileges of his house upon the rich rather than the poor; whereas, by this Act,

the man with the gold ring and gay clothing is preferred unto the man with vile raiment and poor attire'. The Synod censured Erskine for his sermon and decided to rebuke him. He then appealed to the General Assembly which upheld the judgement of the Synod. Erskine protested against the decisions of the Assembly. He was joined in his action by three other ministers: William Wilson of Perth, Alexander Moncrieff of Abernethy, and James Fisher of Kinclaven. In consequence of the four persisting in their protest they were 'loosed from their charges' and declared to be no longer members of the Church. When the sentence was delivered, 'loosing them from their charges', they read a paper in which they declared a secession from the prevailing party in the Established Church and appealed to the 'first free faithful and reforming General Assembly of the Scottish Church'.

Seven ministers including Ralph Erskine protested against the decision and declared their intention to hold communion with the four in spite of the sentence passed on them. A month later the Seceders met at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross, and formed the Associate Presbytery, with Ebenezer Erskine as their first moderator. The Scottish Secession Church had begun. Though Ralph was present at Gairney Bridge and was in sympathy with their stand, three years were to pass before he handed in a Declaration of Secession to the Dunfermline Presbytery.

In the late 1730s a correspondence was begun between Ralph Erskine and George Whitefield that led to the evangelist coming to Scotland; his first sermon in Scotland was delivered from Erskine's Dunfermline pulpit. Whitefield's consuming passion was the preaching of the gospel to lost sinners. As an Episcopal clergyman he did not comprehend the ecclesiastical strivings of the Erskines against the growing evil of Moderatism that was casting spiritual death over the Established Church. Whitefield was unwilling to confine his ministry in Scotland to the Secession pulpits and a sad rupture ensued, with the Associate Presbytery opposing Whitefield's work, especially in relation to the revival at Cambuslang.

In less than fourteen years the Secession Church was torn in two over its attitude to the Civil Oath taken by the Burgesses of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Perth. The Oath pledged those responsible for local government to oppose papistry and to support 'the true protestant religion presently professed within this realm and authorised by the laws thereof'. Some Seceders, led by Alexander Moncrieff and Adam Gib, held that the oath implied approval of the Established Church. The Erskines viewed the matter differently, stating that it was designed to exclude Papists from local government by ensuring that those who held office adhered to the religion professed by law; namely the Westminster Confession. After protracted debate those who opposed the Oath withdrew in 1747 and constituted themselves as the General Associate Synod. At the time of the division Ralph Erskine was sixty two, and only five more years of his ministry were left. For the Burgher Synod, so named because they saw little wrong with the Burgess Oath, these were years of growth and consolidation. The Erskines and James Fisher produced an Exposition of the Shorter Catechism that John Brown of Edinburgh described as containing 'in short compass the fullest and

clearest exposition of Christian doctrine and law to be found in any language'. Ralph wrote the exposition of questions' 76-95.

When John Willison of Dundee was dying in 1750, Ralph, who had often crossed swords with him, was beside his bed as a comforter. A woman foolishly tried to revive the quarrel by saying to Erskine, 'there will be no secession in heaven'. The two men smiled, and Willison nodded assent as Ralph retorted, 'Madam in heaven there will be a complete secession - from sin and sorrow.'

Ralph Erskine was twice married. His first marriage was on 15 July 1714 to Margaret Dewar of Lassodie (died 22 November 1730 aged 32), by whom he had ten children, of which three became Secession ministers. His second marriage was to Margaret Simpson of Edinburgh on 24 February 1732; by her he had four sons.

In the 1750's he gradually became unfit for pastoral work because of the development of heart disease. His last sermon was in late October 1752 from the text, 'All her paths are peace'. He died on 6 November 1752. His last words were, 'I shall forever be a debtor to free grace, Victory, Victory, Victory!' When Ebenezer heard of his death he said, 'And is Ralph gone? He has twice got the start on me; he was first in Christ, and now he is first in glory'. Alexander R. MacEwan, a biographer of the Erskines, speaking of Ralph's writings, says, 'The highest place that can be given to him among Scottish writers of his school is next to Thomas Boston. That, however, is a high place...'

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