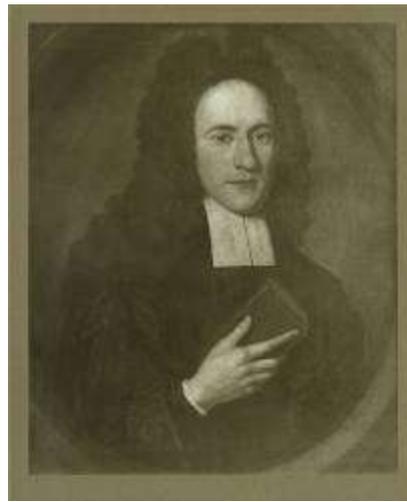


Whose Faith Follow

Collected Articles on Scottish Divines



Ralph Erskine, Secession Minister, Dunfermline

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Preface

Although it is not my native town, Dunfermline was my home from the age of five to the age of twenty-five. Dunfermline has sometimes been referred to as the cradle of the secession movements of the eighteenth century. As a young man, I became interested in the history of the seceders, especially Ralph Erskine who had originally been Minister of Dunfermline Abbey. For some years I was a member and eventually an elder in Erskine Church, Dunfermline.

Having now passed my three score years and ten, I decided to dig out some of the biographical articles that I had written in the past and put them together in booklet form. The articles are not confined only to "worthies" of the secession movements.

This booklet has no pretensions to be an authoritative or a scholarly work. It is merely a collection of popular articles, no more and no less. In reading over these articles some forty years on, there was a real temptation to rewrite or heavily edit them. I have resisted this temptation and, apart from very light revision or clarification, the articles are offered more or less as they were written.

Looking at some of the past controversies within the Kirk through the eyes of men from previous centuries, I cannot help comparing them with some of our own contemporary difficulties. Whilst the causes of division are different today from those of the 18th and 19th centuries they are being no better handled now than they were in previous generations. It seems that in the Church of Scotland we do not always learn from our past mistakes.

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Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754)

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The name of Erskine is linked permanently with the secession movements in 18th century Scotland. Ebenezer Erskine was a son of Rev Henry Erskine a Presbyterian Minister who had held a pastoral charge at Cornhill in Northumberland but was ejected from his living at the time of the "Great Ejection" of 1662.

After the Revolution Settlement, Henry Erskine was called to the Scottish Border parish of Chirnside where he ministered faithfully for the eight years preceding his death in 1696.

It is an interesting coincidence that the young Ebenezer Erskine was born on 22nd June 1680, the same day on which Richard Cargill and Donald Cargill posted on the market cross at Sanquhar - known to posterity as the Sanquhar Declaration - which disowned Charles Stuart (The Old Pretender) for his tyranny and breaches of the Covenant, declaring war on him and all who helped him.

This serves as a reminder of the general mood and background of these troubled days. It was not a period of tolerance and moderation and men can only be judged within the context of the times in which they lived. Their father's ejection from his home and living, his period of imprisonment and possible torture on the Bass Rock, the family poverty and deprivation for the sake of Christ's Crown and Covenant - all of these factors were inevitably to mould the sons' thoughts on religious matters.

After studying Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, the young Ebenezer was licensed to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Kirkcaldy on 11th February 1703 and, on 22nd September of the same year, he was ordained and inducted to the parish of

Portmoak on the eastern side of Loch Leven. It is interesting that the central area of Scotland, but especially the parts roughly between the lines of the Ochil hills and the Forth were to form the homeland of the Secession movements.

Erskine's ministry at Portmoak was to be a memorable one. It is recorded that literally thousands of people flocked to this picturesque parish to attend the sacrament. He remained at Portmoak until 1731 during which time he was given special grace and was built up by God. He emerged from this quiet little parish as a veritable giant of great spiritual conviction and earnestness as well as a man of broad experience. In 1731 he was presented with a call to the Third Charge of Stirling, to the church formerly ministered to by the saintly James Guthrie who had been martyred after the Restoration of Charles II.

The events which were to lead up to Erskine's secession from the established church in 1733 are, in fact, quite complex. Put simply, the controversy was two-headed: political and theological. In its political sense it concerned the thorny problem of patronage. The right of popular election of a minister had actually only been employed in Scotland for some thirty years which included the Cromwellian period. In 1690, the election was given to the elders and heritors of a parish subject to acquiescence of the local Presbytery; but, in 1712, Parliament removed the right of election from elders and heritors and restored it to patrons (frequently a local landowner).

If, however, a patron did not exercise his right within six months (which very often he did not), the right of election devolved to the Presbytery. In 1732, the General Assembly passed an Act permitting the election of a minister by the elders and heritors where the right had devolved to Presbytery under the 1712 provisions. This Act was, in fact, a sensible and

humane procedure which attempted to remove some of the anomalies of the patronage system.

Erskine, however, quarrelled with the Act since he would have preferred that the right of election should simply devolve to heads of families and not to heritors and elders. To us, this may seem an unimportant distinction, but it was not unimportant at the time. In reality, however, the controversy was really the tip of an iceberg as there was much unrest within the church and great divisions in matters of ecclesiastical polity and theology.

Theologically, the 18th century church was divided into two basic "camps", namely moderates and evangelicals. The moderates (they were not in fact given this title until the second half of the 18th century) were generally favoured among the more influential classes and were to include in their ranks such brilliant men as Principal Robertson, Alexander "Jupiter" Carlyle of Inveresk and John Home of Athelstaneford, author of *The Douglas*. Moderates could be characterised by their formalism and rationalism, their somewhat chilly moralism and intellectualism and were in contrast to the evangelicals.

Evangelical theology was that of the Doctrines of Grace, earnest love of the Word of God within a framework of Calvinism and orthodoxy. One particular evangelical emphasis at the time was the free offer of the Gospel to all men. This sounds uncontroversial yet if, as the Westminster Confession claims, some are predestined for salvation and others for damnation, there is an obvious inconsistency in offering salvation to everyone. A contemporary theological controversy on the needlessness (or otherwise) of forsaking sin before coming to Jesus Christ that ran its course in the Presbytery of Auchterarder only served to fan the flames.

The doctrine of free offer had been set out in a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* by Edward Fisher, published in 1645 and rediscovered by Thomas Boston (who was converted under the ministry of Henry Erskine). In 1718, Thomas Hog of Carnock published a new edition of *The Marrow* and the book was condemned by the General Assembly of 1720. Some ministers, however, dissented from this condemnation and their number included Thomas Boston and Ebenezer Erskine.

These men were loyal Calvinists and they did even imply that they would endorse all of the teachings found in *The Marrow*. However, they felt grieved that a book that contained so much that was not only orthodox but warmly evangelical should be dismissed in such a cavalier manner by the General Assembly. The "Marrow Men" (as they came to be called) also took great exception to the fact that John Simson, a Divinity Professor in the College of Glasgow, alleged to have taught certain heretical doctrines (although never convicted of heresy) was very leniently dealt with by the Assembly and, although suspended, was allowed to retain his professorial status and to draw his salary.

The theological waters of 18th century Scotland were often troubled. Although it was a century in which the moderates seemed to be in the ascendant, it was also the century that witnessed the Revival of Cambuslang, the rise of the secession movements and the setting up of many praying societies.

It was against this two pronged background that, in 1732, Erskine preached a very controversial sermon to the Synod of Perth and Stirling on the text *The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner*. The Synod felt that the sermon was unduly controversial and rebuked him. This was too much for Erskine who appealed to the General Assembly in 1733. In the meantime, he aggravated matters by publishing the sermon in pamphlet form!

The General Assembly sustained the Synod's rebuke. Erskine immediately lodged a protest which, although procedurally out of order, was read to the General Assembly. In the protest, three other men were associated - William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff and James Fisher. The Assembly did not take kindly to the tone of the protest and the four were ordered to withdraw it - which they did not.

The Commission of Assembly was, later in that same year, to suspend (not depose) the four ministers. They ignored the suspension and so were deposed in November of 1733. In reply to this, the four stated that they were seceding from the established church.

So, on 15th December 1733, they met, with some others, in a cottage at Gairney Bridge on the west side of Loch Leven, to the south of Kinross, and formed themselves into the Associate Presbytery. (The site of the cottage is still marked by a memorial obelisk.) Curiously, they retained their manses and stipends and continued in the meantime with their normal preaching and pastoral duties.

On reflection, the General Assembly realised that it had been somewhat hasty and harsh in its dealings with the four men and so became conciliatory and forbearing in its attitudes towards them. In 1734 they were officially reinstated. The Assembly even repealed the 1732 Act and sent a commission to London to plea for the total abolition of patronage.

The way seemed open for the four brethren to be received back into the established church with honour and dignity - but this they declined. They were united in their dissatisfaction with the state of theological affairs within the Kirk, the position regarding patronage, the 1712 Act of Toleration and the fact

that the Revolution Settlement had meant the abandonment of the Covenants.

Their final deposition took place in 1740 after the General Assembly had made many attempts to be conciliatory, but to no avail.

Ebenezer Erskine died on 2nd June 1754 in the 74th year of his age and the 51st of his ministry. He will be remembered as a courageous warrior and a soldier of Christ's militant church. The secession, though it was to cause a scar on the church in Scotland was yet to be an instrument of much blessing.

Ralph Erskine (1685 - 1752)

Published in the Bulwark Magazine January 1973

Ralph Erskine was the brother of Ebenezer Erskine, although not quite so well known. If he sometimes lacked the doughtiness of his brother, yet he made up for it in other ways. Ralph was perhaps surprisingly, very musical and played well on the violin. Perhaps even more surprisingly, he smoked. Indeed, he wrote a poem entitled "Smoking Spiritualised" which was included in a volume of his poetry entitled *Gospel Sonnets* first published in 1734. All in all, he was rather more versatile and sensitive than his somewhat formidable brother and was a more attractive personality.

After he left Edinburgh University, he obtained the position of tutor to the family of Lieutenant-Colonel John Erskine (a very distant relative) at Culross and remained there for two years. One of the Colonel's sons was John Erskine who was to become Professor of Scots law at Edinburgh University and author of *An Institute of the Law of Scotland*. John's son, in turn, was Dr John Erskine, the leader of the evangelical party in the established church at the end of the eighteenth century. He is portrayed by Sir Walter Scott in his novel *Guy Mannering*.

In 1709, Ralph was taken on trials for licence to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Dunfermline and thereafter he received calls from several churches in the area. It was, however, to the "auld grey toun" of Dunfermline itself that he was eventually guided. Dunfermline, a former capital of Scotland with its many weavers' cottages clustered together in the shadow of its parish church was to be the scene for his whole ministry. Indeed, most of his preaching was to take place within the walls of the ancient sanctuary of Dunfermline Abbey.

The Abbey Church was, at that time, the only church in the burgh and was collegiate charge. In 1711, Ralph was ordained and inducted as Minister of the Second Charge and became Minister of the First Charge in 1716. Rev James Wardlaw was thereafter chosen as Minister of the Second Charge.

The two men laboured together in great harmony and friendship which continued up until the time of Erskine's secession from the national church. It is interesting to note that the two men had a bond of agreement as to their behaviour and conduct with one another. One thing on which they agreed was that neither would listen to gossip or criticism of the other's wife!

Ralph, like his brother was a loyal Calvinist who was also most anxious to stress the free offer of the Gospel. Again, like his brother, he was greatly moved by much that he read in "The Marrow" and took the same theological stand on patronage and on the Simson case. Yet Ralph was not one of the original four who made up the first Associate (Secession) Presbytery in 1733. He was, however, present as an observer at the historic meeting at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross.

He did not finally throw his lot with the secession until 1737 and only then with certain misgivings. His action in joining his brother in the secession was to create a cleavage between Ralph and Mr Wardlaw who, although an evangelical and in great sympathy with all that his senior colleague stood for, yet deplored the whole concept of secession. This was to mark the beginning of a pulpit war which was to continue for some time whilst the bewildered citizens of Dunfermline looked on, not knowing whom to believe.

After he joined the secession, Ralph Erskine's followers built a new church for him; yet his connection with the parish church was to continue for some time yet - indeed it did not finally cease until May, 1742. He was so popular that crowds thronged

to hear him and there appeared to be no real way for the Presbytery to eject him from the pulpit. In many ways, it was foolish of him to continue preaching in the Abbey at all after 1737. Certainly the whole situation was not very edifying for the whole body of Christ. The death of Mr Wardlaw, however, hurried matters on somewhat and, after taking legal advice the Presbytery declared both charges vacant and proposed to "intrude" a Mr Hardy of Culross to preach to the congregation.

The church was guarded against Erskine's entry but when he appeared, no one dared to stop him. It appeared that there might be a riot, but Erskine calmly entered the church, mounted the pulpit and announced the opening Psalm. Mr Hardy, who had remained in the Session House, left the building quietly.

Erskine had won the day, yet immediately afterwards he accepted the ruling that the charge was legally vacant. Thereafter he continued his ministry in the new meeting house erected for him by his flock. He remained there until his death in 1752.

The first building was replaced in 1800 by a fine rectangular edifice which still forms one of the main features of the Dunfermline skyline and is a landmark in the surrounding area. It is perhaps a sign that Ralph Erskine left the established church with considerable misgivings that a Latin inscription, with a certain pathos, was placed above the door of the first church and read (in translation):

*Feed and provide, O Christ, for Thy flock scattered abroad.
The Lord will provide.
Ralph Erskine, Minister of God's Word, 1740¹*

¹ The inscribed stone was mislaid when the 1800 church was built and later rediscovered among some rubbish. It was then built in to the new building.

His ministry continue in the new church until his death in 1752.

The seceders and the moderates were united in one thing - their opposition to the Jacobite cause. Ebenezer Erskine raised a militia company to defend Stirling and Ralph's son Henry did the same at Falkirk where he was minister.

One great sorrow in the life of the Erskine brothers - especially Ralph who was the more sensitive of the two - was the "Burgher controversy". In 1743, a seceder minister by the name of Adam Gib (nicknamed "Pope Gib"), a very doughty fighter who had originally trained for Law, asked the Associate Synod (as it was now called) to condemn outright one clause in the Burgess Oath which was required of burgesses in a mere handful of burghs in Scotland. Basically they were required to *profess and allow the true religion presently professed within this realm and authorised by the laws thereof...* Gib and one of the original four seceders, Rev Alexander Moncrieff (Laird of Culfargie) maintained that the Oath cut across seceder testimony.

The '45 Rebellion temporarily distracted the fathers and brethren from this question but it was taken up again in 1746 and 1747 when the seceders virtually split into in two, into Burghers and Antiburghers, i.e. those who thought that it was permissible for seceders to take the Oath and those who did not. This was a tragic event for all concerned. As J H Leckie ² put it, "... the Antiburghers were perhaps the more logical, but the Burghers were the more sane ..."

When the split came the Antiburghers purported to excommunicate the Burghers. One prominent Antiburgher was John Erskine, a son of Ralph. Indeed, Ralph Erskine was a particular target of Antiburgher denunciation. He himself

² *Secession Memories*, 1926, p.51

published two pamphlets on the controversy entitled *Fancy no Faith* and *Fancy still no Faith*.

With remarkable zeal, the Antiburghers were now to wage a veritable crusade against a whole collection of obscure oaths, including the Constable's Oath, the Chapman's Oath and the Mason's Oath!

In the course of time, the split was to be further complicated by the division of both Burghers and Antiburghers into "Auld Lights" who favoured Covenants and a state connection and "New Lights" who favoured what was later known as the Voluntary Principle and were Anti-Covenanting.

One other highlight of Dunfermline's religious life during the time of Ralph Erskine was the visit of the famous Methodist preacher George Whitefield in 1741. This is a story in itself as it began cordially yet finished less so. Had a close liaison been established between the Methodists and the seceders, the subsequent history of the church in Scotland might have been very different.

Ralph Erskine died in Dunfermline in 1752 in the 68th year of his age and the 42nd of his ministry. His bones lie, very fittingly, in the Abbey Churchyard and a handsome monument was erected on his grave in 1876. The text on the monument reads:

Remember them which had the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversations, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever. (Hebrews 13: 7-8)

Some Sidelights on Ralph Erskine

Published in the Banner of Truth Magazine 72 (1969)

To those who know anything about the Scottish Seceders, there immediately springs to mind the name of Ebenezer Erskine [1680-1754], minister at Portmoak from 1703 until 1731 when he moved to Stirling, and leader of the Seceders. The same Ebenezer Erskine was an impressive and majestic person both in word and in deed, a man of brilliance and eloquence whose gifts made him appear to overshadow his younger brother Ralph.

Ralph Erskine [1685-1752] perhaps lacked some of the impressiveness of his brother, yet Robert Mackenzie says of him³ that he was "...gentler, more ideal, more mystical than his brother, fond of music and proficient on the violin."

Ralph was not one of the original Seceders of 1733 although he had been closely associated with his brother's stand on the "Marrow" controversy, patronage and the Simson case. However in 1740 when he was finally deposed by the General Assembly, he threw in his lot with his brother and the Associate Presbytery.

In 1711 he had been appointed as Minister of the Second Charge at the famous Dunfermline Abbey and in 1716 he became Minister of the First Charge of that Church. That he was a scholar and a theologian of considerable ability can be shown by the fact that his collected Works in ten volumes passed through many editions. *Gospel Sonnets*, his best known work, was first published in 1734.

Ralph Erskine was the son of Rev Henry Erskine of Cornhill, Northumberland and later of Chirnside in Berwickshire. Henry Erskine was a Puritan and, as such, was forced to vacate his

³ John Brown of Haddington, 1918, p.70

living at Cornhill under the Act of Uniformity, 1662. One of the great successes of Henry Erskine's preaching was the conversion of Thomas Boston.

In his turn, Ralph had made considerable study of many of the great commentators, preferring above all Matthew Henry. Among his favourite writers were Owen, Manton, Flavel and Boston. But above all books the one he studied most was, of course, his Bible. His biographer, Fraser of Kennoway could say "His delight in study was cordial and persevering." Ralph was an emphatic believer in the Sovereignty of God as may be seen from the following extract from his diary:

After I had remembered the public abroad and at home, particularly to beseeching the Lord to bless my ministry at Dunfermline and to remember His words, 'Lo, I am with you' and to bless what I was preaching on, even all things being in the hand of Christ, that He would give evidence of it by His working powerfully upon many. I was then helped to beg the Spirit constantly to water and watch me. Under a sense of absolute weakness and inability to stand for myself, I was helped, with a heart poured out before God, to declare to Him that, though He was calling me to wait upon Him, yet I could not wait on Him a moment unless He would water me 'every moment.' I was made to seek assistance, success, strength and courage for my work in the congregation, while the Lord called me to the ministry therein, being conscious that my fainting spirit was unfit for any work, if the Lord would not be with me.

His sermons were characterised by solid preparation in the Spirit and with due and careful thought. One criticism that is sometimes laid against him is that he overdid the concept of the wrath of God. Perhaps we should just let Ralph speak for himself: "... I love not, sirs, to preach of wrath and hell, but I see so many people running that way through their slighting the

road that leads to Heaven, that I am resolved you shall not have it to say hereafter that you had a minister who never told you where you were going. Nay, you shall rather have it to say 'Our minister told us to fell from the wrath to come'."

Ralph Erskine's sermons were always written out in full and, for the most part he kept fairly close to his script during delivery. It is said of him that he had an excellent pulpit appearance, a pleasing voice and a pleasant manner. In particular he was in the habit of making many full and free offers of Christ to his hearers in a persuasive, attractive manner in which he urged them to accept the offer which was graciously made to them on the authority of the divine Word. Above all, he was true pastor, who knew his people and, as such, was able to speak to their particular needs, hopes and aspirations.

Like all true preachers, both then and now, he considered his exposition of the Scriptures on Sunday to be the central part of his whole ministry. In the early years of his ministry, he expounded the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the Acts of the Apostles and, later, the themes of the Epistles.

Of Ralph Erskine we could certainly say that he was a preacher and a pastor and that, for him, these were not two unconnected functions. His journals give us ample evidence of his care and anxiety for his people in sickness, death or any kind of trouble.

In matters of discipline too he was dutiful - a minister of such a large flock in Dunfermline could not be otherwise - yet never was he harsh or vindictive. Of considerable interest is a list of questions used by him to remind elders of their duties. These eight questions, whilst not exhaustive, are very useful and at least in general outline, could be used with profit in the twentieth century for elders or their equivalent in other traditions of the church.

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