

Church History (48): Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine

"Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754) and his younger brother, Ralph (1685-1752), were great eighteenth-century Scottish preachers. God used them to bring hundreds of people to conversion and thousands more to spiritual maturity through their lives, ministries, sermons, and writings" (Beeke).¹

I. Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine

1. *Their personal lives.* "Ebenezer Erskine was born in Dryburch, Scotland, in 1680. Five years later, his brother, Ralf, was born in Monilaws, near Cornhill, Northumberland, the northernmost country of England. Their father, Henry, was a Puritan minister who had been forced to vacate his home and pastorate in Cornhill in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity. Their mother was Margaret Halcro, Henry's second wife" (Beeke).² In 1690, Henry Erskine accepted a call to the parish of Chirnside, near Berwick, in southeastern Scotland, where he ministered until his death in 1696 at the age of seventy-two. Ralph was converted at a young age. "According to notebooks he kept, Ralph believed the Lord began His saving work within him when he was age eleven and his father died. 'Lord, put Thy fear in my heart,' the young boy wrote. 'Let my thoughts be holy, and let me do for thy glory, all that I do. Bless me in my lawful work. Give a good judgment and memory—a belief in Jesus Christ, and an assured token of Thy love'" (Beeke).³ He entered Edinburgh University at the age of fifteen to study theology. "After earning a master's degree in theology in 1704, Ralph worked for five years as a private chaplain for his relative, Colonel John Erskine. He was ordained to the ministry in 1711 and assumed the parish at Dunfermline. "Ralph was ordained to the second charge in Dunfermline in 1711 and promoted to the first charge in 1716" (Beeke).⁴ After he began his pastoral labors, Ralph fell prey to doubts about his calling (as a Christian and minister). Thomas Boston's work on the covenant of grace finally brought him relief. After reading Boston, Erskine was able to plead the promises of God and regain peace of heart" (Beeke).⁵ Ralph Erskine married Margaret Dewar on July 15, 1714, three years after his ordination. She died sixteen years later having bore him ten children, five of which died in infancy. He remarried 2 years later (1732) to Margaret Simson who bore him four additional children (three of which died in childhood).

Having read that word, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths' (Prov. iii. 6.), I now acknowledged that a prudent wife was from Him, and that the qualifying of a wife for me was from Him. I acknowledged Him as a promising God, to whom I looked for the blessing, and sought her as a blessing to me and to my children. I looked upon them as not my children, but the children of God, His concern. I was made to seek that the Lord, who had taken away their mother, and left them orphans, would provide a mother for them, and make my bride a loving kindly mother to them. Here, with all my heart melting, and my eyes dissolved in tears, I was made to seek that the Lord would create love in her heart, first to God, and then, in Him, to me and to the children.⁶

"Ebenezer Erskine studied philosophy and the classics at Edinburgh University, then earned a master's degree in theology in 1697. He served as tutor and chaplain to the God-fearing family of the Earl of Rothes until he was licensed in 1703 by the Presbytery of Kirkcaldy and ordained to Portmoak, near

¹ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 238

² Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 238

³ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 240

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 241

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 241

⁶ Ralph Erskine, *The Life and Diary of Ralph Erskine*, 441

Kinross, where he would minister for the next twenty-eight years" (Beeke).⁷ Though ordained to the ministry, it appears Ebenezer was unconverted. "After a few years of spiritual struggle, he finally began to experience what he called 'the true grace of God.' In the summer of 1708, Erskine wrote in his diary that he finally 'got his head out of Time into Eternity.' On August 26, he said that God had 'brought my heart to give a consent to Him' and that he was now sure that God could never 'deny His own covenant' with him" (Beeke).⁸ "His memory was quickened and flooded by his heart, and his constrained manner changed into ease and vigor. He had the external advantages of a public speaker in his appearance and voice, and native dignity of bearing; but the new power of his preaching lay in the conviction he had gained of evangelical truth and in the central place he gave it in his message" (Ker).⁹ "Erskine's encounter with God transformed his life and ministry. Thousands of people flocked to hear him, coming from as far as sixty miles, particularly during times of Communion. Hundreds of people were converted to Christ. Many members of his congregation began to take notes of his sermons. Erskine sometimes addressed the note-takers publicly as his 'scribes'" (Beeke).¹⁰ "Six months after his ordination at Portmoak, he had married Alison Turpie. She was a young woman of more than extraordinary talents, and of undoubted piety, and had been trained long in the school of temptation and spiritual conflict—so much so, that at times she had been plunged into almost uncontrollable despondency. Nearly half a century after, when his diary was brought to light, traces of his wife's influence were discovered through all his career of usefulness, in a ministry most exemplary and successful" (Ker).¹¹

"Mr. Erskine, from time to time, was visited with successive and severe personal and domestic trials. The year 1713 was one of sorrow upon sorrow. Within the short space of a few months, three of his children, Ralph (2), Henry (9), and Alexander (5), were taken from him by death" (Ker).¹² A year later, a fourth child died (Isabel), and then in August 1720, his first wife died. Ebenezer married again three years later to Mary Webster, who bore him three additional children who all died young. "On the 15th of March 1751, he lost his second wife, and his dear brother Ralph the year following. When the news of his brother's death reached him, he said with emotion, 'And is Ralph gone? He has twice got the start of me; he was first in Christ, and now he is first in glory.' In a letter to a friend about the same time, he wrote: 'Many of God's billows are going over me, yet still I hope the Lord will command His loving-kindness in the day-time, and His song shall be with me in the night'" (Ker).¹³ As his health began to fail, he was unable to fulfill his duties. "His last sermon was literally preached from his bed to a company assembled in his room. It was from the text, 'This God is God forever and ever; He will be our God even unto death' (Ps.43:14). He was buried, by his own desire, in the middle of his meeting-house, where a large stone with a Latin inscription, recording the date of his death, his age, and the periods of his ministry, marks the spot. In consequence of a new church having been built behind the old one, his grace is now in the open space in front, with a monument erected to his memory" (Ker).¹⁴

2. *Their pastorates.* Ebenezer pastored two churches: Portmoak (1703-1731) and Stirling (1731-1754). "After Ebenezer labored at Portmoak with great pleasure and success for many years, it seemed good to an all-wise Providence to transfer him to a wider and more noticeable sphere. In the new and important sphere of ministerial exertion which he now occupied; he did not disappoint the high expectations formed by the inhabitants of Stirling. In performing the public and private duties of his office,

⁷ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 239

⁸ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 239

⁹ John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 5-6

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 240

¹¹ John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 60-61

¹² John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 73

¹³ John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 124

¹⁴ John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 128-129

he maintained the same zeal and diligence which he had discovered at Portmoak. His ministrations were eminently popular and useful" (Fraser).¹⁵ "Ralph would serve the Dunfermline congregation for more than forty years until his death in 1752. God mightily blessed that work. Within two years of his ordination, the Spirit was working so powerfully through his preaching that worshipers filled the church and church yard. A previously dead church came alive" (Beeke).¹⁶ All three churches pastored by the Erskine brothers prospered greatly and the influence of both men, spread well beyond their local parishes. This influence and popularity resulted in two trials: their controversy with the Church of Scotland and George Whitfield.

(1) Their controversy with the Church of Scotland. This began in 1717 with the Marrow Controversy, and came to a head in the early 1730s with their departure from the Church of Scotland. "The 1731 Assembly, dealing with an overture 'concerning the Method of Planting Vacant Churches,' legalized the appointment of ministers by patrons (wealthy landowners) rather than by the vote of church members. Both of the Erskines spoke out against the proposal, arguing strenuously for the right of the people to choose their ministers" (Beeke).¹⁷ This led the Assembly to suspend Ebenezer and three other ministers from their parishes. In December of 1733, "the four ministers met to form the Associate Presbytery, giving birth to the Scottish Secession Church" (Beeke).¹⁸ Ralph joined his brother in 1737, and on May 12, 1740, both of the Erskines and their colleagues were deposed by the General Assembly. "His delay arose from the hope of seeing a better spirit and some attempt at reformation in the Church, but, disappointment in this, he threw in his lot with the Seceding brethren" (Ker).¹⁹ Most of Ralph Erskine's congregation left the established church with him. A new building seating 2,000 was completed in 1741. "Unlike Ralph, Ebenezer was immediately shut out of his church after he was deposed. Instead of letting his congregation break down the doors, Erskine began preaching outdoors. His congregation grew rapidly in the ensuing months. The Erskines became busier and busier. As they ministered to their own large churches and a variety of other parishes throughout Scotland, the Secession cause grew great dramatically, promoting Morrow theology" (Beeke).²⁰ Eventually, a meeting-house was contrasted for the church at Stirling. "With all due speed they constructed for him a meeting-house, which was numerously attended, not only by the inhabitants of Stirling, but my serious Christians from surrounding towns and villages, to the distance of more than ten miles; in which he continued to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ, with delight and with success, while life and health were spared" (Fraser).²¹

(2) Their controversy with George Whitfield. As early as 1739, Ralph Erskine and George Whitfield began to correspondence through letters. "Ralph proposed that Whitefield visit Scotland and advised him how to proceed with ministry there. He said it would be best to join with the Associate Presbytery; to do otherwise would unduly comfort the Seceders' opponents. Whitefield relied that he could not do that, for he was coming as a visiting preacher to any who would hear him regardless of denominational affiliation" (Beeke).²² Ralph wrote: "Come, if possible, dear Whitefield, come. There is no face on earth I would desire more earnestly to see. Yet I would desire it only in a way that, I think, would tend most to the advancing of our Lord's kingdom, and the reformation work among our hands. Such is the situation among us, that, unless you come with a design to meet and abide with us of the Associate

¹⁵ D. Fraser, *The Whole Works of Ebenezer Erskine*, 1: xii-xiv

¹⁶ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 242

¹⁷ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 245

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 246

¹⁹ John Ker, *The Erskines: Ebenezer and Ralph*, 31-32

²⁰ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 248-249

²¹ D. Fraser, *The Whole Works of Ebenezer Erskine*, 1: xxi

²² Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 249

Presbytery, I would dread the consequences of your coming, let it should seem equally to countenance our persecutors."²³ "On July 30, 1741, Whitefield arrived in Dunfermline, and the next day he preached for Ralph Erskine. The following week, Whitefield met with the Associate Presbytery at Dunfermline" (Beeke).²⁴

I met with the Associate Presbytery, who asked me to preach only for them till I had further light on church government. I asked why only for them? Mr. Ralph Erskine said, 'they were the Lord's people.' I then asked whether there were no other Lord's people but themselves; and supposing all others were the devil's people, they certainly had more need to be preached to, and therefore I was more and more determined to go out into the highways and hedges; and that if the Pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Christ therein. The consequence of all this was an open breach. I retired, I wept, I prayed, and after preaching in the fields sat down and dined with them, and then took a final leave.²⁵

3. *Their preaching.* "The preaching and writings of the Erskines affected tens of thousands of people in Scotland for over a century. Their preaching gave direction to the Secession movement. It assimilated and passed on the essence of Marrow theology to subsequent generations. Ebenezer Erskine's *Whole Works*, first printed in Edinburgh in 1761, was reprinted six more times in Scotland. Ralph Erskine's writings, first published in 1764, were reprinted four times in Scotland" (Beeke).²⁶ While there may be subtle differences between the sermons of Ebenezer and Ralph, they are more alike than different. "In a sense, the sermons of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine could have been written by the same hand. The brothers differed, of course. Ebenezer's gifts were not as striking as Ralph's, but Ebenezer had a calm, sure strength that made him a better leader. Ralph was more self-effacing, more devout, and more experimental than his brother. Nevertheless, the substance and spirit of their sermons are so similar—and remained so throughout their careers—that examining them together does no disservice to either" (Beeke).²⁷

(1) It was God exalting. The Erskines possessed an exalted and orthodox view of God. In a lengthy sermon preached after the administration of the Lord's supper, on September 29th, 1723, entitled, *The Harmony of the Divine Attributes Displayed in the Redemption and Salvation of Sinners by Jesus Christ* (Ps.85:10 – 'Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other'), Ralph Erskine said of God's attributes: "The divine Essence is undivided; and as, 'There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit; and these three are one;' so the attributes of God, however manifold, to our apprehension, yet there is no division among them, they are all one; and their conspiring together in Christ for our redemption, is called THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD. The manifold perfections of God meet together in one, with one consent and with one heart. Behold Mercy and Justice in one another's arms; and so close is the embracement that they are just one."²⁸ For the Erskines, each attribute of God is God Himself. In a sermon preached on July 17, 1726, entitled, *God in Christ, a God of Love* (1Jn.4:16 – 'God is love'), Ebenezer said: "All I shall say of it by way of explication is only to tell you, that God is one simple and uncompounded Being, and the divine attributes and perfections are all one in Him: His wisdom is nothing else but the infinitely wise God; His power is nothing else but the omnipotent or almighty God: His holiness is nothing else but the infinite

²³ Ralph Erskine, taken from *George Whitefield*, 2:88

²⁴ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 249

²⁵ George Whitfield, taken from, *George Whitefield*, 2:89-90

²⁶ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 261

²⁷ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 265

²⁸ Ralph Erskine, *Select Sermons*, 2:142-143

holy God; His justice is the just and righteous God; so here love denotes the loving God, or a God of love."²⁹

He then described three aspects of God's love: it is a love of benevolence, beneficence, and complacency. With respect to the latter he said: "There is a love of complacency, or delight and satisfaction, which is peculiar only to believers; who because of the excellency of His loving-kindness, do put your trust under the shadow of His wings. O believer, the Lord loves thee, a God of love loves thee, not only with a love of benevolence and beneficence, as He doth others, in some respects, but He loves thee with a complacent love, as so to take pleasure in thee." "Now, the complacent love of God to his people, is variously expressed in scripture. As, 1. His love is said to be a pastoral love, or the love a shepherd hath to His flock: Is. 40:11, 'He shall feed His flock like a shepherd'; 2. His love is a friendly love; 'Ye are my friends, (says He) if ye do whatsoever I command you.' 3. His complacency in them sometimes runs out into a conjugal love: Is. 56:5, 'Thy Maker is thine husband, the Lord of hosts is His name'; 4. It sometimes runs out into a paternal love, 'I will be to them a Father, and they shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.' But why do I stand on this? In one word, His love is the love of a God; His love cannot be expressed by any similitude, for God is love; He is as it were all one flame of love to the believer. Love is in Him in its perfection, and perfect love casts out hatred; His heart is just the very center of love; and whatsoever sparks of love are to be found in any of our hearts, they are all kindled at this fire. As all the waters that are in the rivers come originally from the sea, and return back to it again; so any drop of love that is to be found in any of our hearts, it is just a release of His love, returning back again into its proper center from whence it came."³⁰

(2) It was promise promoting. "The Erskines are best known for sermons that, in keeping with Scottish tradition, focus on the promises of God. The Scots Confession of 1560 spoke of an 'assured faith in the promises of God.' 'What is the gospel but a word of promise?' Ebenezer Erskine asked. 'Take away the promise out of the Bible,' wrote Ralph Erskine, 'and you take away the gospel', for 'the gospel and the promise is one and the same thing'" (Beeke).³¹ For the Erskines, God's promises cover eternity past to eternity future, and are all fulfilled in Christ. Thus, their preaching was thoroughly Christ-centered. Ebenezer said: "All prophecies, promises, histories, and doctrines of the Word point us to Him, as the needle in the sailor's compass points to the pole-star. Our preaching, and your hearing, is in vain, unless we bring you to the knowledge of Christ and an acquaintance with Him. All the lines of religion meet in Him as their center."³² In 1726, Ralph preached a series of seven sermons entitled, *The Pregnant Promise, With Her Issue; Or, The Children of Promise Brought Forth and Described* (Gal.4:28 – 'Now, we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise').³³ In the final sermon he said: "Consider the excellency of the promises. The apostle says, they are exceeding great and precious promises (2Pet.1:4). Some things may be great, and yet not precious; but the promises are both great and precious; and not only so, but exceeding great and exceeding precious. You may consider the excellency of the promises in these following respects, namely, 1. The promises are excellent and precious, in respect of their author, which is God. 2. The promises are excellent and precious, in respect of their object, or the person to whom they are made, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Mediator and Redeemed; not to the elect immediately, but to Christ for them. 3. They are excellent and precious in respect of their price. We use to value things according to the price that they cost us. Now, the price of the promise was the blood of the Son of God. 4. They are excellent and precious, in regard of the reality of them. The promises are not vain toys or empty notions; nay, all the promises are so many pardons,

²⁹ Ebenezer Erskine, *The Whole Works*, 1:275

³⁰ Ebenezer Erskine, *The Whole Works*, 1:281

³¹ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 266-267

³² Ebenezer Erskine, *The Whole Works*, 2:7-8

³³ Ralph Erskine, *Complete Works*, 5:91-283

so many blessings, so many bounties, so many substances of the greatest reality that can be imagined. 5. The promises are excellent and precious, in regard of their certainty and immutability. Riches have wings, and flee away; honors have wings, and flee away; but God may as soon cease to be God, as not to be true to His word, and sure in His promise. 6. The promises are excellent and precious, in regard of their fullness."³⁴

The promise contains salvation from sin, from the guilt of sin, from the filth of sin, from the power of sin, from the sting of sin, from the stain of sin, from the fruit of sin, from the fountain of sin, and from the very being of sin at length. Here are promises of salvation from wrath, from the law, from justice, from death, from hell, from the world, and from the devil and unreasonable men; salvation from troubles, and reproaches, and fears, and doubts, and faintings; salvation from desertion and despondency, from wants and weakness, from wrongs and injuries done to your names or otherwise; salvation from all woes and weariness; salvation from backsliding and apostacy; salvation from plagues and all imperfections; innumerable positive salvations and mercies; pardoning mercy, sin-subduing mercy, healing mercy, conquering mercy, comforting mercy, upholding mercy, grace increasing mercy, and perfecting mercy; sanctifying mercy, to sanctify all providences, all crosses, all relations; defending mercy, strengthening mercy, helping mercy, following mercy, enlightening, enlivening, enlarging mercy; mercy for supplying your wants, dispelling your fears, covering your infirmities, hearing your prayers, ordering all things for your good; and salvation to everlasting life, glory, and immortality.³⁵

(3) It was Christ offering. "Like the Reformers, the Erskines advocated for the free offer of the gospel. The gospel was extended to everyone without conditions or reserve. They protested against the kind of extreme Calvinism that offered the gospel only to the elect. They believed that such a limited offer displaced the heart of the gospel message" (Beeke).³⁶ In a sermon on Zech.13:7, "Awake, O sword against My Shepherd, and against the Man that is My Fellow, says the LORD of hosts," entitled, *The Sword of Justice Awakened Against God's Fellow*, after providing several reasons the Messiah had to be both God and Man, Ralph then concluded: "Hence we may see, what is the great duty of all who hear this gospel, namely, to embrace the man that is God's Fellow, to flock in to this Shepherd, and come to Him as the sacrifice and propitiation in His blood, in whom the sword of divine justice has got satisfaction. Let me then exhort you, in the name of the Lord to this duty, before I close. Is it so, that the sword of the Lord of hosts is bathed in the blood of the Shepherd, the Man that is God's Fellow, then, as you would not fall a sacrifice to this sword of God's wrath forever, O close with the Man that is God's Fellow, as He that fell a sacrifice to this sword in your room. Have you no apprehension of the wrath of God, and of your dreadful condition by nature, wherein you are lying bound to be a sacrifice to the wrath of God, the Lord's hand being stretched out to lay on the stroke, and the wrath of God abiding on you, liable to the law's sentence, which is the curse of God, and the vengeance of His awakened sword, until once you get the Man that is God's Fellow put in your room? All that the gospel aims at is this, that you should seek to change rooms with Christ: guilty sinners, here is the way to get your debt paid, your Judge pleased, justice satisfied, God atoned, sin expiated, and everlasting peace and reconciliation between God and you made up. The sword of the Lord of hosts is hanging over your heads, crying, Vengeance, vengeance upon the guilty sinner. But behold the Man that is God's Shepherd and Fellow; the curse of the law, the vengeance of God, the sword of Jehovah, has lighted upon Him that it might not fall upon you: there is the glad news and good tidings of the gospel (RE, 1:92)."

³⁴ Ralph Erskine, *Complete Works*, 5:256-259

³⁵ Ralph Erskine, *Complete Works*, 5:259

³⁶ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 276-277