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Puritan or enlightened? John Erskine and the transition of Scottish Evangelical theology

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Introduction

G. D. Henderson contends that the 'Evangelical party in the Scottish Church of the eighteenth century displays very clearly the main characteristics of puritanism'.[1] John Erskine (1721-1803), the leader of the Popular party, was listed by Henderson as 'the most distinguished of the later Evangelicals' of the Scottish Puritan tradition.[2] Henderson's point is well taken. Although the Enlightenment was a powerful intellectual movement in Scotland during this time, it did not overshadow the Puritanism that was so pervasive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Men like John Owen, Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, David Dickson and Thomas Boston were often treated as saints among Evangelicals in the Kirk, who emulated their works.[3] Thomas Boston, for example, was the premier Scottish Puritan of his day. His *Fourfold State* was extremely influential and adorned the bookshelves of many Scottish families.[4] Puritanism was naturally suited for eighteenth-century Scottish Evangelicals.

But, was Puritanism so pervasive that Evangelicals in Scotland were hostile to the Enlightenment? David Bebbington has suggested that the Enlightenment was the foundation for Evangelicalism.[5] He describes Erskine as typically enlightened and therefore different from the previous Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[6] Both agree that Erskine was an Evangelical, however, whether he was Puritan or enlightened is to be examined in this article.

The Puritan pastor

The preaching of the Word of God was the mainspring of doctrinal inspiration

1 G. D. Henderson, *The Burning Bush: Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 139.
2 Henderson, *Burning Bush*, 150.
3 James Walker, *Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 1560-1750* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982 2nd ed.), 7.
4 Henderson, *Burning Bush*, 141-42.
5 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2005), 21-69.
6 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 33, 54, 62-63, 73.

and piety among the Puritans, and was equally integral to Erskine.[7] Edward Hindson's comment that 'The genius of Puritan theologians was that they were preachers first and theological writers secondly' might indicate why one of Edinburgh's finest ministers was committed to the craft of preaching as an outlet for his theology.[8] Erskine's collection of some thirty-eight published sermons outnumbered his theological treatises, which were limited to five in his *Theological Dissertations*. His conformity to a traditional orthodox style of preaching did not go unnoticed. Writing in the nineteenth century of famous preachers in Scotland, William Blaikie opined that Sir Walter Scott depicted Erskine in his novel *Guy Mannering*, rather than William Robertson or Hugh Blair, because the great historical novelist wanted to characterise a typical Scottish minister who stemmed from the Reformation, instead of the moderate preacher of the day.[9] For Erskine, preaching was pivotal for dispensing God's Word.

Much of the content of his sermons detailed the gloomy effects of sin on the human heart, which was characteristic of the Puritans. Erskine was opposed to the optimism of many Enlightenment preachers, who saw mankind's moral state as generally healthy and improving. In the pulpit, he championed the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity. 'The throne of the heart is filled with empty vanities', complained the Edinburgh minister, 'and the worst and lowest room in the soul is thought sufficient for the Lord of glory'.[10] 'If you ask, Why is God so little loved?', Erskine replied, 'Human nature has degenerated; sense is exalted; the intellectual powers are woefully depressed'.[11] He was disgusted with the prevailing thought of the new era which taught that individuals need only to put forth a moral effort in order to be a lauded as good Christians.

Like most of the Puritans, Erskine denied a works-orientated righteousness and held firmly to the belief that Christ's death alone was the exclusive source for salvation. Because he died, but conquered death by rising again, Christ alone was capable of freeing mankind from the grip of death.[12] The Scottish Evangelical was careful not to allow a Pelagian definition of salvation to seep into his theology. He asked, 'But, upon whose account, is the Lord thus well pleased? Is it on account of their dispositions and performances? No; it is for Christ's righteous-

7 Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 24.

8 Edward Hindson, 'Introduction to the Puritans', in Edward Hindson (ed.), *Introduction to Puritan Theology: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 20.

9 William Garden Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland from the Sixth to the Nineteenth Century: Twelfth Series of the Cunningham Lectures* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 264.

10 John Erskine, 'On the Unprincipled Contempt of Religion', in Henry Moncreiff Wellwood (ed.), *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Ogle & Aikman, 1804), 199.

11 John Erskine, 'On the Want of Love to God', in Wellwood (ed.), *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 2, 169-70.

12 John Erskine, 'The Influence of Religion on National Happiness', in Wellwood (ed.), *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 2, 481.

ness' sake'.[13] Following Owen, Erskine preserved the mystery of God's election, which he argued cannot be discovered by reason, and denied that good works were a means of persuading God who should be saved.[14] Regarding Christ's death, the Presbyterian minister stated, 'Surely, this implies more than purchasing a possibility of salvation for mankind, upon conditions, whose performance depended on their own precarious choice'.[15] This view was different from the Arminian understanding of election, which he repudiated:

> The opposite opinion, which represents God as equally designing the happiness of all mankind, on the uncertain condition of their repentance, faith and perseverance, supposes that God's gracious designs are either accomplished or baffled, as the sovereign choice of man decides; so that God can extend his love and mercy, no farther than man thinks fit to allow.[16]

A denial of works, and complete credit to God for salvation, were standard orthodox beliefs espoused by the Puritans and Erskine.

His Puritanism was more pronounced in his soteriology. Erskine's described Christ's work using typical Reformed terminology. He portrayed Jesus as having 'paid the punishment' which humans owed to God 'and purchased for us' as 'our representative'.[17] He was committed to limited atonement, which he based on the apostle John's words who said that salvation was given to 'as many as were given him' as opposed to saying that 'all' were given to Christ by the Father.[18] Thomas Boston was a forerunner to Erskine's thought. Boston stated, 'There is no universal redemption, nor universal atonement'.[19] More specifically, he asserted that 'Jesus Christ died not for all and every individual person of mankind; but for the elect only'.[20] Erskine had the same opinion that those given to Christ 'were a select, determined number, not the whole of mankind'.[21] 'The foundation of redemption', according to Erskine, was 'laid before the world was' and 'for the benefit of the elect'.[22] But, this does not mean that the Edinburgh Evangelical adhered to double-predestination. Calvin's theology, for instance, was built on a two-fold foundation of grace whereby the whole world received some mercy

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13 John Erskine, 'On Death', in Wellwood (ed.), *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 2, 482.

14 John Erskine, 'Power Given to Christ for Blessing the Elect', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: William Creech and Archibald Constable, 1798), 445; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 82.

15 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 450.

16 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 452.

17 John Erskine, 'Jesus Received up Into Glory', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 438.

18 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 451.

19 Thomas Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace from the Sacred Records* (Lewes: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1990), 32.

20 Boston, *Grace*, 32.

21 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 450.

22 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 445.

by God, which was attributed to his revealed will, while only some were adopted as his children under the means of a more particular or special grace, which was decided in his secret will.[23] The decision to save some was not random, but beyond human understanding, which meant that 'it flowed not from mere arbitrary will, but from motives transcendently wise and excellent, though motives to us unsearchable'.[24] Thus, election may be seen as God's active rescuing of some while simply passing over others. In other words, using this understanding of predestination, God is not required to purposely single out some for hell. Moderate Calvinists, like Erskine, were firm that individuals choose to go to hell by rejecting the offer of salvation, while not being so liberal as to suggest that Christ died for all.

His confidence in the doctrine of election was based on his understanding of justice and mercy. He acknowledged that this plan of limited atonement might seem harsh, but it was for the overall good of mankind and conformed to God's good nature. 'Justice doth not require', he averred, 'that the highest manifestations of divine bounty should be granted to every transgressor; and therefore, doth not require, that every transgressor should be chosen to salvation'.[25] Since every one is sinful, and deserving of eternal punishment, there is no injustice in denying salvation to any person. This was the same view that the Scottish Puritan, Brown of Wamphray detailed when he argued that since God created the world, including mankind, he may do whatever he wishes and is not obligated to save all from punishment. The same opinion was held by Samuel Rutherford, who determined that God was not obliged to save mankind, but decided so by his own free will.[26] The difference hinged on the definition of justice and mercy, in which the former is the penalty of everlasting punishment that is deserved by all, while the latter is the act whereby God rescues some from the fire.[27] Election is based on mercy, whereas God's passing over some individuals is rooted in his justice.

Whereas Alister McGrath, Isabel Rivers and C. F. Allison write that many British divines were moving away from the Puritan belief of imputed righteousness, in favour of a more Pelagian understanding of justification by faith, this was not true of Erskine.[28] Cragg argues that the Puritan form of Calvinism in its 'reckless

23 Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 60.

24 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 455-6.

25 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 454.

26 Walker, *Theology*, 52, 68.

27 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 455.

28 Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification: Volume II: From 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 109, 116; Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780: Volume I: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 73; C. F. Allison, The Rise of Moralism: *The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 184.

lack of moderation' ultimately led to the shift from a dominance of Calvinism to Arminianism, which turned into English Deism.[29] Even among Evangelicals like John Wesley, imputed righteousness was becoming less in vogue with the new Enlightenment spirit, which gave greater weight to human ability than was previously taught.[30] Erskine, however, believed that Christ's death alone was the reason why salvation was possible; there was nothing in humanity that could aid this process. Efforts to justify oneself through good works have only 'a finite value' and thus cannot satisfy the demands that God requires.[31] He explained that the 'righteous' are those who have 'imputed righteousness', which 'qualifies' them for heaven and is demonstrated by the 'evidence' of their true character as a Christian.[32] God cannot simply forgive sins without atonement because such a decision would 'eclipse the glory of the law, and cast a cloud upon his spotless purity and awful justice'.[33] This view undoubtedly came from his affinity for Calvin's penal substitution theory of atonement. As a response to those who 'ask with a sneer' how Christ's justification can be counted to individuals, the Presbyterian evinced that the Saviour's actual righteousness is not taken from him and 'transfer[red] to us'.[34] Rather, God simply 'places' Christ's righteousness 'to our account, deals well with us for the sake of it, and graciously accepts it for our pardon and justification'.[35] Here again, Erskine was following the typical Calvinistic understanding of imputed righteousness advocated by Puritans like John Owen.[36]

One of the trademarks of Puritanism was a wrestling with assurance of one's salvation.[37] McGrath articulated that when the Bezan school suggested that one may appear to have saving faith, but not be in reality one of the elect, this resulted in the infamous Puritan anxiety about election.[38] Although Bebbington reported a shift in belief toward assurance of salvation among Evangelicals, there were many notable Christians in the eighteenth century who underwent tremendous spiritual anguish before arriving at a final security of their election.[39] The American colonist Samuel Hopkins struggled with this in his days at Yale and even in

29 G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason: A Study of Changes in Religious Thought Within the Church of England, 1660 to 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 30-31.

30 Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 417.

31 John Erskine, 'The People of God Considered as All Righteous', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 289.

32 Erskine, 'Righteous', 280.

33 Erskine, 'Righteous', 284.

34 Erskine, 'Righteous', 291.

35 Erskine, 'Righteous', 291.

36 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill (ed.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 725-53; John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ, Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated* (Coventry, 1797).

37 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 112.

38 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 114.

39 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 42.

the subsequent years after his graduation.[40] In typical Puritan fashion, the Scottish Relief Presbytery minister Thomas Gillespie believed that it would be rare for someone to be assured of their salvation within their lifetime.[41] The Anglican hymn writer John Newton wrestled with the assurance of his own salvation before settling on a humble security of it.[42] Many of the Scottish Seceders, under the auspices of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, reverted back to the older teachings of the Puritans on intense self-scrutiny for assurance of salvation so that they were often overwhelmed with doubts as to their salvation.[43] Therefore, it cannot be said that all forms of Puritanism were outdated among eighteenth-century Evangelicals in Britain.

Erskine, perhaps gaining his own assurance years before, never hinted at a struggle with his own election in any of his published works or letters, but he did continue to teach in his sermons that a certain amount of soul-searching was advisable. It was necessary to 'search and try our ways', he remarked, 'to examine ourselves whether we be in the faith, to prove ourselves in earnest, whether Christ be in us, or whether we are yet reprobates'.[44] Complementing Puritan thought, he warned his parishioners of a feeling whereby one may believe salvation is secure, but in reality has the potential to bring 'you to the grave with a lie in your right hands'.[45] These feelings are 'certain religious impressions made upon their minds' as well as 'a certain train of experiences, carrying in them a great resemblance to a work of conversion'.[46] The possibility of such deception is attributed to 'a natural sweetness of temper' of which 'the passions of some are easily wrought upon, by lively representations, whether of a pleasant or terrible nature'.[47] Though not evident in his own life, the Puritan practice of grappling with one's salvation continued to be taught by Erskine.

Throughout his sermons there was a measure of homage that was given for the traditional teachings of the gospel that were resistant to some of the pressures of the Enlightenment. Progress 'by the aid of various experiments and observations' improves society but is not as constant as the gospel.[48] This is because the gospel, 'when mingled with human inventions, loses much of its native luster,

40 Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1981), 27-30.

41 Kenneth B. E. Roxburgh, *Thomas Gillespie and the Origins of the Relief Church in 18th Century Scotland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 148.

42 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, '"I Am a Sort of Middle-Man": The Politically Correct Evangelicalism of John Newton', in George A Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll (eds.), *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 32, 41-42.

43 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 55.

44 Erskine, 'National Happiness', 228.

45 Erskine, 'Righteous', 303.

46 Erskine, 'Righteous', 303.

47 Erskine, 'Righteous', 304.

48 John Erskine, 'Instructions and Consolations from the Unchangeableness of Christ', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 225.

and, like adulterated milk, affords but scanty and unwholesome nourishment'.[49] There was an acknowledgement that the current enlightened age had recommended a divergent, more liberal understanding of the Bible, which Erskine defied.[50] He asked, 'Have the words, faith, salvation, justification, conversion, and others which often occur in the New Testament, acquired another sense in the 18th century, than they had in the first?'[51] From this account, he might be interpreted as more hostile to the Enlightenment than favourable to it.

The enlightened Evangelical

Although in one sense Erskine seemed to reject the Enlightenment and alternatively embrace the Puritanism of the past, there is ample evidence that he embraced the Age of Reason. For instance, he adopted the stance that Christ's death was sufficient for everyone, even though not all would be blessed with final salvation. This more moderate form of Reformed theology was a deviation from the high Calvinism of the previous era. This fresh perspective is attributed, at least in part, to the impact of the Enlightenment.[52] In Scotland, the catalyst for this new thought was a book entitled, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which was originally published in 1646, but was resurrected by Thomas Boston and republished in 1718. It was condemned by the General Assembly in Scotland on 20 May 1720 because of the influence of Principal Hadow of St Andrews, who believed that it was conveying a message that grace was offered to all freely through faith, as opposed to a strict predestinarian understanding of salvation.[53] The Marrow Men, those who accepted the principles of this book, vehemently opposed the ruling of the General Assembly since they themselves adhered to particular redemption. The difference, however, was that the Marrow Men treated the gospel as a message that should be offered to all, despite most being unwilling to accept it.[54] Their perspective was consistent with limited atonement since only the elect would accept the gospel call and receive saving faith. This subtle distinction between the more moderate doctrine of the Marrow Men and the high Calvinists separated the progressive Evangelicals, who wanted the gospel message to be preached to all, from those who believed that missions was not important since God alone would effectually call those who were elect.

Erskine concurred with the Marrow Men that salvation should be preached to all. In the majority of his sermons, he concluded with a call to accept the gospel message, which was the offer to repent of one's sins, turn to God and receive

49 John Erskine, 'Ministers of the Gospel Cautioned Against Giving Offence', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 51.

50 Erskine, 'Instructions', 227.

51 Erskine, 'Instructions', 227.

52 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 63-64.

53 Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1973), 35-37.

54 Walker, *Theology*, 87-88.

his offer of salvation through faith in Christ. The Scot painted the picture of a Saviour whose 'kind and benevolent affections' are the same today as they were yesterday so that Jesus is always ready to forgive and accept the most malevolent sinners.[55] 'If multitudes of blinded Heathens, and profligate Jews, became eminent and exemplary for holiness of heart and life', exclaimed the Edinburgh divine, 'that grace and power, which produced in them so happy a change, is still the same, and shall be bestowed on every one, who applies to Christ for it, with a humble confidence'.[56] Erskine put forward that 'The joyful tidings, that Christ came in the name of the Father to save us, must be proclaimed in every corner of the habitable earth'.[57] Even in his homily on election, in which he postulated that only a certain number of individuals would be saved, he continually made an offer of the gospel to his listeners, which he hoped they would accept.[58]

It is significant that Erskine was not indifferent to the idea that everyone should be given a chance to receive saving faith; he believed that all ministers should be proactive in encouraging, if not pleading with their parishioners to respond. In fact, he contended that 'Ministers are unfit for their office, who are not able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convince gainsayers'.[59] Since Jesus and the Apostles at no time refused sharing the gospel message with anyone, all should be given a clear and convincing account of Christ's atonement. Although Erskine fully endorsed that 'the gospel is properly the glad tidings that Jesus is able and willing to save, and that even the chief of sinners are warranted to come to him for salvation', he did not presume that everyone would be saved.[60] This was because the 'gospel call doth not declare, that every individual to whom it is addressed shall finally be saved' even though 'it invites and commands him to come to Christ for salvation, and assures him, that if he thus comes, Christ will in no ways cast him out'.[61] Since everyone has the opportunity to accept or reject such an offer, all will be held responsible for their decision.

The example he used was the bronze snake that God commanded Moses to erect in the wilderness for the Israelites to look upon and be healed. Surprisingly, although the Jews were given such a simple instruction, some chose not to obey and faced God's wrath.[62] 'It is not enough', the Scot assured his listeners, 'that there is balm in Gilead and a physician there: His prescriptions, though of sovereign efficacy, leave all diseased, who will not use them'.[63] This way of thinking was congruous with other Evangelicals who were influenced by the Enlightenment.

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55 Erskine, 'Instructions', 229-30.
56 Erskine, 'Instructions', 231.
57 John Erskine, 'Jesus Preached Unto the Gentiles', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 402.
58 Erskine, 'Righteous', 307-308.
59 Erskine, 'Gentiles', 406.
60 Erskine, 'Gentiles', 407.
61 Erskine, 'Blessing the Elect', 457.
62 Erskine, 'Gentiles', 408-409.
63 John Erskine, 'Jesus Believed on in the World', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 418.

For instance, the Baptist preacher, Robert Hall, exchanged the high Calvinistic tenet of double-election with the understanding that God simply passed over some for salvation. In his book, *Help to Zion's Travellers* (1781), he explained that 'What is opposite to election, is a mere negation, or a leaving others in that state in which all men are viewed by the great Eternal when he chose his people'.[64] Hall's work, which Erskine respected, was consistent with the soteriological beliefs of many British Evangelicals. Evangelicals were not obliged to abandon the doctrine of limited atonement since God's special grace for some meant that sinners continued to be accountable for rejecting his offer of salvation.

Erskine adopted Jonathan Edwards's hypothesis, in his *Religious Affections* (1746), that true saving faith could be tested for sincerity, which was based on Locke's empiricism.[65] The Edinburgh minister vehemently opposed the former dominant scholasticism and fully embraced the new age. In his thesis, 'On the legitimate use of right reason, or on liberty of thinking', which was written during his days as a student at Edinburgh University, he described Aristotle as the 'oppressor' of 'liberty of judgment', who reigned 'with almost dictatorial power'. Men like Bacon and Locke were applauded by the young student since they 'had shaken off the Aristotelian yoke and had introduced liberty of thinking'. Through their contributions, the sciences 'gradually moved forward and the mysteries of philosophy' were 'more penetrated'.[66] Erskine's treatise on faith, written around mid-century, demonstrated his adherence to the thought of Locke and Edwards since the Presbyterian appropriated the Enlightenment principle of testing the reliability of information, and in this instance, the sincerity of one's faith by empirical data. There is a knowledge of God, he taught, that is 'posterior to our spiritual espousals', whereby one knows by 'feeling' that one possesses saving faith. Erskine taught that salvation is 'a certainty from our own feelings', rather than from 'divine testimony' that Jesus is the Son of God; it is 'an assurance of sense, not of faith'. The Edinburgh minister proposed that faith is the revelation of truth in the mind, but assurance of it stems from a different source. Sanctification is the process that takes place over time in which one learns from 'divine revelation, rather than the precepts' about the nature of God. In other words, it is the testing grounds by which one experiences first hand knowledge of what one now believes. The command to love the Lord is not followed because God requires it, but through personally discovering his affection. Only by sustaining the virtues of justice, long-suffering and mercy does one know that God is all those characteristics and more. 'None rightly believe that Christ is a Saviour', Erskine

64 Robert Hall, *Help to Zion's Travellers: Being an Attempt to Remove Various Stumbling Blocks Out of the Way, Relating to Doctrinal, Experimental and Practical Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851 3rd ed.), 68.

65 John E. Smith, 'Puritanism and Enlightenment: Edwards and Franklin', in William M. Shea and Peter A. Huff (eds.), *Knowledge and Belief in America: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Religious Thought* (New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 201-203.

66 See John Erskine's essay in John Stevenson's logic class, Edinburgh University Library, Dc. 4.54, 30 April 1737.

reasoned, 'who have not suitable conceptions from what he saves. And none can have such conceptions, without perceiving the goodness and excellency of the gospel salvation'.[67] The heartfelt feeling confirms the faith that the mind assents to, of which godly actions are the proof of one's beliefs.

The enlightened method of preaching

Besides his conviction that the gospel should be preached to all, there was a definite style and execution in Erskine's sermons that was absent in most Puritan pastors prior to the Enlightenment. For instance, J. I. Packer, while consistently praising John Owen's works, describes 'plodding through' his 'ill-arranged and tediously-written treatises' as a 'labour'.[68] Erskine was commended by his biographer, Sir Henry Moncreiff Wellwood as an adherent to Calvinistic beliefs, but 'not the vulgar Calvinism, which exhausts itself on intricate and mysterious dogmas; which more frequently addresses the imaginations, than the understandings of the people'.[69] Even among many of the pre-Enlightenment, quasi-Puritan Marrow Men, Erskine towered over them in terms of polished speech and eloquence. Blaikie recognised this when he recalled that the 'sermons of Dr. John Erskine show much more grace and finish in plan and expression than those of his namesakes, Ebenezer and Ralph, and especially those of the seventeenth century'.[70] Thus, while Erskine shared some common traits of the former Puritans, he surpassed them in the way he expressed his opinions.

A good example of this difference in preaching style might be seen by comparing Erskine to two of his heroes: Thomas Boston and John Maclaurin. Many of Boston's theological convictions were identical with Erskine. For instance, he believed that the covenant of grace was decided by God in eternity and that there was no universal offer of redemption.[71] But Boston's style was more exhausting to read since he often expatiated on subjects with seemingly very little structure and numerous random quotations from the Bible. Erskine was much more succinct and convincing since all of his points aggressively pursued one primary argument.[72] According to Richard Sher, the Moderates, who were well-versed in polite rhetoric and partial to this method of preaching, harshly critiqued the 'crude', but 'pious' sermons of Ebenezer Erskine and the 'vulgarity' of Thomas

67 John Erskine, *Theological Dissertations* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1765), 185-90.

68 Packer, *Godliness*, 84.

69 Sir Henry Moncreiff Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine, D. D., Late One of the Ministers of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1818), 380.

70 Blaikie, *Preachers*, 238.

71 Boston, *Grace*, 32.

72 See, for example, his sermons: 'On the Want of Love', 'The People of God Considered as All Righteous', 'The Important Mystery of the Incarnation', 'Jesus Believed on in the World', 'Jesus Preached unto the Gentiles' and especially 'On Infant Baptism'.

Boston, in the first two issues of their *Edinburgh Review*.[73] Erskine, on the other hand, was often admired for his 'discourses'.[74] A good analysis was provided by Sir Walter Scott, in his novel, *Guy Mannering*, who gave a fair description of Erskine's skill as a preacher at Old Greyfriars in Edinburgh. From the perspective of a former parishioner, Scott retold what it was like to listen to one of his sermons:

> A lecture was delivered, fraught with new, striking, and entertaining views of Scripture history – a sermon, in which the Calvinism of the Kirk of Scotland was ably supported, yet made the basis of a sound system of practical morals, which should neither shelter the sinner under the cloak of speculative faith or of peculiarity of opinion, nor leave him loose to the waves of unbelief and schism. Something there was of an antiquated turn of argument and metaphor, but it only served to give zest and peculiarity to the style of elocution.[75]

This is a much more favourable depiction of Erskine when compared to some of his predecessors. In terms of the content of his teachings in the pulpit, Erskine was a Puritan of the past, but was stylistically consistent with other Enlightenment preachers.

John Maclaurin was equally extolled by Erskine, but was more modern in his ideas and method than Boston. Maclaurin, who was seventeen years younger than Boston, also had greater exposure to the intellectual contributions of the Enlightenment because he lived approximately twenty years longer than his older contemporary, dying in 1754. John McIntosh assesses that Maclaurin was a leading Scottish Evangelical, who integrated Enlightenment principles within his theology.[76] In John Gillies's posthumously edited version of Maclaurin's *Sermons & Essays* he included some letters written by friends of Maclaurin, one of which was by John Erskine written in Culross, 19 September 1754. The younger Erskine euologised that the 'strength of his genius and the solidity of his judgment, furnished him with sentiments new and ingenious, and yet solid and convincing, when explaining, or vindicating some of the most important articles of our Christian faith'.[77] Whereas Boston issued a barrage of citations from scripture, using a wearisome writing style, Maclaurin quoted sparingly. Maclaurin and Erskine, unlike Boston, focused on one crucial point, which they argued incessantly without deviation. Blaikie writes that Maclaurin's objective was to 'take a single line of thought, to throw upon it all the light which it required,

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73 Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 69.

74 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690-1900* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 69. According to Horton Davies, the very fact that sermons from British divines were titled discourses was proof that they were influenced by the Enlightenment.

75 Sir Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* (London: Soho, 1987), 262-63.

76 John R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 54.

77 John Maclaurin, *Sermons & Essays* (London: W. Baynes, 1802), xix.

and to direct it to the great practical objects which it was fitted to enforce'.[78] It is much more pleasing for the reader to follow a train of thought without digression, while apprehending the supporting evidence for what an author intends to communicate.

The difference between Erskine and Maclaurin was that the former had a greater depth of theological knowledge as well as an attorney's intensity and thoroughness. Maclaurin's assertions were more subtle than Erskine's and did not draw from as many eminent thinkers, such as Locke or Edwards. Unlike Erskine, Maclaurin had scarcely any footnotes citing scripture or contemporary authors. But, there can be no doubt that Maclaurin was influenced by the Enlightenment. It is remarkable the number of times in his sermons, for instance, Maclaurin referred to a person's reason, which was either 'right' or corrupted. 'Nothing is more reasonable', he stated, than believing God is just for punishing the wicked and it is 'unreasonable' to think that a sacrifice or propitiation is not necessary if one simply repents.[79] Further, 'Nothing is thought more reasonable' than a hero being rewarded 'not only in his own person, but also in the persons of others related and united to him'.[80] For Maclaurin, it was 'clear from experience and reason, as well as from scripture' that God uses means to accomplish his will.[81] Enlisting reason and scripture to plea a well-constructed argument was entirely compatible with Erskine's general approach. Maclaurin was superior then, in terms of style and method by comparison to Boston, but inferior to Erskine as the archetype of an enlightened intellectual.

Erskine deviated from the Puritans by fusing Enlightenment ideas within his theology to gain followers for Christ. The evolution of preaching that occurred from the Reformation to the eighteenth century was described more explicitly in the appendix to his funeral service sermon on behalf of William Robertson in 1793. After the Restoration many ministers preached 'with little study, and with little accuracy', Erskine proclaimed, so that 'they often crowded a vast variety of matter into one discourse'. He commented on the 'multitude... of their divisions and subdivisions', which 'would have blunted the force of truth, had not an uncommon measure of divine influence accompanied and blessed their honest and hazardous labours'. Once the Glorious Revolution was over, 'from habit', preachers 'often retained a manner of preaching, which had no longer the apology of necessity'. This method was continued in the next generation, but soon many of the Scottish clergy put an end to this type of preaching and 'corrected those blemishes, improved their taste, and convinced them that the charms of truth might be concealed by a sordid and slovenly dress'.

Around 1730, some of the younger ministers, 'avoiding a negligent style', were 'betrayed, by a blind admiration of Lord Shaftsbury, into the opposite extreme, of pompous, florid, and ill connected harangues'. About this time a group of

78 Blaikie, *Preachers*, 255.
79 Maclaurin, *Sermons & Essays*, 141, 147.
80 Maclaurin, *Sermons & Essays*, 151.
81 Maclaurin, *Sermons & Essays*, 169.

ministers rose up 'to gain the attention and esteem of their hearers', but Erskine interjected, not for their own benefit, but to draw attention to 'the glorious truths and duties which they taught'. He named George Wishart and Patrick Cumming as two of the best examples of this newer model of a preacher. Besides Cumming, who had 'an extensive historical and critical knowledge', there was also Alexander Webster, who utilised 'a tender, pathetic address' as well as George Wallace and William Wishart who maintained 'a depth of thought, originality of genius, and the art of gaining attention to the most common and necessary subjects' through 'new reflections, illustrations and arrangements'. Erskine very much admired these men for the way in which they preached. In the footnote here, he reminisced about listening to a sermon by William Wishart in 1746 in which Erskine did not remember the content of his sermon, but recalled 'in how beautiful and interesting manner [Wishart] illustrated the change made on self-love, the social principle, and other springs of action in the human heart'. The Edinburgh minister's statement that Wishart 'was unjustly accused of heresy, for maintaining, that true religion is influenced by higher motives, than self-love' affirmed that though an Evangelical, Erskine was not so dogmatic in his beliefs to reject someone who held a more liberal theology. Although he felt that Shaftesbury had exceeded the boundaries of orthodoxy, Erskine believed that some Enlightenment principles were useful for preaching.

The more traditional Scottish ministers of the past were now viewed as outdated by many who embraced the changing tempo of the age. Against this new polite preaching style, Erskine lamented of how some 'from unwearied study' and 'acquaintance with the human heart, and Christian experience', were less admired than the popular polite preachers of the day, yet 'kept back from their hearers nothing profitable'. He listed William Crawford's *Dying Thoughts and Zion's Traveller*, James Bannatyne's *Mistakes about Religion* and John Maclaurin's posthumous *Sermons and Essays* as 'almost the only larger publications of divines of those times'. The reason why they did not receive as much attention as many other Scottish ministers was attributed to their modesty. Thomas Boston was a case in point. Erskine suggested that this Scottish Puritan, although 'justly valued by many serious Christians of almost all denominations' would have received greater attention had his works 'avoided blemishes of style'.[82] There were casualties associated with the incoming tide of the Enlightenment, namely that many of the works of preachers who did not meet the current standards of style were often discarded for more contemporary writings.

The amalgamation of Puritanism and the Enlightenment

Erskine recognised the importance of modern preaching and writing and sought to rectify the situation. He had witnessed the deterioration of Calvinism largely because the writing style of the former Puritans had become obsolete. He ac-

82 For this section, see John Erskine, 'The Agency of God in Human Greatness', in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions*, vol. 1, 268-71.

knowledged this shift in sentiment in the preface of Thomas Gillespie's work on temptation by commenting, 'We are indebted to those who profit us by the instructions of wisdom, though they do not delight and entertain us with the charms of eloquence'.[83] Erskine's attitude was that the fundamental doctrines of traditional orthodoxy were not to be altered, only its technique, in terms of creating an argument. The prototype of this delicate, but necessary balance was Jonathan Edwards. In the preface to Edwards's *Miscellaneous Observations on Important Theological Subjects*, edited by Erskine, the Edinburgh minister noted that Edwards interacted with John Tillotson, Hugo Grotius, Isaac Newton and others in his diatribe against deism.[84] Writing this preface on 30 September 1793, Erskine approved that the 'President's originality of genius, and attachment to Calvinist principles, did not hinder his seeking and finding instruction in their writings, whose system of theology was very opposite to his. It were well, if in this he was imitated by all who possess distinguished talents, and who boast of liberality of sentiment'.[85] Based on the Scot's analysis, it becomes clear why he adopted enlightened principles in his writings – he believed that it would be necessary for the success of the Evangelical Revival.

This appears to be the reason why he read so many books and distributed them to other Evangelicals. His objective was to educate and enlighten his friends, who were leaders in the Evangelical Revival, so that they could offer a current version of the gospel that was appealing to intelligent minds. Writing to his friend James Hall in a letter dated 15 July 1743, Erskine suggested that 'improving your style should be another part of your care... But in this as every thing else, example is generally of more weight than precept, and the perusing [of] elegant writings will be found the best direction for acquiring an elegant style'. In the same letter, there is an even more vivid quotation of the difference between the former Puritans and contemporary authors. After recommending the works of men such as Thomas Boston, Robert Trail, Richard Sibbes, James Durham and John Owen, Erskine lamented to his friend that 'I'm sorry to say that many of the authors above recommended will be of small service' for teaching eloquence since their writings were 'at once dull and obscure'.[86] It is worth mentioning that one of those whom Erskine recommended to Hall as an ideal pulpit orator was Philip Doddridge, a precursor to Evangelicalism who had integrated many of the new principles of the age.[87] The model Evangelical preacher

83 Thomas Gillespie, *A Treatise on Temptation* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1774), xiii.

84 Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellaneous Observations on Important Theological Subjects* (Edinburgh and London: W. Gray and Vernor & Hood and Ogilvie & Speare, 1793), iii.

85 Edwards, *Miscellaneous*, iii.

86 John Erskine, 'John Erskine Letterbook' [microfilm reel 252], Massachusetts Historical Society, MSS S-377.

87 See Alan C. Clifford, 'The Christian Mind of Philip Doddridge (1702-1751): The Gospel According to an Evangelical Congregationalist', *Evangelical Quarterly* 56 (1984), 227-42; David L. Wykes, 'The Contribution of the Dissenting Academy to the Emergence of Rational Dissent', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99-139.

was one who had assimilated the new techniques of pulpit rhetoric.

But Erskine was not willing to embrace the Enlightenment at the expense of the Bible. He reminded Hall that,

> I need not caution you against affecting a florid haranguing style, nor tell you that the more of scripture there is in a sermon so much the better, as we ought not only to declare truth, but to declare it in the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth. There is an energy and force in the words of the Bible, which all the wisdom and eloquence of men can never equal, and which by the influences of the Spirit produces effects peculiar to itself.[88]

In other words, the Enlightenment was beneficial only so far as it did not infringe on classical Reformed doctrine. If left unchecked, the moralism of the fashionable preachers of the day would provide no substance for their parishioners. This was reinforced by Erskine, who wrote that he had 'old fashioned taste', in terms of the Puritan works that he read, and postulated that if certain people were to have seen the books he endorsed, they would have been 'heinously ill, that the noble Earl of Shaftesbury and several English Divines, (who write in the same strain tho' not with the same spirit, and seem to have derived their notions more from him than their bibles) have not been recommended'.[89] Even at the tender age of twenty-two, Erskine acknowledged the spirit of the age, embracing it as long as it did not conflict with scripture.

The Presbyterian minister propagated both Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment through books because reading was his passion. In the February edition of the 1803 *Scots Magazine*, which gave a summary of Erskine's achievements, the writer informed his readers that Erskine browsed other works besides those on theology so that 'no books of merit, either on the subjects of literature or science, were published which he did not read'.[90] His friend and fellow Edinburgh minister, Thomas Davidson, said that a conversation with Erskine was like having access to 'an index to books'.[91] Since Erskine at least owned some 3,800 works at one time, which were auctioned after his death, Davidson had sufficient grounds for such a claim.[92] Among the many individuals to whom Erskine wrote, one consistent feature of his letters were the number of books he either recommended or included. The purpose was to enlighten his friends for their betterment and to position the gospel in a more pertinent way to the modern world. This seems to be the case in his exchange of letters with Jonathan Edwards, who in many instances relied on Erskine for the latest theological and philosophical

88 Erskine, 'Letterbook'.

89 Erskine, 'Letterbook'.

90 'Account of the Public Life and Character of the Late Dr Erskine, of Edinburgh', *The Scots Magazine* 65 (1803), 78.

91 Thomas Davidson, *A Sketch of the Character of Dr. John Erskine, One of the Ministers of the Old Gray Friars Church of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: H. Inglis, 1803), 16.

92 See John Erskine, 'Catalogue of the Library of the Late John Erskine of Carnock, D.D', University of Aberdeen, MN.10.208.

works.[93] Proficient in English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French, German and Dutch, Erskine was one of the foremost enlightened Evangelical scholars of the eighteenth century, which made his endorsements of books particularly influential for this Christian movement.

One of Erskine's correspondents was Charles Nisbet, who had emigrated from Scotland to America to become Principal of Dickson College. Speaking of Erskine, Nisbet's biographer, Samuel Miller, estimated that

> no private man on the other side of the Atlantic ever sent so many books gratuitously to this country as Dr. Erskine. He probably had twenty or thirty correspondents in different parts of the United States; and it is believed that almost every letter he wrote was accompanied by a package of books; some of them for his correspondents themselves; and others for the public libraries of Colleges and other institutions, to which he was constantly remitting rare and curious books.[94]

Erskine read and commended various books from authors whose opinions differed from his own, including the notion of universal redemption that was advocated by Fraser of Brae and Charles Chauncy. He preferred allowing his correspondents to decide for themselves what they believed. This was characteristic of the Scottish Evangelical. For example, even though he acknowledged the flaws in Solomon Stoddard's book on the righteousness of Christ, he endorsed it to John Ryland Jr. Erskine quipped that 'because the Son hath dark spots, shall I despise its light?'[95] The books that Erskine owned and propagated formed part of his contribution to both enlightened thinking and the spread of Evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Was Erskine a modern-day Puritan or an enlightened Evangelical? Perhaps he was a hybrid of these two movements. Although the Enlightenment, which swept over much of Scotland in the eighteenth-century, had a tendency to loosen the shackles of Calvinistic orthodoxy, it was not so powerful of a force that it eradicated Puritanism altogether. Erskine might be viewed as typical in sustaining the heritage of traditional Reformed preaching despite its deficiencies. The five points of Calvinism were part and parcel of his message from the pulpit. Total depravity, rather than the liberal optimism of some of the contemporary preachers, was articulated as necessary for saving faith. But Erskine broke away from

93 See George S. Claghorn (ed), *Jonathan Edwards Letters and Personal Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). See letters 86, 90, 93, 117, 123, 129, 151, 159, 170, 203 and 226-28.

94 Samuel Miller, *Memoir of the Rev. Charles Nisbet, D.D., Late President of Dickinson College, Carlisle* (New York: R. Carter, 1840), 194.

95 John Erskine to John Ryland Jr., 11 June 1792, Edinburgh University Library, MS E.99.14.

the high Calvinism of some the scholastic Puritans, by advocating the gospel to be preached to all. This was a definite indicator that Erskine was a moderate Calvinist who was hopeful that the preaching of the Word of God could lead to the salvation of those who heard. The Presbyterian's chief interest in the Enlightenment was the realisation that the times had changed and new techniques of eloquent preaching and writing were needed to win the masses for Christ. No longer could one rely on the archaic methods of the Puritans, who seemed to bore their readers with their metaphysical speculations and lengthy diatribes. Erskine recognised this problem and sought to remedy it, not only by improving his own preaching skills, but by passing along what he was learning to his friends in the Evangelical movement. His expertise as a bibliophile meant that he could sift through mountains of books and determine what was the most useful to advance Evangelicalism within an enlightened age. Therefore, Erskine was a forward-looking Evangelical who integrated the tools of the Enlightenment with Puritan theology for the purpose of spreading the gospel.

Abstract

John Erskine was an eighteenth-century Scottish Evangelical who shared many of the theological beliefs of the Puritans while appropriating the techniques of the Enlightenment. He was thoroughly Calvinistic in affirming the total depravity of mankind, a denial of works and freewill in salvation, divine election and imputed righteousness. But, his method of preaching was more congenial to the Enlightenment since he abandoned the metaphysical speculations of the Puritans in favour of a simple, but clear message from the pulpit. He believed that the success of the Evangelical Revival depended on its leaders adopting these measures, so he became a leading propagator of books in order to enlighten his correspondents and assist them in making the gospel message more attractive in the current age.