

Alexander Henderson: the Great Leader of the Second Reformation in Scotland.

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ALEXANDER Henderson was born in the parish of Creich (Fife) in 1583. He died 300 years ago on the 19th August, 1646, in his 63rd year. He was a descendant of an old Scottish family - the Hendersons or Hendrysons of Fordell. He studied at St. Andrews (St. Salvator's College) and in 1603 took his Master's degree. From 1603-1611 he was Regent of Philosophy in the University. During this period he completed his course in divinity. In his early years Henderson was an Episcopalian and the oft-told story of how he changed his creed is well known.

At the beginning of his career, as already stated, Henderson was an Episcopalian, and at his settlement in Leuchars he found the doors shut against him. Under a sermon preached by Robert Bruce from the text: "He that entereth not by the door into the sheep-fold but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (John x. 1). The truth found a place in his conscience and from that day Alexander Henderson was another man.

Samuel Rutherford in a letter to him writes in his own original way: "The wind is now on Christ's face in this land and seeing ye are with Him ye cannot expect the lee-side or the sunny side of the brae." "The sunny side of the brae" was not to be his lot. It is interesting to learn how these companions in the conflict saluted and encouraged each other as they contended earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.

Not a few pages could be filled by the tributes paid to this notable man but we will content ourselves with two - one by a man of his own time - Robert Bailie - and the other by Prof. Masson, the well-known literary critic, whose studies for his standard work on Milton brought him into contact with the civil and religious contendings of the Westminster Assembly period. Here is Bailie's tribute paid to him in his speech at the Assembly, 1647- "That glorious soul who is now crowned with the reward of all his labours for God, and for us, I wish his remembrance may be fragrant among us so long as free and pure Assemblies remain in this land, which we hope will be to the Coming of our Lord. You know he spent his strength and wore out his days, he breathed out his life in the service of God and His Church. This binds on our back as we would not prove ungrateful to pay him his due. If the thoughts of others be

conform to my inmost sense, in duty and reason, he ought to be accounted by us and posterity the fairest ornament after John Knox of incomparable memory that ever the Church of Scotland did enjoy.”

Masson's tribute to Henderson, though shorter, is no less laudatory: “The greatest, wisest and the most liberal of the Scottish, Presbyterians --- the greatest man in the Church after Knox – a man of super-eminent composure, comprehensiveness, and breadth of brow - a cabinet minister without office - and yet a man who has never received justice in general British History” (Life of Milton, vol. III.). As one runs over the names of the great leaders at different periods of the Church's history in Scotland what noble gifts Christ gave to His Church in our native land - they were indeed the messengers of the Churches and the glory of Christ.

In 1612, Henderson was presented to the church and parish of Leuchars by the patron, Archbishop Gledstanes. At the Perth Assembly of 1618 he raised his voice against the Five Articles. In 1619, he was charged before the Synod of St. Andrews for not administering communion according to the rules laid down at Perth. He was exhorted to obedience and conformity.

Matters in Scotland were moving swiftly to a crisis and it was largely through his influence that the National Covenant was drawn up and signed in 1638. Henderson was chosen Moderator of the famous Glasgow Assembly of 1638 and when the High Commissioner left the Assembly, Henderson refused to close it, carrying on the business which gave the death-blow to Episcopacy as the recognised religion in Scotland. One of the acts of the Assembly was to translate their Moderator from Leuchars to St. Giles, Edinburgh.

Henderson was appointed one of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly. His part in connection with the drawing up of the Solemn League and Covenant which is to be distinguished from the National Covenant should not be passed over even though it be but a short notice that is given to it.

When King Charles surrendered himself to the Scots, he sent for Henderson but the great church leader was not able to break down the infatuated Stewart determination that ultimately ended on the scaffold.

Henderson died in 1646 and was buried in Edinburgh. Such in brief outline are some of details in the life of one of the greatest leaders in Scottish church history.