

The Secession of 1733

By Rev. Donald Beaton

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Part I.

ON 5th December, 1733, the Succession Fathers - Ebenezer Erskine, William Wilson, James Fisher and Alexander Moncrieff met at Gairney Bridge, which lies on the Great North Road between Edinburgh and Perth, three miles from Kinross, and after some time devoted to prayer, they formed themselves into a Presbytery. There were also present Ralph Erskine and Thomas Mair who, while in sympathy with the Four Brethren, had not yet cast in their lot wholly with them. The most noted of the Four Brethren was Ebenezer Erskine whose famous sermon before the Synod of Perth and Stirling brought about the deposition of these Brethren from the ministry of the Church of Scotland and shook it to its foundations.

It was the first serious disruption in the Church of Scotland and was destined to play a very important part in the religious life of Scotland. The causes leading up to the Secession of 1733 were many. At the Revolution Settlement a considerable number of ministers were admitted into the Church whose allegiance to Presbyterianism and the doctrines of the Confession was cold and lifeless. As years went on Moderatism, nourished in a congenial atmosphere in high places of the nation and of the Church, grew stronger and began to lay its cold hand on the evangelical piety of the most loyal and faithful supporters of the Presbyterian heritage won at such a tremendous cost during the Covenanting struggle.

The restoration of Patronage by Parliament in 1712 was the beginning of sorrows for the Church of Scotland. By the law of patronage it was provided that if the patron did not exercise his right of presenting a minister to the parish within six months when a vacancy occurred the Presbytery should (*jure devoluto*) take measures for inducting a minister to the parish. In the case of presbyteries which were opposed to patronage it was usual to pass on this right to the people; in other cases however, the Presbytery took the place of the patron and their presentee might be far from satisfactory to the people.

Owing to the diversity prevailing in connection with such settlements it was deemed advisable by the Moderate section in the Church to have a law passed

with the ostensible purpose of having uniformity in the appointment of ministers to vacant charges. In 1731, therefore, an overture was brought before the Assembly and was ordered by it to be sent down to presbyteries under the Barrier Act. By this overture it was proposed that the election of a minister for a vacant parish should belong only to the elders and Protestant heritors; in the royal burghs, to the magistrates, town council, and elders. After the election the person elected was to be proposed to the congregation, to be by them either approved or disapproved. If the congregation disapproved of the choice of the heritors and elders they were to lay their reasons before the Presbytery by whose determination the calling and the entry of the minister should be concluded according to the rules of the Church (Act VIII. of Assembly, 1732).

This Act took away the liberty of the people in the election of ministers and gave it to the heritors and elders. It was not required of heritors that they should be members of the Church. They might be Episcopalian or anything at all provided they were Protestant. When the Assembly met in 1732 forty-nine presbyteries reported – thirty-one presbyteries rejected the overture; six approved of it being passed into a law; twelve gave their sanction to it on condition that certain material amendments, which they suggested, should be adopted; eighteen presbyteries sent no report.

The Assembly by a logic that suited the ruling party in the Church came to the strange conclusion that the presbyteries which did not report were favourable to the overture - a decision which called forth the following criticism from the historian of the Secession: "Whatever portion of wisdom the Assembly of 1732 possessed, it did not appear to be that which cometh from above, neither could it be said of it that it was peaceable without partiality or full of good fruits" - a criticism which will be endorsed as eminently just by all who know the history of the case. Several ministers, among them Ebenezer Erskine, and elders protested against the passing of the Act but the Assembly refused to enter their protest on the record.

At this Assembly a number of representations embodying certain grievances were presented but no satisfaction was given. The ruling party meant to carry everything before them and were blind enough not to see where their high-handed policy was leading them. Another event that caused a good deal of heart-burning was the proceedings in connection with the settlement of a minister at Kinross. A call had been given by the people to a Mr. Francis Craig

but another person, Mr. Stark, had received the presentation. As Mr. Stark had scarcely a single vote the Presbytery of Dunfermline refused to ordain him.

The Commission of Assembly, however, appointed a Committee to proceed to Kinloss and ordain him. Both the presbytery and the parishioners protested against this high-handed action but their protests were rejected. When the Assembly met the following year (1733) those who refused to ordain Mr. Stark were summoned to the bar and rebuked and the Presbytery was commanded to encourage and strengthen the hands of Mr. Stark in the work of the ministry and the members were instructed to appear before the Commission in August and report as to their obedience and the Commission was authorised to inflict the highest censure of the Church on such as should be disobedient.

Such is a brief account of the condition of things in the Church preceding and immediately following the date when Ebenezer Erskine preached his famous sermon at Perth on 10th October, 1732. The Synod of Perth and Stirling met that year in St. John's, Perth. The Church is famous in Scottish ecclesiastical history as that in which John Knox delivered one of his rousing sermons which set the hearers on fire. Ebenezer's sermon was also to set the hearts of some of his ministerial hearers on fire but it was with the fire of indignation. He preached from the text: "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner" (Ps. cxviii. 22). The sermon is contained in vol. 1. of his works (1871). It consists of about 30 of our Magazine pages.

The preface to the published sermon opens as follows: "The following sermon gave occasion of three days warm debate in the reverend Synod of Perth and Stirling, and has been the subject of much talk and speculation since that time." "The author's design," it is further added, "in pitching and preaching upon that text, was what he could to raise the glory of the blessed Corner-stone, to set up the corruptions of the Jewish builder as so many beacons, that builders of our day might beware of them, and to cast in the small mite of his testimony against what, to him, appears as injury done, either to Christ personal or mystical."

He then offers his *apologia* for the manner in which he dealt with certain controversial matters in the sermon. "If any think," he writes, "upon the reading of the following discourse, that there is too great freedom used with respect to the present steps of defection ; let them remember, that there is now no other way left to bear testimony against such thing", but by warning the world against them from press or pulpit; representatives and petitions

from ministers or church members at the bar, being utterly disregarded, and no access to enter any protest or dissent against these proceedings in the public records, for the exoneration of conscience, or the information or our posterity, that such things did not pass in our day without a struggle and testimony against them. If any of the author's friends or well-wishers be afraid of further trouble to him, upon the account of this sermon, let them know, that, through grace, he chooses rather to suffer with the oppressed members of Christ, than to enjoy all ease and pleasure of those who oppress them in their spiritual liberties; which, being the purchase of a Redeemer's blood will be reckoned for before the scene be ended. Heb. xi. 24-26; I. John iii. 16; II. Thess. i. 6, 7."

Part II.

The sermon to which reference has been made in the preceding article caused the greatest offence to a number of the ministers in the Synod. The court was no sooner constituted than complaint was made of Erskine's sermon. A proposal was made by Adam Ferguson, Logierait, and supported by other ministers that a committee be appointed to confer with Erskine and to report to the Synod. Three days were spent in keen debate; and at last, when several of Erskine's friends had withdrawn through sheer fatigue, the Synod by a majority of not more than six decided that he was censurable for some expressions in his sermon "tending to disquiet the peace of the Church, and impugning several Acts of Assembly and proceedings of Church judicatories." Mr. Alexander Moncrief, Abernethy, entered a dissent which was adhered to by twelve ministers and two elders. E. Erskine appealed to next Assembly.

Notwithstanding, the Synod proceeded with the case and agreed to rebuke Mr. Erskine at their bar and "admonish him to behave orderly for the future." They also appointed" the Presbytery of Stirling to inquire anent his after behaviour at their privy censures and report to the next Synod." When the Synod met again at Stirling in April of the following year (10th April, 1733), Mr. Erskine could not be persuaded to express regret for what he had said in his sermon against the objectionable Acts of the Assembly.

A Representation and Petition, subscribed by fifteen Elders of the Kirk-session of Stirling, was laid before the court beseeching the Synod to reverse the sentence passed against their minister. Among other things, they call attention to the dangerous consequences likely to follow from the execution of the sentence. "Though the condemnatory sentence passed against our minister,"

they say, "cannot lessen his character among us, nor diminish from the just esteem that we, and many others through the land, have for him; yet, what wide breaches such proceedings may occasion, we leave it to the more deliberate judgment of this reverend court." The Petition was not transmitted to the Court by the Committee of Bills and the Synod, after reasoning, refused to hear it. The Presbytery of Stirling made an abortive attempt to have a conference with a Committee of the Synod.

Mr. Erskine was then called and when the Synod was about to pronounce sentence, he told them he adhered to his appeal. He then read the following paper: "According to the utterance given by the Lord to me at Perth, I delivered His mind, particularly with relation to some prevailing evils of the day, which to me are matter of confession, and therefore I dare not retract the least part of that testimony. I am heartily sorry that ever the reverend Synod should have commenced a process against me, for what I am persuaded was nothing else but truth; especially when they have never yet made it appear that I have in the least receded from the Word of God, and our approved standards of doctrine, worship, discipline, or government. Every man has his own proper gift of utterance; and, according to the gift bestowed on me, so I expressed myself at Perth; and, if I had given offence by any expressions uttered by me at that time, I should very willingly retract, and beg pardon. But I hope my Reverend brethren will excuse me to say, that I am not yet convinced of any just ground given for a rebuke and admonition."

When the General Assembly met in May, 1733, it began with the notorious case of the intrusion at Kinross and pronounce a rigorous sentence against the Presbytery of Dunfermline for The Secession of 1733. 283 their refusal to receive and enrol Mr. Robert Stark as a member of Presbytery. When Mr. Erskine's case came up the Reasons of Appeal were read. The Assembly, after hearing parties at the bar, by a majority of votes "found the expressions vented by Mr. Erskine, and contained in the minutes of the Synod's proceedings, with the answers thereto made by him, to be offensive, and to tend to disturb the peace and good order of the Church; and therefore, approve of the proceedings of the Synod, and appoint him to be rebuked and admonished at their own bar, in order to terminate the process."

While he submitted to the rebuke Mr. Erskine made a protest in which he says: "I hereby adhere unto the testimonies I have formerly emitted against the Act of Assembly 1732, whether in the protest entered against it in open Assembly,

or yet in my Synodical Sermon; craving this my protest and declaration to be inserted in the records of the Assembly." Messrs. Wilson, Moncrieff, and Fisher adhered to this protest. The paper on which the protest was written fell from the Assembly Clerk's table and was picked up by one of the members of Assembly who called the Assembly's attention to the terms of the protest.

When read it roused strong feelings of indignation and orders were given that the Four Brethren should be cited to appear before the Assembly next day. When they appeared a committee was appointed with the purpose of persuading them to withdraw their protest. The committee reported that they had failed in their efforts; whereupon, the Assembly by a great majority passed sentence to the following effect: That the Four Brethren should appear before the Commission in August next, to express sorrow for their conduct, and retract their protest; that in the event of their refusal to submit, the Commission is appointed to suspend them from the exercise of their ministry; that if they shall then act contrary to the sentence of suspension, the Commission, at their meeting in November, or any subsequent meeting, must proceed to a higher censure.

When the Commission of Assembly met on 8th August representation and petitions were presented by the Kirk-session of Stirling, by the Magistrate's and Town Council of the Burgh, and also by the Presbyteries of Stirling, Dunblane, and Ellon but all to no effect. The Commission, after a Committee had made an un-successful attempt to persuade the Four Brethren to acquiesce in the General Assembly's sentence, passed sentence suspending "the Four Protesting Brethren from the exercise of the ministerial function, and all parts thereof."

When the sentence was announced to them they protested for themselves, and as many as adhered to them that the sentence was null and void and that it would be lawful for them to exercise their ministry as they had previously done. Protests were at the same time made by the ruling elders of the four congregations concerned. The suspended brethren continued their ministerial labours as formerly notwithstanding the sentence of suspension. They were again summoned before the November Commission when renewed efforts were made to induce them to withdraw their protest but these proved fruitless.

A number of Synods and Presbyteries also sent up communications counselling forbearance and tenderness towards the suspended ministers. Many members

of the Commission also pled for delay. Then the question was put to the Commission: "Delay" or "Proceed," it was decided by the Moderator's casting vote to proceed with a higher censure. On the 16th November the Commission therefore passed sentence on them, loosing their relation from their respective charges, declaring their churches vacant: and prohibiting all ministers of the Church of Scotland to employ them in any ministerial function. Mr. Gabriel Wilson, Maxton, immediately made a protest declaring that it would be lawful for them to complain against this sentence to any subsequent Assembly; to testify in a becoming manner, on all occasions, against the defections of the Church; and to hold ministerial communion with their brethren as if no such sentence had been passed against them.

A few weeks after their expulsion from the Church of Scotland the Four Brethren met at Bridge of Gairney, a small village about three miles south of Kinross. The first day of their meeting, 5th December, was wholly spent in prayer. The following day was also spent in similar exercises. The question was raised at this meeting should a Presbytery be formed. "After much and serious reasoning on both sides of the question," as is recorded by one of their number, "the Four Brethren did all, with one voice, give it as their judgment that they should presently constitute into a Presbytery."

In the month of May after the formation of the Associate Presbytery (5th December, 1733) as noted in our last issue the Four Brethren drew up what is known as the First or Extrajudicial Testimony. When the Assembly met in 1734 the members were in a more conciliatory mood. They rescinded the objectionable Acts of 1730 and 1732 - the former forbidding church courts to record dissent; and protests and the latter dealing with the settlement of vacant parishes. They also passed an Act authorising the Synod of Perth and Stirling, without pronouncing any judgment on the legality or formality of the former proceedings of the church judicatories in relation to this affair, to restore the Four Brethren to communion, and to their respective charges.

When the Synod met in July it accordingly "did take off the sentence pronounced by the Commission of the General Assembly, 1733, against the foresaid Four Brethren" and reinstated them in their office as ministers of their several parishes. This action of the Assembly was expected to meet with instant acceptance on the part of the Brethren. After solemn and repeated deliberation, however, they concluded that whatever joy was given by this Act of the Assembly that it was their duty to remain in a state of secession until

they would see more decided proof that the course of defection against which they had protested was really abandoned. They set forth their reasons in a small pamphlet published before the meeting of Assembly (1735).

The Seceders felt that the temperate measures of the 1734 Assembly were due not so much to a real desire to get rid of objectionable practices but were the outcome of a policy of worldly diplomacy forced on their opponents by men who felt that they had gone too far. That they were not wide of the mark was soon evident by some violent intrusions that took place in 1736 and in the lax dealing with one of the theological professors (Simson) whose erroneous views had been causing uneasiness in the Church.

When the Brethren met at Perth on 3rd December of that year, they drew up their Second, or Judicial Testimony. On the 17th May, 1738, in consequence of representations from the Synod of Perth and Stirling, and the Synod of Fife, complaining of disorderly practices pursued by the Seceding ministers, the Assembly appointed the Commission to prepare and execute a libel against them. The Commission following these instructions appointed that a libel should be executed against the eight ministers (Messrs. R. Erskine, Thomas Mair of Orwell, Thomas Nairn of Abbotshall, and James Thomson of Burntisland, had by this time cast in their lot with the Four Brethren). These ministers were summoned to appear before the General Assembly of 1739 to answer for their deeds.

The Assembly deliberated two days on the subject and finally resolved to proceed on the libel drawn up by the Commission of the former Assembly. Against this decision Mr. Willison, Dundee, with four ministers and two elders, entered their dissent. The libelled ministers, while the Assembly was sitting, met and drew up a Declinature in which they declined all authority, power, and jurisdiction which the judicatories of the Church of Scotland might claim over the Associate Presbytery, or of any of its members, or any who chose to place themselves under its inspection. When called to appear before the Assembly on the 18th May they put in an appearance. The Moderator assured them that, notwithstanding all that had happened, the Assembly was willing to drop the libel and receive them with open arms, if they would return to the bosom of the Church.

Mr. Mair, Moderator of the Associate Presbytery, read an act agreed upon by the Presbytery. The Assembly then caused the libel to be read, after which Mr. Mair read the Declinature and then delivered it to the Moderator of the

Assembly. The Presbytery then withdrew to their place of meeting. The Assembly declared the eight ministers worthy of deposition but for expediency's sake they deferred the passing of the sentence and recommended the next Assembly to proceed against them "unless they returned to their duty and submission."

On the 19th May the Assembly, on the motion of the Rev. James Bannatyne, proceeded to consider the libel and finding it relevant and proven they did "actually depose them from the office of the holy ministry, prohibiting and discharging them, and every one of them, to exercise the same, or any part thereof, within this Church, in all time coming." Their charges were declared vacant and the Moderator was appointed to write letters to the civil authorities, in the several places of their residence, that they might be dispossessed of their churches. This sentence was passed by a great majority but fifteen ministers and four elders dissented from it.

In this way the Church of Scotland cast out men who had the ear of thousands in Scotland and the first serious rent was made in her ranks. We say the first rent because it must be borne in mind that the Society people or Cameronians had not associated with the Church at the Revolution Settlement. There were a number of ministers in the Church of Scotland who were in full sympathy with the Seceders such as Willison, Dundee, but who did not sever their connection with the Church of Scotland. The ecclesiastical standpoint of these sympathisers is set forth in Willison's *Impartial Testimony*.

The Seceders were severely criticised for not accepting the offers of the Church of Scotland to return from the years 1733 to 1738. They were, however, satisfied in their minds that these efforts to get them back were the outcome of a worldly policy of expediency. Their replies to their opponents are not lacking in point and in some cases show keen insight into the ecclesiastical condition of the Establishment.

When the Moderator of the Presbytery of Stirling wrote Erskine asking him to return after the sentence of the 1733 Commission was removed, he justified his continued secession by saying: "Some brethren call us to come in and help them against the current of defection. But now that the hand of Providence has taken us out of the current against which we were swimming and set us upon the reformation ground by a solemn testimony and constitution, it would be vain for us to endanger ourselves by running into the current again, unless our reverend brethren, who call for our help, can persuade us that our so

doing will turn the current and save both them and ourselves, and so preserve the Lord's work and testimony. In my opinion, it would be much safer for these brethren to come out of the dangerous current to us, than for us now to come back to them (Jer. xv. 19-21). No doubt, worldly interest gives a strong bias against this motion; but if it be duty, we are bound to forsake all and follow the Lord.”