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**The Theology And Practice of Preaching In The Ministry Of Dr John Erskine
(1721-1803).**

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**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract.

The Theology and Practice of Preaching in the Ministry of Dr John Erskine (1721 -1803)

This thesis aims to portray the theology and practice of preaching in the ministry of one of the most prominent Evangelical ministers in the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century, Dr John Erskine (1721-1803).

There will first of all be a survey of Erskine's role and stature in the Church of Scotland of the eighteenth century and of his image in contemporary and subsequent literature. We will then proceed to a general survey of the history of preaching in the Christian Church until the eighteenth century to grasp how it was understood and practised and to set the subject of this thesis in its wider historical context. This will be followed by a focus on the history of Scottish preaching in particular. This is to gain some understanding of Erskine's place in the history of preaching and some of the influences which may have shaped his preaching.

There will then be an examination of the elements of the preaching event as understood by Erskine: the synergy of preacher, the congregation and the Holy Spirit working through the proclaimed Word.

Finally, there will be an examination of Erskine's homiletic practice: his preparation for the pulpit, the structure of his sermons, his contemporaneity, his theological emphasis and his delivery.

Chapter 1: Biographical Sketch.

By the time of his death in 1803 Dr John Erskine was regarded as something of a national treasure in the Church of Scotland. In his *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* H.G. Graham gives us a view of the High Street in Edinburgh around 1771 where 'there were more men of note to be seen in an afternoon than could have before been seen in a century.'¹ In this imaginary survey he sees among others David Hume, the philosopher; Dr William Robertson, Principal of the University of Edinburgh; Dr. Adam Smith, the political economist; Lord Monboddo, the Judge; and in his sedan-chair Dr Cullen, the great physician. Keeping company with these and other eminent men is

a tiny stooping form, with arms hanging limp like a bird with shot wings, with a placid sweet face, surmounted by a brown wig and cocked hat, who was Dr. John Erskine, most saintly of ministers and gentlest of saints.²

A modern historical survey of 'the fabric of Edinburgh society' at the end of the eighteenth century cannot bypass the two ministers of Old Greyfriars Church and offers a more measured description of Erskine:

The historian Dr Robertson, Principal of the University...eschewed any address to the 'passions', and in sensible, logically argued sermons he excelled in applying scriptural history to life. His austere Greyfriars Colleague, Dr John Erskine, was perhaps most practical of all, fervour and sound arguments making up for a harshly monotonous delivery, which lacked the elegant presentation beloved of pulpit admirers.³

Henry Cockburn in his *Memorials Of His Time*, says of Erskine: 'No Edinburgh figure was better known.'⁴ For Cockburn, this was a reputation not so much based on his scholarship and preaching but on the quality of his character:

Though able and well read, his reputation rested on the better basis of a fine spirit...He was all soul and no body. Never was there such a spectre, or such a spirit. There was nothing that this man would not do for truth or a friend.⁵

In his memoirs, Dr Thomas Somerville (1741-1830), compares the preaching of Erskine with that of his colleague in Old Greyfriars Parish Church, Dr William Robertson:

To Dr Erskine...as a practical and useful preacher, I have no hesitation in assigning the

¹ Graham, Henry Grey. *Social Life Of Scotland In The Eighteenth Century*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1906, p.115.

² Ibid.

³ Cosh, Mary. *Edinburgh The Golden Age*, Edinburgh, John Donald Publishers, 2003, p.32.

⁴ Cockburn, Henry. *Memorials Of His Time*, Edinburgh and London, T.N. Foulis, 1856, 1910, p.49.

⁵ Ibid.

preference, not only to his contemporaries, but almost to any preacher I have heard.⁶

This was said despite Somerville's reservations about Erskine's theological emphasis and style:

the solidity of the matter, the weight of his arguments, the perspicuity of his expression, the fervour and earnestness of his address, much more than atoned for these minor imperfections.⁷

Another more eminent writer who would not be in total agreement with Erskine's theology and ecclesiology but who nevertheless appreciated his ministry was Sir Walter Scott (1772-1832) who was well acquainted with Erskine in his youth due to his parents' membership of Old Greyfriars Church. In his novel, *Guy Mannering*, as one Lord's Day draws near in Edinburgh, it is suggested to Colonel Mannering that he may like to attend a church service. He readily agrees:

'I should wish much to hear some of your Scottish preachers whose talents have done such honour to your country, - your Blair, your Robertson, or your Henry...'⁸

Colonel Mannering is therefore conveyed to Old Greyfriars Church by Mr Pleydell to hear Principal Robertson, 'our historian of Scotland, of the Continent, and of America.'⁹ They are however disappointed for it is Dr Erskine, Robertson's colleague, who ascends the pulpit. In a footnote, Scott remarks: 'This was the celebrated Dr Erskine, - a distinguished clergyman, and a most excellent man.'¹⁰

There follows a description of Erskine's appearance and the style and content of his preaching. Mannering is impressed. In his experience he 'had seldom heard so much learning, metaphysical acuteness, and energy of argument brought into the service of Christianity.'¹¹ He is moved to comment: 'Such must have been the preachers to whose unfearing minds, and acute, though sometimes rudely exercised, talents we owe the Reformation.'¹² Pleydell responds:

And yet that reverend gentleman ...has nothing of the sour or pharisaical pride which has been imputed to some of the early fathers of the Calvinistic Kirk of Scotland. His colleague and he differ, and head different parties in the kirk, about particular points of church discipline, but without for a moment losing personal regard or respect for each other, or suffering malignity to interfere in an opposition, steady, constant and apparently

⁶ Somerville, Thomas. *My Own Life And Times 1741-1814*, Edinburgh, Edmonston and Douglas, 1861, pp.61-62

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Scott, *Guy Mannering Volume I*, London, John C. Nimmo, 1892, p.85.

⁹ Ibid., p.86.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹ Ibid., p.87.

¹² Ibid., pp.87-88.

conscientious on both sides.¹³

While some of the above expressions of appreciation may verge on hagiography, there is no doubt as to the high regard in which Erskine was held in the Church of his day. This was despite the fact that he was a leader of the Evangelical Party in the Church of Scotland which throughout his life and ministry never exceeded the Moderate Party in influence. The differences between Moderates and Evangelicals were not always clear-cut but there was fundamental disagreement over the issue of patronage which in Erskine's lifetime led to two major Secessions. Moderates were favourably disposed to the presentation of a minister to a parish by a patron while Evangelicals regarded this as a denial of an important Presbyterian principle: a congregation's right to call and elect its own minister. There was much heated debate over this issue at Presbytery and General Assembly level.

Erskine was deeply involved in this and yet he managed to maintain the respect of those who would disagree with him. In his *Autobiography*, Carlyle is often scathing in his comments on certain members of the Evangelical Party but includes Dr Erskine in 'the truly upright and honourable men among them.'¹⁴ What seems to have impressed friends and opponents alike was Erskine's dedication to the tasks of ministry, particularly preaching; his integrity in his dealings with people of all theological hues; and his spirituality which left no one in any doubt that he saw Christian faith as essentially a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

Erskine came from an eminent Scottish family with a strong Presbyterian and Whig heritage. His great-grandfather, Henry Erskine, the second Lord Cardross was persecuted in the reign of Charles II for his allegiance to the Presbyterian Church and was eventually forced to live in exile in Holland. His grandfather, John Erskine, who was to become a Lieutenant Colonel, was an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution of 1688 embracing the classic Scottish Whig principles of his day namely limited monarchy, aristocratic government and the establishment of Presbyterianism. He was a member of the last Scottish Parliament before the Union of Parliaments in 1707, representing Stirling. He was an ardent supporter of the Union.

Erskine's father, also John, followed a legal career becoming Professor of Scottish Law at the University of Edinburgh. His *Institutes of the Law of Scotland* became a standard manual which was used many years after his death.

Erskine's maternal grandfather was Lord George Melvill whose family were unequivocally

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁴ Carlyle, Alexander. *Autobiography*, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1861, p.240.

Whig and Presbyterian. Lord George was His Majesty's commissioner to the Scots Parliament in 1690.

It is important to sketch this background for politically and ecclesiastically Erskine remained true to his heritage. It might also help to explain in part, why Erskine was so acceptable to Edinburgh society despite his theology and his pulpit delivery which lacked the fashionable polish of the time. The fact was that someone with his aristocratic background was not to be easily ignored.

It was as a student at the University of Edinburgh that Erskine's theological orientation was set. His contemporaries were William Robertson (1721-93), Alexander Carlyle (1722-1805) and John Home (1722-1808) with whom he mixed very readily although they would later become his adversaries in the General Assembly. Indeed there was intimation of future friction over the ministry of George Whitefield (1714-70). In 1741, the English Calvinist Methodist preacher and evangelist responded to an invitation from the ministers of the Secession to come to Scotland. These were the ministers who had left the Church of Scotland in 1733 claiming that a congregation's right to elect its own minister was being undermined by the increasing exercise of patronage. This provoked a discussion in the literary society of which Erskine and Robertson were members. There was a disagreement between the two with Erskine being 'among the warmest admirers'¹⁵ of Whitefield, and Robertson totally opposed to his preaching in Scotland. So vociferous was the disagreement that the literary society broke up.

Erskine was licensed by Dunblane Presbytery in 1743 and was successively minister at Kirkintilloch, Dunbartonshire (1744-53); Culross, Fife (1753-8); New Greyfriars, Edinburgh (1758-67); and Old Greyfriars, Edinburgh (1767-1803).

The latter was a collegiate charge with William Robertson who by this time was a distinguished historian and regarded as the leader of the Moderates. There has been much speculation as to the nature of Erskine and Robertson's relationship. Sir Henry Moncreiff Wellwood (1750-1827), Erskine's only biographer and personal friend, does not go into this in any detail and others would seem to suggest that the relationship was generally amicable. Although evidence is sparse, however, it could hardly be the case that no points of disagreement arose between them. Anderson writes of alleged 'awkward collisions' which came from Erskine having to listen every Lord's Day 'to doctrines very different from his own.'¹⁶

There was surprise within the broader evangelical community in Britain that Erskine would

¹⁵ Anderson, William. *The Scottish Nation*, Edinburgh, A. Fullerton & Co., 1863, p.162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.160.

want to associate himself so closely with one whose views differed so markedly from his own. Haldane records an anecdote concerning the visit of John Aikman (1770-1834), an Edinburgh Congregational minister, to John Newton (1725-1807) in London. Before his leaving, Erskine had asked him to take his compliments to the celebrated hymn-writer and preacher. On receiving Erskine's compliments, Newton remarked:

Oh! my good old friend, Dr Erskine; I am always happy to hear of him. He is, indeed, a man of God. But do you know, Mr. Aikman, there is one thing surprises me very much about Dr. Erskine, more indeed than I can express; and that is, that one so truly evangelical in his doctrine can remain as the colleague of Dr. Robertson, who certainly preached to his people another Gospel. That, Mr. Aikman, is a compliance which my conscience would not sanction.¹⁷

Moncrieff Wellwood expresses regret that Erskine with his bent for scholarship did not find time to write more. Although there was a considerable literary output in the eighteenth century there is not much in the way of significant theology. McIntosh, however, refers to Erskine's *Dissertation on the Nature of Christian Faith*, published in 1765, as 'the most significant theological treatise by any member of the Popular party in the latter half of the eighteenth century.'¹⁸ In this, Erskine makes the distinction between faith as it is outwardly professed and 'saving faith' where the Christian has made a genuine response to the love of Christ. McIntosh declares this to be 'the classic delineation of Scottish theology on the subject until the Evangelical Revival in the nineteenth century.'¹⁹

Another piece of writing which had influence beyond the Church was Erskine's pamphlet: *Shall I go to War with my American Brethren* which was first published anonymously in London in 1769. The main thrust of the pamphlet was opposition to war as a solution to the rising tension between Great Britain and America. Erskine argued that war would have no benefit to either parties and counselled a solution which could be based on 'fair and amicable concessions, in which the true interests of both might have been effectually consulted without injury to either.'²⁰ This was not to be and after war commenced, in 1777, Erskine found a publisher in Edinburgh who was willing to distribute the pamphlet, this time with Erskine's name along with a new preface and appendix.

Erskine's concern over the war with America had in part to do with the friendships he had formed with Christians in that land, among them Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), the

¹⁷ Haldane, Alexander. *The Lives Of Robert Haldane Of Airthrey, And Of His Brother, James Alexander Haldane, Esq.*, Edinburgh, W.P. Kennedy, 1856, p. 121.

¹⁸ McIntosh, John R. *Church And Theology In Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800*, East Lothian, Tuckwell Press, 1998, p.166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.166.

²⁰ Wellwood, (Sir) Henry Moncrieff. *Account Of The Life And Writings Of John Erskine, D.D.*, Edinburgh, Archibald Constable and Company, 1818, p.268.

American Calvinist and philosopher, with whom he corresponded on a regular basis This was not the only link that Erskine had with the international Christian community. Drummond describes him as 'essentially an 'Ecumenical' Protestant, anxious to recover contact with other Reformed Churches, which had largely lapsed in the eighteenth century.'²¹

This international perspective on the Church was also seen in Erskine's concern for 'foreign mission' as it was known in his time. In a debate at the 1796 General Assembly, the question was raised as to whether the Church of Scotland should support a Christian Mission to the non-Christian world overseas.²² It was argued that human beings have to reach a certain level of refinement and sophistication before they could be introduced to religious truth. In opposition to this Erskine referred to Acts 28: 1-10 and Paul's enforced stay among the 'barbarous people' of Malta and how he was moved to share the gospel with them.

Erskine and his supporters lost the debate but his speech in 1796 is seen as a significant step towards the Church of Scotland's eventual acceptance of overseas mission which was to come officially at the General Assembly of 1824.

Erskine is therefore a significant figure in the history of the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century and beyond. Needham seeks to sum up his contribution in these words:

By his preaching, literary output, church court activities, and personal influence among the upper classes, Erskine contributed powerfully to the evangelical cause in the Church of Scotland...A many faceted man, Erskine was among other things a champion of the missionary movement; a precursor of the Disruption fathers in his antagonism to intrusion; a cordial correspondent of many foreign divines (including Jonathan Edwards); an ardent Whig; an opponent of the war with the American colonies; and an adversary of Catholic emancipation, the French revolution and the slave trade...²³

With all these 'facets' to his ministry, Moncrieff Wellwood can still say that preaching was to Erskine 'the leading object of his life.'²⁴ He writes:

with all the multiplicity of his occupations, and the steadiness with which he followed out the rules by which every one of them was kept in its own place; with all the eagerness with which he seemed to enter into every thing, that was either interesting or agreeable to him; his preparation for the pulpit was never at any time neglected, or even slightly or carelessly

²¹ Drummond, Andrew L. *The Kirk And The Continent*, Edinburgh, St. Andrew's Press, 1956, p.157.

²² Hewat, Elizabeth G.K. *Vision And Achievement 1796-1956*, Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960, pp. 1-7.

²³ Needham, N.R. 'Erskine, John', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1993, (hereafter *DSCHT*), pp.300-301.

²⁴ Wellwood, *Account Of The Life And Writings Of John Erskine D.D.*, p.240.

attended to...²⁵

It is his preaching, the theology that was its inspiration and the practice which gave shape the message, that is the focus of this study. It is important to remember, however, that any preacher is part of a tradition which has been established within the universal Christian community but has its foundations in the life and worship of the community of Ancient Israel. We will now examine that tradition and later the particular tradition of the Church in Scotland to understand the influences which were working on Erskine to shape his preaching ministry.

²⁵ Wellwood, *Account Of The Life And Writings Of John Erskine D.D.*, pp.239-40

Chapter 2: The Preaching Tradition In The Church.

The history of preaching is inextricably bound up with the history of the Church as a whole. Commitment to preaching and the quality of it have both varied according to the spiritual temperature of the Church at any one time. The cultural conditions in which the Church has had to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ have also played a part. There are times throughout the history of the Church when preaching is quite definitely on an upward movement with much enthusiastic practice and serious reflection on the theology and 'art' of preaching. At other times it would appear that the Church had lost touch with preaching, usually in periods of general decline. There is no doubt, however, that from the earliest days of the Christian Church preaching has been central to her life and witness. Hughes Oliphant Old is right to say:

Preaching is essential to the worship of a covenant community and has therefore throughout Church history been one of the Church's basic ministries.¹

Indeed, some may want to argue that preaching is *the* basic ministry of the Church not only shaping the life of the community of faith but also the social, economic and political conditions of the world at large. Dargan writes: 'The life and progress of nations, the rise and fall of governments have been closely connected with preaching.'²

This survey is an attempt to recall the theology of preaching throughout the history of the Church and how the Church has set about the task of preaching. The survey will cover a period from the earliest days of Christian preaching to the end of the eighteenth century when Dr John Erskine exercised his ministry. Together with the subsequent survey on the development of preaching in Scotland until the end of the eighteenth century, this will enable us to gain some insight into the influences working on Erskine to bring him to the particular theology and practice of preaching which characterised his ministry.

Before we proceed it is important that we understand what preaching is. Preaching has taken many forms and in certain periods missionary and evangelistic preaching have been a vital part of the Church's witness. The main focus of this survey, however, will be the exposition of the Word of God which has always been at the centre of the Christian community's formal worship. O.C. Edwards offers this definition of a sermon:

a sermon may be defined as a speech delivered by an authorized person applying some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a Biblical passage, to the lives of the congregation

¹ Old, Hughes Oliphant 'The History of Preaching' in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Edinburgh, St Andrew's Press, 1992, p.286.

² Dargan, Edwin C. *A History of Preaching*, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1904, 1954, p.8.

with the purpose of moving them to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.³

Some may want to refine this definition somewhat by tying the sermon more closely to a Biblical text. Thus Richard Lischer: 'A sermon is a cultic performance of a biblical text among people who identify themselves as Christians.'⁴

Even with definitions like these in mind there is still a divergence of opinion as to where the roots of Christian preaching lie. There is general agreement, however, that the soil was the life and experience of the covenant community of Israel and it is there we must begin bearing in mind that that experience will overlap with the earliest development of the Christian Church.

The Biblical Period.

In considering the beginnings of preaching, Old points to the priesthood in pre-exilic Israel and its important function of teaching the Law. Part of Moses' blessing on the priestly tribe of Levi before his death says of the tribe: 'He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel.'⁵

The post-exilic priest Ezra can be seen as an example of one who expounded the Law to the people and indeed probably introduced the practice of systematic teaching chapter by chapter. The story is told in the book of Nehemiah where we read of the Persian Emperor, Xerxes, commissioning Ezra to re-establish the Jerusalem Temple and its services. According to Nehemiah 8:1-8 this was initiated by Ezra calling an assembly of the people where he began to read the whole book of the Law of Moses. He would read a section and one of the Levites would then step forward and explain what had been read. This continued all morning each day for an entire week until the whole of the Law of Moses had been read and expounded.

Old sees in this the beginnings of synagogue worship with its systematic reading of the Law Sabbath by Sabbath along with an explanation of what had been read. This became known as *lectio continua*, preaching through the Word of God systematically, each Sabbath taking up where the reading left off the Sabbath before, and was to have a considerable influence on the development of Christian preaching.

Old recognises that the prophets have a place in the history of preaching as exhorters of

³ Edwards, O.C. 'History of Preaching' in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, p.185.

⁴ Lischer, Richard. *The Preacher King*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.8.

⁵ Deuteronomy 33:10. Bible quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version.

the people to be faithful to the Covenant. However, for him prophetic preaching is a distinct genre, tied to a time and place and practised outside a traditional liturgical structure. He cites the distinction made by Roland de Vaux between the ministry of the Word as it was exercised by the priests and the ministry of the Word as it was exercised by the prophets:

(de Vaux) tells us that the priests were concerned with the interpretation and application of the Word of God as it was revealed in the Law of Moses, while the prophets were concerned with proclaiming the Word of God as God revealed that Word directly to the prophet. The prophet was a man who was "directly inspired by God to give a particular message in definite circumstances."⁶

John Ker gives a more prominent place to the office of prophet. Indeed he argues that Christian preaching has its main antecedent in the Old Testament prophets. He describes them as a class of men set apart 'to learn and to declare the will of God to the people.'⁷ Their distinct commission begins with Moses who was charged to preach God's message to Pharaoh. In time, when the people of Israel were released from captivity in Egypt, they were in need of instruction concerning God and His mission for them. Moses was supported in this work by seventy men called 'elders' who Ker would consider had a prophetic role in that they delivered God's will to His people. An account of the 'setting apart' of these elders is given in Exodus 18. From this point on, Ker sees 'companies' or 'schools' of prophets gathering around people like Samuel until the office of prophet becomes a fixed institution in each part of the divided nation of Israel.

Dargan would agree with this. In fact, he has no place for the priesthood in his 'elements of origination' in Christian preaching. He links Christian preaching to the tradition of Hebrew prophecy which, he argues, extends to 'the most remote patriarchal times' and describes prophets as 'an order of orators charged with divine messages and devoted to the moral and spiritual culture of the people.'⁸

Ker and Dargan are both right to give the prophets a prominent place in the history of preaching but if we are thinking of preaching as something that would normally be heard within the context of formal worship then Old's argument still carries most weight.

Following on from this our next point of contact within Jewish culture is the worship of the synagogue. There is some debate as to when synagogue worship actually began. Some would argue that it came into its own during the Babylonian Exile. Others would

⁶ Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Reading And Preaching Of The Scriptures In The Worship Of The Christian Church Vol ume 1 The Biblical Period*, Michigan, Eerdmans, 2002, p.41.

⁷ Ker, John. *Lectures On The History Of Preaching*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1888, p. 16.

⁸ Dargan, Edwin C. *A History Of Preaching*, p.19.

argue for a much later post-Exilic date. O.C. Edwards Jr ⁹ reckons that the synagogue emerges as late as the first or second century BC. There would be broad agreement, however, that the pattern of synagogue worship was influenced by the ministry of Ezra and the Levites as described in Nehemiah 8:8:

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

Not much is known about the early days of synagogue worship. Ironically, some of the earliest evidence comes from the Christian Scriptures: the story in Luke 4: 16-21 of Jesus preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth and the account in Acts 13 of Paul preaching in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. In both instances we learn that after the reading of the Law and the Prophets (Torah and Haftarat) there would be commentary and application. This agrees with the description of Philo (c.20 BC-c.50 AD), the Jewish philosopher. He said of the synagogue services in the early days of Christianity that they 'consisted chiefly of oral instruction and of free extended speaking.'¹⁰

John 6: 26 - 58 provides us with an example of Jesus' synagogue teaching. Old argues that the passage represents 'a good rabbinical sermon conforming perfectly to the liturgical forms of the synagogue'.¹¹ He recognises two texts, one from the Law: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat' from Exodus 4: 16ff; and another from the prophet Isaiah 54: 13: 'They will all be taught by God'. The former text is Jesus' main focus which he explains phrase by phrase but the heart of the sermon is Jesus presentation of himself as the fulfilment of both texts. He is 'the bread of life' and he is God teaching the people. In this way, we can see the sermon as not only rabbinical but as a prototype of the Christian sermon in that it announces that the law and the prophets are fulfilled in Jesus.

One curious aspect of the synagogue sermon in John 6 is the exchanges which take place between the congregation and Jesus. Apparently this was a feature of some synagogue services.¹²

Synagogue sermons have been preserved from 70-200 although the majority of early examples come from 200-500. By and large they follow the general pattern of explication and application of Scripture noted above in relation to Jesus and Paul's synagogue sermons. This leads Brillioth to state that the oldest Christian preaching began in the synagogue and that Jesus' sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth 'gives us

⁹ Edwards, O.C. 'History Of Preaching', p.186.

¹⁰ Dargan, Edwin C. *A History Of Preaching*, p.21.

¹¹ Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Reading and Preaching Of The Scriptures Volume 1*, p. 62.

¹² Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According To John*, Leicester, IVP, 1991, pp. 299-300.

the key to the history of Christian preaching through the ages.’¹³ He sees three basic elements which link Jewish and Christian preaching. Both are *liturgical* in that they are part of a service; they are *exegetical* in that they are spoken from a text; and they are *prophetic* in that they speak to the present with divine authority. Thus there was a clearly defined basis for Christian preaching in the worship of the people from whom Christianity developed.

There is in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles significant preaching from John the Baptist, Jesus and the Apostles which is outside the worship of the synagogue but this would surely be more in line with the tradition of prophetic preaching. The preaching of the Apostles, however, was not so much based on direct revelation from God as the Christ-event, His birth, death and resurrection, and also the interpretation of Old Testament texts which point to Jesus as the Messiah.

The Early Church

When we turn to the subject of Christian preaching in the post-apostolic period, we find that there is very little for us to focus our minds on. In his *Apologia 1* written around 165, Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) describes Christian worship in which preaching is normative:

the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished the president gives a discourse, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples.¹⁴

From this it is clear that by this time there were Old Testament and New Testament readings. Already the writings of the Apostles, ie. the Gospels and Epistles, were regarded as Scripture and being read in worship. There does not seem to be a fixed lectionary since the writings were read ‘as much as time permits.’ It is also significant that there was one reader and one preacher, the latter presiding over the service and forming his discourse around the ‘memoirs’ and ‘writings’.

Two works preserved for us from the mid to late second century would appear to have been written to be delivered to Christian people assembled for worship. From the fourth century the first has been called the *Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* in the belief that it was written by Clement of Rome (d.c.97). This is doubtful but the text is almost certainly a sermon based on the Isaiah 54:1. The second is known as the *Paschal Homily* of Melito of Sardis (d.c.190) a Bishop in Asia Minor. The heart of the sermon is an interpretation of the Passover as a type of the death and resurrection of

¹³ Brilioth, Yngve. *A Brief History Of Preaching*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1945, 1965, p.11.

¹⁴ Bettenson, Henry. *The Early Christian Fathers*, London, Oxford University Press, 1956, 1978, p.62.

Jesus but it is also interesting from a stylistic point of view. The Bishop is undoubtedly influenced by 'the sort of rhetoric with which professional orators were dazzling Asia Minor at the time.'¹⁵

Rhetoric is important to the development of Christian preaching. It was a strong element in Greco-Roman culture and many if not all the great preachers in the Patristic period were influenced by it. This theory of public speaking first developed in Greece and was largely a result of there being no professional lawyers who could represent citizens in court. By the fifth century BC handbooks on effective Rhetoric began to appear. Aristotle took this further with his attempt to gather together all available Greek thought on the subject. He stated the aim of Rhetoric as: 'the discovery of the available means of persuasion.'¹⁶ Edwards describes the grand Rhetorical style thus: '...(it) aims to move the audience to believe or do what the speaker is calling upon it to believe or do.'¹⁷

It was from this Greek heritage that Origen of Alexandria (c.185-c.254) arose to give the Church the classical form of the homily. There is an earlier document from Origen's teacher Clement (c.150-c.215), a verse by verse analysis of Mark 10: 17 - 31, which some scholars have argued is a homily. Since, however, we have no proof that it was ever delivered to a congregation we must be cautious.

Although he is often hailed as the Church's first systematic theologian, Origen's main interest was Biblical interpretation employing the word by word analysis often used by Greek grammarians in their study of classical texts. Before delivering a homily he would prepare himself exegetically and then deliver extemporaneously. Many were taken down by a stenographer so that we have some idea of his method and style. There being no Lectionary or prescribed order of pericopes, Origen would appear to have preached through books of the Bible verse by verse, explaining the meaning and then applying it to the lives of his listeners. Originally this is what a 'homily' was. Dargan quotes T. Christlieb, a nineteenth century theologian as saying: 'Through Origen the sermon received the fixed form of an explanation and application of a text'¹⁸

Despite his foundational work in the history and development of Christian preaching, Origen's allegorical methods of interpreting and applying Scripture have been consistently questioned by scholars. His methods of application he called moral and mystical. Edwards explains this: 'The moral sense looked for the meaning of the passage for the soul, and the mystical sense sought what the passage meant in regard to

¹⁵ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.189.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.187.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dargan, *A History Of Preaching*, pp.48-49.

Christ and the Church.’¹⁹

There does not seem to be much doubt that this led Origen to a level of allegorical interpretation of Scripture which went well beyond the plain meaning of the text. Eusebius, the Church historian of the third and fourth century, believed that Origen learned this allegorical method of interpretation from Stoic teachers which he proceeded to apply to the Old Testament. Origen believed this was the best way to unravel the mysteries, metaphor and symbolism of Scripture to a non-Jewish audience. Well-intentioned though it was, there is no doubt that allegorical interpretation can become dangerously subjective and must be used carefully. Brilioth says:

For Origen, allegory was doubtless the means by which he presented the message of the gospel as he understood it. It was his method of prophesying. But it is disheartening to note that the first great exegete in the history of preaching made the word of Scripture the bearer of a quite unbiblical message and introduced a method of interpretation into the tradition of the church which led exegetical preaching on the false path of allegory for hundreds of years.²⁰

Origen did not write a systematic homiletic but Dargan draws on the work of A. Nebe, a nineteenth century German scholar, who has gathered from Origen’s writings his thoughts on the theology and practice of preaching:

He believed both in the divine call and qualification of the preacher, and also in the need of human effort to acquire and improve the divine gift of prophecy. He cared little for heathen rhetoric and art in speech, but much for the simple, clear, forcible exposition of God’s word. He insisted that the preacher should himself be pure and reverent that he might properly teach his hearers the truth of God...As the source of the sermon must be the word of God, so its supreme end must be the spiritual edification of the hearer, and to this end there must be both instruction and exhortation. So he insists that the teacher should know both the word and the hearts of men.²¹

An alternative to the school of Origen in Biblical interpretation and preaching arose in Antioch in Syria. The Oxford English Dictionary of the Christian Church has this to say on ‘Antiochene Theology’:

The theology of the early Christian Church of Antioch was sometimes complementary, sometimes opposed, to that of Alexandria. Its tendency was Aristotelian and historical, in contrast with the more Platonic and mystical tradition characteristic of Egypt.²²

This was seen in the area of Biblical interpretation. According to Ker, the Antiochene School applied ‘practical reason’ to Biblical interpretation rather than ‘philosophy or

¹⁹ Edwards, ‘History Of Preaching’, p.89.

²⁰ Brilioth, *A Brief History Of Preaching*, pp.24-25.

²¹ Dargan, *A History Of Preaching*, pp. 51-52.

²² *The Oxford English Dictionary Of The Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, 1966, pp.63-64.

speculation'.²⁸

The most prominent of Antiochene preachers and some would say the greatest of all Christian preachers was John who was nicknamed 'Chrysostom' or 'golden mouth' (347-407) He had a considerable influence on the way Christian preaching developed. He was trained in Rhetoric, studied theology under Meletius (d.381), Bishop of Antioch, and spent six years in the silence of a monastery. He was not ordained as a Presbyter until 386 and after preaching in Antioch for a time was made Bishop of Constantinople.

Chrysostom's preaching was strong on exegesis. He regarded the preacher's task as essentially the exposition of a text and therefore allegory is used sparingly. There is more of an appeal to the feelings in Chrysostom than in Origen. Some might say more preaching than teaching. There was also a boldness in him which constrained him to preach what the text was saying to him no matter what the consequences. In his *'On Priesthood'*, perhaps the earliest written discussion of homiletics, he declares the first duty of the preacher to deliver God's message and think nothing of man's applause. This conviction led him to periods of conflict with the authorities and his eventual banishment and exile.

Chrysostom's usual preaching practice was to deliver sequences of expository sermons on various books in the Bible. It is thought that he preached through most of the Bible although not all of his sermons survive. He probably preached without notes but he was recorded by a stenographer who later wrote out the sermons for publication. The first half of a sermon was verse by verse explication from which he draws moral lessons in the second half. His style was conversational which created a strong rapport with his listeners who often had to be restrained from bursting into applause. He drew images and illustrations from nature and everyday life and frequently made use of contemporary events.

The Greek of Chrysostom remained the dominant language in the Church for several centuries. Even in Rome the language of the Church was Greek This undoubtedly affected the development of preaching in the West but when it eventually bloomed there were some powerful witnesses.

Latin Christian literature arose first in North Africa. Tertullian of Carthage (160-220) was the first Christian theologian to write in Latin. He has left no sermons but his writing appears to have been influenced by Latin Rhetoric. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (200-258), has left no sermons but he had a high reputation as a preacher and is said to be the first to introduce oratory into the preaching of the Western Church. Judging from his

²⁸ Ker, *Lectures On The History Of Preaching*, p.65.

writings, it would appear that he may have had an allegorising style in explaining the Scriptures but it is also plain that he had a true vision for preaching. For Cyprian preaching is unlike any other form of communication. The priority of preaching is the setting forth of God's truth with style and elegance of speech secondary considerations.²⁴

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (339-397) was a considerable influence in the development of catechetical preaching which was primarily aimed at new converts to Christianity. Old suggests that he might be regarded as 'the father of catechetical preaching' ²⁵ for his pattern of preaching had considerable influence after his death and was a great inspiration to the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Each year before Easter he prepared those to be baptised by preaching to them daily, carefully explaining the basic teaching of the Christian faith. He would deal with the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer and gave a detailed explanation of the sacraments of baptism and communion. His surviving sermons which would be preached as part of worship tend to be allegorical and are heavily influenced by Rhetoric and the need to fit into the liturgy.

Ambrose is also significant for his influence on Augustine (354-430) who is of monumental importance for the history of the Christian Church not least for his contribution to the development of preaching. He found his own style as a preacher, shaking off what Brilioth calls 'the Greek yoke'. By the time he became a presbyter he was trained in Rhetoric, had experienced asceticism and been involved in spiritual pilgrimage. He has left over three hundred sermons which show that he was capable of a variety of approaches: textual, liturgical and consecutive preaching on whole books of the Bible. It is thought that he first wrote out his sermons or dictated them and then preached from a written rough draft. He was never, however, bound by the written word. In fact, the manuscripts of the sermons we have have been largely prepared from stenographic notes.

Augustine is unique among the early Fathers in actually writing a textbook on preaching. Indeed, *De Doctrina Christiana* is regarded as the first textbook on preaching dealing as it does with hermeneutics and homiletics, ie., the interpretation of a text and how to communicate it to a congregation. Edwards paraphrases this as 'what to say and how to say it effectively so that people will hear and act.' ²⁶ Writing near the end of his life, Augustine has a wealth of experience to reflect upon. He sees the essence of preaching as the exposition of a Biblical text in as natural a style as possible. It is obvious that he tried to leave behind his training in Rhetoric but he saw its value to some extent and it always remained influential. There were certain basic principles, however, which could

²⁴ Ker, *Lectures On The History Of Preaching*, p.100.

²⁵ Old, Hughes Oliphant. *Guides To The Reformed Tradition:Worship*, Atlanta. John Knox Press, 1984, p.65.

²⁶ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.192.

never be abandoned: prayer; the priority of content over outward form; and the desire to be understood rather than to be thought clever.

Augustine is also very clear that the life of the preacher is the most effective speech. By the end of Augustine's life, Roman culture was beginning to decline as a consequence of the barbarian invasions. Confidence in preaching declined but fared better post-Augustine than post-Chrysostom in the East. To some extent preaching became a rubric in the liturgy with the Lectionary governing the preached text. Bishops were the normative preachers but where a Bishop could not attend a sermon could be read from the Fathers. This created a demand for collections of homilies which became known as 'homiliaries'. The first such collection was probably used in Africa in the mid fifth century. They may not have furthered the development of living preaching but as Edwards says they kept preaching alive in what for preaching was a dark age.²⁷

One notable preacher of this time was Leo the Great (d.461) who was Pope from 440 until his death. A collection of his sermons have come down to us which reflects the growth of the liturgical year and the rapid development of the *lectio selecta*, since the days of Augustine. This was the selection of biblical texts for preaching which were deemed appropriate for particular seasons of the Christian year. According to Old, Leo's sermons are not intended to explain the Scripture lessons which were read in the liturgy so much as to present the liturgical theme of the day. 'They are liturgical homilies rather than expositions of Scripture.'²⁸ This was to become a model for the Middle Ages.

At its best the preaching in this period began with the preacher and his study of Scripture. From this he formulated a message which he delivered to a congregation gathered for worship. The whole process from study to delivery was inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. By and large, the preaching would appear to have been conversational in style although it was often influenced by insights from Rhetoric.

The Middle Ages

A new emphasis on preaching came with the reforms of the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814) in the eighth century. The Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire wanted his subject peoples to be instructed in the Christian faith. Preaching was vital to this project so a law was passed requiring sermons to be preached at every mass and on every holy day. The Bishops embraced this with enthusiasm by and large and aimed to

²⁷ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.195.

²⁸ Old, *Guides To The Reformed Tradition: Worship*, p.67.

translate the Gospel into the language of the people and to explain it with exhortation.

A new homiletic literature emerged to help presbyters with their preaching. Charlemagne requested that Paul the Deacon (c.720-c.800) write a collection of homilies to which was added Alcuin's compilation. Alcuin (c.735-804) was an important religious and educational adviser to the Emperor whose most significant contribution was undoubtedly his lectionary which gave the prescribed pericopes more stability throughout the West.

Preaching gained a new prominence in this period but there was very little development. As Brilioth says: 'Preaching had become an art in the use of borrowed materials.'²⁹ This state of affairs continued until the eleventh century when there were a number of important advances. Textbooks began to appear on preaching such as *A Book About The Way A Sermon Should Be Given* written in 1084 by Guibert of Nogent (1053-1124).

The eleventh century also saw a renewal of the monastic movement which gave impetus to preaching. In monasticism preaching had to do with counsel in how people might love Christ and devote their lives to him entirely. This is made plain in the Rule of Benedict which became standard in the West. Preaching, usually delivered twice a day in the monastery, was the main means whereby the Abbot taught monks how to advance in the spiritual life. Examples of monastic preaching show the influence of the Fathers with Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) being a typical example. Much of his published work is preaching although many of the homilies have been obviously revised. Nevertheless, they are an indication of what monastic preaching aimed to be.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a remarkable outpouring of preaching. Edwards writes: '...few periods compare with the late Middle Ages for the quantity of preaching that was done, the enthusiasm with which it was heard, and the sheer volume of 'helps' created to assist it.'³⁰ How can we account for this? Edwards cites an expanding network for travel and trade with a subsequent multiplication of cities. With people thus more widespread the Church needed to find new ways of reaching them with the Gospel. Perhaps a greater motivation for preaching, however, was the growth of heresy which itself was largely spread by charismatic preachers. Prior to the twelfth century, heresy had seemed a sporadic affair which created but a few ripples on the surface of the Church's life. It was plain, though, that things were changing. Stephen O'Shea writes: 'Religion was becoming personal again, and ephemeral messiahs and cranky reformers sprouted like weeds in an untended garden.'³¹

²⁹ Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, p.73.

³⁰ Edwards, 'History of Preaching', p.199.

³¹ O Shea, Stephen. *The Perfect Heresy*, London, Profile Books, 2001, p.27.

The Church's response was to employ her own most gifted preachers to counter the spread of the unwelcome and disruptive ideas. Bernard of Clairvaux, who already had a notable reputation as a Crusades preacher, and Dominic de Guzman (1170-1221) were sent to the Languedoc region of France to counteract the growing influence of heresy. Dominic had to face the rising tide of Catharism and although he laboured for ten years or so enjoyed comparatively little success. Nevertheless, Dominic became convinced of the need for a distinctive order of preachers that might be specially trained to respond to the increasing challenges to orthodoxy. Thus a bull of confirmation was granted by Pope Honorius III in 1216 which established Dominic's followers as the Order of Friars Preachers. This was significant because until this time doctrinal preaching was reserved to the bishops of the Church.

Other religious orders would be founded with preaching as their priority. The members of these orders were called friars like the Dominicans; they were not to live secluded lives like the monks; and as they travelled they were to live off alms. One such order which rivalled the Dominicans in numerical strength and in influence was the Franciscans. It was not specifically designated for the fight against heresy, as the Dominicans were, but it served the purpose well with its commitment to popular teaching and its insistence on obedience to the Pope and the bishops.

The 'mendicant' friars were by and large well educated. The new universities being founded at this time were clerical institutions where they imbibed Scholastic theology and benefited from the preaching which was part of the curriculum. Although the friars preaching was by and large 'occasional' rather than liturgical, more geared to mission or specific events in the life of the Church, surviving sermons show that their preaching had a definite form. They did not engage in verse by verse commentary but constructed each sermon on a single verse of the Bible which was broken down into component parts. There were usually three divisions each with three subdivisions.

With this kind of preaching in vogue there was a demand for 'helps' for preachers. Several hundreds appeared during this period which explored the 'art' of preaching and endeavoured to assist preachers in the development of their skills and method as they sought to communicate with a largely oral and preliterate society. In addition to this other reference works were developed as resources for preachers: concordances, 'distinctions' showing the senses of different Biblical words, 'florilegia' which were collections of authorities who could support the preacher's argument, sets of sermons, collections of outlines and 'exempla' or illustrations.

The story of preaching in the Middle Ages is not all positive, however. This was a time when the right to preach was restricted to those who had the cure of souls and those with

papal dispensation like the mendicants. There is also the matter of the content of the preaching. There were faithful expositors of Scripture but the use of the Lectionary militated against consecutive preaching through books of the Bible. The parish priest was restricted to the pericope for the day. Allegorical interpretation was common and often the lives of the 'Saints' replaced Scripture as the main source of preaching.

The picture which emerges from this period is of preaching becoming more formal and increasingly under the control of the Church hierarchy. Yet it continues to have a central role in missionary activity and in the maintenance of orthodox teaching against the encroachments of heresy.

The Reformation

Eventually the enthusiasm and spirituality of the friars waned and men like John Wycliffe (c.1329-84) began to protest against their worldliness and the shallowness of their preaching. Wycliffe found himself drawn to the Patristic model of preaching and his example inspired the Lollard movement which in time operated much as the friars had done.

Wycliffe was part of a growing tide of thought which was rising to challenge western Roman Catholic culture. By the sixteenth century a significant part of the intellectual world was turning to classical antiquity for its inspiration. These people were called 'Humanists' because of their interest in the humanities ie. grammar, Rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. This influenced the preaching of the day, particularly the rediscovery of rhetoric. In his *Ecclesiastes* Erasmus (c.1466 -1536) refers to 'sacred rhetoric' and delivers himself of the opinion that the priest has no more important task. Therefore he should be well trained: 'If elephants can be trained to dance, lions to play, and leopards to hunt, surely preachers can be taught to preach.'³²

The problem with Erasmus' vision of preaching is that it had little to say concerning the importance of a sermon being anchored to Scripture and therefore his influence on preaching is minimal. This could not be said of his near contemporary, the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther (1483-1546). Says Edwards: 'Few people in the history of preaching have had more influence than Martin Luther...'³³

What, then, did Luther believe about preaching? For Luther the Word had three manifestations: the Son who was the Incarnate Word; the Bible which was the Written

³² Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.203.

³³ Ibid., p.204.

Word; and preaching which was the Preached Word. The whole purpose of Scripture is to reveal Christ and the key to all Biblical interpretation is discovering the proclamation concerning Him. For that the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit is needed.

In Luther's mind, preaching is the medium of salvation so every sermon must contain Law and Gospel. It is not merely a human activity but the very Word of God proclaiming itself through a preacher. There is a 'real presence' in the preached word just as there is in the Eucharist. This is what Old calls 'the kerygmatic presence of Christ'.³⁴ Christ is present to the congregation through the preaching: '...when the gospel of Christ is present in all its saving power for God's people to receive for their salvation, then Christ is present to those who receive him by faith.'³⁵ But again, the Holy Spirit has a crucial role in enabling people to hear and to be saved. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that Christ is present to us in His Word. Ultimately, preaching was for Luther an eschatological struggle in which Christ would elect individuals and save them. In a very real sense preaching continues the battle begun by the saving event and is itself the saving event.

Ker sees Luther placing preaching above the written Word, not in the sense of being more authoritative but in the ordinary practice of preaching it is more effective in 'convincing and converting'.³⁶ For Luther preaching is the Word of God passing through the heart of the living witness, and carried home to the heart of the hearer. But while preaching 'rises above the Bible' in that sense, it must always be rooted in the Bible for its authority. Not that the preacher is to aim merely for a literal understanding of the text. Understanding for Luther is not merely to know words and grammar but to enter into the real meaning of the text and to feel its living power imparted by the Spirit of Christ.

With this in mind we can understand why Brilioth writes: 'No person, before or since, has so exalted the Word, not only the written Word but the living Word on the lips of the preacher.'³⁷

In the beginning of his ministry Luther's homiletic practice was very close to the mediaeval textual or thematic homily but he soon developed his own unique form. It was close to the Patristic model but it was not so much concerned with verse by verse exposition as seeking to grasp the central meaning of a passage and once that was identified he developed an outline to communicate the meaning.

³⁴ Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures In The Worship Of The Christian Church, Vol. 4: The Age Of The Reformation*, Michigan, Eerdmans, 2002, p.40

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ker, *Lectures On The History Of Preaching*, p.154.

³⁷ Brilioth, *A Brief History Of Preaching*, p.110.

Luther never wrote a manuscript. He preferred to immerse himself in a passage, usually a prescribed pericope, and then preach in an engaging conversational style with a brief outline before him. Apparently, he departed from this so often that someone was led to say that the structure of his preaching was one of 'holy disorder'.

Luther's Reformation was most influential in the Germanic countries. The Reformation in Switzerland was different in many ways. The chief personality here was Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). His vision of preaching involved more radical reform than that of Luther. He abandoned the Lectionary and instead preached serially through whole books of the Bible in the Patristic manner. As a Christian Humanist, Zwingli embraced the motto '*ad fontes*' or 'to the sources' and accordingly his preaching was greatly influenced by Chrysostom and Augustine, the two great examples of Patristic preaching. According to Zwingli's friend Heinrich Bullinger, when Zwingli was appointed to the pulpit of the Great Minster in Zurich in 1519 he announced that he intended 'with God's help to preach the gospel according to St Matthew in full and consecutive order and not divided into the prescribed extracts.'³⁸ This he did day by day for a whole year. As Old says:

Like a Christian Ezra, he based his reform on preaching through the law of Christ. Like a Swiss John Chrysostom he preached through the Bible, verse by verse, one book at a time.³⁹

This decision of Zwingli to return to the *lectio continua* of the Fathers was a momentous step in the history of preaching particularly in the way it set the course for future preaching in the Reformed tradition. Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541) had begun to preach a *lectio continua* of Romans at Basel in 1518 but he did not popularise it as Zwingli did. Ford is right to say:

Preaching in the Reformed tradition began on 1 January 1519 when Huldrych Zwingli began to expound the Gospel of Matthew verse by verse as the people's priest at the Grossmunster in Zurich.⁴⁰

He made it plain, moreover, in the way he ordered the worship in Zurich that nothing would be allowed to interfere with the preaching of the Word, not even the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We should be cautious in agreeing with those who would say that Zwingli held a 'low' view of the Lord's Supper as against his 'high' view of the preached Word. Nevertheless, the impression that would be given in the normal worship of Zurich was that the preached Word was central.

David Buttrick sees Luther and Zwingli disagreeing in their theology of preaching as they

³⁸ Potter, G.R. *Huldrych Zwingli*, London, Arnold, p. 14.

³⁹ Old, *Guides To The Reformed Tradition: Worship*, p.69.

⁴⁰ Ford, James Thomas. 'Preaching In The Reformed Tradition' in *Preachers And People In The Reformation And Early Modern Period*, ed. Larissa Taylor, Leiden, Brill, 2001, p.65.

differed in their sacramental theology.⁴¹ Consubstantiation allowed Luther to affirm that the bread and wine in the Eucharist *are* Christ for us and so he insisted that when preachers preach their voices *are* the voice of God! Buttrick links this to a tendency in Luther's thought towards Eutychian Christology which says that though in Christ there were two natures 'before the Incarnation', there was only one 'after the Incarnation', which leads to the view that in the Incarnate Christ there is a mixture of the two natures, human and divine, into one. So, in seeking to explain the relationship between Word and Spirit, Luther argued that the Spirit could not be imparted to the soul independently of Word and Sacrament.

Zwingli was reluctant to bind Word and Spirit in this way. He argued that preaching was a human witness to Christ, intended to prompt us to seek the true inner Word of God, given by the Spirit. Thus Zwingli sharply distinguishes between between the *verbum Dei externum* which is human preaching, and the *verbum Dei internum* which is the Holy Spirit. In support of this he quotes the Gospel of John: 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.' (John 6:44). Preaching might point to Christ but only the Spirit draws.

Luther and Zwingli also differed in their view of Scripture. Luther appears to equate preaching and Scripture as 'Word of God'. God's voice is heard in both. The Word of God is the Gospel from pulpit or biblical page. In Zwingli's thought, Scripture is elevated above any human testimony. God the Spirit is the author of the Bible and the only true interpreter of Biblical texts.

John Calvin's (1509-64) method and theology of preaching were very much tied to his view of Scripture. For Calvin, Scripture is the supreme revelation of God. He recognises that God reveals Himself in Creation but a further 'guide and teacher' is needed if men and women are to believe in God and enjoy a saving faith. This 'guide and teacher' is Christ Himself, the eternal Wisdom of God, who speaks through the Scripture and bestows its authority. The knowledge of the author and the recognition of the authority of Scripture is given to the individual by the action of the Holy Spirit. The authority of Scripture cannot be proved in any other way. The Spirit must convince.

For Calvin there is no authority above Scripture. To the Romanists who argued that the Church was the supreme authority since the Church was in existence before the New Testament and indeed determined what the New Testament should contain, Calvin insisted that the message of the New Testament existed before the Church and that the canon was an acknowledgement of the truth proclaimed by God.

⁴¹ Buttrick, David G. 'Preaching, Theology of', in *Encyclopedia Of The Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Edinburgh, St Andrew's Press, 1992.

Calvin argued that Scripture was crucial to the salvation of men and women. In fact, God does not deal with people apart from Scripture. This was argued very strongly against some groups of Anabaptists who placed immediate revelation on the same level as Scripture or even above it. Calvin, however, recognised that Scripture can be 'a dead letter', giving no life, but 'if..the message of Scripture is imprinted in the heart by the Holy Spirit and so reveals Christ, then it is the word of life, converting the soul.'⁴²

How did Calvin see the relationship between the written Word and the preached Word? Parker points to Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) and Richard Hooker (c.1554-1600) as preachers in the Reformed tradition who were never very sure of this. Bullinger was always clear that Scripture is 'evident, plain and most assuredly certain'⁴³ but he can be vague as to the value of exposition. Parker sees a parallel here with the Zwinglian view of the Lord's Supper where the signs are clearly separated from what is signified. This is surely the Zwinglian reluctance to bind Word and Spirit which has been noted earlier.

Calvin's view is much closer to Luther's. In fact, Parker states: 'It is a view that in essentials he shared with Luther.'⁴⁴ For Calvin, the preacher's duty is to invent nothing of his own but simply to declare what he has found in Scripture. If he has received the message as originally given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and if he faithfully declares that message, then the Word of God is proclaimed. Calvin was always careful, however, never to elevate preaching to the same level as Scripture. As Parker says: 'Scripture is definitive and sovereign; preaching must be derivative and subordinate'.⁴⁵

Preaching can only be regarded as the Word of God if it delivers a Biblical message. It is totally dependent on Scripture for its authority. But if it is preached faithfully, if a man has received the Word of God and delivers that Word to a people, then it is God who is speaking. Calvin himself said:

When a man has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar, and that he may be preeminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man. And he does us that favour of presenting himself here and wishes a mortal man to be his messenger.⁴⁶

For Calvin, the preacher is a man who is permanently a student in '*l'escole de Dieu*' or 'the school of God'. Only if he learns from the supreme Master can he faithfully pass on the Master's teaching. The school is God teaching in Holy Scripture; the preacher

⁴² Parker, T.H.L. *Calvin's Preaching*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1992, p.5.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.25.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.24.

delivers to his congregation what he has been taught.' ⁴⁷ If this happens then there is revelation and redemption. God is present in the midst of his people and His voice is heard. It must always be borne in mind that Scripture is primary with preaching secondary but 'the same message is powerful and effective in the one as in the other.' ⁴⁸

Calvin was also strong in affirming the preacher in the role of 'ambassador', an image found in 2 Corinthians 5:20: 'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.' Calvin drew from this the preacher's unique status, that if he faithfully hands on what he has received from those who were taught directly by God, ie the prophets and apostles, then he is God's ambassador in that he represents God and is speaking for God.

This is not to say that preaching is just a repetition of instructions. Calvin was always clear that preaching is revelation in the here and now and is therefore an activity of the Holy Spirit. For instance, when it is preached that Christ has made satisfaction for our sin, that satisfaction is present, available and effective. It is not simply declared that God is gracious. In His Word God is being gracious now, wherever the Word is being preached. It is the Holy Spirit who presents the reality of Christ and all the benefits he has obtained for us. The Word is never separated from the Spirit. It is the hearer who needs the power of the Spirit in order to benefit from the preaching and become 'an effectual hearer'.

It is with all this in mind that Buttrick says: 'Calvin's confidence in the power of the Word is awesome: God's Word, never fruitless, does what it declares.' ⁴⁹

Calvin, nonetheless, admits the possibility of the preached Word having no effect. This happens when a preacher is expressing his own ideas rather than the mind of God. There is also the possibility that the Word is rejected by the 'reprobate' but in a sense the Word is still active in judgement and condemnation.

So for Calvin the proclamation of God's Word by way of exposition and application is itself God's Word in a twofold sense. Firstly, it is the same message that was revealed to the Biblical writers that is being delivered by the preaching Church, and that message is God's message or Word. Secondly, it is the same Spirit of God who gave the message who ensures that the message shall accomplish in any generation what He had originally intended.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.27.

⁴⁸ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p.27.

⁴⁹ Buttrick, David G. 'Preaching, Theology of', *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim, p.290.

It is obvious, then, that Calvin afforded the highest significance to the preacher in the Christian community and his works show evidence that he often pondered the qualities a preacher should possess. For instance, the preacher had to be humble in his submission to Scripture. When in the pulpit the preacher had to be aware of the sovereignty of the Bible over himself as well as the congregation. In this regard, it is significant, as Parker notes, that Calvin in his preaching always uses the 'first person plural'. He does not address his congregation 'from some remote spiritual eminence'.⁵⁰

Obedience is also an essential quality for the preacher. He must not be urging teaching on a congregation that he himself is not prepared to obey. On the other hand, he must not be timid in declaring what is the plain truth of Scripture no matter what the consequences may be for himself or the congregation. For in the end, the preacher has no authority unless what is preached is from the Word.

As significant as the preacher is in Calvin's thought, he also has a crucial role for the congregation, those who listen. Parker says:

The preacher is only the half of the Church's activity of proclamation. He has received God's message from Holy Scripture and is now handing it on to others. These others, the members of the congregation, form the other half.⁵¹

Calvin did not see a congregation as a passive unit. In the same way that the Lord's Supper is an act of the whole Church so is preaching. Indeed, Parker refers to preaching as 'the audible Sacrament'⁵² where the believer actively hears and then takes into himself the Word of God. So it is important for the believer to have a clear idea of what Christian preaching is and what is happening in the sermon ie. that here God is ruling His Church by declaring His will and that the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ is being made plain. If the believer is satisfied that this is what is happening then he is called to submit to the Word. This, however, is a work of grace. It is the Spirit who makes a person ready to be taught by the Word; it is by the Spirit that a person recognises it as the Word and distinguishes it from all other words; it is by the Spirit that they believe and become 'doers' of the Word.

Together, preacher and congregation should have a clear purpose in mind with regard to preaching: edification, 'the building up of the believer in the knowledge and love of God and thus the building up of the Church into God's holy Temple.'⁵³

Calvin's own preaching was expository, the explanation and application of a passage of

⁵⁰ Buttrick, 'Preaching, Theology Of', p.39.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p.52.

Scripture. This can be done in a variety of ways but Calvin followed the method which was most closely associated with the fourth and fifth centuries and has been described as *lectio continua* : ie. the exposition of whole books of the Bible, passage by passage. This was the method of Chrysostom and Augustine and it had largely dropped out of Church practice in the four or five centuries preceding the Reformation. It was, however, continued in the theological faculties where verse by verse exposition of complete books was the favoured method in the teaching of the scriptures. So when Calvin embraced this method he was following in the tradition of the later Fathers and of mediaeval theological training.

Almost all of Calvin's recorded sermons are connected series on books of the Bible. He would prepare from the original Biblical languages and would have a Hebrew Old Testament or a Greek New Testament before him as he preached. He had no notes but his sermons would be transcribed as he preached by Denis Raguener who was appointed by the Genevan Council for this purpose.

Whatever differences the Continental Reformers may have had in their theology of preaching, there is no doubt that together they believed that it was possible for a human voice to preach the Word of God. This happened when the preacher studied the Word of God, formed a message and delivered it to a congregation in the power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin's thinking is particularly important to us. His vision of the Holy Spirit bringing forward the Word of God within the synergy of Scripture, preacher and congregation is one we will recognise later in the theology of John Erskine.

The Reformation In The English Speaking World

In the Reformation period there is a complicated picture in the English speaking world due largely to the way ecclesiastical orientation varied over the centuries. Later in this study there will be a separate survey of Scottish preaching which will reflect something of the circumstances in Scotland. In England, Henry VIII (1491-1547) replaced papal with royal authority and in the reign of his son Edward VI (1537-53) the protectors moved the English Church in the direction of Calvinism. Under Mary Tudor (1516-58), however, papal obedience was restored but another change came with the long reign of Elizabeth I when the Anglican *via media* between Romanism and Protestantism set the pattern for the future. Nevertheless, this was not without interruption. The Civil War brought the Puritans to power which was in turn replaced with the Restoration Of the Crown.

During the reign of Henry VIII, there was a shift from the thematic preaching of the Middle Ages due largely to the influence of Erasmus and Luther. Edward's reign saw a need for

reformed doctrine to be widely taught. To help with this *The Book of Homilies* was produced which was a collection of topical sermons written by Thomas Cranmer and other leaders of the Church of England. Some of the best preaching of this era, however, comes from Hugh Latimer (c.1485-1555) who was eventually martyred under Mary Tudor. His preaching has been compared with Luther's in his use of the homily form and the colloquial, racy language he employed. He did not appear to have any order to his preaching apart from the verses of the passage before him.

During the reign of Elizabeth, theologians who had fled England during the reign of Mary returned more deeply committed to the ways of the Reform. These were called 'Puritans'. They had before them a vision of an established Church more closely modelled on the pattern of Geneva which they regarded as more scriptural. There was significant support for this amongst the laity. It was not uncommon for congregations, if they felt they were being starved of Biblical preaching, to hire their own clergy to preach at times other than the regular services.

Puritan preaching followed the Calvinist ideal of public exegesis. The classical form of the Puritan sermon which could be heard both in England and in America can be found in *The Arte of Prophesying* by William Perkins (1558-1602) originally written in Latin in 1592 and translated into English in 1607. This is Perkins' Summary at the end of his work:

Preaching involves:

1. Reading the text clearly from the canonical Scriptures.
2. Explaining the meaning of it, once it has been read, in the light of the Scriptures themselves.
3. Gathering a few profitable points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage.
4. If the preacher is suitably gifted, applying the doctrines thus explained to the life and practice of the congregation in straightforward, plain speech.

The heart of the matter is this:

Preach one Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ.⁵⁴

Commenting on this Edwards writes:

As simple as this formula sounds, sermons based on it could last several hours, during which every shade of the meaning of the text was explored, doctrines were extrapolated, and each was applied to the lives of the faithful. The number of divisions and subdivisions could be enormous.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Perkins, William. *The Art of Prophesying*, Edinburgh, Banner Of Truth, 1996, p.79.

⁵⁵ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.211

Anglo-Catholic preaching in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century could not be more different. Those falling in this tradition were John Donne (1571-1631) and Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626). Their preaching required a learned audience who could appreciate Rhetoric and classical allusion and inevitably came into conflict with Puritan ways.

The Seventeenth Century

By this time, there was a growing distaste for what was perceived as the extreme preaching styles of Anglo-Catholicism and Puritanism. Robert South (1634-1716), preaching to ordinands at St Mary's Oxford in 1660, appeared to criticise both Anglo-Catholic and Puritan styles and advocated preaching that was 'plain, natural and familiar'.⁵⁶

The greatest influence in the promotion of the 'plain style' was John Tillotson (1630-94) who was Archbishop of Canterbury for the last three years of his life. Tillotson's style is called 'neoclassical' by some scholars because it has much in common with the influential homiletical movement of that name in France of which Jacques Benigne Bossuet (1627-1704), Bishop of Meaux was a part. The term neoclassical is appropriate because sermons or 'discourses' were heavily influenced by the principles of classical Rhetoric. It was assumed that sermons should follow the structure of a forensic speech. This meant that inevitably sermons were topical, discussing a subject rather than expounding Scripture. In the end, it could be argued that these sermons were closer in form to essays.

Another major influence on this style was the French neoclassicist Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711) who published a translation and commentary on a work written by Longinus around the first century called *On The Sublime*. The main thrust of the argument here was that the goal of the speaker should not be to persuade the listeners but to 'transport them out of themselves' into an experience of the sublime. This was a time when there was a growing consciousness of art as the creation of beauty, 'art for art's sake', and Longinus' understanding of rhetoric meant that a speaker or preacher could function as an artist. Along with essayists and critics he could be said to be producing 'belles lettres'.

Shortcomings notwithstanding, this style became enormously popular. Edwards says: 'Soon the plain style of sermons became the only style preached by any cleric of any denomination.'⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p. 213.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.214.

The theology of Tillotson and most of the clergy who followed him during the next century was 'Latitudinarian'. This was characterised by a belief in the divine benevolence of God towards all human beings. The idea of judgement towards all those outside the Kingdom of God was decidedly muted. It was a preaching style for the times, the Enlightenment, when Christianity was very much on the defensive.

In Germany at this time there was a revival in interest in preaching due to Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) whose preoccupations and emphases were very different from those of Tillotson and his followers. To Spener, form and Rhetoric meant little. The two great essentials in preaching were the substance of the sermon and the personality of the preacher. The substance had always to be the Scriptures, both Law and Gospel, and the 'new life in Christ' had always to be emphasised. While disregarding form as of the essence of preaching, Spener urged that 'the natural rule of the subject' should govern a sermon.⁵⁸ The meaning of a text must be found, then the doctrine expounded and applied to the hearers.

Spener saw the personality of the preacher as vital in preaching. He constantly argued the case for a well-trained ministry but the basic requirement from a man was that he should be a Christian and speak from conviction. Ker sums up his attitude:

The truth he preaches must first be proved in his own heart, and then borne to his hearers by prayer. The most useful sermons, he said, are those in which there is least thought of self, and most thought of God and of the souls of men... His (Spener's) ideal preacher was a man eager to communicate to others truths which he had tested in his own heart and life.⁵⁹

The influence of Spener gave impetus to the growing Pietist movement in Germany but perhaps the greatest influence was August Hermann Francke (1663-1727). He was a man of great learning who sought to breathe life into what had become a rather dead orthodoxy in Lutheran Germany. He was a Professor in the University of Halle, which became the headquarters of the Pietists, and also ministered to one of the town churches. His preaching made a considerable impact upon a congregation which had before his coming been in a 'broken and desolate state'.⁶⁰ Ker describes his preaching:

It was not sensational, nor filled with figures and stories, but drawn from the Bible through his own heart. It was full of faith and warmth, simple and direct, referring constantly to Christ, and to life through Him.⁶¹

Pietism had a considerable impact on Christian life in Germany. There were defects,

⁵⁸ Ker, *Lectures On The History Of Preaching*, p.194.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.95-96.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.203.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

however. It was a scholarly movement but it was perhaps too concerned with the things of the 'heart'. This tended to make it too individualistic and introspective. Moreover, there was a pronounced distrust of science and literature and the reaction against Rhetoric and oratory was perhaps overstated. In the end, Pietism tended to produce closed societies of the like-minded although Francke himself did not fall into this trap.

Edwards has called this period in European Church history as 'The Age of Feeling'.⁶² Pietism was not confined to Germany. There were a number of religious movements throughout Europe that emphasised religious experience. This 'religion of the heart' was not only seen in the Lutheran tradition in Germany but also the Reformed tradition in Holland, in seventeenth-century Puritanism in Scotland and England, in Scots-Irish revivalism and the Quaker movement. It would also give birth eventually to Moravianism and Methodism.

It will be seen that some of the major concerns of Pietism will be seen in John Erskine's theology of preaching. He places great emphasis on the personality of the preacher and in particular his personal relationship to Jesus Christ. Moreover, he is not content with a purely intellectual or sentimental response to the preaching of the Gospel. 'Saving faith' can only come from the heart.

The Eighteenth Century

The kind of preaching associated with Pietism was essentially evangelistic and designed to encourage inner piety or devotion to Jesus Christ. It would find its greatest expression in the eighteenth century in the preaching of George Whitefield and the Wesleys, John and George, although it can be detected in the Scottish and Irish Calvinism of the mid-seventeenth century. It was preaching based on an understanding that the election of those predestined to salvation generally occurs when the Word of God is preached to a congregation. Edwards says: 'Although it was God's eternal decree that effected salvation, it was nevertheless preaching that was the usual medium of conversion.'⁶³

It was this understanding of preaching which lay at the heart of the Evangelical Revival sometimes called 'The Great Awakening'. This is usually associated with John Wesley (1703-91) in England and Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) in America but the two movements had in common the influence of George Whitefield (1714-70). He anticipated the Wesleys in emphasising conversion, in beginning an itinerant evangelistic

⁶² Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.214

⁶³ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p.215

ministry, in field preaching and in the formation of 'religious societies' in Church of England parishes.

One of Whitefield's major contributions was the transformation of the understanding of a revival from an occasional work of grace sent by the Holy Spirit in God's good time into something that could occur on a regular basis. For thirty years he toured England, Scotland, Ireland and America sometimes preaching several times a day, always working for emotional response and usually leaving large numbers converted.

Whitefield created the basic pattern of evangelistic preaching. The sermon was usually based on a text but exposition was limited. Edwards describes his sermons thus:

after an introduction and some background, there was an announcement of the points that would be made. After that, the sermon developed topically, with each of the heads having several sub-headings, all leading to a conclusion. So far, the evangelistic sermon followed neoclassical lines.⁶⁴

The difference was Whitefield's emotional appeals. He was unashamedly aiming for conversion and his sermons were driven by the conviction that people had to be brought face to face with the depths of their own sin and their need of God's intervention. This was something that John Erskine would wholeheartedly endorse and he had no reservation in supporting Whitefield's visits to Scotland.

⁶⁴ Edwards, 'History Of Preaching', p. 215.

Chapter 3: The Preaching Tradition In Scotland Until The Eighteenth Century.

There can be no doubt that from the earliest days of Christianity in Scotland preaching was an important part of the worship and devotion of the community of faith. Actual examples of preaching during this time are, however, rare. This is perhaps to be expected in a culture where the quill had not yet taken its place alongside the human voice as a means of communicating the Gospel. But even the years leading up to the Reformation and that turbulent time itself have not left us with many examples of Scottish preaching, although there are accounts of the preaching of prominent figures like John Knox. It is only when we come to the seventeenth century that the publication of sermons becomes more common along with theological reflection on the purpose of preaching. This prepared the way for the eighteenth century when there was what McIntosh calls 'a voracious demand for printed sermons'. He writes further:

Not only were the great devotional writers, such as Thomas Boston of Ettrick and John Willison of Dundee, in demand for most of the century and well into the next, but also the sermons of even unknown parish ministers were regularly published in what were usually small local editions.¹

The following brief survey of preaching in Scotland from the earliest days until the eighteenth century is an attempt to show how preaching developed to the point of the 'voracious demand' in which Dr. John Erskine was caught up.

The Early Period

Christianity begins to appear in Scotland as the Roman occupation of Britain comes to an end. The fifth and sixth centuries were a great era of evangelism with names like Patrick, Ninian and Kentigern and Columba to the fore. There is, however, not much evidence of written sermons attributed to these men or their contemporaries. The chroniclers of the period seem more preoccupied with the miracles associated with them. For instance Adomnan's *Life of Columba* contains no examples of his preaching.

It is with Ninian that the story of Scottish Christianity begins to take shape. Duke writes:

The first authentic figure in the story of Christianity in North Britain is St Ninian: when we come to St. Ninian, we emerge at last out of the twilight of legend and the shadowy region of conjecture into the clear light of history.²

¹ McIntosh, *Church And Theology In Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800*, p.13.

² Duke, John A. *History of the Church Of Scotland To The Reformation*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1937, p.5.

It is thought Ninian was born of royal Christian parents in Galloway in the last quarter of the fourth century AD. His education was completed in Rome and it is possible that he was made a Bishop before his return to Scotland as a missionary around 397. There is some dispute as to whether he established a Christian community at Whithorn or if he built upon an already existing community. The worship, however, would almost certainly be 'Roman'. Maxwell describes Roman worship as 'extremely simple and compact, and terse and restrained in its expression and ceremonial'.³ He gives some idea of the Roman liturgy at this time and notes that at a particular point the Scriptures would be read and a sermon preached. Nothing is said about the significance of the reading and preaching of the Scriptures in the Roman tradition but in a footnote Maxwell says: 'It is to be noted that the Church has always regarded the reading of the Holy Scriptures (and especially the gospel) as a proclamation from God the Most High...'⁴

Bray acknowledges that there is very little documentary evidence of preaching styles from the early Church in Scotland but points to 'the broader literary evidence' as demonstrating the importance of sermons in a Church which in the Celtic period was 'vigorously evangelistic and intellectual'.⁵ He points to 'Old Irish' or Gaelic glosses appearing on 'scriptural passages' which contain many allusions to preaching: 'Approaches vary from brief elucidation of Scripture (with some application) to fully fledged homilies addressing particular themes, such as thankfulness to God for all his blessings.'⁶

The style is marked by its simplicity and directness although there are some indications of influence from secular poems and prose tales. This would be the kind of preaching that was common on Iona although Bray sees the Columba of Adomnan as more of a prophet than a 'homilete' by which he means perhaps that there is little evidence of Columba the liturgical preacher.

The Medieval Period

Lawlor⁷ writes that the sacramental role of parish clergy in the later medieval period had a tendency to place the preaching ministry on the margins of Church life. There is not much evidence of a developed concern for preaching for the period before the sixteenth century. Bishops would preach on important occasions but the main work of preaching

³ Maxwell, William D. *A History of Worship In The Church Of Scotland*, London, Oxford University Press, 1955, p.3.

⁴ Ibid., p.5.

⁵ Bray, D.A. 'Preaching Themes and Styles: Celtic and Early Medieval', *DSCHT*, p. 667.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lawlor, J.M. 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Later Medieval', *DSCHT*, p.667.

was undertaken by the Dominican, Franciscan and Carmelite orders. They were employed as diocesan preachers but often only preached once a year in any one place. According to Bray, the preaching would be heavily influenced by Latin literary culture 'drawing heavily on early Church writings for its themes and styles'.⁸

Maxwell's description of a Scottish medieval mass according to the Sarum rite, which became the predominant use in the eleventh century, has no place for a sermon although he notes that 'the Holy Scriptures are woven into its very fabric in psalmody, readings and prayers, and the propers for the day are especially rich in Scriptural reference and interpretation.'⁹ Sermons were seldom preached by parish clergy, once a year if at all.

The people were rarely exposed to preaching unless their parish was the focus of a mission from one of the orders of monks. Although the religious orders virtually dominated preaching in Scotland until the Reformation very little can be said about the style, content or impact. By deduction, from examples in England and the continent, however, it is possible to say that the preaching of the friars tended to be moralistic, based to a large extent on 'exempla' which were short moralizing stories derived from the lives of the saints. The faithful were called to moral self-improvement, to imitate Christ and the saints. It also held a strong emotional appeal. By dwelling at length on the Passion, they aimed to encourage the committed and to convert the impenitent.¹⁰

The Reformation

The Council of Trent (1545-63) attempted to rectify the general neglect of preaching in the parish churches by ordering the inclusion of a general instruction on the Epistle and the Gospel during the liturgy. There was a largely positive response to this in Scotland and a benefice was established to support a preacher in every diocese and monastery to give theological and spiritual instruction. As a result of these and other measures to revive preaching, the homily became more integrated into the liturgy. From the printed evidence available it would seem that in content the homily tended to be preoccupied with doctrines under attack such as the mass, the sacraments and good works.

There are, however, very few examples of Scottish preaching prior to and during the Reformation. Bardgett notes: 'Any description of Scottish preaching of the Reformation era must be impressionistic, because very few actual sermons have come down to us.'¹¹ No one should be in any doubt, however, as to the importance of preaching at this time.

⁸ Bray, 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Celtic And Early Medieval', *DSCHT*, p.667.

⁹ Maxwell, *A History of Worship In The Church Of Scotland*, p.37.

¹⁰ Galbraith, James. 'The Middle Ages', *Studies In The History Of Worship In Scotland*, ed. Duncan Forrester and Douglas Murray, Edinburgh, T&T Clark Ltd., 1984, 1996, p.30.

¹¹ Bardgett, F.D. 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Reformation', *DSCHT*, p.668.

Blaikie writes:

During the long period of more than three centuries, from the extinction of the Culdee Church¹² to the Reformation, we find scarcely a trace of Christian preaching in Scotland worthy of the name.¹³

Preaching was mainly confined to the friars as noted above and Knox's *History Of The Reformation Of Religion In Scotland* makes mention of some men who were possessed of a reforming zeal with regard to morals and doctrine. In the main, though, the picture in Scotland is bleak. Blaikie notes:

In other countries where the Church of Rome ruled, preaching had not sunk to such a low ebb. In England and in France the pulpit had not been so neglected as it had been in Scotland.¹⁴

The Catechism of John Hamilton, Archbishop of St Andrews, published in 1552, was an attempt to improve matters. This was a response to the ideas of the Reformers which were beginning to find a foothold in Scotland. It sought to provide for the people a diet of sound religious instruction and is remarkable in that it was prepared in the Scottish dialect. This was to ensure maximum impact and clergy were instructed to read it consecutively for half an hour every Sunday and holiday. The problem for the Church was the lack of literacy amongst its secular clergy whose reading of the Catechism did not commend it to the people.

Notable preachers of this time were Patrick Hamilton (1504-1528) and George Wishart (c.1513-1546). Hamilton was influenced by Erasmus in Paris, Luther in Wittenberg and Tyndale at Marburg. His treatise *Patrick's Places* was influential in the development of Reformed thought in Scotland, and Knox and Spottiswood testify to the great following his preaching gathered.¹⁵

Wishart studied in Switzerland and in Geneva under Calvin with whom he learned the value of expository preaching. According to Knox, he preached a series of expository sermons on the Epistle to the Romans in Dundee circa. 1544.¹⁶

John Knox had a close connection with Wishart and it is thought that it was from him that Knox first learned the value of consecutive exposition of a book of Scripture in the pulpit.

¹² '...communities of clergy attested at several places in Scotland during the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, but of somewhat uncertain origin and character.' I.B.Cowan, *DSCHT*, p.226.

¹³ Blaikie, William G. *The Preachers Of Scotland From The Sixth To The Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1888, p.36.

¹⁴ Blaikie, *Ibid.*, p.43.

¹⁵ Blaikie, *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹⁶ Knox, John. *The History Of The Reformation of Religion in Scotland*, ed. Cuthbert Lennox, London, Andrew Melrose, 1905, p.52.

He would receive further encouragement in this method from Calvin. Blaikie writes:

We find here probably the genesis of that method of biblical exposition or lecturing which has always been one of the characteristic features of the Scottish pulpit, and which has proved the means of imparting to our countrymen a knowledge of their Bibles probably unsurpassed in any other people.¹⁷

For all his reputation as a preacher we only possess one sermon of Knox's which was published because in its original delivery it had been misrepresented. In his *History* Knox refers to some of his sermons which were delivered on specific public occasions but his preaching in St Andrews towards the end of his life in 1571-72 was probably more typical of his regular style. He preached weekly from a single chosen text - Daniel 9 - from which he sought to apply prophecy regarding God's judgement on Israel to the Scotland of his day.

According to his contemporaries, it was in his application of a text that Knox's particular preaching gift lay. Knox never regarded it as sufficient to expound the general meaning of Scripture. True preaching was when the Word was given particular application. As a student in St Andrew's, James Melville (1556-1614) heard Knox preach these last sermons when he was physically very weak. He wrote in his Diary:

In the opening up of his text he was moderate the space of an half hour; but when he entered to application, he made me so to grow and tremble, that I could not hold a pen to write.¹⁸

Another preacher worthy of mention in this era is John Erskine of Dun (1509 -90). He was less politically radical than Knox in his preaching but Bardgett's description of his few surviving sermons suggest that he was similar in his method:

a man concerned to preach from the text of the Gospels: first explaining his passage, then expounding its spiritual challenge to his hearers.¹⁹

Commenting in general upon Scottish preaching Bardgett says:

Whether directed to a particular political situation or not, Scottish Protestant preaching took as its sole authority the teaching of the Bible. Above all, as the Scots Confession states, a 'true Kirk' was marked by 'trew preaching' from 'the written Worde of God.'²⁰

For the Reformers the preaching was always the heart of a diet of worship to the extent that that services were sometimes described as 'the time of sermon' or 'of prayers and

¹⁷ Blaikie, *The Preachers Of Scotland From The Sixth To The Nineteenth Century*, p.56.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.64.

¹⁹ Bardgett, F.D. 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Reformation', *DSCHT*, p.668.

²⁰ Ibid.

preaching'.²¹ Preaching the Word was the supreme priority of the minister and hearing the Word was the source of spiritual life for the people of God. It was vital, then, that adequate provision be made for preaching in every parish in the land. This was difficult due to the extreme shortage of ministers and took many years to achieve. For many parishes, in the years after 1560, preaching was at most monthly. The gaps were filled by Readers whose main resource was the *Book of Homilies* of the Church of England.

The Covenanting Period

This was a turbulent period in Scottish History when Presbyterian and Episcopalian alike experienced persecution and encapsulates a defining time for Presbyterianism in Scotland. The National Covenant 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant 1643 have long remained in Scottish Presbyterian consciousness as crucial commitments to the Reformed faith, particularly with regard to the spiritual independence of the Church and the sole headship of Christ within it.

Lachman describes the typical seventeenth century sermon as using for a text 'something between a portion of a verse and, at most, several verses.'²² This was divided into points of doctrine, uses and application and made for a complicated structure. But the advantage was that it was easier to remember. Note-taking was also easier and it is by this that much of the more accomplished preaching of the time was preserved. Those who deviated from this practice and began to preach without heads of doctrine were said to be 'skimming the text'.

Lachman quotes from a General Assembly Commission which he believes summarises the ideal of preaching in the period. According to this, preaching is setting forth 'the excellency of Christ in His person, offices and the unsearchable riches of His grace...' This was to be the main theme of the preaching but included

other things with a relation to Christ and urging all by the authority of God's commands, the love of Christ and the grace of the Gospel, directing people to Jesus Christ that they might receive from Him the grace to enable them to comply.²³

Sermons were long, sometimes as much as 3 hours although 1 hour was more typical.²⁴ Ministers usually preached from an 'ordinary'. This was a passage of Scripture or an entire book which would form the basis of the preaching from Sunday to Sunday

²¹ Bardgett, F.D. 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Reformation', p.668.

²² Lachman, D.C. 'Preaching: Themes and Styles: Seventeenth Century', *DSCHT*, p.669.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Henderson, G.D. *Religious Life In Seventeenth Century Scotland*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1937, p.193.

sometimes lasting a year. Presbytery visitations would often enquire regarding the ordinary. If there was none the minister could be subject to rebuke.²⁵ John Willcock's account of the ministry of Rev John Mill (1712-1805) In *A Shetland Minister Of The Eighteenth Century* shows that this practice continued well into the eighteenth century:

Mr Mill was in the habit , as the Session minutes indicate, of preaching for lengthened periods on the same text, Sunday after Sunday. Thus in one year he began on April 11th to preach from John V: 1-27 and the Session minutes testify that he continued to deliver sermons on that passage until October 10th, when he "finished the subject". On November 14th of the same year he took up Haggai 11:7, and it was only on the 15th of the following May that he was able to record that he had "finished" that subject also.²⁶

It was around the mid-seventeenth century that the practice of 'lecturing' began to take hold in the Church of Scotland. This came from a Puritan conviction that the Scriptures should not be read at public worship, unless they were expounded as they were read. McMillan notes that this practice was widespread in Scotland.²⁷ In 1643, the congregation of the Scots Kirk in Rotterdam objected to their Minister adding exposition to the portion of Scripture read. In response, the Minister quoted from a letter which he had received from the Scots Ministers in London who were Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly of Divines to the effect that exposition was not only lawful 'but since the Reformation has always been practised in some of the kirks in Scotland.'²⁸

McMillan also cites a letter by Robert Baillie (1599 -1662) Professor of Divinity and Principal of the University of Glasgow, which mentions that in London he found that the Presbyterian Ministers usually read four chapters and expounded some of them before preaching.²⁹ McMillan writes further: 'The Directory allowed expounding and from this permission there arose the 'Lecture' which was for so long a prominent feature of our Scottish service.'³⁰ Here he is referring to the *Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God 1643*. In the section headed 'Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures', the Directory says:

When the Minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended; and regard is always to be had unto the time, that neither preaching, nor other ordinances be straitened, or rendered tedious. Which rule is to be observed in all other publick performances.³¹

²⁵ Henderson, G.D. *Religious Life In Seventeenth Century Scotland*, , p.196.

²⁶ Willcock, John. *A Shetland Minister Of The Eighteenth Century*, Kirkwall, T&J Manson, 1897.

²⁷ McMillan, William. *The Worship Of The Scottish Reformed Church, 1550-1638*, London, James Clarke & Company, 1931, p.131.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *The Westminster Directory*, ed. Thomas Leishman, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1901, pp.18-19.

This could actually be interpreted as placing restraint on lecturing but there is no doubt that the *Directory* acknowledges two different approaches to the reading and preaching of the Scriptures: *lectio continua* as practised by the Continental Reformers and the analytical preaching of the medieval preaching orders which tended to preach on a text dividing it and applying it to different doctrinal or moral questions. Whether it was a conscious decision or not, the Westminster Divines allowed for both. The result was what Old calls 'the double sermon.'³² Early in a service there would be the reading of a Scripture passage with exposition and at the end a sermon based on a text and addressing some point of moral or theological interest. Thus two traditions of preaching were united in one service.

It was inevitable that at such a turbulent time in the Church and the State there would be a certain amount of political and social comment. One John Livingstone (1603 -72) declared that he never liked to hear of a man whose preaching dealt chiefly with public business, but he admitted there were times 'wherein a man's silence may bring a curse on his head.'³³ However, 'public business' did not seem to dominate the preaching. Even the sermons preached on the hills and moors by the Presbyterian field preachers in the time of persecution paid little attention to the evils of the time and remained 'richly Christocentric, not only fostering the Covenanter's desire to see King Jesus head of his Church, but exhibiting a warm personal love for him and union, by faith, with him.'³⁴

Moderates and Evangelicals

Drummond and Bulloch's *The Scottish Church 1688-1843* is subtitled: *The Age of the Moderates*.³⁵ This refers to a party within the Church of Scotland which dominated the General Assembly throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century and which was influential in shaping policy in a number of controversial issues, including patronage and foreign mission. The origin of the term 'Moderate' is disputed but Sefton refers to the belief emerging from modern scholarship that it should only be applied to that party of churchmen who gathered around the leadership of William Robertson in the years after 1750.³⁶

This may well be the case with regard to the 'Moderates' as a recognisable party within

³² Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Reading And Preaching Of The Scriptures In The History Of The Christian Church: Volume 5: Moderatism, Pietism And Awakening*, Michigan, Eerdmans, 2004, p.29.

³³ Henderson, *Religious Life In Seventeenth Century Scotland*, p.206.

³⁴ Lachman, D.C. 'Preaching: Themes And Styles: Seventeenth Century', *DSCHT*, p.669.

³⁵ Drummond, Andrew L. and Bulloch, James. *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press, 1973.

³⁶ Sefton, Henry. 'Moderates', *DSCHT*, p.596.

the Church but the characteristics of 'Moderatism' are discernible from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The main characteristics of Moderates would seem to be that they so valued the ecclesiastical settlement of 1690 that they were prepared to endure the presentation of ministers to parishes by patrons and the necessity of subscribing to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Their opponents regarded patronage as an intolerable infringement of the rights of the Church and many seceded in 1733, 1761 and 1843. Others remained within the Church to fight the issue. These were known as 'Evangelicals' or the 'Popular Party' since there was a widely accepted belief that the people in the parishes were in the main opposed to patronage.

The difference between Moderate and Evangelical preaching seems to have been one of degree rather than kind. According to McIntosh, much preaching in the middle to late eighteenth century cannot be described as clearly Moderate or Evangelical.³⁷ Indeed, most preachers of the time could be accurately described as 'orthodox Calvinists' who would not deviate from the core beliefs of Christianity as represented in the historic creeds of the Church and the Confessions of Faith of the Reformed Churches. Blaikie, although obviously sympathetic to the Evangelicals, concedes: 'In some cases, it would be difficult to draw the line between preachers of the Moderate and preachers of the Evangelical parties.'³⁸

In his portrait of Alexander Gerard (1728-1795), Henderson describes him as 'a typical Moderate, preaching virtue and carefully avoiding dogma, emphasis upon which he regarded as a cause of the prevailing scepticism'.³⁹ Speaking of the Moderate in general Henderson says that in comparison to the Evangelical he 'was broader minded and broader hearted, but his tendency was towards rationalism, formalism and mere morality...'⁴⁰ Moreover 'Moderates as a rule were more interested in culture than in theological controversy, and in the pulpit dealt largely with manners and morals, assuming a complacent scholastic attitude towards Calvinism.'⁴¹

Henderson says that while outwardly services conducted by Moderates and Evangelicals would be the same, the 'atmosphere' would be different. The Moderate service would be more concerned with 'order and decency, taste and reticence' while the

³⁷ McIntosh, J.R. 'Preaching: Themes and Styles: Moderates and Evangelicals', *DSCHT*, p.670.

³⁸ Blaikie, *The Preachers Of Scotland From The Sixth To The Nineteenth Century*, p.219.

³⁹ Henderson, G.D. 'A Typical Moderate' in *The Burning Bush*, Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press, 1957, p.167.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.141.

Evangelical would be notable for 'fervour, unction, pathos, personal directness.'⁴² It is possibly with this in mind that Blaikie describes Moderate preaching as 'without life or power' in comparison to that of the Evangelicals.⁴³

These observations arise from the different emphasis in Evangelical preaching which is typified by Dr John Erskine. McIntosh argues that one of the great theological contributions of Erskine to the latter part of the eighteenth century was to insist that the majority of those professing Christianity in Scotland had no experience of 'saving faith'.⁴⁴ They had not been touched in the depths of their being by the love of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel and had therefore not responded to Him with true faith. Thus it was that from this time it became more common for Evangelical ministers to preach for conversion and to encourage the pursuit of holiness in contrast to the Moderate emphasis on virtuous living.

The Evangelicals, however, were not untouched by the Moderates' regard for style and structure in preaching. Although Erskine's sermons never approached the ornamented style of the Edinburgh *literati*, men like Hugh Blair and Alexander Carlyle, Blaikie can say they 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.'⁴⁵ He makes a revealing comparison between Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712) at the beginning of the eighteenth century and Erskine at the end:

there is an identity as to the message delivered, but a notable change in its dress. Halyburton carrying into the eighteenth century much of the ruggedness of the seventeenth, while Erskine shows the impress of a more cultured age.⁴⁶

It is to Dr Erskine, who embodies a degree of transition, that we now turn as we seek to unravel his theology and practice of preaching.

⁴² Henderson, G.D., 'A Typical Moderate', p.141.

⁴³ Blaikie, *The Preachers Of Scotland From The Sixth To The Nineteenth Century*, p.219.

⁴⁴ McIntosh, John R. *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740 - 1800*, East Lothian, Tuckwell Press, 1998, pp.166-175.

⁴⁵ Blaikie, *The Preachers Of Scotland From The Sixth To The Nineteenth Century*, pp.237-8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.247.

Chapter 4: The Preacher.

In Erskine's view the role of the preacher within the Christian community is crucial to the birth of faith and its subsequent nurture. It is a role not to be undertaken lightly and demands a high quality of life spiritually and morally along with a strong commitment not only to preaching but to all the tasks of ministry. This view emerges from both volumes of his published sermons *Discourses Preached On Several Occasions*.

The Place of Preaching in the Spiritual Lives of Believers.

This is made plain in Part I of 'Motives For Hearing Sermons'.¹ Erskine responds to the question, why are sermons needed? He doubts whether people on their own with the Scriptures fully understand what they are reading. The Biblical model seems to be that in relation to the Scriptures people need a teacher. The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8: 26-40 is cited as an example of someone who needed help to understand the Scriptures. Erskine argues: 'For wise reasons the Bible was not written in systematic form.'² The teaching on any one doctrine or subject is scattered throughout the whole Bible and needs to be gathered within a coherent structure. Much important teaching could be overlooked unless some people are appointed whose chief employment is to this end. For Erskine the best means of attaining important religious knowledge is through preaching or as he expresses it:

the discourses of those who, have not only made it their chief business to study the sacred oracles, and the language, sentiments and manners of those to whom they were first delivered, but who, by cultivating their rational powers, have acquired a facility of forming distinct conceptions of things and of expressing those conceptions with plainness and propriety.³

The question then arises if, in the end, the preached Word is more effective than the believer's personal reading of the written Word? Erskine would often seem to be saying this although he shies away from making it an absolute principle. He goes on in the same sermon to say:

doubtless the sounding of God's message into the ears of men with becoming solemnity vehemence and concern, has something in it more piercing and efficacious, than the

¹ Erskine, John. *Discourses Preached On Several Occasions*, Edinburgh, W. Creech and A . Constable, 1801, pp.141-169.

² Ibid., p.146.

³ Ibid.

mere solitary reading of the Bible often has.⁴

The 'often has' leaves the possibility that sometimes the 'solitary reading of the Bible' can be as effective as the preached Word. On balance, however, it would be fair to say that Erskine's inclination is towards the preached Word and is an indication of the essential role he sees for the preacher in the Christian community.

This is consistent with the thought of the Reformers who had an aversion to people reading the Bible in their own way. To show this Hazlett cites John Knox's 1556 pamphlet, *A most wholesome counsel, how to behave ourselves...touching the daily exercise of Gods most holy and sacred worde...* which offers guidelines on how the Bible should be used and on principles and methods of scriptural interpretation. Knox argues against an approach to the Bible which involves 'individualism, subjectivism, captiousness and selectivity' and commends 'family, corporate, and communal reading and exposition, in order to arrive at a common mind in accordance with the Spirit.'⁵ It should always be within the Church, the Body of Christ, that the Bible should be interpreted. A departure from this principle could easily result, in Hazlett's words, in 'an implosion of authority and an explosion of doctrines and errors jeopardizing salvation.'⁶

The Preacher's Personal Life.

Erskine frequently stresses the highest standards of spirituality, morality and commitment in the life of the preacher. In 'The Qualifications Necessary For Teachers Of Christianity',⁷ Erskine presents what is essentially a portrait of a Christian preacher. This follows the ancient tradition in homiletics beginning with Augustine of emphasising the preacher's personal devotion to Christ, his concern for the salvation of souls and his willingness to work at his calling. All of this is regarded as essential if a man is to have an effective preaching ministry. Erskine's text in this sermon is James 3:1: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.'⁸

The sermon was preached before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, at Glasgow, on October 2nd 1750. Since at the end of the sermon Erskine directly addresses students for the ministry, it may be that their reception was one of the main items of business on that day.

⁴ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.149.

⁵ Hazlett, W. Ian P. *The Reformation In Britain And Ireland*, London, T&T Clark, 2003, p.139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, pp. 1 - 44.

⁸ All quotations from the Bible in this chapter and following will be from the Authorized Version.

The main thrust of the sermon is the quality of a preacher's life, particularly focussing on his personal relationship with Christ and his commitment to the task of preaching. Drawing from his text, Erskine makes it quite clear that these are matters of some gravity. Ministers will come under judgement if they fail in their calling and the whole Church will be subject to judgement if she has been negligent in the choice and appointment of ministers. The latter was of particular importance at a time when the settlement of a minister in a parish was often taken out of the hands of the congregation and made the responsibility of patrons. Thus in his conclusion to the sermon he addresses the students for the ministry with these words:

You behold with indignation the empiric⁹, who will venture to hazard the health and lives of men for a little paltry gain. If such deserve to be counted murderers of the body, shall not the loss of souls be laid to thy charge, if thou shalt undertake the care of them while unqualified for it, and if, through thy negligence or unskillfulness, they shall eternally perish?¹⁰

Erskine returns to this theme in a sermon entitled, 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence'¹¹ which is based on the text: 'Giving no offence in any thing that the ministry be not blamed...' (2 Corinthians 6:3) Here, he underlines the importance of ministers never putting a stumbling block in the way of belief because of their life-style or the manner in which they exercise their ministry. They have a duty of giving no offence. Having said that, Erskine recognises that it is an impossible task because people are often too ready to take offence. For example:

Not visiting the sick when we were altogether ignorant of the sickness; visiting one person oftener than another; preaching a little longer than usual, or a little shorter...repeating the same sermon in different pulpits...¹²

Erskine also recognises that human nature being what it is even truth and holiness can give offence. 'But if men take umbrage at us for doing our duty, it becomes us to offend man rather than God.' The point is that ministers should never give anyone 'just cause of offence, by doing anything unbecoming our professions as Christians, or of our office as ministers of Christ.'¹³

Erskine has five 'heads' in *The Qualifications Necessary For Teachers Of Christianity*,¹⁴ each one a quality which he believes should be present in the preacher if he is to avoid jeopardizing the souls of his people and drawing the judgement of God. This provides a

⁹ 'a quack', *The Chambers Dictionary*, 2003, p.488.

¹⁰ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.46-82.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.1-45.

convenient framework for us to explore in detail his view of the essential qualities of a Christian preacher, a subject he deals with frequently in his published sermons. The five 'heads' are these:

personal religion; soundness in the faith; a good genius, improved by a complete measure of true learning; prudence and discretion; and a due mixture of a studious disposition, and of an active spirit. ¹⁵

'personal religion'.

Erskine concedes that God can use anyone in the cause of His Kingdom but generally 'wicked ministers' are unfruitful. 'Their matter is holy, their work is holy; and therefore it becomes them to be holy also.' ¹⁶ He returns to this theme in a later sermon, 'Difficulties Of The Pastoral Office' ¹⁷ in which he refers to Titus 2: 7-8 which emphasises the highest standards of belief and conduct. He comments, 'A holy, exemplary behaviour, gives a force and energy to sermons, which learning, genius and eloquence, could never have procured them.' ¹⁸ A minister is someone who has felt the power of the Gospel in his own heart, who has responded in faith to Jesus Christ and therefore preaches the Gospel to others.

It is because of his personal devotion that he will not be diverted from his task and he resists the temptation to be selective in what he preaches from the Word of God. His is a total commitment to preach 'the whole counsel of God' whether it is welcome or not: 'The faithful minister...will rather offend man by his boldness, than offend God by conniving at sin.' ¹⁹

This commitment to the task will not be sustained without prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. Speaking of his spiritual life, Erskine says of the minister: 'He is a favourite at the court of heaven.' ²⁰ In other words, he must be a man of prayer, not least in relation to his preaching. The sermon entitled: 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence' ²¹ contains charges given to a minister in which Erskine emphasises the role of prayer in preparing for the pulpit.

Seek out and set in order acceptable words; and when about to prepare for the pulpit, beg

¹⁵ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.118-140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46 - 82.

the direction of the Spirit in choosing a subject, his assistance in composing and delivering your sermon, and his blessing to render it effectual. Arrows thus fetched from Heaven, bid fairest to reach the cases of your hearers, and to pierce their hearts. ²²

In the charges given to Rev David Black on his admission as minister of Lady Yester's Kirk which are appended to the Discourse: 'The Blessing Of Christian Teachers',²³ Erskine says:

Let earnest prayers for the down-pouring of the Spirit on your hearers, precede and follow your sermons. If the rain of divine influence is restrained, though you could preach with the zeal of a Paul, or the eloquence of an Apollos, none of the wicked would understand and return and live. ²⁴

Erskine also emphasises the importance of meditation on the Scriptures for the minister's spirituality. If he is to stay in God's will, know the influence of the Spirit and be preserved from error, the Scriptures must be frequently read. This will also benefit the people over whose souls he has the care. A minister's 'inward piety' can help others in their spiritual struggles.

This 'inward piety' cannot be taken for granted. Erskine raises the possibility that some ministers have not responded in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ and are, in effect, unconverted. This is not merely a problem for themselves, it is ruinous to their people. Speaking of the preaching of such men he says: 'their words not coming from the heart are not likely to reach it.' ²⁵ It is only a truly converted minister who will have a concern for the souls of his people and will therefore strive to be effective in communicating the Gospel:

Unless ones gifts are uncommonly mean, a warm concern for souls will animate and influence his language, dictate to him the most moving and pathetic addresses and, on some occasions at least, inspire him with a divine, and almost irresistible eloquence, which, with amazing force, will pierce the conscience, ravish the affections, and strike conviction into the most obdurate offender. ²⁶

A man's spirituality, his personal relationship to Christ through prayer and the Word, must be the prior concern if he is to be a faithful and effective preacher. Erskine goes as far as to say: '...if the seeds of godliness are not sown in the heart ere we undertake the pastoral office, probably they will never be sown there.' ²⁷ Indeed, the work of the preacher could well result in such a man becoming 'hardened in impenitence.'²⁸ If he

²² Erskine, *Discourses*, p.78.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.83-117.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

enters the ministry with the habit of resisting the Gospel, the likelihood is that he will continue to the detriment of his soul.

'soundness in the faith'

Orthodoxy or 'soundness in the faith' is a major concern for Erskine. In raising this he believes he is reflecting a concern of the Apostle Paul. He refers to the teaching of Paul in the Timothy letters, the Letter to Titus and also the Letter of Jude with their emphasis on the importance of right belief and asks: 'Does not this import, that the common salvation cannot be secured, if fundamental articles of faith are renounced?'²⁹ How is faith in Christ possible when people do not know the truth of who He is? How is Christian living possible if there is no knowledge of the true will of God? Says Erskine: 'Truth and general utility necessarily coincide.'³⁰ It is therefore essential for the preacher to be free from error although Erskine concedes: '...it can scarcely be expected that in the present state of human nature, such an one should be found...'³¹

It is interesting to note here that because of the fallen state of human nature Erskine does not believe that complete purity of doctrine is possible. This would seem to run counter to a strong strain of thought within the Scottish Presbyterianism of the eighteenth century and is consistent with Erskine's general scepticism with regard to 'perfectionism' which holds fast to the belief that human perfection is attainable in this life. Nevertheless, despite this concession, Erskine still believes that doctrinal purity is something to which the preacher must aspire. It is only by preaching sound doctrine that he has any right to expect positive results ensuing.

This is underlined in 'The Blessing Of Christian Teachers'.³² Erskine cites one of those blessings as being that teachers 'spread and defend the doctrines of religion'³³ and in doing so they arouse 'just sentiments of divine things'.³⁴ In other words, when right doctrine is preached it has a positive effect amongst those who listen:

If thou believest the religion of Jesus, thou canst not esteem it a small matter, that, in sacred assemblies, the wavering are confirmed, doubts resolved, and the infidel is convinced; that Jesus was no imposter, and no enthusiast, but truly what he claimed to be, the Son of God and the Saviour of men.³⁵

²⁹ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 83-117.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

It is not just in declaring false doctrine that preachers are unfaithful but also in neglecting to declare essential doctrine. Erskine speaks of preachers who appeal to people's need to be entertained or to their aesthetic sense but neglect essential truths. They cannot expect God to bless their efforts by reforming the lives of their people:

What reformation may therefore be expected when preachers provoke not the Spirit to withhold his blessing from their useful moral instructions, by shunning to declare the whole counsel of God, and keeping back from their hearers, truths the most profitable and necessary. ³⁶

From an Evangelical point of view this was one of the great faults of the preaching of the Moderates. In a letter to Bishop Warburton in 1744, Erskine made reference to 'paganized Christian divines' ³⁷ who Moncreiff Wellwood describes as 'preachers who affected to use the style and tone of the ancient philosophers more than the language of Christ or his apostles.' ³⁸

'a good genius, improved by a complete measure of true learning.'

Here Erskine makes clear his commitment to an educated ministry which is in line with traditional Reformed thought. A man may have a close personal relationship with his God, he may be completely orthodox in his beliefs but Erskine is in no doubt that if he aspires to be a minister he must be educated. He argues that physicians, advocates and judges need to be properly qualified and so do ministers:

Uncommon talents are necessary to explain obscure passages of Scripture, to resolve intricate cases of conscience, and to defend the truth against gainsayers; services to which ministers have frequent calls. ³⁹

A man is needed who has 'gifts as well as grace' and in particular 'has acquired a facility of imparting his ideas to others'.⁴⁰ In Erskine's view 'the best natural powers will need to be well cultivated by a liberal education.'⁴¹ This would include the study of Scripture in the original languages, natural and moral philosophy, history, antiquity, classical authors, logic, rhetoric and 'criticism'.

This view of a 'learned ministry' is held against those who deem such study to be

³⁶ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.99.

³⁷ Wellwood, *Account of The Life And Writings Of John Erskine, D.D.*, p.55

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.59.

³⁹ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

unnecessary for faithful ministry. Erskine sees dire consequences in this:

if the hedge of a learned ministry were once removed from these lands, as I am afraid some wish it to be; what could we expect, but that ignorance and infidelity, error and heresy, superstition and enthusiasm, should quickly overspread them...We cannot therefore entertain too low and despicable an opinion of such ignorant presumers, as set up for teachers of Christianity, and pretend to show unto others the way of salvation, while their own ideas of it are so dark and confused, that they have need to be taught which are the first principles of the oracles of God.⁴²

Erskine is clear that great responsibility attaches to those who would interpret the Scriptures for others. On their interpretation hangs the reputation and integrity of the whole Church. He concedes that parts of Scripture are difficult to translate from the original languages and need to be carefully handled if they are not to be misunderstood and used to undermine the faith:

There are some scriptures, from which, if they stood in the original as they do in our translation, almost unanswerable objections might be drawn against our holy faith.⁴³

It will always be necessary for the 'spiritual instructor' to be 'mighty in the scriptures'. If he is to teach the word to others he must know it himself and that means study and understanding. In 'Difficulties Of The Pastoral Office',⁴⁴ Erskine makes the point that the kind of direct inspiration once enjoyed by the prophets and the apostles has now ceased along with 'miraculous gifts' and therefore if a minister is concerned with revealing the Word of God 'much time must be spent in reading and meditation' if he is to get in touch with that Word in order to deliver it to others.⁴⁵

This is consistent with the view of Calvin that the offices of Apostle, Prophet and Evangelist recognised in the New Testament were not instituted to be 'perpetual' but were only necessary in the formation of churches where none had previously existed. Calvin refers to these offices as 'extraordinary', the 'ordinary' offices being Pastor and Teacher 'with whom the Church can never dispense.'⁴⁶

'prudence and discretion'

The emphasis on study should not result in the minister becoming divorced from the experience of the people to whom he will preach. To this end, Erskine recommends that

⁴² Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.24-25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 118 - 140.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁴⁶ Calvin, John. *Institutes Of The Christian Religion Volumes I and II*, trans. Henry Beveridge, London, James Clarke & Co., 1957, Volume II, IV, 3, 4, p.319.

the minister should show 'prudence and discretion'⁴⁷ in the exercise of his duties. By this Erskine would seem to mean that the minister must be sensitive to the spiritual needs and the intellectual capacities of his people. He says: 'Ministers have need to know men as well as books' and as a consequence sermons should be composed 'as that the meanest may understand, and the most judicious have no cause to despise them.'⁴⁸

As part of charges given to a minister at his ordination Erskine says: 'Ministers would labour with better success, if they lived more in the hearts of their people.'⁴⁹ The sermon given before the charges on this occasion was entitled: 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence'⁵⁰ and was based on the text: 'Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.' (2 Corinthians 6:3) Here Erskine lists five reasons why ministers may give offence among which is 'the neglect or undue performance of the more private duties of our calling.'⁵¹ By this, he means visiting the sick and bereaved as well as the more formal business of catechizing.

Preaching on 'Difficulties Of The Pastoral Office', he commends visitation to the people. Not the formal kind of visitation which would perhaps be associated with catechizing but the kind of visitation which would result in the opening up of people's lives to the minister so that spiritual problems might be addressed. This could only result in preaching becoming more effective: 'Sermons, like arrows shot at a venture, seldom hit the mark, when we know not the character of our hearers...'⁵²

'a due mixture of a studious disposition, and of an active spirit.'

It is his concern for balance in the lives of ministers which leads Erskine to call finally for ministers to combine 'a studious disposition' and 'an active spirit'.⁵³ He must readily engage in the practical work of ministry: catechising, visiting, personal instruction, but preparation must never be neglected. The minister must never rely on the inspiration of the moment but must always carefully prepare. Erskine's example in this regard is Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Adopting the tradition of referring to Quoholeth, Solomon's nom-de-plume, as 'the preacher', Erskine says of Solomon:

(He) took pains to arrange his thoughts in a proper method, and to express them in

⁴⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.30.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

agreeable language...so that his sermons were the fruit of labour and study, as well as inspiration.⁵⁴

Erskine concedes that there are individuals who may well be so gifted that they can preach 'warmly and accurately too' without having to write out their sermons in full but they will always have to be prepared. He is critical of 'extemporary performances'. It is his view that 'though for a little they may please some, (they) seldom do credit to God's ordinances, or produce any lasting effects on the hearers.'⁵⁵ He therefore commends meditation and reading:

Meditation... and reading are necessary branches of a minister's duty; and consequently, those must be unfit for pastoral office, who are of an unfixed, sauntering disposition, who have no relish for study, know not what it is to meditate, and are never pleased but when with company or abroad.⁵⁶

'The Qualifications' is an important first step as we seek to understand Erskine's theology and practise of preaching. It emphasises the responsibility of preaching and how negligent and half-hearted work can damage the flock of the Good Shepherd and bring a preacher under the judgement of God. The preacher, therefore, has to have a regard for his own soul and be sure that he has a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Erskine says: 'God does not call those to feed the sheep of Christ who have no love for the Shepherd.'⁵⁷

There is also a great responsibility falling to the whole Church to ensure that only those who are so called are commissioned to preach the Gospel and given the care of God's people.

Prayer and meditation on the Scriptures are necessary to the spirituality of the preacher and the integrity of his preaching. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he must get in touch with the truth contained in the 'sacred writings' so that this can be delivered to God's people. Failure to do this will result in superstition and error taking hold.

The preacher, then, is a spiritual man engaged in a spiritual task but he must also be committed to hard work in relevant areas of study. Scripture is not always easy to understand or to teach. Erskine speaks of 'obscure passages of Scripture' which need to be carefully handled and others that might be used to raise 'unanswerable objections' against the faith. Appropriate training along with application are needed to deal with this.

⁵⁴ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.37.

Despite this emphasis on the scholarly aspect of ministry, Erskine makes a plea for people-centred preaching. His assertion that preachers need 'to know men as well as books' is both a warning against preaching above people's capacity to understand and also a reminder that the purpose of preaching is not to satisfy the preacher but to bring the flock closer to the Good Shepherd. To this end, the preacher must strive for balance in his life. There will always be many duties for him to undertake and he must give himself to them wholeheartedly but preparation for ministry should never be neglected.

Erskine's concern for the people of God is reflected in the role he sees for them in the preaching event. It is to this that we now turn.

Chapter 5: The Congregation

Erskine is conscious that authentic preaching is not merely dependant upon the preacher. A congregation is needed to receive the preached Word and their openness is vital to the complete communication of God's truth. Erskine therefore devoted a number of sermons specifically aimed at helping people to listen, understand and apply the preached Word to their lives. This was to help with the spiritual growth of God's people but it is also apparent in these sermons that Erskine did not believe that everyone who attended worship on the Sabbath was truly converted. Some did not possess the authentic faith that would save them from judgement. There are five of these sermons altogether in the first volume of *Discourses*.

On 2 and 9 July 1758 he preached two sermons consecutively to his congregation at New Greyfriars on the theme 'Motives For Hearing Sermons'.¹ The background to this is a concern Erskine had with regard to the low spiritual temperature of Scottish society. He was aware of neglect in respect of Sabbath observance and feared that personal devotions were shallow and worship unworthy. The sermons are based on the text in Proverbs 8: 33-34:

Hear instruction and be wise, and refuse it not.
Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors.

Erskine interprets Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs as being a type of Jesus and therefore the words of the text are His words.² The 'gates' and 'posts' are the assemblies of God's people who are gathered to hear the Wisdom of God. Erskine states the aim of the sermon: 'to excite you to this duty'³ i.e. the duty of gathering together to listen to the word of truth.

His first 'head' is, 'The tendency of preaching and hearing the word to promote our best interest'.⁴ Attendance at public worship should not be a matter of taste or choice like going to a public lecture or the theatre. Listening to the preached word is vital to our quality of life now and our destiny in the life to come. We come to understand how we can be 'useful' in this life and 'happy' in eternity. Speaking of the Scriptures or 'the sacred oracles' Erskine says:

¹ Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.141-169.

² *Ibid.*, p.142.

³ *Ibid.*, p.144.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The doctrines revealed in them, are not doubtful speculations, or light and trivial matters; but truths of infallible certainty, of the most sublime and excellent nature, and, to us men, of infinite importance.⁵

The Scriptures are so arranged, however, that a teacher is needed to bring these truths to the minds and hearts of God's people. Erskine says:

For wise reasons the Bible was not written in systematic form. The instruction it imparts concerning the several branches of faith and practise, is scattered up and down in different passages, many of which would be overlooked by the bulk of mankind, if some were not employed to collect and explain them.⁶

For Erskine, then, the best way to attain knowledge of the truths of Scripture is

the discourses of those who have not only made it their chief business to study the sacred oracles, and the language, sentiments and manners of those to whom they were first delivered, but who, by cultivating their rational powers, have acquired a facility of forming distinct conceptions of things and of expressing those conceptions with plainness and propriety.⁷

Against those who say that it is sufficient to be alone with the Bible, Erskine says:

doubtless the sounding God's message into the ears of men with becoming solemnity, vehemence and concern, has something in it more piercing and efficacious, than the mere solitary reading the Bible often has.⁸

The second 'head' emphasises that 'Hearing the word is enjoined by divine authority'.⁹ Erskine points to the Priests and Levites in the Old Testament who were appointed to expound 'the sacred oracles': 'They not only read in the law of God, but gave the sense, and caused the people to understand the reading...' ¹⁰ There were also 'extraordinary messengers' like Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes and the development of synagogue worship which employed specially trained teachers to interpret and enforce what had been read from the Law. He cites Luke 4: 16-27 and Acts 17: 2-3 which tell of Jesus and Paul respectively preaching in synagogues.

From this, Erskine draws support for the view that preachers are necessary for the edifying of the Church and if ministers are bound to preach, others are surely bound to listen: 'We cannot succeed as Christ's Ambassadors, where we are denied an audience...' ¹¹

⁵ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.144

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.154.

In the second sermon preached on 9 July 1758, Erskine concentrates exclusively on his third 'head'.¹² This deals with the judgement which falls upon those who resist the preached word and the blessings which are promised to faithful preachers and hearers.

At the outset he presents a number of texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament that reveal the judgement which will be visited upon those who will not gather to hear the preached word. He argues against individualism in piety, there being a particular experience of the presence of God when His people are gathered for worship. He brings this home forcefully with this illustration:

The master of a family doth not send meat through every corner of the house, to each particular member of his family, but calls them together to a common table, and there giveth, to every one, his due portion of food. The soul doth not animate the members of the body, when cut off and separated one from another, but when joined and united together. Thus it is with the influences of the Holy Spirit.¹³

2 Chronicles 26: 15-17 and Psalm 81: 11-12 are cited as evidence that the judgement that will fall upon those who resist the master's call are both spiritual and temporal.

Turning to the faithful preachers and hearers, Erskine uses a whole series of Biblical references 'to remind the friends of Jesus how expressly God hath promised his special presence and blessing to the faithful preaching and conscientious hearing of his word.'¹⁴ Those who have been 'born anew by the word' will only grow in faith and Christian life as they receive the word:

What was the mean of imparting a spiritual and divine life, becomes also the mean of preserving, of strengthening, and of increasing it.¹⁵

No one is exempt from this, neither those 'exalted to superior stations' nor the poor. After making the point to rich and poor that: 'It is Christ that speaks to you by us', he firmly asserts the indispensable role of preaching within the community of faith:

Know, then, that preaching and hearing the word are the chief means of extending the Redeemer's empire, and of, advancing his honour. Faithful ministers are the glory of Christ.¹⁶

And again:

¹² Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.156-169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.158.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.168.

It is by the preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, that all men see, what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world, has been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ. Nay, it is by this despised gospel, the objects it reveals, and the effects it produces, that, to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, is made known, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God.¹⁷

If hearing the Word of God is essential for entering the Christian life and growing in the Christian life, it matters how one continues to listen to the preached word. 'Directions For Hearing Sermons'¹⁸ consists of three 'parts', probably three separate sermons preached on consecutive Sundays based on the text: 'Take heed, therefore, how ye hear...' (Luke 8: 18). There are no dates and we are not told where these sermons were preached.

The parable of the Sower is taken as reflecting the state of the Church. In the same way that the bulk of the Sower's seed is wasted on unfriendly ground, so the vast majority of those who sit under the preached Word do not retain it and do not profit from it. For Erskine this is not a psychological or educational issue. It has to do with a lack of authentic faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This affects people's capacity to receive the preached Word and if this 'faulty manner of hearing (the gospel)' continues there will be grave spiritual consequences for them. He says: 'Men may enjoy the brightest sunshine of gospel ordinances, and yet no divine light irradiate their understandings, no spiritual warmth enliven their hearts.'¹⁹ It is with some urgency, then, that Erskine offers some directions on how people might hear the Word with profit to their souls.

There are five 'heads' to the first part of the Discourse which probably constitute one sermon:

- I. 'Hear the word, from right motives and for right ends.'²⁰
- II. 'Our hearing should be preceded, accompanied and followed by earnest prayers for the divine blessing.'²¹
- III. 'Hear the word of God with pleasure and gratitude.'²²
- IV. 'If you would profit by hearing the word, cultivate an honest, impartial love to truth, and a meek, humble candid and teachable spirit.'²³
- V. 'Hear the word with understanding and judgement.'²⁴

The first 'head', 'Hear the word, from right motives and for right ends', is revealing with regard to Erskine's attitude to the congregations that made up the Church of Scotland at this time. He did not take it for granted that everyone who sat under the preached Word

¹⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.170.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.172.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.175.

²² *Ibid.*, p.178.

²³ *Ibid.* p.180.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.183.

Sunday by Sunday was a committed Christian and therefore the Church itself was as much in need of evangelisation as the nation at large:

Preaching my brethren, is instituted, to point out a remedy for spiritual diseases, and a method for securing the heavenly inheritance; and yet many hear sermons from the same motives as others read romances, or frequent the playhouse, that for an hour or two they may be amused or entertained...²⁵

The only true motive for joining a worshipping people on the Lord's Day is to experience more of the grace of God and to find remedy for the sickness of our souls.

Under the second 'head', 'Our hearing should be preceded, accompanied and followed by earnest prayers for the divine blessing', Erskine highlights prayer as a means of securing right motives for hearing the Word and preparing the soul for the work of the Holy Spirit. With this Erskine gets to the heart of what he believes about preaching:

Why is preaching and hearing the word appointed? It is not, that sinners, persuaded by the enticing words of man's wisdom, by strength of argument, or by force of eloquence, should be excited to try their skill in converting themselves: It is, because by these, as means, the Spirit savingly works; and therefore, we ought to place ourselves under them, waiting for his influence to make them effectual; praying that he would bear testimony to the word of his grace, and that it may prove the word by which we shall be saved, while our understanding is divinely enlightened to discern its truth and excellency.²⁶

It is the work of the Holy Spirit that is crucial for the efficacy of the preached word. Even 'weak ministries' can be effective if there is a dependance upon God and his promises. Conversely, when people have raised expectations because of a preacher's abilities, God does not always bless the preacher.

The word indeed is in its own nature quick and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword; but it is only in the hands of the Spirit that it does effectual execution, and pierces through the inmost recesses of the heart ...The ambassadors of God may preach to the ear: it is the Master's prerogative to preach to the heart.²⁷

It is with this in mind that Erskine urges prayer 'even in the time of hearing,'²⁸ that is, as the preacher delivers the Word of God the people should pray for its efficacy.

The third 'head', 'Hear the Word of God with pleasure and gratitude', aims at increasing awareness of how blessed are the people of Scotland to have such full access to the Word of God through preaching. Erskine says: 'To you God hath given his precepts and

²⁵ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.174.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.176.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.178.

testimonies, when he hath not dealt so with every nation.’²⁹ In particular, he has in mind those people who belong to cultures where the Roman Catholic Church is dominant. The fourth ‘head’, ‘If you would profit by hearing the word, cultivate an honest, impartial love to truth, and a meek, humble, candid and teachable spirit’, sets forth a high view of both the people of God and the preacher. Together they are crucial to the success of the preaching event. It is not a congregation’s duty to follow a minister’s teaching blindly. What is preached must always be judged against Scripture and the conscience of the hearers. Says Erskine: ‘The Bible, my brethren, is the only complete and infallible directory of your faith and practise.’³⁰ If, therefore, the people have a conscience informed by Scripture they will act as a bulwark against ‘uninspired teachers’. A people cowed under the authority of the preacher has no place in Erskine’s vision of preaching: ‘Our assertions should have no authority with you, if we are unable to support them by scripture, or sound reason.’³¹

This, however, should not lead anyone to demean the office of the preacher. Indeed, says Erskine: ‘Ministers have peculiar advantages for knowing the will of God, and are under the most solemn obligations to declare it, and in no instance wilfully to impose upon you.’³² According to Erskine, the respect given to priests by Roman Catholics is more than is proper but he believes that respect for ministers of the gospel has fallen too low. People are too quick to criticise and forget that ‘God does not teach you by angels; but by men of like passions with yourself, and exposed, by their station and office, to many peculiar temptations.’³³

Finally, under the fifth ‘head’, ‘Hear the word with understanding and judgement’, Erskine makes a plea for an informed laity. People should study the Bible and ‘other books of instruction’ to make the most of the teaching they receive from the pulpit. Erskine is blunt in commending ‘the necessary and fundamental truths of religion’. He says: ‘If, after all, you remain ignorant of them, you must needs be willfully ignorant.’³⁴

Part II of ‘Directions For Hearing Sermons’ continues to direct people towards the correct attitudes that need to attend the hearing of a sermon:

VI. ‘Hear with attention, seriousness, and solemnity of spirit.’³⁵

VII. ‘Let such a lively faith mix itself with your hearing, as will produce affections suited to

²⁹ *Discourses*, p. 179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.180.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.80.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p.182.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.185.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.187.

the truths you hear.’³⁶

VIII. ‘Wisely apply what you hear, to your own case; and, for that end, endeavour to be well acquainted with the true state of your souls.’³⁷

Under the sixth ‘head’, ‘Hear with attention, seriousness, and solemnity of spirit’, Erskine makes it quite clear that the preached Word is an eschatological event when the eternal destiny of a human soul can be determined. It is a moment in time when the soul who responds in faith is saved from eternal damnation and the sincere believer in Christ is helped towards a greater experience of grace and a new opportunity for obedience. It is inappropriate, therefore, to approach the preached Word with anything other than a deep solemnity of spirit. A person has to be suitably prepared in mind and spirit to listen to the preached Word. Erskine refers to the ‘heaviness’ which can arise as a result of tiredness or ‘too full a meal’ and how that is to be avoided ‘because a wearied body, or an overcharged stomach, are almost invincible enemies to watchfulness.’³⁸ No one would stand before an earthly judge awaiting sentence with anything but ‘awful concern’. No one would approach ‘an earthly potentate’ to hear his commands or ‘solicit his favour’ with anything but reverence.

And is less concern sufficient, when the question is, how shall you escape the damnation of hell? Or less reverence suitable, when a message is brought to you from the King of heaven; nay when you are present before God, to hear the things that are commanded you of God?³⁹

Under the seventh ‘head’, ‘Let such a lively faith mix itself with your hearing, as will produce affections suited to the truths you hear’, Erskine deals with the role of the hearer’s faith in preaching. He makes it clear that the preached Word will not work for anyone’s good unless faith is present. It is faith which makes the Word a living thing and leads the individual to obey the call to follow Christ:

Faith must impregnate this good seed, ere it become a living operative principle of holy obedience. Faith must convert this heavenly manna into proper nourishment for the soul.⁴⁰

Faith, for Erskine, is not just a grasping of the truth but a warm appreciation of the source of all truth who is God:

God demands that the heart as well as the intellectual powers, should be consecrated to his service. If we feel no warmth of heart, when the most awful or amiable truths are set before us, our conviction of them must needs be slight and superficial.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid., p.193.

³⁷ Ibid., p.195.

³⁸ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 188.

³⁹ Ibid., p.192.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.193.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 193-194.

In other words, true faith involves that stirring of emotion which can only be described as love for God for who He is and what He has accomplished for humanity through His Son Jesus Christ. Here Erskine is aware that he has moved into potentially perilous territory. Emotions can be aroused in the preaching event which have nothing to do with love for God. People can be in love with the preacher, with his turn of phrase or his technique or his voice. It is important, therefore, to 'realise what we hear', to see the point of the sermon and apply it to our own lives.

When the examples of the saints in former days are described, let these convince us, that holiness is attainable, as well as lovely; and animate us to be followers of them, who through faith and patience do now inherit the promises...When sermons bring to our remembrance the corruptions of our hearts, or the sins of our lives, let a sense of them produce the deepest shame, sorrow and contrition. When Christ is preached as sent to save even the chief of sinners, and as inviting all to come to him, that they may have life; let us receive this as a joyful saying, and worthy of our warmest and most joyful acceptance...Every truth, without exception, ought to be received, in the love of it.⁴²

The eighth 'head', 'Wisely apply what you hear, to your own case; and, for that end, endeavour to be well acquainted with the true state of your souls', is closely related to this. Listeners to sermons ought to be aware of their own spiritual needs and when the preached Word meets those needs they should receive it and apply it to their lives. Not that this always happens immediately. Years after the preaching event, something may come to mind which is for that time. The important thing is that we respond to the truth we have heard. To drive this home, Erskine places himself in the position of someone who has been touched at a deep spiritual level by the preached Word:

Be exhorted, therefore, to get well acquainted with your own special circumstances, and then wisely accommodate to them the general instructions of God's word. When anything more directly reaches your case, submit to conviction, however painful it prove. Say to thyself, as Nathan said to David, 'Thou art the man. The minister, possibly had no particular aim, or aimed at another; But, certainly the Spirit of God aimed at me, and, in compassion to me, sent him with that message. My conscience is sensibly touched. I feel, I acknowledge, that I am guilty. To man, I never imparted my thoughts. None but God was witness to them. Yet, lo! they have been pointed out, and reprov'd with the utmost exactness. Often have I committed the sins cautioned against: often have I neglected the duties recommended. Now, at length, I see the evil of my ways, and my doings, which have not been good. Wherefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'⁴³

The test of a true hearing of the preached Word will always be the extent to which it is applied to the hearer's life.

It could be argued that with the first two parts of this discourse, Erskine has offered direction on how to prepare to listen to the preached Word and how to apply the Word

⁴² Erskine, *Discourses*, pp. 194-95.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

as it is heard. In part three, he makes suggestions as to how the Word may continue to be effective in our lives. It is not enough merely to return to the duties and the diversions which await us in the world: '...we must take heed to our frame and conduct, after hearing, as well as before, and in the time of it, if we would indeed reap saving benefit from the preached word.'⁴⁴ Using an analogy with medicine prescribed by a doctor, Erskine says that once taken medicine can be left to do its work but the Word received in the preaching must be continually applied. The believer must meditate upon it.

To help with this, Erskine suggests a personal strategy under six 'heads':

- I 'Endeavour to remember what you have heard.'⁴⁵
- II. 'Meditate and expostulate with your hearts, upon what you have heard'⁴⁶
- III. 'Converse with your fellow Christians about what you have heard.'⁴⁷
- IV. 'Reduce what you have heard to practice.'⁴⁸
- V. 'Often examine how you have heard, and improved the word.'⁴⁹
- VI. 'If you have received any benefit by the word, ascribe to God all the glory.'⁵⁰

In the aftermath of the preached Word there has to be a definite commitment to remember what has been heard. Erskine does not hold to the idea that some people have a 'bad memory'. We all have the ability to remember and it must be exercised. In support of this he quotes 1 Corinthians 15: 2: 'By (this gospel) also are ye saved , if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.' It was to aid the crucial process of memory that Erskine followed the tradition of structuring his sermons by 'heads'.

What we remember should be mulled over and, in effect, 'preached' to our hearts and there is also a place for discussion with friends on what has been received from the preached Word. Erskine, however, hands out a warning that 'Gospel truths are revealed, not barely to be known and contemplated, but to sanctify the heart, and to govern the life.'⁵¹ In other words, what is received in the preached Word is not merely an encouragement towards introspection or fuel for discussion, it is a foundation on which we must build our lives. Using medical imagery of which he is so fond, Erskine asks: 'Can you expect to get to heaven, by hearing sermons, though persisting in the wilful neglect of duty, or in the commission of sin? Will hearing a lecture of medicine, cure a disease?'⁵² There has to be a constant assessment of our lives in light of the Word we have

⁴⁴ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.200.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.209.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.212.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,p.214.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.209.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

received.

Finally, Erskine makes it plain that anything received from the preached Word is by the grace of God. There is so much against our retention of the Word that if we do profit from it we must give the glory to God. Erskine sees the preaching event as a time of spiritual warfare when the good God provides for us can so easily be taken away.

When thou comest to present thyself before the Lord, Satan also comes with thee. The moment the good seed of the word is sown, malicious spirits, swift and numerous as the fowls of the air, will endeavour to pick it up. ⁵³

What is at stake is nothing less than the eternal soul of the hearer. 'Formal and forgetful hearing' will be punished, perhaps in this life but certainly in the next.

Our eternal happiness or misery depends on our improving, or not improving, the means of grace...Barren trees may be permitted, for a while, to stand in a wilderness; but, in the vineyard of the church, God most speedily cuts them down. Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the tree; and no careless unfruitful hearer can tell how soon it may receive a commission to strike the fatal blow. ⁵⁴

The congregation has a vital role to play in the completion of the preaching event. This begins with the written Word of God and a man called by God studying this Word to preach to the people who have been given to his care. The Spirit then forms a message in the mind and heart of the preacher. In the power of that same Spirit, the preacher delivers his message to the people gathered together to worship God. This people must be open to the preached Word. They come to the preaching because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and their desire to live their lives according to the will of God. They believe that God will speak to them through the preaching to increase that faith and direct their lives. Therefore their dependance is upon the same Spirit who inspired the written Word and brings that Word to life in the preaching.

⁵³ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.215.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.217.

Chapter 6: Word And Spirit.

Following Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, Erskine believed that Scripture is the source of all true preaching and that the basis of the preaching event is established when the preacher is alone with the Scriptures, studying them to discover the truth contained therein so that he can share it with a congregation met together for worship. Addressing a congregation on the importance of hearing sermons, Erskine says: 'The Bible, my brethren, is the only complete and infallible directory of your faith and practice.'¹ It is vital for the preacher, therefore, to discover that 'complete and infallible' direction and to offer it to his people. Erskine's approach to this could be described as combining scholarship with personal devotion.

Scholarship is always important to Erskine. In the sermon entitled 'Difficulties Of The Pastoral Office'² he avers that preachers ought to know the original languages of the Bible for they are 'able to bring out of our treasures things new and old'. He goes on to say: 'Inspiration and miraculous gifts are now ceased; and therefore much time must be spent in reading and meditation, in order to attain such knowledge.'³ The direct inspiration and miraculous signs which accompanied the ministries of the Apostles and the Prophets are no longer normative in the life of the Church so there has to be a commitment on the part of the preacher and, indeed, the whole Christian community to spend time with the Written Word in order to know God's truth and to experience His presence and His power.

There are times when we see Erskine engaging in a close analysis of a text. In 'The Qualifications Necessary For Teachers of Christianity',⁴ he expresses reservation on the rendering of his text, James 3:1, in the Authorised Version and offers his own translation as closer to the 'original'.⁵ In 'The Important Mystery Of The Incarnation'⁶, which contains two sermons preached on 1 Timothy 3: 15-16, he begins in the first sermon by disputing the normal interpretation of 'the pillar and ground of truth' as the Church. Erskine believes this refers to the Incarnation and that the false interpretation arises from the unnatural divisions forced on the text by versification. He states: '...the mistakes arising from the division of Scripture into verses, are many; and expositors often follow one another,

¹ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 180.

² *Ibid.*, pp.118-140.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.1-45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.328-368.

blindly, and without examination.⁷ Whether Erskine's interpretation is right or not, this shows that he was not unwilling to engage with the Scriptures in a critical fashion and to propose interpretations which ran counter to what was generally accepted.

We also see Erskine reaching beyond the Biblical text in order to illustrate its truth. In the first part of 'Motives For Hearing Sermons'⁸, he is seeking to emphasize the importance of the preached word to the community of faith and draws on two areas of historical background. He puts forward the opinion that 'the revolt of Israel' in various times in their history was due to 'want of provision for public religious instruction'. It was only after the Babylonian captivity when every town and village had a synagogue that 'the Jews adhered to the law of Moses, with a strictness and nicety not to be paralleled in history'. He goes on to cite the response of Julian the Apostate⁹ as he saw Christianity spread. Preachers were appointed to promote 'moral philosophy' because Julian realised 'how wise an institution preaching was, for promoting the knowledge and practise of religion'.¹⁰

Erskine, then, was not averse to using the tools that scholarship provides in order to understand and illuminate the Word of God. This always had to be balanced, however, with the minister's own personal devotion.

Delivering charges to David Black on his admission as minister of Lady Yester's Kirk, Edinburgh on 20th November 1794, Erskine said: 'But let the sacred oracles be your chief study.'¹¹ He takes this up again in 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence'. Here, he stresses that 'true religion' needs to be emphasised and explained. Therefore, in the study of Scripture balancing scholarship and devotion has to be the priority of the preacher. He says:

His office is to make known to perishing sinners the sublime, the affecting, the comforting truth of the lively oracles; and for that end, attentively to read them, to meditate on them day and night; and whilst he despises not the labours of able and worthy men, who have endeavoured to illustrate them, to secure a better and more effective help, by humbly and fervently imploring the Father of lights to open his eyes to behold wondrous things out of God's word.¹²

Here, Erskine makes it clear that in preparing for preaching, scholarship alone is not

⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 328.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.141-169.

⁹ Julian The Apostate (332-63) was Roman Emperor from 361. 'With regard to the Church, his policy was to degrade Christianity and promote paganism by every means short of open persecution.' *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, 1966, ed. F.L. Cross, p.752.

¹⁰ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.57.

enough. Effective preaching depends upon the preacher's personal contact with the living Word of God. The Spirit who inspired the Biblical writers must also inspire the preacher. His approach to his work, therefore, is essentially devotional. He must be focussed on God, believing that Scripture is His Word and depending upon His Spirit to reveal His truth in the Word.. The Spirit is not mentioned in the above quotation but His work is clearly implied. In his *Theological Dissertations* Erskine says: 'Minds enlightened by the Spirit, can clearly discern the rays of divinity in the sacred oracles.'¹³

The immediacy of the preacher's contact with the truth must not be obscured by 'the labours of able and worthy men'. In other words, the thoughts contained in Bible commentaries should not take the place of the truth revealed to the preacher in his own personal encounter with the living Word. To Erskine, this was probably what was happening when he resisted the accepted interpretation of I Timothy 3:16.

This necessarily involves a commitment on the part of the preacher to get to the heart of the text on which he has chosen to preach and to be true to what is revealed to him. He must always be aware that he is dealing with the 'sacred oracles', not some dissertation which contains views to be accepted or rejected. Scripture must be handled properly: 'If they give ground of offence who add to the word of God, they do it also who take from it.'¹⁴ Preaching must always be shaped by the Word itself not by the predilections and prejudices of the preacher.

To David Black Erskine says:

When you have chosen a text, ascertain the meaning of it from the scope of the inspired writer, and the sense in which he generally uses particular expressions. It argues either poverty of genius, or culpable inattention, when preachers wander from the particular subject of their text, to some commonplace dissertation, which would equally suit a hundred other passages of scripture, if disclosed in that manner.¹⁵

Preachers have to commit themselves to delivering 'the whole counsel of God', not majoring on 'certain subjects peculiarly easy and agreeable to us'¹⁶ As a corrective to this Erskine urges the practice of preaching on large portions of Scripture. In this way Scripture itself will shape the message with the added advantage that a large field of doctrine and morality would be covered in the natural flow of an exposition. This would avoid the impression that the preacher is promoting his own particular views, something which his listeners might naturally resist :

¹³ Erskine, John. *Theological Dissertations*, Edinburgh, J. Pillans and Sons, 1808, p.203.

¹⁴ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.52.

Both we and our hearers would grow better acquainted with the lively oracles, and learn to read them more profitably. Besides, short occasional hints, which naturally arise in our ordinary course of expounding a gospel or an epistle, may fall with weight on our hearers ere they are aware, and force conviction. Whereas, when the subject of a sermon is directly levelled against vulgar prejudices or fashionable vices, instantly the alarm is taken, and the mind strengthens against the evidence. The heart is a fort more easily taken by sap than by storm.¹⁷

Erskine is in no doubt, however, that when a minister arrives at the truth in his study of Scripture and delivers that truth to a congregation then they are hearing the very Word of God. In his charges to the congregation at Lady Yester's Kirk he says:

While (your minister) preach no other things, than the apostles and prophets have written, receive the word which you hear from him, as the word, not of men, but of the living God: for he who despises, what is spoken from the pulpit, agreeable to the sacred oracles, despises the Spirit, by whom these oracles were inspired. Consider not, therefore, his sermons as advice, which, though they who choose, do well to follow: others who find complying with it inconvenient, are at liberty to reject. God, in a preached gospel, speaketh to you from heaven.¹⁸

On one occasion, referring to preachers, he said to his congregation in New Greyfriars: 'It is Christ that speaks to you by us...'¹⁹

In this 'high' view of the preached Word, we hear echoes of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. In the presence of the preached Word men and women are hearing the voice of God. But, again, like these eminent reformers Erskine is quite clear that this cannot be achieved without the work of the Holy Spirit.

How, then, can the preacher be sure of the Spirit's direction? 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence' contains charges given to a minister in which Erskine emphasises the role of prayer in preparing for the pulpit and underlines the importance of the Holy Spirit to make the preaching effective.

Seek out and set in order acceptable words; and when about to prepare for the pulpit, beg the direction of the Spirit in choosing a subject, his assistance in composing and delivering your sermon, and his blessing to render it effectual. Arrows thus fetched from Heaven, bid fairest to reach the cases of your hearers, and to pierce their hearts.²⁰

Thus we see the vital involvement of the Holy Spirit from the conception of the sermon to the delivery and it is as a consequence of prayer. Erskine can envisage no effective preaching apart from the guidance, inspiration and power of the Spirit which comes to the preacher through His openness to God in prayer. The preacher's 'arrows' have to be

¹⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.52-53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.78.

fashioned in heaven if they are to pierce the hearers' hearts.

This line of thought is developed in the charges given to David Black on his Admission as minister of Lady Yester's Kirk. Erskine says:

Let earnest prayers for the down-pouring of the Spirit on your hearers, precede and follow your sermons. If the rain of divine influence is restrained, though you could preach with the zeal of a Paul, or the eloquence of an Apollos, none of the wicked would understand and return and live.²¹

Preachers can be noted and praised for the liveliness of their preaching and their clever way with words but there will be no true conversions unless the Spirit is at work in the preaching. For this involvement of the Spirit the preacher must pray.

In the second of his sermons given under the title 'Motives For Hearing Sermons', Erskine makes it clear that the operation of the Spirit through prayer is not just with the preacher alone. Those who listen to the preached Word have an obligation to call upon the Spirit to make the preaching effective within them:

Why is preaching and hearing the word appointed? It is not, that sinners, persuaded by the enticing words of man's wisdom, by strength of argument, or by force of eloquence, should be excited to try their skill in converting themselves: It is, because by these, as means, the Spirit savingly works; and therefore, we ought to place ourselves under them, waiting for his influence to make them effectual; praying that he would bear testimony to the word of his grace, and that it may prove the word by which we shall be saved, while our understanding is divinely enlightened to discern its truth and excellency.²²

This gets to the very heart of what Erskine believes about preaching. It depends for its power upon the Holy Spirit. Only He can make the preached word clear so that souls may be saved. Only He can convince the hearer of his need for salvation. To underline this Erskine makes the point that even 'weak ministries' can be effective if within the preacher there is a dependance upon God and His promises. Conversely, when people have raised expectations because of a preacher's abilities, ie. his scholarship, eloquence or presentation, God does not necessarily bless the preaching. A man's abilities and achievements might make for an impressive performance but it is only the Holy Spirit who can make the preaching an effective medium for the living Word to flow.

The word indeed is in its own nature quick and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword; but it is only in the hands of the Spirit that it does effectual execution, and pierces through the inmost recesses of the heart ...The ambassadors of God may preach to the ear: it is the Master's prerogative to preach to the heart.²³

²¹ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 110.

²² *Ibid.*, p.176.

²³ *Ibid.*

This might seem to echo the care Zwingli took always to distinguish between the word that is a human witness to Christ (*verbum Dei externum*) and the true, inner Word of God (*verbum Dei internum*) which can be given only by the Spirit. The apparent distinction, however, may have arisen out of Erskine's desire to emphasise the crucial role the Spirit plays in the preaching event. It is with this in mind that Erskine urges prayer on the people of God 'even in the time of hearing,'²⁴ that is, as the preacher delivers the Word of God the people should pray for its efficacy.

Erskine underlines the importance of this in 'The Nature of Christian Faith' in *Theological Dissertations* where he argues that the Holy Spirit working through the preached Word is crucial to the birth of faith and the believer's growth in Christlikeness. Faith is born when we give assent to the revelation of God in the preached Word. This is not a general, implicit assent to Christianity or to the Bible. True faith or 'saving faith' is knowing what and in whom we believe.

In seeking to understand how revelation works Erskine cites I Corinthians 2: 9-14:

But as it is written, 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.' But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The Spirit takes the things of Christ and shows them to men so that the eyes of faith can be opened and they be numbered among those who are saved by Christ.

The Spirit takes from the scriptures the grand evidence of faith, which he had lodged there, and carries it to the hearts of the elect, and then the light and power of divine truth so apprehends and overcomes the soul, that it can no longer resist. That triumphant evidence is no other than the glory and excellency of the gospel-scheme of salvation, manifested by the Holy Spirit in such a manner, as produces full conviction, that a scheme so glorious could have but God for its author.²⁵

Saving faith may therefore be defined, a persuasion that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, flowing from spiritual views of such a glory in the gospel, as satisfies and convinces the mind, that a scheme so glorious could have none but God for its author.²⁶

It is clear from this that for Erskine the preaching event was a great spiritual struggle in

²⁴ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 176.

²⁵ Erskine, *Theological Discourses*, pp.198-99

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.206

which the Holy Spirit of God is present through the preached Word to bring men and women to a saving faith in Christ. This can be seen in the appeals he often makes to individual conscience. In 'Directions For Hearing Sermons', Part 2, he challenges his listeners to be honest about the true state of their souls and not to resist the conviction that God is speaking to them personally. To bring this home, he takes on the role of the listener:

Say to thyself, as Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man. The minister, possibly, had no particular aim, or aimed at another; But, certainly the Spirit of God aimed at me, and, in compassion to me, sent him with that message. My conscience is sensibly touched. I feel, I acknowledge, that I am guilty. To man, I never imparted my thoughts. None but God was witness to them. Yet, lo! they have been pointed out, and reprov'd with the utmost exactness. Often have I committed the sins cautioned against: often have I neglected the duties recommended. Now, at length I see the evil of my ways, and my doings, which have not been good. Wherefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."²⁷

The presence of the Holy Spirit brings an immediacy and an urgency to the preaching event. He is present to address individual souls and it is vital that they respond according to the conviction He has brought to them.

We can see, then, that for Erskine the process which brings a sermon from the study to the pulpit and into the hearts and minds of a congregation depends on two factors. The substance of the sermon must always be found in Scripture and its effectiveness depends upon the Holy Spirit who works through the Word as a consequence of the prayers of preacher and congregation.

²⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.198

Chapter 7: Sermon Structure.

The published sermons of John Erskine consist of two volumes of *Discourses Preached On Several Occasions*. The first volume contains sixteen sermons. Three were preached at meetings of Church Courts, one at a funeral, one in the aftermath of the death of a colleague and one designated 'Glasgow, 1745' but with no occasion specified.

The second volume contains twenty-two sermons. Six were preached in association with charities or on civic occasions.

Only two sermons in the first volume are specifically associated with a charge Erskine held, ie. New Greyfriars, and in the second volume one sermon is preached before the Magistrates of Edinburgh in Old Greyfriars Church. It may be reasonable to assume that the other sermons were preached at various times in the normal course of Erskine's ministry.

If the published *Discourses* are an indication, Erskine employed a variety of structure and method in the actual delivery of a sermon. He also embraces a variety of genre.

With regard to structure, the *Discourses* are in some respects close to the model embraced by many eminent Scottish and English preachers of the time, particularly those who were of a Latitudinarian disposition in theology. This would cover most of the ministers in the Church of Scotland who were of the Moderate Party. Lessenich¹ identifies a basic structure to what he calls the 'neoclassical' sermon which was much in vogue from 1660 until 1800 and favoured by the Moderates. Citing the sermons of Bishop Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715) and Dr Hugh Blair (1718-1800), he identifies two basic divisions. Burnet calls them the 'Explanatory Part' and 'the Application' while Blair refers to them as the 'Argumentative Part' and the 'Pathetic Part'. In the end, both amount to the same thing. The text or the subject addressed had to be opened up or explained to the listeners and then it was shown how this was related to their own lives. Burnet argued that the Application had to be aimed at the conscience. Similarly, Blair believed that first of all the speaker had to appeal to the understanding and judgement of the hearers and then seek to 'arouse their passions.'

Lessenich places this structure in the context of eighteenth century Enlightenment thought: 'The idea that the reason of the auditor had to be convinced before his passions were

¹ Lessenich, Rolf P. *Elements of Pulpit Oratory In Eighteenth Century England (1660-1800)*, Bohlau-Verlag, Koln Wien, 1972.

stirred bears the mark of eighteenth century rationalism.’² He quotes Steele and Swift’s appreciation of Francis Atterbury (1662-1732) in Tatler 66 ‘who always convinced the reason of his hearers before he conquered their passions’³.

The basic two divisions contained seven parts: Exordium, Explication, Proposition, Partition, Argument, Application and Conclusion. These did not appear in every sermon but in essence the Exordium and Explication prepared people for instruction; the Proposition and Partition laid out the points to be covered; Argument and Application, the main body of the sermon, explained the text or topic and then related it to the lives of the listeners; and the Conclusion recapitulated what had gone before or was an appeal to the listeners to embrace the principles revealed to them in the preaching.

There was division of opinion with regard to Partition which Lessenich describes as ‘a... short and precise enumeration of the separate points of view under which the subject was consecutively treated.’⁴ The main argument against this was that it was not aesthetically pleasing but in practise few neoclassical preachers omitted it because it was generally recognised to be helpful to listeners. Some, however, objected to ‘heads’ being announced in advance because curiosity as to what was to come held the attention.⁵ Others believed that the hearers, like the traveller, finds more pleasure in the things presented to him if he is given a short programme before setting out.

Application was always of supreme importance in the neoclassical sermon due to the underlying Latitudinarian theology which was prevalent at the time. Says Lessenich:

The current latitudinarian theology of the epoch was the counter-part to the rational philosophy, both eminently championed by John Locke. Latitudinarian divines clearly placed works above faith, practical morality above theoretical knowledge, the latter being but a means, the first however the end of the pastoral care. Moral righteousness or virtue was the alpha and omega in latitudinarian thought...⁶

Although Erskine clearly differed in theology from the Moderates or Latitudinarians, he was perfectly comfortable with the sermonic structure they embraced and commended. Contemporary accounts of his preaching noted his lack of elegance but the evidence of the *Discourses* would suggest that the basic structure of Explanation and Application was congenial to him. It might also be suggested that the philosophy behind the structure, that men had to be convinced in their minds before their passions could be stirred, was one that Erskine could accept. Furthermore, there is scarcely a sermon in the *Discourses*

² Lessenich, *Elements of Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth Century England (16609- 1800)*, p.39.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.76.

⁵ Ibid., p.78.

⁶ Ibid., p.111.

where Erskine does not employ Partition, either setting out his 'heads' at the beginning of a sermon or establishing them as he proceeds.

In 'Instructions and Consolations from the Unchangeableness of Christ' based on Hebrews 12: 8: 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever...' , Erskine announces his structure at the outset: 'I intend, first, to consider the occasion of these words; and then their meaning, and the practical instructions they suggest.'⁷

This he follows faithfully, first of all placing the verse in context. Referring to the previous verse and the one following, Erskine interprets this as a call to the readers to respect and imitate those Christian leaders who first preached the Gospel to them. The tone of these verses suggests to Erskine that though these leaders are now dead still they are worthy of remembrance and imitation in respect of their lives and their faith. This he is able to link appropriately to the occasion of the sermon which was the funeral service of Rev Robert Walker on 13 April 1783, a Christian leader equally worthy of remembrance and imitation.

Moving to his 'meaning' or application, Erskine contrasts the eternity and unchangeableness of Christ with the mortality of human teachers and the changeableness of the doctrines they teach.⁸ Drawing out the 'practical instructions' Erskine establishes that the religion of Jesus is ever the same; the kind and benevolent affections of Jesus are the same yesterday, today and forever; and the power of Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. All of this should be a comfort and a compensation to the people of God when great ministers are removed.

This sermon shows Erskine at pains to get to the heart of a Biblical text which involves him examining the wider context before he establishes its meaning. Only then does he apply the text to his hearers. His structure is in a sense dictated by his source. One can imagine him asking: 'How did these words arise? What is their meaning? What is their relevance to me?'

A variation on the Explication/Application structure can be found in 'On Self-Denial'.⁹ Erskine's text is John 12:26 but he is careful to place it in the context of the preceding and following verses so that he is really preaching on John 12: 25-27:

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be: if any man serve Me, him will My Father honour. But now is my soul troubled;

⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.220

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.225

⁹ Erskine, John. *Discourses Preached On Several Occasions Vol. II*, Edinburgh, Ogle and Aikman, 1804, pp. 24-42.

and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour:' but for this cause came I unto this hour.'

Having made the point that Jesus' character is held up to us principally that we might imitate it, he sets out the pattern of his sermon. In the first part of the sermon he will consider aspects of Jesus' self denial and then in the second part he will show that 'self-denial is the path to true honour and greatness.'¹⁰ Each part will have its own application.

In Part I Erskine sets out four aspects of Jesus self-denial. It was 'free and voluntary'¹¹; 'wise and rational'¹²; 'extensive'¹³; and 'disinterested'¹⁴. He then challenges his listeners: 'Would we be truly great? Our self-denial must resemble his.'¹⁵ And it is at this point that the Application begins. We are measured against each aspect of Jesus' character previously unveiled by the preacher.

In part II Erskine sets forward the proposition that the self-denial of our Lord 'is the path to true honour and greatness.'¹⁶ A greatness not shown in majesty but in humility and accepted and honoured by God. This is the only greatness worth aspiring to and Erskine brings this part and the whole of the sermon to an end with this appeal:

Display, my brethren, in your personal conduct, such a zeal for God, and such a sense of true greatness, as the view of your suffering Saviour is well calculated to inspire.¹⁷

The first part of 'The Important Mystery of the Incarnation'¹⁸ based on 1 Timothy 3: 15-16 shows how important it was for Erskine to get to the truth of a particular text and how this governs his structure. In the end, however, it is not so much an expository sermon as one which focuses on a particular Christian doctrine and reflects on its implications for believers. To make this plain it is necessary to show the text in full:

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how though oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:
 God was manifest in the flesh,
 Justified in the Spirit,
 Seen of angels,
 Preached unto the Gentiles,
 Believed on in the world,

¹⁰Erskine, *Discourses Preached On Several Occasions, Vol II*, p.25.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p.26.

¹³ Ibid., p.27.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.28.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.29.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.33.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.41.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 328-368.

Received up into glory.

Erskine begins in the Explanatory part of the sermon by arguing against a commonly held view that 'the pillar and ground of the truth' refers not to the Church but to the Incarnation and places this among many mistakes which have arisen 'from the division of scripture into verses'.¹⁹ He maintains that it is not natural for the Church to be referred to as a 'house' and a 'pillar' in the same sentence. Whether this interpretation is right or not we again see Erskine's commitment to work at a text to secure its meaning.

Once he has done this to his own satisfaction, he begins to explore the 'mystery' of the Incarnation, acknowledging the difficult questions it has raised and sharing some of his own insights. With regard to the nature of the Incarnation, he notes that the text speaks of God being made manifest in the flesh for it would never be appropriate for it to be said that the Father was justified in the spirit and received up into glory. On the purpose of the Incarnation, he argues that this came about due to God's interest in both parties who were estranged. Only by His becoming flesh was it possible for Him to mediate peace. In the second part of this Discourse he stresses that the Incarnation is the supporting doctrine to the whole Christian 'system'.²⁰ Without the Incarnation there would have been no Atonement.

Erskine concedes the difficulty of speaking of God being made manifest in in the flesh. It is reasonable to conclude that 'flesh' would obscure God, make Him less than God. He insists, however, in the truth made plain in Scripture that God was in Christ and this being so God was seen in the body of Jesus. His birth was humble because it was the birth experienced by all human beings. It was also majestic because this was more than the birth of a human being, it was the birth of God in human form.

As Erskine repeatedly acknowledges, there is a great mystery at the heart of the Incarnation and yet this does not deter him from relating it to the common experience of men and women. There are five points to his 'practical improvement' or application:

1. 'Judge not the opinions, or character, of any man, or society of men, by their outward circumstances'.²¹
2. 'Think not much...to stoop to the meanest office for Christ, or thy Christian brother.'²²
3. 'Labour, that he who was manifested in your nature, may also be manifested in your persons...'²³
4. 'Reflect, how highly human nature is dignified and ennobled by the Incarnation of the

¹⁹ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.328.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.359.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.336.

²² *Ibid.*, p.338.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.339.

Son of God.²⁴

5. 'Improve and exult in the foundation laid, by God manifest in the flesh, for the encouragement of faith.'²⁵

This is an example of a distinct 'genre' of preaching which may be called the 'doctrinal sermon' or the 'catechetical sermon'. Hughes Oliphant Old describes this as preaching which 'outlines basic Christian teaching.'²⁶ It begins with Scripture but concentrates on a particular Christian doctrine to explain it and then apply it to the life of the believer.

A similar kind of structure to 'Instructions and Consolations' can be found in 'On The Riches Of The Poor'²⁷ although it is not so strong on exposition. The text is Revelation 2: 9: 'I know thy poverty, but thou art rich...' A footnote tells us that this sermon was preached before the Governors of Heriot's Hospital and the impression is inescapable that the occasion shaped the message more than the demands of the text. Erskine uses the text to show that there is such a thing as spiritual riches which are much more to be desired than earthly or material riches. As he often does, he sets out the plan of his sermon near the outset:

I am to prove, that the most valued earthly possessions and enjoyments of the rich are equally bestowed on the poor, or, at least are not placed out of their reach; that many of the poor actually possess and enjoy spiritual riches, with which the most wealthy stranger to religion cannot intermeddle; and that all of them have the means of obtaining the most substantial and durable riches.²⁸

From this he makes three points:

- I 'The poor are rich; for they have the most valuable possessions and enjoyments of the rich and want only those which are of less value.'²⁹
- II. 'Many of the poor, yea, all of them who have obtained precious faith, even in this life, possess and enjoy the best riches.'³⁰
- III. 'The poor are rich, for they have the means of acquiring and securing the most substantial and durable riches.'³¹

Though the structure of the sermon is similar to 'Instructions and Consolations' it takes a more thematic approach. There is no attempt to place the text in its Biblical context. It is

²⁴ Ibid., p.340.

²⁵ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 340.

²⁶ Old, *The Reading And Preaching Of The Scriptures In The Worship Of The Christian Church: Volume 1: The Biblical Period*, p.13

²⁷ Erskine, *Discourses Vol II*, pp.1 -23

²⁸ Ibid., p.4.

²⁹ Ibid., p.5.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid., p.19.

not even acknowledged that this was the pronouncement of the Risen and Glorified Christ on the Church at Smyrna.

This is similar to the sermon which was preached on the Sunday following Dr William Robertson's death on 16 June 1793 entitled 'The Agency Of God In Human Greatness'³² For his text Erskine chose part of I Chronicles 29:12: '...in thine hand it is to make great...' The full verse reads:

Both riches and honour come of Thee, and Thou reignest over all; and in Thine hand is power and might; and in Thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all.

This is part of the prayer of thanksgiving King David offered to God when the influential people in Israel gave generously for the building of the Temple. Erskine mentions nothing of this but merely takes the words which will suit his purpose. This could not be described as an expository sermon since there is very little analysis of the text. Instead Erskine takes the theme of 'greatness' from the text emphasising first of all that it is God who makes men great and then addresses specific words to those who would be considered 'great' and those in lower positions in life.

Bearing in mind the occasion, this is an intriguing sermon. It is reasonable to assume that there would be many and elaborate tributes to the greatness of Dr Robertson in the aftermath of his death. Here, it would seem that Erskine is seeking to put into perspective all talk of human greatness.

The thematic method can be seen again in the three sermons preached on Isaiah 60:21: 'Thy people also shall be righteous...' under the title 'The People Of God Considered As All Righteous'³³ It is acknowledged in a note at the beginning of the Discourse that these are three separate sermons but only one date is appended to them: 'Preached at Glasgow, April 1745'. It is also acknowledged that they were considered to be controversial when they first published one month after they were first preached, apparently because in places Erskine had targeted specific people. His aim for the sermons was: 'as warnings against the delusions of the mere Moralist, on the one hand; and of the Enthusiast and Antinomian on the other.'³⁴

It is not clear what circumstances gave rise to these sermons but this was a time during Erskine's ministry in Kirkintilloch when he was involved in controversy on a number of fronts. He was sympathetic to the events in Kilsyth and Cambuslang³⁵ which were a

³² Erskine, *Discourses*, pp. 240 -261

³³ *Ibid.* pp.279 - 311

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.279

³⁵ Religious revivals which took place in 1742.

matter of concern to many in the Church. He deals in detail with the issues involved in his pamphlet *The Signs of the Times Considered*. His friendship with George Whitefield and his willingness to have him preach in Kirkintilloch was also a problem to many people for a number of reasons. His response to this is contained in *A Fair And Impartial Account Of The Debate In The Synod Of Glasgow And Air, Sixth October 1748, Anent Employing Mr Whitefield*. It may have been necessary, then, for Erskine to be continually making it clear where he stood in the sometimes complex theological spectrum which existed in the Scotland of his time. Moreover, it is clear not only from the *Discourses* but also the *Theological Dissertations* that Erskine was always willing to enter areas of controversy in order to correct beliefs which were not consistent with authentic Christianity as he understood it from the Scriptures and the traditions of the Church.

The text is taken to be a prophecy of the Church and Erskine's task is to explain how the Church is to be regarded as 'righteous'. He first of all defines righteousness:

those only having that honourable title given them in most passages of 'holy writ' who have an imputed righteousness to found their claim to heaven.. and who give evidence that this is their true character, by abounding in the outward fruits of righteousness, to the divine praise and glory.³⁶

The three sermons expand on this, drawing on a wide range of textual support from the whole of Scripture. It is basically a series preached on a common theme which aims to show that righteousness can be imputed; that righteousness is not humanly achieved; and that those God has made righteous have the responsibility to show that righteousness in the way they live their lives.

Another important and controversial theme which Erskine addresses over three sermons is that of 'election', an issue which sharply divided the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century. These appear under the title 'Power Given To Christ For Blessing The Elect'.³⁷ This time, however, we do not merely see the exploration of a theme but an in depth exposition of a particular text: 'As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as though hast given him.' (John 17:2)

From this, Erskine seeks to explain the gift of the elect to Christ from the Father; the power over all humankind given to Christ by the Father; the eternal life which shall be given to the elect; and the connection of Christ's power over all humankind, with his giving eternal life to those given him by the Father.

These are all principles connected to the theme of 'election' but they also arise directly from the text and therefore the sermons can be said to be expository.

³⁶ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.280

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.455- 492

There is little evidence of *lectio continua* in Erskine's *Discourses* although he has occasion to commend it. The first volume contains five consecutive discourses, X-XV, which have been grouped together, probably due to a common textual source. Discourse X constitutes two sermons based on 1 Timothy 3: 15-16. Discourses XI-XV embrace four sermons based on 1 Timothy 3: 16. It is not obvious, however, that these constitute a six sermon expository series. The two sermons in Discourse X may have been one short series and Discourses XI-XV another distinctive series. Evidence for the latter is found in Discourse XIV where Erskine says at the beginning: 'We set before you, last opportunity...' ³⁸ and then makes reference to Discourse XIII.

It is more likely that what we see in the *Discourses* is Erskine following the tradition of the 'ordinary' where a passage from Scripture would form the basis of the preaching over an extended period of time.

In 'Ministers Cautioned Against Giving Offence'³⁹ which was preached before the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale in 1763, he condemns as 'evil' the practice of preaching without due attention to the chosen text. As a corrective against this, he commends preaching on 'large portions of Scripture'. Some of the advantages he sees in this method are rehearsed elsewhere in this thesis but here it is worth noting the benefit which would fall both to preacher and people in that together they would 'grow better acquainted with the lively oracles, and learn to read them more profitably.'⁴⁰ It is, however, a method that is more likely to benefit hearers and elicit a positive response from them:

short, occasional hints, which naturally arise in our ordinary course of expounding a gospel or an epistle, may fall with weight on our hearers ere they are aware, and force conviction.⁴¹

This gradual but persistent exposure to the truth is to be preferred as more subtly engaging than the verbal hammer-blows which might fall on 'vulgar prejudices or fashionable vices'. Erskine perceives that this can result in hearers hardening their hearts against the preaching and pithily observes: 'The heart is a fort more easily taken by sap than by storm'.

This would seem to indicate that Erskine favoured *lectio continua*. The lack of evidence for this in the *Discourses* is probably due to the fact that most of the sermons contained in the two volumes are 'occasional' in that they were prepared for particular services.

³⁸ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.417

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46 - 80

⁴⁰ Erskine, *Discourses*, p. 52

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.52-53

Chapter 8: The Times.

If John Erskine is mentioned at all in any history of eighteenth century Scotland it is usually in connection with his controversial pamphlet: *Shall I go to war with my American brethren?* It was published anonymously in London in 1769 and again in Edinburgh in 1776. In this he makes it clear that if he were speaking from a pulpit:

I should remember, that my business there was not to discuss political questions, and to determine the disputed rights of sovereigns and subjects, but to explain and inculcate the great truths and duties of our holy religion...¹

Erskine was very conscious of this most pressing of priorities and yet he believed that there were times when it was necessary for the preacher to uphold the honour of God by addressing critical events which have occurred in the nation or the wider world. Preaching at the Admission of David Black as Minister of Lady Yester's Kirk on 20th November 1794 he said:

Counsels equally necessary at all times, are the most important, and should be the most fervent subjects of sermons. Yet counsels peculiarly adopted to the times, have their importance, and the withholding of them may diminish our usefulness...When political opinions spread, seducing subjects to undermine, under pretense of improving, an excellent constitution, and to rebel against their rightful Sovereign because they see not the wisdom of certain measures of government, we ought occasionally to exhibit scripture principles and precepts, which demonstrate the falsehood of such opinions, and the guilt and danger of such practices.²

Perhaps the most powerful example of Erskine addressing 'the times' is the sermon entitled: 'The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy' which was published as a pamphlet in 1793 and was later included in Volume 2 of the Discourses. In his Preface to the sermon, Erskine alludes to the 'mobbish spirit' which had appeared in Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland in May and June of 1792. He had given 'public warning' against this, presumably in his preaching, but in the end it seemed to subside sufficiently for him to believe that the crisis had passed. It was events in Paris on 10th August 1792 which moved him to preach 'The Fatal Consequences' and by this time 'the melancholy transactions at Paris, 2d and 3d September' were taking place. It was as a consequence of these events and the general unease they caused that Erskine was asked to publish his sermon.

The reasons for the 'mobbish spirit' in Scotland in May and June Of 1792 are complex.

¹ Erskine, John. *Shall I Go To War With My American Brethren?*, London, 1769, 1776, p.7

² Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.103-104

There was a growing movement for the extension of the franchise throughout Great Britain at this time. In the Spring of 1792 a modest proposal for reform was talked out of parliament. This was not a new occurrence, nor was it unexpected. There had been regular attempts in the past, usually sponsored by Richard Sheridan (1751-1816), MP for Stafford, which had all met a similar fate and which did not move the population to any great protest. On this occasion, however, there was discontent and resentment in several places in Scotland. Henry Dundas (1742-1811), Home Secretary and the government's 'manager' for Scotland, was burnt in effigy in Aberdeen, Dundee, Perth and Brechin. The mob went on the rampage in Edinburgh for three days during the King's birthday celebration in June 1792 and the windows in Dundas' house were broken, along with those of his nephew, Robert, the Lord Advocate.

The modern Scottish historian Thomas Devine is not convinced that these disturbances can wholly be blamed on political discontent. Economic and social factors had a part to play. For instance, corn prices had risen to their highest for a decade and agricultural improvement had caused massive disruption to people's lives. There is no doubt, however, that people were angry with the government and its refusal to consider even the most modest reform proposals. This anger was taken out on the most high profile government official in the land, Henry Dundas.³

The events in Paris of 10th August 1792 which moved Erskine to preach 'The Fatal Consequences' refer to the fall of the monarchy in France in the wake of great disturbances amongst the population as the Revolution of 1789 advanced. This subsequently led to the 'melancholy transactions at Paris, 2d and 3d September' commonly known as 'The September Massacres'. They actually extended until 5th September.

In the wake of 10th August more than a thousand people were taken into custody. The vast majority were 'refractory priests' including the Archbishop of Arles and the bishops of Saintes and Beauvais. There were also royalist writers, personal servants of the King and Queen and members of the nobility. By mid-August France was under military threat from Prussia and these prisoners were denounced by certain leaders of the Revolution as the 'enemy within' who could influence the common criminals in the prisons against the Revolution. It was widely rumoured that as men left Paris for the front there would be a breakout from the prisons.

As news reached Paris that Verdun had fallen and the road to the city lay open to the Prussian army, there was an increasing demand for the death of the imprisoned conspirators. In the ensuing attacks on the city prisons and other places of incarceration

³ Devine, T.M. *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000*, London, Penguin, 2000, pp.204-205

1,400 people were killed in cold blood including Princess de Lamballe, a friend of the Queen, who was hacked to pieces after interrogation by an improvised court.

The British press spared no details in their descriptions of these events but still there was support within Scotland for the ideals of the Revolution. When the French army defeated the invading Prussians, there were renewed demonstrations throughout Scotland: 'the erection of liberty poles, the wearing of the red cap of liberty, public rioting and the burning in effigy of the leading Scottish politician Henry Dundas.' ⁴

Dundas believed that the collapse of public order was imminent and for people like Erskine who believed in a divinely ordered society with a place for monarchy and aristocracy there was considerable alarm .

Erskine's response is to turn to Isaiah 24: 1-5:

Behold the Lord maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof.

And it shall be, as with the people, and so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usuary, so with the giver of usuary with him.

The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled:

For the Lord hath spoken this word.

The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish.

The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.

Erskine declares his ignorance with regard to the historical background to this passage but he believes that it reflects what was going on in France at that time and gives God's people an opportunity to reflect on the fatal consequences of anarchy and to trace the sources 'that you may avoid the conduct which tends to these calamities'. ⁵

Under consequences, Erskine sees anarchy as 'levelling all ranks' and therefore transgresses a 'a great law of nature and of the God of nature' ⁶ It is his view that when lawful government is working well everyone benefits from the highest to the lowest. It is part of God's plan for humankind that there be differences in ability and opportunity and that these promote security and happiness. Erskine draws on his text to show that anarchy turns divinely-ordered social relationships upside down:

⁴ Murdoch, A.J. ' French Revolution, age of the' in *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. Michael Lynch, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.250

⁵ Erskine, John. *The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy*, Edinburgh, M. Gray, 1793, p.4

⁶ Ibid.

And so it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usuary, so with the giver of usuary to him.

In Erskine's mind, there is no doubt that these conditions are a sign of God's judgement on a nation in the same way that they were a sign to Israel.

Erskine then proceeds to make a point from social and political history. He argues that the work of anarchists provokes their worst enemies and hardens their hearts still further against much needed reform:

Ill-judged, and unconstitutional measures in the last century, for redressing real grievances, and checking the usurpations of the prince, inflamed the evils they meant to remove; introduced a new form of tyranny; paved the way for restoring monarchy; and gave the monarch signal advantages, for acquiring, and transmitting to his successors, absolute and unlimited authority.⁷

Here he is undoubtedly referring to Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who became Lord Protector on the execution of Charles I (1600-1649). Erskine obviously believes that the excesses of Cromwell created a new sympathy for monarchy which allowed Charles II to reign with a more authoritarian hand than his father.

Before he deals with the sources of anarchy, Erskine feels he has to clarify his own position in relation to politics in the pulpit: 'Should the pulpit canvas the propriety of political measures, about which the wise and good think differently?'⁸ The answer is no, but he believes that there are principles in 'the sacred volume' which may be relevant to public debate and they must not be withheld. What Erskine seems to envisage is that in the normal course of a preaching ministry these principles will arise and the preacher would not be fulfilling his duty if he held them back:

The teacher who keeps back from his hearers nothing profitable, but declares to them the whole counsel of God, will sometimes illustrate those portions of the sacred volume: and surely, their applicableness to questions which excite general attention, renders this not reasonable.⁹

Turning to the sources of anarchy, Erskine sees it first and foremost as a general spirit of lawlessness which has come about because reason has been flouted and Scripture neglected. Anarchy is not open to what reason and Scripture teach but 'acts in passion' without considering consequences.'¹⁰ It happens when people lead undisciplined lives

⁷ Erskine, *The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy*, p.9

⁸ Ibid., p.10

⁹ Ibid., p.11

¹⁰ *The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy*, p.11

and here he speaks of rulers who are neglectful of their responsibilities and are morally careless. They create a climate of resentment among the people which is a danger to order. A violent, vindictive spirit takes hold which is against the 'peaceableness and union' prescribed by reason and Scripture.

In the end, though, the source of anarchy for Erskine lies in the condition of the human heart and its tendency to flout 'the great laws of religion'.¹¹ Christianity promotes love of God and neighbour. Where this is resisted we inevitably have an unstable society:

Without justice, integrity and kindness, in the various intercourses and connexions of life, there is no social happiness...Where there is no religion, the firmest support of government is removed, the surest bond of social union is broken, and a wide door is opened for vice to enter, and to usher in disorder and misery.¹²

Only Christianity can attack the cause of anarchy at its very root and maintain a stable society. Erskine returned to this theme in 'The Blessing of Christian Teachers' preached in 1794:

In this dangerous crisis, when without are fightings, and within are fears, men should be excited to turn to Him who threatens to smite, and to seek the Lord with the whole heart. Personal reformation should be exhibited, as necessary for national reformation, and for preventing national ruin.¹³

He is not specific about the 'dangerous crisis' but this was a time of some considerable political and social tension in Scotland, perhaps especially in Edinburgh. The movement for reform of the franchise was gathering momentum. Tom Paine's 'Rights of Man' with its call for universal suffrage had a wide readership throughout Britain. By the end of 1793 it had sold 200,000 copies. Reform societies began to gather more support and in July 1792 the Scottish Association of the Friends of the People was founded in Edinburgh. It consisted mainly of skilled craftsmen who wished to see reform of the franchise and to this end promoted the democratic ideals of the French.

This created some anxiety within the political establishment of Scotland. Events in France were becoming more and more extreme, not to say bloody, and when France declared war on Britain in February 1793 the reformers, were branded as the enemy within and many suffered retribution. Devine quotes John Brims:

'Lawyers of allegedly "Jacobin" sympathies were deprived of briefs, radical journeymen and school-teachers were dismissed from their employments, and master tradesmen and shopkeepers of democratic political views were boycotted.'¹⁴

¹¹ *The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy*, p.35

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.35-36.

¹³ Erskine, *Discourses*, p.103.

¹⁴ Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700 - 2000*, p.208.

Devine himself adds: 'Ministers of the Church of Scotland and the dissenting congregations railed from their pulpits and roundly condemned parliamentary reform as a threat to the very existence of Christianity'.¹⁵

When the British Convention of the Friends of the People met in November 1793 it was to adopt a more radical stance. It passed resolutions supporting universal adult male suffrage and annual parliaments, adopted French styles such as 'citizen' and 'section' and agreed to organize popular resistance if liberties were threatened. These provocations seemed to confirm the conservative conviction that the reformers were revolutionaries at heart, supported by a foreign power and this made it easier for the authorities to act against them.

The Convention was ordered to disperse but continued to sit. The leaders were arrested and sentenced to 14 years transportation to Botany Bay. There was little popular opposition to these verdicts. It was perceived that the Convention was guilty of fomenting revolution on the French model during a time of war with the French enemy and for that it deserved dissolution and the leaders severe punishment.

In Scotland a plot was uncovered to mount a revolutionary coup in Edinburgh. This was the so-called 'Pike Plot' which was conceived by Robert Watt, an ex-government spy. The pikes to be used in this attempt and which were found in Watt's home allegedly belonged to the British Convention. Says Devine:

In the fevered atmosphere of the time, Watt and one David Downie were tried for high treason. Downie was reprieved but Watt was found guilty and executed at the tollbooth of Edinburgh, the only Scot put to death during the revolutionary era.¹⁶

The execution took place in October 1794, one month before Erskine's sermon at David Black's Admission to Lady Yester's Kirk. This would explain his reference to 'this dangerous crisis' and his warnings against those who seek

to undermine, under pretense of improving, an excellent constitution, and to rebel against their rightful Sovereign, because they see not the wisdom of certain measures of government.¹⁷

Erskine is revealed as a political conservative who believes society to be divinely-ordered for the well-being of all its subjects. Therefore any attempt to change that order, whether by violence or persuasion, is to be regarded as a Godless act. Only by honouring God and His Word can a society be truly happy and stable. The human heart has a natural tendency to work against the will of God in every aspect of life producing the

¹⁵ Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700 - 2000*, p. 208

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.209.

¹⁷ Erskine, *Discourses*, pp.103-104

selfishness, disruption and strife which undermine the life of a nation. The solution to this is a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which can only happen when the Gospel is faithfully preached by ministers and honoured by those who hear.

Chapter 9: From Text To Sermon.

This chapter will attempt to identify Erskine's method of preparing and delivering a sermon. From advice given to other ministers in sermons and charges this always began in the study with prayer, then there would be a careful examination of the chosen text or passage.

It is not clear that Erskine always wrote out his sermons in full. The published sermons would seem to suggest this but since it is acknowledged by Moncrieff Wellwood that the first volume was prepared for the press by Erskine and the second volume by Moncrieff Wellwood himself, the author being prevented by age and health, it may be that in their original form the sermons were not actually written out in full.

In the Preface to 'The Fatal Consequences of Anarchy', Erskine admits that this particular sermon in its original form was not written and gives us a glimpse into his normal preparation methods:

Though I neither approve, nor practise, going to the pulpit, without studying my subject as health and leisure allow; this sermon, like many I have preached for some years past, was not written. ¹

It was only after he had been approached by the Lord Provost of Edinburgh and the Kirk Session of Old Greyfriars that he wrote out the sermon from memory and prepared it for publication, but only after a gap of several months due to ill health.

From this we see that it was not always Erskine's practice to prepare for the pulpit by writing out his sermons in full. It is certainly the case from contemporary reports that he never read from a full manuscript but always had before him a scrap of paper with notes. The fullest account of his pulpit practice can be found in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Guy Mannering* where we are told: 'The sermon was not read; a scrap of paper containing the head of the discourse was occasionally referred to...' ²

This concurs with an account of a Communion season in Lockerbie where Erskine was the guest preacher and it was noticed with some dismay that he had a scrap of paper before him while he preached:

While he did not read his sermon, he had a slip of paper in front of him, on which were

¹ Erskine, John. *The Fatal Consequences And The General Sources Of Anarchy*, p.iii.

² Scott, *Guy Mannering Volume II*, p.87

written the heads of his address. This was almost as great an offence as reading the whole sermon, as it betrayed the fact that the preacher had no inspiration from heaven. Besides, they argued, how could a "paper" preacher expect ordinary folk to mind his sermon when he, with all his learning, could not remember it himself?' ³

'Paper' preaching was a major issue for many people in the eighteenth century. A pamphlet published in 1744 entitled *Reading No Preaching* gives us some idea of the depth of feeling produced by 'paper' preaching. The original pamphlet was anonymous although it was later attributed to one Roderick Mackenzie. It refers to the practice in England at the time but it can be assumed that similar arguments would be current in Scotland. The author makes a clear distinction between reading and speaking and argues that the Gospel was not meant to be read but spoken or preached. He provides scriptural backing for this in the practice of Moses, Jesus and the Apostles. At the heart of his argument, however, is the belief that reading 'leaves not the Freedom of Access for the Spirit of Grace, which alone, makes preaching the Gospel effectual to the Salvation of Souls.' ⁴ The Holy Spirit has been promised to believers to lead them to truth.

Consequently:

if Ministers should confine the Spirit of God, to suggest to them in Private, all that they were to read in Publick, and in Fact to deny him Access to lead them to one fresh Thought in Time of Action, only ask a Blessing from him, on what he is said to give in Private; I think it were but just, that he neither should give them in Private, nor bless what he gave not; because Vanity and the ensnaring Fear of Man, prevailed with them to rob him of his Publick work, in order to perform their own the better.⁵

The author comes very close in this and a subsequent pamphlet called *Reading Is Not Preaching* published in 1781 to suggesting that God will not bless the delivery of a 'paper' sermon'. He goes as far as to suggest that a person who cannot hold in his memory the heads of a sermon along with supporting Scripture verses and speak for half and hour ought never to preach.⁶ He contends that 'paper-priests' are the cause of the lamentable spiritual state of England. He writes:

What is the reason that England is so profane, so guilty of blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking, as soon as they come out of the place of worship? Why, it is because they do not enjoy the pure preaching of the gospel, but only hear a dry paper read by their priests; and it being a dead thing of itself, cannot bring life into either priest or people, and so the Spirit of Christ, which is the life of ordinances and souls, breathe not on their paper-means of man's devising, contrary to his own: therefore the souls of the people remain dead in

³ Henderson, Thomas. *Lockerbie: A Narrative Of Village Life In Bygone Days*, Lockerbie, Herald Press, 1937, p.163

⁴ Mackenzie, Roderick. *Reading No Preaching - Or, A Letter To A Young Clergyman From A Friend In London Concerning The Unwarrantable Practice Of Reading The Gospel Instead Of Preaching It*, London, J. Oswald, 1744, p.14

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29

the valley of their paper-vision...⁷

It was views like these which worked against Erskine as he preached in Lockerbie. We do not have a record of his own views on the subject but obviously from the persistence of his practice we can say he did not feel that his scraps of paper were any barrier to authentic preaching.

Erskine's accent and pronunciation are a subject for comment in contemporary accounts of his preaching. Scott refers to: 'the enunciation, which at first seemed imperfect and embarrassed' and judges that 'the discourse could not be quoted as a correct specimen of pulpit eloquence'⁸ Thomas Sommerville considered Erskine to be the most 'practical and useful' preacher he had ever heard despite the pronunciation which he deemed 'harsh and monotonous'.⁹ William Anderson writes a warm appreciation of the quality and effect of Erskine's preaching but says:

As a public speaker he was too little attentive to those external recommendations, which give the great charm to many preachers. His pronunciation was uncommonly broad...Neither were his sermons distinguished by studied elegance of language, or by the higher graces of eloquence...¹⁰

In his sermon preached in Old Greyfriars on the Sunday after Erskine's funeral which included a warm appreciation of his qualities, Dr. Thomas Davidson nevertheless remarked:

His manner in the pulpit was not graceful, and it had the disadvantage of being accompanied with a broader pronunciation than is now common among well-educated men, even in this country...¹¹

That this merited a mention in the course of a tribute shows that this was an issue of some importance for the professional and literary people of Edinburgh in the latter half of the eighteenth century. It became something of a cause for the Select Society formed in 1754 by the painter Allan Ramsay (1713-84) along with the philosopher David Hume and Adam Smith. The initial objects of the Society were literary discussion, philosophical inquiry and improvement in the art of public speaking. The membership aspired to make their mark on the British and colonial stage and while they had no desire to abandon their Scottish national culture they believed that in order to be taken seriously by their southern counterparts they had to adopt the southern English style of speech. This was the

⁷ Mackenzie, Roderick. *Reading Is Not Preaching; Or A Letter To All Reading Clergymen Concerning The Unwarrantable Practise Of Reading The Gospel Instead Of Preaching It In The Pulpit, Part II*, London, 1781, p.3

⁸ Scott, *Guy Mannering Volume 2*, p.87

⁹ Sommerville, *My Own Life And Times*, pp.61-62

¹⁰ Anderson, *The Scottish Nation Volume II*, p. 163

¹¹ Davidson, Thomas. 'An Account Of The Author' in Erskine, *Theological Dissertations*, p. xiii.

language of intellectual debate, business, politics and loyalty to the Crown. So, according to James Buchan in *Capital Of The Mind*, Henry Home, Lord Kames, spoke in Scots dialect in his normal conversation but when he was elevated to the bench in 1752 used a language that 'approached to English'. Buchan also notes that David Hume's letters are

peppered with warnings against purely Scottish usages, such as 'park' instead of 'enclosure' and 'compliment' instead of 'a present'. He drew up a list of Scotticisms to be avoided which was published in the *Scots Magazine*.¹²

In his *Autobiography*, Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle expresses his gratitude to a widowed aunt who came from London to stay with his family when he was around 6 years old: 'She staid with us for a year, and during that time taught me to read English, with just pronunciation and a very tolerable accent - an accomplishment which in those days was very rare'.¹³

The Select Society's campaign to promote 'polite English' culminated in them importing Englishmen to teach correct pronunciation. In 1761, the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan who had trained Scottish lawyers to perform at the bar in London gave a series of sixteen lectures in Edinburgh to audiences which sometimes touched three hundred. As a result of this the Select Society launched a fund to import English-language teachers to Edinburgh under the name of 'The Society for promoting the reading and speaking of the English Language in Scotland.' The fund stood for something like four years but subscribers eventually fell away and it folded in 1765.

None of this seems to have had any effect on Erskine who retained an accent and pronunciation which grated on some ears but does not seem to have impaired the effectiveness of his preaching. James Boswell (1740-95) was a member of the Select Society and a great admirer of Thomas Sheridan. After attending his lectures on correct pronunciation he wrote in his Journal on 28 November 1762 that Sheridan is 'a man of great genius and understands propriety of speech better than anybody'.¹⁴ Yet, Boswell was also an admirer of Erskine and does not seem to have found his accent and pronunciation a barrier to appreciation. We know from his Journals that Erskine baptised his son James on 11th October 1775¹⁵ and he attended worship on 24th November 1776 where he considered himself 'edified by Dr Erskine'.¹⁶

From contemporary accounts it would appear that any imperfections in Erskine's manner

¹² Buchan, James. *Capital Of The Mind*, London, John Murray, 2003, p.129

¹³ Carlyle, *Autobiography*, p.4

¹⁴ Milne, Hugh M. *Boswell's Edinburgh Journals 1767-1786*, Edinburgh, Mercat Press, 2003, p.22.

¹⁵ Milne, *Boswell's Edinburgh Journals 1767 -1786*, p.198

¹⁶ Milne, *Boswells Edinburgh Journals 1767 -1786*, p.275

and pronunciation in the pulpit were far outweighed by the substance of the message and the effectiveness of his delivery. This is perhaps best illustrated by Thomas Somerville's brief comparison of Erskine and his colleague Dr William Robertson. While Robertson excelled in explanation, illustration and application and always had a logical order to his argument, Erskine was the more effective and above any preacher of Somerville's experience:

Dr Erskine's aspect was austere, his pronunciation harsh and monotonous, his composition defective in elegance and correctness; but the solidity of the matter, the weight of his arguments, the perspicuity of his expression, the fervour and earnestness of his address, much more than atoned for these minor imperfections.¹⁷

In one of the three sermons which appears under the title 'Directions For Hearing Sermons', Erskine himself is eager to make the point that in the delivery of a sermon it is the 'matter' that is of supreme importance above the language used, the delivery employed and the voice. For him, too many people were assessing sermons in the same way they would assess a poem, a play or a novel and giving undue weight to the superficial:

Here it is necessary to observe, that affections, raised by sermons, will not avail us, if the weight and importance of the matter is not the source.¹⁸

¹⁷ Somerville, *My Own Life And Times*, pp. 61-62

¹⁸ *Discourses*, p.194

Chapter 10: Conclusion.

John Erskine is part of a long tradition of Christian preaching which has its roots in the covenant community of Israel. Within that community it was believed that God gave messages to individual men and women which when preached were regarded as the Word of God. Sometimes these messages came from prophets who were seen as directly inspired by God but there were also authorised teachers whose main role was to expound the written Law. This was regarded as a declaration of the Word of God and is exemplified by the post-exilic priest Ezra as he appears in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Under his ministry the Law was read and expounded systematically.

This tradition of *lectio continua* was at the heart of synagogue worship and was a formative influence on the development of Christian preaching. Accounts of Christian worship in the second century include the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, the Gospels and the Epistles as well as the Old Testament. Moreover, the great Christian preachers of this period saw their task as essentially the systematic exposition of Scripture. It is thought that in the course of his ministry John Chrysostom preached through most of the Bible.

This model of preaching waned in the Middle Ages but was revived by the Continental Reformers in the sixteenth century. Zwingli and Calvin preached through entire books of the Bible and set a standard for all preachers in the Reformed tradition. There was a particularly strong commitment to this in Scotland where important figures like George Wishart and John Knox had come under the influence of Calvin. Erskine commends *lectio continua* as a means of gradually exposing congregations to the whole range of Biblical truth¹ although there is little evidence of it in the *Discourses*.

The central concern of Reformed preaching, however, was not with methodology but that the living Word of God might be heard. Consequently there was a strong conviction that when a preacher prayerfully studies Scripture, comes into contact with divine truth and then shares that truth in the power of the Holy Spirit, then the Word of God is being declared. Christ is present in the midst of his people and all the benefits of his life, death and resurrection are available to the hearers.

This emerges strongly from John Erskine's *Discourses*. He is expressing a deeply held conviction when he says to his congregation in New Greyfriars: 'It is Christ that speaks to you by us.'² Thus it is essential to the spiritual well-being of the people of God that they

¹ *Discourses*, p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

are served by a committed preaching ministry. Not that Erskine ever saw the congregation as passive. He followed Calvin in his belief that preaching is an act of the whole Church and therefore we find in the *Discourses* instruction on how to listen to preaching and apply it to our lives. It is in the reception and application of the Word that the preaching event is complete. Only then is the congregation 'edified', that is strengthened in the faith and prepared for service.

For some, however, the preaching will be a call to 'saving faith'. Erskine was openly evangelistic in his preaching since he believed that not all who outwardly professed faith had experienced that 'saving faith' which brought them into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. In this Erskine could be seen to be close to the Pietist emphasis on religious experience which had been influential in Protestant Churches throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unlike the Pietists, however, Erskine valued structure in his preaching. Indeed, the structure of his sermons in the *Discourses* is not far from that which would be favoured by those of the Moderate tendency in the eighteenth century Church of Scotland. In this he risked the disapproval of some in his own Evangelical Party but shows that he was not content to be restricted by a particular method in his attempts to communicate the Gospel. This reminds us of the early Christian preachers who were willing to press Rhetoric into the service of the Gospel.

While it could be argued that Erskine's main concern was with the spiritual health of the individual he did not shy away from social and political comment when he deemed it appropriate. Indeed, he would argue that national and international upheaval were related to 'infidelity' within the Church and the low spiritual temperature of the nation in general. It was through these upheavals that God was showing his displeasure and calling upon humankind to turn to him in faith. Thus the role of the preacher is crucial not only to the well-being of the Church but also to the nation and the world. It is the preacher who in the power of the Spirit makes known the mind of God, convinces people of their need of salvation and sets forth the possibility of spiritual renewal. It is this conviction which leads Erskine to say:

Know, then, that preaching and hearing the word are the chief means of extending the Redeemer's empire, and of, advancing his honour. Faithful ministers are the glory of Christ.³

³ *Discourses*, p.168.

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