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HIGHER RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

History Text Book.

ACCOUNT GIVEN OF THE FIRST SECESSION.

BY ANNA ROSS.

SO far back as 1646, a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* had been published by Edward Fisher, an Oxford Master of Arts. A copy of this work had found its way into a humble cottage in the now suppressed parish of Simprin, of which Thomas Boston was minister at the end of the 17th century. Boston read the book, was delighted with it, and lent it to friends. One of these, James Hog, minister of Carnock, thought so highly of it, that in 1718 he republished it with a preface. Discussion was prevailing at the time concerning the unguarded language which some preachers used as to 'the needlessness of forsaking sin in order to come to Christ.' There can be no doubt that these excellent men intended to encourage holiness, not to depreciate it; but their language gave ample opportunity for such misconstructions. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was supposed to inculcate this dangerous doctrine, and immediately it attracted attention. It was denounced from many pulpits; and in 1720 the General Assembly condemned its teaching, and enjoined its ministers 'to warn and exhort their people in whose hands the said book is, or may come, not to read or use the same.' Against this decision Ebenezer Erskine, minister of Portmoak, and others protested. For this protest they were rebuked by the General Assembly of 1722; but even in accepting the rebuke, they asserted that they would still consider it lawful 'to bear testimony unto the truths condemned.'

Erskine was doomed to come into yet more deadly collision with the church. The General Assembly of 1732, having enacted as a modification of the law of patronage that a minister should be chosen by 'the majority of the elders and heritors, if Protestants,' considerable dissatisfaction was aroused. No voice was given to congregations, and the patrons did not require to belong to the Scottish Church. The Assembly was thus virtually stamping with approval what had been previously accepted as a mere expedient. The new 'defection,' as it seemed to him, roused the indignation of Erskine, who was now minister of Stirling. As Moderator of the Synod of Perth and Stirling, he preached a sermon attacking the measure and its promoters so vehemently that the Synod, instead of the customary thanks, gave him a vote of censure. He appealed to the Assembly, which more strongly confirmed the censure of the Synod. Lodging an indignant protest against this treatment, Erskine and three other ministers who adhered to his protest were summoned to appear before the Commission of Assembly, and, as they showed no symptoms of submission, it was agreed

by the casting vote of the Moderator 'to proceed immediately to inflict a higher censure.' To this higher censure of deposition they did not wait; but in December 1733 formed themselves into an 'Associate Presbytery' at Gaviney Bridge, near Kinross. Although refusing to hold communion with the ministers of the Church, they continued in possession of their own pulpits. The feeling gained ground that they had been summarily dealt with; the sentence of deposition was not carried out, the enactments which had specially excited their hostility were repealed, they were invited to resume their old seats in the several Presbyteries, and Ebenezer Erskine was eventually elected Moderator of the Presbytery of Stirling; but all to no purpose. The Seceders were intractable. If they were at first treated with undue harshness it is only fair to say that they were afterwards treated with amazing leniency and patience. Having tried every conceivable method of reconciliation, the weary Church at length deposed them in 1740. They were good men and this result must be regretted; but it was mainly due to their own unreasonableness.

"When Whitfield came to Scotland, the Seceders who had at first been inclined to welcome him, would have nothing to do with him. When they found that he would preach for others as well as for them. The repeal of the cruel laws against witchcraft appeared to them amongst those evils which cried to heaven for judgment upon the nation. Possessed with the conviction that they alone were 'the Lord's people,' they were split from one another as violently as they had split from the Church. A controversy arose as to whether it was lawful for burgesses to take an oath that they adhered 'to the true religion presently professed within this realm, and authorized by the laws thereof.' Those who believed that it was lawful were called Burghers; those who believed that it was unlawful were called Anti-Burghers. The strife went from less to more till the parties would have no fellowship with each other. The fact which would be strangely ludicrous were it not strangely mournful remains, that at the time of his death in 1754, Ebenezer Erskine himself had been for four years excommunicated by the Anti-Burgher section: 'Cast out from the communion of the Church of Christ, declared to be of those whom the Lord Christ commanded to be holden by all and every one of the faithful as heathen men and publicans, delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.'"

Unless I am much mistaken, there are those in the United Church to whom the names of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine are fragrant, I would like to know if they consider the above to be a *fair* account of their controversy with the Church of Scotland. Is it one they would be willing for their children to take as the authentic version by means of which to judge of other accounts? The "memory of the just is blessed," and it ought to be blessed and not distorted. My child receives a serious hurt who is prepossessed in his early days with false or ungenerous impressions concerning the life and work of such a man as Ebenezer Erskine.