

SCOTTISH THEOLOGY

IN RELATION TO
CHURCH HISTORY SINCE
THE REFORMATION

John Macleod

The Academy in the Service of Christ and His People

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VII. THE 18TH-CENTURY CONTRAST— EVANGELICALS AND MODERATES

1. JOHN MACLAURIN

WE have looked at representative divines of the beginning of the 18th century and of its first third in speaking of Thomas Halyburton and Thomas Boston. They had a younger contemporary who lived into the second half of the century, whose name calls for special notice. The third of the succession of the John Browns among the Seceders did not stand quite side by side with his conservative forebears on the old ground that they held. He parted company with the definite doctrinal tradition for which his grandfather of Haddington had stood. It was not, then, so significant as it would be if he had held to the theology of his family that in his edition of Maclaurin's Essays he recognises the author, John Maclaurin of Glasgow, to have been the leading theologian of Scotland in the 18th century. In forming such an estimate he was not far out. And yet Maclaurin was not the founder of a school nor has he left extensive literary remains to tell of his activity with the pen. But what he did was eminently well done, and there is one piece of his work in particular that, as a classic in the homiletic department, shows the application of Scottish Theology at its best. It is his Sermon on *Glorying in the Cross of Christ*. Of this discourse, Dr Robert S. Candlish is reported to have said that it was the greatest sermon ever preached. Such words are a hyperbole: the praise is exaggerated. The sermon, however, is a noble monument of rich doctrinal and Evangelical teaching such as the Scottish pulpit has never surpassed. Though it is the best known of Maclaurin's works, it can hardly be said to excel his Sermon on *The Sins of Men not chargeable to God*. This masterly discourse was preached

by its author when he was still a young man of under 30, ministering in the quiet country parish of Luss on the side of the lovely Loch Lomond. The parish of Luss in Maclaurin's time, that is, over 200 years ago, was still one in which the minister's main work would be done in the Gaelic language. His hearers were plain country folk. Yet for such an audience he prepared a sermon which, for profundity and compression of thought, will bear comparison with the best compacted work of his contemporary, Bishop Joseph Butler. In contrast, however, with Butler's works, it shows, as everything that Maclaurin did showed, how permeated with the salt of the Evangel all his teaching was. He ranked amongst the most highly cultivated men of his generation. Born in the manse of Glendaruel in Cowal in the county of Argyll, he took his University course at Glasgow and finished his theological studies in Holland. In his ministry he carried out the traditions of the pure Theology that still prevailed in the schools of the Netherlands, a Theology which was, as a scheme of Christian teaching, his own hereditary treasure. For the first generation of post-Revolution ministers of the Synod of Argyll in the circles in which his father and uncle moved were worthy specimens of the Evangelical and Covenanting ministry of Scotland who found a shelter under the kindly Protestant shield of the great family of Argyll. To this class belonged his father, whom he lost when young, and his father's brother, the minister of Kilfinan, on the shores of Loch Fyne, in whose manse and under whose care he and his brother Colin were brought up. This brother, the friend and interpreter of Sir Isaac Newton, was as much distinguished in the field of pure science as the minister was in his own walk of life. For Colin Maclaurin was the outstanding mathematician of his native country in the 18th century. The intellectual gifts of the brothers were of the highest order.

There are two strains that were intertwined in the teaching of the young minister of Luss, who afterwards was better known as the minister of the Ramshorn Kirk in Glasgow, a Church that is now called St David's. These

strains were the Evangelical and the Apologetic. The men who are conspicuous for the place that they give to the Apologetic side of Christian truth do not often excel in the richness of their vein of Gospel preaching. In Maclaurin, however, both veins are found. He sensed what an unbelieving age needed and he laid himself out in delivering his message to commend it, not only to the heart but to the head. And in doing so he shunned that rusticity of speech and pronunciation that was still a common thing among the Scottish ministry and that served to repel the more educated classes and to prejudice them against the plain message of the pulpit. This profound thinker, with his firmly knit and compact thought, was one of the best-known preachers of the Gospel of his time, one of the leaders in religious revival, and one of the correspondents of Jonathan Edwards, whom in many respects he resembled. In both of them massive intellect went hand in hand with heart godliness of the most pervasive, controlling and winsome character. On the two sides of the Atlantic they were leaders and brethren in the work of the great awakening which broke in on the slumberous Church life of 200 years ago. This work raised up a crop of witnesses who were called to hold aloft the banner of the Reformed Faith in the days of declension and apostasy in the Churches of New England and Scotland both—days that were at hand and that were destined to last until the end of the 18th century.

Edwards died in 1758. Four years earlier Maclaurin predeceased him. The year of his death was that in which his elder contemporary, Ebenezer Erskine, was also taken away. Erskine, among the Seceders, was distinguished in his preaching for the exhibition that he gave of the freeness of the Gospel of Christ and of the majesty with which that Gospel sets before us the God of all grace. The two worthy men did not by any means see eye to eye in regard to some of the public questions that divided the Church of their day. Yet as surely as Erskine was the sworn foe of Erastianism, there was no mistake as to Maclaurin's opposition to it. The tyranny of a drilled and disciplined faction, which by

organised and preconcerted joint action captured the management of the courts of the Church and worked it in the interest of their own less than worthy ends, and their high-handed policy found few men more disposed to stand up against them than the author of the elaborate pamphlet which came from Maclaurin's hand in criticism of the despotic line of action that brought about, through the deposition of Thomas Gillespie of Carnock, the formation of a new Presbyterian denomination.

This new Church, when it was fully organised and gathered strength, came to be known as the Synod of Relief. It grew to be a Synod with more than 100 Churches and represented an Evangelical and for many years an Orthodox tendency which sought to keep in touch with that wing of Methodism to which George Whitefield belonged, and which, in taking this line, tried to avoid any undue entanglement with the doubtful questions that had come to be bones of contention among the successors of the Covenanters. Such questions had split the Secession and stirred up controversy, not only with the National Church, but with the Cameronian Remnant. These debated things bore on the precise relation in which the Covenanting witness of the previous century stood to the faith and duty of the Church and nation in the environment of another age.

In Maclaurin's later days, when he wrote anonymously on this subject, the success of Robertson's rigorous Moderate policy was not yet by any means the assured thing that it came to be in a score of years after his time. If the Orthodox were but to adopt the tactics of their opponents and combine in following a considered policy they could still outvote the Broad Church Erastians. If only they had always men like Maclaurin and Witherspoon to lead and organise them, things would have been different. Their forte, however, was not the sphere of the ecclesiastical schemer and manager. Had they given better heed to what could be done in the region of the Church's public business the vogue of fashionable Moderatism might never have come to have the place which it got in the life of the Church. We have seen already

that in the years that followed the Secession of 1733 the Orthodox bestirred themselves to undo the mischief that their opponents had done, and for a few years they kept up their effort and controlled the General Assembly. This showed the advantage that there was in working in concert. The region, however, of Church politics was one in which they felt themselves less at home than in that of preaching the Gospel to their fellows. So their effort as militant ecclesiastics was short-lived.

The Apologetic strain that was in Macdaurin bears witness to the call of his time. His lot was cast in a city; and Glasgow already had cliques and coteries that were prepared to welcome the fashionable Deism of the age. Men like Boston and the Erskines and Willison were rooted in the Evangelical tradition of Reformation and Covenanting times and their followers and hearers were of the same general outlook with themselves. They felt but little of the impact of deistic unbelief on the life of the community. It was otherwise with Macdaurin and his predecessor, Halyburton. They were in touch with the type of unbelieving thought which from the middle of the 17th century onwards had been telling on the academic and fashionable circles of the country. They took their share in the work of Christian defence. The times called for it. And they answered this call.

One has only to note how, in the course of his own spiritual struggles, Halyburton had to grapple with the problems that were raised by the objections of the Deists. These struggles belonged to the last decade of the 17th century and Deism was the fashionable New Light of the age. It was quite fitting when he came to have a firm foothold for himself that he should be the leader in his Church in the opposition to Deism. His *Reason of Faith* is of the same type of believing Protestant defences as the work in the same department of his master, John Owen. It is an exposition of the reasonable character of the autopistia which historical Reformed Theology taught to be inherent in the Scriptures and which it held to be the ultimate and everyday reason on which working Christian faith proceeds as it

accepts the witness, and bows to the authority, of Holy Writ. Such belief is rooted in, and it is owing to, the witness that is borne by the Spirit by and with the Word in the heart. This work was over and above his *magnum opus*.

In the case of Maclaurin we have one who was not only in contact with the currents of thought that were working in his own Church and land, he was a man, too, that carried with him from his early days the knowledge of the influences that were telling in an unfavourable direction on educated people in other lands. He had the more comprehensive view of things of one that had the advantage of pursuing his theological studies in the divinity schools overseas. In these, he had an ample opportunity of learning how the Cartesian doubting and questioning in philosophy was affecting the theological thinking of the younger generation. So he brought home with him a wider outlook than that of his home-bred contemporaries apart from Halyburton. In his work on the Prophecies and as a seasoning element in his other writings the Apologetic strain comes out, not perhaps so much explicitly and directly as in the guarded and careful way in which he makes his positive affirmations. He spoke as he wrote in this vein like a man who was cognisant of the objections that hearers, who might be opponents, would be likely to take to the substance of his statements. So he put them in the best defensive form that he could find and an open-eyed reader or hearer would appreciate the positive truth of his teaching. This he firmly held, none the less firmly indeed that he took a cautious and irenic method to state his case. Irenic the method might be said to be, though it was adapted to disarm unfriendly criticism and to guard his clients from the quibbles and objections that were rife in circles to which they might have ready access. In his piece which deals with prejudices against particular aspects of Gospel truth, writing for an age whose great bugbear in religion was Enthusiasm to which all serious thought on spiritual things was apt to be set down, he handles such unfavourable judgments as preoccupied the mind of his hearers in regard to the more mystical side of definitely

revealed truth, as, for instance, the teaching of the Scriptures on the subject of our Union with Christ; and we may quote the closing paragraph of the section in which he handles this topic as a specimen of his style in dealing with the matters that he has in hand:—

“Man naturally loves honour and dignity; and, indeed, ambition to be great, if it were directed to right objects, would, instead of being a vice, be a cardinal virtue. Man is naturally a sociable as well as an aspiring creature. These joint inclinations make men love to be incorporated in societies that have dignity annexed to them. The subject we are treating contains all the attractives that can reasonably affect one that loves society; it is made up of the choice of all other societies; contains all the true heroes that ever were, and comprehends the flower of the universe. The meanest member is promoted at the same time to a near relation to the infinite Creator, and to all the best of His creatures; allied to the Spirits made perfect in heaven and to the excellent ones of the earth: he can claim kindred to the patriarchs and prophets, and martyrs, and apostles, and all the other excellent persons who adorned this world and of whom it was not worthy. Though they be in heaven and we on earth, one Spirit animates them both. Surely it is industrious stupidity, if one contemplates such a society, without being enamoured with it; and all other society, or solitude, is only so far valuable as it is subservient to it. A society headed by infinite perfection, cemented by eternal love, adorned with undecaying grace, supplied out of all-sufficient bliss, entitled to the inheritance of all things, and guarded by Omnipotence: a society as ancient as the world, but more durable; and to whose interest the world and all that is in it are subservient: a society joined together by the strictest bands, where there is no interfering of interests but one common interest, and where at last there will be no opposition of tempers or sentiments; when its members, now many of them scattered far and near, but still united to their Head, shall one day have a glad universal meeting in an eternal temple never to part, and where they shall celebrate a jubilee

of inconceivable ecstasy and transport without mixture, without interruption, and which crowns all, without end."

There is a paragraph picked almost at random from Maclaurin's pages; and one can taste in it the quality of his thinking and work.

The Apologetic strain, as distinct from the Dogmatic or the Polemic, was to be found in only a modified degree in the preaching of the Evangelical school as a whole. They adhered in the main to the method of witness which proceeds without preliminary argument on Scripture and on its teaching as authoritative, a method that called for instant surrender and submission to their message. They aimed at bringing home the truth that they preached to the heart of their hearers so that by the inward teaching of the Spirit the body and system of Bible truth might evince itself to the conscience to be indeed of God. Thus they sought to set it forth that it might shine in its own light of self-evidence and constrain the conscience of the hearers to own it as being of God and as such stamped in its every fibre of warp and woof with the mark that tells of its heavenly character and origin. On the polemic side they would freely argue, with Scripture authority to back them, in defence of the doctrine that they taught. There were men of the Orthodox school in whose work a more undiluted strain of Apologetic showed itself. Such, for example, was Sir Henry Moncreiff Wellwood, who was, by the end of the 18th century, one of the most outstanding of the Evangelical clergy. His friend, Andrew Thomson, in his Sermons on Infidelity, illustrates the presence of the same strain; and Thomas Chalmers, in his Astronomical Discourses, is the outstanding or representative man of such a tendency among the Orthodox. As a rule, it was among the Moderates that this side of things was specially cultivated.

The Moderates, in their Apologetic work, found themselves more at home in the defence of the outworks of the Faith than in the exposition of the citadel truth that the outworks only flank and guard, being to it but as the husk is to the kernel; and their work gives less place than was due to it to the internal evidence that special revelation carries with

it in its own bosom.¹ However much this defence of the possibility and the truth of the miraculous might be needed in academic circles or in fashionable society, it was very much at a discount among the rank and file of the Church.

2. JOHN INGLIS AND MISSIONS

Perhaps the best specimen of the work of this ecclesiastical school in the department of the clearing away of difficulties in matters of Christian teaching was Dr John Inglis, to whom the credit belongs of securing, over a century ago, a place for Foreign Missions as a definite scheme in the programme of the Church of Scotland.

When the Church embarked on its overseas enterprise it was the first National Reformed Church that, as a body, set on foot a corporate missionary undertaking of its own and recognised the organised Church to be in one of its proper functions a Foreign Missionary institute. This was something distinct from the Colonial evangelising policy of the Dutch Oriental Empire, as, for example, in Ceylon. It was only in 1829, however, that Alexander Duff was sent out as the first agent of the Church as such in the Foreign Field. In taking this step, the Church in effect avowed that it was as surely its function to be aggressive in sending forth the Word of Life to the ends of the earth as it was undeniably its calling to be conservative of the truth of the Word by confessing and standing for it at home and seeing to its transmission to the succeeding age. Under Dr Inglis' leadership the step was taken which, thirty years before, Dr Hill had refused to take in the General Assembly of 1796. Inglis, in view of his soundness of doctrine, might be spoken of not as a Moderate, but as an Evangelical Erastian. His clear views of Divine truth, and the care and caution with which he expressed them, put him on his Apologetic side in the line of succession from Maclaurin. That succession is to be traced in other lines as well.

¹ This held good on the whole, though we find Duncan Mearns of Aberdeen criticising with vigour Thomas Chalmers' early work on *The Evidences* for its exclusively objective character.



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bald Clerk, he produced the Gaelic Reference Bible (1860) (see Bible (Versions, Gaelic)).

AFC I, 244; *FES* VI, 477; D. MacKinnon, *The Gaelic Bible and Psalter* (Dingwall, 1930), 98.

D. E. Meek

MacLaurin, John (1693–1754), minister of Glasgow, Ramshorn (North-West or St David's) (1723–54) and one of the ablest preachers and theologians of the eighteenth-century CofS. His sermon 'Glorying in the Cross of Christ' is widely regarded as the epitome of Scottish evangelical preaching of the century. Possibly his most important theological work was his 'Essay on the Nature of Christian Piety' (in *Sermons and Essays*, G, 1755), in the course of which he dealt extensively with the nature of faith. He played an important role in the disputes over patronage* in the latter part of his life, producing what was arguably the most effective defence of the 'Popular'* position in *The Nature of Ecclesiastic Government* (G, 1754). In this work, he advanced criticisms of the Moderate* position which were never answered, and displayed con-

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siderable acquaintance with the work of continental political and philosophical writers. He was also active in improving social conditions and in poor-law reform.

W. H. Goold (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John MacLaurin*, 2 vols (E, 1860) – including life by J. Gillies; *DNB* XXXV, 198; *FES* III, 439; J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (E, ³1974).

J. R. McIntosh

McLaurin, Malcolm (1785–1859), itinerant* preacher with the Independents.* Born at Ardchattan, Argyll, and educated at Rotherham Independent Academy, Yorkshire, he became a full-time itinerant preacher in 1818, supported by the Society in Paisley and its Vicinity for Gaelic Missions, and making extensive tours of the West Highlands and Hebrides, reaching St Kilda. He settled in Islay in 1822 as pastor of the Independent church at Port Charlotte. He was the author of several Gaelic* works, including translations of

W. Jones, *Works* (L, 1860); *Bicentenary* McLean, B. Edinburgh: The Baptists

Maclean, J. Moray and Somerset, v. he studied (MA, 1880). Conceiving ancestry and offer himse (1883) to th served as cl thedral Ch umba's, Poi In 1886