

A Critical Analysis Of The Pneumatology Of Thomas Erskine Of Linlathen

Introduction

Thomas Erskine (1788 – 1870) wrote theology as a well informed layman; he was by profession a lawyer. He was also a Scottish landowner with significant responsibilities. Erskine observed the Scottish West Country revival that began in late 1829. It was a revival in the Pentecostal or Charismatic sense. Erskine was an intensely religious man, an acute observer and a prolific writer. He read about this revival and spent considerable time with some of those who were involved. Yet in all of his writings in which he talks much about the actions of the Holy Spirit, there appears to be no developed traditional Trinitarian Pneumatology and a pronounced silence at many points in his writings that seem to call for a doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

There is a difference between a developed traditional pneumatology on the one hand and someone having things to say about the Holy Spirit in his writings, albeit many things, on the other hand. A pneumatology developed along traditional lines would follow the teachings of the church fathers and deal with the subject of the relationship between the persons of the Godhead. Thomas Erskine did indeed talk much about the Spirit and the actions of the Spirit in his writings without references to relationships within the Godhead. In the final analysis this language can be considered to be another kind of pneumatology, a dynamic one.

The purpose of the thesis is, first, to document through a detailed analysis of his written works that Thomas Erskine did not have a developed traditional Pneumatology. Erskine watched for and welcomed manifestations of the Holy Spirit. He read and quoted manifold references to the Holy Spirit in Scriptures. He commented on these references and manifestations in his writings. Second, therefore, we shall attempt to account for the relative lack of any clear doctrine of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit in Erskine's corpus. Erskine admitted that he was not interested in the relationships within the Godhead which traditionally define a Pneumatology. "The distinction of persons in the Divine nature," he wrote, "we cannot comprehend; but we can easily comprehend the high and engaging morality of that character of God which is developed in the history of the New Testament."¹

Erskine and his works will be examined in this thesis in several ways. In part I we shall consider whether there are other factors, intrinsic to the substance of his theology, which account for his relative silence concerning the Spirit at key junctures. We shall set him in his context. Like any thinker Erskine was effected by his familial, educational and social experiences. These considerations shall be examined in Part I. In Chapter One we shall reflect briefly on Erskine's biography. In Chapter Two we shall consider the wider intellectual and cultural currents of his age. Erskine was born late in the eighteenth century and lived well into the nineteenth. Thus his

¹Erskine, Thomas, *Remarks on the Internal Evidence for the Truth of Revealed Religion*, 9th edition, Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1829, 74.

writings need to be read against the background of such influences as Romanticism and the Great Disruption in Scotland as considered in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three will consider the impact of an event instead of a theme: namely, the “West Coast revival” which began in late 1829 in Scotland and involved certain manifestations among the followers of Edward Irving in London as well. Erskine proclaimed these to be the actions of God in his published writings. However, it was not long before Erskine published a recantation of his earlier position. Both Erskine's approbation and his recantation regarding these phenomena are important to understanding his pneumatological journey and will be examined in this chapter. The writings of theologians of the times, particularly those of Schleiermacher, which were an important influence on Erskine's context shall be examined in Chapter Four.

Next we shall turn to Pneumatology as such. In considering the reasons for Erskine's approach to the Holy Spirit several questions must be asked. Are there other concepts that take the place of the Holy Spirit in Erskine's thinking, and if so, what are they? How much of this is the result of being a child of his time and culture? Does Erskine have a Pneumatology of a sort after all based on the Holy Spirit's agency in the world that largely avoids the metaphysical approach which just looks different?

In Part II we shall turn to an analysis of Erskine's works. A useful taxonomy for understanding Pneumatology has been developed by John McIntyre in his book *The Shape Of Pneumatology*. The categories in McIntyre's taxonomy cover many Pneumatological possibilities from patristic times through the Reformation up to and

including the twentieth century. This taxonomy will be considered in Chapter Five with a view to locating Erskine's thought within it.

Erskine's works are subjected to an initial detailed statistical analysis in Chapter Six. This analysis has been done using a computer search for every occurrence of the words "Spirit" and "Ghost." Each occurrence of these nouns are examined in relationship to attendant verbs. Instances of the use of the word "Spirit" which refer to an attitude (such as "he had a contentious spirit") will be set aside as well as references to evil spirits or to the human spirit. Each time the Holy Spirit is identified the reference will be tabulated and classified. When the Holy Spirit is spoken of as an agent, the relevant verb will be identified. Further analysis will group the actions of the Holy Spirit together to study the use of all verbs associated with the Holy Spirit and the relative force of these verbs will be examined. The purpose of this analysis will be to determine whether Erskine has, in McIntyre's categories, a "dynamic" Pneumatology as contrasted to a traditional one and to determine whether, if such a Pneumatology exists, it is a pronounced one.

In Part III we turn to a more substantial investigation of specific themes in Erskine's work. Chapter Seven will consider a key theme, namely, Erskine's distinction of the "First Bond" and the "Second Bond" between God and man.² The concept of the "Second Bond" indicates a knowing of God which can be attributed to conversion, or becoming conscious of a relationship with God within the individual

² The terms "First Bond" and "Second Bond" are peculiar to Thomas Erskine and will always appear in quotation marks in this thesis.

human soul. The “First Bond” for Erskine is a relationship with God inside each individual human soul which is unrecognized by the human until the moment of personal faith. This “First Bond,” according to Erskine, has been found throughout the entire race since the fall and predisposes the soul towards God in some sense. Again we shall explain the importance of this theme in Erskine's understanding of the Holy Spirit's Person and work.

Another key theme is conscience. The concept of conscience associated with an inner knowing of God was familiar in Erskine's era. Erskine himself refers to conscience many times in his writings. We shall see that in his use “conscience” is often used to indicate the human spirit. In addition, we shall see that Erskine does not always distinguish clearly between the actions of the Holy Spirit and the actions of the human spirit within the heart of man. Chapter Eight will, therefore, consider his use of this language and its significance for his Pneumatology.

Christology and Pneumatology are necessarily, or should be, inseparably linked. Erskine's friend Edward Irving developed a Christology in which a high place was given to the Spirit. Therefore, it is worth while considering Erskine's Christology and seeing how and why the same emphasis on the Spirit is not to be found. This will be done in Chapter Nine.

Part IV offers a positive statement of Erskine's Pneumatology in Chapter Ten, and then the Conclusion which includes an important final analysis of the thesis as a whole.