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Stephen G. Myers, *Scottish Federalism and Covenantalism in Transition: The Theology of Ebenezer Erskine* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2016), pp. xxi + 257, £21.00/\$42.00.

This volume originated as a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh and reflects the painstaking research and rigorous analysis expected at such a level. The author is now Visiting Professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina; the subject, Ebenezer Erskine, occupies a notable place in eighteenth-century Scottish church history; and the time-line covers a succession of historic controversies such as the Abjuration Oath, the Marrow Controversy, the Secession of 1733 and the Breach among the Seceders over the Burgess Oath of 1744.

But, as the subtitle indicates, there is also a more fundamental theological line, reflecting the conviction that Erskine's approach to all these crises was governed by his personal version of Federal Theology, variously described as Evangelical Federalism and Modified Covenantalism.

This, the thesis argues, was particularly true of Erskine's involvement in the Marrow Controversy. Behind the disputes over such issues as universal atonement, the gospel-offer and alleged antinomianism, there lay critical divergences over the nature of the Covenant of Grace, and it is in these divergences that we have to locate the real roots of the controversy between Erskine and Principal Hadow of St Andrews.

It would have been good to have a clear, continuous and uncluttered exposition of Erskine's own Federal Theology, but Dr Byers has chosen instead to give us a binary summary in which we flit from Erskine to Hadow. As far as Erskine is concerned, the most striking feature of his Federalism is that he adopts a straightforward two-covenant framework consisting of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, rejecting the idea of a Covenant of Redemption, and thus parts company with the older Scottish Federalists such as Dickson, Rutherford and Durham. He complicates the picture, however, by still positing a *pactum salutis* between the Father and the Son, albeit only as an essential part of the Covenant of Grace.

The crucial impact of this two-covenant framework is that it leaves no room for a covenant between Christ and the believer. Instead, the Covenant of Grace is strictly between the Father and the Son, and in this covenant the benefits of salvation are promised *unconditionally* to Christ on behalf of his people. Considering that such alleged antinomians as Tobias Crisp also spoke of the unconditionality of the Covenant, it is easy to see how Erskine and his colleagues could be portrayed as belonging to the same antinomian camp. They certainly appeared to be keeping bad company. But Erskine's concern

was to portray the covenant as a covenant of ‘immediate’ grace, where no requirements stood between believers and their inheritance. He also saw the covenant as an ‘indefinite’ one, according to which Christ was a gift to be offered to all. Hadow, on the other hand, gave priority to the ‘definite’ Covenant of Redemption, in which, prior to the Covenant of Grace, the elect were assigned to Christ; and while the gospel was to be preached to all, only to the elect was it a ‘deed of gift and grant’.

In his discussion of Erskine’s role in the Secession, Byers argues that Erskine’s ecclesiology, like his support for the *Marrow*, was rooted in his Federalism, and this appears to be confirmed by the fact that the Secession quickly adopted both the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, requiring personal subscription to each. But are we justified in regarding these national covenants as a species of Federal Theology? While they certainly drew rhetorical support from the theocratic covenants of the Old Testament, their real roots lay in the ‘bonds’ which had long been a feature of Scottish society; and these bonds were not divine–human covenants, but mere human compacts binding people together in a common cause.

What is fascinating is that when the Seceders adopted the National Covenant they adopted it only in its 1581 form (‘the King’s Confession’) and omitted the ‘bond’ added to it in 1638 by Alexander Henderson and Johnston of Wariston, basically because they saw no need to continue its confrontational tone towards the state. Whereas Knox, Goodman and Rutherford had viewed it as the duty of government to suppress heresy, Erskine argued for a political Federalism in which it was the duty of Christians to submit to an ‘irreligious’ magistracy: a position which reflected his vision of the Seceders as a covenanted national church serving a now uncovenanted nation.

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