



## Makers of the Scottish Church

### *Samuel Rutherford*

Samuel Rutherford was born in 1600 and died in 1661. These were turbulent years. They witnessed the reigns of the three most despotic Stewart kings, James VI, Charles I and Charles II; the signing of the National Covenant in 1638; the English Civil War; the deliberations of the Westminster Assembly; the beheading of the King; the occupation of Scotland by Cromwell's army; and the restoration of Charles II in 1660. No other period in British history saw such upheaval.

#### Anwoth

And never did the Scottish church produce such a splendid array of talent. Rutherford was but one in an outstanding group of preachers and theologians: Alexander Henderson, David Dickson, James Durham and George Gillespie. Any one of these would have adorned an age. That all should be given to a single generation is remarkable.

Rutherford's birth-place was the village of Nisbet in Roxburghshire. He graduated from Edinburgh University in 1621 and immediately afterwards was appointed Regent (Tutor) in Humanity. In 1625, however, he was forced to demit office on account of some rumour. The details are obscure; the truth or otherwise of the rumour even more so. What is certain is that years afterwards he himself, referring to this period in his life, wrote, "*I knew a man who wondered to see any in this life laugh and sport.*"

Whatever the problem, Rutherford recovered and was inducted to Anwoth in 1627. His Letters have turned the parish into the stuff of romance, but in reality it was an unfashionable rural parish in Kirkcudbrightshire, without even a village to serve as its focal-point. Rutherford's ministerial commitment to it was total. He rose at three every morning for prayer and study, and men said of him, "*He is always praying, always preaching, always visiting the sick, always catechising, always writing and studying.*" He was also remembered for his vigorous pulpit delivery. Indeed, one observer wrote, "*Many times I thought he would have flown out of the pulpit when he came to speak of Christ.*"

Yet his ministry bore little fruit. "*I would be glad,*" he once wrote, "*of one soul, to be a crown of joy and rejoicing in the day of Christ.*" It was far from being a model parish, meekly complying with a repressive Calvinism. On the contrary, Rutherford had to endure the sight of young men playing football on the village green every Sunday. His main influence appears to have been as a spiritual counsellor to the local gentry.

By the time he was inducted to Anwoth, Rutherford was already an ardent presbyterian, but this did not prevent him from sometimes showing an ecumenical spirit. There is a tradition that one Saturday evening he gave hospitality to a stranger. It was Rutherford's custom to include catechising in his family worship and the stranger was granted no exemption. Rutherford asked him how many commandments there were. "Eleven!" said the stranger. Rutherford corrected him, but the stranger stood his ground and quoted John 13:34, "*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.*"

On Sunday morning, Rutherford went for a walk round the manse to meditate on his sermon. Suddenly, in the morning stillness, he heard the voice of a man praying for the parish: no ordinary prayer, and no ordinary visitor. It turned out to be Archbishop Usher of Armagh, one of the most celebrated theologians of the day. Rutherford asked him to conduct the morning service. Usher

gladly complied and preached on the very words he had quoted earlier, “*A new commandment I give you.*”

But Rutherford made no secret of his opposition to bishops and in July 1636 he was summoned to appear before the Court of High Commission. The President of the court was the Bishop of Galloway (a clear breach of the discipline of the Scottish church, which forbade the clergy to be members of the judiciary). The outcome of the hearing was a foregone conclusion. Rutherford was deprived of his ministerial office and banished to Aberdeen.

## The Letters

It was from there that he wrote many of his famous *Letters*. The collection, edited by Robert Mcward, was first published only in 1634, three years after Rutherford’s death. McWard had been one of Rutherford’s most distinguished students, but by this time he was in exile in Holland, having already been imprisoned for his forthright pro-Covenant and anti-Government views. He withheld his own identity and signed himself simply, “*A well-wisher to the work and people of God.*” Even the name of the writer of the Letters was withheld. They were ascribed to “Joshua Redivivus”: Joshua come-alive-again.

CH Spurgeon once said of William Gurnall’s *Christian in Complete Armour* that he never failed to find a live coal on Gurnall’s hearth. This is even more true of Rutherford’s *Letters*. You can open them anywhere and read with relish. Apart from all else, they often cast an interesting light on the origin of our church practices. Take, for example, the phrase “fencing the Table.” This is often taken to mean that the officiating minister at Communion puts a guard-fence round the Sacrament to keep away the unworthy. The original idea was quite different, as appears from the following comment of Rutherford on the Court of High Commission (a court created by the King to secure fast-track convictions for those opposed to bishops). It was “*fenced*”, he says (Letter 301, Bonar’s edition), “*but not in Christ’s name*”. Earlier (Letter 163) he had used a similar figure: “*I know not if this court kept within my soul be fenced in Christ’s name.*”

It is plain from these remarks that “fencing” had nothing to do with deterring people from the Lord’s Table. It was a technical legal term. “The court was fenced” meant that it was constituted, although sometimes the “court” Rutherford has in mind is not a court of law but a royal court. It was in this sense that Christ’s court was fenced in his heart. Christ, the King, was holding court there and His children were courtiers. It is an attractive image of the Lord’s Table. We have been summoned to Court to dine with the King.

Not all the Letters, of course, relate to his time in Aberdeen. But many do, and they have a special poignancy. For at least some of the time, he seems to have enjoyed a kind of spiritual euphoria and to have felt himself almost in Paradise. On September 1636, for example, he writes, “*God’s sun and fair weather carryeth me to my time-paradise in Aberdeen. Christ hath so handsomely fitted for my shoulders this rough tree of the cross as that it hurteth me no ways.*”

I find this idea difficult. A cross is never made to fit. Christ’s certainly didn’t. The cross contradicts, frustrates, tortures and terrifies and there were certainly many occasions when Rutherford himself was almost overwhelmed with depression. In Letter 162, for example, he lets us know that what wakes him up every morning is the question, “*Am I serving God or not?*” He found it hard to be barred from preaching, not only because it was deeply frustrating, but because it might be sign of God’s rejection. He writes:

*“My closed mouth, my dumb Sabbaths, the memory of my communion with Christ in many, many fair days in Anwoth, whereas now my Master getteth no service of my tongue as then, hath almost broken my faith in two halves.”*

Editions of Rutherford’s *Letters* often close with some pages of poetry entitled, “The Last Words of Samuel Rutherford”. These are not by Rutherford at all, but by Anne Ross Cousin, wife of William Cousin, the Free Church Minister of Melrose. Cousin was a close friend of the Bonars and a member of that distinct Free Church circle gathered around them: a circle distinguished for piety and pre-millennialism.

What Mrs. Cousin has done is to weave into a poem many of the phrases in the Letters. Take, for example, the lines, *The Bride eyes not her garment But her dear Bridegroom's face*. These echo Letter XXI: *"the bride taketh not, by a thousand degrees, so much delight in her wedding-garment as she doth in her bridegroom."*

The closing lines, however, are not from the Letters. They were in fact Rutherford's last words: *Glory, glory dwelleth In Immanuel's land*.

## **Always writing**

As we have seen, Rutherford was "always writing". Not all his writings have survived. We know, for example, that he was working on commentaries on both Hosea and Isaiah, but the manuscripts are lost. The range of the publications which have survived is astonishing; their breadth of scholarship even more so. It is easy to understand why Rutherford was twice offered professorships in Dutch universities.

Several of the works are in Latin and today their very questions terrify us. One of them, *A Scholastic Disputation on Divine Providence*, drove Richard Baxter to comment that the Letters were the best book he had ever read and this book on divine providence was the worst.

Many of Rutherford's English books are also controversial, defending Presbyterianism and attacking Independency and Antinomianism. But he was no mere controversialist. Many of his books are of enduring spiritual value and anyone with a few pounds to spare should pick them up on sight (preferably with the owner's permission). Among these are *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, *The Covenant of Life Opened and Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (very expensive this, I'm afraid). But best of all are the collections of sermons published by Andrew Bonar in the 19th century: *Fourteen Communion Sermons by the Rev. Samuel Rutherford and Quaint Sermons of Samuel Rutherford*.

There is space for only a few gleanings. Rutherford is clear as a bell on, for example, the Free Offer of the Gospel: *"Christ cometh with good tidings to all, elect and reprobate"*, and as a result, *"everyone is obliged to believe the power of infinite mercy to save him and to hang by that thread in humility and adherence to Christ."* He is equally clear on the love of God. It was eternal: *"if God had at any time begun to love sinners, then His love would have had a beginning"*; and that, in Rutherford's view, was preposterous. Is the love of God older, then, than the death of Christ? Most emphatically! *"Christ's death only permits God to show the fruits of a love that is eternal."*

Or take his comments on Preparationism: the idea that the gospel is only for seeking or convicted sinners and that the rest of us can reject it because we are not "ready". Rutherford is blunt: *"When want of preparation holds a man from Christ, it is of the Devil."*

But it is when he speaks of the cross that Rutherford is at his most moving. His clear grasp of the doctrine of the incarnation left him in no doubt as to who the victim was: *"The Lord of glory was hanging on a tree there"*; and the blood He gave to justice was *"blood that chambered in the veins and body of God."* He comments powerfully, too, on the darkness that fell over the land: *"The candle that lighted the sun and the moon was blown out. The Godhead was eclipsed and the world's eye was put out."*

At times Rutherford comes close to abandoning the idea that God Himself can feel no pain:

*"But Oh! What a fury was there!  
God weeping, God sobbing under the water!  
Oh! To see Life wanting life!  
To see Life lying dead!  
To see that blessed mouth silent!"*

## **Lex Rex**

After his return from banishment, Rutherford was appointed Professor of Divinity at St. Andrews: a position he held till his death in 1661. For long periods, however, he was in London attending the

Westminster Assembly and it was during one of these periods that he wrote *Lex Rex* ("The Law is King"). This was a passionate but remorselessly logical protest against the pretensions of the Stewarts, who held themselves kings by divine right and sought to govern the church as popes and the land as tyrants.

Rutherford made the classic case for limited monarchy: the king derived his power from the people. They bestowed it on whom they willed; they could as easily take it back; and if the king violated the law and turned on his own subjects then they had a divine right to take up defensive arms.

On 17 February 1688, James Renwick, the last minister to die for the Covenant and aged only 26, would go to the scaffold for adhering to Rutherford's principles and declaring James VII to be no lawful king. A mere four months later, a handful of London's Whig and Tory grandees were driven to the same conclusion and sent off their fateful letter inviting William of Orange to become King of Britain.

The people had taken the crown from the Stewarts. In 1776, the exasperated Americans would wrest it from the Hanoverians.

### **Disastrous divisions**

During the 1650s Scotland was occupied by Cromwell's army: a disaster due in no small measure to the fact that divisions in the church destroyed the morale of Scottish soldiers. The divisions were typically presbyterian. Men agreed entirely in their theology and principles, but they fell out because one group thought certain men should be excommunicated and others thought they should not. The precise issue was how they should deal with those who had tried to negotiate with the duplicitous King, Charles I. Rutherford was for banning them for ever from public life, David Dickson was for letting them back, the two men never spoke again and James Durham died of a broken heart, weeping for the Church of Scotland.

After the death of Cromwell, Britain had had enough of government by Puritan Independents and Charles II was restored to the throne. The thirty years that followed were both the darkest and the most inspiring in Scottish history, as the Covenanters did battle with tyranny and the land suffered its Presbyterian Holocaust.

Rutherford, although by this time on his deathbed, was an immediate target of the new government. He was deposed from office, *Lex Rex* was twice burned by the public hangman and he was summoned on a charge of high treason. He sent a memorable reply. He had had another summons, he said, to a higher judge and to a superior judicatory and "*I behove to answer my first summons; and ere your day arrive, I will be where few kings and great folks come.*"

He died at St. Andrews on 30 March, 1661. Two months later, his friend, James Guthrie, was hanged and beheaded at the Market Cross in Edinburgh.

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