

Church History (46): The Marrow Controversy

The Marrow Controversy was an eighteenth-century controversy, among Scottish Presbyterians. We will consider its historical context, primary issues, and major figures (next week).

I. Marrow Controversy

1. *Its historical context.* The Marrow Controversy had its start in February 1717, in a small Scottish town by the name of Auchterarder, forty-five miles to the northwest of Edinburgh. A young candidate for the ministry was being questioned by the presbytery of Auchterarder. "As a candidate in the presbytery of Auchterarder, William Craig had been asked to agree to a statement that had become a unique hallmark of its examinations. The question itself came to be known as the 'Auchterarder Creed.' He was asked to agree to the following statement: I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in covenant with God" (Ferguson).¹ At first, Craig agreed with the statement and was licensed, but he then changed his mind a few weeks later, and his license to preach the gospel was declared null and void. "In the months that followed, through a process of appeal against the presbytery decision, the issue of the Auchterarder Creed came before the next meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The fathers and brethren of the Kirk condemned the creed and declared 'their abhorrence of the foresaid proposition as unsound and most detestable doctrine.' The presbytery of Auchterarder was ordered to restore his license" (Ferguson).²

Things would have likely ended there, had two men not been present at the original presbytery meeting. These men were John Drummond (1676-1742) and Thomas Boston (1676-1732). Drummond was a member of the presbytery of Auchterarder, whereas Boston was a member of the neighboring presbytery. Both men confided to each other that they generally agreed with the statement in question. Boston described the event in his memoirs: "The Auchterarder Creed was all at once at that Assembly judged and condemned; though some small struggle was made in defense thereof. And poor I was not able to open a mouth before them in that cause; although I believed the proposition to be truth, howbeit not well worded."³ This prompted Boston to distribute a book originally published in 1645 by Edward Fisher, entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Other Puritans such as Joseph Caryl and Jeremiah Burroughs endorsed the book when it was first published. Boston had found the book in the home of one of his members in 1700. The book is written in the form of a dialogue between four fictitious men: Evangelista (a minister of the Gospel), Noimista (a Legalist), Antinomista (an Antinomian), and Neophitus (a young Christian). The book is divided into two parts. Part I is an exposition of the Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace, and the Law of Christ, and Part II is an exposition of the Ten Commandments. It's within the first part where themes such as "the extent of the atonement, saving faith, and the gospel offer" are discussed, "with the controversy's focal point being the nature of gospel proclamation" (Vandoodewaard).⁴ The book was warmly welcomed among Boston's ministerial friends, who eventually became known as "the marrow men," and who reprinted it in 1717. "So deeply opposed was the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to the teaching and influence of the *Marrow* that it passed an act in 1720 prohibiting ministers from recommending the book either in preaching or writing and from saying anything in its favor. In addition, if they discovered any of their members reading it, they were to warn them of its dangers and urge them neither to use it nor to read it" (Ferguson).⁵ This resulted in the Marrow Men issuing another printing of the

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 27-28

² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 28-29

³ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:291

⁴ William Vandoodewaard, *The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition*, 4

⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 32-33

book in 1726 along with Boston's footnotes. They also responded to the Assembly's action by publishing a "Protest and Representation" against the condemnation of the book. In response, an assembly commission presented them with twelve questions related to the teaching of the *Marrow*. "The Marrow Men replied that while they would not subscribe to every jot and tittle in the book, they believed that its overall doctrinal thrust was both biblical and wholesome. Their case, they believed, was never really answered" (Ferguson).⁶

2. *Its primary issues.* In short, the Marrow Men believed a subtle form of hyper-Calvinism had infiltrated the Church of Scotland. John Brown (1722-1787) of Haddington, described the Church of Scotland at this time: "While the Church of Scotland was clear and exact in her standards, and many of her preachers truly evangelical, a flood of legal doctrine filled many pulpits about this time."⁷ Fisher himself summarized his purpose for the *Marrow* in his original preface: "For this cause I, though I be nothing, have by the grace of God endeavored, in this dialogue, to walk as a middle man betwixt them both (Legalism and Antinomianism), in showing to each of them his erroneous path, with the middle path (which is Jesus Christ received truly, and walked in answerably) as a means to bring them both unto Him, and make them both one in Him; and O! that the Lord would be pleased so to bless it to them, that it might be a means to produce this effect!"⁸ Boston in commenting on this summary of Fisher, said: "A short and pithy description of the middle path, the only path-way to heaven—Jesus Christ, the way, received truly by faith which is overlooked by the Legalist and walked in answerably, by holiness of heart and life, which is neglected by the Antinomian. The Antinomian's faith is but pretended, and not true faith, since he walks not in Christ answerably." He then concluded: "Thus, both the Legalist and the Antinomian are each of them destitute of true faith and true holiness; forasmuch as there can be no walking in Christ, without a true receiving of Him; and there cannot be a true receiving of Him, without walking in Him: so both of them are off the only way of salvation, and, continuing so must needs perish. Wherefore it concerns every one who has a value for his own soul, to take heed that he be found in the middle part."⁹

The Marrow Brethren described the covenant of grace as a testament containing God's promises of grace in Christ, which is freely offered to all. Assurance is found primarily in Christ and His work. A believer's response to this is love and gratitude, they said. Their opponents viewed the covenant as a contract with mutual obligations. The gospel is offered only to the prepared or 'sensible' sinner, and assurance focuses on the good works of the believer. Obedience is a response to threats of God's wrath as much as it is to His love. The Marrow Brethren were more in harmony with the Reformed orthodoxy of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, codified in the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms. Marrow opponents, though representative of the majority of ministers in the early eighteenth-century Church of Scotland, reflected the legalistic tendencies of a part of Reformed theology that developed in the late seventeenth century.¹⁰

The Presbytery of Auchterarder having begun to require candidates for license, to acknowledge it *unsound to teach that men must forsake their sins in order to come to Christ*, the Assembly 1717, declared their abhorrence of that principle as *unsound and most detestable*—as if men ought only to come to Christ, the alone Savior from sins,

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 34

⁷ John Brown, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:465

⁸ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:163

⁹ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 7:163

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spiritually*, 245

after they have got rid of them by repentance. Having recommended a tract called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the Assembly 1720, fell upon it with great fury, as if it had been replete with Antinomian errors, though it is believed many of these zealots never read it, at least had never perused it, in connection with the Second Part of it, which is wholly taken up in manifestation of the obligation, meaning, and advantage of observing the law of God. They condemned the offering of Christ as a Savior to all men, or to sinners as such, and the doctrine of believers' full deliverance from under the law as a broken covenant of works, they asserted men's holiness to be a federal or conditional means of their obtaining eternal happiness. They condemned those almost express declarations of Scripture, that believers are not under the law—that the Lord sees no sin in them, and cannot be angry with them, as Antinomian paradoxes—and condemned the distinction of the Moral law as a covenant of works, and as a binding rule of duty in the hand of Christ.¹¹

(1) The free offer of the gospel. "The Marrow Controversy raised a major question about how the gospel is to be preached. But the answer to that question depends on our answer to a more fundamental one: What is the gospel" (Ferguson)?¹² For the Marrow Men, as Christ Himself is the gospel, the proclamation of the gospel, is nothing less than an offering of Christ Himself with all of His benefits. The language used by Fisher in the Marrow was taken from earlier Puritans such as Ezekiel Culverwell (1553-1631) and John Preston (1587-1628). In quoting Culverwell, Fisher says through Evangelista: "I beseech you, consider, that God the Father, as He is in His Son Jesus Christ, moved with nothing but with His free love to mankind lost, hath made a deed of gift and grant unto them all, that whosoever shall believe in this His Son, shall not perish, but have eternal life."¹³ Fisher then quotes John Preston: "And hence it was, that Jesus Christ Himself said unto His disciples, Mark 16:15, 'Go and preach the gospel to every creature under heaven:' that is, 'Go and tell every man, without exception, that here is good news for him! Christ is dead for him! and if he will take Him, and accept of His righteousness, He shall have him.'" Boston's footnote on this passage is helpful. "This deed of gift or grant, or authentic gospel offer is expressed in John 3:16...Where the gospel comes, this grant is published, and the ministerial offer made; and there is no exception of any of all mankind in the grant. This is the good old way of discovering to sinners their warrant to believe in Christ; and it doth indeed bear the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ for all, and that Christ crucified is the ordinance of God for salvation unto all mankind, in the use-making of which only they can be saved; but not an universal atonement or redemption."¹⁴

The scope of our author is not to determine concerning the extent of Christ's death, but to discover the warrant sinners have to believe in Christ, namely, that the offer of Christ is general, the deed of *gift* or *grant* is to every man. This necessarily supposes Christ crucified to be the ordinance of God for salvation, to which lost mankind is allowed access and not fallen angels, for whom there is none provided. Therefore he says not, 'Tell every man Christ died for him;' but, Tell every man 'Christ is dead for him:' that is, for him to come to, and believe on; a Savior is provided for him; there is a crucified Christ for him, the ordinance of heaven for salvation for lost man, in the use-making of which he may be saved. Thus, what (according to Dr. Preston and our author) is to be told every man, is no more than what ministers of the gospel have in commission from their great Master. Matt.22:4, 'Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I

¹¹ John Brown, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:465

¹² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 37

¹³ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:262

¹⁴ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 7:263

have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready, come unto the marriage.' There is a crucified Savior, with all saving benefits, for them to come to, feed upon, and partake of freely.¹⁵

According to Ferguson, Boston and the Marrow Men, sought to preserve two "great keynotes of the New Testament's message" with regards to the free offer: "First, that in Jesus Christ there is a fullness of grace for all who will come to Him. This was Boston's interpretation of the nation that God has made 'a deed of gift and grant' to all men because of His free love to lost humanity. This is genuinely good news for every man. There are no exceptions. 'Christ is dead for him.'"¹⁶ "Second, it preserved the New Testament's emphasis not only on the *fullness* of the grace of Christ but also on the *freeness* of that grace in Christ. To this extent Boston was in agreement with the intention of the Auchterarder Creed, that it is not sound to say that a man must first quit sin in order to be qualified for the offer of Christ. The offer of the gospel is to be made not to the righteous or even the repentant, but to all. There are no conditions that need to be met in order for the gospel offer to be made."¹⁷ In other words, Christ Himself, along with all of His benefits, is to be offered to every hearer of the gospel message. As Ferguson points out, both Arminians and hyper-Calvinists fell into the same error. Arminians believe it's not possible to offer the benefits of salvation unless Christ died equally for all, and hyper-Calvinists believe it's not possible to offer the benefits of salvation as Christ only died for the elect. "What, then, is the biblical response? It is simply that at no point do the apostles preach the gospel in these terms: 'Believe because Christ died for you.' No, the warrant for faith in Christ is neither knowledge of election nor a conviction of universal redemption. Nor is it a sense of our sinfulness. It is that Jesus Christ is able to save all those who come to God through Him, since His is the only name given under heaven whereby we may be saved. Christ Himself is the gospel"¹⁸ (Ferguson).

From the perspective of the Marrow Men, the Assembly had lessened the centrality of faith and turned repentance into a work. Their insistence that "a man must first forsake his sin before he accepts Christ," put the cart before the horse. It turned the gospel into a conditional message, based upon a proper amount of remorse for sin. As a sinner is ordinarily humbled for his sin prior to coming to Christ, the Assembly made humility for sin a requirement for coming to Christ. They placed what ordinarily happens (mourning for sin), for what must happen. This became known as preparationism. Ferguson explains their thinking: "You may know Christ's benefits, if you are among the elect. You may receive forgiveness if you have sufficiently forsaken sin. You may know the message of grace if you have experienced a sufficient degree of conviction of sin."¹⁹ "Repentance, turning from sin, and degrees of conviction of sin do not constitute the grounds on which Christ is offered to us. They may constitute ways in which the Spirit works as the gospel makes its impact on us. But they never form the warrant for repentance and faith" (Ferguson).²⁰ Such a view, directs the sinner to look within (to himself) and not without (to Christ). "The whole point of the Auchterarder Creed was to test whether a ministerial candidate believed in and would stress the unfettered grace of God and the freeness and fullness of the gospel offer in his preaching and pastoral ministry. The same motivation energized the Marrow Brethren. They saw that to make the offer of grace dependent upon anything, not least upon graces, was to distort the true nature of grace"²¹ (Ferguson). Thus, the Marrow Men rejected any conditions placed upon the gospel. There were no conditions that must be met for a sinner to have Christ

¹⁵ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 7:264

¹⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 42

¹⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 42

¹⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 51-52

¹⁹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 57

²⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 58

²¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 64

and His benefits. God's love for sinners isn't conditioned on Christ's death. God doesn't love the world because He gave His Son, but He gave His Son because He loves the world. Furthermore, the experiencing of this love is not conditioned upon anything in us. Christ is freely given to all men in the gospel.

Evangelista: Because it seems you conceive a sinner ought to repent before he believes, I pray tell me what you do conceive repentance to be, or wherein does it consist?

Nomista. Why, I conceive that repentance consists in a man's humbling himself before God, and sorrowing and grieving for offending Him by his sins, and in turning from them all to the Lord.

Evangelista: And would you have a man to do all this truly before he come to Christ by believing?

Nomista: Yea, indeed, I think it is very meet he should.

Evangelista: Why, then, I tell you truly, you would have him to do that which is impossible. For, first of all, godly humiliation, in true penitents, proceeds from the love of God their good Father, and so from the hatred of that sin which has displeased Him; and this cannot be without faith. Secondly, sorrow and grief for displeasing God by sin, necessarily argue the love of God; and it is impossible we should ever love God, till by faith we know ourselves loved of God. Thirdly, no man can turn to God, except he be first turned of God; and after he is turned, he repents; so Ephraim says, 'After I was converted, I repented' (Jer.31:19). The truth is, a repentant sinner first believes that God will do that which he promises, namely, pardon his sin, and take away his iniquity; then he rests in the hope of it; and from that, and for it, he leaves sin, and will forsake his old course, because it is displeasing to God; and will do that which is pleasing and acceptable to Him.²²

(2) The nature of Christian liberty. One central purpose of the *Marrow* was to properly distinguish between the law and gospel. It's for this reason, Fisher quotes Luther's commentary on Galatians more than any other single author. "*Nomista.* Are all believers dead to the law, and the law dead to them? *Evangelista.* Believe it, as the law is the covenant of works, all true believers are dead unto it, and it is dead unto them; for they being incorporated into Christ, what the law or covenant of works did to Him, it did the same to them; so that when Christ hanged on the cross, all believers, after a sort, hanged there with Him. And therefore the apostle Paul having said, 'I through the law am dead to the law,' adds in the next verse, 'I am crucified with Christ;' which words the apostle brings as an argument to prove that he was dead to the law, for the law had crucified him with Christ" (Fisher).²³ For Fisher and the *Morrow* Men, this was the essence of Christian liberty. Freedom from the commanding and condemning power of the law as a covenant of works. "The law of the ten commandments neither promises eternal life, nor threatens eternal death to a believer, upon condition of his obedience or disobedience to it; neither does a believer, as he is a believer, either hope for eternal life, or fear eternal death, upon any such terms. No; 'we may assure ourselves, that whatsoever the law says,' on any such terms, it 'says to them who are under the law,' but believers 'are not under the law, but under grace,' and so have escaped eternal death, and obtained eternal life, only by faith in Jesus Christ; 'for by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses'" (Fisher).²⁴

²² Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:278-281

²³ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:246-247

²⁴ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:251-252

Wherefore, my dear *Neophitus*, to turn my speech particularly to you, I beseech you to be persuaded that here you are to work nothing, here you are to do nothing, here you are to render nothing unto God, but only to receive the treasure, which is Jesus Christ and apprehend him in your heart by faith, although you be never so great a sinner; and so shall you obtain forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal happiness, not as an agent, but as a patient, not by doing but by receiving. Nothing here comes betwixt but faith only, apprehending Christ in the promise. This then is perfect righteousness, to hear nothing, to know nothing, to do nothing of the law of works, but only to know and believe that Jesus Christ is now gone to the Father, and sits at His right hand, not as a judge, but is made unto you of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption.²⁵

(3) The nature of evangelical obedience. According to the Marrow Men, liberty from the law as a covenant of works, in no way removed our obligation to obey the law. "The Marrow Men were accused of holding and encouraging a number of views that were contrary to Reformed orthodoxy. *Antinomianism* featured at the top of the list. As a matter of historical record the Marrow Brethren held tenaciously to the teaching of the Confession of Faith. They believed that God's law remains as a rule of life for the Christian believer. In fact part 2 of the *Marrow* is an exposition of the Ten Commandments" (Ferguson).²⁶ "*Nomista*. Then, sir, I pray you proceed to speak of the law of Christ; and first let us hear what the law of Christ is. *Evangelista*. The law of Christ, in regard of substance and matter, is all one with the law of works, or covenant of works. Which matter is scattered through the whole Bible, and summed up in the decalogue, or ten commandments, commonly called the *moral law*, containing such things as are agreeable to the mind and will of God, that is, piety towards God, charity towards our neighbor, and sobriety towards ourselves. And therefore was it given of God to be a true and eternal rule of righteousness, for all men, of all nations, and at all times. So that evangelical grace directs a man to no other obedience than that whereof the law of the ten commandments is to be the rule" (Fisher).²⁷ "While Christians are wholly and altogether delivered from the law as a covenant, they remain under the law of the TC as a way of life in the hand of a Mediator" (Boston).²⁸

Nomista. But yet, sir, I conceive, that though the law of Christ, in regard of substance and matter, be all one with the law of works, yet their forms do differ.

Evangelista: True, indeed; for the law of works speaks on this wise, 'Do this and you shall live; and if you do it not, then you shall die the death;' but the law of Christ speaks on this wise, 'if you love Me, keep My commandments.' Thus, you see, that both these laws agree in saying, 'Do this.' But here is the difference; the one says, 'Do this, and live;' and the other says, 'Live, and do this;' the one says, 'Do this *for* life;' the other says, 'Do this *from* life;' the one says, 'If you do it not, you shall die;' the other says, 'If you do it not, I will chastise you with the rod out of love.' The one is to be delivered by God as He is a Creator out of Christ, only to such as are out of Christ; the other is to be delivered by God, as He is a Redeemer in Christ, only to such as are in Christ. Wherefore, neighbor *Neophitus*, seeing that you are now in Christ, beware that you receive not the ten commandments at the hands of God out of Christ, nor yet at the hands of Moses, but only at the hands of Christ; and so shall you be sure to receive them as the law of Christ.²⁹

²⁵ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:254-255

²⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 137

²⁷ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:305

²⁸ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 7:487

²⁹ Edward Fisher, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:306-308