

# The Marrow Controversy

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## The Historical Background

I will attempt to give an overview of a controversy which took place between 1718 and 1723 in the Scottish churches. This dispute was called "The Marrow Controversy". The name "Marrow Controversy" is taken from the title of a book published in England in 1645 that has as its title: "The Marrow of Modern Divinity". This book played a major role in this dispute which shook the Scottish churches. Some well-known ministers involved in this dispute were Thomas Boston, James Hog, John Drummond and the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. The issues in this controversy are the free offer of the Gospel, the place of the law in Christian life and the assurance of faith.

In this section I will give a brief overview of the church history of Scotland and describe the immediate background and setting in which the "Marrow Controversy" took place.

Before the dawn of the reformation in the 16th century, Scotland was a very uncivilized country. Spiritual darkness prevailed. There was hardly a country in Europe that was more backward in civilization, or one in which life and property were less secure. A licentious and rapacious clergy held in their hands nearly half the wealth of the land. The looseness of their living was matched only by the ignorance that prevailed in their ranks. Scotland stood in need of a Reformation, if any country did. The likelihood that such a change would take place was very remote indeed.

Yet when the reformation entered Scotland the results were far reaching. In 1560 the Scottish government officially abolished the jurisdiction of the pope in Scotland. Soon, there was hardly any Roman Catholicism left in Scotland. In that same year a law was passed proclaiming the Reformed Churches to be the only church in the realm of Scotland. The effects of the reformation were so great that John Knox could write: "Then might have been seen the Bible lying almost upon every Gentleman's table; and the New Testament was borne about in many men's hands".

Church historians assert that there was no country in which the principles of the reformation were so thoroughly and so broadly accepted, as they were in Scotland. The reason for this is that in Scotland the reformation was propagated by means of powerful preaching, whereby it gained a major influence among the people. In several other European countries the reformation was effectuated by its king or ruler. The Scottish reformation was not implemented with the authority of the royalty but by the authority of the Word of God, which gained great influence on broad layers of society.

The reformation in Scotland did not come about without bloodshed. Already in the 15th century several men had been put to death for their beliefs. The first Scottish martyr of the reformation was Patrick Hamilton. He was burned at St. Andrews in 1528. His death caused the reformation to spread quickly throughout Scotland. At that time a certain John Lyndsay, who was the advisor of the Archbishop James Beaton said: "My lord, if ye burn any more, except ye follow my counsel, ye will utterly destroy yourselves. If ye will burn them, let them be burnt in how (underground) cellars; for the reek of Master Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon!" Another famous Scottish preacher was George Wishart, who was burned in 1546. He died but not without having secured a dedicated disciple in the young John Knox.

In 1557 the Scottish nobility had united themselves to promote the reformation. They established a covenant and called themselves the "Lords of the Congregation". They had sworn: "...before the majesty of

God and His congregation that we (by His grace), shall with all diligence continually apply our whole power, substance, and very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the most blessed Word of God and His Congregation; and shall labour at our possibility to have faithful Ministers purely and truly to minister Christ's Evangel and Sacraments to his people."

These "Lords" asked John Knox to leave Geneva, where he was being trained by John Calvin, and return to Scotland, to which request he complied in 1559. The results were that already in 1560 the Scottish parliament officially rejected the authority of the pope and the celebration of the mass was prohibited. After the pro-Roman Catholic Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned in 1568, the Reformed Church of Scotland became the official church of Scotland.

However the issue of what kind of church government to adopt, would form the cause of future struggles. On the one hand there were the episcopals, who favoured very much a church government characterized by hierarchy with bishops having authority over ministers and consistories. These bishops in turn would be under the authority of, for instance, the king. On the other hand there were the presbyterians, who favoured the synodical, presbyterian form of church government, whereby consistories and synods would have authority within the church. The background of this struggle was the repeated attempts by the royalty to organize the Church of Scotland according to the English church. A great example of this was the church polity of Queen Elizabeth I of England who had decreed in 1559 the "Act of Supremacy" which stated that: "The Queen's highness is the only supreme governor of this realm, and of all other [of] her highness's dominions and countries, as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal..."

The successor of John Knox was Andrew Melville (1545-1612), who greatly favoured and propagated presbyterianism. He was able to persuade the king and the parliament of Scotland to officially approve and adopt presbyterianism as the only legitimate form of church government. It seemed that from now on presbyterianism would prevail in the Church of Scotland. However, when king James VI started to reign over Scotland at the beginning of the 17th century, the tide turned. Around 1610 he managed to reform church government into one that was suited to episcopal views. His son Charles I was crowned king in 1625 and pursued the same church policy. The result was that the Scottish king gained authority over the Church of Scotland.

This change in church government was rigorously opposed by the clergymen and by the people of Scotland. This led to the signing of the so-called: "National Covenant" on February 28, 1638. Numerous clergymen, and many of the nobility, as well as common citizens signed this document. Some did so with their own blood. Their aim was "to recover the purity and liberty of the Gospel". King Charles I tried to suppress this movement by force and the result was that in 1643 the presbyterians from England and Scotland united themselves in "The solemn League and Covenant" and in 1649 the English put King Charles I of Scotland to death. The Scottish then crowned his son Charles II to be their king. He promoted a milder form of Episcopacy. The effect was that in 1662 all ministers who refused to accept the episcopal system were ejected from their office. Around 300 ministers had to leave their office. These faithful ministers now took preaching to the open air. Bloody persecutions were carried out against "the covenanters". When Charles II died in 1685, James II became king. He was a fervent follower of the Church of Rome. Terrible persecutions broke out. This period was later referred to as "the killing time". When it became clear that James II was favouring Roman Catholicism, the Scottish nobility and citizens requested help from William of Orange from Holland. The royal throne of Great Britain was offered to him.

In 1690 William crossed the North Sea and the glorious revolution took place by which the danger of falling back into the darkness of Roman Catholicism was averted. Instead "the revolution settlement of 1690" was drawn up giving presbyterianism full reign again in the Scottish churches.

G.D. Henderson comments: "The new sovereign agreed to "settle by law that Church government in this kingdom which is most agreeable to the inclinations of the people," and accordingly Episcopacy was set aside, and the Presbyterian system of 1592 was revived. 'Ousted' ministers were restored, the Westminster

Confession was confirmed, and the first meeting of the General assembly since 1653 was summoned for October 3rd, 1690. The Stuart theory that the king was "supreme over all persons and in all causes, civil and ecclesiastical," was explicitly repudiated."

In 1712 an "Act of Toleration" was issued in which it was decreed that those who wished to maintain the episcopal form of church government were allowed to do so. From that time on there would be, next to the large presbyterian Church of Scotland, a small Episcopal Scottish church.

In the beginning of the 18th century there was no real unity in the official Church of Scotland. There were two groups: Firstly the "moderates" who were inclined to adhere to rationalism and who considered themselves to be enlightened, but who were considered by their opponents to be heretics, and secondly the "evangelicals", who were Calvinists and who in turn were considered by their opponents to be narrow-minded.

Outwardly Scotland was a church-attending nation. The Church of Scotland had great influence in society. Officially, the church wished to be orthodox and to hold to the authority of Scripture. However, slowly but steadily this started to change. The influence of the "moderates" and the enlightenment became greater. Prosperity also increased. In 1710 the Church adopted "The Act for preserving the Purity of Doctrine". This act stated that the church was glad to be propagating the truth, but that the church still felt compelled to urge all its ministers to teach and instruct in full agreement to the confessions and catechisms of the church. This showed that "all was no longer well in Zion" (D.C. Lachman). In fact certain clergymen denied the doctrine of man's total depravity, the atoning work of Christ and even the doctrine of the Trinity. John Simson, a professor of Divinity in the college of Glasgow, was prosecuted twice before the judicatories of the church, first for Pelagian and Arminian errors and lastly for Arianism. However, the church failed to respond strongly to these heresies.

Next to this growing influence of rationalism in the Scottish Church there was also another trend. A certain type of preaching became prevalent among several ministers whereby too much emphasis was placed on God's sovereignty. The free offer of the Gospel was shunned and God's sovereignty was expounded at the expense of man's accountability to God.

It is in this setting that the marrow controversy took place. This dispute occurred in a church where on the one hand rationalism was growing, but on the other hand the sovereignty of God was one-sidedly emphasized.

## **The Contents of the Book: "The Marrow of Modern Divinity"**

In May 1645 a book was published in England written by a certain E.F. These initials stand for Edward Fisher, a London barber, who was well read on theological issues. The full title of this book is: "The Marrow of Modern Divinity; the first part. Touching both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace: With their use and end, both in the time of the Old Testament, and in the time of the New. Clearly describing the way to eternal life by Jesus Christ."

This was the first part of a book that was going to consist of two volumes which together was called: "The Marrow of Modern Divinity". The first part deals with the relationship between law and gospel, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. It gives the opinions of various reformers and puritan theologians. Since these puritans were contemporaries of the writer, their opinions are referred to as "modern", that is to say, "present". That explains the title of the book: "The Marrow of Modern Divinity". In September 1648 the second part was published, under the title: "The marrow of Modern Divinity. Part Second", which contains an explanation of the Ten Commandments.

The background which led to the publication of this book was the discussion in England at that time about antinomianism, legalism and Arminianism. The word antinomianism comes from the Greek language: 'Anti' means against. 'Nomos' means law. In short, antinomianism claims that the Ten Commandments are not binding on Christians as a rule of life. Legalism is the doctrine that teaches that man is saved by doing the works of the Law. That means, man can make himself worthy of receiving salvation by being obedient unto God's Law. Arminianism is a doctrinal system that contains various errors. In this setting it is important to keep in mind that one of the main errors of Arminianism is the doctrine of man's free will of man. Man can procure salvation and resist the saving work of God.

During the 1640's in England there was a resurgence of antinomianism. These antinomians emphasized God's free grace at the expense of personal sanctification. They wished to uphold God's free and sovereign grace without considering the works of man. They went so far in this direction that even personal faith was of little importance. The law had really no function in the life of a Christian. The antinomians taught that everyone had a free 'warrant' to come to Christ. The legalists who concurred with the Arminians stated that keeping the law was essential to salvation. They made forgiveness dependent on personal repentance. Obedience to God's law must, according to their views, precede the forgiveness of sins. In other words: the beginning of sanctification precede justification.

The Marrow of Modern Divinity takes an in-between stand. The Marrow teaches that there is a free invitation for all to come to Christ. Every sinner has a warrant to come to the Saviour. The Lord does not demand us to meet certain conditions before coming to Him. Besides this, the book also emphasizes the place of the law in its uncovering work and in its sanctifying work. The law is still applicable to a Christian.

In England the two volumes of the Marrow were well received and were published with recommendations of puritans such as Jeremiah Burroughs, and Joseph Caryl. By 1690 the book was going through its ninth edition. This book had a major influence on English Reformed theology and prevented men who wished to be reformed from drowning in the waves of legalism, and provided them with a clear insight into the free grace of the Gospel.

In later years this book also became a major influence in the Church of Scotland. Thomas Boston wrote: "I have been acquainted with that book eighteen or nineteen years and many times have admired the gracious conduct of Providence which brought it to my hand, having occasionally lighted upon it in a house of the parish where I first settled as minister. As to any distinct uptakings of the doctrine of the Gospel I have, such as they are I owe them to that book."

The Marrow also greatly influenced Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. They wrote: "We do indeed own that we esteem it as a book whose principal aim is to debase self; to exalt our great Master and His everlasting righteousness and to rid marches between the law and the Gospel. We own we have been edified by it".

Let us now review the contents of "The Marrow of Modern Divinity".

In its introduction, distinctions are made as to what the author calls: "the law of works, the law of Christ and the law of faith." The "law of works" is formed by the Ten Commandments, as given to man in the covenant of works. The believer is released from this covenant of works and is therefore also released from the Ten Commandments as a "law of works". Instead, the believer is under the Ten Commandments as the "law of Christ". In that case he is a partaker of the Covenant of Grace and is under the Ten Commandments as "a rule for the life of gratitude". You can see that distinction is made between the Ten Commandments as they function in the Covenant of Works and in the Covenant of Grace. The "law of faith" is the Gospel, or the Covenant of Grace itself. Man is justified by the "law of faith", i.e. man is justified by means of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Adam is the representative of man and when he sinned against God, he did this on behalf of all mankind.

Adam sinned against the whole law of God. Salvation by works has now become impossible. God now deals with fallen man in the way of His promises given unto man through the Lord Jesus Christ. These promises were given to Adam and then to Abraham. These promises concern life and salvation. There is no salvation through the Covenant of Works. The law is given to us under the Covenant of Works "for no other end, than that man being thereby convinced of his weakness, might flee to Christ". The Marrow quotes Luther: "The law was our schoolmaster unto Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith". Emphasis is put on Christ alone as the only and all-sufficient ground for salvation. The works of the law cannot even justify partially. "God will have none to have a hand in the justification and salvation of a sinner, but Christ only."

Salvation must be offered unconditionally: "I beseech you to be persuaded that here you are to work 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 ever 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." Various puritans are quoted. Ezekiel Culverwell: "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 of them all shall believe in this his Son, shall not perish, but have eternal life." John Preston: "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."

The author of the Marrow fully subscribes to the sovereign election of God, whereby certain people are saved and others not. But as long as the Lord has not placed a mark on those He has elected, we must preach the Gospel to all. The Marrow clearly opposes the legalistic notion that repentance and works of new obedience should take place before justification. That would be a new covenant of works.

The Marrow distinguishes between "the law of works" and "the law of Christ". Both have the Ten Commandments as contents. The believer is no longer under "the law of works". He is under "the law of Christ". Because of love to Christ he will desire to obey the Lord Jesus. "...if the everlasting love of God in Jesus Christ be truly made known to your souls, according to the measure thereof, you shall have no need to frame and force yourselves to love and to do good works, for your souls will ever stand bound to love God and to keep his commandments, and it will be your meat and drink to do his will.... Evangelical grace directs a man to no other obedience than that whereof the law of the Ten Commandments is to be the rule.... Neither can any man thereby gather that the law is superfluous to the faithful, whom notwithstanding, it doth not cease to teach, exhort, and prick forward to goodness, although before God's judgement-seat it hath no place in their conscience". When the believer sins against the "law of Christ" God can chastise and punish, but will never give that soul up to hell.

Regarding assurance of faith, the Marrow teaches that the promises of God are the foundation of assurance: "For the promise of God in Christ is of a tried truth, and never yet failed any man, nor ever will. Therefore I would have you to close with Christ in the promise, without making any question whether you are in the faith or no; for there is an assurance which rises from the exercise of faith by a direct act, and that is, when a man, by faith, directly lays hold upon Christ, and concludes assurance from thence."

A secondary way of receiving assurance of faith is when the believer observes the fruits of faith in his own heart and life: "But if he looks upon these things in himself, and thereupon conclude, that because these things are in his heart, Christ dwells there by faith, and therefore he is accepted of God, and justified, and shall certainly be saved, and so make them an evidence of his believing, or the ground of his believing that he has believed.." There are three kinds of fruit: 1. True love, reverence and hunger for the Word of God. 2. True love for the people of God. 3. Love for his enemies that one can pray for them and forgive them their misdoings.

Finally when all these means lack to work assurance of faith then as a last resort the Marrow urges the soul to look unto Jesus. "The right way for you in this case, to get your assurance again, is, when all other things fail, to look to Christ; that is, go to the word and promise, and leave off and cease a while to reason about the truth of your faith; and set your heart on work to believe.."

## The Actual Controversy

At the beginning of the 18th century in Scotland, Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism were gaining influence among the clergy. Several ministers published pamphlets against these trends. As a response to this, the Synod of Fife forbade ministers to publish tracts without approval of a synodical committee.

In comparison to the 17th century, the theological situation in Scotland had changed. James Fraser of Brea, who during the persecutions had been imprisoned, wrote later on in his memoirs:

"I perceive that our Divinity was much altered from what it was in the primitive Reformers' time. When I read Knox, Hamilton, Tindal, Luther, Calvin, Bradford, etc., I thought I saw another Scheme of Divinity much more agreeable to the scriptures and to my experience than the modern. And though I plainly saw the errors of the antinomians, yet I perceived a Gospel spirit to be in very few and that the most part, yea, of ministers did woefully confound the two Covenants and were of an Old Testament spirit, and little of the glory of Christ, Grace and Gospel did shine in their writings and preaching. But I abhorred and was at enmity with Mr. Baxter, as a stated enemy to the grace of God, under the cover of opposing Antinomianism."

James Fraser knew from his own life the struggle to come to "Gospel liberty". He explains how the Lord "opened his eyes to see the glorious mystery of the Covenant of Grace". The means used were Luther's Commentary on Galatians, Calvin's Institutes and The Marrow of Modern Divinity.

Thomas Boston was at first also legalistic in his ministerial work. He found preaching so dry. While he was still a candidate for the ministry in 1697, he complained about this to a minister, called John Drysart, who gave him the following advice: "But if you were entered on preaching of Christ, you would find it very pleasant."

Boston was installed as minister of Simprin, "where there were only 88 `examinable souls', a meagre stipend and a manse in ruins". During his ministry in Simprin his love to the evangelical truth was strengthened by hearing a fellow minister, named George Mair, preach. Boston writes that the result was that "upon the back of this I sometimes thought I preacht but too little of Christ...I found my heart desirous to preach Christ's fullness, his being "all and in all"."

A third decisive factor in Boston's life leading to his full understanding and acceptance of the Gospel doctrine of free grace, was his finding a copy of "The Marrow of Modern Divinity" in the home of one of his church members in Simprin, near the end of 1700.

Because of these factors, Thomas Boston became a fervent preacher of free grace. During the next 18 years nothing much was said or noticed about the book "The Marrow of Modern Divinity". Boston and other "evangelical" ministers in Scotland quietly preached in agreement to the "marrow theology", i.e. they emphasized the wealth of an all-sufficient Christ offered unto all who are under the Gospel.

There are two reasons for the actual onset of the so-called Marrow controversy. The first reason was the ecclesiastical procedure against professor Simson of Glasgow. In 1717 he was accused of Arminianism, and would later be accused of Arianism. Boston writes about this procedure: "Simson admitted using questionable modes of expressions but declared that he had never intended to deviate from the teaching of the Church's Confession. He was acquitted with a warning `not to attribute too much to natural reason and

the power of corrupt nature to the disparagement of revelation and efficacious free grace'. " Boston was of the opinion that the General Assembly had expressed itself "with great softness to the professor; who, from the attempts he had then made against the doctrine of the grace of Christ, hath since advanced to attack the doctrine of the person of Christ, and to overthrow the foundation of Christianity."

The second reason was that at the same meeting of the General Assembly of 1717 the appeal made by William Craig, a candidate for the ministry, was dealt with. He had been examined by the classis Auchterarder and had been denied permission to be installed as minister. This classis objected to the views of Simson and of legalism. Their own opinion was formulated in a "proposition" which every candidate for the ministry in their classis had to sign. William Craig had refused to comply and was therefore denied ordination to the ministry. The case was brought before the General Assembly of 1717.

Boston writes about this: "This proposition, called in derision "the Auchterarder Creed," was all at once at that diet judged and condemned; though some small struggle was made in defence 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. It was as follows: -"It is not sound and orthodox to teach, that we must forsake sin, in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in covenant with God." For this when I came to my chamber, my conscience smote me grievously; for that I could speak in my own cause, as said is, but could not speak in the public cause of truth." Boston concluded that this condemnation initiated a struggle against the doctrines of free grace which the assembly considered to be antinomianism.

The General Assembly condemned the classis Auchterarder and insisted to have Craig installed as a minister. The classis was not allowed to require the signing of any classical propositions. These measures would have been sufficient. The Assembly however proceeded to condemn "the Auchterarder Creed" in strong language. This proposition was considered to be "unsound and most detestable, tending to encourage sloth in Christians and slacken people's obligation to Gospel holiness".

Boston was greatly distressed by this decision and communicated this to one of the delegates of the classis Auchterarder, John Drummond, minister of Crief. Boston clarified his viewpoint by referring to "The Marrow of Modern Divinity". John Drummond was able to purchase a copy of this book and passed it on to James Webster of Edinburgh, who had been the main accuser of Prof. Simson. In turn Webster passed the book on to James Hog, minister of Carnock, who republished the book in 1718, with a preface written by himself. The reprint caused upheaval in the Scottish churches. Many had thought that grace was conditional. To receive forgiveness one was to prove his sincerity by forsaking sins. Otherwise, according to their view, grace would be very "cheap", and would promote antinomianism. The reprint of the Marrow initiated a flow of pamphlets which were either pro or contra the Marrow. The General Assembly of 1719 appointed a committee to ensure purity of doctrine. The result of their work was that the General Assembly of 1720 declared that various statements in "The Marrow of Modern Divinity" were unsound. The same Assembly then adopted a motion to condemn the entire book. The five accusations against the book were:

1. Concerning the nature of faith, under which the charge is that assurance is made to be the essence of faith.
2. Of universal atonement and pardon.
3. Holiness not necessary to salvation.
4. Fear of punishment and hope of reward not allowed to be motives of a believer's obedience.
5. That the believer is not under the law as a rule of life.

Thomas Boston called this decision later: "the Black Act". The assembly urged the ministers to warn their people not to read "The Marrow of Modern Divinity".

Thomas Boston and eleven other ministers who had been greatly blessed by the reading of the Marrow requested the General Assembly of 1721 to revise the decision of the previous assembly. Their representation was as follows:

1. The Father hath made in the Gospel a free and unlimited offer of Christ and of salvation to all men, by virtue of which every individual who hears the Gospel has warrant to take hold of the said offer and apply it to his own soul.
2. An assured persuasion of the truth of God's promise in the Gospel, with respect to one's self in particular, is included in the very nature of saving faith.
3. The believer's holiness is in no way the price or condition of salvation.
4. Believers in yielding obedience to the law as a rule of life ought not to be influenced either by mercenary hopes of heaven or by slavish fears of hell.
5. The believer is not in any way under the law as a Covenant of Works.
6. It is just and Scriptural to distinguish between the law as a Covenant of Works and the law as a rule of life in the hands of Christ.

The General Assembly of 1721 postponed the discussion on this representation until the General Assembly of 1722, which on May 21, 1722 decided to uphold the decision of the General Assembly of 1720 and to condemn the twelve ministers who had appealed.

Thomas Boston wrote later in his memoirs: "This affair was brought to the issue aforesaid in the afternoon session of that day; and their meeting for that black work appointed to be at three o'clock that day, there came on, a little before the hour, a most dreadful storm of thunder and hail, by means whereof their meeting was for a considerable time hindered.... I well remember, with what serenity of mind, and comfort of heart, I heard the thunder of that day, the most terrible thunderclap being just about three o'clock. It made impression on many, as Heaven's testimony against their deed they were then about to do; though in this it is not for me to determine."

The decision was taken by a large majority of 134 against 5. The twelve ministers immediately submitted a "protestation", which the assembly declared to be unlawful. The protestation was afterwards published for the benefit of the church members, and was in fact a brave and Scriptural protest against the opinion of the large majority of the Church of Scotland. One would have expected the assembly to have taken further measures against the marrow men, but nothing else happened. The people loved the warm preaching of the marrow men. The matter had now seemingly been brought to a close.

In the churches, however, the influence of the Marrow continued to be present. The preaching of the marrow men had much influence on the people. In 1726 Thomas Boston published a new edition of "The Marrow of Modern Divinity", and added footnotes to explain various passages. This edition is in volume 7 of his Works (ed. Roberts, Wheaton, Illinois).

## **The Free Offer of the Gospel**

Why were the marrow men so persistent? Why were they so zealous to defend "The Marrow of Modern Divinity", an English book from the 17th century? The marrow men realized that deep down the issue was not merely a book. The issue was the heart of the Gospel, i.e. free grace. When the General Assemblies of 1720 and 1722 of the Church of Scotland condemned the Marrow, it had actually condemned the doctrine of free grace. Therefore this was not a trivial dispute between some theologians, but the very heart of the Gospel was at stake. The marrow men understood two things very clearly: 1. There is in Christ a fullness of grace for all who come unto Him. 2. This grace is not only full but it is also free. Grace is unconditional and is given freely to the sinner who comes to Christ.

The General Assembly confused two true statements: 1. The grace of God saves the elect. 2. The elect will neglect sin. They drew the logical conclusion that God gives grace to those who neglect sin. That means: when a sinner confesses and forsakes his sin, the Lord will be gracious to him.

The marrow men emphasized that grace must be offered to all sinners and that Christ is "a deed of gift and grant to all mankind". That sounded like antinomianism to the General Assembly. The assembly was of the

opinion, that the sinner first had to show fruits of grace before he could receive the grace of God. In this way they changed the fruit of grace into a condition for grace. The marrow men taught that grace granted to a person would lead him to forsake sin, but never is the sinner's forsaking of sin a prerequisite to receiving grace. Then grace would no longer be free. Then Christ would be separated from His benefits.

The opponents of the Marrow essentially propagated conditional grace. But what they failed to realize was that this eventually would also lead to an unbiblical view of God. The sovereignty of God would be touched. God would be dependent on man's fulfilling certain conditions in order to grant grace to him. Conditional grace leads to the idea that God Himself is conditional. But this cannot be, for God is sovereign in all His dealings.

The marrow men emphatically stressed the free offer of the promises of the Gospel to all who come under the preaching. The theologians opposing the Marrow reasoned along the following lines: To whom belong the benefits of Christ? The answer to this question is obvious: The benefits of Christ will be received by the elect. Therefore they concluded that the benefits of Christ must be offered to those who display signs of election. Over against this, Boston and the marrow men stated that Christ must be offered to all under the Gospel, even though only the elect will share in the benefits of Christ. If the marrow men could not offer the promises of the Gospel, then in their opinion there really can be no true preaching.

It is noteworthy to see how Christ was typically referred to by the marrow men and their opponents. The marrow men declared Christ to be the Saviour of the world, or the Saviour of sinners. The opponents of the Marrow often called the Lord Jesus the Saviour of the elect.

How should we then view the doctrine of the free offer of the Gospel as formulated by the marrow men? There are many examples from Scriptures which show us that the grace of God is offered freely and fully to all who are under the Gospel. For instance Isaiah 42:6, 55:1; Revelations 3:20, 22:17; Acts 2:21,39; John 1:29, etc. The offer of the promises of the Gospel is also in agreement with the Reformed confessions. The Canons of Dordt teach clearly the free offer. See heads I,3; II,5 (. This promise ... ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons... to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.) and heads III/IV,8. It should be noted that this free offer of the promises of the Gospel is mentioned in conjunction with the doctrine of limited atonement, see head II,8.

John Calvin also taught the free offer of the promises of the Gospel to all who are under the preaching of the Gospel. Without going into too much detail I refer you to some passages from his Institutes (translation Ford Lewis Battles): Book III, chapter XXIV, par. 8: "There is the general call, by which God invites all equally to Himself through the outward preaching of the word - even those to whom he holds it out as a savour of death..." Book IV, chapter I, par. 25 we find: "But I do not want to begin a never ending enumeration. For the prophets are full of promises of this kind, which offer mercy to a people though they be covered with infinite crimes."

The important question is: What is the **warrant** for the free offer of Christ? The opponents of the Marrow thought that the offer of Christ must coincide with the extent of the atonement. In other words, the offer of Christ must only be extended unto those for whom Christ had efficaciously died. Otherwise, one would have to teach universal atonement. This is the doctrine that teaches that Christ died for each and every human being and that Christ thereby paid the price of the sins of each and every single person. This has always been vehemently denounced in Reformed churches, because Scripture clearly teaches that the Lord Jesus died only for His people; He only paid for the sins of the elect. Summarizing this, we can say that according to the opponents of the Marrow, a free offer of Christ to all could only be warranted by the doctrine of universal atonement. But this would not be reformed, consequently they denied the free offer of the Gospel.

However, the marrow men never taught universal redemption. They denied such unreformed thinking

completely and affirmed that Christ only died for His elect. Thomas Boston, for instance, writes: "Our Lord Jesus Christ died not for, nor took upon him the sins of all and every individual man, but he died for, and took upon him the sins of all the elect". The marrow men subscribed very much to the doctrine of limited atonement.

What was the warrant for the marrow men to offer Christ freely and fully to all who are present under the preaching? This warrant was not based upon some kind of universal atonement, but upon the unlimited power that lies in the Blood of Christ. His Blood is powerful to save every sinner. The warrant for the free offer does not lie in an universal atonement but in a "perfect atonement". Actually, this warrant is nothing less than submitting to the authority of God's Word. God Himself commands in His Word that the Gospel must be preached unto all. This awe and deep reverence for the Word of God caused the marrow men to offer Christ freely.

This led the marrow men to go so far as even exclaim to the hearers of the Gospel: "Christ is dead for you". Some have thought that this was preaching universal atonement. This is however not the case. They were only proclaiming the full and free offer of the Lord Jesus Christ to sinners. If the marrow men would have taught plainly: "Christ has died for you", then that would have been displaying universal atonement. But the marrow men never used this expression. They only wished to offer Christ unto all because of the perfect power that Christ had to save all who came to Him.

The marrow men were in agreement with Scripture. Preachers of the Gospel do not have the mandate to proclaim that Jesus paid the price of sin for each and every one of the hearers personally. The marrow men proclaimed on the one hand that Christ did not die for all men, but on the other hand failed not to preach to all the fully sufficient power of Christ's sacrifice. It is this offer that melts sin-sick souls.

When R.M. McCheyne was lecturing in the 1800's on the beneficial uncovering effect of preaching the law, he added: "And yet to me there is something far more awakening in the sight of a Divine Saviour freely offering Himself to every one of the human race. There is something that might pierce the heart like a stone in that cry: `Unto you, o men, I call; and My voice is to the sons of man.'"

It was this tender offer that greatly influenced the marrow men. It was their joy and true conviction to offer Christ fully and freely to all under the Gospel. As an example I pass on these words from a sermon of Ralph Erskine on Zechariah 13:7:

"Behold! once for all, I make you the richest offer that ever was heard tell of; in the name of the Lord of hosts I offer you the man that is God's fellow, to be a complete saviour to you, to stand between you and the sword of divine wrath, and to be the burden bearer for you; to bear the weight of all the curses of the law, the weight of all God's wrath, the weight of all your salvation for you; and to do all your work in you and for you..... Are you a child of wrath? I offer him as a saviour to redeem you, and deliver you from the wrath to come. Are you a poor bankrupt? I offer him who is the heir of all things, and has unsearchable riches to pay all your debt. Are you a poor ignorant creature? I offer you him as made of God unto you wisdom. Are you guilty? I offer him as made unto you righteousness. Are you polluted? I offer him to you, as made unto you sanctification. Are you miserable and forlorn? I offer him to you, as made of God unto you complete redemption. Are you hard-hearted? I offer him in that promise, "I will take away the heart of stone." Are you content that he break your hard heart, according to his promise? Come then, put your hard heart in his hands. Are you a wretched backslider, that has backslidden an hundred times, a thousand times more than an hundred? I offer him in that promise, "I will heal your backslidings," Are your corruptions strong and prevalent? I offer him in that promise, "I will subdue your iniquities." .....

## **The Implications of the Free Offer of the Gospel**

The marrow men propagated the free offer of the Gospel. This is in full agreement to God's Word and the Reformed confessions. We have seen that John Calvin also taught the free offer. We have also considered one of Ralph Erskine's sermons and have seen there an example of how he offered Christ freely unto his hearers. The "free offer" is the most important and well-known issue of the marrow controversy. Many who are familiar with the marrow controversy will refer to the "free offer" as the heart of the dispute. Thomas Boston and the Erskines are still well known for their teaching of the free offer of the Gospel. These issues are discussed also in our day. However, sometimes one gets the impression that this doctrine is propagated at the expense of other Biblical doctrines. One can hammer so often on this one doctrine that he risks minimizing other essential Biblical doctrines.

Some people emphasize the free offer of the Gospel so much that they forget man's inability to accept this free offer. They will stress man's responsibility so strongly that they tend to forget that the Holy Spirit has to apply God's word to the human heart. These people emphasize the free offer of the Gospel at the expense of the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. I believe that this line of thought is also penetrating our circles.

The devil always tries to lure us in a certain error. If we repudiate that error and stay firm on the truth, then he will try to make us emphasize this truth so much that it will be at the expense of other vital truths from God's Word. I believe that this is a danger that we are facing in our churches.

We stand for the free offer of the Gospel. That is Biblical. The promises of the Gospel must be preached unto all. The marrow men fully stood for this truth. There are other truths, the marrow men also cherished, such as the total depravity of man and the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Man's Total Depravity**

The marrow men never stressed the free offer of grace at the expense of the preaching of the total depravity of man. They addressed their hearers as sinners. They did not refer to their congregations as nearly all saved. They did not refer to their hearers as church members who only needed some religious education and with whom basically all was spiritually well. On the contrary, they emphasized the truth that man is by nature dead in sins and trespasses. The marrow men preached in order to save sinners from death. They stressed the need for personal repentance and remission of sins. Their sermons were convicting. They shunned not to call their hearers bankrupt, poor and ignorant, under God's wrath, guilty, polluted, miserable and forlorn, and hard-hearted. God's people would be even referred to as wretched backsliders. To all these people the rich promises of God would be offered. But this free offer always took place in the context of man's total depravity.

The marrow men understood what the Lord Jesus said: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" Matthew 9:12b. In order to offer the sweet Gospel of Christ, the marrow men wished to uncover their congregations to their sin and show them their urgent need of "closing with Christ". That is also the Scriptural setting of the free offer of Christ. Man is lost and unless man is aware of his lost state there will be no felt need for Christ, even though Christ may be frequently offered to him.

Let us look at some sermons by Thomas Boston on Ephesians 1:6, (Works, Vol 11, pages 149-170). He stresses therein the necessity of being accepted in Christ. Boston explains that those who are not in Christ are offenders who have provoked God. They are sinners in Adam. They are unpardoned offenders. Original guilt lies on them, as well as their actual sins. God is highly displeased with them. God even loathes them. The wrath of God is upon them and they lie under His curse.

Boston writes: "They may have made a fashion of repenting, and begging pardon, for some of their grosser sins; but since they are not in Christ, there is not one of them blotted out; for without shedding of blood is no remission... Whatever ease they be in, rejoicing or weeping; whatever they be doing, serving God in

their way, or serving their lusts, his countenance is never towards them, because they are not in Christ... God may lay common favours to their hand, health, wealth, etc.; as the condemned man is allowed his meat till the execution; but he grants them no special saving favours, no peace, no pardon, etc. He may allow them to come, and call them into the outer court of ordinances, and make them offers of grace; but they cannot come into the inner court, nor partake of grace, not being in Christ, John x.9. They are children of wrath... if the thread of their life be cut off while they are in that state of wrath, they are for ever undone without remedy."

After this Boston proceeds to show the wealth of Christ. "There is a sacrifice slain and offered, that is of such a sweet-smelling savour.. There is an open proclamation made in the gospel, that all may have the benefit of that sacrifice, and be accepted of God." After Boston has first sought to uncover his hearers, he offers Christ in all His sweetness and fullness. Boston is here not addressing worldly people, but his own congregation of Etterick, where he preached these sermons in 1726.

It is the calling of all ministers to offer a full Christ to all hearers but always in the setting of man's utter lost condition and guilt before God. We must learn to own our guilt and to bow down in the dust before a Holy God. There we are invited to plead the sweet promises of grace. The knowledge of sin is not a prerequisite for pleading the promises of God, but **it is the way** in which the grace of God is applied to sinners.

The marrow men knew that without a true saving knowledge of Christ we are lost forever. This truth impressed Boston and others. That is why they delighted to preach a full and rich Saviour unto lost sinners. Have we already seen our need of Christ? Have we owned our guilt? Have we closed with Christ yet?

### **The doctrine of the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit**

The marrow men always stressed the free offer of the Gospel together with the doctrine of the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. This links up directly with man's total depravity. The sweet promises of grace are offered to a guilty people, but sinners are so depraved that they cannot lay hold on Christ in their own power. They need the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. He makes room for and applies Christ to the sinner.

In their preaching of the free offer of grace, the marrow men never presumed that man in himself is able to take Christ and so secure his own salvation. The marrow men realized that the Lord Jesus Christ must be granted or applied to the heart. They preached the necessity of "closing with Christ". The sinner has to repudiate himself and to rest only on the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This rich blessing however can only be realized in life by means of the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. The marrow men were aware of this. They did not point the people to their own ability to take Christ, but would set before them the work of the Triune God, Who not only procured salvation, but also applies salvation through His Holy Spirit. They taught that the Holy Ghost works grace in the life of a sinner. The Lord takes away the heart of stone. He heals the backslidings. The Lord subdues the iniquities of sinners who flee to Him. He removes the curse of sin.

In the above mentioned sermons of Thomas Boston on Ephesians 1:6, we have an example of how the marrow men preached the free offer of grace in conjunction with the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. Boston speaks of "the sinner's bestirring himself for acceptance with God" but refers to the work of the Holy Spirit as recorded in John 16:8 and Acts 2:37.

To be accepted in Christ, Boston says, three things are necessary:

"1. A conviction of unacceptableness to God John xvi.8. Men must be convinced of their being unacceptable to God ere they will come to Christ. It is their not seeing their own

loathsomeness, that makes them slight the sacrifice of sweet savour; and think to be accepted of God, while yet they are not in Christ. And for that cause it is needful they get a sight of God's holiness and their own vileness.

2. A weighty concern and uneasiness about it. They must not go on to be easy, whether they be accepted of God or not. As long as a man can live contented without it, he will never be accepted. But the soul shall be brought to that, that all shall be sapless without it.

3. Anxiety of heart for it, Acts ii.37. There must be earnest longings to be accepted of him, yea the soul must be brought to esteem and so prize it, as to be content with it upon any terms, Acts ix.6. Not as if these were required to qualify us for acceptance with God; but that without them we will never come into Christ to be accepted in him."

Boston urges his people to seek to be in Christ; to be united to Him. He asks (page 163), "How may we then get into Christ?.. The only way to get into Him is by faith, Ephesians iii.17... The only way to get that faith, is by His Spirit in us, 2 Cor. iv.13. Christ communicating his quickening Spirit unto the dead soul, it believes; and believing is united to Christ, and accepted in him. Wherefore breathe, pant, and long for the Spirit of Christ, Luke xi.13."

Boston speaks further in experiential terms of God's work in the soul. The Lord accepts a sinner into favour for the sake of the righteousness of Christ. The wrath of God ceases against the soul. The curse is removed. He is fully pardoned. The Lord gives the soul peace through the Beloved, Ephesians ii.14. The Lord is pleased with the believer's person as ever He was displeased with him and He admits them into communion with him, 1 John i.3. The springs of mercy are opened to the sinner. Rivers of compassion flow to him. He has peace of conscience and access to God with confidence.

This all belongs to the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, all these blessings are bestowed on the sinner freely. "There is nothing in the sinner himself to procure it, or move God to it, Romans III.24, but as the sun shines without hire on the dung-hill, so God accepts sinners of mere grace."

The marrow men preached the free offer in close conjunction with the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit. We in our age stand in danger to succumb to a very subtle kind of Arminianism that lets us believe that we can simply take Christ to be our own. This will be accompanied by prayer and Bible reading. Then the conclusion is quickly drawn that we are accepted of God. This takes place under the banner of the "free offer". This is not what the marrow men taught however. They considered the merit of our works to be "smoke of the bottomless pit darkening the glory of grace in the acceptance of sinners" (Boston, vol 11 page 170). The marrow men contended for the offer of free **and** the sovereign grace that had to be applied to the heart by the Holy Ghost.

To be saved, we also need that same work of the Holy Spirit. Do we know that work of the Spirit in our own heart? Let there be much prayer in our midst for rich outpourings of God's Spirit. May He uncover us to our depravity and apply the Lord Jesus to our hearts and souls.

## **The Scriptural Setting of the Law of God**

The marrow men contended for the unconditional and free offer of the Gospel. That means that sinners do not have to meet certain conditions before coming to Christ for salvation. Neither do they first have to forsake certain sins before calling on the Lord for deliverance. The marrow men taught that grace is unconditional and independent of man's works. This teaching caused the opponents of the marrow men to accuse them of antinomianism. Antinomianism teaches that man is under no obligation to keep the law of God.

The opponents of the Marrow taught that one must show sincerity of one's repentance by forsaking certain sins and thereby 'qualify' for grace. The marrow men realized however that grace would then not be free, but made dependent on our works. That would result in a return to a religion of works. The opponents responded by saying that the marrow men neglected the necessity of obedience to God's law.

How did the marrow men view the law of God? Were they indeed antinomians? Did they teach that one need not obey the law of God?

The marrow men strongly maintained the law of God. They stressed personal holiness, but they never considered holiness to be a pre-requisite for grace. That would be overthrowing the principle of "Sola Gratia" of the reformation. Thomas Boston writes: "That true repentance and acceptable reformation of life, do necessarily flow from, but go not before saving faith."

In this context the marrow men also denied that knowledge of sin is a condition for a person to flee to Christ. In a sermon on Matthew 11:28: "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden", Boston writes:

"The words "labour and heavy laden", do not restrict the invitation and offer to such as are insensible of their sins and longing to be rid of them, though indeed none but such will really accept; but they denote the restlessness of the sinful soul of man; a qualification (if it is so called) to be found in all that are out of Christ, whether they have, or have not, any notable law work on their consciences."

In this way the marrow men were in agreement with the earlier puritans and the later "evangelical" Scottish writers.

The puritan Robert Traill, who greatly influenced the marrow men, writes (Works, Vol.I, Page 263, ed. Banner of Truth):

"Shall we tell men, that unless they be holy, they must not believe on Jesus Christ? That they must not venture on Christ for salvation, till they be qualified and fit to be received and welcomed by him? This were to forbear preaching the gospel at all, or to forbid all men to believe on Christ. For never was any sinner qualified for Christ. He is well qualified for us, 1 Cor 1: 30; but a sinner out of Christ hath no qualification for Christ but sin and misery."

This same viewpoint has been described later on in a pastoral way by John Colquhoun, (Repentance, page 114, Banner of Truth):

"Do you postpone the act of trusting in the Lord Jesus for all His salvation, till you first sit down and mourn a while for your sins, or till your heart be so humbled that you may be welcome to Him, and so have from your own resources a warrant for trusting in Him? Do you object against coming to Christ, because you are not certain that your conviction of sin and your repentance are of the right sort? Do you apply yourself to the exercise of repentance in order to be qualified for believing in Christ, or do you apply your conscience to the commands and curses of the broken law, in order so to repent as to be entitled to trust in Him? Know, I intreat you, that this preposterous and self-righteous course will but sink you the deeper in unbelief, impenitence, and enmity to God. The longer you try in this manner to seek for evangelical repentance in your heart or life, the further you will be from finding it. But perhaps you will reply, Can any man who is not a true penitent exercise a saving faith in Christ? I answer, No, he cannot. But though no man can act a saving faith without having the principle of true repentance, or a disposition to exercise it, implanted by the Holy Spirit in his heart, yet multitudes have believed, and do believe to the saving of the soul, without having previously seen that they had that principle, and without any previous exercise of it. To have it is necessary to the acting of true faith; but to know that you have it, is not necessary".

These theologians together with the marrow men stress that a sinner is unconditionally called to come to Christ. We also are under the obligation to forsake ourselves and to seek our life and salvation outside of ourselves only in Christ Jesus.

Then the question may arise: What is the function of the law in coming to faith according to the marrow men? Did they perhaps under- estimate the convicting work of the law? Certainly not!

Boston writes:

"I make no question, but before a sinner will come to Christ by believing, he must be an awakened, convinced, sensible sinner; pricked in his heart with a sense of his sin and misery; made to groan under his burden, to despair of relief from the law himself, or any other creature, and to desire and thirst after Christ and his righteousness.... And therefore the law must be preached by all those who would preach Christ aright. But that these, or any other things in the sinner, are required to warrant him, that he may come to Christ by believing, is what I conceive the Scripture teaches not; but the general offer of the Gospel... warrants every man that he may come." (Works VII, page 277, footnote h).

What then is the place of the law in the lives of the believers? Is there still a place for the law of God in the lives of God's children or do the marrow men consider the law as being obsolete? Were the opponents of the marrow men right in accusing them of antinomianism?

We must say that the marrow men were no antinomians. They certainly ascribed a major place to the law of God in the lives of the believers. The marrow men distinguish clearly between the significance of the law of God for the believer and the unbeliever. They do that by distinguishing between the "law of works" and the "law of Christ". Both have the Ten Commandments as their contents.

The unbeliever is under the law as a law of works. The law convicts, accuses and condemns him. The believer is not under the law of works but is under the law of Christ. The believer is urged by the love of Christ to live according to all the commandments of God.

Ralph Erskine explains this further in a sermon on Galatians 2:19. There he writes:

"The commands of the law, in the hand of Christ, have lost their old covenant-form, and are full of love. The command of the law of works is Do, and Live; but in the hand of Christ, it is, Live, and Do: the command of the law of works, is, Do, or else be damned: but the law in the hand of Christ is: I have delivered thee from hell, therefore Do: the command of the law of works is, Do in thy own strength; but the law in the hand of Christ is, 'I am thy strength: My strength shall be perfected in thy weakness,' therefore Do."

Moreover Ralph Erskine fully underscores that sanctification is necessary for salvation: "Hence see how it is, that holiness is necessary to salvation; why, it is the very life of the justified man, being dead to the law, to live unto God: he is not holy that he may be justified, but justified that he may be holy."

The marrow men cannot be properly accused of antinomianism. They were afraid of forsaking the scriptural view of the law. The marrow men feared to base man's salvation partially on the works of man. Their opponents, however, had a wrong view of God's law. They were actually legalists who made man's salvation dependent on conditions that he had to fulfil. Deep down this was salvation by works and not by faith. That is characteristic of legalism.

Perhaps you think: "What is the use of studying these issues today?" Well, these issues are again very much in discussion today. We can hear people in certain circles exclaiming: The Christian is free from the law. We don't have to live according to God's law, for Christ has fulfilled the law. This is nothing less than antinomianism. Next to this we can still discern, even within our own heart, the call to obey the law, to live a decent and good life and so to earn grace. Many people believe: If you do your best, the Lord will reward

you, and if you pray really well, the Lord will answer you. This is a form of legalism.

What should our response be to antinomianism and legalism? How should we view the law of God? Antinomianism and legalism are a misunderstanding of the different ways of using the term "law" in Scripture and especially in the Pauline epistles. The apostle Paul uses the term "law" in two ways. John Calvin shows this (Institutes, II,VII,1): "I understand by the word "law" not only the Ten Commandments, which set forth a godly and righteous rule of living, but the form of religion handed down by God through Moses."

The antinomian reading certain passages of Paul dealing with the law concludes that the Christian does not have to live according to God's law. He will quote texts like Galatians 5:18; Romans 10:4; 1 Timothy 1:8-10. The legalist, on the other hand, will consider other texts in Scripture that refer to the law and conclude that we must keep the law of God as a means to gain salvation. He will base his arguments on texts like Romans 3:21; Matthew 5:17,18.

The truth is that both do not realize the proper place of the law in God's order of salvation. Paul speaks very positively about the law of God, but the law can never be a means of salvation.

The law of God is the expression of God's will to man. That remains intact, no matter what happens. In paradise, man was created according to God's image. The law of God was written in his heart. Man lost that true image of God. In the work of salvation, the Lord restores that image of God in man. Therefore, the Lord revealed His law again at Sinai. The prophets frequently refer to this event. God promises to write His law on the heart of man again. This does not take place by means of our own attempts to keep God's law, but through the power of His Spirit. See Romans 8:4; Ephesians 1:4; 2:10; Galatians 5:22,23. The desire of the believer is to walk according to God's law, out of love to Christ, see Romans 7.

The antinomian and the legalist have a distorted view of these truths. The Lord does not abrogate His law. The ungodly will be judged according to God's law and the godly will be transformed according to that same law.

Has the law of God already become our delight? May the Holy Spirit teach us to say with the psalmist: "O how love I Thy law! it is my meditation all the day". Psalm 119: 97.

## **The Assurance of Faith**

The marrow men were also faced with opposition regarding their views on the assurance of faith. In those days assurance of faith was an important theological issue. Today we also have many in our midst who struggle with this same issue. God's people know the struggles of faith, also in respect to the assurance of their salvation. Luther once said: "He who has never doubted has never really believed." It may prove beneficial to consider the views of the marrow men on assurance of faith.

The marrow men made a twofold distinction with regard to assurance of faith. On the one hand they taught that faith, by definition, is assurance. On the other hand they recognized that a believer who has faith can be afflicted with many doubts and can lack a "sensible" feeling of his acceptance of God.

The marrow men were in full agreement with the reformers when they stressed that assurance belongs to faith by definition. If there is no element of assurance present in faith, then there is no longer faith. Faith will trust and lean upon something and that always presupposes a form of assurance. The opponents of the Marrow denied that assurance was an essential element of faith. They thought of the many struggles believers have with respect to assurance of faith and could not grasp what the marrow men were driving at in emphasizing that faith comprises assurance. They asked the marrow men to explain their position. The

answer they received was a very pastoral consideration of dealing with problems concerning assurance of faith. According to the marrow men faith is:

"A particular persuasion of my heart that Jesus Christ is mine and that I shall have life and salvation by his means, and whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for me;" (Boston, Works 7, page 478).

When a sinner hears the call to Christ and by God's grace comes to Christ in faith, then that faith presupposes a measure of assurance. Boston states:

"Make no doubt of the pardon offered, or of the proclamation, hearing, that every one of us may safely return to God in Christ; but thereupon draw near to him in full assurance of faith. There can be no saving faith, no acceptance with God, where there is any doubting, is what can hardly enter into the head of any sober Christian, if he is not under a grievous temptation, in his own soul's case, nor is it in the least insinuated here. Nevertheless, the doubting mixed with faith is sin and dishonoureth God, and believers have ground to be humbled for it...." (Boston, Works 7, page 267).

The marrow men clearly wished to lead their hearers to lean upon God's Word. The ultimate ground for assurance for them is the Word of God. In a sermon on 2 Samuel 7:25, Ralph Erskine explains this clearly: "The object and the ground of faith is the divine saying; and faith rests upon a Thus saith the Lord;.. The word is the immediate object of faith".

How then do the marrow men explain so many problems regarding assurance of faith within true believers? To clarify matters, the marrow men distinguished between assurance of faith that is inseparably connected to faith, and the assurance of sense that is the assurance I feel. One could also call this the difference between objective assurance and subjective assurance. Alternatively, one could describe this as the direct act of faith and the reflect act of faith. The difference between these two, Boston says, is:

"The assurance of faith has its object and foundation without the man, but that of sense has them within him. The assurance of faith looks to Christ, the promise and covenant of God and says, "This is all my salvation; God has spoken in his holiness, I will rejoice:" but the assurance of sense looks inward at the works of God, such as the person's own graces, attainments, experiences, and the like. The assurance of faith giving an evidence to things not seen, can claim an interest in, and plead a saving relation to a hiding, withdrawing God. .... But, on the other hand, the assurance of sense is the evidence of things seen and felt. The one says: "I take him for mine;" the other says, "I feel he is mine."...." (Boston, Works 7, page 484).

Boston further comments that this assurance of sense is not essential to be a true Christian:

"One may have true faith, and yet want full assurance, Isa.50. 10. One may go to heaven in a mist, not knowing whither he is going. We read of some, Hebrews 2.15, 'who through fear of death are all their life time subject to bondage,' Our salvation depends on our state, not our knowledge of it." (Works, vol 2, page 18).

Ralph Erskine also distinguishes between "assurance of faith" and "assurance of sense". He also places the source of assurance on the Word of God:"I suppose many do not understand themselves, when they say they want assurance; for what better assurance would you have than the word of God? If you have his word, and take his word, you need no better assurance." According to Erskine, the "assurance of sense" is the "assurance of the work, when you have got the thing that is promised". This is actually the "enjoyment" of experiencing God's Fatherly love in the heart. The "assurance of faith" is the "assurance of a word". Erskine compares these two kinds of assurance: "And though the assurance of sense be sweetest, yet the assurance of faith is the surest assurance;.."

John Colquhoun in his "Treatise on Saving Faith" gives a summary of the views of the marrow men on the assurance of faith and sense:

"The assurance of faith is as inseparable from faith as light is from the sun: but it is quite otherwise with the assurance of sense. A man cannot have faith without having assurance of it; but he may have faith and not have assurance of it. .... This assurance of sense or reflection then, is not a believing in Christ; but it is a believing that we have believed in Him.... But although the direct act may be without the reflex, yet the latter cannot be without the former.....

The assurance of faith is commonly not so strong nor sweet as the assurance of sense that is supported by evidences. By the former a man trusts upon the warrant of the free offer and promise that Christ will do the part of a Saviour to him; by the latter, he believes upon the inward evidences of grace, that his faith is unfeigned and operative. By the one, he is assured of the truth of what God hath said to him; by the other, of the reality of what God hath wrought in him... The object of the assurance of faith is Christ revealed and offered in the Word; the object of the assurance of sense is Christ formed and perceived in the heart."

There is great pastoral wealth in these comments. There are believers who deny that they have assurance of faith, but who are continually looking unto the Lord for grace and salvation. These people deny that they have faith, because they do not feel the assurance of faith. Yet there is a Scriptural warrant that these people are true believers. Faith by definition looks to the Lord. By looking unto Him and seeking the Lord, they manifest faith.

For instance, we can think of the penitent thief on the cross from Luke 23. He cried: "Lord remember me". He acknowledged that the Lord Jesus Christ was righteous, but he himself sinful. In his need he fled to Jesus and the Lord heard him. The Lord did not rebuke Him, but delivered him. If you were to ask the thief when he cried to Jesus: "Do you have a true faith?", he would not have said: "Yes I do". No, his only desire was to receive grace, for he was at the brink of death. He fled to Jesus for he needed Christ alone. But yet he had faith because the Lord heard him. He believed in the Lord Jesus, otherwise he would not have been delivered. He had faith, but not the assurance of faith.

We can also think of the woman with the issue of blood from Mark 5. She only touched the hem of Christ's garment. If you would have asked her: "Do you believe that your sins are forgiven?", she would not have been able to say so. She only knew one thing: "I am in need, great need and there is only one Refuge for me." She fled to Christ and in so doing she exercised faith in Christ. The Lord Jesus said to the woman: "Daughter be of good comfort, thy faith hath made thee whole."

We must distinguish between faith and assurance of faith. With the marrow men, we can also distinguish between the direct act of faith and the reflect act of faith. In the direct act of faith a sinner casts himself in his need on the Saviour. He flees to Christ as his only Hope. In the reflect act of faith, the sinner receives an inward certainty that he belongs to the people of the Lord. Then the sinner receives the assurance of faith. Then the Lord grants the crown on faith. If you would then ask the thief on the cross or the woman with the issue of blood: "Do you trust that your sins are forgiven?", they would say: "Yes, for we have heard it from His own mouth. He has told us Himself."

Many of God's people only have a direct act of faith. Their only refuge is in Christ and they are daily on their knees before Him. They do not dare say they have assurance of faith. They can even doubt whether they are believers. They are a trembling people. But these distressed people of the Lord belong to God's people. They display faith in their daily looking unto Jesus. That is assurance in itself already. People who lack this assurance of faith should not despair as if everything were lost, but they should diligently use the means of grace to receive a full assurance of their share in Christ. These are the spiritual lessons the marrow taught. Weary sinners may lean on the sure promises of forgiveness which are there for those who flee unto Christ in their miseries and sin. This is free grace. This is what the marrow men contended for.

The marrow men contended for the doctrine of free grace. Their concern was not to initiate church disputes. They were moved by love to "Sola Gratia". That was their basic motive and that is why they preached according to the Marrow theology. They lived and died for free grace. The last words of Ralph Erskine were: "I shall be forever a debtor to free grace. Victory, victory, victory!"