

Foreword by
TIM KELLER

THE
WHOLE
CHRIST

*Legalism, Antinomianism, &
Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow
Controversy Still Matters*

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

“This book has three things I’m very interested in: eighteenth-century Scottish church history, doctrinal clarity on the gospel, and learning from Sinclair Ferguson. As fascinating as this work is as a piece of historical analysis, it is even more important as a careful biblical and theological guide to the always-relevant controversies surrounding legalism, antinomianism, and assurance. I’m thankful Ferguson has put his scholarly mind and pastoral heart to work on such an important topic.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church,
East Lansing, Michigan

“This book could not come at a better time or from a better source. Sinclair Ferguson brings to life a very important controversy from the past to shed light on contemporary debates. But *The Whole Christ* is more than a deeply informed survey of the Marrow Controversy. It is the highest-quality pastoral wisdom and doctrinal reflection on the most central issue in any age.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology
and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on
the Christian Life*

“I know of no one other than Sinclair Ferguson who has the capacity, patience, and skill to unearth an ancient debate, set in a Scottish village with an unpronounceable name, and show its compelling relevance to gospel preaching and Christian living. This may be Sinclair’s best and most important book. Take up and read!”

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

“Sinclair Ferguson scratches through the surface definitions of legalism and antinomianism to reveal the marrow, the whole Christ. When we are offered the whole Christ in the gospel, we do not want to settle for anything that undermines the greatness and power of God’s grace. Both pastors and lay people will benefit from reading this historical, theological, and practical book.”

Aimee Byrd, author, *Housewife Theologian* and *Theological Fitness*

“I marvel at Sinclair Ferguson’s grasp of historical detail, but I praise God more for Sinclair’s love of and zeal for gospel clarity. The grace that saves our souls and enables our obedience is defined, distinguished, and treasured in this discussion about keeping the proclamation of the gospel free from human error.”

Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary;
Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“It is no exaggeration to insist that the issue dealt with in this book is more important than any other that one might suggest. For, as Ferguson makes all too clear, the issue is the very definition of the gospel itself. The errors of antinomianism and legalism lie ready to allure unwary hucksters content with mere slogans and rhetoric. I can think of no one I trust more to explore and examine this vital subject than Sinclair Ferguson. For my part, this is one of the most important and definitive books I have read in over four decades.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church,
Columbia, South Carolina; Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and
Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta, Georgia

“In a day when there is so much confusion about sanctification, Sinclair Ferguson cuts through all the noise and provides us with beautiful clarity on this glorious doctrine of the Christian faith. Without hesitation, this will be the first book I recommend to those who want to understand the history and theology of this most precious doctrine.”

Burk Parsons, Copastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida;
Editor, *Tabletalk* magazine

“This great book takes up the perennial issue of how grace and works relate to each other in our salvation. Ferguson begins with an old debate that took place in Scotland. He writes with deep knowledge and acute judgment, bringing clarity and insight to this issue and showing us the way out of our contemporary muddle.”

David F. Wells, Distinguished Senior Research Professor,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Writing with a pastoral heart and scholarly mind, Sinclair Ferguson provides a biblical understanding of grace that sets a solid foundation for life, ministry, and worship. Using the backdrop of the Marrow Controversy, Ferguson exposes the subtle hues of legalism and antinomianism that continue to permeate the church today. I found *The Whole Christ* personally convicting, theologically challenging, and Christ exalting.”

Melissa B. Kruger, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church,
Charlotte, North Carolina; author, *The Envy of Eve* and *Walking with
God in the Season of Motherhood*

“Ours is a day when we again hear charges of ‘antinomianism’ and ‘legalism’ thrown back and forth, often between folks who share the same confessional background. During such times of tension, more light and less heat is generally needed. I believe Sinclair Ferguson’s *The Whole Christ* offers us timely perspective, helping us better understand grace, human agency, and gospel assurance. By taking us back to historical debates Ferguson also helps us better understand our own moment, even our own confusions.”

Kelly M. Kapic, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“It’s easy to cry “legalist” or “antinomian,” but the realities are far subtler than we admit. Sinclair Ferguson takes an old Scottish controversy and uses it as a spotlight to illuminate our spiritual struggles today. This outstanding book untangles many a knot about God’s law and grace and powerfully reminds us that legalism and antinomianism are not opposites, but evil allies in Satan’s bitter war to dishonor the great name of Jesus Christ.”

Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“It’s hard to imagine a more important book written by a more dependable guide. From a seemingly obscure theological controversy, Sinclair Ferguson brings to light issues of fundamental and perennial significance for twenty-first century evangelicals. With deep learning, theological discernment, and pastoral wisdom, he not only exposes distortions of the gospel but also helps us savor the substance of the gospel, which is Christ himself.”

Jeff Purswell, Dean, Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastors College

THE WHOLE CHRIST

*Legalism, Antinomianism, and
Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow
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Foreword by Tim Keller

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters*

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For
Walt and Joie
Chantry
with
gratitude and affection

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FOREWORD BY TIM KELLER

The volume in your hands is not just a helpful historical reflection; it is also a tract for the times.

The Marrow Controversy was a debate within the Church of Scotland in the early eighteenth century. The occasion, though not the main cause, was the reprint and subsequent division over Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The root of the dispute was the perennial difficulty of properly relating works and grace, law and gospel, not merely in our systematic theology but in our preaching and pastoral ministry and, ultimately, within our own hearts. Sinclair does a good job of recounting the Marrow Controversy in an accessible and interesting way. However, his real aim is not merely to do that. Against the background and features of that older dispute, he wants to help us understand the character of this perpetual problem—one that bedevils the church today. He does so in the most illuminating and compelling way I know of in recent evangelical literature.

One of the striking features of the Marrow Dispute is that supporters of the *Marrow* were accused of defending antinomianism, and at least some of its critics were, in turn, suspected of legalism—even though all parties had subscribed to what the Westminster Confession says about justification and works. The Confession's presentation of the doctrine is remarkably precise and clear. It teaches that faith in Christ leads to justification on the basis of

Christ’s “obedience and satisfaction” being imputed to us, not on the basis of anything wrought in us or done by us.¹ Nevertheless, while good works are in no way the reason for our justification, they are absolutely necessary evidences that we have justifying faith.² Nevertheless (again!) such “evangelical obedience”—good works out of “thankfulness and assurance” for our gracious salvation³—never in any way become part of our standing as justified before God,⁴ a standing that cannot be lost, even when we fall through sin under “God’s fatherly displeasure.”⁵

That is an extraordinarily nuanced exposition of the Protestant understanding of justification by faith alone through Christ alone. All those involved in the Marrow Controversy had subscribed to this precisely worded theological statement. How then could charges and countercharges of antinomianism and legalism arise that would expose a fault line in the church and eventually lead to a split in the denomination? While such theological precision is crucial, evidently it does not finally solve this ongoing problem of the role of the law and of obedience in the Christian life.

From the Marrow Controversy as a case in point, Sinclair draws several conclusions but expands and looks at each one so that we can apply them to our own time. Here are some of his theses and arguments that I found so very helpful, convicting, and wise.

The first and inarguable conclusion is that *legalism and antinomianism are much more than doctrinal positions*. Neither side in the Marrow Controversy was saying, “You can save yourself through works,” or, “Once you are saved, you don’t have to obey the law of God.” Neither side subscribed to overt, explicit legalistic or antinomian doctrine. Nonetheless, legalism and antinomianism can be strongly present in a ministry. Each is a web of attitudes of

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 11.1.

² *Ibid.*, 16.2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.5.

heart, practices, character, and ways of reading Scripture. At one point Sinclair even says, rightly, that a legal spirit consists in part in how you *feel* toward God.

The legal spirit is marked by jealousy, oversensitivity to slights, “metallic” harshness toward mistakes, and an ungenerous default mode in decision making. Both the author of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and Thomas Boston, the leading “Marrow Man” and supporter of the work, shared moving and convicting accounts of how they spent years in ministry, subscribing to the correct doctrine of justification, but at a practical level still functioned as if the law of God was a “covenant of works” rather than a “rule of life.”⁶ At the same time, practical antinomianism can develop even when doctrinal antinomianism is denied. It can take the form of a secular gospel of self-acceptance masquerading as Christianity. Even more often, it is present when the minister’s preaching and pastoring is characterized by a subtle divorce of duty and delight. Any failure to present full, eager, complete obedience and submission to God as ultimately a great joy—as a way to resemble, know, and bring delight to God—is a tendency toward the antinomian spirit.

The second thing I learned was that *the root of both legalism and antinomianism is the same*. My guess is that most readers will find this the best new insight for them, one that could even trigger a proverbial paradigm shift. It is a fatal pastoral mistake to think of legalism and antinomianism as complete opposites. Sinclair says that, rather, they are “nonidentical twins from the same womb.” He traces both of them back to the “lie of Satan” in the garden of Eden, namely, that you can’t trust the goodness of God or his commitment to our happiness and well-being and that, therefore, if we obey God fully, we’ll miss out and be miserable.

Because both mind-sets refuse to believe in the love and graciousness of God, they assume that any commands given to us are evidence that he is unwilling to bless us. They both fail to see

⁶Ibid., 19.6.

obedience as the way to give the gracious God delight as well as the way to become our true selves, the people we were created to be. They participate in the same incomprehension of the joy of obedience—they see obedience as something imposed on us by a God whose love is conditional and who is unwilling to give us blessing unless we do quite a lot of work. The only difference is that the legalist wearily assumes the burden, while the antinomian refuses it and casts it off by insisting that if God is really loving, he wouldn't ask for it. In order to salvage an idea of a gracious God, antinomians find ways to argue that God doesn't require obedience.

Therefore, the third thing I learned was that *to think the main problem out there is one particular error is to virtually put one foot into the other error*. If you fail to see what Sinclair is saying—that both legalism and antinomianism stem from a failure to grasp the goodness and graciousness of God's character—it will lead you to think that what each mind-set really needs for a remedy is a little dose of the other. In this view, it would mean that the remedy for legalism is just less emphasis on the law and obedience, and the remedy for antinomianism is more.

This is dangerous. If you tell those tending toward legalism that they shouldn't talk so much about obedience and the law, you are pushing them toward the antinomian spirit that cannot see the law as a wonderful gift of God. If you tell those tending toward antinomianism that they should point people more to divine threats and talk more about the dangers of disobedience, you are pushing them toward the legal spirit that sees the law as a covenant of works rather than as a way to honor and give pleasure to the one who saved them by grace.

Finally, this book showed me that *the cure for both legalism and antinomianism is the gospel*. Sinclair writes:

The gospel is designed to deliver us from this lie [of the Serpent], for it reveals that behind and manifested in the coming of Christ

and his death for us is the love of a Father who gives us everything he has: first his Son to die for us, and then his Spirit to live within us. . . . There is only one genuine cure for legalism. It is the same medicine the gospel prescribes for antinomianism: understanding and tasting union with Jesus Christ himself. This leads to a new love for and obedience to the law of God.

Since the root of both errors is the same, the cure is the same—to lift up the essential goodness and love of God by recounting the gospel, thereby making obedience a joy. The remedy for both is a fuller, biblical, and profound understanding of grace and of the character of God.

There are plenty of other helpful veins of inquiry and argument in this book. Just to name two examples, Sinclair shows how the New Perspective on Paul can, in some instances, encourage a more legalistic way of reading the Bible, while those who criticize the traditional threefold nature of the Old Testament law—moral, ceremonial, and civil—can support an antinomian mind-set. However, here are the main inferences I draw from this fine book for our current discussions around these issues.

Calvin called justification the “chief axis” or “main hinge on which religion turns.” He proceeded to say that “unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have [no] foundation . . . on which to build piety toward God.”⁷ That is certainly right, namely, that our justified standing with God cannot be “one motive among many.” It must be the foundation of all our thinking, feeling, and doing; otherwise our default mode—our belief that God is not *for* us—will pull us back into a covenant of works.

But if it is true that our main problem is a disbelief in the love and goodness of God, then to say, “All you need for sanctification is to believe in your justification,” is too simplistic. That may lead

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3:11:1.

you to try to cure a legalistic spirit with just less emphasis on law. You need more than just an abstract belief in your legal exemption from punishment; you need a renovation of your view of God. However, John Owen, in his work on mortification, shows that the answer is not, on the other hand, just to say, “What you need for sanctification is to work hard to become holy.” Owen argues that the root of our sinful behavior is an inability to hate sin for itself, and this stems from a tendency to see obedience as simply a way to avoid danger and have a good life—not as a way to love and know Jesus for who he is.

So to grow in grace comes not simply from believing more in our justification, though we should meditate on that reality daily. Understood more comprehensively, it flows from using the gospel of grace on the root of our sin—the mistrust of God’s goodness and the inordinate love of other things—of other savior-things. When we behold the glory of Christ in the gospel, it reorders the loves of our hearts, so we delight in him supremely, and the other things that have ruled our lives lose their enslaving power over us. This *is* sanctification by going deeper into the gospel, but it is not merely telling yourself that you are accepted and forgiven, as foundational as that is. In this book, Sinclair Ferguson shows us how important it is for preaching and pastoral effectiveness to get this straight.

INTRODUCTION

The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters sounds like a book title with a history. And so it is. The story itself begins in early eighteenth-century Scotland. It then moves briefly backwards some seventy years to England and to the writing of an obscure and unusual book set in the form of a Socratic dialog. There are four participants: a young Christian, a legalist, an antinomian, and a minister of the gospel. It is a patchwork quilt of quotations from the good and godly of the Reformation and Puritan periods.

Were it not for a Scottish pastor spotting the book in a home in his obscure parish in the Scottish Borders, it would have remained the relatively unread work it already was. His discovery of it led, two decades later, to a theological controversy that has permanently engraved the book's title into the history of the church.

Fast-forward 260 years, and we arrive at the origin of this book.

In the spring of 1980 a letter arrived at our home in Glasgow, Scotland. It contained an invitation to speak later in the year at a ministers' conference in Indianapolis on this subject: "Pastoral Lessons from the Marrow Controversy."

The topic struck me in probably much the same way it may strike you: "Really?" Were it not for the adventure of visiting the United States (I had been only once before), my respect for the minister who had invited me, and the privilege of addressing fellow

ministers when I was still a very young one myself, the invitation would perhaps have been declined. A contemporary minister might be excused for thinking that “Pastoral Lessons from the Marrow Controversy” sounds unnervingly like a “Veggie Tale for Ministers”! Perhaps every self-respecting Scottish theological student had heard of this controversy and the book that lay behind it, but had anybody else?

Now, more than three decades later, one memory still stands out vividly in my mind’s eye. A few days before I was scheduled to leave for the conference, my wife, Dorothy, brought coffee into the study. I recall looking up from the notes I was preparing and saying, slightly despondently, “I don’t know why I am spending time on this. I can’t imagine there is anyone in the United States who has the slightest interest in the Marrow Controversy!”

The conference came and went. I was soon grateful that I had gone. I enjoyed the conference; the addresses seemed to strike a chord; and during the event I made a number of lifelong friendships.

I came home, and life went on.

Three years later, in 1983, our family moved to Philadelphia where I was to join the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary and begin a long season of ministry in the United States. Between then and now, almost everywhere I have gone to preach, speak, or lecture, *someone* has said to me, “I have listened to your Marrow tapes [yes, “tapes”!].” The Christian life, and certainly Christian ministry, is full of surprises. William Cowper was right: “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.”¹

There are reasons for interest in this apparently recondite topic. On the surface the Marrow Controversy was about how we preach the gospel; what role, if any, God’s law and our obedience play in the Christian life; and what it means to have assurance of salvation. But those issues are always, at bottom, about the gospel itself.

¹ William Cowper, “Light Shining Out of Darkness,” better known by its first line, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1774).

While these themes have taken center stage at particular periods in the church's history, that is only the tip of the iceberg. They are perennially relevant because underneath them lies the most fundamental question of all: Who is the God whom we come to know in Jesus Christ (John 17:3)? What is he really like, truly like—deep down, through and through? The atmosphere that characterizes my Christian life will reflect my answer to these questions.

That was the issue that lay deeply embedded in the Marrow Controversy. To that extent, reflecting on it can never be merely an antiquarian hobby or an academic exercise.

Over the years people have asked if the material behind those conference addresses would ever be put into print. Others who speak (especially if they have seen transcripts of what they actually said!) know that the metamorphosis of material prepared for an ad hoc occasion into book form usually requires more time and energy than the original preparation. In the intervening decades time and energy have, of necessity, been employed in other tasks. But at the back of my mind the thought has lingered, *Perhaps one day?*

That day has now come.

What is *The Whole Christ*? It is not a study of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* as such, although reference will be made to it. It is not an historical analysis of the often heated Marrow Controversy, although that serves as the background to it. Nor is it a study of the theology of Thomas Boston, although his name regularly appears in it.

Perhaps the best way to describe it is by borrowing from the world of classical music: *The Whole Christ* might well be subtitled, "Variations on themes from *The Marrow Controversy*." It is an extended reflection on theological and pastoral issues that arose in the early eighteenth century, viewed from the framework of the present day.

One particular consideration has motivated me to put this material into print. Thomas Boston, who perhaps more than any other

wrestled with the issues raised by the *Marrow*, said that his ministry was transformed as a result of his reading and reflection:

These things, in these days, while I was in the Merse,² gave my sermons a certain tincture, which was discerned; though the Marrow, from whence it sprang, continued in utter obscurity.³

I hope it will become clear throughout these pages what this tincture was. There is a perennial need for it in the ministry of the gospel. It is not linked to a particular personality type or a way of preaching. It is both more profound and more atmospheric than that. But God’s discerning people recognize it when they see it, even if they cannot articulate what exactly it is.

It seems to me that anyone who wrestles theologically and personally with the great themes of gospel grace, legalism, antinomianism, and assurance, and is redirected to the Scriptures, should emerge with something of this “tincture.” I hope that these pages will do something to encourage the desire for, the expression of, and then the recognition of this tincture. Whether or not people discern its source is immaterial.

Every book is a debt repayment, and this one is no exception.

I am grateful to Justin Taylor and the staff at Crossway for being willing to publish *The Whole Christ*. The final stimulus to forge this material into book form I owe to a conversation with Tim Keller. Once colleagues at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and therefore often in each other’s company, our paths now cross only on rare occasions. They did so in January 2014 when we were both speaking at a conference in Texas. During a coffee break he mentioned the Marrow addresses. In half jest I responded that if I

²“The Merse” is the low-lying area of Berwickshire in the Scottish Borders between the River Tweed and the Lammermuir Hills. Boston’s first pastoral charge of Simprin lay within this area.

³*The Memoirs of Thomas Boston*, in *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend Thomas Boston*, ed. S. M’Millan, 12 vols. (Edinburgh, 1848–1852), 12:157. The nineteenth-century edition, *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of Thomas Boston*, with introduction and notes by G. H. Morrison (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), was reprinted by Banner of Truth in 1988. On the assumption that more readers may have access to this edition, it will be the one cited in subsequent references to *Memoirs*. The quote here can be found on p. 171 of the 1988 edition.

wrote the book, then he could write the foreword! I am indebted to him for following through with the latter and grateful to him for the final stimulus to do the former.

In addition I owe a lasting debt to Walt Chantry. He was the minister who, in the spring of 1980, sent the invitation to give addresses on the Marrow Controversy. (There was at least one person in the United States who was interested in the Marrow Controversy after all!). Behind the invitation lay his keen discernment that if a group of ministers thought together about the issues in this debate of yesteryear, it would at the same time help them wrestle with some of the biggest pastoral issues in ministry in any day. To Walt and his wife, Joie, who have been friends and encouragers ever since, these pages are affectionately dedicated.

My wife, Dorothy, has once more been the encourager, patient observer, and prayer helper who has meant that the solitary and sometimes intense activity of writing a book has not been a lonely one. Her ongoing love and lasting friendship have long made me seem more efficient than I actually am, and for that and a host of other blessings I am grateful to her and to God.

Since the message of this book has a special relevance to those who are pastors and teachers, it goes now with my prayer that the same fresh tincture that marked Thomas Boston's ministry will be seen again in our own day.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
October 2014

“MARROW”

II. In figurative and other extended senses.

3.

- a. Nourishing richness; the most rich, succulent, or nourishing part of something.
- b. The innermost or central part of something.
- c. (The seat of) a person’s vitality and strength.

4.

- a. The vital or essential part of something, the essence.
- b. In the titles of books: the key points or sum of knowledge *of* a particular subject, field, etc.; a compendium or digest *of* writings in a subject. Chiefly in 16th-and 17th-cent. titles.
- c. *Church Hist.* Short for or in allusion to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the title of a book by Edward Fisher (1645, republished with notes by the Revd. James Hof in 1718).

The Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edition (updated December 2000): *sub* “Marrow,” <http://www.oed.com>.

HOW A *MARROW* GREW

This story begins some three hundred years ago in a small Scottish town, at a meeting attended by perhaps a few dozen men. It records the progress of a theological conflict that grew out of a single question asked of a young man hoping to become a Presbyterian minister.

The question, however, had a sting in its tail.

Nobody knows who first thought up the question or who formulated its precise wording. Nobody knows who was first to ask the question or how many times it had been asked before. But it was intended to tell the questioner much more than the person who answered it might want to reveal.

Nobody at the meeting could have imagined what would happen as a result of the answer that was given. Nor could any of them have suspected that three hundred years later people would still be discussing it. If you had suggested to them that they were setting in motion the “Marrow Controversy,” they would have said (as people still do!), “The *what* controversy?”

So, where and when and why did all this take place? And what was the question?

Auchterarder

Some forty-five miles or so to the northwest of Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, lies Auchterarder, population less than five thousand. Until a few decades ago the main road from Stirling to Perth ran through the long main street, from which the town was popularly known as “The Lang Toun.” The slow one-and-a-half-mile drive regulated by a thirty-mile-an-hour speed limit caused many a frustrated driver to be caught in a speed trap at its far end. Better by far to have taken a break in town and enjoyed a fine coffee accompanied by some excellent home baking!

To the outsider little seems to happen in Auchterarder.

Someone knowledgeable in Scottish family history might just know that much of the land in the area was once owned by John Haldane of Gleneagles, who had sat in the last Scottish Parliament and also, from 1707, in the first British Parliament.¹

A few Christians might recognize the Haldane name. It was from this family line that the remarkable brothers Robert Haldane (1764–1842) and James Haldane (1768–1851) were descended. Robert would become the more famous in the annals of the church because of a remarkable awakening that took place among theological students in Geneva through a Bible study that he led while visiting the city. The Enlightenment-influenced theological faculty was so hostile to the informal gatherings at which he expounded Paul’s letter to the Romans that the professors took it in turns to stand sentry outside the Haldanes’ rented apartment. They noted and reported the names of students who attended, later threatening them with being barred from ordination!²

Haldane of *Gleneagles*. Gleneagles? This is the great estate that is now the famous Gleneagles Hotel and golf courses. If today the

¹ While the crowns of Scotland and England had been united in 1603, when James VI (of Scotland) had also become James I (of England), the Parliaments were not united until 1707.

² The whole story makes for thrilling reading. See Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey and His Brother James Alexander Haldane* (1852; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 413–62.

tranquility of Auchterarder is disturbed, it is likely to be because the hotel is hosting an occasion of international interest. It was here that the July 6–8, 2005, G8 Summit took place, when Auchterarder played host to world leaders and a veritable army of media and security experts. A report to the Scottish executive on the economic impact of this weekend gathering put the price tag at around one hundred million dollars.

September 2014 saw a similar invasion for the playing of the Ryder Cup, the biennial golf match between the United States and Europe, which now captures the third-largest television viewing audience for a sporting event, with spectators present from as many as seventy-five countries. Simply hosting the event had the potential to boost the value of the Scottish tourist industry by an annual figure well in excess of one hundred million dollars.

But three hundred years ago, Auchterarder and its people presented a very different picture. It was then a small mill town where most of its residents squeezed out a subsistence living as weavers, tenant farmers, and, for the women, as domestic servants. An extant set of accounts for the household of a local farm laborer indicates an annual income of \$40.00 for the year, with expenditures of around \$39.90. The wealth and publicity of a G8 Summit or a Ryder Cup would have been far beyond the wildest dreams of those who passed their days here.

In a rural Scottish village like Auchterarder in the early eighteenth century, nothing was expected to happen that would excite the interest of the wider world or be recorded in the annals of church history.

That is, until the regular meeting of the Auchterarder Presbytery of the Church of Scotland in February 1717.

Presbyterianism

Scottish church life has been dominated by Presbyterianism since the days of John Knox and the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In Presbyterian churches each congregation is led, or “governed,”

by elders, usually one *teaching* elder (the minister) and a number of *ruling* elders,³ at best men of spiritual integrity and some measure of discernment and pastoral ability. The teaching elder was normally a university-educated, theologically trained man. The ruling elders had no formal theological education. They learned to be elders by years of receiving biblical instruction, by themselves being led by elders, and by a kind of osmosis as in due course they took their place in the company of longer-standing elders in what was known as the “Kirk Session.”

In addition to the life of the local congregation, the minister and an elder would regularly gather with representatives of other local congregations at the presbytery to hear reports and discuss matters of common interest and concern.

Beyond this simple structure lay a less frequent gathering of several presbyteries, known as the “Synod,” and also the annual national gathering of congregational representatives at the General Assembly. While each congregation was basically self-sufficient, and was led by its own elders, these “courts of the church” provided a sense of unity and a kind of ascending hierarchy of authority in matters of common concern or dispute.

The selection, examination, and ordination of ministers were all the responsibility of the local presbytery. With this in view candidates for the ministry were taken under supervision. Throughout the period of their training they completed prescribed exercises. These culminated in a final oral examination administered in the presence of the whole presbytery—any member of which might ask a question, and all of whom would eventually vote on the candidate. Daunting indeed!

A Narrative of Surprising Presbytery Meetings

Imagine then, that you have traveled back in time. It is Friday, February 12, 1717. The presbytery of Auchterarder is holding its

³The distinction was usually based on Rom. 12:7–8 and 1 Tim. 5:17.

monthly gathering. The agenda has now moved to the case of a young candidate for the ministry. He has already preached, presented the requisite church exercises, and completed his dissertation on a doctrinal point put to him in Latin. The trials can be rigorous. But this particular young candidate has completed all of the stages. Indeed at the previous presbytery meeting he had been licensed as a preacher of the gospel.

But now there is a problem.

Two meetings before this, on December 11, 1716, the presbytery had given the candidate his examination in theology. It had, however, postponed further consideration of him until the next meeting. And so, on January 15, 1717, he came before the presbytery again. He was now asked to sign his name to his answers to the questions the presbytery had put to him.

In the nature of the case in most presbyteries, patterns of questioning become somewhat stereotyped. In addition there are sometimes individuals who will ask their personal “litmus test” question. These are rarely straightforward. At best they challenge the candidate to take biblical teaching with which he is familiar and apply it to a question or situation with which he is unfamiliar. At worst they set theological traps. These need to be carefully negotiated.

The candidate before the presbytery of Auchterarder is William Craig. He has been caught in such a trap.

“The Creed”

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. Were it not for his response, it might well have remained hidden in the dust-gathering volumes of the presbytery’s handwritten minutes. 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.⁴

Perhaps Craig was well enough known to the members of the presbytery that they already suspected he would be in some difficulty.

Turn the question over in your own mind. How would you respond? Do you agree that “it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ?” Perhaps you can hear the echo of the words beloved by TV lawyers: “Mr. Craig, just answer the question yes or no.”

Craig had some scruples about the precise wording of the test question. Nonetheless, at the January meeting he had been willing to subscribe his name on the presbytery copy of the [Westminster] Confession of Faith, and had been duly licensed.

In the event, however—perhaps you have some sympathy with him?—Craig’s conscience was troubled, and he returned to the following presbytery meeting. He explained that he had subscribed his signature in haste and now wished for an opportunity to explain his position.

The presbytery of Auchterarder heard him out, and at its stated meeting on February 12, 1717, proceeded to declare William Craig’s license to preach the gospel null and void.

Perhaps the presbytery assumed the matter would rest there. If so they were to be disappointed.

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 un-

⁴Cited here from the Minutes of the thirteenth session of the General Assembly, on May 14, 1717, recording the “Act discharging Presbyteries to use any Formula in licensing Probationers, and ordaining or admitting Ministers, but such as is or shall be agreed unto by the General Assembly, with a Reference to the Commission of the Presbytery of Auchterarder’s carriage in that matter.”

sound and most detestable doctrine, as it stands, and was offered by the said Presbytery to the said Mr. William Craig.”⁵ The presbytery of Auchterarder was ordered to restore his license.

That might have been the end of the matter were it not for a private discussion that took place immediately afterward between two ministers who “happened” to fall into conversation when the session concluded.

Who Is My (Assembly) Neighbor?

Present at the 1717 Assembly was the Reverend John Drummond, a minister from the town of Crieff and a member of the presbytery of Auchterarder. Beside him at the critical session sat one of the most remarkable ministers in the entire history of the Church of Scotland.

The Assembly neighbor was at that time forty-one years old. He had written his first book some two decades earlier while still a young probationer minister. Its quaintly worded title, *Soliloquie on the Art of Man Fishing*, expressed his evangelistic zeal as well as his pastoral heart. He soon hoped to publish what would become his best-known book, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*.⁶

His own congregation lay deep in the border country between Scotland and England in the valley of the River Ettrick, set within what has been described as a “sea of hills.” He had been called to this widespread parish in 1711. It had had no minister for four years.

When he had arrived in his new parish, he found the people were far more concerned about this world than the world to come.

⁵In keeping with the procedural rules of the Church of Scotland, during the debate on “The Auchterarder Creed” members of the Presbytery of Auchterarder were “removed,” that is, they were not able to take part. They were later called to appear before a Commission of the Assembly in August of the same year, which was given power of final decision making.

⁶*The Fourfold State*, as it became known, was first published (in an imperfect edition) in 1720. It began life in a series of sermons preached in Simprin, which were then reworked for the congregation in Ettrick. In due course the book became virtually synonymous with the evangelical tradition in Scotland and could be found in many homes along with a family Bible, the Shorter Catechism, and a copy of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

They were conceited and censorious. A shy man by natural disposition, although a preacher of unusual ability, he suffered the indignity of members of the congregation making noises while he was preaching, walking out, and even wandering around the churchyard outside talking deliberately loudly. Fathers who conducted family prayers when at home could be heard cursing in the streets. While a minister in the congregation he had previously served in Simprin, Sundays had been the best day of the week. But now he wrote: "The approaching Sabbath, that sometimes was my delight, is now a terror to me."⁷ In addition, another, more exclusive, church fellowship had gathered in the same area, and its members were not slow to criticize the parish minister of such a spiritually indifferent congregation.

By God's grace, now in 1717, things had begun to change wonderfully under his rich ministry of the gospel.

The name of John Drummond's Assembly neighbor was Thomas Boston.⁸ But we can let him tell the story of their conversation in his own words:

The "Auchterarder Creed," was all at once at that diet [i.e., of the General Assembly] 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. . . .

And here, namely, in the condemnation of that proposition, was the beginning of the torrent, that for several years after ran, in the public actings of this church, against the doctrine of grace, under the name of Antinomianism. . . . Meanwhile, at the same time sitting in the assembly house, and conversing with Mr. John Drummond, minister of Crief, one of the brethren of that presbytery above mentioned, I happened to give him my

⁷Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 220.

⁸1676-1732.

sense of the gospel offer; Isa. lv. 1, Matt. xi: 28, with the reason thereof; and withal to tell him of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.⁹

Treasure Hidden on a Window Head

In his earlier ministry in Simprin, at that time one of the smallest parish churches in Scotland,¹⁰ Boston had long struggled with issues of the law and the gospel. But around the year 1700,¹¹ while on a pastoral visit, he spotted on a window head a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. He took it down, read it, and discovered that it spoke to both his heart and his mind and to a wide variety of pastoral issues in his ministry. He imbibed the insights it stimulated into biblical and pastoral theology. His own preaching and teaching began to reflect what he saw as a new, Christ-centered, gospel-rooted emphasis.

Boston had in fact noticed *two* books lying on the window head of his parishioner's house. His reaction to the second book, *Christ's Blood Flowing Freely to Sinners*,¹² was very different. His comments are significant in light of the controversy that would later arise, and particularly the accusation of antinomianism that was leveled against the teaching he espoused:

These [the two books] I reckon, had been brought home from England by the master of the house, a soldier in the time of the civil wars. Finding them to point to the subject I was in particular concern about, I brought them both away. The latter, a book of Saltmarsh's, I relished not; and I think I returned it without reading it quite through. The other, being the first part only of the Marrow, I relished greatly; and purchased it, at length from

⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 317. I have retained Boston's spelling and punctuation throughout.

¹⁰The ruins of the church building suggest it was no more than 50 feet long and 18 feet wide.

¹¹It is worth noting that the influence of the theology of the *Marrow* had already been percolating into the fiber of Boston's thinking and preaching for almost two decades before the book itself became a matter of public controversy. He was a very *mature* Marrow Man long before the time of the controversy.

¹²John Saltmarsh, *Free Grace; or the Flowings of Christ's Blood Freely to Sinners* (London: for Giles Calvert, 1645).

the owner . . . and it is still to be found among my books. I found it to come close to the points that I was in quest of and to shew the consistency of these, which I could not reconcile before; so that I rejoiced in it, as a light which the Lord had seasonably struck up to me in my darkness.¹³

Saltmarsh—that is, John Saltmarsh—was one of the most notable antinomians of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Boston had so little taste for his teaching that he returned the book—unfinished.

John Drummond immediately acted on this “chance” conversation:

Hereupon he [Drummond], having inquired in the shops for the said book, at length got it; and from him Mr. James Webster¹⁵ getting it, was taken therewith; and afterward, Mr. Drummond himself being hardly allowed time to read it through it came into the hands of Mr. James Hog, minister of Carnock;¹⁶ and in end was reprinted in the year 1718, with a preface by the said Mr. Hog, dated at Carnock, Dec. 3, 1717.¹⁷

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

¹³ Boston, *Memoirs*, 169.

¹⁴ John Saltmarsh (d. 1647) was a gifted Cambridge graduate with a mystical disposition that seems to have unhinged him from the stability of the more balanced members of the “Puritan Brotherhood.” Described by William Haller as “a mystic, an enthusiast, [and] a metaphysical poet,” he was not without the kind of insight that is possessed by those on the margins, but at the end of the day seems to have been “strange genius, part poet and part whirling dervish.” William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 79, 214. Saltmarsh, who had been an army chaplain, rose from his deathbed in November 1647 and rode almost 40 miles from Ilford to the headquarters of the New Model Army to tell General Fairfax that “the Lord had forsaken them and would not prosper them.” C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972; repr. London: Penguin, 1991), 70.

¹⁵ James Webster (1659–1720) was minister of the Tolbooth church in Edinburgh and a leading opponent of John Simson, professor of divinity in the University of Glasgow who was accused of Arian theology (denying the full deity of Jesus Christ).

¹⁶ The village of Carnock is in Fife, some 3 miles from the outskirts of Dunfermline and 20 miles northwest of Edinburgh.

¹⁷ Boston, *Memoirs*, 317. Boston comments that he later had no memory of the conversation.

were to warn them of its dangers and urge them neither to use it nor to read it.¹⁸

In reaction, in 1721 Boston's friends, impressed by the sense of the grace of Christ in his ministry, urged him to write his own explanatory notes on the *Marrow*. These he duly published in a new edition of the book in 1726. Given the ban that had been placed on the book, he did so under the name of Philalethes Irenaeus.¹⁹

A book placed on an *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*²⁰ of a Presbyterian and Reformed Church? We may well ask, What was so extraordinary about this book?

The Marrow of Modern Divinity

The *Marrow* had been published in two parts under the initials "E. F.": part 1 in 1645, part 2 in 1648. The author's identity has been disputed, but the consensus view is that he was Edward Fisher, a barber surgeon in London and the author of several other minor works in the Puritan period.²¹

The book itself is a series of dialogues. The participants at various points are: *Neophytus*, a young Christian who is troubled about basic elements of gospel truth; *Evangelista*, the pastor who counsels him; and two others, *Nomista*, a legalist; and *Antinomista*, an antinomian. Part 1 deals with theological issues in the relationship between law and gospel. Part 2 contains an exposition of the Ten Commandments.

¹⁸To the best of my knowledge the act has never been rescinded. As a minister in a denomination (Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church) whose roots lie in part in this controversy, it is a pleasure to recommend the edition with Boston's notes!

¹⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 379. The suggestion was made to him on July 10, 1721 (*ibid.*, 361), and his notes were completed in July of the following year (*ibid.*, 366). Poignantly, the month in which Boston agreed to the publication of his notes along with a new edition of the *Marrow*—April 1725—was also the month in which he recorded the last occasion on which his wife was able to be present at public worship when he was preaching. For the last six years of his ministry she experienced debilitating sickness and paralyzing mental distress.

²⁰The allusion is to the *Index* of the Roman Catholic Church whose original version was promulgated by Pope Paul IV in 1559—as it happens, the same year as the publication of the final Latin edition of Calvin's *Institutes*.

²¹See the discussion by D. M. McIntyre, "First Strictures on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 10 (1938): 61–70. Fisher favored the dialog as the vehicle of his writing. His other works—*A Touchstone for a Communicant* (London, 1647); *London's Gate to the Lord's Table* (London, 1648); and *Faith in Five Fundamental Principles* (London, 1650)—all have this format.

The General Assembly accused the *Marrow* (and suspected its supporters) of encouraging antinomianism and a subtle form of universal redemption. The group of ministers who were publicly identified as its chief supporters came to be known as “the Brethren” and sometimes as “the Twelve Apostles” (since there were twelve of them). They included James Hog, James Wardlaw, the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine (under whose father’s ministry Thomas Boston had been converted), and, of course, Boston himself.

These ministers responded to the Assembly’s action by publishing a “Protest and Representation”²² against the condemnation of the book. In response, an assembly commission²³ presented them with twelve questions related to the teaching of the *Marrow*. The “Marrow Men” (as they have come to be known) 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.²⁴ Their case, they believed, was never really answered.

The Big Issue

What was it about the preaching of the church in the early eighteenth century that led to the existence of the Auchterarder Creed and such emotional tensions over *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*? And what was it that chiefly concerned the Marrow Men? Boston, we remember, said that he agreed with the *tenor* of the Auchterarder Creed, although he felt its *wording* left something to be desired. But what did the creed reveal? And what were Boston’s burdens?

²² Hence they were known by their contemporaries not as “Marrow Men” but as “Representers” or simply as “the Brethren.”

²³ That is, a group appointed for specific purposes to represent the Assembly.

²⁴ These are conveniently printed as an appendix to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity with Notes by the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*, in *Whole Works*, 7:465–89. Boston’s edition of the *Marrow* was reprinted (Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1978), and there the appendix is on pp. 344–70. In 2009 Christian Focus produced a new edition of the *Marrow* with Boston’s notes in a new arrangement under their Christian Heritage imprint. In this edition the appendix is on pp. 345–76. Hereinafter all references to the *Marrow* are to the last of these, the Christian Focus edition.

The Marrow Men were suspected of antinomianism. What they most deeply feared was that many of the condemners of the Marrow doctrine were themselves guilty of a subtle form of legalism.²⁵ At the root of the matter lay the nature of the grace of God in the gospel and how it should be preached. Boston's concern about the "moderation" that had begun to grip his denomination was exacerbated by the fact that the same General Assembly that had dealt so harshly with the Marrow doctrine passed over what he regarded as a grave case of incipient Arminianism and Arianism.²⁶ This acted as a catalyst for the somewhat reserved and diffident Boston to engage in public controversy and to take up arms against what he saw as false doctrine.²⁷ For him the issue was not the merits or demerits of a human publication, or the expressions of a local presbytery's test question, but the gospel itself. Here is how he saw it:

As matters now stand, the gospel-doctrine has got a root-stroke by the condemning of that book.²⁸

And so the Marrow Men objected to the way in which the Assembly's focus on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was liable to

turn the matter off its proper hinge, by giving a wrong colour to our Representation, as if the chief design of it was to plead, not for the precious truths of the gospel which we conceived to be wounded by the condemnatory act, but for *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the which though we value for a good and useful book, and doubt not but the Church of God may be much edified by it as we ourselves have been, yet came it

²⁵ It should be noted that there was a spectrum of opinion in the context of this controversy. Not all who refrained from siding with the Marrow Men were by any stretch of the imagination legalists. Many were fellow evangelicals, John Willison of Dundee being perhaps the most notable.

²⁶ In the case of Professor Simson mentioned above (n15).

²⁷ On one occasion, when a commissioner, he stood entirely alone in the Assembly in protest against the demeaning of Christ in the face of the Arianism of John Simson (1668–1740). Simson was eventually suspended in 1729, but his salary was continued until his death, even though it was thought "not fit or safe" for him to teach. For Boston's intervention, see *Memoirs*, 414–19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

never into our minds to hold it, or any other private writing, faultless, nor to put it on a level with our approved standards of doctrine.²⁹

To the heart of these matters we can now turn.

²⁹Fisher, *Marrow*, 346. Boston's own differences with the *Marrow* range from his rejection of the view that Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18; Heb. 7:1–4) should be identified as Christ: "This seems to be to me a more than groundless opinion" (*ibid.*, 73), to scrupling at a reference to *Saint John*: "This word might well have been spared here" (*Marrow*, 69), to matters of substance such as whether the Sinaitic covenant was the covenant of works, which evokes a short essay-length comment (*ibid.*, 76–77).

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