

THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

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I. INTRODUCTION

A common belief exists today that one of the byproducts of the Reformation was unity on the doctrine of *sola fide*. After all, the message of faith alone in Christ alone was the very cry of the Reformers. However, just as there is presently debate on what constitutes justification by faith alone, so there has been since the days of Luther and Calvin. It was their successors, Melanchthon and Beza respectively, who added “faith that saves is never alone” to *sola fide*.

This doctrinal disunity in Europe continued for nearly two centuries until the Marrow Controversy erupted in 1720. Although this debate over what constitutes faith alone did not occur until the early eighteenth century, the Marrow Controversy began brewing nearly two hundred years prior. Beginning with Melanchthon and continuing with Calvin and Beza, the Marrow Controversy merely illustrates the great debate that has always existed among those who profess to believe in faith alone in Christ alone.

II. SIXTEENTH CENTURY LUTHERANISM

In 1546, with death looming over his head, Martin Luther called together his closest Wittenberg colleagues, including Melanchthon, who would become Luther’s main interpreter after his death.¹ He remarked,

Hitherto you have heard the real, true Word, now beware of your own thoughts and your own wisdom. The devil will kindle the light of reason and rob you of your faith. This is what happened to the Anabaptists and the antisacramentarians, and now we have nothing left but instigators of heresy...I foresee that, if God does not give us faithful ministers, the devil will

¹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, Vol. 2 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 173.

tear our church apart through the sectarians and he will never cease until he has accomplished it...If he cannot do it through the pope and the emperor, he will accomplish it through those who are still in accord with us in doctrine.²

It would not be long before Luther's prediction would become a reality.

Soon after Luther's death, the Lutherans began arguing over the doctrine of justification. The strict Lutherans held that Melanchthon's belief that good works were "a result and witness to it [faith],"³ was in basic disagreement with Luther. This caused a schism between the strict Lutherans who believed in justification by faith alone and the Philippists, those in agreement with Melanchthon, who believed that works were a necessary result of justification. The debate climaxed with the Augsburg Interim, the vehicle through which the Pope and Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, attempted to force the Lutherans to compromise.

Unlike Luther, Melanchthon was a man of peace and unity.⁴ Consequently, although he and the rest of the Lutheran leaders were not excited about this Interim because it was effectively a Lutheran/Papal marriage, Melanchthon, along with the Wittenberg theologians, signed the Leipzig Interim—a modified version of the Augsburg Interim.

The Leipzig Interim was designed by Melanchthon with the intended purpose of helping Protestants avoid Catholic persecution by compromising not on doctrine but on practice. It states, "Our concern is based upon our desire to be obedient to the Roman Imperial Majesty and to conduct ourselves in such a way that his Majesty realize that our interest revolves only around tranquility, peace, and unity."⁵ However, the evidence within the document indicates that practice was not all that was compromised. While the papal influence exerted over the Augsburg Interim was toned down in the Leipzig Interim, it is evident nonetheless. The document states,

² Martin Luther, "The Last Sermon in Wittenberg, 1546," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 51, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 377-78.

³ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 174.

⁴ For instance, Luther broke ties with Erasmus over doctrinal issues concerning justification by faith alone; however, Melanchthon continued relations.

⁵ "The Leipzig Interim," in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, trans. Oliver K. Olson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 184.

For this reason, to say it briefly, it is easy to understand that good works are necessary, for God has commanded them. Those who act against them are discarding God's grace and the Holy Spirit. Such sins merit eternal damnation...It is true that eternal life is given for the sake of the Lord Christ by grace, and that at the same time all are heirs of eternal salvation who are converted to God and receive forgiveness of sins and faith through the Holy Spirit. At the same time, these new virtues and good works are also most necessary so that, if they are not awakened in the heart, there is no reception of divine grace.⁶

With Melancthon's compromise, came a gradual espousal of a Roman Catholic understanding of justification.

The strict Lutherans accused the Philippists, headed by Melancthon, of forsaking Reformed doctrine. Since Melancthon wanted to keep the peace, not only with the Catholic Church, but also with the Lutherans, he drafted a document entitled "adiaphora." This document was designed to establish a distinction between those elements which were essential and those which were not. In effect, it was an attempt to justify his religious compromise.

III. SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURY CALVINISM

Since a generation divided them, John Calvin and Martin Luther never met, yet there is no doubt that Calvin was well acquainted with Luther's works—especially his views on justification. Luther's works greatly influenced the writings of John Calvin. And although the beliefs of Luther were being diluted by Melancthon, Luther's view of faith alone remained in tact in his writings.

Although the impact of Luther upon Calvin is sometimes underestimated, Calvin's *Institutes* remain influential in their own right. The *Institutes* were originally written in Latin and contained only six chapters. Anderson writes,

When John Calvin first published his *Institutes* in 1536 there were only six chapters. He defended forensic justification by faith alone from Romans 4. He understood that one could be declared righteous at a moment in time when a sinner's faith intersected with God's offer of the free gift of eternal life

⁶ Ibid., 190.

through His Son Jesus Christ. As such, no sins past, present, or future could bar the sinner-turned-saint from entrance to God's Kingdom.⁷

Calvin clearly spoke of a "full and fixed certainty," "full assurance," "sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation," "assurance of his salvation," "fruit of great assurance," and "indestructible certainty of faith."⁸ Nevertheless, the Council of Trent convened from 1545 until 1563 and unmistakably condemned the Reformers. They called anyone who preached *sola fide* anathema and labeled the Reformers as Antinomians. Their influence upon Calvin was unmistakable. Once again, Calvin began to write:

You cannot possess Christ without being made partaker in his sanctification.

In our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.

Of those who openly wear his badge, his eyes alone see the ones who are unfeignedly holy and will persevere to the very end [Matt. 24:13]—the ultimate point of salvation.⁹

It is clear from these quotes that Calvin, although he once spoke of a certain assurance, made a soteriological shift, which has been highly influential in the last four centuries. Anderson continues,

To tell people their future sins are already forgiven in Christ is to tell them they can live any way they want and still go to heaven when they die. This kind of preaching will promote loose living, the Council accused. These attacks needed answers. So John Calvin continued to write. When he finished his *Institutes* in 1559, there were eighty chapters. And under pressure from the Council of Trent, Calvin remarried justification and sanctification.¹⁰

A century after Calvin's *Institutes* were published, one of the most influential Reformed documents ever written, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, was formulated. It was, in essence, the sum of Calvinistic

⁷ Dave Anderson, "The Soteriological Impact of Augustine's Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism: Part Two," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002): 24.

⁸ See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.2.15-16, 24.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.16.1; III.11.1; IV.1.2.

¹⁰ Anderson, 24.

doctrine of its day. The Assembly that drafted it met from 1643–1649. It was this document that formed the backdrop for much of the theology of England and the British Isles. Even today, S. Lewis Johnson believes it to be the “standard of reference that evangelicals as a whole will accept in the main.”¹¹ However, it is clear that the confession provides assurance for only those who persevere in love and good deeds. Chapter XVIII Section I of the *Confession* reads,

Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions: of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed.¹²

This statement accurately reflects the state of Reformed thought in the mid-seventeenth century.

IV. POST-REVOLUTION¹³ BACKGROUND

In a small window in time during the post-revolution era of the Church of Scotland, The Marrow Controversy arose. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, by Edward Fisher (1627–1655),¹⁴ was published in 1646 in London—the same year the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was introduced. David Lachman notes that *The Marrow* “was a work of popular divinity which largely reflected the orthodox Reformed thought of its time. That it became the focus of theological controversy in early eighteenth-century Scotland indicates the extent of the changes which

¹¹ S. Lewis Johnson, “How Faith Works,” *Christianity Today* (September 1989): 21.

¹² This 1646 version of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* can be viewed online at http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html.

¹³ This revolution in Scotland (1596–1651) was characterized by severe persecution of those in the Reformed Church.

¹⁴ There is some dispute about who the author actually was since the work was published under the initials “E. F.” See Steward Mechie, “The Marrow Controversy Reviewed,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 22 (1950): 20.

had occurred in Reformed thought over the previous century.”¹⁵ The book spoke of “free grace,” “appropriating persuasion,” and “faith alone.” Fisher’s theology was most likely influenced by the teachings of John Cameron¹⁶ (1579–1625), Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646), Moise Amyraut¹⁷ (1596–1664), and Richard Baxter¹⁸ (1615–1691), who believed that the theology of Calvin was distorted by theologians such as Theodore Beza and the Synod of Dort.¹⁹ Although the cry of the Reformers was faith alone, Beza began adding the addendum “but faith that saves is never alone” to *sola fide*.

It was believed that the faith of the Reformers (Luther and Calvin) had been hijacked. Thus, Hall writes, that *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, “sought to delineate clearly the biblical, or Reformed, way of salvation.”²⁰ Consequently Burroughs asked,

Where is the blessedness you spoke of? What’s the meaning of this blessedness? Certainly this blessedness in my text was this blessed doctrine—St. Paul being the first one who brought

¹⁵ David C. Lachman, “Marrow Controversy,” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 547. Contra Joseph H. Hall, “The Marrow Controversy: A Defense of Grace and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 239-57. He writes, “The pristine orthodoxy of the Scottish Reformation had begun to wane by 1700.”

¹⁶ Professor of Divinity at Saumur whose followers were sometimes called the Cameronites.

¹⁷ Professor at Saumur whose followers were commonly called Amyrauldians. Demarest notes, “A master of the literature of Calvin, Amyraut held to the main tenets of Calvinistic theology. Nevertheless he sought to revise what he judged to be the unacceptable teachings of seventeenth century scholastic Calvinism on grace and predestination and to forge a return to Calvin himself.” (B. A. Demarest, “Amyraut, Moise,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 42.) It is interesting to note that the infamous Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, has often been referred to as an Amyrauldian.

¹⁸ Concerning Burroughs, Baxter wrote, “If all the Episcopalians had been like Archbishop Ussher...and all the Independents like Jeremiah Burroughs, the breaches of the church would soon have been healed,” which is quoted on the inside cover of Jeremiah Burrough’s work *Gospel Remission*.

¹⁹ See a series of articles in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* beginning in Spring 1988.

²⁰ Hall, “The Marrow Controversy,” 243.

it to the Galatians, concerning the free justification of a poor soul by faith in Jesus Christ, in the free pardon and remission of his sin by faith in Christ.²¹

Burroughs' first question was borrowed from Paul. The truth had been delivered to and accepted by the Galatians; however, they had lost sight of it. Thus, Paul asked, "What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*?" (Gal 4:15a) hoping to stir their hearts once again. So Burroughs asked that same question at a time when the gospel was becoming foggy in the minds of his colleagues.

Though an extraordinary shift in thought had occurred, the post-revolution Church of Scotland was characterized by immense doctrinal pride. David Lachman comments, "In the years following the Revolution, there was little cause to deny the truth of their [the ministers and laymen of Scotland] claim that the Church of Scotland was an example for all the Reformed Churches."²² Nevertheless, much of this was false pride.

Although the purging of Reformed thought through severe persecution had ceased with the end of the Revolution (1651), a new way of eradication had begun. The placement and removal of parish ministers was now based on civil loyalty. The ministers that remained preached sermons that were decidedly legal and which avoided distinct Reformed doctrine. Furthermore, Church and State both recognized the Westminster Confession as the avowed Confession of Scotland. Thus began the silent, rather than violent, purging of Reformed distinctives. The State found that it could not force doctrine upon its people through persecution; however, silent legislation was working perfectly. The State would not stop until what they saw as their crowning achievement came to fruition—doctrinal purity in Scotland. It was in this setting that the Marrow Controversy erupted and it was for this reason that much disdain would soon accompany Fisher's work.

²¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Remission* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1668, reprint 1995), 5.

²² David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 74.

V. THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

A. THE EFFECTS OF *THE MARROW OF MODERN DIVINITY*

The year that Robert Sandeman²³ was born in Perth, Scotland, marked the beginning of the Marrow Controversy. In 1718 Thomas Boston, a Scottish preacher, recommended *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* to a fellow minister. Boston had borrowed the book from a friend years earlier and enjoyed it so much that he purchased it. In a day when libraries were small but highly esteemed, it had become one of his most prized possessions. After the *Marrow* was recommended to a friend, it eventually fell into the hands of a fiery Scottish preacher named James Hog who republished the work in 1718, adding a preface. In his preface, noting his disdain for the gospel that many in the Church of Scotland espoused, Hog blasted,

Nevertheless, while the world is wandering after the beast, behold! evangelical light breaks forth in papal darkness...That the tares of such errors are sown in the reformed churches, and by men who profess reformed faith, is beyond debate; and these, who lay to heart the purity of gospel doctrine.²⁴

It is no wonder why controversy soon erupted. Because of Hog's guileless approach, it was clear to his opponents that Hog believed them to be heretics.

After the *Marrow's* republication, a pamphlet war ensued between Hog and James Hadow, principal and professor at St. Mary's College. Hall writes,

Hadow distinguished himself as the leader against the Marrow men. He charged Hog and the *Marrow* with teaching antinomianism and unlimited atonement, a charge that Hog viewed as demonstrating clearly that the Church of Scotland had compromised faithful preaching and teaching of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. In

²³ See Michael D. Makidon, "From Perth to Pennsylvania: The Legacy of Robert Sandeman," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2002): 75-92.

²⁴ James Hog, "Preface to Edward Fisher's *Marrow of Modern Divinity*," in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1837), 7.

short, in Hog's eyes, many in the Scottish Church failed to understand the nature of the gospel.²⁵

The Marrow of Modern Divinity, which was originally published three quarters of a century earlier, had seen little controversy until 1718. John Brown, a minister from Haddington, wrote:

the Assembly, 1720, fell upon it with great fury, as if it had been replete with Antinomian errors, though it is believed many of these zealots never read it, at least had never perused it, in connection with the Second Part of it, which is wholly taken up in the manifestation of the obligation, meaning, and advantage of observing the law of God.²⁶

It is unfortunate, but many of the critics of the work were grossly uninformed of its content, nevertheless they condemned it as heresy. Soon those who subscribed to it were condemned as well.

In 1721 the Marrow Men, those who subscribed to the doctrines expressed in the *Marrow*, met in order to respond to these charges. On May 11 they drafted what was known as *Representation and Petition*.²⁷ This was their formal response to the Assembly. The Assembly, not pleased with these twelve men, rebuked them with several queries. Query VIII asked,

Is knowledge, belief, and persuasion, that Christ died for me, and that he is mine, and that whatever he did and suffered, he did and suffered for me, the direct act of faith, whereby a sinner is united to Christ, interested in him, instated in God's covenant of grace? Or, is that knowledge a persuasion included in the very essence of that justifying act of faith?²⁸

To this, the Marrow Men answered:

From all which it is evident, they [Protestant Divines: Luther, Calvin, etc.] held, that a belief of the promises of the gospel, with application to oneself, or a confidence in a crucified Saviour, for a man's own salvation, is the very essence of

²⁵ Hall, "The Marrow Controversy," 244.

²⁶ John Brown, "The Occasion of the 'Marrow' Controversy," in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 344.

²⁷ Because of this document, the Marrow Men (also called the Twelve) would come to be known as the Representatives.

²⁸ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow*, 358.

justifying faith; or, that we become actually possessed of Christ, remission of sins, etc., in and by the act of believing, or confidence in him, as above mentioned. And this with them was the assurance of faith...²⁹

Their response illustrates their belief that indeed assurance is the essence of saving faith.

Because the Marrow Men did not back down from their convictions, the Assembly was further enraged. Soon negative connotations would surround the book and so Boston decided to republish the work (1726) with a large number of annotations. Because of the pejorative connotation, Boston wrote in his preface,

Reader, lay aside prejudices,—look and see with thine own eyes,—call things by their own names, and do not reckon Anti-Baxterianism or Anti-Neonomianism to be Antinomianism, and thou shalt find no Antinomianism here; but thou wilt be perhaps surprised to find, that that tale is told of Luther and other famous Protestant divines, under the borrowed name of the despised Mr. Fisher, author of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.³⁰

B. THE THEOLOGY OF EDWARD FISHER AND THE MARROW MEN

While Edward Fisher was at times unclear, as were his forerunners who at times spoke of baptismal regeneration and an assurance satiated with works, his doctrine of justification was generally clear. Consequently, for those who were tempted to marry justification with sanctification, he reminded:

Therefore, whensoever, or wheresoever, any doubt or question arises of salvation, or our justification before God, there the law and all good works must be utterly excluded and stand apart, that grace may appear free, and that the promise and faith may stand alone: which faith alone, without law or works, brings thee in particular to the justification and salvation, through the mere promise and free grace of God in Christ; so that I say, in the action and office of justification, both law and works are to be utterly excluded and exempted, as things which have nothing to do in that behalf...therefore

²⁹ Ibid., 363.

³⁰ Thomas Boston in his preface to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 11.

faith only is that matter which justifies a man before God, through the strength of that object Jesus Christ.³¹

Fisher clearly believed that assurance was the essence of saving faith. This is clear in his comments concerning the Philippian jailor:

Wherefore, as Paul and Silas said to the jailor, so say I unto you, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." That is, be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours, and that you shall have life and salvation by him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for you.³²

The General Assembly thought Fisher's beliefs were blatantly heretical. In reaction, the Act of the General Assembly of 1720 wrote,

The same [doctrine of absolute certainty] is asserted [in *The Marrow* on], pages 121, 122, 123, 124, 131, 136, 137, 175, 176, 177, and in many other places in the book. This notion of *saving faith* appears contrary to scriptures...

They believed that the Scriptures, the Confession, and the Larger Catechism demonstrated that Fisher's doctrine of assurance was heresy.

Fisher also understood the distinction between rewards and eternal life. He wrote of the fear of punishment and reward for those Jews who had believed:

But, alas! the spirit of faith was very weak in most of them, and the spirit of bondage very strong, and, therefore, they stood in need to be induced and constrained to obedience, by fear of punishment and hope of reward.³³

He knew that this punishment was only temporal for believers, however it remained a possibility:

Were not Moses and Aaron, for their disobedience, hindered from entering into the land of Canaan, as well as others? (Num 20:12). And was not Josiah, of his disobedience to God's

³¹ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 341. Fisher seems to be quite clear concerning the distinction between discipleship and justification; however, in a section entitled "Marks and Evidences of True Faith" he seems to deviate from an otherwise clear work.

³² *Ibid.*, 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

command, slain in the valley of Megiddo? (2 Chron 35:21, 22). Therefore assure yourself, that when believers in the Old Testament did transgress God's commandments, God's temporal wrath went out against them, and was manifest in temporal calamities that befell them as well as others (Num 16:46). Only here was the difference, the believers' temporal calamities had no eternal calamities included in them, nor following of them; and the unbelievers' temporal blessings had no eternal blessings included in them, and their temporal calamities had eternal calamities included in them, and following of them.³⁴

Although the papacy was trying to rid Scotland of this "heresy," the Marrow Men did not step down. In a section entitled "On Faith," Ebenezer Erskine wrote, "Its appropriation or assurance. (1.) The ground of this. A particular application is grounded on the word, for faith relates to testimony, believing on a word to be believed."³⁵ For Erskine, the testimony of God was the only assurance that one could have of his justification. Erskine wrote in his memoirs:

Because it is charged on us [The Marrow Men] as an error, that we preach *assurance* to be of the essence of faith, I design to publish the substance of some sermons on that subject from Heb. 10:22; from which I hope it will appear, that our principles on that head are agreeable unto the scriptures of truth and the ancient and modern standards of truth in this church.³⁶

The Marrow Men did not stop fighting for the truth of the gospel. Concerning justification, Thomas Boston wrote,

That there can be no mixing of our own righteousness, in greater or lesser measure, with the righteousness of Christ, in our justification. . . . And evident it is, that we cannot pretend to a perfect righteousness of our own, and therefore must go wholly to Christ for one.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Erskine, in *The Marrow* (1718 ed.), 278-79.

³⁶ *Gospel Truth*, ed. John Brown (Canonsburgh, PA: Andrew Munro, 1827), 47.

³⁷ Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 11:200.

Boston was clear that man's righteousness has no part in justification. Like the other Marrow Men, he also believed that assurance was the essence of saving faith. This is evidenced in his belief that no one "can go to heaven in a mist not knowing whether he is going."³⁸ He believed that his understanding of assurance was different than that of the Confession in that it was not a subjective "kind of assurance which the Westminster Confession expressly treats, but an assurance which is in faith...a fiducial appropriating persuasion."³⁹ For Boston, if the gospel is not by faith alone, preaching it "would be of no more value than a crier's offering the king's pardon to one who was not comprehended in it."⁴⁰

Though the Marrow Men were being attacked on all sides and were being charged with distorting the beliefs of the Protestant divines (Luther and Calvin), they stood strong. They held out so that men like Robert Sandeman could continue the battle for the gospel.

VI. CONCLUSION

Controversy among those who hold to the doctrine of *sola fide* is nothing new. This debate began shortly after the dawn of the Reformation and has existed ever since. Just as the Marrow Men contended for the gospel of grace in the eighteenth century; so, we should fight so that grace is not forgotten in the twenty-first century.

May we, like the Marrow Men who came before us, remember that when faith alone is not alone, its essence ceases to be. May Paul's words in Romans soberly remind us of this fact: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:4-5). When faith and works are mixed, grace disappears.

We have a high calling to stand firm in preaching the gospel—that Christ justifies all who simply believe in Him for eternal life. May we faithfully preach this message of grace.

³⁸ Ibid., 2:18.

³⁹ Boston, in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 95.

⁴⁰ Boston, *The Complete Works*, 7:263.