

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

FIRST STRICTURES ON "THE MARROW OF MODERN DIVINITY".

I

THE *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, a small and unpretending volume, was published by Giles Calvert, at the sign of "The Black-Spread-Eagel, near Paul's" in May 1645. It was offered as an eirenicon, discriminating between legalism and antinomianism, and pointing out "the middle path, which is Christ Jesus, received truly and walked in answerably". It was dedicated to Colonel John Downes, a zealous Parliamentarian, now principally remembered as one who, unwillingly, consented to the judgement of death on King Charles the First. The author, modestly wishful to conceal his name, appended to the title merely the initial letters "E.F.". On its first publication the *Marrow* was welcomed as a book specially suitable for the times, and testimony of benefit derived from its perusal followed on the announcement of each new edition. The second edition (London, 1646), was much enlarged, but the new matter was not always wisely conceived, and a large part of it was omitted in succeeding editions. In 1648 a detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments was added. This treatise formed the Second Part of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. It enforces with great fullness the moral requirements of the Gospel. This addition ought therefore to have acted as a shield against the adverse criticism with which the First Part was assailed.

Samuel Prettie, a divine whose "orthodoxness" was vouched for by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and who in turn was one of several who added their testimony to the *Marrow*, gives us a punning clue to the identity of E.F. "God," he writes, "hath endewed His Fisher with the net of a trying understanding." From this we conclude that the name of the author was "Fisher". But for some years we find in the writings of the time almost no reference to the person of E.F.

Soon after the issue of the first edition of the *Marrow* a tractate appeared under the title of "A Manifest and Breife Discovery of some of the errours contained in a Dialogue called the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*". The writer confesses that he is quite without knowledge of the person whose work he assails: "I know not the author but by his book, nor ever heard so much as his name. . . . The author I know not, nor yet could perfectly heare of by any man." From this date onwards several writers refer to the *Marrow* as if it were virtually an anonymous publication, and so late as 1654, in his reply to Richard Baxter's strictures upon it, John Crandon plainly says, "I never knew who was the author of that worke", and adds that he is unaware whether the writer be alive or dead."

It is Richard Baxter who gives us the first clue to the authorship. In his *Catholick Theologie* he refers with some disfavour to "the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, written by an honest barber, Mr. Fisher, as is said, and applauded by divers Independent divines". This identification, though based only on hearsay, was correct. Edward Fisher was a member of the Guild of Barber Surgeons, an honourable and not unintelligent fraternity. It is recorded in the registers of the Barbers' Hall that Edward Fisher was admitted to the freedom of the Company by servitude, on the 14th day of November 1626. The Great Fire of London has blotted out other particulars. In his *Obituary* John Davies records the death of "Mr. Fisher, bookseller and barber in the Old Baily", as having taken place in 1650. This is almost certainly our author. For the authors which he laid under contribution—not in the *Marrow* only, but in all his writings—he would simply have to turn to some of those which were lying on his own shelves. The heated language of some disputants in the "Marrow Controversy", when they loudly asserted that the treatise which they assailed was "the puny performance of some contemptible animal or other of a mechanic", was quite beside the mark; and the shrewd retort of Riccaltoun, "And is it impossible for a barber to be a man of sense and learning?" was entirely apposite.

In 1692 Anthony à Wood brought out the second volume of his *Athenae Oxonienses*. On page 198 we have the following:

"Edward Fisher, the eldest son of a knight, became a gentleman-commoner of Brasen-nose College, August 25, 1627; took on his degree in Arts, and soon after

left that House. . . . He became a noted person among the learned for his great reading in ecclesiastical history, and in the Fathers, and for his admirable skill in the Greek and Hebrew languages. His works are . . . The Marrow of Modern Divinity. . . .”

The Edward Fisher to whom Anthony à Wood refers was the eldest son of Sir Edward Fisher, Knight, of Mickleton, in Gloucestershire. He was a royalist of pronounced antipathies, who would have died rather than dedicate any of his books to Colonel Downes: he entertained a strong disrelish for the tenets and practices of the Puritans. He wrote several volumes under the signature of “E.F.”; and by a not unnatural mistake Wood attributes to him the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. But the two sets of books are unlike in every particular, except in the accident of the initials. And no one who has examined, however cursorily, the several writings can hesitate to determine which came from the pen of the Oxford graduate and which from the hand of the unassuming Puritan. The latter was certainly not “a noted person among the learned”. He seldom quotes from the Greek or Latin fathers, and then always at second hand, and as one to whom the ancient authorities were little more than names; and although he was familiar with the theological debates of his own time he was quite unversed in the history and technique of theology. Other points of contrast are still more clearly marked. Edward Fisher the royalist was a man of a different spirit from that evinced by the author of the *Marrow*: the two sets of books are divergent in view and discordant in temper. But by an unconsidered reliance on Anthony à Wood identification of the two authors has generally been taken for granted by editors and historians.

II

Let us now endeavour to glean some direct knowledge of this man, whose work God so signally blessed, but who, even in his own day, was so little known, and whose memory the lapse of years had nearly blotted out. Almost all we know of him is to be gathered from a few incidental notices in his several writings—for it must not be supposed that the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* is the only product of his pen. The following works are known to us, and there may have been others: *Newes from heaven both good and true concerning England* (1641);

A Touchstone for a Communicant (1647); *London's Gate to the Lord's Table* (1647); *Faith in Five Fundamentall Principles* (1650).

The few fragments of autobiography which are embedded in these volumes are chiefly these:

1. Fisher was, as he expresses it, "a poore inhabitant" of the City of London; was known to and highly esteemed by a number of leading divines; was on terms approaching intimacy with various persons of noble birth or of commanding influence.

2. He was converted to God through the instrumentality of Mr. Thomas Hooker at some date prior to 1633—the year in which Mr. Hooker sailed for New England. Before that time he had spent twelve years in careful observance of the duties of religion. "Let me confess ingenuously," he says, "I was a professor of religion at least a dozen years before I knew any other way to eternal life than to be sorry for my sins and ask forgiveness, and strive and endeavour to fulfil the law and keep the commandments. . . . At last, by means of conferring with Mr. Thomas Hooker in private, the Lord was pleased to convince me that I was yet but a proud pharisee, and to show me the way of faith and salvation by Christ alone, and to give me, as I hope, a heart in some measure to embrace it.

3. Fisher's ecclesiastical position is clearly set forth. In the heat of the "Marrow Controversy", Principal Hadow made the following ungenerous statement—a statement which received only too ready credence from those who regarded the *Marrow* with disfavour: "Edward Fisher, the author of the *Marrow*, was a tool whom the independents thought fit to encourage in that juncture. He took upon himself to be a minister of a separate or independent congregation . . . and so set up for the independent way, in opposition to Presbyterian government." It is difficult to find excuse for these unfortunate assertions. It is impossible to see in E.F. a tool of any party. No one who reads his books with an unprejudiced eye can hesitate to acknowledge the justice of Jeremiah Burroughs' assurance that "the grace of God . . . helped this author in making his work"; and that "his ends were very sincere for God and thy good". Even those who hotly opposed his tenets were ready to do honour to the man. And we have Fisher's own word for it that he was not a pastor, that he held no ecclesiastical office, but that he was an untitled

member of a Presbyterian Church in which Sir Henry Rolles served as a "ruling elder". The titles of his books are sufficient to show that he continued to regard the antinomian error with the utmost disfavour: his latest work, *Faith in Five Fundamental Principles . . . by E.F., a seeker of the Truth*, was intended to be a counter agent to the mystical errors of the Seekers, a sect "newly come up".

4. With regard to his attainments in theological learning, Fisher is equally definite. He emphatically repudiates all claim to special erudition, and frequently laments his unfitness for so high a task as the settlement of theological disputes. One of the passages in which he makes this avowal is so clear that one may quote some sentences: "I did hereupon adventure to put forth a small tract, intituled *A Touchstone for a Communicant*; then, after further thought, did publish this.¹ For indeed, I do acknowledge that if any man do but know my weakness, and my want of those human helps which many others do enjoy, so well as myself do know them, if they consult with flesh and blood they will see just cause to say with Nathanael (John i. 46), 'Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?' . . . But if they will be pleased to consult with the oracles of God, they shall see that in the building of Solomon's temple there was room as well for burden-bearers as for other more curious artificers. . . . Yea, and they shall see that at the first making of the tabernacle not only the spinners of blue and silk and purple and scarlet, but even the poorer sort, which brought goats' hair and rams' skins, were accepted; yea, and they shall find that the Lord made Balaam's ass to utter the truth. . . . If it bring any little increase either of sound knowledge or sweet feeling in the mysteries of Christ to any of the Israel of God that is of a humble spirit, as, blessed be God, I have been informed my *Marrow of Modern Divinity* hath done to many, I have my reward, and shall desire to magnify the name of the Lord for making use of such a weak instrument as I am."

III

On a review of all that we have learned regarding the author of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, we shall certainly agree with the estimate of one of those who first defended the

¹ *London's Gate to the Lord's Table.*

Marrow from attack: "It appeareth to me to be written from much experimental knowledge of Christ and teaching of the Spirit."

In 1646, when the third edition of the *Marrow* was being rapidly exhausted, the first attack on its doctrine was made by a Puritan divine. The Address to the Reader is signed "I.A." The author may have been John Angel of Grantham, afterwards Public Lecturer in Leicester, a "frequent and painful preacher, a man mighty in word and doctrine among the Puritans", but one harassed by much soul-distress. The London ministers were at that time divided into two camps, the line of demarcation between them having reference to the right of a sinner to come to the Saviour without conscious fitness to receive mercy. Those who maintained, according to the teaching of the early Reformers, that need itself, and not the sense of need, was the sinner's warrant to come to Christ, were regarded with disfavour by those of the contrary party. These were judged to be "of the Antinomian way"; while the more rigorous divines were themselves often so fettered by the sense of their own unworthiness, that they failed to enter into the full liberty of the Gospel.

I.A. notes several exegetical "falsehoods"; but "the palpable error" of the *Marrow*, an error in which the author "has gone the direct way with the Antinomians", is that "there are no evangelical preparations of faith in Christ". "It is impossible," he affirms, "for any other to believe in Christ to the saving of the soul, but only such as are so prepared."

Two other divines attacked the *Marrow* from the same quarter. In 1647 John Trapp published *A Commentary or Exposition upon all the Epistles, and the Revelation of St. John the Divine*. In his note on Hebrews iii. 2—"As also Moses was faithful in all his house"—he complains, "And yet so unworthily handled by the author of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, that sly Antinomian, in divers passages of his book, as might be easily instanced". The charge of Antinomianism need not cause distress to anyone familiar with seventeenth century polemics. Certain missiles—and this was one—were too convenient not to be employed with more freedom than discrimination.

Thomas Blake, a firm assertor of the *conditionality of the covenant of grace*, and a representative of the sterner school of

doctrine, regarded with equal disrelish the freeness of the gospel invitation as addressed by Evangelista to Neophytus. In his *Vindiciae Foederis* (London 1653) he censures the *Marrow* in these words: "Away with stammering Moses, saith the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, a morsel in which few divines can find sweetness." It was Luther who used these words—or their equivalent—and it is worthy of remark that Fisher in his quotations from the German Reformer frequently softens the phraseology, omitting any particularly pungent phrase. Lutherisms are sometimes indefensible, but Blake's discountenance of the *Marrow* has a deeper ground than his distaste for one paradoxical sentence. He evidently objects, along with those whom we have already named, to the unqualified declaration of the gospel invitation which is so characteristic of the *Marrow*. Like John Angel, Blake often dwelt in the night time and the shadow of death. In his funeral sermon Anthony Burgess testified of him that while he administered consolation to others, God sometimes left him to walk in spiritual darkness; yet at length He dispelled those gloomy fears, and caused him to rejoice in His salvation. Upon his death-bed he found the comfort of the doctrine he had preached. He would have been spared much anxiety if he had found it earlier.

IV

In the first stage of his chaplaincy in the Army of the Commonwealth, Richard Baxter was grievously vexed by the lax doctrine of some of Cromwell's ironsides. Antinomians in particular he regarded with unqualified disapproval. He pursued them with dialectic and invective until his own mind seems to have taken a list towards the contrary doctrine—to such a degree that his writings appear to have at least a tincture of legalism. Because of this the system of doctrine which he cherished and enforced was significantly termed "Baxterianism". His peculiar tenets are most plainly set forth in his *Aphorismes of Justification*. (London 1649), a somewhat unbalanced treatise which was composed amid the contendings of the camp. In after years he freely spent time and strength in an endeavour to justify the views which he therein expressed.

In the Appendix to the *Aphorismes* Baxter assails the doctrine of the *Marrow*. But he prefaces his strictures with a

generous acknowledgment of the worth of the little volume which had chafed his polemical spirit: "Let me tell you that I much value the greatest part of that book, and commend the industry of the author, and judge him a man of godliness and moderation by his writings. And (he adds with a true Baxterian touch) I conjecture the author's ingenuity to be such that he will be glad to know his own mistakes, and to correct them."

Baxter was the hammer of the Antinomians; he unsparingly opposed every view which even appeared to approximate to their manner of teaching. He stigmatises as "intolerable errors" the following assertions: "That the sins of believers are not to be understood as transgressions of the law of works"; "That the believer is not by them rendered liable to God's everlasting wrath"; "That the covenant of grace threatens nothing but present afflictions and the loss of our present communion with God". The doctrine of the *Marrow*, "that we must not act for justification, but only in thankfulness for it", was quite foreign to Baxter's view of the gospel. He says: "That very speech which the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* so blameth, as joining our own righteousness with Christ's to make up one entire righteousness, is yet in itself no unfit expression, but apt to set forth the very scope of the Gospel, and in the mouth of a sound Christian it is sound divinity. I mean those vulgar words, 'We must do our best, and God will help us by His grace, and forgive us wherein we fail.'"

In the *Marrow* Antinomista asks: "Sir, what think you of a preacher that in my hearing said, he durst not exhort nor persuade sinners to believe their sins were pardoned, before he saw their lives reformed, for fear they should take more liberty to sin?" Evangelista answers: "Why, what should I say, but that I think that preacher was ignorant of the mystery of faith." Baxter eagerly seizes the bait and joyfully confesses that he is such an "ignorant" preacher.

In *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, another book written during his military service, Baxter re-asserts his conviction with some asperity: "I speak the more of this (that Christians are under law in a sense of duty) because I find that many moderate men who think they have found the mean between the Antinomian and the Legalist yet do foully err upon this point (Do this, and live). As Mr. F. in the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*,

a book applauded by so many eminent divines in their commendatory epistles before it; and because the doctrine, 'That we must act from life, but not for life', or 'In thankfulness to Him that hath saved us, but not for the obtaining of salvation' is of such dangerous consequences that I would advise all men to take heed of it that regard their salvation. . . . I here undertake to prove that this forementioned doctrine reduced to practice will certainly be the damnation of the practiser; but I hope many Antinomians do not practise their own doctrine."

Again, in *Catholick Theologie* Baxter returns to the attack: "Reader, hold close to this plain doctrine . . . and you will have more solid and practical and peaceable truth about this point than either Dr. Thomas Tullie, or Maccovius, or Mr. Crandon, or Dr. Crispe, or the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, or Paul Hobson, or Mr. Saltmarsh, or any such writers do teach you in their learned Net-work treatises, by which (being wise or orthodox overmuch, being themselves entangled and confounded by incongruous notions of man's invention) they are liker to entangle and confound you, than to shew you the best method and grounds for the peace of an understanding dying man."

John Crandon, in his treatise entitled *Mr. Baxter's Aphorisms exorized and authorized* (London 1654), defends the *Marrow* against Baxter's assaults upon it: "I never knew who was the Authour of that worke. Neither have I read it otherwise than here and there a fragment as I found it lying in my friends' houses, so that I could no otherwise judge of it but *ex ungue leonem*—what the whole was, but by that which my slender judgment told me the part I read was not onely orthodox but singularly useful . . . I see not but the passages are pure and cleare enough in the Booke, if he would forbear the casting in of his saltpetre to corrupt them." Baxter presently retorted on his adversary in *An unsavoury volume of Mr. Jo. Crandon's anatomized, or a nosegay of the choicest flowers in that garden* (London 1654). But we need not continue to track these ancient contendings.

V

The ninth edition of the *Marrow* was published in 1668; this was the basis of the famous edition of 1718. In 1699 a revised version was executed by one whose name is withheld,

but whose acquaintance with the Free Grace Controversy then raging, appears to have been most intimate. It is not unlikely that the reviser was Isaac Chauncey, the chief antagonist of Dr. Williams. The *Marrow* was greatly valued by the Free Grace party in the time of the Neonomian controversy. In this edition obnoxious phrases were omitted, uncouth sayings were pruned, and those passages which had been already challenged were "all smoothed according to the stile of the Westminster Confession". Hog of Carnock did not know of this edition, but there were some who thought that, if he had made use of it, instead of the reprint of 1668, the "Marrow Controversy" might have been avoided.

In the days of the second persecution in Scotland the *Marrow* was well known and highly esteemed. It passed from hand to hand, and because copies were scarce, many transcribed it with much labour. These manuscript copies circulated freely among "the afflicted remnant"; and one of Christ's confessors in that dark day, Fraser of Brea, at one time a prisoner on the Bass Rock, afterwards minister in Culross, expressly acknowledges in his *Memoirs* the help which he received from this book in the beginning of his Christian life. And it is certain that he was only one of many.

Riccaltoun informs us that Mr. Osburn, Professor of Divinity in Aberdeen, from 1697 to 1711, was accustomed to commend the *Marrow* "as one of four books to fix the scholars in true notions of the fundamental principles of religion". The other works were *The Westminster Standards*, *Vincent's Catechism*, and *Pareus' Edition of Ursinus on the Palatine Catechism*.

Glasgow.

D. M. McINTYRE.