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

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

THE MARROW CONTROVERSY REVIEWED

I

IN MAY 1645 there was published in London a theological work entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which was destined nearly a century later to become an apple of discord in the Church of Scotland and to take an honoured place in the small but select library of the pious and humble folk of that country. It was published under the initials "E.F.", and the writer is generally said to have been Edward Fisher, a gentleman of good family in Gloucestershire, whose name appears in 1627 upon the books of Brasenose College, Oxford. Some have disputed this identification, maintaining that there was another "E.F." who was writing theological books about the same period. The question is of little moment, for the worth of the book is independent of its authorship. The author, indeed, makes no claim to originality, as the title sufficiently indicates. The work is avowedly composed on the basis of extracts from the writings of prominent Reformers and Puritan divines. The author's ingenuity has been principally exercised in weaving them together into an argument and setting the whole in the form of a dialogue.

The theological standpoint of the book may be indicated by saying that it is a clear and forcible statement of that Federal or Covenant Theology which, starting with the Reformers, dominated all religious thinking of a Puritan character during the seventeenth century and continued vigorous in Scotland down to the middle of last century. The author is at great pains to steer a middle course between legalism and antinomianism. This he does by drawing a distinction between the moral law as "the matter of the covenant of works" and the moral law as "the matter of the law of Christ". Thus,

the law of Christ in regard of substance and matter, is all one with the law of works, or covenant of works . . . both these laws agree in saying, Do this. But here is the difference. The one saith, Do this and live: and the other saith, Live and do this. The one saith, Do this for life: the other saith, Do this from life. The one saith, If thou do it not, thou shalt die: the other saith, If thou do it not, I will chastise thee with the rod. The one is delivered by God as He is a Creator out of Christ only to such as are out of Christ: the other is delivered by God as He is Redeemer in Christ only to such as are in Christ.

The *Marrow's* temperate and clear statement evidently commended it to the authorities, for it came forth with the imprimatur of Joseph Caryl, the censor of theological books under the Westminster Assembly, which was sitting at the time of its publication. A second part of the *Marrow* appeared in 1648 with the same commendation and in a short time the whole work passed through some ten editions.

It is more than half a century later before the book again attracts the notice of history. In 1699 a new minister, Thomas Boston, was settled in the parish of Simprin in Berwickshire. He had at that time no clear views on the doctrine of grace and was concerned to get the claims of God's law and the relation of a child of grace thereto satisfactorily adjusted. He soon found enlightenment and that within his own parish, for in his *Memoirs* for 1700 we read:

As I was sitting one day in a house of Simprin I espied above the window-head two little old books, which, when I had taken down, I found entitled, the one *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the other, *Christ's Blood Flowing Freely to Sinners*. These 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 other, being the first part only of the *Marrow*, I relished greatly; and having purchased it at length from the owner, kept it from that time to this day, and it is still to be found among my books. I found it to come close to the points I was in quest of, and to show 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.

Again the *Marrow* retires into obscurity, but this time for less than twenty years. It is Boston who is again instrumental in bringing it into prominence. In 1717, now minister of Ettrick, he was a member of the General Assembly and found the business interesting and important. The first heresy case against Professor Simson of Glasgow was brought to an end "with great softness to the Professor". Further, the Presbytery of Auchterarder was condemned for having sought to impose on a candidate for licence the declaration, "It is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ and instating us in covenant with God". The majority of the Assembly considered this "Auchterarder Creed" dangerously antinomian, while Boston, though admitting it to be unhappily worded, thought it contained Gospel truth. Sitting in the Assembly next Mr. John Drummond, minister of Crieff and a member of the censured Presbytery, Boston got into conversation

with him and happened to mention the *Marrow*. Drummond was so interested that he enquired for the book in the Edinburgh shops and managed at length to secure a copy. From him it passed to the Rev. James Webster of Edinburgh and thence to the Rev. James Hog of Carnock. The result was the republication of the first part of the *Marrow* in 1718 with a laudatory preface by Hog.

Soon it became known that in influential quarters the book met with anything but the favour which to Boston and his friends it seemed to merit. Hog, accordingly, thought it wise to publish two pamphlets in its defence, but this, far from removing objections, brought the opposing party out into the open. On 7th April, 1719, James Hadow, Principal at St. Andrews, preached a sermon before the Synod of Fife and alleged that the *Marrow* was inconsistent with the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession of Faith. In May 1719 the Assembly ordered the Commission to enquire into the spreading of books and pamphlets tending to the diffusion of the condemned "Auchterarder Creed". Surmising that this remit of Assembly was due to the instigation of Hadow, Hog produced another pamphlet defending the *Marrow* from the charges contained in his adversary's Synod sermon. With that the conflict entered on its formal stage. The Commission of Assembly appointed a Committee for Preserving Purity of Doctrine which reported to the next Assembly that in the writings they had examined there were certain portions and expressions that deserved to be further considered. The Report concluded with some propositions from the *Marrow* alleged to be unsound. The Committee's report having been approved with only four votes against, the Assembly proceeded to pass "An Act concerning a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*". After a short preamble the Act mentions five heads of doctrine under which obnoxious passages in the *Marrow* are classified. Then follow six antinomian paradoxes which are "fenced and defended" in the *Marrow* by applying the distinction between the moral law as law of works and as law of Christ, e.g., "that the Lord can see no sin in a believer". Then the Act notes certain dangerous expressions, e.g., "A minister that dares not persuade Sinners to believe their sins are pardoned before he see their Lives reformed, for fear they should take more Liberty to Sin, is ignorant of the mystery of Faith". The Act concludes by

prohibiting ministers of the Church from saying anything in favour of the *Marrow*. They must rather warn and exhort their people not to read it.

Such a sweeping condemnation could not lightly be accepted by men like Boston who had found the book a real source of enlightenment. Accordingly a concerted effort was made to have the Act of Assembly revoked. A "Representation" to that effect was presented to the Assembly of 1721 by Boston, Hog and ten other ministers, including the two brothers Erskine. Throughout the later stages of the controversy these were variously known as "The Twelve Apostles", "The Representatives" or "The Marrowmen". Not only did they beg the Assembly to revoke the Act of 1720 but they carried the fight into the enemy's country by questioning two clauses in another Act of the same Assembly which seemed to them to encourage a tendency to turn religion into mere morality and to be dangerous to the doctrine of free grace.

Owing to the illness of the Royal Commissioner the Assembly was dissolved before the Representation could be considered, but the Commission of Assembly was instructed to "ripen and prepare these matters concerning doctrine" for the next Assembly. Principal Hadow sought at this stage to vindicate his position by publishing a pamphlet, *The Antinomianism of the Marrow of Modern Divinity Detected*. His hand was generally recognised, too, in the steps now taken by the Commission. In November 1721 it presented twelve short queries to the Marrowmen and sent up their answers together with an overture to the Assembly of 1722. Eventually, after some modifications had been made, the Commission's overture was carried by 134 votes to 5. The Act of 1720 was confirmed, the preaching of *Marrow* doctrine was prohibited, and the Presbyteries and Synods, especially those within whose bounds the Marrowmen resided, were ordered to see that this decision was obeyed. The twelve Representatives were also called to the bar of Assembly and rebuked by the Moderator. Expecting an adverse decision, they had already subscribed a Protestation which, in effect, announced their intention of disregarding the Acts of Assembly on this matter, and this was at once laid on the table. The Assembly refused to receive it, but it was soon published for the benefit of the public, and was seen to be a bold defiance of the majority of the Church.

It might have been expected that the outcome would have been the deposition of the Marrowmen. Rumours were indeed current about possible action against them, but nothing was done. They had sufficiently safeguarded their liberty by making a public protest; and the majority of the Assembly presumably deemed it wise to let the matter rest. Perhaps, as has been suggested, a hint to that effect was received from the civil authorities, anxious to avoid division in the Church in view of the still potent Jacobite peril. However that may be, no action was taken. *Marrow* doctrine continued to be preached, and in 1726 a new edition of the book appeared with notes by Boston. His name was withheld, but the notes were partly controversial and designed to vindicate the *Marrow* position from the charges brought against it by Hadow.

II

One of the charges in the Act of 1720 was that the *Marrow* taught that holiness is not necessary to salvation, and the sixth Query put to the Representers was, "If a Sinner, being justified, has all Things at once, that is necessary for Salvation? And if personal Holiness and Progress in holy Obedience is not necessary to a justified Person's Possession of Glory?" To the first part of the question the Marrowmen answer in the affirmative. As regards the second part they hold that holiness and justification are inseparable in the believer and therefore refuse even to suppose, as the question does, their separation. Personal holiness they reckon as necessary to the possession of glory as is an antecedent to its consequent or a part to the whole: but "if the meaning of the Query be of such a Necessity of holy Obedience in order to the Possession of Glory as imports any Kind of Causality, we dare not answer in affirmative: for we cannot look on personal Holiness or Good Works as properly federal and conditional Means of obtaining the Possession of Heaven, though we own they are necessary to make us meet for it". In all this the Representers are true to the *Marrow* itself. Its teaching on this point is that the believer enters into a state of justification by faith in Christ and no future sin can prevent his final salvation. If he does sin by disobeying the moral law as law of Christ, then in proportion to his sin will be the temporal adversities which he will receive in this life to turn him again into the way of righteousness. Holiness will thus eventually become a mark of his; but

such holiness does in no sense earn his salvation. He has got his salvation already assured to him by grant from Christ. Thus in strictness it is true to say that the *Marrow* taught that "holiness is not necessary to salvation"; but the antinomianism of that statement is removed when we remember that it taught that holiness accompanies salvation.

Again, the *Marrow* was charged by the Assembly with holding that assurance is of the essence of faith and that the saving faith commanded in the Gospel is a man's persuasion that Christ is his and died for him, and that whoever has not this persuasion or assurance has not answered the Gospel call and thus is not a true believer. The point at issue here is a little obscure unless we remember what was the out-and-out antinomian view on this question. A real antinomian would hold that a believer is justified before he believes, before faith is in him at all, indeed from all eternity. In that case his faith is just the assurance that he is one of the people of whom this holds true. Faith and assurance are practically the same thing. Faith is purely declaratory of what already is. It makes no difference. It is in this sense that the making of assurance the essence of faith can be condemned as antinomian. As against such doctrine it was customary to distinguish between the direct act of faith by which we believe in Christ and the reflex act of faith by which we gain a comforting assurance of our faith. It is the first, of course, which justifies, not the second. The distinction is clear in the *Westminster Confession*, chapter 18, paragraph 3.

Now, what was the Marrowmen's attitude to this point? They made a real distinction between the direct act of faith and the reflective assurance, which they never held to be of the essence of faith. In making this distinction they avoided antinomianism. The charge against them, however, had a certain plausibility from the fact that they had a more vital view of the direct act of faith than had their opponents. In the course of their answer to Query VIII, they quote with approval a definition of faith as "A particular persuasion of my heart that Christ Jesus is mine and that I shall have life and salvation by His means; that whatsoever Christ did for the Redemption of mankind, He did it for me". This definition, they rightly hold, is essentially the same as that of the *Marrow*, and—more important for their defence—it is the view of faith held by all the Reformers and Reformed Churches. If faith is to be of any worth at all it must

at least mean that a man appropriates to himself what before has lain in common in the Gospel. Without such appropriation there can be no "closing with Christ" and no receiving of Him. A man must not only assent to a scheme of salvation; he must gratefully accept its applicability to himself. The Marrowmen not unjustly claim that all the Reformers stand for that "special Fiducia, Confidence or appropriating Possession of Faith spoke of in the condemned pages of the *Marrow*". Thus the Marrowmen like the Reformers import into faith a certain measure of assurance or, perhaps better, a measure of "Appropriating Persuasion", but this they distinguish from that reflective assurance which, as they remark in their representation, "ariseth from Spiritual Sensation and rational Argumentation".

The standpoint of the opponents of the *Marrow* is of importance here. It is stated by Hadow in his preface to *The Antinomianism of the Marrow Detected*. He holds that

the Thing proposed in the Gospel to a Sinner to be believed by the direct Act of justifying Faith is not that Christ is his and hath died for him in particular; nor, that God hath loved him and pardoned his sins; nor, that Christ hath purchased Redemption for every one of Mankind without exception and fortune in particular, and that he shall be saved by Christ, seeing these are not Things revealed in the Word and commanded to be believed by every hearer of the Gospel: But the Thing proposed is the Testimony of God concerning Christ the Saviour, and the Method of Salvation through Him: and every hearer of the Gospel is called not only to give his Assent unto the Truth revealed, but also his Consent unto the way of Relief and Salvation proposed to him and so to accept of and receive Christ and to rest on Him alone for salvation, as He is offered in the Gospel.

According to this view a man first assents to the plan of salvation, then consents to its application to himself, then devotes himself humbly to Christ's service, and after a time he becomes assured of his union with Christ and of full salvation as his secure possession. According to the *Marrow* view something of assurance or "appropriating persuasion" is produced in the believer much earlier by the grace and worth of Christ. Faith means embracing and resting on a Saviour who avails to satisfy from the first. The truth seems to be that the Marrowmen and their opponents were regarding the matter from different points of view. The latter were analysing the Christian life and bringing out its logical stages: the former were describing an unanalysed experience of a personal or even mystical kind. Many people doubtless go through something like the stages set forth by Hadow, but whenever religious experience is of the vivid

intuitional kind the stages get mixed up. The order of logic is obliterated and only comes to its own again when experience has become more gradual and analysable. It may be doubted, however, whether Christian experience ever takes on the shape of a bare assent to a scheme of salvation which gradually expands into a personal assurance of union with Christ. It rather seems that there is from the first a yielding of personal devotion to Christ as one worthy of trust; and this is what the Marrowmen meant by "appropriating persuasion" without which there could be no faith.

Again, the Act of Assembly complained that the *Marrow* taught a universal atonement and pardon. The view of the *Westminster Confession* on this point is clearly stated in chapter 3, paragraph 6. Very different is the language of the *Marrow*, e.g.:

I beseech you to consider that God the Father as He is in His Son Jesus Christ, moved with nothing but with His free love to mankind lost, hath made a deed of gift and grant unto them all, that whosoever of them all shall believe in this His Son shall not perish but have eternal life. And hence it was that Jesus Christ Himself said unto His disciples "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature".

Here, as the Act of 1720 points out, "is asserted an universal Redemption as to purchase", contrary to the Confession.

It must not be supposed, however, that the *Marrow* came anywhere near the modern doctrine of Universalism. It held to election and reprobation, but viewed these as mysteries which need not concern the preacher or his hearers.

I beseech you to consider that, although some men be ordained to condemnation, yet so long as the Lord hath concealed their names and not set a mark of reprobation upon any man in particular, but offers the pardon to all without any respect either to election or reprobation, surely it is great folly in any man to say, it may be I am not elected and therefore I shall not have benefit by it, and therefore I will not accept of it, nor come in.

It might be supposed from this that the Marrowmen insisted on offering the Gospel to all not because Christ had died for any but the elect but simply because, not having access to the Divine eternal decree, they as preachers could not know which of their possible hearers were elect, and so, lest God's purpose be frustrated, they must offer to all. It appears, however, that this is scarcely an accurate statement of their view. They held, it seems, the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ for all and the suitability of the Gospel offer to all. The legatees of Christ according to the usual theory were the elect. The Marrowmen

made all mankind His legatees, though explaining that only in the case of the elect does the legacy become effective.

If it be asked, What is the use of making the Gospel offer to all, seeing that only the elect can respond?, we are forced to consider a curious passage in their reply to Query X. Discussing 1 John v. 10f. and speaking of unbelievers, they say:

By not receiving this gifted and offered Remedy, with Application and Appropriation, they fly in the Face of God's Record and Testimony; and therefore do justly and deservedly perish, seeing the Righteousness and Salvation and Kingdom of God was brought so near to them in the free offer of the Gospel and yet they would not take it.

According to this curious view salvation is to be preached to all in order that reprobates, in rejecting it, may fall under fuller condemnation. They are doomed in any case, seeing they are the subjects of God's decree of reprobation, but that decree makes itself effective by causing such men to reject the Gospel offer, whereupon they "do justly and deservedly perish" because they will not accept the free offer made to them. They perish because they reject salvation, but they reject salvation because they are not elect. So it appears that damnation as well as salvation is of the Lord; and thus we come upon the impasse of logical Calvinism.

III

We shall only understand the controversy aright if we remember that the wrangling over minute points was, in truth, symptomatic of a considerable divergence of theological tendency. That difference may be expressed by saying that Hadow stood for logical Calvinism, Boston and his friends for religious Calvinism. The latter sought to do justice to the broad statements of the Gospel offer to all men. They proclaimed a deed of gift and grant by God to mankind lost. The legatees under Christ's testament are not believers only, but sinners universally, though in the case of the former only does the testament take effect. It may be urged that it is futile to preach the Gospel to all mankind unless you give up the doctrine of reprobation, as the Marrowmen never did. For all practical purposes the Gospel offer is to the elect alone. Thus logically Hadow was the true Calvinist. The Marrowmen, however, despite their theology, were impelled by their evangelistic interests to say little about election and reprobation and much about God's grant to mankind

lost. They were less logical than their opponents, but more religious. That explains why they were favourable to the "Auchterarder Creed", while their opponents thought it detestable. It affirms that "it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ and in-stating us in covenant with God". That is practically equivalent to

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come.

The "Creed" is only the heart-cry of a penitent sinner wrought out in somewhat formal language. To a man who knows the experience it is perfectly safe language; to one who does not, it is rank antinomianism. The Marrowmen did know the experience; their opponents, devout men as they may have been, did not. Hence the controversy.

It should be noted that the familiar Scottish terms, "evangelical" and "moderate", must be used with some discrimination in this matter. If by "evangelical" we mean a preacher of good news, one who is primarily concerned with bringing in "them that are without", then the term applies to the Marrowmen. That was their interest. They were preachers whose ministrations commended them to the people because they had a message for all. They had caught something of the gracious yet urgent missionary spirit of the New Testament. Hadow, their outstanding opponent, was not a Moderate, in the sense that that term acquired in the late eighteenth century in Scotland. He was a logical Calvinist or a hyper-Calvinist, not a Moderate. However many young ministers of the school of Simson, the Glasgow heresiarch who was suspended in 1729, voted against the *Marrow*, the leader of the majority and his nearest associates were not of that school. In fact, Hadow who fought the *Marrow* so keenly was also one of the foremost opponents of Simson. That fact suggests that we must be careful in using the terms "evangelical" and "moderate" at the time of the *Marrow* controversy. Perhaps it would be safe to say that the majority who condemned the *Marrow* were partly logical Calvinists and partly Moderates of the later type. It would be interesting to enquire whether Moderatism of the "mere morality" type was not the natural outcome of Hadow's type of Calvinistic orthodoxy: but that would lead us too far into the realm of

speculation. It must suffice to declare that the Marrowmen stood in the evangelical succession. They represented a Gospel for all. Their motives were essentially the same as operated powerfully in Scotland in the second part of the following century. Then it was that men, influenced by the Revival of 1859 and the later evangelism of Moody, sought to avoid the strictness of *Westminster Confession* doctrine by Declaratory Acts. Whenever there is a fresh apprehension of the Gospel, there is the desire to bring the Good News to others; and that desire will manifest itself within a system of election and reprobation orthodoxy, even though it strain the logic of the system. So it was at the time of the Declaratory Acts; and so it was when the Marrowmen, upholding particular redemption in theory, yet offered salvation to all.

In conclusion, we must note what appears to be an attempt to excuse the majority of the Church on the ground of their partial acquaintance with the *Marrow*. In his *Scotland and the Union 1695-1747* W. L. Mathieson says in a footnote to page 230, "Had the work been published in full, it would have been seen that the second part professed to vindicate the moral law". From this one might imagine that Hadow and his followers had no means of knowing the second part of the *Marrow*, the contents of which are indicated by its sub-title: *touching the most plaine, pithy and spirituall exposition of the ten Commandments, the examination of the heart and life by them, the reason why the Lord gave them, and the use that both believers and unbelievers are to make of them; Profitable for any man who either desires to be driven out of himself to Christ, or to walk as that he may please Christ*. If it were so, indeed, it is surprising to find the Marrowmen saying in their *Representation*:

"Tis also hard that the Book is condemned, as denying the necessity of Holiness to Salvation, and the Believers being under the Law, as a Rule of Life, without once making the least Intimation that the one half of the said Book contained in the second volume, is an explication and application of the Holy Law in its Ten Commandments not only to unbelievers, but also to Believers themselves . . . yea, and without that half of the Book, its being once under the consideration either of the Assembly or Commission for Preserving the Purity of Doctrine.

This clearly implies that the second part of the *Marrow* was available before May 1721, though it had not received consideration from the authorities. The solution of the difficulty is found in McCrie's article in the *Evangelical Review* for October

1884, where he tells us on page 716 that there was a publication of the second part of the *Marrow* in 1718 with a preface by the Rev. John Williamson of Inveresk, who became one of the twelve Marrowmen. It will not do, therefore, to excuse the majority on the ground that they had no chance of acquainting themselves with the whole work. The terms of the remit to the Commission in 1719 required that it should have reviewed not only the volume published in 1718 with Hog's recommendation, the first part of the *Marrow*, but also all writings tending to the diffusion of the "Auchterarder Creed".

At the same time we must note that the Marrowmen were not entirely without blame. When Hog published the *Marrow* in 1718 his preface was quite commendatory. He never suggests that any of its statements are extreme or misleading when taken in isolation. This provided good ground for Hadow's complaints when, during the controversy, the Marrowmen admitted that certain expressions were harsh and unguarded. Why then, he rightly asked, were readers not warned at the beginning? Boston was wiser in his edition of 1726, but by that time the trouble was over. To have said from the beginning that readers must exercise discrimination might have prevented the controversy from breaking out at all.

Perhaps the only fact in the whole affair which can give us unalloyed satisfaction is that there followed a considerable dissemination of the real religion which, breathing through the *Marrow*, fired the zeal of its supporters. The book itself received a fine advertisement and was widely read. The Marrowmen were marked figures and their audiences did not on that account decline. The book became a source of inspiration in Scotland, bringing light to many souls and nourishing, during a somewhat barren period, a true religious warmth of spirit. For the sake of that service to the religious life of the land we may be content to accept the *Marrow* controversy with thankfulness.

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