

# The Marrow Controversy #01: Historical Details

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*The Marrow Controversy*

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The subject that has been allotted to me for these three conference addresses is, as you would have noticed from the program, “Pastoral Lessons From the Marrow Controversy.”

You may well wonder what the Marrow Controversy is or was. Let me say to you that it is not some strange sect that appeared in Scotland arguing at some time about the price of butcher meat, nor, for that matter, about the true interpretation of 1 Corinthians chapter eight.

It is, indeed, as we shall see in these days together, one of the least known and yet one of the most pastorally significant of all the theological controversies that have taken place within the area of reformed theology.

Many of you, I know, will have read that famous book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and many of you, perhaps, will know a good deal about the Marrow Controversy. But it may be that there are some of us here today that for one reason or another are not acquainted with the historicity of that controversy and so what I have planned to do for part of our opening address in this theme is to take you a little into the historical detail of the controversy if you will bear with me. And then we will turn to the first of what I consider to be the great pastoral lessons that may be drawn for us this 20<sup>th</sup> century, the forum pastors seeking to grapple with the truth of Scripture and to apply it in a pastoral context to our own people.

Let me begin by this in the first place. When you come to Scotland next and visit the Banner office in Edinburgh you may care to travel some 45 miles or so to the northwest of Edinburgh to watch the Scottish Highlands. And there you will find the apparently sleepy little town of Auchterarder. The only thing, honest, that you will notice as you drive through it is that it has a very, very, very long main street. It is well known by travelers in that parts as a speed trap, for those who have been frustrated for many years by the speed limit.

But those who stop in the town of Auchterarder find there a rather pleasant little coffee shop with excellent home baking. And I commend it to you.

The two town churches you will notice have closed for 24 hours of six days of the week and 23 hours on the seventh day and very little apparently seems to happen.

A man with some knowledge of the theology of Scotland and the history of God's work there may know that within a few miles of Auchterarder, despite its apparent sleepiness, the boys James and Robert Haldane were born and reared. And those who are a little more affluent will know that a matter of miles down the road lies the famous Glen Eagle Hotel and the famous golf courses. And here the American tourist may rub shoulders with the British Rolls Royce owner. Here the American tourist may even rub shoulders with royalty and nobility or, of that matter, with the common [?] Arab millionaire. It is one of the idyllic spots of Scotland.

But in Auchterarder itself almost nothing seems to take place that would excite the observer. But imagine, will you, for a moment that it is not the year 1800, 1980, but the year 1717. You are present as the presbytery of Auchterarder is in session. It has set to examine a young man to be ordained to the holy ministry. In his examination he has to preach, to present certain exercises, to give a theological dissertation on a doctrinal point phrased in Latin. The trail for his license to preach the gospel are rigorous indeed.

This student's name happens to be William Craig. And being before the presbytery of Auchterarder he faces a question that he would have faced in no other presbytery in the land at that time, a question that was part of what came to be known as the Auchterarder Creed. And the question that William Craig is now asked is this.

Do you subscribe to the following? I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ. I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ.

As you watch the presbytery in action it awaits the response of the young William Craig. And you inevitably turn over in your mind. I wonder what my response would have been to such a question. Do I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ?

In the event, William Craig—and you may have some sympathy with him—stuttered and stammered and hesitated to sign his name to the Auchterarder Creed. And the presbytery refused him license and though they assumed the matter would rest there, at the next meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in the same year the whole issue of the Auchterarder Creed—it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ—was raised before the fathers and brethren.

And they Auchterarder Creed was condemned in these words, as unsound and detestable doctrine.

But neither did the matter rest there. For sitting in the assembly beside the Reverend John Drummond, a minister from the small town of Crief and the presbytery of Auchterarder, sat one of the most remarkable ministers the Church of Scotland has ever

known, perhaps one of the most remarkable gospel ministers who has ever graced the face of the earth. He was at that time 41 years old and had published his first book some 20 years before as a probational minister. That book, you may well know, bore the title, *The Art of Man Fishing*.

His own congregation lay down in the borders of Scotland near to England and his name, as all of you I am sure will know, was Thomas Boston. But let Thomas Boston tell us the story in his own words. He writes about that time in his memoirs.

The Auchterarder creed, was all at once at that diet judged and condemned; though some small struggle was made in defence thereof. And poor I was not able to open a mouth before them in that cause; although I believed the proposition to be truth, howbeit not well worded.

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 assemblyhouse, and conversing with Mr. John Drummond, minister of Crief, one of the brethren of that presbytery above mentioned, I happened to give him my sense of the gospel offer, Isa. 55: 1, Matt. 11: 28, with the reason thereof; and withal to tell him of the Marrow of Modern Divinity.

Here let me break in to Boston's memoirs to say that Boston had struggled with the issues of the law and the gospel in his earlier ministry. And about the year 1700 as he was visiting one of his parishioners, he spied a book on the parishioners bookshelf entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. He took it down and read it and discovered that it spoke to his heart and to the situation of his own ministry. He imbibed its teaching and he began to expound that marrow of modern divinity during his own ministry.

But let him continue his story.

Hereupon he, having inquired in the shops for the said book, at length got it; and from him Mr. James Webster getting it, was taken therewith; and afterward, Mr. Drummond himself being hardly allowed time to read it through...

There was no difference in those days from today.

... it came into the hands of Mr. James Hog, minister of Carnock; [about 20 miles from Edinburgh] and in end was reprinted in the year 1718, with a preface by the said Mr. Hog.

Later on in the year 1721 Boston's friends urged him to write notes from the *Marrow* and he did and these were published with the *Marrow* in 1726. But already so great was the influence of the teaching of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* that in 1720 the General

Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed an act prohibiting ministers either by preaching or writing from recommending *The Marrow* or from saying anything in its favor. On the contrary, if ministers discovered any of their members reading it, they were to warn them of its dangers and urge them neither to use it, nor to read it.

I don't believe that Act of 1720 has ever been rescinded. And being a minister of the Church of Scotland I therefore ought not to urge or recommend you to read *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, but you will in the back a copy of Thomas Boston's notes on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and I urge you to read that.

Now you may well ask, "What is so extraordinary about this book?" Indeed, you may ask this once you have read it, but it gained a place on the *index librorum* of a Presbyterian church.

*The Marrow* had been published in two parts in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 1645, part one; 1648, part two under the initials E F, commonly understood to be those of Edward Fischer, the author of one or two other minor works in the Puritan period.

The book itself is made up of a series of dialogues basically among a young Christian who is troubled about a basic understanding of the elements of gospel truth, his pastor who counsels him and two other participants—a legalist on the one hand and an Antinomian on the other.

The first part, the more important part of *The Marrow* deals with the biblical relationship between the law and the gospel. And the second part deals with the exposition of the 10 Commandments.

The General Assembly—and this is the point to grasp—accused *The Marrow* and those who subscribed to its theology of holding a position of Antinomianism. And the ministers who came to be known as the Marrow Men sometimes known as the 12 apostles because there were 12 of them, were men like Thomas Boston, Wardlaw and the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine under whose father's ministry Thomas Boston had been converted.

These ministers gathered together, wrote a protest and representation against the assembly's condemnation of the book. In response, because there were 12 apostles the assembly commission presented them with 12 queries on the teaching of the *Marrow*. They in turn replied and sought to demonstrate that while they would not subscribe to every jot and tittle in the *Marrow*, they believed that its doctrine was wholesome and Biblical. But in the historical event, their case was never really answered.

Now if we are to profit from a discussion of the themes arising out of the Marrow Controversy, it is important for us, I believe, to grasp what it was that concerned these great men of God during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Boston says, you remember, that he agreed with the tenor of the Aughterarder Creed, although he felt it perhaps had been imperfectly worded. And what emerges in a study of those days and the writings of these men is this:

that on the one hand, the Marrow Men were being accused of Antinomianism. On the other hand, the condemners of the Marrow doctrine and the Auchterarder Creed were guilty of legalism. And at the root of the matter, as the Marrow Men themselves recognized, at the root of the matter lay neither legalism or Antinomianism, but the question of the nature of the grace of God in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is a very interesting thing to know that the very same General Assembly which dealt so harshly with Marrow doctrine likely passed over a serious case of Arminianism that ultimately was to grow into a form of Arianism. And this is why Boston, who wasn't at all given to controversy took arms against what he saw to be false doctrine. He saw that what was at stake at the end of the day was not the merits or demerits of a human publication, not the expressions of some human creed, but the gospel itself and the free grace of God in the gospel.

Listen to how he puts it in his Memoirs:

As matters now stand in this controversy it is the gospel doctrine that has got a root stroke by the condemning of that book.

And so the Marrow Men in their answers to the Assembly's questions comment about the title of these questions, that:

They turn the matter off its proper hinge by giving a wrong color to our representation, as if the chief design of it was to plead, not for the precious truths of the gospel which we conceive to be wounded by the condemnatory act, but for the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which though we value for a good and useful book and doubt not that the Church of God may be much edified by it as we ourselves have been, yet came it never into our minds to hold it, nor any other private writing faultless, nor to put it even on a level with our approved Standards of Doctrine.

It is the precious truths of the Gospel that these men considered to have been wounded in the Marrow Controversy.

Now, in fact, there are several valuable, indeed vital, pastoral lessons that we might learn from this controversy. There are perhaps four of them that are signally important.

The first is: The Marrow Controversy opens up to us the question of the nature of the grace of God and the offer of the gospel. Secondly, it opens up to us the relationship between saving faith and the assurance of salvation. Thirdly, it opens up the answer of the grace of the gospel to legalism and, fourthly, it answers up the grace of God to Antinomianism.

And since, as you will see in our program, Dr. DeWitt is to be dealing with this whole area of assurance and counsel on assurance, I suggest to you that we limit ourselves in these studies in these mornings to the first, the third and the fourth; the question of the grace of God and the offer of the gospel, the answer of the grace of the gospel to

legalism, and the answer of the grace to Antinomianism. And so I want, if I may and if you will come with me, to consider in the rest of this session the question of the nature of the grace of God and the offer of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I've already tried to labor for you that the Marrow Controversy from the point of view of these Marrow Men was not about some means of expressing the Gospel, but about the very heart of the Gospel itself. What they were concerned to do was the safeguard the grace of God, that is, to safeguard the truth and revelation of God about himself. But of course ostensibly as many of you will know, the Marrow Controversy was about the offer of the gospel. And its very clear both of the questions that were put to the Marrow Men and from many of the things that were written at that time, that it was the semantics of the presentation of the Gospel that some men believed to be under question. The Marrow Men were in no doubt whatsoever that what was at stake was not a form of expression but the very heart of the gospel itself.

The 10th question which the Assembly's Commission put to the Marrow leads us into the heart of this controversy. Let me read it to you if you will bear with me,

What of the revelation of the divine will in the Word affording a warrant to offer Christ and to all and a warrant to all to receive him can be said to be the Father's making a deed of gift and grant of Christ and to all mankind, is this grant to all mankind by sovereign grace and whether it is absolute or conditional.

Now the fact of the matter is that there are several statements in the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* which directly give rise to this question. Let me quote the two most important to you. You will find at one point in the *Marrow*, that Evangelist, the pastor of the people, is quoted as saying this:

I beseech you, consider that God the Father as he is in his Son Jesus Christ moved with nothing but with his free love to mankind hath made a gift of deed of gift and grant unto them all that whosoever shall believe in this his Son shall not perish but have eternal life.

Now the words that are being quoted there in the *Marrow* are the words of the Puritan writer Ezekiel Calverwool. What is it that is being stressed? Listen to Boston's comment

This deed of gift and grant or authentic gospel offer is expressed in so many words, John 3:16. Where the gospel comes this grant is published and the ministerial offer made and there is no exception of any of all mankind in the grant. This the good old way of discovering to sinners the warrant to believe in Christ and it doth indeed bear the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ for all and that Christ crucified is the ordinance of God for salvation unto all mankind in the use making only of which can they be saved, but not a universal atonement or redemption.

So you see what Boston is saying. He is saying there is no question of the old confessional standards being allowed to drop. No one stood for the Confessional Standard more firmly than he and the Marrow Men. But against the background of these Confessional Standards, the message of God's word, Boston is saying, is that the offer of the gospel be published to all men everywhere without exception or qualification.

Immediately following in the Marrow comes the quotation from the great Puritan John Preston in his work on faith:

And hence it was that Jesus Christ himself said unto his disciples (Mark 16:15), 'Go and preach the Gospel to every creature under heaven...' That is, go and tell every man without exception that here is good news for him. Christ is dead for him, and if he will take him and accept of his righteousness, he shall have him.

Now again, it needs to be said that in his own edition of the *Marrow*, Boston adds a lengthy note to demonstrate that the *Marrow* is not here teaching Antinomianism or Arminianism but rather is stressing what has become obscured in a mortified reformed confessional orthodoxy, that the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is a gospel of free grace, that it is to be proclaimed freely to all. And what Boston saw was that without denying a biblical Calvinism this emphasis of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* preserved two of the great keynotes of the New Testament's message. First of all, that in Jesus Christ there is fullness of grace for all that will come to him. God has made a deed of gift and grant to all men because of his free love to mankind lost. There is good news for every man without exception. Christ is dead for him.

And secondly, it preserved the New Testament's emphasis not only on the fullness of the grace of Christ but of the freeness of the grace of Christ. And hence Boston's agreement with the Auchterarder Creed, that it is not sound to say that a man must first quit sin in order to be qualified for the offer of the gospel that will lead him to Christ. For the offer of the gospel is not only a message about the fullness of Christ for all who will come, it is a message about the free grace of our Lord Jesus Christ bestowed not upon the righteous but upon the unrighteous.

And you see the significance of these statements and Boston's appreciation of them and the reason perhaps why they seem to us to be so pointedly, some of us might even think dangerously, worded is this.

Let me emphasize again that these men belonged to a confessing church. They thoroughly confessed the doctrines of the Westminster Confession. And yet you see that they belonged to a reformed orthodoxy that was thoroughly cold and thoroughly lifeless, thoroughly moderate and dead. And one of the things that Boston saw with unusual penetrating clarity was this: that while he stood with those who condemned the *Marrow* in preaching a God of unconditional election there were men who held to a doctrine of unconditional election but were preaching a doctrine of conditional and conditioned

grace. And they were therefore tearing the feet from under the fullness and the freeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it may help us as we think of this if I put the doctrine that the Marrow Men opposed in the form of a logical syllogism. The major premise was this: the grace of God in Christ saves the elect. The minor premise was this: the elect are known by the forsaking of sin. And the conclusion drawn was this: grace is therefore given to those who forsake sin. And you see immediately what they were doing. Inevitably men operating with this kind of logic would find the Auchterarder Creed and the words of Culverwell and Preston and the teaching of the Marrow Men some strange form of Arminian and Antinomian aberration.

But you see what these men were doing. There were confusing the fruit of grace in their minor premise with qualifications for grace. They were saying that what grace does to a man when it touches his life and changes him is what these men must present as their credentials to Christ before he touches them with his grace. And they were turning the free grace of God in the gospel upon its head and distorting the message of the glorious God both to those who heard it evangelistically and to those who needed its healing and saving power pastorally.

Now, my brethren it's vital as many of us may have discovered in our ministries that we turn over these matters in our minds because this is not a curiosity from some recondite source of Scottish Presbyterianism. It is as you may well know a perennial danger in the reformed churches. It is a danger that arises no where more than where there is a discovery over a period of years of what we call the doctrine of grace. And at the end of the day we may well find that these very issues of the Marrow Controversy are among the most vital pastoral issues at the deepest possible level that we will ever face.

Now what I want to suggest to you we do is this. I want to suggest that there are four errors that were written in to the position that the Marrow Men opposed, four errors into which our reformed theology so readily slips, four distortions that can so easily take place in the minds of ministers of the gospel. And it is of great importance that we root them out and deal with them.

What was happening in this great and famous reformed church at the beginning of the 18th century?

Well, the first thing was this. In the teaching of those whom the Marrow Men opposed, Christ was being separated from his benefits in the preaching of the gospel. Or perhaps we might put it the other way around. The benefits of the gospel were being separated from Christ who is the gospel in its preaching.

You see what had happened was that reformed men had begun to adopt a wrong starting place in their thinking about the gospel.

They were thinking along these lines. To whom belong the benefits of the work of Christ? And the answer within their confessional standards was obvious. The benefits of the working of Christ belong to elect. No other sincerely and heartily close with the saving benefits of the cross.

Quite so and quite right.

But then you see they concluded that what we must do in our preaching of the gospel is to offer the benefits of Christ's work to those to whom that benefit belongs, namely, the elect. And we can never really offer those benefits until we have some sense or another of who the elect really are. And that means at the end of the day that we begin to offer the gospel to those we deem to show some signs of belonging to God's secret elect.

Now I beg you to notice the radical difference between this and teaching of the Reformation and the teaching of the Puritans. What was at the heart of their gospel message? Do you remember how Calvin emphasizes it, how he so often speaks about Christ coming to us clothed with the gospel, Christ coming to us clothed with his promises, Christ coming to us and his graces, Christ coming to us with the benefits? And what is the significance of this emphasis and the emphasis that you find for example in Owen and Brooks and Sibbes and the other Puritans on the preaching of *totus Christus*, the whole Christ.

Well, of course the significance is this: that in pristine reformed theology the person of our Lord Jesus Christ as an exalted Savior and Prince, could never be separated from the benefits he brings in his saving work. And it was those things that God had joined the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the person of Christ as Savior, and the benefits of his person in salvation that had been torn asunder in the development of reformed theology.

And you see the difference immediately. The benefits of Christ's work in a sense were being offered only to those to whom they belonged. But oh, in the mercy of God, the Marrow Men had seen that Christ himself in all the fullness and sufficiency to save all who will come to him by faith, that Christ may be offered to all even though the benefits of that work be received only by those who believe.

He is the father's deed of gift and grant to all lost mankind and in his name reformed evangelists may speed throughout the earth with the most exalted reformed confessional orthodoxy and yet say to every man, not "Christ died for you," not "The benefits of Christ's death I know to be for you." But can speed throughout the earth and say with the Marrow, "Christ is dead for you." That is to say, "There is a Savior and in his death and resurrection, he is sufficient to save all and every man that comes to him by faith. There is fullness of grace in Christ crucified. And you, too, may find salvation in his name."

The other really interesting this is this, you see, that it was precisely at this point that reformed theology began to fall into the categories of Arminianism. Do you notice this? It began to theologize with the same basic premises. What does the Arminian say when

he hears about election and particular redemption? He says, "If the benefits of Christ's death are thus particularized, if there is distinguishing grace like this, then I can no longer say to a man, 'Christ died for you.' How then can I evangelize them? Where is the gospel if I cannot say, 'The benefits of Christ are for you.' My gospel is gone."

And we all lovingly take such brethren aside and we turn them to the pages of the New Testament and we say, "My brother, the great apostolic message is not merely the offering of the benefits of Christ to men, it is the exalting of Christ as the only name given under heaven whereby men may be saved. It is Christ himself who is the gospel." And, you see, it is the separation of the benefits of the gospel from Christ who is the gospel that is the father and mother of so much of this Arminian theology, and so much of this second blessing theology, so much of this theology that leads us to Christ as Savior (that is, receive his benefits now) and then thereafter receive him as Lord.

But Christ is never to be thus separated, my brothers. Nor are the benefits he brings to us ever to be separated from his saving person and his kingly Lordship. And, of course, when we turn back to the pages of the New Testament, do we not discover that this is the great emphasis, the great nexus that joins together the electing grace of God and the free offer of the gospel to all men?

It is not that we believe the benefits of Christ to be for all men, but that Christ himself in the fullness of his grace is able to save all who will come to him in faith.

"I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and has revealed them to babes, for such was thy gracious will."

Unconditional election. Now he pleads, "Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and from me you will find rest for your souls. You will discover a yolk that is easy and a burden that is light."

It is written into the very marrow of our Savior's theology. He offers himself to men and women, and they will never discover truly his benefits until they find him, himself first of all, as Savior and Lord clothed with the mercies and benefits of the gospel to all who will receive him.

And so there was this first danger of separating Christ and the benefits of the gospel.

The second danger was this, that those whom the Marrow Men came to of controversy with, exercised a preaching of the Word that involved a conditional offer of the gospel, a conditional offer of the gospel.

Now in a sense we have already hinted at the disastrous results of the separation of Christ and his benefits. What happens is that if Christ's benefits are offered and held forth without Christ himself being held forth, those benefits must be held forth on condition. "You may know these benefits," it came to be said, "if you are among the elect. You may

receive forgiveness if you have sufficiently forsaken sin. You may know the message of grace, if you have known a sufficient degree of conviction."

And you see how once again, this turns the message of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ upon its head, however subtly and however imperceptibly and in whatever reformed circles it happens.

Why? Because it is only the grace of God in the gospel, it is only our Lord Jesus Christ himself that enables men to forsake sin and therefore that forsaking of sin can never be a condition of hearing the offer of full salvation in Christ. It is because there is forgiveness with God that he is to be feared.

Brethren, there are few points, perhaps, at which we need our minds cleared and our hearts in tune with the heart of God than this whole area. Whenever we make the offer of Christ dependent upon conditions we have taken the grace of God in the gospel and disgraced it. Grace is no more grace, however subtly it happens, no matter how reformed the language may be in which it is expressed, and you and I know and labor surely brethren in one area in which this is of great importance to us.

Because it is possible, I believe, so to join the Puritan tradition of theology with the understanding of the gospel of the natural man that we all once were, so that quite explicitly in our preaching we make the free offer of the Lord Jesus Christ conditional upon the degree of conviction which our hearers feel. We make conviction a condition which men must meet rather than a means which God will use to bring them to Christ.

Now none of us would speak on this matter without great hesitation. And therefore, let me as Presbyterians seem to be doing in this conference hide behind the stalwart figure of C.H. Spurgeon. Those of you who have seen pictures of him will know that even I would be able to hide behind him.

In a sermon preached in 1858 entitled "Christ Crucified," which you'll find in the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Volume 46, pages 211 to 212, if you don't believe what I'm about to read. He says this almost as an aside:

By the way [he says] Let me tell you a little story about Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I am a great lover of John Bunyan, but I do not believe him infallible. And the other day I met with a story about him which I think a very good one. There was young man in Edinburgh who wished to be a missionary. He was a wise young man so he thought, "If I am to be a missionary, there is no need for me to transport myself far away from home. I may as well be a missionary in Edinburgh." Well, this young man started and determined to speak to the first person he met. He met one of those old fish wives with her basket of fish on her back. Those of us who have seen them can never forget them. They are extraordinary women indeed.

So stepping up to her, he said, "Here you are coming along with your burden on your back, let me ask you, have you got another burden, a spiritual burden?"

"What," she asked, "you mean that burden in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? Because if you do, young man, I got rid of that burden many years ago, probably before you were born. But I went away better than the Pilgrim did. The Evangelist that John Bunyan talks about was one of your parsons that do not preach the gospel for he said, 'keep that light in thine eye and run to the wicked gate.' Why, man alive, that was not the place to run to! He should have said, 'Do you see that Cross, run there at once.' But instead of that he sent the poor pilgrim to the wicked gate first and much good he got by going there, he got tumbling into the sloughs and was like to have been killed by it."

The young man was rather abashed. "But did you not," the young man asked, "go through any Slough of Despond?"

Yes, I did, but I found it a great deal easier going through it with my burden off than with it on!"

The old woman [said Spurgeon] was quite right. John Bunyan put the putting off of the burden too far off from the commencing of the pilgrimage. If he meant to show what usually happens, he was right. But if he meant to show what ought to have happened, he was wrong. The cross should be right in front of the wicked gate and we should say to the sinner, "Throw thyself down there and thou art safe, but thou art not safe 'til thou canst cast thy burden and lie at the foot of the Cross and find peace in Jesus."

Now, beloved, you see the point that is being made, surely. It is not a denial of that gracious work of the Spirit of God in bringing men to a sense of the conviction of their sin. But it has always been a danger in reformed thinking and preaching that we express the gospel in such a way that men have to merit grace by a degree of conviction experienced. And at the end of the day that is to make the offer of Christ conditional, when Christ bids all men to come and believe in him freely and fully.

And of course, as you know, this is the place that Calvin and the Puritans and the great reformed tradition has always at his best put conviction in, where Boston and the Marrow Men and Spurgeon wanted to place it. If we can express it simply like this: they made a very vital distinction in their thinking about the conviction of sin between the means that God employs and the conditions that we proclaim.

In his gracious Providence, God mightily uses a conviction of sin in various ways and to various degrees to bring men and women to his Son, but he never bids us to go and preach conviction of sin as the warrant of faith. He bids us go and freely offer Jesus

Christ in all his sufficiency as the warranty of faith to any man to come and bow before him as a suppliant penitent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conviction of sin is never a condition for the free offer of the gospel of our lord Jesus Christ. And we will discover in our own preaching and in our pastoral counseling with our people that if we can distinguish between the means that God himself may employ as the winds blow where it lists and not where I will it to blow, between the conditions that God employs in experience and the warrant we proclaim for unbelievers to come to Christ, then in the mercy of God we will be entirely set free from offering the gospel to needy sinners on conditions.

And something of that power, something of that Holy Spirit power that came upon the enlarged soul of Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost that brought conviction and conversion, to those who knew the Law, to those who had known already the pricks of the Law in their experience, something of that may be repeated, God willing, in our own ministries.

So there is this second danger that lay at the heart of moderate teaching in the days of the Marrow Controversy.

But, then, may I share with you the third issue. As these issues rise, they come to climaxes in our experience and our thinking for what was beginning to happen was that a distortion was beginning to take place in the very character of God himself.

You see the whole point of the Aucterarder Creed was to stress the unfettered free sovereign unconditional grace of God in Christ. It meant to emphasize the great indicatives of what God has done, out of which come the great imperatives of how we are to respond. The same motivation fired the Marrow Men. They saw that to make the offer of the grace of God dependent upon anything even upon graces, was to distort the true nature of grace. And that was so on two levels.

First of all, it was so in the general work of salvation. The marrow theology emphasizes that salvation is accomplished through grace and one only needs to think of a passage like Romans 5:6 and following to find their point. When did Christ show grace to us? What conditions had we met when Christ came in grace to die for us?

“Well,” says the Apostle, “it was while we were yet helpless that Christ died for the ungodly. God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

It was when we were enemies that we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. What conditions must be met before God sends his only Son into the world to die graciously for sinners? None. There are none. And even if there were conditions, no man dead in trespasses and sins could ever meet them.

But there is another vital level to this distortion that takes place in the very character of God. And that I believe lies in our thinking of God the Father as our source of

redemption. We all know and shy back from that preaching of the message of the cross that appears to make Christ the Son persuade an unwilling Father to be gracious to sinners. We shy away from that preaching of the cross that seems to make the grace of God to lost sinners conditional, that seems to say that God only has a heart of grace towards us because God twisted his heart round through his Son, or perhaps, even worse, that his Son twisted the Father's unwilling heart towards sinners.

It is very interesting to read Boston's comments on the *Marrow* in this connection. In his *Memoirs* he says two significant things. First of all he says:

I had no great fondness for the doctrine of the conditionality of the covenant of grace. I had no great fondness for any conditions in the covenant of grace.

And the second striking thing he says is this that he could not accept the existence of a separate covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son.

Many of you will know that this is the very point at which Jonathan Edwards, who spoke of Boston as a truly great divine, said that he couldn't really understand what Boston was driving at in his covenant theology. And the reason, of course, was that Edwards wasn't facing the kind of crisis that Boston was facing. Boston rejected the idea of the covenant of redemption not primarily on exegetical grounds, but because he believed there was a danger in thinking of a separate covenant of redemption that made the grace of God conditional upon something that Christ would promise to do, that brought conditionality into the very fellowship of the trinity and thus distorted what Boston saw to be the free unfettered grace of God.

However, respective of all the nice theology that is involved in all of these areas, you will see what the burden of the Marrow theology was, it was concerned to hold aloft this truth: that the reason that the Son of God died upon the Cross was not in order to persuade God, but because God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. The death of Christ is the means by which God's love reaches needy sinners, it is not the reason why God loves needy sinners. He loved us from the first of time. He loves us to the last. And this, these Marrow Men saw, was the foundation of the grace of God in the gospel.

So that you see it was not simply the question of the gospel offer that was at stake. It was not even in Boston's case a question of the number and the nature of the covenants. It was ultimately a question that lies at the question of all theology and all pastoral work. Who is this God with whom we have to do and what manner of God is he? Is he a God who comes to sinners lost and broken and brings to them conditions by which they may be saved? Or is he a God who deals with man on the basis of free unmerited, unearned grace?

If one may bring the Marrow Controversy down to its starkest it is this: the issue that arose between the Marrow men and those who denigrated them was the very issue that

arose between our blessed Lord Jesus Christ and the Pharisees. Both believed in the holiness of God, both believed in predestination and election. Both believed in the law of God and its application. But the Pharisees believed and taught conditional grace, and therefore, a conditional God. And our Lord Jesus brought down upon them the woes of the judgment seat of God, because at the end of the day they were not only distorting the gospel, they were distorting the character of his Father in heaven, and he was jealous for the loving gracious free character of his holy Father. And so he brought down upon them his dominical anathema.

You see the Pharisees preached that men could be saved if they met conditions and Jesus preached that he would save those who could meet no conditions. Jesus' message was "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat and come buy wine and milk without money and without price," unconditional grace from an unconditional God.

And my dear friends it bites into the very heart of the natural man. Do you remember how John Owen expresses it? Applying this to the life of the believer, he says:

Unacquaintedness with our mercies, our privileges is our sin as well as our trouble. We hearken not to the voice of the Spirit which is given unto us that we may know the things that are freely bestowed upon us of God. This makes us go heavily when we might rejoice and to be weak where we might be strong in the Lord.

Then listen to this. Listen, my brothers. Listen.

How few of the saints are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love? With what anxious doubtful thought do they look upon Him? What fears, what questionings are there of his good will and kindness? At the best many think that there is no sweetness at all in God towards us but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus. It is true that that alone is the way of communication but the free fountain and spring of all is in the bosom of the Father.

My brothers, is this something that we have grasped ourselves? I stress to you again how Boston was at pains to emphasize his adherence to the Confessions of the reformed churches. But he had been mastered by free grace and he could not believe in an unconditional election which worked through a conditional grace. And he saw that what was at stake was the very character of God himself.

And that brings us very briefly to the final point. We've seen the dangers of this wrong understanding of the gospel that the Marrow Men controverted that separates the benefits of Christ's work from his person as Savior and Lord. It renders the offer of the gospel conditional rather than free. It distorts the very nature and character of the grace of God

himself. And the fourth thing, and for us one of the most salient is this, that at the end of the day it distorts the nature of the pastoral ministry.

You see, what had happened among these men in the early decades of the 18th century was this. They had mastered the pattern by which the grace works. There wasn't a comma in the *ordo salutis* with which they were not familiar. They knew their Confession of Faith forwards and backwards and upside down. And yet while they were familiar with the pattern by which grace works and had mastered it, they had never really been mastered by the grace of God in the gospel in their hearts. They knew what John Owen calls, "The distinction between the knowledge of the truth and the knowledge of the power of the truth." They were masters of Calvinism who had never been mastered. They were Calvinists with the minds and hearts of natural men, at least as far as these truths were concerned.

Why is that so significant for us in the pastoral ministry? For this reason, beloved, because men who have only a conditional offer of the gospel will have only a conditional gospel, the man who has only a conditional gospel knows only conditional grace and the man who knows only conditional grace knows only a conditional God and the man who has only a conditional God will have only a conditional ministry to his fellow men and, at end of the day, he will only be able to give his heart and his life and his time and his devotion to his people on condition. And he will love and master the truth of the great doctrines of grace but until grace in God himself masters him, the grace that has mastered him will never flow from his to his people and he will become a Jonah in the 20th century sitting under his tree with a heart that is shut up against sinners in need of grace because he thinks of God in conditional terms.

And that, you see, was the blight upon the ministry in the Church of Scotland of those days, men who were thoroughly reformed in confessional subscription but whose bowels, whose hearts were closed up to God's people and to the lost in all the nations.

Wasn't it Alexander Whyte of Freesen Georges who used to say there was such a thing as sanctification by vinegar that makes man accurate and hard? And that is what they were.

But when your people come and have been broken by sin and have been tempted by sin and are ashamed to confess the awful mess they have made of their life it is not a Calvinistic pastor who has been sanctified by vinegar they need. It is a pastor that has been mastered by the unconditional grace of God from whom ironclad orthodoxy has been torn away and the whole armor of a gracious God has been placed upon his soul, the armor of one who would not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick, the God of free grace, the pastor who would say, "Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded to have you, but I have prayed for you and when you are converted, strengthen the brethren."

You see, my friends, as we think together in these days about a Godly pastor... What is a Godly pastor? A godly pastor is one who is like God, who has a heart of free grace running after sinners. The godly pastor is the one who sees the prodigal returning and

runs and falls on his neck and weeps and kisses him and says, “This my son was dead, he was lost and now he is alive and found.”

And so that we discover even in the stretching of our minds over in this Marrow Controversy that the first pastoral lesson we learn is really a question: What kind of pastor am I to my people? Am I like the Father? Or am I like the elder brother, who would not go in?

Let us pray!

*Our heavenly Father, we bow with those who have been the recipients of your free gift of grace in our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant, we beseech you, upon our hearts these words, “Freely you have received, freely give,” for Jesus’ sake. Amen.*