

All too often, McGowan insists his conclusions are biblical for the most controversial points for the Reformed community and argues by summarizing other literature, rather than providing exegetical or theological demonstration. Yet his work is a readable and clear presentation of a noncovenantal scheme that shows awareness of the major issues and figures.

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Sinclair B. Ferguson. *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2016. Pp. 256.

In this book, Sinclair Ferguson uses an eighteenth-century controversy in the Church of Scotland to illuminate, in both a theological and pastoral way, the reality of God's free grace in Christ.

The "Marrow Controversy," which took place in the Church of Scotland in the early eighteenth century, brought great division to the church and ultimately led to the first secession of 1732, where a number of distinguished ministers, led by the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, left the Kirk. It began when a young candidate for the ministry was asked, during his "trials for licence" by the Presbytery of Auchterarder, to affirm a statement (called "the Auchterarder creed") that denied that repentance was a prior requirement for coming to Christ. The student refused and was ultimately vindicated by the general assembly, which condemned the presbytery's statement. In the subsequent debate, Thomas Boston, who favored the presbytery, urged a friend to read *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which he believed set out the issues very well. *The Marrow* was a pastiche of quotations from significant Reformation and Puritan writers, written in the form of a dialogue, which involved a minister counseling a young Christian on gospel issues, the other contributors being a legalist and an antinomian. This led to a great debate, which lasted a number of years. Later, the general assembly would also condemn *The Marrow*.

At its heart, the Marrow Controversy was about the nature of God's free grace in Christ Jesus. There had arisen a "legal" strain in the Kirk that so emphasized predestination that it denied the free offer of the gospel. The gospel was only to be offered to those showing "signs of election." This view prevailed in the general assembly for a number of years and had implications for the doctrines of repentance, assurance, and faith. On the opposing side, Boston, the Erskines, and the rest of the "marrow men," emphasized

the unconditional free offer of the gospel and the unconditional freeness of God's grace in Christ. They were accused of being antinomian, whereas in reality they were anti-neonomian.

As Ferguson makes clear, the prevailing party in the church was guilty of making the gospel conditional, whereas the gospel properly preached teaches that there are no conditions to be met and, if there were, we would be unable to meet them. There is, however, a deeper point being made here, concerning the nature and character of God. As the author says, "One of the dangers Boston recognized was that conditionalism feeds back into how we view God himself. It introduces a layer of distortion into his character. For it is possible to see that no conditions for God's grace can be met by us yet still hold to a subtle conditionality in God's grace in itself" (p. 65). It has been said that almost every theological error can be traced back to a faulty doctrine of God, and that is certainly the case here. If we get God wrong, we will get the gospel wrong.

Throughout the book, we return again and again to this teaching that we must properly understand God so as to correctly understand the gospel. For example, when the subjects of legalism and antinomianism are being discussed, we read this: "Legalism at root is the manifestation of a restricted heart disposition toward God, viewing him through a lens of negative law that obscures the broader context of the Father's character of holy love. This is a fatal sickness. Paradoxically, it is this same view of God, and the separation of his person from his law, that also lies at the root of antinomianism. The bottom line in both of these *-isms* is identical. That is why the gospel remedy for them is one and the same" (p. 85).

One of the most striking aspects of the book is when the author argues that legalism and antinomianism are not equal and opposite errors, such that a legalistic spirit could be cured by moving in the direction of antinomianism and *vice versa*. Rather, both of these errors are really the same error expressed in different ways, and the cure for both of them is the gospel.

The positive teaching of the book concerns the doctrine of union with Christ. It is in Christ that every benefit and blessing is to be found, and so our understanding of union with Christ is the key to unlocking the gospel in all its fullness. The *ordo salutis* method of laying out the Christian life and experience may have some usefulness in helping to analyze various doctrines and their significance, but it can also lead to a failure to see the centrality of Christ and instead imagine that once we have received blessing A, B will follow, and then C, and so on.

The emphasis upon grace in this book should not be taken to mean that the law of God is insignificant. Rather, the key to understanding the law

(like everything else) is to set it in the context of God and his grace. Sinners who are brought by the unconditional grace of God into union with Christ will love the law. It will be their hearts' desire to obey the law, not as a means of salvation and not as "our" contribution to sanctification but because they wholeheartedly love God, are thankful for his grace, and want to serve him as he has commanded us to do.

Towards the end of the book, the author turns to the theological understanding and pastoral application of the doctrine of assurance. In light of everything he has said already, he gives wise counsel to ministers of the gospel, and encouragement and hope to the struggling believer. The message is that we must look to Christ and realize all that we have in him, rather than focusing upon our own sin and failures in the Christian life.

Thirty-five years ago, I was writing my PhD on Thomas Boston. I was doing it part time, while serving as a parish minister of the Church of Scotland. My parish had six churches, five of which were only accessible by sea, four of them on islands in the Inner Hebrides! With a busy parish and regular travel round the islands, together with a supervisor who was deeply antagonistic to federal theology, my commitment to the dissertation was beginning to lag. Then, on January 5, 1981, at one of our Crieff Brotherhood conferences, Sinclair spoke on the Marrow Controversy and highlighted its significance for an understanding of the free grace of God in the gospel. My interest was immediately rekindled, and I went back to my work with new enthusiasm. I was grateful to Sinclair then, and, having had the pleasure of reading this book, I am grateful again.

This book should be read by every minister of the gospel and by every Christian struggling to understand and enjoy the free grace of God in Christ.

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