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*The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition*

William VanDoodewaard

# **The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition**

**Marrow Theology in the Associate Presbytery  
and Associate Synod Secession Churches  
of Scotland (1733–1799)**

William VanDoodewaard



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*The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition*

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—William VanDoodewaard



## Introduction

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Many in Reformed and Presbyterian communities continue to view the Marrow controversy in the Church of Scotland (1718–1726), with its contentious debate over the gospel and its proclamation, as a critical juncture in church history and theology. David Lachman notes, “[The Marrow controversy] involved issues at the heart of Reformed theology...particularly the great emphasis laid on God’s gracious dealing with men in Christ.”<sup>1</sup> He states that the Marrow men’s gospel view gained “a considerable popularity in the country at large and helped create a ready constituency for the Secession.”<sup>2</sup> In an article on the Marrow controversy, Donald Beaton argues that “the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* and the ‘Marrow Controversy’...stand for much that is vital in the religious life in Scotland...because of the influence [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*] exercised over such men as Fraser of Brea, Boston, the Erskines, Whitefield, Hervey and Chalmers, apart from the fact that it was the cause of one of the greatest controversies in the Scottish Church.”<sup>3</sup> J. B. Torrance states, “The Marrow Controversy’... in itself is from beginning to end a most revealing commentary on Scottish theology.”<sup>4</sup> William Philip concurs, stating, “The issues [the

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1. David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy, 1718–1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis*, Rutherford Series One: Historical Theology (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 6, 485.

2. Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 485.

3. Donald Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity’ and the Marrow Controversy,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 1 (1926): 112–13.

4. J. B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 59.

controversy] raised touch the very heart of the Reformed faith, to the extent that what was at stake was not the merit of one mere human publication, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, but the very nature of the gospel and the free grace of God itself.”<sup>5</sup> In a recent republication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Sinclair Ferguson agrees, promoting the enduring value of the book: “Anyone who comes to grips with the issues raised in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* will almost certainly grow by leaps and bounds in understanding three things: the grace of God, the Christian life, and the very nature of the gospel itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the perceived historical and theological significance and lasting practical value of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, a survey of existing literature on this work reveals little scholarly examination of it in its initial context. David McIntyre’s brief 1938 article and David Como’s recent volume on English antinomianism both contribute some helpful insights into the authorship and English context of *The Marrow* but do not provide a thorough examination and assessment of authorship, content, or context.<sup>7</sup> Substantial scholarship exists on the Marrow controversy in Scotland, particularly in the work of church historian David Lachman. His comprehensive historical and theological assessment remains the definitive work on the Marrow controversy; other work is limited to either short articles or discursive reference in survey texts on Scottish church history and theology.<sup>8</sup> Related scholarship, such as the dissertations of Charles Moffat and Donald Bruggink, is focused on individual figures, such as James Hog

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5. William J. U. Philip, “The Marrow and the Dry Bones: Ossified Orthodoxy and the Battle for the Gospel in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Calvinism,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 27.

6. Sinclair Ferguson, book jacket of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* by Edward Fisher (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009). This fine republication includes introductory essays, Thomas Boston’s commentary, an index of Scripture references, and bibliography.

7. David McIntyre, “First Strictures on the ‘The Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” *Evangelical Quarterly* 10 (January 1938): 61–70; David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

8. Beaton, “Marrow of Modern Divinity”; Philip, “Marrow and the Dry Bones”; John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: The Publications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, 1943), 139–88; Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John MacLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 224–29.

or Thomas Boston, and does not purport to “examine the theology of the Marrow controversy.”<sup>9</sup> The more recently published dissertations of Andrew McGowan and Philip Ryken focus on analysis and discussion of the theology of Thomas Boston.<sup>10</sup>

Appraisals of Marrow theology, particularly when they describe the influence of the theology of the supporters of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, depict a revival of a biblical gospel theology and spirituality with lasting impacts. Contenders for continuities of Marrow theology in Scotland point to the 1733 Secession from the Church of Scotland and the ensuing Secession churches as the primary stream of continuity of Marrow theology. John Macleod describes the early Secession Church as attached “to the ‘Marrow’ teaching” and provides a running commentary on several Secession ministers and writers but lacks specific references and analysis.<sup>11</sup> Lachman, James Torrance, McGowan, and Joel Beeke all posit Marrow theology as definitive for the Secession churches, but give little to no substantiating evidence to support the claim.<sup>12</sup> P. H. van Harten’s Dutch language dissertation argues that the sermons of two Seceders, Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, reflect aspects of Marrow theology, but the author’s limited assessment references primarily Ralph Erskine’s early sermons.<sup>13</sup> No comprehensive comparative study of historical and theological continuities between the Marrow controversy and successive Scottish Reformed church history and theology exists. In fact, the absence of substantive support, particularly in light of the atonement controversy in the United Secession Church in

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9. Donald J. Bruggink, “The Theology of Thomas Boston, 1676–1732” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1956), vii. Charles L. Moffat Jr., “James Hog of Carnock (1658–1734): Leader in the Evangelical Party in Early Eighteenth Century Scotland” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1960).

10. A. T. B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1997); Philip Graham Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1999).

11. Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 167–68.

12. *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), s.v. “Marrow Controversy”; Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 485; J. B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract,” 60; McGowan, *Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*, 45–46; Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 249.

13. Pieter Hendrick van Harten, *De Prediking van Ebenezer an Ralph Erskine: Evangeliever-kondiging in het spanningsveld van verkeizing en belofte* (Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 1–313.

the 1840s, raises the legitimate question whether such statements of the enduring influence of Marrow theology are more a twentieth- and early twenty-first-century retrospective legitimization of tendencies in Reformed theology and spirituality rather than a historical reality.

While the complete answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this book, it offers a substantial beginning by revealing that there is compelling evidence for the continuity of Marrow theology in the Secession Church stream of the Associate Presbytery and Associate Synod churches of Scotland between 1733 and 1799. In doing so, it buttresses the reality that contemporary appreciation of Marrow theology in evangelical and Reformed communities is more than an isolated resurgence; rather, it is a continuity of a vibrant, historic stream of gospel-focused, Christ-centered, Reformed theology.

Assessing the influence and continuity of Marrow theology requires a careful methodology. This book first introduces *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in its original context in England and then moves to its Scottish context, defining the contours and essence of Marrow theology as formulated by supporters of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in the context of the Marrow controversy. The key areas of recurring debate during the Marrow controversy were the doctrine of the atonement, saving faith, and the gospel offer, with the controversy's focal point being the nature of gospel proclamation. While Lachman deals with the history of this controversy comprehensively, providing a chronologically ordered assessment of ecclesiastical meetings, theological writings, and the multitude of figures and influences involved, the density, rapidity, and sheer volume of his work lacks the summative clarity, precision, and depth necessary to provide the basis for a comparative assessment of Scottish Marrow theology with later Secession theology. A fresh and succinct examination of each of these doctrinal areas, as presented in representative ecclesiastical and individual published works of both Marrow supporters and opponents, provides a concise determination of the characteristic content and formulations of the Marrow doctrines, as stated by the supporters of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* situated within the context of the Marrow controversy in the Church of Scotland.

Second, this book indicates continuities of Marrow theology, as defined in the context of Scottish controversy, through relevant historiographical, theological, and sermon publications of the Associate

Presbytery and Associate Synod churches of Scotland between 1733 and 1799, including both ecclesiastical publications and individual works by ordained ministers of these bodies.<sup>14</sup> These documents indicate substantial evidence for the importance of Marrow theology and the history of the Marrow controversy in Secession historiography as well as a strong continuity between the Seceder theology of the Associate Presbytery and Associate Synod churches and the Marrow theology of the supporters of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The proof for this comparative theological analysis of Seceder and Marrow theology lies in direct references to and quotations of Marrow theology in published works as well as theological consistency with and continuity of the characteristic content and formulations of the doctrine of the atonement, saving faith, and gospel offer, as stated by those men supporting *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* during the controversy of 1718 to 1726. The evidence presented not only proves continuity of the stream of Marrow theology, but, perhaps even more significantly, it brings to life a rich spiritual tapestry of not-yet-perfected churches struggling with sin while resting, growing in, and proclaiming God's all-sufficient grace. The story that is revealed is of pursuit of faithfulness to Christ, Spirit-transformed lives, and passionate sermons and writings, all from a partly forgotten yet sweet and precious Christian legacy.

A foreseen potential pitfall in this examination of sources for direct references to Marrow writings as well as theological consistency with or continuity of Marrow theology, is that the endeavor could tend to a selective interpretation of sources that fails to fully and accurately represent the authors. I have attempted to anticipate and allay this potential weakness through an extensive and careful reading of all relevant source materials as well as by providing numerous references to and quotations of the sources, the latter at times extensive, in order to better provide the contextual setting. This has the added benefit of providing the reader with a substantial taste of the works cited, some of which rest in dusty archival obscurity and inaccessibility. Where evidence for the continuity of Marrow theology is limited or inconclusive, it is noted as such. This careful methodology allows an

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14. Due to the vast body of theological literature published by Secession pastors and theologians, this study will be limited to the Associate Presbytery and Associate Synod stream of the Secession churches.

assessment of the extent of thematic continuity of Marrow theology among the Seceders while also bringing forward evidences of direct historical dependence on Marrow theology as embodied in both *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and the writings of the supporters of Marrow theology during the Scottish Marrow controversy. It also provides an apparatus fully enabling the critical reader to return to and comparatively examine the sources as referenced.

Finally, this study concludes by assessing the nature of the continuity of Marrow theology in the Associate Presbytery and Associate Synod churches of the Secession movement. While there is a clear, vital continuity of the rich gospel teaching of Marrow theology, indicating its significance in evangelical Reformed thought and life, I also note and assess the increasing theological diversity and declension in parts of the Secession churches during the nineteenth century. Suggestions for potential future research related to both Marrow theology and the largely neglected field of the history and historical theology of the Secession churches are also provided.<sup>15</sup>

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15. Existing scholarly works on the history and theology of the Secession churches include John L. Carson, "The Doctrine of the Church in the Secession" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1987); Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990); Jack Whytock, *"An Educated Clergy": Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession, 1560–1850* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007). While Hamilton briefly mentions Marrow theology in relation to the atonement controversy of the early 1840s (see 64–65), none of these works provide a focused assessment of the influence of Marrow theology on the Secession churches.

## **PART ONE**

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### **Views of the Gospel and Its Proclamation: The Era of the Marrow Controversy**





## CHAPTER 1

### ***The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and the Marrow Controversy**

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As we consider the influence of Marrow theology on the Secession Church, we must begin with an introduction to the origin, theology, and historical context of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which is necessary for understanding the definition of Marrow theology and the Marrow controversy in Scotland.

#### **E. F. and *The Marrow of Modern Divinity***

*The Marrow of Modern Divinity* first appeared in print during the early summer of 1645 in London. Joseph Caryl, a leading Independent preacher appointed by Parliament as imprimatur, or official censor, for theological literature, praised the work's clarity, moderation, and helpfulness in "endeavouring to reconcile and heal those unhappy differences which have lately broken out afresh amongst us."<sup>1</sup> Caryl penned his preface on May 10, a little less than a month before the bloody Battle of Naseby, a decisive military victory marking the gradual ascendancy of the New Model Army against the Royalist forces of King Charles I. Newfound liberties that allowed for gatherings like the Westminster Assembly also led to new tensions in the face of the fading religious-political yoke of Charles I and the late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. Even though by the 1640s most Puritans and Parliamentarians shared a common dislike for the policies of Charles and Laud, which included heavy taxation, imprisonment

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1. E. F., *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London: Printed by R. W. for G. Calvert, at the Black-Spread Eagle near Pauls, 1645), 1. This first-edition copy of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* is found in the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

without trial, and the direction they were taking the Church of England, they were not immune to fractious controversy, with its attendant varieties of mediating spirits.

The author of *The Marrow* sought to mediate in a controversy over the theology and life of the church. “I, by the grace of God,” he stated, “endeavoured in this ensuing Dialogue to walk...as a middle man” between “the Strict Professor according to the Law, and the loose Professor according to the Gospel”—to elucidate a biblical middle way between the errors of legalism and antinomianism.<sup>2</sup> Written in a popular dialogue form, the work features three individuals: Nomi-sta, a legalist; Antinomista, an antinomian; and Neophytus, a young Christian being counseled by a minister, Evangelista, toward a biblical understanding of law and gospel. Directed by Evangelista, the discussion explained the nature and role of the law, the covenant of works, the nature of saving faith, the covenant of grace in Christ, the gospel offer, and the role of the law of Christ in the life of the believer. As David Lachman notes in his exploration of the theology and theological context of *The Marrow*, the author “reflected Reformed theology of the earlier [Reformation and post-Reformation] period, endorsing commonly received opinions rather than doctrines newly propounded.”<sup>3</sup> From both its content and marginal notes, it is clear that *The Marrow* sources a wide range of Reformation and Reformed works ranging from the writings of Luther and Calvin to those of contemporaries such as John Preston and Thomas Goodwin.<sup>4</sup>

*The Marrow*’s federal theology described the covenant of grace as absolute, arguing against those who held to a neonomian conditionality of the covenant of grace, tying it to repentance or obedience. It saw

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2. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 13.

3. Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 12. Lachman provides a substantial exploration of the theology and broad theological context of *The Marrow* in the seventeenth century (see 9–73), but minimal examination of the work in the immediate context of its authorship. This introduction provides a concise summary of the leading theological tenets of *The Marrow*, set within a more thorough exploration of the theological motivations of the author.

4. In his later editions the author appended, following his preface to the reader, “a catalogue of those writer’s names, out of whom I have collected much of the matter contained in this ensuing dialogue” (E. F., *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* [London: Printed by R. Leybourn, for Giles Calvert, 1646]).

this as a confusion of justification and sanctification, or a confusion of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. *The Marrow* stressed that the covenant of grace “terminates itself only on Christ and his righteousness; God will have none to have a hand in the justification and salvation of a sinner, but Christ only. . . . Jesus Christ will either be a whole Saviour, or no Saviour.”<sup>5</sup> The covenant of grace was made complete in Christ, as He fulfilled the complete obligation and penalty of the covenant of works in the place of the elect by His substitutionary atonement.<sup>6</sup> This covenant of grace in Christ is published, proclaimed, and offered to all in the gospel “deed of gift and grant.”<sup>7</sup> In applying the biblical warrant to “go and preach the gospel to every creature under heaven,” the author of *The Marrow* expounded, “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 it.”<sup>8</sup> Saving faith, itself a sovereign gift of grace, was the sole instrument or means by which the believer freely receives the gift of complete salvation in Christ and enters into and is preserved in this covenant of grace in Him. Yet, at the same time, *The Marrow* was both careful and thorough in warning against those “in this city” who are “antinomians,” citing the apostle Paul’s warning in the second epistle to Timothy that “there is a form of godliness without the power of godliness.”<sup>9</sup> Sanctification is the necessary result of justification. Faith brings with it other graces, the necessary fruits of faith, as “the Spirit of

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5. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 87.

6. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 36.

7. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 101.

8. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 101. Lachman notes that some, such as Richard Baxter, would claim that this statement, cited from John Preston’s *The Breastplate of Faith and Love* (London: W. I. for Nicolas Bourne, 1632), 8, was indicative of an Amyraldian covenant theology. Lachman argues that neither Preston nor Ezekiel Culverwell, who coined the language of “deed of gift and grant,” provides evidence of holding to Amyraldian doctrine but rather used this language only in relation to the gospel offer (Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 22–36). Jonathan Moore’s recent work, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), argues that while Preston was not Amyraldian, he did hold to a form of “hypothetical universalism.” Moore, however, notes that in the Scottish context of the Marrow controversy, Boston and the other Marrow brethren argued that Preston, as cited in *The Marrow*, “was a consistent particular redemptionist” (117–21, 217–29).

9. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 90.

Christ writes the lively law of love in [the believer's] heart, so that he is ready to do every good work, the love of Christ constraining him.... He seeks to do the will of God... [in] true sincere obedience."<sup>10</sup>

Despite Joseph Caryl's commendation, the author of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* revealed little more than the initials of his identity in print in his dedication of his work to Member of Parliament John Downes, Esq.<sup>11</sup> Why did he do this? Perhaps it was a spirit of modesty; perhaps he knew his position was one certain to evoke religious criticism—the specter of Laudian oppression and still ongoing civil war were reminders that public address was a potentially costly venture, even with the imprimatur of Joseph Caryl. Perhaps it was another concern. However, the Westminster Assembly and many of its constituents were living and writing publicly, without anonymity. So who was E. F.?

In his dedication to John Downes the author notes, “[I have] by mine own experience, and by the confession, and observation of others, found out our aptness to tread in one of these erroneous paths [legalism or antinomianism].”<sup>12</sup> E. F. had personally wrestled with the issues in the midst of “hot contentions” in the churches “about some 18 or 20 years ago, and now within these three or four years last past.”<sup>13</sup> This means that E. F. must have been an adult during the early years of the reign of Charles I (r. 1625–1649) and had experienced the king's attempts, with Archbishop Laud, to move the Church of England away from the toleration and partial support for Calvinist, Puritan influences manifest under King James I (r. 1603–1625) and Archbishop George Abbott.<sup>14</sup> In the first few years of Charles's reign, there was an “uneasy coalition” between some of the Puritan-minded and the Laudian regime; both were briefly united in civil and ecclesiastical action against what they viewed as antinomian threats to truth and order.<sup>15</sup> Evidence from the

10. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 141.

11. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), A3, 14.

12. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 12–13.

13. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 13.

14. King James I and Archbishop George Abbott had taken keen interest in the Remonstrant-Contra-Remonstrant controversy in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, sending a delegation to the Synod of Dort, which took part in the deliberations and eventual framing of the Canons of Dort. With the ascension of Charles I to the throne, the leadership of church and nation moved toward a high church, or “Romish,” Anglicanism.

15. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 91. Como's fresh historical study provides helpful insights relevant to the origins of *The Marrow*. However, his descriptive language and,

late 1620s indicates a variety of antinomian fringe movements that proclaimed that law was irrelevant for those in a state of grace.<sup>16</sup> There were also those among the Puritans who noted concern over both antinomian and legal tendencies among their own. Laudian leadership in the Church of England was perceived by critics as stressing law, or moral righteousness, at the expense of gospel grace, allied with their movement toward a high church, sacramental theology. As Laudian ruling policy quickly evolved beyond anti-antinomianism to repression and persecution of Puritanism, the initial, tentative unity quickly dissipated.<sup>17</sup> Decades later, with Laud's removal to the Tower of London (1640) and his beheading (1645), the author of *The Marrow* had both the freedom to publish and a readership willing to peruse and purchase his volume.

Republished numerous times during the years following 1645, *The Marrow* must have met demand and interest. A second edition, substantially revised, came out in early 1646. It included the appended "Patrick's Places," a series of propositions written by the early Scottish Reformer Patrick Hamilton on the relation of law and grace in justification by faith and Christian living. The publisher, Giles Calvert, was a Londoner with wide religious connections who eventually embraced Quakerism.<sup>18</sup> The new notice on the title page stated that the work was "corrected, amended, and much enlarged by the author, E. F.,...[and now included] the commendatory epistles of divers divines of great esteem in the citie of London."<sup>19</sup> Bearing the same commendatory imprimatur of Joseph Caryl, the second edition also included commendations by Jeremiah Burroughs and William Strong, Westminster divines respected for their theological acumen. As Independents, Burroughs and Strong pushed for Congregational church government, though in this they manifested a spirit of moderation toward their Presbyterian brethren at the Assembly. Along with these commendations, E. F. also gained the commendation of Joshua Sprigge, a popular London Independent preacher who served as a chaplain to Lord Fairfax

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at points, questionable analysis of historical and theological evidence tend toward a sensationalized and fractured portrait of the era.

16. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 91.

17. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 91–92.

18. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 455.

19. E. F., *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed by R. Leybourn, for Giles Calvert, 1646), 1.

and the New Model Army.<sup>20</sup> These connections suggest that E. F., either by virtue of his person or writings, was gaining the respect of notable Reformed theologians and popular preachers of his day. A commendation by a less prominent divine, Samuel Prettie, gives what appears to be a tantalizing hint about E. F.'s identity. Prettie states, "God has endowed his *Fisher* with the net of a trying understanding, discerning judgment, and discretion."<sup>21</sup> In light of Puritan love for allegory and wordplay, it seems a legitimate possibility that E. F. may be E. Fisher, a lead which opens up at least two more lines of evidence toward discovering the author and context of *The Marrow*.

Historical evidence points to the existence of at least two E. F.s who authored religious works during the time of *The Marrow's* early editions. One was Edward Fisher, Esq., the son of Sir Edward Fisher of Mickleton. This E. F., Esq., who studied at Brasenose College, Oxford, and gained accolades for his scholarly ability, received a bachelor of arts in April 1630. In the first Scottish reprint of *The Marrow*, James Hog of Carnock cited Anthony Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses* as giving an account of this E. F. as the author of *The Marrow*.<sup>22</sup> It is undisputed that this Edward Fisher did author numerous works, including *The Feast of Feasts, or, The Celebration of Sacred Nativity*, defending the observance of holy days such as Christmas, and *A Christian Caveat to the Old and New Sabbatarians*, in which he argued "the morality and divine institution of the Lord's Day are mere fictions."<sup>23</sup> A man with Royalist inclinations during the Civil War, Fisher's writings indicate sympathy for the Laudian order of high church Anglicanism. For several reasons it is unlikely that this Edward Fisher is the author of *The Marrow*, despite the popular attribution of Scottish publishers, who followed Wood's historiography. The theology expressed in works that

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20. Sprigge would later hold to an unorthodox view of the second coming of Christ as a present inward experience (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Sprigg [Sprigge], Joshua").

21. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646), 28–29.

22. Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the Most Famous and Ancient University of Oxford* (London: Printed for Thomas Bennet at the Half-Moon in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1691), 1, 132.

23. Edward Fisher, Esq., *A Christian Caveat to the Old and New Sabbatarians, Or a Vindication of Gospel Festivals* (London: Printed for E. Blackmore, at the Angel in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1650), 1.

are clearly written by Edward Fisher, Esq., does not conform to what would be expected of the author of *The Marrow*. While *The Marrow* was published in Welsh in 1651, and Edward Fisher, Esq., did spend time in Wales, the Welsh publication of *The Marrow* predates his arrival by five years.<sup>24</sup> Finally, all the works that are clearly attributable to Edward Fisher, Esq., bear both his full name and title on the front page or E. F., Esq. The title “esquire” suggests a self-distinction from the other E. F., who wrote and published at the same time and was a commoner.

While gaining numerous commendations for the second edition of 1646, E. Fisher, author of *The Marrow*, also made substantial editorial and content changes to the work. He toned down bold language, and he clarified vague statements. Expanding discussions of the covenant of works and of grace and enlarging the final section on “the heart’s happiness, or soul’s rest,” Fisher improved his level of theological and pastoral discourse.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the changes made in the preface to the reader between the first and second editions are most interesting and helpful in confirming the author’s full identity. In the second edition Fisher mentions by name “Master Dod” in his discussion of his own former legalism and “Master Thomas Hooker” as the one who counseled him toward his conversion, making him aware of his hypocrisy and bringing to him an understanding of the free riches of Christ’s grace.<sup>26</sup> Dod and Hooker were both respected among Puritans. Hooker, suffering persecution, fled to exile in the Netherlands, where he continued to face danger from Laud’s agents.<sup>27</sup> Like the

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24. Records indicate that he became deeply indebted, selling his father’s estate in 1656, fleeing creditors to teach in Wales before fleeing again, this time to Ireland, where he died.

25. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646), 240–45.

26. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646), 14–15. The diversity of concerns among the broad Puritan movement of the seventeenth century is exemplified in Thomas Goodwin’s concerns about Thomas Hooker’s theological tendency toward a legal spirit. Como notes that in one letter written to Samuel Hartlib, Goodwin criticized Hooker’s “preparationist notions,” stating that he was “a severe and Cruel Man like John Baptist, [who] urges too much and too farre the Worke of Humiliation” (Sheffield University Library, Hartlib Papers, MS. 29/2/61B. *The Hartlib Papers: A Complete Text and Image Database of the Papers of Samuel Hartlib [c. 1600–1662] held in Sheffield University Library*, 2nd ed., Sheffield: Humanities Research Online, 2002, as cited in Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 450).

27. Hooker eventually immigrated to Boston, Massachusetts, in 1633.

commendators of *The Marrow*, Hooker held to a Congregational view of church polity. This second edition indicated that Fisher was well connected in Independent circles. Perhaps most fascinating was a hint, erased from the second edition, that after his conversion and movement away from spiritual legalism, Fisher's affections for the free grace of the gospel led to a feeling of sympathy and respect for those within Puritan circles who leaned toward antinomianism. Did he evidence a weakness common to many in church history—a greater sympathy toward those beyond his theological position than for those from whose ranks he had come?

Fisher deliberately removed the statement, "I have endeavoured to imitate the laborious Bee, who out of divers flowers gathers honey and waxe, and thereof makes one combe.... Yet I hope it will not be distasteful to any," from the second edition.<sup>28</sup> A marginal reference beside the original text cited Henry Burton, a bold Puritan Independent who preached and wrote in fiery opposition to antinomianism, and specifically to one John Eaton in London. Due to his bold Puritan preaching, Burton had suffered the punishment of having his ears cut off during Archbishop Laud's persecutions. Fisher's juxtaposition of his bee analogy with his concern for offense and mention of Burton's writings raises an intriguing question. Was his allusion to the work of the bee a veiled reference to the work entitled *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification*, written by Eaton in 1630–1631 and first published posthumously by supporters in 1642 in London?<sup>29</sup> Despite being in the mainstream of Reformed thought in most of his writing, Eaton developed an emphasis in *The Honey-Combe* on what he viewed as the implication of Christ's imputed righteousness: free justification meant the abolishment of "all the filthy nakedness of our sins out of God's sight."<sup>30</sup> He stressed this to "the conclusion that

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28. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 14.

29. See Como, "John Eaton, the Eatonists, and the 'Imputative' Strain of English Antinomianism," in *Blown by the Spirit*, 176–218.

30. John Eaton, *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ Alone Collected out of the Meere Authorities of Scripture and Common and Unanimous Consent of the Faithfull Interpreters and Dispensers of Gods Mysteries upon the Same, Especially as They Express the Excellency of Free Justification/Preached and Delivered by John Eaton...* (London: Printed by R. B. at the charge of Robert Lancaster, 1642), B2v.



justification utterly banished the sins of believers from God's sight."<sup>31</sup> Burton and other leading figures in London churches believed that Eaton was heading dangerously near antinomianism, a perspective only reinforced by Eaton's bold attacks against what he saw as legalism and pharisaism among fellow Puritans.<sup>32</sup> The picture seems clear—Fisher was sympathetic to Eaton's work *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification*, but did not want to offend men like Burton. He wanted to carefully "walk as a middle man in this ensuing dialogue."<sup>33</sup> Why was this removed for the second edition? The work had already received Caryl's approval. One possibility may be that either Jeremiah Burroughs or William Strong, men noted for theological precision and moderation, suggested its removal prior to its second publication. Whatever the case, these changes did not prevent published criticism of the work from surfacing that year, shortly after the publication of the third edition of *The Marrow*.<sup>34</sup>

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31. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 183.

32. Eaton's repute included a somewhat dubious past: in 1619, under a Church of England that had just taken part by delegation in the Synod of Dort, Eaton was disciplined, tried by the High Commission for teaching "errors and false opinions," and deprived of his pulpit in Suffolk. After a period of study he was allowed to reenter the ministry as a curate and appears to have spent substantial time in London prior to his death in the 1630s (Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 179).

33. E. F., *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 13.

34. The first published opposition to *The Marrow* criticized it particularly on the grounds that it argued that "true and evangelical repentance is a fruit of faith, and cannot be before faith in Christ." The concerned author went on to state: "I will show you the contrary... that it is not a fruit of justifying faith, but a work of the Spirit, to prepare the heart to the believing of the promise.... God doth always work repentance in them whom he hath a purpose to save forever, before he bestows on them that faith which doth justify or assure them of the pardon of their sins in the blood of Jesus Christ.... I do not say that repentance is the condition required in our parts to our justification, as being our own work, but yet I affirm that it is the way which God doth always take.... For Christ calls none but such [poor penitents] unto him, neither ought any minister to apply the promises of mercy to any other but such as are weary, heavy laden, mourn, and earnestly desire mercy and pardon of sin (J. A., *A Manifest and Brief Discovery of Some of the Errours Contained in a Dialogue Called the Marrow of Modern Divinity* [London: Printed by T. W. for Joshua Kirton, 1646], 8–13). Some believe the critic J. A. may have been John Angel of Grantham, "a man mighty in word and doctrine among the Puritans, but one harassed by much soul-distress." Other critics of *The Marrow* in the late 1640s and early 1650s included John Trapp, Richard Baxter, and Thomas Blake (McIntyre, "First Strictures," 66–67).

There is further evidence toward uncovering the full identity of E. Fisher and the context of his theological writing. Prettie's commendation, the connection to John Eaton, numerous London Independent connections, and his publisher all indicate that the author of *The Marrow* was either a Londoner or had strong ties in the city. London's civil and ecclesiastical records provide further evidence toward filling in the gaps in the search for the E. Fisher of *The Marrow*.

Throughout history, tax officials have shown meticulous skill in keeping tabs on citizen income and property. Seventeenth-century poll tax records for companies of the city of London are no exception, and they provide a compelling possibility for solving the identity mystery of *The Marrow's* author. Stephen Wright notes that "on 14 November 1626, an Edward Fisher was made free of his master Richard Marshalsey of the Company of Barber-Surgeons, and this was certainly the Edward Fisher who appears in the poll tax returns for 1641, as a barber and member of that company, and resident in the parish of St. Sepulchre. This was the only person so named recorded among all the members of the London companies in the returns of that year."<sup>35</sup> What appears to strongly confirm this as relevant are references made in statements by the former antinomian Giles Creech before the Laudian High Commission in 1638. In naming various antinomian sects, underground libertine movements, and other connected individuals while fearing the judgment of the Commission against him, Creech referred to a part-time bookseller and barber-surgeon named Edward Fisher.<sup>36</sup> Creech's testimony was part of the Laudian Commission's ongoing effort during the 1630s to impose high church uniformity and quell dissent. Previous records indicate that "in 1632, John Eaton's widow, sought in the aftermath of her husband's death...to publish 'The Honey-Combe of Free Justification'...and she too was dragged before the High Commission...[and] received a four-month stint at Newgate [prison]."<sup>37</sup> In 1633, the same year Fisher's early mentor Thomas Hooker escaped Laud's agents in the Netherlands by head-

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35. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Fisher, Edward." Both Lachman and McIntyre view this record as conclusive evidence in establishing the identity of E. F. (Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 5; McIntyre, "First Strictures," 66-67).

36. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 51.

37. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 99.

ing to New England, an Edward Fisher was called to appear before the Court of the High Commission, which recorded his occupation as “barber” and manuscript dealer and charged him with failing to comply “with the Court in not giving his personal Answers to the Articles objected against him.”<sup>38</sup> He was ordered to prison until he accommodated the court’s requests. These records compellingly suggest that E. F. was indeed this Edward Fisher. Fisher’s further publications in the years following 1646 only help solidify the case for Edward Fisher, the London barber-surgeon, as the author of *The Marrow*.

Despite some initial criticism, it appears *The Marrow’s* popularity steadily continued. A fourth edition came to print in 1646, a fifth in 1647, and a sixth in 1648. In late 1647, Edward Fisher wrote and, with the aid of a new publisher, published a work on qualifications for participation in the Lord’s Supper, which also received Caryl’s imprimatur.<sup>39</sup> In the same way that he wrote *The Marrow*, Fisher wrote this new work in the form of a pastoral dialogue “betwixt a minister of the Gospel, Zacheus a worthy communicant, and Simon an unworthy communicant.”<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Simon was a morally upright, self-righteous church member, and Zacheus was one who had sinned visibly but who repented and rested in Christ alone for forgiveness. The lessons of the work were clearly in harmony with the heart of the teaching of *The Marrow*—the covenant of grace in Christ, the free gospel offer, proclaimed all-sufficient grace, both for justification and sanctification.

The following year Fisher published a second dialogue on the role of office bearers in examining those who sought to participate in the Lord’s Supper titled *London’s Gate to the Lord’s Table* (1648).<sup>41</sup> For the first time, his work bore the imprimatur’s commendation of Edmund Calamy, a Presbyterian Westminster divine. As a preacher to

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38. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 99.

39. E. F., *A Touch-Stone for a Communicant. Serving for the True Trial of a Man’s Fitness or Unfitness to Come to the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper...* (London: Printed for John Wright at the Kings Head in the Old Bayley, 1647). It appears that from this point on, Edward Fisher chose to work with a new publisher for his new publications, though Giles Calvert would continue to republish the first part of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.

40. E. F., *Touch-Stone for a Communicant*, 1.

41. E. F., *London’s Gate to the Lord’s Table* (London: Printed for John Wright at the Kings Head in the Old Bayley, 1648), 1.

the House of Commons in 1642, Calamy addressed the necessity of following a scriptural path that turned neither to Arminian moralism nor to antinomianism. While serving as a leading Presbyterian in the Westminster Assembly, Calamy engaged in pamphlet warfare with the Henry Burton who had been opposed to John Eaton's antinomian tendencies. Calamy-Burton tensions arose after Burton began advocating Congregationalism in Calamy's parish, leading Calamy to give orders to have Burton locked out of the church buildings.<sup>42</sup> Their debate, however, was over Independent versus Presbyterian church polity rather than legalism versus antinomianism.

Evidence from church records suggests that by this point Edward Fisher was a member of a Presbyterian congregation. The content of *London's Gate to the Lord's Table* corresponds with this. In it, Fisher proposes the "Presbyterial way in the case of examination of communicants...so that our dissenting brethren...may be moved thereby to come in amongst us."<sup>43</sup> He also notes what appears to be a new state of church membership for himself in his dedication to Sir Henry Rolle, a chief justice and ruling elder, "chosen, in that congregation whereof you have been pleased to admit me a member."<sup>44</sup> The preface to the reader states that this E. F. is the same one who has written *A Touch-Stone for a Communicant* and who prays for "increase either of sound knowledge or sweet feeling in the mysteries of Christ...as blessed by God (I have been informed) my *Marrow of Modern Divinity* hath done to many."<sup>45</sup>

In 1648, Fisher wrote what would be published in 1649 as *The Marrow of Modern Divinity. The Second Part. Touching the Most Plain, Pithy, and Spiritual Exposition of the Ten Commandments...in a Dialogue*.<sup>46</sup> Commending this addition to *The Marrow*, Joseph Caryl wrote, "The Marrow of the second bone is like that of the first, sweet and good. The Commandments of God are Marrow to the Saints as well as the promises, and they shall never taste the Marrow of the promise who

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42. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Calamy, Edmund."

43. E. F., *London's Gate to the Lord's Table*, 5.

44. E. F., *London's Gate to the Lord's Table*, 4-5.

45. E. F., *London's Gate to the Lord's Table*, 19-20.

46. E. F., *The Marrow of Modern Divinity. The Second Part. Touching the Most Plain, Pithy, and Spiritual Exposition of the Ten Commandments...in a Dialogue...whereunto Is Added the Difference betwixt the Law and the Gospel*. By E. F. Author of the First Part (London: Printed for John Wright at the Kings Head in the Old Bayley, 1649).

distaste the Commandments.”<sup>47</sup> One of the commendators of this addition was the Independent Ralph Venning, a respected Puritan preacher and theologian who was appointed to the prominent chaplaincy of the Tower of London in 1648. He also served under the Westminster Assembly as examiner for all naval chaplains.<sup>48</sup> Other commendations of the work came from Samuel Moore and John Cradocot.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, Moore’s praise of Fisher’s new publication echoed the preface of Fisher’s first edition of *The Marrow*: “Reader... bless God for this Author, who hath like the Bee, painfully fetched this honey out of various flowers, and at last brought it into this hive.”<sup>50</sup> Was this simply the analogy that came to Moore’s mind at the moment, or did it recall a mutual respect for John Eaton’s writing? And, if Fisher had become convinced of Presbyterian principles, why was it that the second part of *The Marrow* again appeared to predominantly have the publication support of Independents?

Fisher’s final work may provide some insight into this intriguing combination of strong Independent ties and support for Presbyterianism. Published in 1650, the manuscript was entitled *Faith in Five Fundamental Principles, Strongly Fortified against the Diabolical, Atheistical, Blasphemous Batteries of These Times. Serving for the Conviction of Opposers, the Satisfaction of Doubters, and the Confirmation of Believers. In a Conference Which a Godly Independent Minister and a Godly Presbyterian Minister Had with a Doubting Christian*.<sup>51</sup> In these last years of his life, Fisher had sought to encourage a correct path between legal-

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47. E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity. The Second Part*, A1. Caryl’s commendation is dated September 6, 1648, and the other commendations are dated later in the same month, indicating the work must have been near completion before 1649.

48. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Venning, Ralph.”

49. Samuel Moore, *An Heavenly Wonder, or, a Christian Cloath’d with Christ Purposely Penned to Comfort Christs Sin-Sick-Spouse / by Sam. Moore, Minister of the Gospel of God Sometimes at Brides in Fleetstreete, London* (London: Printed by Matthew Simmons, 1650). Samuel Moore, a London minister, published three works between 1647 and 1650, the last bearing some similarity in emphasis to John Eaton’s *Honey-Combe*.

50. Moore in E. F., *Marrow of Modern Divinity. The Second Part*, 13.

51. E. F., *Faith in Five Fundamental Principles, Strongly Fortified against the Diabolical, Atheistical, Blasphemous Batteries of These Times. Serving for the Conviction of Opposers, the Satisfaction of Doubters, and the Confirmation of Believers. In a Conference Which a Godly Independent Minister and a Godly Presbyterian Minister Had with a Doubting Christian* (London: Printed for John Wright at the Kings Head in the Old Bailey, 1650), 1.

ism and antinomianism, seeking what he viewed as the biblical path of moderation. The publication of *The Marrow's* second part clearly explicated and applied the law to the lives of both believers and unbelievers. Now in the midst of an intensifying Presbyterian-Independent controversy, Fisher wrote a defense of some essentials of the faith in a dialogue form with two godly counselors, “a moderate Independent Minister” and “a moderate Presbyterian Minister” and with “a tempted doubting Christian.”<sup>52</sup> For one final time his pen exhibited his layman’s pastoral heart, mediating spirit, and, above all, his love for the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. That same year a London obituary noted the death of “Mr. Fisher, bookseller and barber in the Old Bailey.”<sup>53</sup>

### **An Introduction to the Marrow Controversy in Scotland**

An understanding of the English origin, content, and context of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* gives essential background to its Scottish history. However, a survey of the historical context of the Marrow controversy is also necessary to understand the views of the gospel expressed during the controversy, which would become known as Marrow theology. Before the beginning of the Marrow controversy in Scotland, there were a number of occurrences and developments that helped set the stage for it. With the reestablishment of Presbyterian polity in 1690, persecution of the Covenanters ended. The Church of Scotland firmly established the Westminster Confessions and Catechisms as its doctrinal standards, and there was a clear desire to “preserve the purity of doctrine” and to prevent “any doctrines not agreeable to our Confession of Faith and Catechisms.”<sup>54</sup> Presbyterianism and Reformed theology were once again placed in a dominant role throughout the nation, though dissension over patronage issues would remain as well as the “imposition of oaths by the government, as a qualification to sit in church courts.”<sup>55</sup>

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52. E. F., *Faith in Five Fundamental Principles*, A3.

53. See McIntyre, “First Strictures,” 61–70.

54. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Held and Begun in the Year 1717...in Register of the General Assembly Annes 1712, 1713, 1714, 1715, and 1717* (MSS 232, Special Libraries and Archives, King’s College, Aberdeen), 830.

55. John M’Kerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (Glasgow: A. Fullarton and Co., 1841), 4–5.

It is generally agreed (as would be evidenced in the Marrow controversy) that the dominant stream of theology in the Church of Scotland, particularly in relation to the gospel offer, bore certain legalistic and hyper-Calvinistic tendencies.<sup>56</sup> William Blaikie states, "It was not... so much that the old Calvinistic creed was formally attacked, as that the doctrines of grace were discredited, and in some degree neutralised by the introduction of a spirit of legality."<sup>57</sup> John Macleod asserts that "the hyper-Calvinistic brethren held that there is no world-wide call of Christ sent out to all sinners.... They maintained that Christ is held forth or offered as Saviour to those only whom God effectually calls.... The eye of the hearer was directed to the hidden man of the heart to the obscuring of the call to look out and away from self to Saviour."<sup>58</sup> At the same time, in the ongoing case of John Simson (professor of divinity at Glasgow, 1708–1739), the majority of the Church of Scotland leadership tended toward leniency in dealing with inroads of Enlightenment philosophy into Reformed theology in its divinity schools.<sup>59</sup>

In terms of ecclesiastical controversy, the event immediately before and leading directly to the Marrow controversy was the action of the Presbytery of Auchterarder, including the denominational response to it. In 1716 the Presbytery of Auchterarder set out a series of propositions that ministerial candidates were required to assent to prior to the granting of license or ordination. One of these propositions was intended to guard against the preaching of the necessity of preparation

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56. While there is agreement on this, there is disagreement on what actually constitutes hyper-Calvinism. Some, such as Donald Bruggink, M. C. Bell, T. F. Torrance, and J. B. Torrance, argue that hyper-Calvinism is essentially inherent in the federal theology of the Westminster Confession in its positing both predestination and limited atonement; others, such as Macleod, Lachman, McGowan, Philip, and Ryken, see hyper-Calvinism as a distortion of federal theology, which particularly impacts the preaching of the gospel so that "a therapeutic type of preaching doles out the Gospel to those only who are alive to their ruined plight.... With this restricted presentation of Christ as Saviour, the sinner has no end of questionings as to whether or not he is so truly convinced of his sin as to have a warrant to stretch out his hand to take off the Gospel table the Bread of Life as his own" (John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], 142).

57. William Garden Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland—From the Sixth to the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 189.

58. Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 143.

59. J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 287–91.

for grace. The candidate was to agree that “I believe 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 to God.”<sup>60</sup> One student, William Craig, was rejected by the Presbytery for his refusal to assent to this proposition. He appealed to the General Assembly, which ruled in his favor. The Assembly of 1717 rejected the legitimacy of subscriptions to any formula “but such as is or shall be agreed to and approved by the Assemblies of this Church.”<sup>61</sup> They continued by declaring their “abhorrence of the foresaid proposition, as unsound and most detestable,” arguing it would lead to spiritual sloth and unholiness, and they requested a commission to further investigate and report back to the following Assembly.<sup>62</sup> While in its report to the 1718 Assembly the commission found that the Presbytery was sound and orthodox in its meaning, it found that “they had expressed it in words very unwarrantable and exceptionable,” and the Presbytery was admonished not to use them again.<sup>63</sup> This event set the stage for the Marrow controversy.

### A Chronology of the Marrow Controversy

The Marrow controversy began in 1718 when *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the work of popular divinity written in England by Edward Fisher during or prior to 1645,<sup>64</sup> was republished in Scotland, with a recommendatory preface by a Church of Scotland minister, James Hog of Carnock in Fife.<sup>65</sup> Hog read *The Marrow* at the recommendation of Thomas Boston, who came across the work during a pastoral visit and read it with profit “by the latter end of the year

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60. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland...1717*, 839–40.

61. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland...1717*, 840.

62. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland...1717*, 840.

63. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Held and Begun in the Year 1718...in Register of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Annes 1718, 19, 20, & 1721* (MSS 233, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 154.

64. E[dward] F[isher], *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), 1.

65. E[dward] F[isher], *The Marrow of Modern Divinity, with a Recommendatory Preface by James Hog*, 9th ed., corrected (Edinburgh: John Mosman and William Brown, 1718).



1700” in his parish at Simprin.<sup>66</sup> Boston had struggled with his personal understanding of the gospel due to the influences of legalism and hyper-Calvinism and, as a result, had also wrestled with these issues in regard to gospel proclamation.<sup>67</sup> In his *Memoirs*, Boston describes the direct link between the 1717 Assembly decision on Auchterarder and the republication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*:

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; and is unto this day overflowing. Meanwhile, at the same sitting in the assembly house, 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. lv. 1; Matt. xi. 28, with the reason thereof; and withal to tell him of the Marrow of Modern Divinity. 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, it came into the hands of Mr. James Hog, minister of Carnock; and in end was reprinted in the year 1718, with a preface by the said Mr. Hog, dated at Carnock, Dec. 3, 1717.<sup>68</sup>

Immediately after publication, controversy about the book ensued, with Hog defending *The Marrow* against rumors and attacks. This in turn quickly developed into pamphlet warfare, primarily between Hog and Principal James Hadow of St. Andrews College in Fife. Hadow’s opposition to *The Marrow* and Hog’s defense of it led to the former preaching a sermon against it at the opening of the Synod of Fife on

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66. Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of Mr. Thomas Boston...in The Complete Works of the Late Reverend Thomas Boston*, ed. Samuel M’Millan (London: William Tegg and Co., 1853), 7:154–56.

67. See Boston, *Memoirs*, 94–95.

68. Boston, *Memoirs*, 291–92. It is interesting to note that according to the attendance roll a number of the leading figures involved in the Marrow controversy were present at the General Assembly of 1717 decision on Auchterarder. These included the following: James Hog, minister of Carnock; Thomas Boston, minister of Ettrick; James Hadow, principal of St. Andrews College; and Thomas Blackwell, professor of divinity at Marischal College, Aberdeen (*Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland... 1717*, 657–62).

April 7, 1719.<sup>69</sup> A formal complaint was brought against *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* to the General Assembly that same year. The Assembly consequently gave the standing Commission for Purity of Doctrine the task of examining the matter.<sup>70</sup>

The Commission for Purity of Doctrine's report the following year was not favorable for the cause of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The 1720 General Assembly, seeing the developing Marrow controversy as a substantial issue, delayed official discussion and decision making on it until late in the Assembly meetings to allow members time to read excerpted statements from and doctrinal complaints against the work as well as allowing the Committee for Overtures time to investigate further.<sup>71</sup> Following the charges made by Hadow and the committees, the resulting Act of Assembly stated that the theological expressions in *The Marrow* were "exceptionable" and "exceedingly harsh and offensive."<sup>72</sup> In its act, the Assembly did "strictly prohibit and discharge" all ministers "either by preaching, writing, or printing to recommend the said book, or, in discourse, to say anything in favour of it; but, on the contrary they are hereby enjoined and required to warn and exhort their people, in whose hands the said book is, or may come, not to read or use the same."<sup>73</sup>

The Act of the 1720 Assembly drew national attention to this previously obscure book, serving to stimulate the promoters and supporters of *The Marrow* in their attempt to rectify the wrong done to the "truth of the gospel, the doctrine of free grace."<sup>74</sup> Acting without success at the presbytery level, they drafted a complaint, their *Repre-*

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69. Boston, *Memoirs*, 317. See also James Hadow, *The Record of God and Duty of Faith Therein Required* (Edinburgh: John Mosman and Company for John Paton, 1719).

70. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Held and Begun in the Year 1719... in Register of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Annes 1718, 19, 20, & 1721* (MSS 233, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 177–342.

71. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Held and Begun in the Year 1720... in Register of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Annes 1718, 19, 20, & 1721* (MSS 233, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 404–5, 407, 422, 427.

72. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland... 1720*, 432.

73. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland... 1720*, 32–33.

74. Boston, *Memoirs*, 319.

*sentation and Petition*, to the 1721 Assembly.<sup>75</sup> In it they argued that the condemnation of *The Marrow* was a condemnation of gospel truth. After answering the charges of the Assembly against the work, the petitioners requested that

the very reverend assembly, seriously and impartially to consider the premises, with the great weight and importance of this affair, in which the Honour of our common Master and Message, the Salvation of our Souls, our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, the Covenants National and Solemn League, and the Remains of the Peace of this Church are so much concerned: and laying aside all Considerations of another Kind, to repeal the 5th Act of the late Assembly.... And to provide such Remedy, as may remove the Offence, arising from the two above specific clauses, in the 8th Act of the said Assembly, entitled, Act for Preaching Catechetical Doctrine, with Directions Therein: Which will afford Matter of Thanksgiving unto God, in behalf of the Truth, and of your Selves, to many who love the Truth and Peace.<sup>76</sup>

The 1721 Assembly referred the complaint to a commission to be reported on and dealt with at the 1722 Assembly.<sup>77</sup> The Assembly of 1722 confirmed the decision of the 1720 Assembly, including in its act a more extensive summary and refutation of doctrine found in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. This was undoubtedly in response not only to the *Representation and Petition* but also to the continuing determined defense of *The Marrow* and its doctrine in discussions, sermons, tracts, and pamphlets.<sup>78</sup> The Assembly also acted to rebuke and admonish the Representatives, but it stopped short of requiring subscription to the Assembly's decision in order to try to preserve the church from

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75. *The Representation and Petition of Several Ministers of the Gospel to the General Assembly Met at Edinburgh May 1721 with the 5th Act of Assembly May 1720 to Which It Relates* (Edinburgh, 1721).

76. *Representation and Petition*, 42.

77. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Held and Begun in the Year 1721...* in *Register of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Annes 1718, 19, 20, & 1721* (MSS 233, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 587–88.

78. *Register of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Held and Begun in the Year 1722...* in *Register of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Annes 1722, 23, 24, & 1725* (MSS 233, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 149–80.

what “would certainly have meant a split in the national Church.”<sup>79</sup> However, it was restated that continued promotion of *The Marrow* and its doctrine was not to be tolerated.

While the Assembly Act of 1722 was the final statement by the Assembly on the Marrow controversy, pamphleteering continued for several years. The last and most substantial written work of the controversy was a new edition of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in 1726, which included extensive explanatory notes by Thomas Boston.<sup>80</sup> Controversy and dissension would continue at local levels, with some of the Marrow brethren charged with doctrinal error and others kept from moving to more important parishes. These realities of theological division would become an influence leading to the Secession Church movement in the early 1730s.

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79. Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, 418.

80. E[dward] F[isher], *Marrow of Modern Divinity...with Notes in The Complete Works of the Late Reverend Thomas Boston*, ed. Samuel M'Millan (London: William Tegg and Co., 1853), 7:143–489.