

**THE MARROW CONTROVERSY:
A DEFENSE OF GRACE AND THE FREE
OFFER OF THE GOSPEL**

by Joseph H. Hall

Introduction

THE PRISTINE ORTHODOXY of the Scottish Reformation had begun to wane by 1700. This was due in part to the residual influence of the Englishman Richard Baxter's theology. Baxter (1615-1691), an Amyraldian, conceived of Christ's death as a work of universal redemption, penal and vicarious but not strictly speaking substitutionary. For Baxter, God offers grace to sinners by introducing the "new law" of repentance and faith. Consequently when penitent sinners "obey" this new law, they obtain a personal saving righteousness. Effectual calling induces such obedience and preserving grace sustains it. This doctrine, known as "Neonomianism," reflected Amyraldian teaching, with Arminian "new law" teaching as an addendum.

The legalistic dimensions of Baxter's Amyraldianism, along with the increasing influence of Laudian hierarchism,¹ brought on

¹William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury under Charles I of England, imposed on England, and sought to impose on Scotland, high church Anglicanism during the 1630s. The Scots fiercely and successfully resisted English uniformitarianism under Charles I only to have it re-imposed upon them after the restoration of Charles II.

by the Act of Union of 1707,² made England dominant in both Church and State in Scotland. Added to this was the reintroduction of the abuses of patronage into the Scottish Kirk.³ These factors all contributed to the waning of vigorous, well-balanced Calvinism wherein the warmth of Scotland's earlier Calvinism, with all its biblical and ecclesiastical integrity, gave way increasingly to doctrinal and spiritual indifference or "moderatism." Hence those called moderates were those who opposed Reformation doctrine.

It was into this declining environment that God in his providence reintroduced historical Calvinism and therefore reformation renewal. This was brought about in what came to be called the Marrow Controversy. The controversy, which began in 1717, did not end until 1733 with the formation of the Secession Church. The Secession Church in turn became the spiritual progenitor of the Free Church of Scotland, formed in 1843.

It is the burden of this article to present the Marrow men's earnest efforts to preserve the grace of the gospel over against the new Baxterian legalism, and to defend the free offer of the gospel over against a misguided and misinformed hyper-Calvinism. In maintaining the fully gracious character of the gospel, the Marrow men suffered the opprobrium of the Neonomians. In maintaining the free offer of the gospel, the Marrow men were labeled Arminians by the hyper-Calvinists who denied such an offer. Even today there are those who argue that justification by faith alone, apart from works, leads to antinomianism. Likewise, the apparent antinomy that stands at the center of the free offer controversy—How may a sovereign God offer the gospel, and salvation, to all men without distinction when he has previously predestinated all people either

²The Act of Union of 1707 brought Scotland into the United Kingdom, and thus brought the Scottish Kirk under the control of the English crown, tending to compromise Scottish Presbyterianism.

³The system of Church patronage in which local potentates had undue influence in the selection of the minister undermined the Reformed teaching that each local congregation under presbyterial oversight possessed the right to choose its own pastor.

to heaven or hell—is a question that continues to trouble the churches.

The heirs of Calvin have sometimes departed from the balance of the Genevan Reformer, allowing the nerve of evangelism to be severely strained, if not cut altogether. In this way God's gracious sovereignty is allowed to swallow up man's responsibility. Calvin himself did not take this path. In his *Institutes*, after treating the doctrine of reprobation, Calvin remarkably stresses that believers should try to make everyone they meet partakers of Christ.⁴ It is therefore lamentable that some in the Reformed churches in the past as well as today have failed to maintain the balance between an electing God whose salvation is all of grace and a gospel freely offered to all. This has been to the impoverishment of such churches and constitutes disobedience to the Great Commission of our Lord.⁵

History of the Marrow Controversy

The Marrow Controversy in the Scottish Church during the early part of the eighteenth century accented, indirectly, the necessity of the free offer of the gospel. Proponents of the free offer, variously called “Marrow men,” “Marrow brethren,” and “the Representers” numbered among their ranks some of the most renowned preachers of the period, including Thomas Boston, Ebenezer Erskine, and Ralph Erskine.

⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.23.14.

⁵There have been tendencies to allow the very important truth of the particularism of the covenant of grace to overshadow the free offer of the gospel. We see this not only in the Marrow Controversy of the eighteenth century in Scotland, the subject of this article, but its reemergence in the Scottish church in the nineteenth century. In this century similar tendencies have been reflected in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the United States during the 1940s, which called for the official affirmation of the free offer of the gospel. Sadly, the denial of the free offer of the gospel has become the official position among some Dutch Reformed, especially the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia.

The Prelude to the Controversy

The Controversy, however, actually began not over the issue of the free offer but over the issue of legalism. In 1717 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland took action which set in motion a reform movement. The movement sought to purify the mother church by leading her away from legalism and neonomianism. This however, at least in part, led to the expulsion of the Marrow men and the formation of the Secession Church in 1733.

The Church of Scotland had fallen prey to both declining reformational purity of doctrine and Presbyterian polity. Two issues arose simultaneously in 1717 that revealed this decline in both doctrine and polity. Theological professor, John Simson, was judged by the Assembly in 1717 with having taught improper doctrines regarding original sin. He was mildly admonished, being required simply to desist from such teaching—a chastisement far less than the required “*ex animo*” subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

While the 1717 General Assembly dealt mildly with one of its theology professors, it dealt harshly with persons who were later to form the core of the Marrow men. The Assembly condemned the action taken by the Presbytery of Auchterarder, which refused licensure to ministerial student, William Craig. The grounds for the denial were Craig’s doctrine of repentance, for Craig refused to subscribe to this statement: “It is not sound and orthodox doctrine to teach that we must forsake sin, in order to our coming to Christ....”⁶ Student Craig appealed to the General Assembly of 1717. The Assembly ruled in his favor and condemned the “Auchterarder proposition.”

Although Thomas Boston did not consider the Auchterarder proposition to be felicitously worded, he nevertheless agreed with its sentiment. In retrospect, writing in his *Memoirs*, he viewed this episode as the first link in the chain of the opposition, who

⁶Thomas Boston, *Memoirs* (Edinburgh: Banner of truth Trust, 1988), 317. Boston’s *Memoirs* can also be found in *Complete Words of Thomas Boston*, vol. 12.

charged the Marrow men with antinomianism.⁷ One may contend, however, that in reality the charges of antinomianism were darts aimed at the reformation doctrine of grace.

The Book “Marrow of Modern Divinity”

The nomenclature “Marrow men” or “Marrow theology” is related specifically to the introduction into Scotland of the book, *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Thomas Boston, having read the book years earlier, mentioned it to a fellow pastor at the 1717 General Assembly.

Ultimately the book came into the hands of Reverend James Hog, who republished it in Scotland in 1718 with an introduction. Boston himself would later publish a greatly annotated edition of the *Marrow* in 1726 after the book had been placed on the proscribed list by the General Assembly.

The book *Marrow of Modern Divinity*,⁸ written by Puritan Edward Fisher a century earlier, sought to delineate clearly the biblical, or Reformed, way of salvation. The book’s format is a sustained dialogue among *Evangelista*, a minister of the gospel, *Nomista*, a legalist, *Antinomista*, an antinomian, and *Neophytus*, a young Christian. That the republication of this (in my opinion “worthy”) Puritan book engendered such intense theological controversy is itself indicative of the decline in Scottish theological orthodoxy. So reprehensible was the *Marrow* in the eyes of the declining church that Scottish novelist George MacDonald (spiritual mentor of C. S. Lewis) made the hero in one of his novels hide his aunt’s copy of *Marrow* in a violin case in order to prevent her from reading her beloved book.

James Hog’s republication of the *Marrow* threw down the gauntlet for doctrinal reform in the Church of Scotland. In his preface, Hog charges the established church with error in its preaching, and declares: “When gospel light is clear and attended

⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 317.

⁸This book was published in 1645. It can be found in *Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, vol. 7. Also see the 1991 reprint by Still Water Revival Books, Edmonton, AB.

with power, Satan's kingdom cannot stand heaven.... And according to the contrary ... Christian churches went off by degrees ... until the great antichrist did mount the throne.... That the tares of such errors are sown in the reformed churches ... is beyond debate.... Such degrees of antichristianism do yet remain, or are brought in amongst us."⁹

A pamphlet battle ensued between Hog and Dr. James Hadow, principal and professor at St. Mary's College, St. Andrews University. Hadow distinguished himself as the leader against the incipient Marrow men. He charged Hog and the *Marrow* with teaching antinomianism and unlimited atonement, a charge that Hog viewed as demonstrating clearly that the Church of Scotland had compromised faithful preaching and teaching of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. In short, in Hog's eyes, many in the Scottish Church failed to understand the nature of the gospel.

Such failure was further demonstrated when Hadow correctly concluded that the *Marrow* taught the free offer of the gospel. Hadow, however, argued that the free offer depended upon the doctrine of universal atonement. In his view, the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement precluded the free offer of the gospel.¹⁰ Since the atonement was for the elect alone, it must be offered only to those who began to show evidence of election. And how did the elect manifest evidence of their election, except through the keeping of the law? Thus a new legalism (neonomianism) was mixed with the pure preaching of the grace of the gospel.

Sinclair Ferguson maintains that in denying the free offer, the opponents of the Marrow men misunderstood the very nature of the gospel. Consequently many in the church likewise misunderstood the gospel, separating Christ from the benefits of

⁹James Hog, "Preface to Edward Fisher's *Marrow of Modern Divinity*," republished in and quoted from, the 1726 edition edited by Thomas Boston, p. 7.

¹⁰A.T.B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Cumbria, 1997), p. 43.

the gospel. Because of that separation, many were plunged into a new legalism and even Arminianism.¹¹

The Marrow Condemned

The *Marrow of Modern Divinity* was brought to the General Assembly's attention in 1720. An appointed commission charged that the book, due to its insistence on faith alone by grace alone, taught not only antinomianism but also universal atonement and reconciliation. The volume was thus condemned, along with those who subscribed to its alleged errors.¹²

The ministers holding to Marrow theology met together in 1721 in order to respond to the Assembly's charges, spending much of their time in prayer. Boston remarked that the Lord was with them in that meeting, and the meetings that followed.¹³ The group, numbering twelve, and henceforth pejoratively dubbed the "Apostles" or the "Twelve," proceeded to reply to their condemnation in a document addressed to the General Assembly, entitled *Representation and Petition*, dated 11 May 1721.

The twelve Marrow men or "Representers" labored to clarify their position, affirming that no one needed to obey the law as a precondition to inclusion in the covenant of grace. Indeed since man had broken the covenant of works (citing the Westminster Confession, 19:6), he was unable, now fallen, to render any obedience to the law prior to entrance into the covenant of grace, which is (following regeneration) by faith alone—faith itself being a gift. Moreover, the "Representers" argued that obedience to the law as a guide-for-living is, in order of sequence, *after* entrance into the covenant of grace.¹⁴

¹¹Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Marrow Controversy," tapes 1 and 2, (Philadelphia: Westminster Media, 1994).

¹²John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in relation to Church History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 157.

¹³Boston, *Memoirs*, 356-357.

¹⁴"Representation and Petition ... to the General Assembly met at Edinburgh, the 11th day of May, 1721," cited in Andrew Robertson, *History of the Atonement Controversy* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1846), 30.

The 1720 General Assembly had already condemned the following passage in the *Marrow* as teaching universal atonement: “The Father hath made a deed of gift and grant unto all mankind, that whosoever of them shall believe in his Son shall not perish.” The Representers, for their part, declared that they did not understand this passage to be teaching universal atonement but to be affirming “the revelation of the divine will in the word, affording a warrant to offer Christ to all, and a warrant to receive him.” The Marrow men concluded that the biblical offer of the gospel was a warrant to believe and therefore should be preached to everyone without discrimination.¹⁵ The Marrow men’s *Representation and Petition* concluded with a lamentation over the current generation’s strong propensity for “turning that religion left among us into a mere morality,” thus dishonoring Christ by disobedience.¹⁶

The *Representation*, as an overture to the General Assembly, was assigned to a committee which was responsible to consider its arguments and render a verdict. That committee reported back to the 1722 General Assembly. The General Assembly in turn reaffirmed its previous judgments, condemning the *Marrow* while, most interestingly, challenging the Representers with a series of twelve “queries” regarding their position.

The Marrow Men Respond

The Marrow men responded to the Assembly’s incisive queries, building upon the *Representation* with clearer, more cogent responses and with sharper criticism of the Scottish Church. Two of their responses to the “queries” especially command our attention, for they strike at the heart of the gospel, salvation by grace alone through faith alone and that of the free offer of the gospel.

The first has to do with the Assembly’s first query, which asked the question: “Whether are there any precepts in the gospel

¹⁵Representation and Petition, 30.

¹⁶Representation and Petition, 32

that were not actually given before the gospel was revealed?”¹⁷ The Marrow men answered apodictically that there is no salvation or justification based on any preconditioning or works required by the gospel. From the very first announcement of the gospel in Genesis 3 there exist no precepts that must be obeyed for salvation.

God declared grace in the crushing of the serpent’s head. Likewise, the promise to Abraham was a gracious, unconditional promise. Not even the precepts of faith and repentance are to be considered as law-works of obedience, for they are included in the covenant of grace. Away then with the new legalism (neonomianism) inspired by Richard Baxter and currently leavening the Church of Scotland’s reformation teaching. Since Adam failed in his obedience to the Covenant of works, all Adam’s posterity is shut up to sin and disobedience.

Not content, however, with pointing out the errors of the Scottish Church, the Marrow men were quick to affirm the graciousness of the new covenant of grace in Christ and the believer’s subsequent keeping-of-the-law out of gratitude for so great a salvation. Thus while affirming the motif of law-gospel-law as orthodox, and as a corrective to the neonomianism in the church, the Marrow men opted to speak of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, or law-gospel, in order to deny neonomianism on the one hand, and affirm the gracious character of the gospel on the other. Which is to say, the issue in the church was about justification and not sanctification.¹⁸

The other matter that commands our attention has to do with the General Assembly’s tenth query, which asked: “Whether the revelation of the divine will in the word, affording a warrant to offer Christ unto all, and a warrant to all to receive him, can be said to be the Father’s making a deed of gift and grant unto all

¹⁷Thomas Boston, *Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, 12 vols. (1853; reprint, Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980), 7:466.

¹⁸Boston, *Works*: 7: 466-487.

mankind? Is this grant to all mankind by sovereign grace? And whether is it absolute or conditional?”¹⁹

In reply to this query, the Marrow men patiently affirmed, on the one hand, God’s well-meant offer of the gospel to all men universally. On the other hand, they rejected the doctrine of universal atonement or universal salvation. The “gift and grant” inherent in the gospel offer is not that of “possession,” which is given only to those actually believing in Christ. Nevertheless, the “gift and grant” is a divine, well-meant offer which warrants persons to believe in Christ. The offer is not simply a bare verbal offer, but an offer and revelation of Christ himself to be believed and received. Thus there is no separation of Christ from the offer of grace. To offer the gospel *is* to offer *the Christ* of the gospel; it is therefore to offer the *grace* of the gospel.

According to the Marrow men, in John 6, Christ is seen to offer himself, an offer to be received and believed (which is in keeping with Calvin’s teaching on this passage). On the other hand, the warrant for believing and receiving Christ does not rest upon declaring to the hearers of the gospel, “God has given eternal life to the elect.” Such a declaration, while true in itself, does not fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission (Matt. 28) to offer Christ to all people indiscriminately.

The Marrow men sought to validate their case for the free offer of the gospel by appealing to the offers of grace in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus in the wilderness, all the Israelites were bidden to look upon the brass serpent, so that those who had been bitten by venomous snakes and cast their eyes upon the brass serpent lived. Likewise the words of John 3:16—all those who hear and believe the free, well-intended offer of Christ himself have eternal life.

The offer in both the Old Testament and New Testament (such as John 6) was made to all persons indiscriminately in this sense. In respect to the universal offer, the Marrow men spoke of Christ as a “common savior,” resulting in “glad tidings” proclaimed to all people. The very act of taking hold of, or receiving, Christ presupposes that Christ offers himself to all.

¹⁹Boston, *Works*: 7: 485.

All the Marrow men taught that the sin of unbelief was the cardinal sin. According to 1 John 5:10, the unbeliever makes God a liar because he refuses to believe the free offer of Christ.²⁰ Thus the Marrow men defended the free offer by declaring Christ himself to be offered for believing and receiving. While the “gift and grant” unto “possession” of Christ is for the elect alone, it is Christ’s injunction that he himself be offered in order that all people everywhere might believe and receive him. Moreover, the believing and receiving of Christ are declared to be fruits of the covenant of grace through election. In this way both the free offer of the gospel and the sovereignty of grace are safeguarded. In short, the Marrow men sought a recrudescence of Reformation theology and preaching.

The Preaching of the Marrow Men

A predominant theologian of the Free Church has characterized much of the preaching during the period of the Marrow controversy as “therapeutic” in nature. With that term Professor John MacLeod was describing the new legalism that the opponents of the Marrow men had embraced and that was coming to expression in the Scottish Church. This legalism, part of Richard Baxter’s legacy, produced legalistic preaching. Preaching of this type prescribed what amounted to preconditions that believers had to perform prior to coming to Christ for salvation.²¹ In this way the free offer of grace to condemned sinners was jettisoned. This preaching, in foisting a conditional gospel upon sinners, forced sinners to engage in self-help therapy. What is more, preaching of this sort was preponderantly ethical in content.

Another strain of preaching, however, existed alongside this “ethical” preaching, namely, the preaching of the hyper-Calvinists. They engaged in what MacLeod calls an “exhibition of experimental case divinity.” That is to say, they preached to the

²⁰Boston, *Works*: 7: 485-487; also see Ferguson, tape 2.

²¹John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 145.

elect alone, rejecting the free offer of the gospel to all indiscriminately.²²

To these two types of preaching a third may be added—the preaching of the Marrow men themselves and the numerous clergymen who affirmed their position. Strongly biblical and confessional in nature, they preached the federal headship of Adam under the broken covenant of works. Nothing but the unilateral covenant of grace could rescue fallen man and place him as justified before God’s tribunal, prepared for a life of holy living. Such preaching was diametrically opposed to the ethical “therapeutic” preaching of moderates or the “case divinity” of the hyper-Calvinists.

Along with seeking to correct the above noted excesses regarding the nature of grace, the Marrow men were also men of evangelism, teaching the free offer of the gospel with great fervor and (what I judge to be) biblical balance. Some of these Scottish preachers and Marrow adherents engaged in catechetical preaching, using the Westminster Shorter Catechism as a guide. Some of these men, exhibiting literary gifts, such as Ralph Erskine, put their poetry and prose into the service of reformation goals.

In examining the preaching of the Marrow men, we limit our focus to the two areas: (1) salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and (2) the free offer of the gospel. We shall examine the preaching of each of the three leading ministers: Thomas Boston, Ebenezer, and Ralph Erskine, looking at their writings illustratively, not comprehensively.

Preaching the Gospel as Sola Gratia and Sola Fide

Thomas Boston was the distinguished leader of the Marrow men, braving the charge against the new legalism. He also exerted a positive program in his affirmation of each Reformation *sola* in salvation. Boston’s preaching was characterized by biblical and confessional faithfulness, simplicity and clarity.

²²John MacLeod, *Some Favourite Books* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 145

In a catechetical sermon entitled “the Covenant of Works,” Boston follows the biblical teaching as systematized in the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question and Answer 30, straightforwardly, clearly and cogently. He develops the doctrine of Adam’s failure to fulfill the covenant of works, thereby plunging both himself and his posterity into sin. Although Adam was created in a state of innocence, *posse peccare*, that is, able to sin (or not to sin), as federal head he brought both himself and his posterity into a state of *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin, and thereby into a state of total repugnance to God and his righteousness.

How therefore can man be saved? Boston categorically denies, in opposition to the new legalism, that man is capable of performing the smallest “work” to aid in his justification. In line with this, Boston preaches a second covenant—a covenant that is of grace alone through faith alone. The covenant of grace is God’s divine condescension to totally undeserving people. They must respond in humility and obedience to God’s unilaterally offered grace.²³ By way of application, Boston exhorts his hearers: “Therefore give over this way of seeking life by the broken covenant of works, and come to the Lord Jesus Christ; lay hold on the better covenant, and come up to Christ’s chariot (Cant. iii. 9, 10) which will drive you safely to eternal life and glory.”²⁴

The Erskine brothers, Ralph and Ebenezer, both fulminated against the new legalism. Both men, like Thomas Boston, were ministers in the Church of Scotland. While Ralph may be viewed as the preacher/poet of the Marrow Controversy, Ebenezer helped provide the movement’s sustained drive, being with Boston one of its chief spokesman.

Ralph Erskine, in a sermon on John 14:9 (“He that has seen me has seen the Father”) underscored the complete inability of man to do good works and viewed man’s unbelief as the major sin. Boston accented these same motifs. Unbelief, said Erskine, is

²³Boston, *Works*: 1: 229-241. Also see Boston’s *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* in *Works*, vol. 8.

²⁴Boston, *Works*: 1: 242.

“your sin, your leading sin, and mother of all sins: for herein lies the formal nature of unbelief, that you do not, you cannot, you will not look to Christ and be saved....”²⁵

Moreover, Ralph Erskine battled the Scottish legalists with his poetry:

Let all that love to wear the legal dress
Know that as sin, so, bastard righteousness
Has slain its thousands, who in tow’ring pride
The Righteousness of Jesus Christ deride
A robe divinely wrought, divinely won,
Yet cast aside by men for robes that are their own.²⁶

Ebenezer Erskine also taught the federal headship of Adam which brought upon his posterity the same disobedience wrought by Adam’s failure to keep the covenant of works, together with the consequent inability to keep the law or desire to trust Christ. He declares: “to take Christ and eternal life for nothing is what the proud legal heart cannot stoop to. O what a cursed aversion is there against his being a debtor unto grace, and grace only!”²⁷ Parenthetically, none of the Marrow men failed to preach or teach the third use of the law as a normative guide for the Christian. In this way they were free of the charges of antinomianism levied against them. For example, Ebenezer Erskine declared, “I am sure you will put all the honour upon the

²⁵Ralph Erskine, “The Saving Sight, or a view of God in Christ,” in *Life and Practical Works of Ralph Erskine*, vol.5, (Xenia: Board of Calvinistic Book Concern, 1844), 490. See also his “Law-Death, Gospel-life; or The Death of Legal Righteousness, the Life of Gospel Holiness,” 702ff.

²⁶Ralph Erskine, *Gospel Sonnets* (Pittsburgh, Luke Loomis, 1831), 58.

²⁷Ebenezer Erskine, “The Faith of God’s Elect,” in *The Beauties of Ebenezer Erskine* (Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton, 1830), 20; also see his, “How Christ Magnifies the Law and Makes It Honourable,” 268ff., and, “Motives to Renounce the Law of Works and to Take the Benefits of the Law of Faith,” 412ff.

law as a rule of obedience, and your gratitude to him who fulfilled the law for you as a covenant.”²⁸

The Free Offer of the Gospel

The Marrow men battled on two fronts: against the legalism of the Neonomians, who determined that man could in his post-fallen condition still do some works as preconditions to coming to Christ; and, secondly, against those whose view of predestination precluded a free-offer of the gospel.

Against the legalists who failed to consider man’s total depravity and who posited man’s ability to do good works as preparatory toward faith in Christ, the Marrow men, as shown above, denied man’s ability in any manner to satisfy the covenant of works as a pre-condition for believing in Christ. Moreover, in order to emphasize the “freeness” of the offer they everywhere declared the Reformation “grace alone through faith alone” principle. Thus the depraved nature of man necessitated a truly free gospel if man is to be saved. We see this, for example, in Boston’s sermon, “Christ’s Invitation to the Laboring and Heavy Laden.” Boston maintains that the call of the gospel certainly goes out to those who long to rid themselves of the burden of sin, and even to those who have not had a “law-work upon their conscience.”²⁹

In the heat of the General Assembly’s opposition to the theology of the Marrow men and their doctrine of the free offer (the year 1721), Boston preached a sermon, “Present Room for Sinners in Christ’s House,” based on Luke 14:22: “And yet there is room.” The doctrine found in this sermon is, in Boston’s words, “For those who have not yet embraced and closed with Christ in the offer of the gospel, yet there is room.” Boston sets forth a remarkable contrast between fallen angels, for whom

²⁸Ebenezer Erskine, “Motives to renounce the law of Works...,” in *The Beauties of Ebenezer Erskine*, 270.

²⁹Boston; *Works*: vol. 9, 173ff.

there is no room, and “damned sinners,” who may still hear the blessed and joyful voice say, “yet there is room.”³⁰

Ralph Erskine both preached and poeticized the free offer to all men: “Let me exhort you and all that hear me to come to our Lord Jesus Christ...and though the devil should throw you down and tear you up, yet Christ will lift you up and heal you.”³¹

Should a person object, however, that he may not be one of the elect, Ralph Erskine encourages him that Christ was present in the Father’s eternal council and nothing passed at that council to “prejudice any poor sinner, that would venture his soul upon the blood of the lamb.”³²

And with similar poetic encouragement the unbeliever is encouraged to believe that the gospel is for him, in a strikingly Luther-like exhortation.

Reader, into thine hands there lines are giv’n,
But not without the providence of Heav’n;
Or to advance thy bliss if thou art wise
For thee, for thee, perhaps the Omniscent ken
Has form’d the counsel here, and led the pen.³³

The Marrow men recognized that legalism produces as a corollary the denial of the free offer of the gospel. They met this denial with great fervor, indeed with the same urgency as they defended each reformation *sola*. They argued biblically and confessionally in defense of the free offer. Their opponents claimed that the gospel is offered to the elect alone. These “Moderates” took a position that Ferguson has summarized in the form of a syllogism:

Major premise: *The grace of God saves the elect only.*
Minor premise: *The elect are known by their forsaking sin.*

³⁰Boston; *Works*: vol. 3, 260ff.

³¹Ralph Erskine, “The Comers Conflict,” in *Select Sermons* (Choteau, MT: Old Paths Gospel Press, n.d), 1: 116.

³²Ralph Erskine, “The Lamb in the Midst of the Throne,” 1: 141-142.

³³Ralph Erskine, *Gospel Sonnets*, 71.

Conclusion: *The grace of God (the gospel of Christ) is given to those who forsake sin.*³⁴

This scheme raises a plethora of questions. The principal concern is that it attaches a pre-conditional obedience to the message of the gospel. In view of total depravity, this “obedience” is not possible for the sinner to perform. The effect of this scheme is to separate the *grace* of Christ from the *gospel* of Christ. The Marrow men remind us that Christ came not to save the righteous but sinners. Moreover, implicit in this syllogism is a denial of the free offer of the gospel to all.

The Marrow men opposed the presupposition embodied in the conclusion at every point. Boston, for example, argued that the offer of the gospel as a “deed of gift and grant” is offered to *sinner*s and therefore to *all*. Focusing on John 3:16, Boston maintained that if the gospel were the gospel not freely offered to all purely on the basis of grace alone through faith alone, then gospel proclamation “would be of no more value than a crier’s offering the king’s pardon to one who was not comprehended in it.”³⁵

Ralph Erskine followed suit. During the height of the conflict in 1722, he preached a sermon entitled “The Best Match,” declaring the free, unconditional offer of the gospel to all. He asked his hearers whether Christ courts them as those “able to keep his law” or as “poor heavy-laden sinners” to whom he alone is able to give rest, offering himself to them in the offer of the gospel. Erskine concludes with one of his most poignant appeals to the unbeliever: “You may say, What shall I do then that I may be married to Christ? In one Word, if you would have Christ as your husband, O then entertain his suit, and hearken to his wooing and courting motions.... O quench not this fire till you get water out of the wells of salvation.”³⁶

³⁴Ferguson, “The Marrow Controversy,” tape 1.

³⁵Boston, *Works*: 7: 263.

³⁶Ralph Erskine, “The Best Match,” in Calvinistic Family Library, 5: 201-202.

Although the Marrow men were charged with antinomianism and Amyraldianism, their teaching and preaching was, in my judgment, fully biblical and confessional. Indeed the burden of proof was upon the moderatistic, doctrinally declining Scottish Church to demonstrate that the Marrow men compromised the truth. Consequently no apodictic certainty regarding these charges ever came. By their testimony, even to the point of expulsion from the church, the Marrow men promiscuously preached and taught the gospel of free salvation, thereby restoring Reformation integrity to at least a small segment of the Scottish Church.

Given the modest aims of this article, we have been forced to omit other doctrinal issues directly tied to the Marrow controversy, such as, for example, the doctrine of assurance of salvation and the nature of the atonement. When legalism impinges itself upon the gospel, however, these issues naturally spring to life.

Epilogue

How shall we align ourselves with respect to the Marrow controversy? This is not an irrelevant question for the church today. Ferguson regards this controversy to be one of the most pastorally significant episodes in post-Reformation church history.³⁷ If his assessment is correct, we must determine where we ourselves come down with respect to these issues. Particularly we must ask ourselves whether we affirm the free offer of the gospel in relation to the doctrine of predestination. Our answer is of utmost importance. Our Lutheran brothers (though not Luther himself [cf. Pieper, *et al.*]) are quick to charge the Reformed with rationalism and precisely in denying the free offer of the gospel the “rationalist” label sticks. Lamentably, we must own that charge if we fail to reckon God’s Word and wisdom as higher than our own (see Romans 11:33-36).

³⁷Ferguson, tape 1.

Thus when God's Word affirms both election and the well-meant offer of the gospel, proper theological methodology bids us simply to believe God's revelation and act upon these truths according to the measure of revelation given to us. We do not claim to comprehend fully all that his Word teaches us. To fail to proceed along this path is sheer *hubris*. In that connection, dare we call our Lord's tears, shed over unrepentant Jerusalem, "crocodile tears?" Dare we claim to know with certainty who are the elect, apart from their having heard the free offer of the gospel, having placed their trust in Christ, and living a credible testimony?

It is much better to emulate Augustine and Calvin in their desire to see all reconciled to Christ and partakers of all his benefits. They did not arrogantly pretend to know who the elect are.³⁸ Neither do we know who the elect are. Since this is so, we proceed to preach the gospel promiscuously to all people. That gospel is not a gospel, a "good message," devoid of grace or divorced from Christ; rather, Christ is the grace offered. Christ is himself the message of the gospel; he is offered to sinners. Therefore we may not deny the offer of the gospel of grace to all sinners, for we have the warrant of God's Word (Isaiah 55:1-3; John 3:16, *passim*). Moreover, if we embrace the confessions, let us recall that our votive integrity of subscription calls us to the same faithfulness of offering the gospel to all freely (Canons of Dort, II, 5; III/IV, 8-9; Westminster Confession of Faith, 14:1-2; 15:3, Larger Catechism, Q/A 191).

³⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.14.