

## **THE MARROW CONTROVERSY #01: HISTORICAL DETAILS**

*The Marrow Controversy*

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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**Greenville Seminary & Mt. Olive**

200 E. Main St

Taylors, SC 29687

**Website:** [www.gpts.edu](http://www.gpts.edu)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But in Auchterarder itself almost nothing seems to take place that would excite the observer. But imagine, will you, for a moment that it is not the year 1800, 1980, but the year 1717. You

are present as the presbytery of Auchterarder is in session. It is set to examine a young man to be ordained to the holy ministry. In his examination he has to preach, to present certain exercises, to give a theological dissertation on a doctrinal point phrased in Latin. The trials for his license to preach the gospel are rigorous indeed.

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

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

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

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

And the Auchterarder Creed was condemned in these words, as “*unsound and detestable doctrine.*”

But neither did the matter rest there. For sitting in the assembly beside the Reverend John Drummond, a minister from the small town of Crief and the presbytery of Auchterarder, sat one of the most remarkable ministers the Church of Scotland has ever known; perhaps one of the most remarkable gospel ministers who has ever graced the face of the earth. He was at that time 41 years old, and had published his first book some 20 years before as a probational minister. That book, you may well know, bore the title, *The Art of Man Fishing*.

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

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

And here, namely, in the condemnation of that proposition, was the beginning of that torrent, that for several years after ran in the public actings of this church, against the doctrine of grace, under the name of Antinomianism... Meanwhile, at the same time sitting in the 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. 55: 1, Matt. 11: 28, with the reasons thereof; and withal to tell him of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.

Here let me break into Boston's memoirs to say that Boston had struggled with the issues of the Law and the Gospel in his earlier ministry. And about the year 1700 as he was visiting one of his parishioners, he spied a book on the parishioner's bookshelf entitled, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. He took it down and read it, and discovered that it spoke to his heart and to

the situation of his own ministry. He imbibed its teaching, and he began to expound that Marrow of Modern Divinity during his own ministry.

But let him continue his story.

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

There was no difference in those days from today.

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

Later on in the year 1721, Boston's friends urged him to write notes from *The Marrow* and he did; and these were published with *The Marrow* in 1726. But already so great was the influence of the teaching of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, that in 1720 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed an act prohibiting ministers, either by preaching or writing, from recommending *The Marrow* or from saying anything in its favor. On the contrary, if ministers discovered any of their members reading it, they were to warn them of its dangers and urge them neither to use it, nor to read it.

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

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

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

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

The first part, the more important part of *The Marrow*, deals with the biblical relationship between the Law and the Gospel. And the second part deals with the exposition of the Ten Commandments.

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

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

Now if we are to profit from a discussion of the themes arising out of the Marrow Controversy, it is important for us, I believe, to grasp what it was that concerned these great men of God in

the 18th century. Boston says, you remember, that he agreed with the tenor of the Auchterarder Creed, although he felt it had perhaps been imperfectly worded. And what emerges in a study of those days and the writings of these men is this: that on the one hand, the Marrow Men were being accused of Antinomianism. On the other hand, the condemners of the Marrow doctrine and the Auchterarder Creed were guilty of legalism. And at the root of the matter — as the Marrow Men themselves recognized — at the root of the matter lay neither legalism nor Antinomianism, but the question of the nature of the grace of God in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's a very interesting thing to know that the very same General Assembly which dealt so harshly with Marrow doctrine, lightly passed over a serious case of Arminianism that ultimately was to grow into a form of Arianism. And this is why Boston, who wasn't at all given to controversy, took arms against what he saw to be false doctrine. He saw that what was at stake at the end of the day was not the merits or the demerits of a human publication, not the expressions of some human creed, but the gospel itself, and the free grace of God *in* the gospel.

Listen to how he puts it in his Memoirs:

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

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

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

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

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

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

And since, as you will see from our program, Dr. DeWitt is to be dealing with the whole area of assurance and counsel on assurance, I suggest to you that we limit ourselves in these studies in these mornings to the first, the third, and the fourth: the question of the grace of God and the offer of the gospel; the answer of grace to legalism; and the answer of grace to Antinomianism. And so I want, if I may and if you will come with me, to consider in the rest of *this* session the question of the nature of the grace of God in the offer of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I've already tried to labor for you that the Marrow Controversy, from the point of view of these Marrow Men, was not about some means of expressing the Gospel, but about the very heart of the Gospel itself. What they were concerned to do was to safeguard the grace of God; that is, to safeguard the truth and the revelation of God about himself. But of course ostensibly, as many of you will know, the Marrow Controversy was about the *offer* of the gospel. And it's very clear, both from the questions that were put to the Marrow Men, and from many of the things that were written at that time, that it was the semantics of the *presentation* of the Gospel that some

men believed to be under question. The Marrow Men were in no doubt whatsoever that what was at stake was not a form of expression, but the very heart of the gospel itself.

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

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 of Christ unto all mankind? Is this grant to all mankind by sovereign grace? And whether it is absolute, or conditional?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And secondly, it preserved the New Testament's emphasis not only on the *fullness* of the grace of Christ, but of the *freeness* of the grace of Christ. And hence Boston's agreement with the

Auchterarder Creed, that it is not sound to say that a man must first quit sin in order to be qualified for the offer of the gospel that will lead him to Christ. For the offer of the gospel is not only a message about the fullness of Christ for all who will come, it is a message about the free grace of our Lord Jesus Christ bestowed not upon the righteous, but upon the unrighteous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quite so and quite right.

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

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

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

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

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

Now the really interesting thing is this, you see, that it was precisely at this point that reformed theology began to fall into the categories of Arminianism. Do you notice this? It began to theologize with the same basic premises. Well what does the Arminian say when he hears about election and particular redemption? He says, “If the benefits of Christ’s death are thus particularized, if there is distinguishing grace like this, then I can no longer say to man, ‘Christ died for you.’ How then can I evangelize them? Where is the gospel if I cannot say, ‘The benefits of Christ are for you.’ My gospel is gone.”

And we all lovingly take such brethren aside and we turn them to the pages of the New Testament, and we say, “My brother, the great apostolic message is not merely the offering of the benefits of Christ to men; it is the exalting of Christ as the only name given under heaven whereby men may be saved. It is Christ *himself* who is the gospel.” And, you see, it is the separation of the *benefits* of the gospel, from *Christ* who *is* the gospel, that is the father and mother of so much of this Arminian theology, and so much of this second blessing theology, so

much of this theology that leads us to Christ as Savior; that is, receive his benefits now, and then thereafter receive him as Lord.

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

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

“I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and has revealed them to babes, for such was thy gracious will.”<sup>1</sup>

*Unconditional* election. Now he pleads, “Come to *me* all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and from *me* you will find rest for your souls. You will discover a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light.”<sup>2</sup>

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

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

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

Now in a sense we have already hinted at the disastrous results of the separation of Christ and his benefits. What happens is that if Christ’s benefits are offered and held forth, without Christ himself being held forth, those benefits must be held forth *on condition*. “You may know these benefits,” it came to be said, “*if* you are among the elect. You may receive forgiveness *if* you have sufficiently forsaken sin. You may know the message of grace, *if* you have known a sufficient degree of conviction.”

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

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

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

Because it is possible, I believe, so to join the Puritan tradition of theology, with the understanding of the gospel of the natural man that we all once were, so that quite explicitly in

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<sup>1</sup> Mat 11.25.

<sup>2</sup> Mat 11.28



our preaching we make the free offer of the Lord Jesus Christ *conditional* upon the degree of conviction which our hearers feel. We make conviction a condition which men must meet, rather than a *means* which God will use to bring them to Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

The young man was rather abashed.

“But did you not,” the young man asked, “go through any Slough of Despond?”

Yes, I did, but I found it a great deal easier going through it with my burden off than with it on my back.”

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

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

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

In his gracious Providence, God mightily uses conviction of sin in various ways, and to various degrees, to bring men and women to his Son; but he never bids us to go to preach conviction of sin as the *warrant* of faith. He bids us go and freely offer Jesus Christ in all his sufficiency as the warranty of faith to any man, to come and bow before him as a suppliant penitent, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there is another vital level to this distortion that takes place in the very character of God. And that I believe lies in our thinking of God the Father as the source of redemption. We all know and shy back from that preaching of the message of the cross that appears to make Christ the Son, persuade an unwilling Father to be gracious to sinners. We shy away from that preaching of the cross that seems to make the grace of God to lost sinners conditional; that seems to say that God only has a heart of grace towards us because God twisted his heart round

through his Son; or perhaps, even worse, that his Son twisted the Father's unwilling heart towards sinners.

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

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

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

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

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

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

If one may bring the Marrow Controversy down to its starkest, it was this: the issue that arose between the Marrow Men and those who denigrated them, was the very issue that arose between our blessed Lord Jesus Christ and the Pharisees. Both believed in the holiness of God; both believed in predestination and election; both believed in the law of God and its application. But the Pharisees believed and taught *conditional* grace, and therefore, a *conditional* God. And our Lord Jesus brought down upon them the woes of the judgment seat of God. Because at the end of the day, they were not only distorting the gospel, they were distorting the character of his Father in heaven; and he was jealous for the loving, gracious, free character of his holy Father. And so he brought down upon them his *dominical anathema*.<sup>3</sup>

You see, the Pharisees preached that men could be saved if they met conditions; and Jesus preached that he would save those who could meet *no* conditions. Jesus' message was "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come buy and eat; and

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<sup>3</sup> **Mat 23.13.35** (*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees...*).

come buy wine and milk without money and without price,”<sup>4</sup> — unconditional grace from an unconditional God.

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

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

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

How few of the saints are experimentally<sup>5</sup> acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love? With what anxious doubtful thought do they look upon Him? What fears, what questionings are there of his good will and kindness? At the best, many think there is no sweetness at all in God towards us but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus. It is true, that alone is the way of communication; but the free fountain and spring of all is in the bosom of the Father.<sup>6</sup>

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

And that brings us very briefly to the final point. We’ve seen the dangers of this wrong understanding of the gospel that the Marrow Men controverted. It separates the benefits of Christ’s work from his person as Savior and Lord. It renders the offer of the gospel conditional rather than free. It distorts the very nature and character of the grace of God himself. And the *fourth thing* — and for us one of the most salient — is this, that at the end of the day, it distorts the nature of the pastoral ministry.

You see, what had happened amongst these men in the early decades of the 18th century was this: they had mastered the pattern by which grace works; there wasn’t a comma in the *ordo salutis* with which they were not familiar; they knew their Confession of Faith forwards and backwards and upside down — and yet, while they were familiar with the pattern by which grace works and had mastered it, they had never really been mastered by the grace of God in the gospel, in their hearts. They knew what John Owen calls the distinction between the knowledge of the truth, and the knowledge of the *power* of the truth.<sup>7</sup> They were masters of Calvinism who had never been mastered. They were Calvinists with the minds and hearts of natural men, at least as far as these truths were concerned.

Why is that so significant for us in the pastoral ministry? For this reason, beloved, because men who have only a conditional offer of the gospel, will have only a conditional gospel; the man who has only a conditional gospel knows only conditional grace; and the man who knows only conditional grace knows only a conditional God; and the man who has only a conditional God will have a conditional ministry to his fellow men. And at end of the day, he will only be able to

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<sup>4</sup> Isa 55.1.

<sup>5</sup> Experimentally.

<sup>6</sup> John Owen, *Communion with God*, Part I, “Communion with the Father”, chap. 4.1.

<sup>7</sup> More precisely, Owen drew a distinction between an *intellectual* knowledge of the truth, and an *experiential* knowledge of the *power* of that truth through God’s Spirit. “All the things mentioned as worked instrumentally by the word are *effects* of the power of the *Spirit* of God. The word itself, under a bare proposal to the minds of men, will not so affect them.” *Pneumatologia* (London, 1674), Book III, ch. II, pp. 235-236.

give his heart, and his life, and his time, and his devotion to his people... *on condition*. And he will love and master the truth of the great doctrines of grace, but until grace in God himself masters him, the grace that has mastered him will never flow from him to his people; and he will become a Jonah in the 20th century, sitting under his tree with a heart that is shut up against sinners in need of grace, because he thinks of God in conditional terms.

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

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

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

You see, my friends, as we think together in these days about a Godly pastor... What is a Godly pastor? A godly pastor is one who is like *God*, who has a heart of free grace running after sinners. The godly pastor is the one who sees the prodigal returning, and *runs* and *falls* on his neck and *weeps* and *kisses* him; and says, "This my son was dead; he was lost and now he is alive and found."

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

Let us pray!

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

## **THE MARROW CONTROVERSY #02: THE DANGER OF LEGALISM**

*The Marrow Controversy*

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

**Preached on:** Tuesday, February 3, 2004

**Greenville Seminary & Mt. Olive**

200 E. Main St

Taylors, SC 29687

**Website:** [www.gpts.edu](http://www.gpts.edu)

**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/gpts](http://www.sermonaudio.com/gpts)

[Some of you] no doubt have in recent years purchased those two volumes of the works of Robert Traill and perused them with some interest; and you may know these words that appertain to the subject with which we are to deal this morning. In one of those several majestic works that he wrote, this particular one bearing the succinct title, *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine Concerning Justification and of its Preachers and Professors from the Unjust Charge of Antinomianism in a Letter from the Author to a Minister in the Country*, Robert Traill has this very striking and important thing to say,

That which concerneth our case is that the middle way betwixt the Arminians and the orthodox had been espoused and strenuously defended and promoted by some non-conformists of great note for piety and parts; and usually such men that are for middle-ways in points of doctrine, have a greater kindness for that extreme to which they halfway go, than for that from which they halfway come.

And it was something of that subtle order of things that you and I have often recognized as we have looked upon Christendom, and as we have looked perhaps upon our own people, that was beginning to happen in the days of the Marrow Controversy. We saw very briefly in our first study yesterday, that on the day the General Assembly had condemned the Auchterarder Creed and condemned those who were to follow it, known as the Marrow Men, two cases had in fact appeared before the assembly for jurisdiction.

The Auchterarder creed on the one hand — taken and condemned — but on the same day, John Simpson, professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow, had been accused of propagating Arminianism. His case had dragged on since the year 1715. Indeed there can be very little doubt that he had given vocal expression to Arminianism in contradiction of the confession of the church; and he was later it seems, in his own peculiar way, to teach Arianism.

But in effect, Simpson received little more than a rap over the knuckles and was acquitted with a warning. I quote, "...not to attribute too much to natural reason and the power of corrupt nature, to the disparagement of revelation and efficacious free grace." And yet despite the wording of the churches and the assembly's rebuke, where the fathers and brethren really stood on that occasion, was far more evident from their harsh reaction to the Marrow doctrine, than from their relatively sympathetic reaction to Arminianism, even though that Marrow doctrine had been sharply, and perhaps unhappily, expressed.

And the truth of the matter, historically speaking, was that this Presbyterian Church was on a doctrinal and spiritual slope. It was falling away from the wonders of free grace, towards the bondage of Legalism; and it was gaining momentum with every turn on the way down. It was, therefore, as you see from Traill's comments, showing greater kindness to an Arminianism which proved to be a halfway house to full blown Legalism, and allowed some place for the works and righteousness of man in the great work of salvation. Its confession taught that

salvation was by free grace and free grace *alone*; and to that confession, to a man, the general assembly gave verbal assent and consent. And all the while the members' hearts, many of them, were the stony hearts of men hurtling towards a most subtle and dangerous form of Legalism.

And what we are therefore dealing with when we come to study together some of the pastoral lessons which arise from the Marrow Controversy is, as I suggested yesterday, the dangers of *Legalism* on the one hand, and the danger on the other of *Antinomianism*. That danger that I want us to address ourselves to this morning is the danger of Legalism. And I do so, among many other reasons because, as God willing we shall discover tomorrow, it is impossible for us ever to understand the nature of Antinomianism, until we have first understood the nature of Legalism.

And this was the great concern, I say to you this morning, of the Marrow Men in the 18th century. They had begun with these spiritual antennae that God had given them to detect the presence of a legal strain in the thinking, and then in the preaching, of professing Calvinists. And they saw clearly in the Assembly's reaction to the Auchterarder Creed, that the storms of Legalism they had detected coming over the horizon, were now ready to burst in a great cloud to cover over the sunshine of the glory of the free grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I want to say to you, brethren, that increasingly I feel and believe we all ought to feel that this is a matter of *immense* practical and pastoral importance and relevance. When we are speaking of Legalism, we are not speaking about some curiosity that belongs to the schools — some remote recondite academic problem that could never touch *us* in *our* pastoral situation; that could never touch us who have come to an understanding of free grace. When we address ourselves to the condition known as Legalism and that legal frame, we are speaking about one of the most subtle and all pervasive influences that can ever twist a man's soul away from the God of grace and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want to say to you brethren today, that when we consider Legalism, there is a sense in which we are considering *the* ultimate pastoral problem of all; because what we seek to do is, we seek to bring men from Legalism into free grace; is to undo what Satan did in the Garden of Eden when he persuaded Man that God was not only a God of *moral* law, written in man's being, of *positive* law expressed in the vocalized commandments of God; but when Satan came and sought to persuade that man and woman, that the God whom they had come to know and worship, was a God of essentially legalistic and binding tendencies, of narrow and restrictive spirit, shutting man into a way of self-merited justification, with no gracious promise — as what lies at the back of Satan's words to these our parents in the Garden of Eden when he said, "Did God say you cannot eat of any, *any* fruit of *any* of the trees of the Garden?" — he was simply seeking to persuade Adam and Eve that the God who reigns in glory above, is a God who seeks to bind his creatures with a spirit of legal framework in their relationship to him, and perverts the free grace of God. "You may eat of the tree of any of these in the garden, but this *one* in which I establish my moral law."

And so with this persuasion of Legalism, persuasion of the narrow, restricted, restrictive, legalistic heart of God, as Satan sought to pervert it. The very first pastoral matter that needed to be dealt with in the history of the human race was the matter of a legal frame and bondage to a legal spirit. Because at the end of the day, you see brethren, it is Satan who is a legalist — if I may so express it — it is Satan who has taken the gracious promise of God in the Garden of Eden, and turned it into what has sometimes been regarded as the baneful and malignant influences of a covenant of works; that which is held out to us, if we so understand it, in these early chapters of a gracious promise of life, a covenant of life. And how often Satan has come — and especially in those who have been adversaries of reformed theology and seen in what has become known as the covenant of works, a restrictive and a restricting and a legalistic God.

So that what we deal with when we speak about Legalism, is something that is embedded in the heart of man almost from the very day of his creation. And that is why in this matter we need the wisdom of Solomon if we are *truly* to be pastors and nursing mothers to the children of God. And my dear brothers in the gospel, we come to recognize that this situation with which we deal, of seeking to bring the gospel of grace to those who are of a legal frame, is all the more complicated because we who bring such a gospel of free grace to them come often ourselves with a legal frame in our own hearts.

And so we give attention to some of the most important areas of our pastoral work, and we discover, do we not, that when we are faced with practical Antinomianism, or what you Americans call “easy believism”, so often our instinctive response is the response of Legalism, rather than the response of free grace. So this is not a matter for the schools, my brothers. It is not merely a matter for our congregations. This is a matter for our own hearts. And it was as these Marrow Men found their own hearts *exposed* before the power of the grace of God, and were delivered from their natural Legalism — and every single one of them confesses by nature he was a legalist, as we ourselves do — we find that this indeed is meat and drink for the pastoral ministry.

Now there are five areas, God helping us, that I want us to address ourselves to this morning. *First* of all, we will consider together the nature of Legalism. *Secondly*, the specific development of Legalism to the time of the Marrow Controversy. *Thirdly*, we will look at some of the causes of Legalism. *Fourthly*, we will look at the pastoral dangers of Legalism. And *fifthly*, we will seek to look at the Biblical remedy for Legalism. Unless you think you would be quicker if you got that copy of *The Marrow* at the back and read it through for yourself, let me say that we will only be able to deal with these five points in a very hasty manner.

First of all, then, the nature of Legalism. You will discover I’m sure, in your dictionaries, that they tend to define Legalism in terms of a straightforward doctrine of justification by works, rather than justification by grace. But of course, as you know in your own ministry, things are rarely as straightforward as the dictionaries define them. And since the days of the Marrow Men, and the days of the Apostle, and since the days of our own blessed Savior here upon the Earth, it has frequently been discovered that Legalism takes many forms and has many faces.

The essence of Legalism, whatever face it may wear, is that, at the end of the day, it proves to be a distortion of the grace of God. And for that reason, as you will often have noticed, Legalism is also necessarily not only a distortion of the gospel but, by its very nature, it must be a distortion of the Law. And you will remember when Paul sets out in his letters to Rome and Galatia, for example, to deal a death blow to Legalism, he does not do so at the expense of the Law.

“Do we overthrow the Law by this teaching of grace through faith?” he asks in Romans 3. “By no means!” On the contrary, grace does not overthrow the Law. The reverse — grace *confirms* the law. It is Legalism that destroys grace, and it is Legalism that we shall see that also distorts Law from its original God-given character and function.

Take, for example, the Pharisees. In the evangelical tradition, these men have often been presented in popular preaching as men whose creed was a straightforward form of works righteousness. But you well know that their true theological and practical position was infinitely more subtle than that. Just as the true position of Roman dogma is never presented as straightforward works-righteousness, but is always disguised in an infinitely more subtle form. The Pharisees did not so much oppose the way of works to the way of grace, *simpliciter*, but rather so often mixed the way of works with the way of grace.

The same is true, as you’ll recall, in the epistle to the Galatians. And Paul has to argue to the logical conclusion of mixing grace with works is to destroy grace. But the position the



Galatians believed they held was not a denial of grace, but a *mingling* of grace with works that was indeed a denial of grace. Listen to these words of John Colquhoun<sup>8</sup> of Leith, a Marrow Man, as many of you may know, born out of due season, writing in one of his fine works, *The Law and The Gospel*, he says this:

A man is to be counted a legalist or self righteous if, while he does not pretend that his obedience is perfect, he yet relies on it for a title to life. Self-righteous men have in all ages set aside as impossible to be fulfilled by them, that condition of the covenant of works which God had imposed on Adam; and have framed for themselves various *models* of that covenant, which, though they are far from being institutions of God, and stand upon terms lower than perfect obedience, yet are of the nature of a covenant of works. The unbelieving Jews who sought righteousness by the works of the Law were not so very ignorant or presumptuous as to pretend to *perfect* obedience. Neither did those professed Christians in Galatia, who desired to be under the Law and to be justified by the Law, of whom the Apostle therefore testified that they had fallen from grace, presume to plead that they could yield *perfect* obedience.

On the contrary, their public profession showed that they had some sense of their need of Christ's righteousness; but their great error was this: they did not believe that the righteousness of Jesus Christ *alone* was sufficient to entitle them to the justification of life. And, therefore, they depended for justification *partly* upon their own obedience to the moral and the ceremonial law. It was *this*, and not their pretensions to perfect obedience, that the Apostle had in view when he blamed them for cleaving to the law of works, and for expecting justification by the works of the Law.

By relying for justification partly on their own works of obedience to the moral and ceremonial laws, they, as the apostle informed them, were fallen from grace. Christ was become of no effect to them, and they were debtors to the whole law. You see he pushes them to the logical conclusion of their position, which they failed to see in their joining of works and grace. By depending for justification partly on their imperfect obedience to the law, they framed the law into a covenant of works, and such a covenant of works too as could admit of imperfect instead of perfect obedience. And by relying partly on the righteousness of Christ, they mingled the law with the gospel, and works with faith, in the affair of justification. Thus, they perverted *both* the law *and* the gospel. And formed for themselves a motley covenant of works.

And this is the very distortion that we generally face when we preach the gospel to the natural man. And it is a very subtle distortion of the truth indeed, and it is compounded, you see, in our pastoral work by this fact — that we encounter not only what we might call a *doctrinal* Legalism, but there is also sometimes accompanying it, and frequently separate from it, an *experimental* Legalism. It is possible, as we all well know, to have a legal head and a legal heart; but it is also possible to have an evangelical head and a legal heart. And it was this very position that the Marrow Men found themselves controverting.

And that is why one of the problems of the Marrow Controversy was that their opponents professed the most thoroughgoing orthodoxy this world has ever seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith — men who tenaciously, as I said yesterday, subscribed to reformed and evangelical theology in its most comprehensive and potentially most powerful form. And that was why it took a creed like the Auchterarder Creed, and a book like *The Marrow*, the free grace of God expressed in perhaps clumsy and certainly in radical terms, to smoke out of the dark burrows of Legalism, the hearts of men with an orthodox theology, and a legal spirit.

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<sup>8</sup> Pronounced *Ka-hoon*.

And in that sense, what *The Marrow* itself, and the Auchterarder Creed, and the Marrow Controversy did was this: these things acted, as it were, like a piece of litmus paper, of no great significance in and of themselves; but demonstrating by their touch whether there was the presence of acid or alkaline, grace or Legalism. These men, the Marrow Men themselves, were neither Legalists nor Antinomians; but the moment their teaching, in all its radical form, touched the heart of men that *were*, they were inevitably shown in their true colors.

And so we may say that Legalism is any teaching which either distorts the free grace of God in the gospel, or distorts the true nature of God's grace in the law, or even fails to place the gracious law of God in its proper place in redemptive history. And it was on all these fronts that the Marrow Men wrote in polemic fashion for the free grace of God.

So there, briefly, is the nature of Legalism, or we might even say the natures of Legalism. Now, in the second place, let me say something about the development of Legalism in the period of *The Marrow*.

The reason the Auchterarder Creed — “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ” — the reason that created so much consternation, was because it struck exposed nerves in legalistic hearts. Over the years in the reformed tradition, certainly in Scotland and possibly elsewhere, there had taken place an unnoticed but very real change in the reformed *ordo salutis*,<sup>9</sup> or the personal experience of the benefits of redemption.

What the Auchterarder Creed was saying was this — that in the preaching and proclamation of the gospel, it is ever *grace* that precedes faith, that repentance is a condition neither of the gospel offer, nor is it indeed, strictly speaking, to be considered a condition of salvation. In pristine reformed theology, as you will probably know, repentance, for example in Calvin, was never seen as a *cause* of grace, nor as a *condition* of grace, but always as the *consequence* of grace. And it was the overcoming of this truly evangelical order that led to truly evangelical repentance, which was at the heart of the controversy in the early 18th century in Scotland.

Now, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* already in the 17th century had puts its finger on exactly this point. It suffered, of course, from the traditional divisions of the Puritans. But in Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 3, Subsection 4, the following conversation is recorded between *Evangelista*, the minister or pastor, and *Nomista*, the legalist.

Nomista speaks first.

But yet sir, you see that Christ requires a thirsting before a man come unto him, but which, I conceive, cannot be without true repentance.

The pastor replies.

In the last chapter of the Revelation, verse 17, Christ makes the same general proclamation saying, ‘Let him that is athirst come.’ And as if the Holy Ghost had so long since answered the same objection that is yours, it follows in the next words, ‘And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely, even without thirsting if he will,’ John 6:37. But because it seems you conceive he ought to repent before he believes, I pray you tell me, what do you conceive repentance to be, or wherein does it consist?

And you will notice already here, if I may interject, that subtle confusion that has so often taken place in reformed thinking between *conviction of sin*, and *repentance from sin*.

And Legalist replies.

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<sup>9</sup> The order of salvation: election, predestination, calling, regeneration, conversion (faith & repentance), justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification.

Why, I conceive that repentance consists in a man humbling himself before God and sorrowing and grieving for offending Him by sins, and then turning from them all to the Lord.

*Evangelista.* And would you have a man do all this truly before he comes to Christ by believing?

*Legalist.* Yes indeed, I think it is very meet [i.e. fitting] he should.

*Evangelista.* Why, then, I tell you truly, you would have him do that which is impossible. For first of all, godly humiliation and true penitence proceeds from the love of God their good Father, and so from the hatred of that sin which has displeased him; and this cannot be without faith. Secondly, sorrow and grief for displeasing God necessarily argue the *love* of God; and it is impossible we should ever love God till by faith we know ourselves loved *by* God. Thirdly, no man can turn to God except he be first turned of God. And after he is turned, he repents. So Ephraim says, 'After I was converted I repented,' Jeremiah 31:19.

The truth is, a repentant sinner first believes that God will do that which he promises — namely, pardon his sin and take away his iniquity — then he rests in the hope of it. And from that, and for it, he leaves sin and will forsake his old course — because it is displeasing to God — and will do that which is pleasing and acceptable to him so that, first of all, God's favor is apprehended, and remission of sins *believed*. Then upon *that* come alteration of life and conversion.

And to these words, Thomas Boston set his seal. He indicates in lengthy notes that this is his understanding of the way of salvation. And I want to try to show you briefly this morning that this is also the position of the man from whom so many of us take our name, nickname though it so often be, so that we may be in no doubt as to the reformed pedigree of this great emphasis on the free grace of God that brings us to repentance.

You well know that Calvin's presupposition — as that of all good reformed divines — is this: that we cannot divide faith and repentance chronologically. The true Christian believes penitently and he repents believably. But in the order of nature, Calvin argues, repentance can never precede faith. In the order of nature, the only way we can conceive it is that faith precedes repentance — in the order of nature, I say, never in the order of chronology — just as grace and regeneration precede faith.

Listen to Calvin.

Both repentance and forgiveness of sins, that is, newness of life and free reconciliation, are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith.

And again:

It ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly *follows* faith, but is also *born* of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself then, from the errors of his past life into the right way, and apply his whole effort to the *practice* of repentance. There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith rather than flows from it, or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance, and are moved to feel this way by an unduly slight argument.

And again:

When we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to the birth; but we do mean to show that a man cannot apply

himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace.

What then *is it*? What doctrine *is it* that *The Marrow* and the Auchterarder Creed and the Marrow Men so strenuously opposed? It was essentially, at the root of the matter, a failure to be biblically evangelical. It was certainly, undoubtedly, a failure to be reformed in the most in-depth sense; because they saw the Legalism that was rising to be a subtle falling back into the old Medieval pattern of salvation by works, against which Calvin and Luther fought tooth and nail: penitence meriting grace, penitence meriting forgiveness.

However carefully that change in the *ordo salutis* was disguised under the canopy of a reformed title, repentance that merited grace, in the eyes of the Marrow Men, was the same thing as bondage and Legalism.

My brothers, I wonder if something of the power of this has gripped and grasped our own souls. It's already there, as I say again to you, in the parable of the prodigal son — or as we might well call it, the parable of the free-grace father — the prodigal, the sinner who is welcomed home. And you can see him, can you not, wondering in his heart, "Have I felt sorrowfully enough for my sin in order that my Father may accept me? Have I repented enough for my sin in order that my Father may accept me?"

But, you see, it is the knowledge of the supplies of grace that there are in the heart and the house of his father, that bring the man to himself in the first place, and *then* begin to draw him home. And in the father's arms as he is drawn to his bosom, any talk of conditions that must be met to qualify for the unmerited love his father pours upon him, are silenced in the loving embrace in the bosom of the father.

And yet in that same father's heart lurks anxiety for his firstborn.

"Did not *I* meet all the conditions? Have not *I* merited the ring and the robe and the fattened calf and the feast? Did I not *merit* them?"

"Oh," says the Father, "it is all yours unconditionally and freely, but your legal heart will never set you free to enjoy it. You will only take free grace on condition that you have merited it. And on those conditions you can never have it."

Brethren, I scarcely need to underline for you that there is always the danger that the spirit of the elder brother, the spirit of the Legalist, will invade both the preaching of the free grace of God, and our pastoral application of it to the flock of God.

So we consider briefly something of the nature of Legalism, something of the development of Legalism in those days of the Marrow Controversy. And in the third place we give attention to what I have called *the causes of Legalism*.

One of the plain facts which began to emerge from the Marrow Controversy was that Legalism could almost always be traced back to the same basic principles, no matter what particular face or mask it might wear. And we have time to consider only three of these. They may not be the most common in your experience — in some ways they may not be the most important — but they are three very *real* causes of Legalism, at all times and in all places in the hearts of God's people.

And it will be clear as we look at them, I believe, that when we come to deal pastorally with Legalism, we will find some evidence of these causes needing to be rooted out of the hearts of our people. And we will need to know, brothers, what maladies may be brought to the birth by a spirit of Legalism, why they are there, and what gracious medicine the gospel provides to deliver men and women, and yes, boys and girls, from such malignant spiritual disease.

What are three of the causes of Legalism in the hearts of men, and even in the hearts of God's people?

A first cause of Legalism is a failure truly to grasp that justification is by free grace, and received by faith.

You remember it was Martin Luther who said that justification was the standing or falling article of the Church; but, brethren, it is also the standing or falling article of the individual believer. And the strength or weakness of our grasp of justification by faith, and its domination of our hearts, is bound to be the index and the measure of the liberty of God's children that we enjoy.

You remember the apostle's burning passion to make free justification, by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, *the* foundation-stone of the gospel. And you remember the great blessings he promises it brings: peace with God, joy in tribulations, joy in the hope of the glory of God, joy in God Himself, no condemnation for the believer, no prison cell existence, no spirit of bondage. "For what the Law could not do in that it was weak through our flesh, God has done sending his Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin, and for sin condemning sin in the flesh, that those who walk in the Spirit might have the just requirement of the Law fulfilled in them"<sup>10</sup> In the total liberty of the bondage of the yoke of Christ, there is no *room* for Legalism. Boasting is excluded, says the apostle. On what principle? On the principle of works? NO! he says, not even on the principle of works; but on the principle of the free grace of God.

And these are some of the glorious fine declarations that we proclaim to lost men and women: that God in Christ reconciled the world to himself, and comes offering armloads of free grace to any who will come.

But we would be very naive to assume that evangelical or even Reformed people have grasped this the way they need to. Beloved, the sooner we learn in our ministries that it is not teaching on the so-called "deeper truths" of the Christian life that our people need the better. It is the uncovering of the mighty power of God in these fundamental truths of the gospel, that will lead our people out into such heartfelt liberty that they will cry, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his Holy Name,"<sup>11</sup> that I am a justified and *eternally* justified sinner by the grace of God in Christ; and I am *free* from the condemnation of the Law to serve him for his glory.

And yet, you see, the spirit of Legalism so easily creeps into our thinking, particularly in two areas. It is so easy for the legal spirit, my brothers, to creep into our thinking about the gospel offer.

You know Samuel Rutherford, than whom surely there has never been a more intellectual experimental Calvinist, once said this. I put this to you as the litmus paper of Samuel Rutherford:

*"The reprobate hath the same warrant to believe in Christ as the elect." The reprobate hath the same warrant to believe in Christ as the elect.*

You see, it is nothing less than that kind of extreme statement of the free offer of the gospel, that unravels whether our hearts still smack of that legalistic framework that we introduce an "if" and a "but" into our offer of the gospel of Christ to lost sinners. Let me quote to you again from Traill's fine work on justification:

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<sup>10</sup> Rom 8.3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Psa 103.1,

Is it desired that we should forbear to make a free offer of God's grace in Christ to the worst of sinners? This *cannot* be granted by us, for this is the gospel "faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation" (and therefore worthy of all our preaching of it), "that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and the chief of them."<sup>12</sup> This was the apostolic practice... They began at Jerusalem, where the Lord of life was wickedly slain by them; and yet life in and through his blood was offered to, and accepted and obtained by many of them.

— with the blood of our Saviour on their hands. The free offer of Jesus Christ was made to such Jerusalem sinners. And so, says Traill, would we unconditionally offer Christ to Jerusalem sinners:

Shall we tell men, that unless they be holy, they must not believe on Jesus Christ? that they must not venture on Christ for salvation till they be qualified and fit to be received and welcomed by him? This were to forbear preaching the gospel at *all*, or to *forbid* all men to believe on Christ. For never was any sinner qualified for Christ. He is well qualified for us (1 Cor. 1:30); but a sinner out of Christ has no qualification for Christ but sin and misery... Nay, suppose an impossibility, that a man were qualified for Christ; I boldly assert that such a man would not, nor could ever believe on Christ, — for faith is a lost, helpless, condemned sinner's casting himself on Christ for salvation, and the qualified man is no such person.

Shall we warn people that they should not believe on Christ *too soon*? It is impossible that they should do it too soon. Can a man obey the great gospel-command *too soon*? or do the great work of God *too soon*?<sup>13</sup>

Oh, Beloved, let us not put stumbling blocks in the way of Jerusalem sinners. But Legalism, you see, creeps not only into our thinking about the *offer of the gospel*; it also creeps into our thinking about the *character of sanctification*. And you remember that this is what was happening in the churches at Galatia and Colosse, those letters in which Paul has such striking things to say about the relationship of the believer to the Law. It was Legalism in the heart that was at the root of the distortion of the gospel in Galatia. They had begun with the Spirit who was fulfilling in them the things the Law required, and now they were ending with the flesh. They had begun with faith, but now they were seeking a sanctification which had works as its foundation, and merited favor with God as a result.

And the same basic principle was operated in Colosse. *There* was the promise made of a second blessing, a fullness not hitherto known by justifying faith. But what was this second blessing rooted in? It was rooted in that deviation that has ever since haunted evangelical churches like a specter — *Legalism*. Merit the second blessing by obedience to the Law, and what does it do? Says Paul, it detracts from the fullness of our Lord Jesus Christ for justification, and at the end of the day, it has no power to mortify sin, but only serves to indulge it. For this reason, it is legalistic, based on works, and therefore fleshly and carnal, and never spiritual and gracious.

So the first cause of Legalism often, theologically speaking, is a failure to grasp the sheer liberating power of the truth that justification is *sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo*. It is by grace *alone!* It is received through faith *alone* unmixed with works. It is to be found in Christ *alone*, who is full of grace for Jerusalem sinners.

But a second cause of Legalism is this — a failure to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works, and the law as a rule of life.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Tim. 1:15

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 3:23; John 6:28, 29.

Now that, of course, as you immediately recognize, is the language of *The Marrow*, of the Marrow Men, and of the whole Westminster Confession tradition of theology. So says the Confession, “True believers be not under the law as a covenant of works to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others as a rule of life.”<sup>14</sup>

Now beloved, whether we as individuals employ this time-honored language of the covenant of works or not — which is certainly not the issue we are presently discussing — the point that is being made is surely clear enough. Legalism arises not only out of a distortion of the grace of God in justification. It arises when a man looks upon the law of God as though it itself were the way of works-righteousness. We could put it this way: that Legalism arises when we fail to see the difference between the gracious *covenant* of law that God made with men at Sinai, and a *contract* of law by which we bargain with God as a way of salvation. His covenant is his free, sovereign, gracious disposition, his self-giving, his “whole-souled self-giving,” as Professor Murray used to say. And a contract is a bargain negotiated on agreed terms for salvation.

Now Sinai was *never* such a contract. It was never a legalistic bargain expounding conditions for grace. It always was and remains the word of God’s unconditional grace,

“I am the Lord who brought you out of land of bondage out of the house of Egypt.”

And his unconditioned demands.

“Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.”

And, you see, this is why the Marrow Men and we who follow them, if we do, needed to learn to press home upon their people not only the message of free justification by the grace of God, but to press home upon the people the free grace of God in the giving of the Sinaitic law. For until they are persuaded that the grace of God has been deposited in his Law as well as in his Gospel, they will never find anything at Sinai but thunder and lightning and eternal judgment.

Listen again, will you, to John Colquhoun.

The distinction of the divine law, especially unto the law as a covenant of works and as a rule of life, is a very important distinction. It is (he says) a scriptural distinction. And it is necessary in the hand of the Spirit to qualify believers for understanding clearly the grace and glory of the gospel, as well as the acceptable manner of performing every duty required by the law. To distinguish truly and clearly between the law as a covenant, and the law as a rule is, as one expresses it, ‘the key which opens the hidden treasure of the gospel.’ No sooner had the Spirit of truth given Luther but a glimpse of that distinction than he declared that he seemed himself to be admitted into paradise, and that the whole face of Scripture was changed to him. Indeed, without a spiritual and true knowledge of that distinction, a man can neither discern, nor love, nor obey acceptably, the truth as it is in Jesus.”

And so long as men fail to see that the full revelation of grace in Jesus Christ shows us that Sinai was a pale revelation of that *same* redemptive grace; that in Christ the ten fingers that they have seen as mighty accusations of them for their sin, become gracious friends upon a gracious foundation by which they may frame their way of life — so long are men in a bondage frame of Spirit, and stand in need of the grace of God, in Law and in Gospel, that they may be delivered.

My brethren, we need in our ministries to labor to some of our people some of the time, if not in every situation all of the time, at least in some places some of the time, we need to labor in our exposition of the fact that *the law is not a means to salvation*, but the law is the gracious

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<sup>14</sup> WCF, chap. xix, par. 6.

way in which salvation *leads* us. It is the moral shape that salvation takes. The law is not a motor car to heaven, an automobile to heaven; it is, in and of itself and separated from grace, lacking an engine, lacking in oil, lacking in petrol, lacking in gas, lacking in wheels, lacking in road — but it is, in the hand of God, a map for those who have already been energized by the power of the Spirit — to set out before them those glorious sign-posts that point to the Celestial City — for those who are travelling in the triumphal chariot of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor of the gospel is the man who sits as the map-reader with the law of God in his hand, and leads his people in the way of perfect righteousness, through the grace of God in the giving of the law.

And so we need to labor to bring to bear upon our people this distinction, however we may express it. And all of us recognize we are at liberty to express these truths in other words than our reformed fathers. But we need somehow to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works, and the law as a rule of life.

*The third cause* of Legalism is this — perhaps the most subtle — it is the legality inbred in men’s hearts.

In many ways, I think this is the key to that terrible cry of grief and frustration from the lips of the holy apostle Paul in Romans 7.

“I *know* that the Law is holy and it is good; it is full of grace like God himself — but as for myself I am carnal, sold under sin.”<sup>15</sup>

“Εγὼ δὲ σαρκικός εἰμι, πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν.” he cries. Πεπραμένος, as you may well know, the perfect participle passive, “having been sold under sin.” As A.T. Robertson expresses it vividly, “Sin has closed the mortgage and owns its slave.”

And what Paul is surely saying, and we know something of this in our experience, is this: I am one whom, having been sold under sin, one upon whom sin had closed the mortgage, have now been purchased by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ — no longer under the law as a covenant of works, but under grace.

But my dear friends, when legality has paid and closed the mortgage on your life over many years, since you were conceived in your mother’s womb, for many of us it takes days, and months, and years before the effect of the mortgaging of Jesus Christ and his heavenly purchase begins to dismantle all the influences and the effects that have been sown in our hearts by the previous occupier.

We know a little of this, if I may illustrate rather mundanely, in our own home. For some two and a half years now we have been living in our house, and since we moved in we have been undoing almost everything the previous occupants did; or more accurately, we have been doing what the previous occupants had undone. In our kitchen where there had been cupboards, they took out all of the cupboards; and we have been saving up our pennies to put in the cupboards. In two of our public rooms, they decided to knock down the wall, and we have been saving up our pennies to knock the wall back in. In all the corridors in our houses in the United Kingdom, as you know — it’s so different from your houses here in the United States — they had knocked out all the doors, and we have been saving up our pennies to put back in the doors. And it has taken all this time — indeed, until just before I came away, two weeks ago — it has taken all this time for us at last to get some doors back in.

And, you see, we know in our people, that something of the same order takes place. They have been under the spirit of bondage and legality since their conception. And purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ and his grace, as they are, it takes the constant application of the influences

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<sup>15</sup> Rom 7.12, 14.



of Christ's powerful grace to *remake* them into the image of the child of God, who enjoys the liberty of the children of God. And we know from God's Word that such liberty only awaits the day when the bondage of decay under the curse of the law is removed in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in so many of our people, hidden under so many guises, our pastoral ministry, my brothers, is to seek to remove those deep-seated levels of legal spirit and framework; because they are all like ourselves — men and women and boys and girls, too — who by nature, sin through the law had closed the mortgage. And even those of us who may be on in life, and well-acquainted with the covenant of grace, do we not often feel and act as though we were still under a covenant of works to God? We are like those men, those slaves in those days of liberation, old men who all their days had known masters and lords who could not till their dying day believe that they were really free. And our pastoral ministry to Mr. or Mrs. or Miss or Master Legality, is to bring them by the grace of God into the liberty of the children of Christ.

“In the best of the children of God here,” says Thomas Boston, “there are such remains of the legal disposition and inclination of heart to the way of the covenant of works, that as they are never quite free of it in their very best duties, so at times their services smell so rank of it, as if they were alive to the law and dead to Christ.”

My brothers, there are few believers and there will be few among us who are not haunted, if I may say so, by the ghost of our former husband.

And the glory of the psychology of that illustration the apostle Paul uses in Romans 7, is that we are not only those who have been divorced, as it were, from our former husband which brought us under bondage to the law — we are not only divorced in this sense, but we are remarried to a new husband who is able to love us and nourish us and care for us in such a way that, day by day as we grow in grace, the haunting specter of the former husband, *Legality*, increasingly becomes a dim and ancient memory of the past. That's the Savior we have; and that's therefore the kind of pastors that we need to be.

But that brings us — and we must hurry on — to the fourth point that we examine this morning, where we turn together to the pastoral dangers of Legalism.

Let me simply outline these for you as we hurry on. The doctrinal danger of Legalism, obviously, is that it builds up what the gospel has torn down. And that's why Legalism falls under the *apostolic anathema*. It is another gospel. And even though preached to us by an apostle or an angel from heaven, we need to recognize that it is *destructive* of the grace of God in Christ. And that, of course, is another reason why Legalism lies at the very heart of many pastoral problems, and is one of the chief spiritual sicknesses that we need to treat. Many of the blessings that Christians down through the years have experienced and described in a whole multitude of ways, have been quite simply that by the grace of God, they are being delivered from a legal framework by the Word and the Spirit of God. And so it is of great importance for us to recognize some of the maladies that Legalism produces. And, again, there is time for us — if there is even time for us — to mention only three.

In the first place, Legalism produces a self-righteous temper — *a self-righteous temper*. That, of course, again discloses itself in many ways, some more straightforward than others. It is the Spirit, of course, of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. But he was a man deeply exercised in holiness. His outward conduct was apparently impeccable in the works of religion. He excelled others. He had a zeal for the law and its application. And it is only really in the light of the tax collector's impassioned plea for free propitiation, that the Pharisee's prayer can be seen in its true light. And yet how often that same self-righteous temper is formed in the lives of believers by *comparison* with others. “I thank God I am not like *that* believer.”

The same spirit of legality, and the self righteousness of the elder brother in the parable of our Lord — that only shows itself in the light of the exposure of free grace. Something of it, apparently, remaining in the believers in that parable of the laborers in the vineyard who all received the same reward, although some had borne more of the burden in the heat of the day than others.

And you remember how Matthew tells us that characteristic word they murmured against their fellows.<sup>16</sup>

Beloved, that kind of murmuring against their fellows in our fellowships is very often a sign of that self-righteous temper that has legality at its root; the mentality that speaks (or *doesn't* speak) of “us and them” that is so destructive of our fellowship; the legality that is sometimes — God help us — disguised as zeal for justice and truth, and even as a concern for Church discipline. But at the end of the day, is an unwillingness to welcome those whom Christ welcomes, and not to disputing. It is a temper that finds its source in a heart that has never really been delivered and mastered by Gods free grace.

Let me quote Colquhoun to you again, if I may.

When a man is driven to acts of obedience by the dread of God's wrath revealed in the law, and not drawn to them by the belief of his love revealed in the gospel; when he fears God because of his power and justice, and not because of his goodness; when he regards God more as an avenging judge than as a compassionate friend and father; and when, as infinite in grace and mercy, he flees from him — he shows that he is under the dominion or at least under the prevalence of a legal spirit. If he builds his faith of the pardon of sin, of the favor of God, of eternal life upon any graces which he supposes are implanted in *him*, or upon any duties which are performed by *him*, he is evidently under the power of a self-righteous temper. He shows that he is under the influence of this hateful temper, by grounding his hope and his comfort upon conditions performed by *himself*, and not upon the gracious and absolute promises of the gospel — in a word, when his hope of divine mercy is raised by the liveliness of *his* frame and duties, and *not* by discoveries of the freeness and riches of redeeming grace offered to him in the gospel.

So Legalism reveals itself in a self-righteous frame. Legalism, consequently, produces a bondage spirit. You remember how the apostle travailed to bring the Galatians to full birth in Christ, and emphasizes in that marvelous passage, Galatians 4:1-11, the grace of Christ that is able to set us free from the spirit of bondage. And yet, as you know, the Galatian spirit is a spirit that is so often evident among us.

Do you remember how in *Pilgrims Progress*, if I may resurrect John Bunyan again, how poor Faithful fell and was assaulted, as you recall, by Adam the first:

I looked behind me and saw one coming after me swift as the wind. So he overtook me just about the place where the settle stands. So soon as the man overtook me, he was but a word and a blow, for down he knocked me and laid me for dead. But when I was a little come to myself again, I asked him wherefore he served me so? He said, Because of my secret inclining to Adam the First: and with that he struck me another deadly blow on the breast, and beat me down backward; so I lay at his foot as dead as before. So when I came to myself again I cried him mercy; but he says, I know not how to shew mercy; and with that knocked me down again. He had doubtless made an end of me, but that one came by, and bid him forbear.

*Christian*: Who was that that bid him forbear?

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<sup>16</sup> **Mat 20:11-12** "...they complained against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> "saying, 'These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'

*Faithful:* I did not know him at first, but as he went by, I perceived the holes in his hands and in his side; then I concluded that he was our Lord. So I went up the Hill.

*Christian:* That man that overtook you was Moses: He spareth none, neither knoweth he how to shew mercy to those that transgress his Law.

The secret inclining to Adam the first, to our first husband in terms of Romans 7:1-6, that brings us again into the bondage frame of spirit. And we, brethren, like these Marrow Men, need to come to such and show them that it is only through the free, patient, loving grace of their second husband, the second man, the Last Adam, that they can ever be delivered from a bondage frame of spirit.

And you know, this is really why *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was written. Listen to its author giving his personal testimony:

Though at last by means of conferring with Mr. Thomas Hooker in private, the Lord was pleased to convince me that I was yet but a proud Pharisee, and to show me the way of faith and salvation by Christ alone, and to give me, I hope, a heart in some measure to embrace it; yet, alas! through the weakness of my faith, I have been, and still am, apt to turn aside to the covenant of works; and therefore have not attained to that joy and peace in believing, nor that measure of love to Christ, and to man for Christ's sake, as I am confident many of God's saints do attain unto in the time of this life. The Lord be merciful to me and increase my faith.

And, therefore, in the first place, Legalism and a legal frame in the believer, makes the believer a prey to Satan.

Perhaps Bunyan was right to say that it was Moses who beat Faithful for his secret inclining to Adam the first; but, of course, ultimately it is Satan who does so. For the legal spirit is the landing ground which Satan seeks. It provides the fulcrum he needs to lever his way into our hearts, to use the law as the strength of sin in his murky paw, and then to twist our minds in rebellion against God.

Isn't this how he operated in the Garden of Eden? Isn't this how he has been operating ever since? Driving us back to the law as a works covenant; pressing upon us our sin; confirming in us our worst legal fears about our relationship to God; blackmailing us into further bondage in our Legalism, lest the wrath of God descend upon us — so that he has got us in his grip, and has utterly distorted in our hearts, what we once knew of the pulse-beat of the free grace of God in the gospel.

And so, again, writes Thomas Boston:

While the law retains its power, its dominion over a man, death has its sting, and sin its strength against him; but if once he is dead to the law and wholly and altogether set free from it, as it is the covenant of works, then sin hath lost its strength, death its sting, and Satan his plea against him.

And there is not a man among us who is a true child of God who doesn't know the voice of the evil one saying, Look, you have sinned. You have broken God's law. You are under condemnation. You are not good enough to be a believer, far less to be a pastor.

Beloved, what is our refuge? Our refuge is our confession that there is nothing good dwells in us, but we fly to Jesus our shield and our defender in the Covenant of Grace. We do not trust in the Covenant of Works for our salvation, but in Christ and Christ alone. And in Christ we are safe and free and enjoy the liberty of the children of God.

Yes, bowed down beneath a load of sin, by Satan sorely pressed, by war without and fears within, Yes! I come to thee for rest. Be Thou my shield and hiding place, that shelter near Thy side. I may my fierce accuser face and tell him, Christ has died.<sup>17</sup>

There and there alone is liberty from bondage. And that brings us, in a word, to *the fifth consideration* which is the remedy for Legalism. And the remedy for Legalism need I say to you my dear brethren, is grace, grace, grace. The legal-spirited believer must be persuaded by the word in our preaching and pastoral counseling, and inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit, that his Lord Jesus Christ is more full of grace than he can ever be of sin.

We must teach him to come and say, Oh, Jesus, full of pardoning grace, more full of grace than I of sin. He must be taught that even where the law came in by the side-door to increase the trespass, grace has abounded all the more. He must learn, as we seek to learn in our own hearts, that where sin has abounded, grace has super-abounded; and where the law came, grace reigns. And at the end of the day this means that, as pastors of the flock of God, we must labor to persuade people of the grace of God himself towards them; and therefore, of the grace of Law to those who have faith, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. Indeed, we may go to that Pauline extreme and prove from holy Scripture, exegetically in an expository, in a doctrinal, in a biographical, in a spiritual, and in an experimental form, that where sin has abounded in this world, God's grace has abounded all the more. *Yes!* The more sin there has been, the more grace.

It will be said to us that such free grace will lead people to conclude, "Let us go on sinning that grace may abound." But that indeed may be the supreme index and indicator that it is free grace that we are preaching. And if it is free grace that we are preaching, Antinomianism can never be its fruit, as God willing, tomorrow we will see.

Let us all pray.

Our heavenly Father, we are glad to confess together in your presence, as men set apart for the ministry of the gospel, that we are but *children* in our thinking and *children* in our experience. We are at times the objects of varying degrees of joy and peace and bondage and sorrow. We confess those seasons in our lives when we have been no longer sure whether we are returned prodigals, or legalistic elder brothers. And yet in your grace you have stood before us. You have wept over us. You have sent true pastors of the soul to us in word and in deed, and on the written page. You have sent him who supremely is the pastor and counselor, our Lord Jesus Christ, by his Spirit to persuade us inwardly. And you have made that blessed Spirit to us, not the spirit of bondage to bring us to fear, but the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, "*Abba*, Father." But we come to you this day, confessing our utter unworthiness and inability to be pastors of the flock, to be surgeons of the maladies of men's souls. And we pray this, our blessed Lord, that *that* in our thinking, which has locked in to our needs, to our situations, and to the gracious promptings of your Spirit for our future ministry, may be wonderfully honored by your Spirit and sealed in all our hearts. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> John Newton's words in the hymn, *Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat*, Olney Hymns, W. Oliver, 1779.

## **THE MARROW CONTROVERSY #03: THE DANGER OF ANTINOMIANISM**

*The Marrow Controversy*

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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**Greenville Seminary & Mt. Olive**

200 E. Main St

Taylors, SC 29687

**Website:** [www.gpts.edu](http://www.gpts.edu)

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[We have been looking at] the controversy surrounding the writing and the republication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in the 16th and 17th and 18th centuries' theological controversies. I have tried to say to you that the significance of *The Marrow*, and the significance of the Marrow Controversy, lie not so much in what the group in and of itself is. And it may well have been a wise thing for me to have thus emphasized this right from the start. But as we have discovered in our studies in these days and, as many of you have confessed to me, and that I have found my own heart exposed before this teaching — the Auchterarder creed, and the Marrow Controversy, and the areas which we have been examining together — act, do they not, as a litmus paper to us. They enable us to discern characteristics and marks and forms in our Christian experience, in our Christian ministry, in our work as pastors of the flock of God and preachers of the Word of God. But in a very real sense, are indices to us, an index to us individually of where we are in relationship to the grace of God. And it would have been my greatest desire that alongside these theological and historical studies in which we have been engaged, it might have been possible to provide for you a fundamental and basic exegesis and exposition of all those passages of Scripture that pertain to the relationship of the law and the gospel. And certainly were it possible, in terms of time, this would have been something that I personally would have been anxious to engage in.

But I trust under God that our consideration together during these sessions as I have been trying to expound some pastoral lessons from the Marrow Controversy, and the many conversations that you may have had individually, and the conversations I have certainly had with many brethren, I trust that this will send us back not merely to read *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, nor even to procure those remarkably cheap sets of Thomas Boston's works which I warmly commend to you. I trust these studies together will send us back to the Word of the living God, to burrow afresh in the exegesis of those great passages where law is expounded and grace is explained, and the two are brought together in the most glorious harmony, that we may be better fitted to be able ministers of the New Covenant.

This is one of the hardest knots in all divinity for us to untie; and it is a matter that must burn upon our consciences, brethren, in these days, that we may wrestle with it and pray for ourselves that God will break forth light out of his holy Word for our own hearts and for our own ministries.

Now we are turning in this, our last session, once again to the pastoral lessons of the Marrow Controversy. The Marrow Men, we might summarize by saying, were accused of the three A's. They were accused of *Amyraldianism*, although they held to a doctrine of definite or particular atonement. They were accused of *Arminianism*, although they themselves preached not free will, but free grace. And they also were accused of *Antinomianism*, though, as we shall see in a moment, they tenaciously held that the law of God remained as the rule of life for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And those of you who have obtained a copy of *The Marrow* will notice

that the second part of *The Marrow* is simply a confirmation of this position. It is an exposition of the place of the law of God in the life of the believer.

But when we reflect on these accusations that were set against them, it is certainly not at all surprising to realize that they were being accused of Antinomianism. Wherever natural hearts, or even gracious hearts bound by a legal spirit, hear the message of the fullness of grace in Christ and the freeness of grace in the gospel offer, the question inevitably and almost invariably seems to arise, “Shall we then go on in sin to our heart’s content in order that grace may abound?”

And it is striking to notice that it is precisely at this point that we as pastors of those who in our flocks and in our wider sphere have become Antinomians — it is precisely at this point that we are in danger ourselves of falling back into Legalism in our counsel towards them, and returning to teaching the law of God as though it were a covenant of works.

And so by way of introduction to this, our third theme, let us recognize that wherever free grace is fully preached from an unfettered gospel spirit, the accusation of Antinomianism has ever arisen.

Take our blessed Lord Jesus himself. When John the Baptist came preaching the grace of law — as the instrument of God to lead men to repentance, and under the special constraints of the dispensation during which he was living — he neither ate nor drank. And when men recognized his sensitive prophetic spirit, held in this great oath he had made to serve God in this special way, men immediately cried, “Legalist! Legalist!”

But no sooner had the Son of Man appeared eating and drinking than men called him a glutton and a wine bibber;<sup>1</sup> in other words, they cried of the very Son of God himself, “Antinomianism has come!”

And the constant carping criticism of the Pharisees and the rabbis against the Son of Man was that in his free grace towards sinful mankind, he abrogated the law of Moses.

Understand, you remember, it is true of the apostle of free grace. Romans 3:7-8, “If through my falsehood Gods truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come as some men slanderously charge us with saying? Their condemnation is just.”

And in those words already alluded to, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. What shall we say then?”

What do we conclude from this apostolic gospel of free grace? Shall we conclude that sin may reign that grace may abound?

So, as you see, and it is very important for us to notice, that the kind of Antinomianism of which Paul is speaking in Romans 6:1 following — what that kind of Antinomianism and so many kinds of Antinomianism turn out to be, is a false conclusion from a true premise. The premise is true that where sin has abounded, grace has abounded all the more. But the conclusion drawn from that premise — that we may therefore go on to sin to our hearts content — as the apostle demonstrates, is a conclusion that must receive the apostolic anathema. And yet, you see, it is of equal importance that we ourselves as pastors are to guard our own hearts and our own ministries from a retreat into Legalism. It is of vital importance that we recognize that the premise on which that conclusion is based — that grace super abounds over sin — is a premise that is biblical and apostolic and true; and it comes from the very heart of the gospel and the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is against that background that I want, this

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<sup>1</sup> Mat 11.19.

morning, with you, in our final study, to focus attention on a number of matters that arose out of the context of the Marrow Controversy.

First of all, I want us to look together at something of the nature of Antinomianism. One might even say, as we shall see, the natures of Antinomianism, because it has many faces.

Secondly, I want to direct your attention to one practical cause of Antinomianism — not the exclusive cause, but one practical and common cause of Antinomianism. And thirdly and finally, I want us to examine — as time allows us — I want us to examine the issues that are at stake in the Antinomian controversy.

First of all, then, let me say something about the nature of Antinomianism. The historical use of the expression *Antinomian*, as you probably know, appears to have arisen in the days of the great reformer Martin Luther. You may remember his emphasis on justification by free grace producing the freedom of the Christian man, as he calls us, the most free man of all, who is Lord of all. And in the period round about the end of the 1530s, round about 1537, one of Luther's friends, John Agricola, took this great preaching of free grace, and began to drive it to logical conclusions that were not biblical; and he began to speak about the believer as being free from the law of God as the rule of his life.

And, of course, from these conclusions from true premises, Martin Luther drew back and began to speak about the Antinomianism of his friend Agricola. In general terms, then, and in this fundamental sense, Antinomianism is the view that the moral law, the Decalogue which Moses received, is no longer binding on Christians as a rule of life.

Now it is obviously, surely, from what has already been said and what you know, that Antinomianism, the thing itself existed long before the name was given to it. Even giraffes were giraffes before Adam gave them that name. And the same is true of Antinomianism.

But if we may in our own context in the ongoing development of reformed theology, simplify matters a little, we could put it like this: the Westminster Confession of Faith, as you know, teaches that while the law is not a *covenant of works* to the believer, the law remains as a *rule of life* for the believer. He is no longer bound to the law as though it were a covenant of works. For it never was a covenant of works; but he is bound forever — during the course of his Christian pilgrimage — he is bound to the law as a rule of life. And it is this, in one way or another — the law of God as the rule of the believer's life — it is this, I say, in one way or another that Antinomianism denies.

But it is important for us — important for our fellowship with Christian brethren — important for us in order that we may guard a chaste tongue, to recognize that Antinomianism takes a variety of forms. And it is always a danger, brethren, that we use Antinomianism as a pejorative curse-word upon those who may be true Christians. If we are to receive the apostolic charge, we need to remember that in these matters the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome. He must be able to charge others consistently not to dispute merely about words. He must remember that he is called to correct his opponents with gentleness. And you remember how in the pastoral epistles one of the great issues that already was at stake, was the place of the law in the life of the believer. And it is in that context that the Lord through his apostle gives us these restraints upon our own natural fiery spirits, gives us these restraints on those remnants of corruption that would flare up and accuse brethren by bandying words foolishly and irrationally. And so it is important, I say, for us to have a clear grasp of what these words mean, and also for us to have a faithful recognition that this Antinomianism, error though it may be, appears in a whole variety of forms.

And let us beware, brethren, we are not always aware of this, but we so often attribute the worst possible logical conclusions of theological positions to men who themselves would eschew such logical conclusions, and whose personal lives are beyond reproach. And so this is

a matter in which we not only need the wisdom of Solomon, but we need something of the meekness and the gentleness of the servant of the Lord himself. And we must pray in these days that God will give to us something of that spirit.

And that is what I want to suggest to you, that in our consideration of the nature of Antinomianism, it is in fact a pastoral and a theological duty for us to distinguish between different kinds of Antinomian teachings. And let me therefore suggest to you that we will probably encounter Antinomianism in one of *three different forms*.

First of all, Antinomianism may appear in what we might call a *doctrinal form*. There have been men who have held that the law of God is abrogated, both as a covenant of works and as a rule of life for the believer, fundamentally on doctrinal grounds. In other words, the abolition of the law as the believer's rule of life has been the logical conclusion of a theological or doctrinal premise or presupposition. And all of you know that this took place already within the context of reformed theology, not only in the days of Martin Luther, as in the teaching of Agricola, but also in the days of our Puritan forefathers; and it was associated so often with the names of men like John Saltmarsh and Tobias Crisp and John Eaton. And what was the position they adopted? Well, simply it was this: they placed such an emphasis on the prevenient, eternal, electing, distinguishing grace of God, that they felt any question of law was antithetical and opposite to the mighty grace of God. They emphasized, as you may know, that justification was eternal, and temporal justification was merely an expression of that eternal justification. They emphasized immediate assurance by the indwelling witness of the Holy Spirit, almost apart from the Word of God. And the consequence, of course, the logical development of such views, was that the law of God in all its objectivity, really had no relevant place for the Christian believer if he had all this justification from eternity, justification in time, the Spirit of God witnessing with his Spirit that he was a child of God. Then what need was there for an objective standard for such a believer so in grace?

And so in those days, Antinomianism was actually associated with Hyper-Calvinism. And it failed, as far as I understand it, to see those clear scriptural connections of which we spoke in the discussion yesterday, between the mighty indicatives of the grace of God that join us to the Lord Jesus Christ and raise us up into the heavenly places, and those immediate moral imperatives that flow out of the indicatives of the grace of God — that great pattern laid down for us in the giving of the law at Sinai.

“I have brought you out of the land of bondage, out of the house of Egypt.”

Therefore we can go. We are free men. We do not need any laws. We have the redemption of God changing us and shaping us. We are free people. What need of law?

No, no, says the Lord. Therefore — therefore — remember to guard your freedom, to guard your redemption. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall live a life that is worthy of your calling. And here are my ten great words to you to direct you in the way in which you should live.

So that the great mistake of those Antinomians, those Hyper-Calvinists in the 17th century, was to rend asunder the things that God had joined together in his inspired Word.

And it is interesting, too, to notice that in the early days and as it began to develop, if I may say so without offence to any here, the movement that we know in the United Kingdom as the Christian Brethren, *that* was the foundation of the emphasis of Dispensationalism and some forms of Fundamentalism here in the United States — that great outburst of interest and concern for the purity and the unity of the Church that took place in the 19th century, especially under the influence of John Nelson Darby — that had so many similarities, curiously enough, to the emphasis of Hyper-Calvinism in the 17th century. There, too, we find the same logical conclusions being drawn from the premises of the grace of God. And you may know how



little time John Nelson Darby had for the kind of teaching that appears in a book like Patrick Fairbairns book, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, and how much less time Darby had for any notion that there was a covenant between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden. Indeed, he speaks of the covenant of works at one point as a fable, a mischievous fable. And so it was hardly surprising with his view of the Dispensations of God's dealings with his people, that from a theological point of view he could see no position for the moral law of God and the Decalogue in the life of the believer. And in Darby's eventual full-blown Dispensationalism, the law of God as a rule of life became confined to the dispensation of law and, strictly and logically speaking, had nothing to say to the period of grace.

And if I may say, speaking entirely for myself as an individual with connection with no church organization or anyone else in the whole world, I do believe that that is, perhaps, the chief reason why in our country, and many Christian Brethren settles today, there is so much emphasis on tradition, and so little emphasis on thoroughgoing, rigorous, ethical teaching and application of the Word of God. So that at the end of the day, the only thing that matters in a professing Christian home is that the child has made a decision for Christ. And because the law of God which is the standard of our lives, which is the mirror into which we look to test ourselves according to the work of the Spirit of grace within us, when that no longer has relevance for us, when there are no ethical imperatives in the life of the believer, then no fruits are necessary as the evidencing signs of a work of the mighty Spirit of God's grace within us, and Decisionism takes the place of grace, and Easy-Believism takes the place of the fruit of the Spirit. And wherever it is not seen that unconditional grace involves us in the most unconditioned, serious obligations to the God who has redeemed us, where it is not seen that Christ did what the law could not do in order that what the law could not do in and by itself, God might do in us by the power of his Spirit fulfilling the just requirements of the law. Where this escapes notice in theological thinking, there may be a generation who are able to hold themselves in to the remnants of the moral law of God. But the day comes, and always has come historically — even if it doesn't necessarily need to come logically, it always comes historically and practically — when Christianity becomes more a matter of decision than a matter of living; and grace becomes an excuse for licentiousness.

And so Antinomianism appears in a doctrinal form.

In the second place, and not necessarily antagonistic to that first expression, Antinomianism has sometimes appeared in an *exegetical form*; and probably at no time more frequently than in these days in which we live. It has become commonplace nowadays — as all of you know from reading modern theological treatises — it has become commonplace for lawyers, for theologians, and writers, and scholars, and lawyers for that matter too, to take a view of the law which, to their horror, did they know it, is astonishingly like the position adopted on the one hand by Hyper-Calvinists, and on the other hand by Dispensationalists. That is, it is held on the basis of the exegesis of the New Testament that there is no longer any place for the law of God as the law of morality in the life of the believer. The Christian does not need the law. For Jesus did away with the law.

In the English-speaking world that position has often been adopted by many liberal scholars. But it has been adopted not only by liberal scholars, but by men even of evangelical reputation who have gone into print saying similar things.

According to one of the very best known scholars in the United Kingdom, I quote, "According to Paul, the believer is not under the law as a rule of life. Paul, therefore, makes no distinction between the end of the ceremonial law, and the retention of the moral law."

Now let me say again, lest I be misunderstood, that one is not impugning the morality of Brethren in Christ by saying that this position is Antinomianism. In the case of this position

there are many men who maintain for all practical purposes the same lifestyle as many who regard the Decalogue as the believer's rule of life; except that the question of the continuation of the sabbath has become a major point of embarrassment necessarily to them. But how do they maintain the same form of Christian life? They do so like this: they have replaced the Mosaic *Decalogue* with the Christian *Novemalogue*. In other words, instead of having 10 Commandments rooted in the Exodus chapter 20, they have Nine Commandments that they find rooted in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles.

And I want to say to you, brethren, that I have a sneaking suspicion that it is the absence of the sabbath commandment that is, perhaps, the most significant thing of all. And it is this that sometimes gives us a clue — as we shall see as we develop this whole point — gives us a clue to understanding the mentality and, indeed, the spirituality of some men. I say some, not all men, who evangelically hold that Antinomianism is the position of the New Testament. For while from one point of view, the difference between this exegetical Antinomianism and the position of the Westminster Confession of Faith, is only a matter of ten percent of the commandments, its repercussions are far more considerable than ten percent divergence in the manner in which we live. As for the reason, it involves a basic dislodging of the place of the law of God, as we shall see in the history of redemption.

Now obviously I have given myself sufficiently to suggest to you that I do not share the view of those who expound this *Novemalogue* position. But I want to say this to you, that even if they were right, and the position that I personally espouse were wrong, and the traditional reformed position wrong, there is a far greater gap between these two positions than merely the gap of ten percent of the commandments of God. And it is vital for us to grasp this if we are to see some of the issues that are perennially at stake in understanding the relationship between the law and the gospel.

So Antinomianism appears in a doctrinal form. It appears in an exegetical form. And in the third place Antinomianism appears in an *experimental form*.

It was Thomas Shepherd who wrote that those who deny the use of the law to any that are in Christ become patrons of free vice under the mast of free grace. And this kind of Antinomianism, brethren, is sheer wickedness. It turns the grace of God into lasciviousness. It is reminiscent, appallingly reminiscent of that doggerel, "Free from the law, oh blessed condition. I can sin as I please and still have remission." That is not Evangelicalism. That is Roman Catholicism.

In its mildest form in the [life] of the professing believer, it is but the casual remark as you indicate to him that he is breaking the speed limit on the highway; and he shrugs his shoulders and he says, "Well, it doesn't matter, because I am not under the law. I am under grace."

In other cases, increasingly in the times in which we live, it appears in the guise of self-acceptance, about which Dr. Dee Witwer speaking yesterday afternoon, and we well know in the message of the gospel — that as man, who has been brought out of the pit and from the miry clay, we need to learn to see ourselves reflected as *the Beloved* in the Song of Solomon, over whose lives the banner of the Lord Jesus is love. We need to be embraced increasingly, beloved, to see the riches of the glory of the grace that Christ has bestowed upon us. And if we have a weakness as those who emphasize the significance of the law of God as a rule of life, brethren, it is that we sometimes do not lay a gracious enough foundation in the work of redemption in the minds and hearts of our people, that will enable them to bear that blessed yoke of the law of God. We do not show to them, out of the riches of Scripture, the mighty thing that God has done for them in Christ. It is no small thing that they are regenerated. It can only be parallel to the creation of the world when God said, "Let light shine out of darkness," and the resurrection of his Son when he raised him from the sleep of death and brought him into

everlasting life. To become a Christian is the most supernatural, miraculous thing in all the world, even though it happens silently and secretly in the life of the believer. And only a full-orbed gospel understanding of all that grace has done, can ever sustain the believer as he lives under the law of God as the rule of his life. We need to expound these things to our people.

But it is a very different thing under the guise of self-acceptance to live any way we please, as though the God who has engraced and enriched us in the power of the gospel, had not called us from all eternity to himself, in order that we might be conformed to the image of his only Son, whose only life was conformed to the pattern of the holy law of God, and came to fulfill it.

And, indeed, to those who say that, "Since God accepts me the way I am, I ought not to get straight-jacketed in the law of God; I ought to be myself, even my worst self," we can only with pity say that they have never understood the grace of God, and the gospel that makes men not like themselves, not even like their *best* self, but like Jesus, and conforms them to his image.

So often in our day of individualism, in our day of licentiousness, in our day when the world squeezes professing believers into its mold, Antinomianism in its worst form is merely licensed vice. Free grace becomes cheap grace, and the Son of God is crucified afresh by the wickedness of men. May God prevent the Church from so perverting the grace of God, and the sin that's drawing power of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, that men should say, "We may continue in sin that grace may abound."

And so there is *doctrinal* Antinomianism. There is *exegetical* Antinomianism and there is *experimental* Antinomianism.

And it is against this background that I want to try to say something to you about the practical cause of Antinomianism, and then about the issues that are at stake. And, again, let me issue a word of caution. Since Antinomianism takes these varying forms, not everything that is said now will be applicable to every single individual who holds to one of these forms. It would be an unhappy thing if we condemned men in Christ for positions they did not expouse; and I am not using in this address the word *Antinomianism* as a theological curse, but merely as a convenient, historically understood expression for that position that sets aside the Decalogue as a rule of life for the believer.

And so I want to turn with you to a matter that is not only theological, but profoundly pastoral. As we consider in the second place, under this second heading, one great practical cause of Antinomianism.

We would all recognize that Antinomianism often springs from an inability to understand and to appreciate the place of the law of God in the Christian mind. But I wonder if you have discovered, as I have discovered in that measure of pastoral experience I have been privileged to know, that very often there is much more at stake than merely the intellectual understanding of the position of the law in the economy of God.

You see, very often our temptation is to think of Antinomianism as though it were the opposite of Legalism. Isn't that true? When we associate these things together we say, now the opposite of Legalism is Antinomianism. Now I suggest to you — I believe there is good biblical ground for saying this — that Antinomianism and Legalism are *not* opposites of one another; but they are *both* opposites of the grace of God in the gospel. And in actual fact, as you may have noticed from time to time in dealing with men who have become Antinomians in actual practice and experience, their Antinomianism is a clear cut reaction, not first of all against the grace of God — although it is certainly true — ; it is a clear-cut reaction against Legalism. And yet in thinking that they have reached the opposite of their Legalism, at the end of the day many of them have only fallen into a Legalism that is more difficult for them *ever* to extricate themselves from, than their former Legalism.

You see, Antinomianism can never be the cure for Legalism, because only grace is the cure for Legalism. And it is a very important thing for us, brethren, as pastors, to recognize that even though a man reacts against Legalism into Antinomianism, very often the truth of the matter is this: that he retains precisely the same bondage spirit and legal frame as he had when he *thought* he was a Legalist. In his heart of hearts he thinks of God in exactly the same way he did when he thought he was a Legalist.

Ralph Erskine, one of the Marrow Men, once said that the greatest Antinomian was the Legalist. And, as you know, you can put it the other way around, that the greatest Legalist is very often the Antinomian. Why? Because both distort the grace of God; and both distort the grace of God *and* fail to recognize [grace] in the law of God. And very often you will discover that men who are Antinomians, are men who have fled *to* Antinomianism, and yet have never escaped the ghost of the covenant of works to which they have been married in their former bondage in Legalism. In their spirits they have never been divorced from the law of God as a covenant of *works*, and so they seek to abandon the law of God all together.

Listen, again, to Thomas Boston:

This Antinomian principle that it is needless for a man perfectly justified by faith to endeavor to keep the law and do good works, is a glaring evidence that legality is so engrained in man's corrupt nature, that until a man truly comes to Christ by faith, the legal disposition will still be reigning in him. Let him come himself into what shape, or be of what principles he will in religion, though he runs into Antinomianism, he will carry along with him his legal spirit which will always be a slavish and unholy spirit.

And very often in the reformed tradition and in reformed circles, those who have become Antinomian have been those who have espoused outwardly a reformed position in theology; but inwardly have had a spirit of bondage and a legal frame, and in their heart of hearts — however they have understood the confession of faith, and Dabney, and Hodge, and Berkhof, and Calvin, and all the rest — in their heart of hearts, they have never fully and radically been touched by the knowledge of the free grace of God in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You find the same thing in the writings of J H Thornwell. Whatever form, however, Antinomianism may assume, it springs from Legalism. None rush into the one extreme, but those who have been in the other.

And this is something, brethren, we learn in pastoral experience; and we learn it, do we not, inevitably from our own hearts. The Marrow Controversy is not a controversy a couple of hundred years ago in history. It is a controversy we often have with ourselves. And the only answer to the heart that is drawn in the direction of Legalism, and then drawn in the direction of Antinomianism, is to be drawn in the direction of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“This is my beloved Son. Listen to *him*.” And not only listen to him, but feel the power of the persuasive gracious promise of the Holy Spirit, that he will take the grace that belongs to Christ and *show* it to us — thank *God* he will *show* it to us. And we will know something of that assurance of faith, and that persuasion, that God is a benevolent Father to us.

And, you see, we could almost deduce this from first principles, because *man by nature is a Legalist*. And, therefore, he can never escape from being a Legalist by becoming an Antinomian. The only escape from Legalism, I say again to you, beloved, is *grace*.

Listen once more to John Colquhoun as he speaks of the manifestation of this thing in the life of the true believer.

Some degree of a legal spirit or of an inclination of heart to the way of the covenant of works still remains in believers and often prevails against them. They sometimes find it

exceedingly difficult for them to resist that inclination to rely on their own attainments and performances for some part of their title to the favor and enjoyment of God.

And it is because that's in every single one of us. But every child of God on days will have a tendency to flee into Antinomianism, to escape from this tension of being in Christ, and yet at that same time being in me, and being in the United States of America, or Scotland, or Canada, or wherever it is. But the Word of God to us is that there is no escape from this tension in the life of the believer here and now. So long as he is in this world, so long as he is in Christ and knows the glories and the power of Christ's grace, and yet is a man who lives in a life that has been sold under sin, in which the mortgage of the law has been closed, and only recently Christ has come in order to redeem us by the purchase price of his own blood — it is *inevitable* that such tension arises that at times we cry out, "Oh, wretched man that I am, who can deliver me from this body of death?" But the answer, beloved, is neither Legalism nor Antinomianism, but "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ" who through the mighty sin-breaking power of his death has begun to fulfill by the Spirit in the life of the believer the just requirements of the law.

And that is, of course, the reason why in these mighty expositions of the place of the law of God, the one thing the apostle can never say is that the law has died to the believer. Even although, as you know, so many commentators trying to find some significance in the illustration of Romans 7:1-6, the woman bound to a husband until he dies, which would seem apparently to draw in their minds the necessary conclusion that the law has died.

You see, Bunyan had the secret of that passage. That secret inclination to Adam the first, that's in all of us; but the one thing the apostle can never say, is that the law has died to the believer; but rather, the believer has died to the law. The law still exists and the believer married to Jesus Christ in his imperfect state of sanctification will ever more know tension, because he is married to a new husband. And even that law in which he delights, he recognizes he fails to keep during this mortal pilgrimage. And there is no other way for the child of God to live, who knows that God has revealed and etched his character upon the Ten Commandments of grace he has given to us. There is no other way for him to live, than to seek the grace of the Spirit to fulfill what the law requires as a way of life; and to cope with those days of tension when Satan comes and seeks to prod us in our spirits into Legalism, and in our minds into Antinomianism.

And, you see, this is a pastoral lesson, isn't it? It is not merely a matter of the head. It is a matter of the *heart*, and that for two reasons it is important. Because, you see, this heart reality of Antinomianism is very often and very easily hidden in doctrinal and theological and exegetical discussions; and very often it can only be detected when a man dislocates the relationship of one Scripture to another, and not in his isolated exegesis of one particular Scripture; or perhaps even more significantly, however difficult and dangerous it may be to detect it, when the *Spirit* of Scripture is absent from the *exposition* of Scripture.

My dear brethren, this is a dangerous thing to say, but *test* the spirits. Not only test the spirits in the sense of the words that come out of the mouths, but test the spirits to ask whether these words come in the balance of Scripture, and whether they come in the humble spirit of the servant of the Lord. Because Antinomianism hides itself under all kinds of guises. And very often in our day there have been guises of high intellect, and searching exegesis.

You see, this is one of those things that is almost impossible to express in propositional form. We feel we are grappling with something, and we provide all the arguments against it. We bring to bear upon it what we feel to be the weight of Scripture; and yet somehow or another we don't seem to be able to get *hold* of it. And the reason is, because it is not a matter of the head at all; it's a matter of the heart. And sometimes, you know, brethren, we speak to men who have become Antinomians; and we speak in order to establish the holy law of God and its

perpetuity in the teaching of Scripture — and this is true and accurate. And yet all the while what we need to be dealing with pastorally is not Antinomianism, but Legalism in the heart.

And so it's a very vital pastoral matter for that reason; and it needs the spiritual discernment of a spiritual Sherlock Holmes, and a spiritual Perry Mason. We need to cry to God for such wisdom.

And yet it is important to see that this spirit of Legalism, this bondage spirit, is also a frequent cause of Antinomianism; because it means that very often we will not deal with Antinomianism merely at the level of dogmatic polemic. But ultimately it can only be dealt with at the level of pastoral care — that pastoral, gracious, patient, faithful, Christful unfolding of the Word of God in the gospel applied in such a way as to set men free from the *legality* of their Spirits that grips their lives, and in this extraordinary way makes them argue for Antinomianism.

And, you see, again, what a deep-seated psychological pastoral problem this is. We are back in the Garden of Eden — Antinomianism, you see, that grew out of the legal frame of spirit that Satan planted in the hearts of our first parents. And that is why it is striking to notice that when the apostle Paul deals with this situation, he not only, as he does for example in Galatians chapter three, speaks about the place of the law in the economy of God and its position in redemptive revelation, but he is to deal with these people as a pastor. And he speaks to them and he says, “My dear friend, your real trouble is not merely intellectually that you don't understand the place of the law of God in the economy of redemption. Your trouble is that you have never really felt the power of the grace of God to set you free from a spirit of legality into bond-service to Jesus Christ.”

And in all his pastoral wisdom, you see, he takes this matter on both levels — the theological and the doctrinal level — and yet all the while recognizing that it is a spiritual malady that lies at the heart of the matter.

Men have been uncomfortable under the yoke of Christ, as he has given to them the *grace of law*; and will only be led away from their present Antinomianism by the *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

So it is not only a matter of having a wrong view of the law. It is a matter, ultimately, of a wrong view of grace, be it revealed in law, or in gospel.

But we must hurry on and, if you will, bear with me, come to the third section that I want to consider with you. We have looked at the nature of Antinomianism. We have labored this one practical cause of Antinomianism. But now let us try and give some attention to the doctrinal issues that are at stake in Antinomianism. Let us not think that this is a new matter. This is a question as old as the pastoral epistles. This is a question as old as the apostolic question: Why then the law? And we need to recognize that there are statements in the New Testament which do seem to speak with a certain harshness about the law of God, and the bondage that was gendered under it, and the ministry of death that was associated with it; and on the other hand, statements that seem to suggest that the believer is free from the law, and that he is dead to that which held him captive.

The question that is raised is whether it is not, therefore, true to say that the believer has nothing to do with the law of God, and therefore it would be erroneous to consider the law as the believer's rule of life. Is this not the card that is often said of so much Legalism in reformed Christianity, that the law is placed in a position that doesn't really belong to it?

Now were we giving ourselves, as I trust you will give yourself privately, with the stimulus and fellowship we have shared together in these days — were we giving ourselves to the study of the law of God as such, and not to this particular historical controversy we were investigating — I believe it would have been possible to lay bear the biblical teaching on the law of God, and

draw conclusions from such a study that would stand side by side with some of the things that we have noticed.

But I want to suggest to you several things that may help you in your study of the law of God, and in your seeking to grapple with this whole question of Antinomianism — some pointers that may help you in your own investigation of the doctrinal issues that are at stake.

Let me suggest to you that there are, it seems to me, a number of errors or mistakes which Antinomianism makes. The first is this: Antinomianism fails to take cognizance of the restrictive vocabulary with which the New Testament operates. Now that's a fair mouthful so let me repeat it. Antinomianism fails to take cognizance of the restrictive vocabulary with which the New Testament operates.

C. E. B. Canfield whose recent commentary on the epistle to the Romans and whose commentary on Mark many of you will be familiar with, wrote a very important article in a theological journal in 1964, and he said this — I think it is a very striking thing:

The Greek language used by Paul has no word group to denote Legalism, Legalist and legalistic.

And, of course, they had no word there for Antinomianism.

This means not just that he did not have a convenient terminology to express a key idea, but that he had no definite ready-made concept of Legalism with which to work in his own mind. And this means, surely, that he was at a very considerable disadvantage.

You understand the spirit in which Canfield writes.

... a very considerable disadvantage, compared with the modern theologian, when he had to attempt to clarify the Christian position with regards to the law.

He's not saying that Paul didn't understand the position of the law the way modern theologians did. He's saying Paul didn't have the linguistic equipment — it wasn't there available to him the way it has become available over centuries of historical theology.

In view of this, we should (says Canfield), I think, be ready to reckon with the possibility that sometimes when he appears to be disparaging the law, what he really has in mind may not be the law itself, but the misunderstanding and misuse of it for which *we* have a convenient term, but for which *he* had *none*.

And you will find exactly the same point made very strikingly by John Calvin many centuries before — in chapter seven, part two of Volume II of the *Institutes*. And, as far as I know, no Antinomian writer in the history of Antinomianism has ever given serious thought to the far-reaching exegetical consequences and implications of that statement. For what it means is that an exegesis, a grammatical understanding of the statements of the apostle Paul, particularly about the law, that has no proper theological control, will never be able to unravel the proper meaning of Paul's attitude to the law. And on the other hand, only when this is grasped can we ever begin to understand why in the very passages where Paul and others seem to take such a *harsh* view of the law, he has the most glowing things to say about the law in the whole of the New Testament. Have you ever noticed that in your reading of these great passages about the law, where are those things said about the law which Antinomian theologians would seize onto and say, "Well, there you are. There is the Apostle Paul's view of the law." And in those very passages he reaches almost heights of ecstasy when he speaks about the law.

Beloved, it is not in this 20th chapter of Exodus that the Bible tells us the law is holy, and that the commandment is holy and good, that the law is spiritual and good, that the believer delights in the law of God in his inmost self. It is not even in Psalm 119 that we read this, although it's true. It is in that chapter where the mighty apostle wrestles with his sin in the face

of the law of God, and if he were but a natural man he would have immediately sprung into Antinomianism and said, "God rid me of this law."

And yet the very thing he says is that the law is spiritual, the law is good; it bears the very character of God himself. And he delights in the law of God after the inward man.

Where do we learn of the glory of the ministry of the law? It is not on Mount Sinai that we are told precisely of the glory of the ministry of the law. It is cheek by jowl with those statements in 2 Corinthians three, about the condemnation and death which that old misused ministry of the law brought, when men thought Sinai was a covenant of works.

In other words, while often the theological Antinomian will accuse the confessions position of failing to account of the development of the history of redemption from law to Christ, what in fact the Antinomian has failed to see is that he is coming to Scripture with tinged and tinted spectacles, with a certain exegetical framework that is extraneous to Scripture itself, and can never explain and understand the antinomy that exists in many of the New Testament passages about the law. And the key to it is that we are dealing with a man who is grappling with the most fundamental issues of human experience when it comes into the orbit of the grace of God in the gospel, and he didn't simply have the terms that you and I find as our common bread and butter as students of theology.

And I suggest to you, that's a very significant thing. Antinomianism fails to take cognizance of the restricted vocabulary with which the New Testament operates.

Secondly, Antinomianism consistently fails to embrace wholeheartedly the grace of God in the giving of the law.

Let me say that I believe it to be a terrible mistake not to recognize the vast differences between the revelation of God in the old, and the revelation of God in the new covenants, and I say that unashamedly, too, as a paedobaptist. Let it be said that that has often been one of the failures of Presbyterian and paedobaptist theology, that the covenants of God have been regarded as though there were little difference between the old dispensation and the new dispensation. There is a *radical* difference. There is an *enormous* difference, so enormous is the difference, that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament can be described by John, by comparison with his presence in the Old Testament, that the Holy Spirit was not yet. It is as amazing, it is as radical a difference as that.

And yet at the same time it would be equally a mistake to go to the other extreme and to fail to see the wonderfully consistent presence of the grace of God in *both* testaments, under *both* dispensations, in both the old and the new covenants.

Let me put it simply to your heart like this. Is there a man here who is a true believer who wouldn't give all the treasures in the world to taste the grace of God, and to delight in the grace of God the way the man who wrote Psalm 119 did? Isn't that true? Grace, was there not grace in the law?

Ah, it's all very well for the Antinomian to say that *Torah* means much more than Decalogue. Of course it does. But it can never mean *less* than Decalogue. Never. And if they want to be honest, most practical Antinomians, and many doctrinal Antinomians, and some exegetical Antinomians, would choke before they could say the words:

"Oh, how I love they law. I delight in the law after the inner man."

They could not truly say with Paul:

"I find the law to be spiritual and when I am at my very best and want to do good, I delight in the law of God after the inward man."



The only man who could ever say that was the man who saw, that in the giving of the commandments, there was the operation of the grace of God. And such a man, as in his humanity was our Lord Jesus Christ, would find himself estranged from both Legalism and Antinomianism. Not only because it distorted the law, but because it distorted the God of grace who *gave* the law.

And then in the third place Antinomianism does not do justice to the relationship of the law to the history of redemption. You know that it is a basic presupposition in our reformed theology that the purpose of revelation, redemptive history and salvation, is the restoration of the image of God in man. And that means, of course, that salvation and the economy of God to accomplish salvation, is always *restorative* and *recreative* in scope. And we find much evidence for this pattern of things in Scripture. We find invariably that progressive revelation echoes and builds upon *previous* revelation; and while all was drawing God's people on to radical, fresh insight into the character of God, and giving to them fresh levels of understanding and liberty, God's redemptive revelation as it progresses, invariably calls them back also to what had previously been revealed. And furthermore, we find that the pattern of God's dealings as invariable, the imperatives of obedience are always to be deduced from the indicatives of God's grace.

Now what do we discover against that background in connection with divine law? Why, we discover that natural law, the law that was inbred in man at creation — we find that *that* law continues in the giving of the law at Sinai. That law that was inbred in man, and evidences itself in the continuing presence of even Gentile pagans' obedience at times to the dictates of the law of God written in the heart of man.

Now that natural law grows out of the grace of creation. It has to do with the created order of things, with our manishness — with what we are. And these laws were written in the heart of Adam, and in the very structure of the society that came from the Creator's hands. So that *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* is able to say this, "Adam had as much of the law, and heard as much of the law in the Garden, as Israel did at Sinai; but only in fewer words and without thunder."

But what do we see when we come to Sinai? We see the same pattern that worked grace.

"I am the Lord who brought you out..."

And this is no longer created grace giving rise to natural law. This is re-created, *redeeming* grace giving rise to moral law.

But what do we find when we try to relate natural law, created law to Sinaitic law? We find that there is clearer exposition; we find that there is intensive application. But are the laws any different? Oh, yes, there is application of them that is temporal and suited to the period of time with which God is calling out a people as a holy nation to himself. There is Jewishness in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But that lies not in the contents of the moral law, but in the application of the moral law in order to produce a gospel people who will be a light to the nations because of their distinctiveness, and a gospel people who will believe in Christ, and have persuasions of his grace through the ceremonies that God has given to them, to indicate that he is sending a Savior to them. The laws that were delivered on Mount Sinai, do they not predate the exodus, every one of them being written into the fiber of creation? So that the only thing that is new, is the fullness of the revelation, and the intensity of the application.

And you find this same thing when you turn over through the pages of Old Testament history when the covenant of Sinai lies trodden under the feet of men in 1000 pieces. What happens? God comes through his prophets and calls his people back to the Sinaitic covenant. This is the *key* to the exegesis and exposition of all prophecy, the historical prophetic books, and the books that we commonly call the books of the prophets. The key is that God is calling his

people back to his covenant at Sinai. And it is in the midst of that, that God reveals that he will make a new covenant.

But what is it that is most characteristic of the new covenant? It is that in those days, says the Lord, "I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people." Not only promised, beloved, in Jeremiah 31:31-33, but concerned in the epistle to the Hebrews as the true nature of the new covenant, the law of God written in the heart of the *child* of God. And the only law to which that refers is no *Novemalogue* under the sun, but the *Decalogue* given at Sinai, which was the republication of those gracious gifts and directions God had given to his people in the Garden of Eden.

And the significance of these words should never be underestimated, for they concern that all *progressive* revelation echoes *prior* revelation. It is his law that God puts in his people's hearts in the new covenant. This is the new covenant in the blood of Christ, and its fruit founded now not only on what God has done in creation, or what God has done in Exodus, but founded *now* on a firmer and a surer foundation, in the blood-letting of the Son of God upon Mount Calvary.

And, you see, it is this framework of the history of redemption. So often, isn't it true, those who espouse an Antinomian position, exegetically say of the Westminster Confession's position, "You don't understand the place of the law in redemptive history." And yet, you see, the accusation is the other way around; as we would say, the boot is on the other foot. It's a failure to see the connection of things that God has joined together. And it's when we see that, when we see this basic framework, we recognize the rightness of the classical threefold division of the law into moral, and civil, and ceremonial. "Besides this law commonly called *moral*," says the confession of faith, "God was pleased to give the people of Israel, and the Church, and their age, ceremonial laws containing several typical laws, and this is partly of worship prefiguring Christ, his grace, his actions, sufferings and benefits, and partly holding forth diverse instructions of moral duties. To them also as a body politic he gave sundry judicial laws."

Now this is the cornerstone of their foreign view of the position of the law of God; and it is often said, isn't it, that this is the division of which the Old Testament knows nothing. How can you read the prophets and say they knew nothing about this? How can you see them speaking as the mouthpieces of God, saying, "In God's name"? It's not sacrifice and burnt offering that comes first, but obedience that comes first.

Were they so blind they couldn't see the distinction in the things that God had made to differ? And yet, of course, there is a certain necessity about the apparent uniformity of the law for these people under the Old Testament, because *that* is what they were under. It was the picture of salvation; they had no other. It was the rule of life; they had no other. It was the means by which they would be framed to be the people of God; there was no other way. They could thus be framed.

And yet here we see this glorious parallel between the *prophecy* of the Old Testament, and the *law* of the Old Testament. The prophecy of the Old Testament spoke about a Christ who would come to save his people. But it was only in the light of his coming that men began to see, that as the prophecies of his coming passed through the prism of his presence, those prophecies were broken up into his first coming and his return. Only in the light of his coming could it be seen that he was the end of all the prophecies, both those referring to his incarnation and suffering, and those referring to his coming again.

Well, the same is true of the law. It is only in the light of Christ that we fully and finally see that there were dimensions of the law that were applications of the Decalogue in order to restrain the people as a people unto God, a light to the Gentiles. There were applications of the law that were given in order that, in the days of promise, men might have hope in the ceremonies of a coming Savior who would deliver them from sin and guilt. So that in Christ, as

he fulfills and embodies all dimensions of the law, it is of the very essence of the case that the ceremonial law which is fulfilled in his blood is ceremonial no longer. The civil law which applies to a special nation can be civil no longer, because Christ has broken out of the bounds and the bands that God had hedged around his people; and he himself has become the light of the world.

But as the perfect embodiment of the moral law of God, bidding us to follow his example and be obedient to his commands, he places as a yoke upon our shoulders, the Decalogue of God, and says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light,” and “if you love me you will joyfully keep my commandments.”

And Ephesians 2:15-16 and Colossians 2:14-17 clearly demonstrate to us that civil and ceremonial find their fulfillment and their abrogation in Christ. And Romans 8:3-4 clearly demonstrates that that which is moral, fulfilled in Christ’s active and passive obedience, as *being* fulfilled – the great hand of the blood-letting of our Lord Jesus Christ – is that his fulfillment of the law of God might be repeated in ours.

And so it is in Christ that we truly see the end of the law; and that is why Paul says, “Do we abrogate the law by teaching faith in Christ? No,” he says, “We strengthen it. For Christ did not come to abolish it, but to fulfill it so that it might be fulfilled in us.” And that is why in Romans 13:8-10, Ephesians 6:1, and in other places in other apostolic writings, the apostles are able to speak about the continuing and abiding relevance of the law of God in the life of the believer.

The Old Testament saints saw in the law Christ, and embraced his commands. He knew that he was not under a covenant works; but he rejoiced in the law as the rule of his life and praise God for the power he gave him to love him and obey him. It should not therefore surprise us or grieve us to think that the New Testament believer also learns to see Christ in the law. He sees it with his brothers and sisters before Christ’s coming, as the rule of his life. He sees with Calvin that Christ is the life of the law. He sees that without Christ there is no life in the law. He sees that the law itself is full of life. He sees that he can appreciate the clarity of the law only when he gazes fully into Christ’s face; but when he does gaze into the law, he sees something of the unveiled face of his Lord Jesus Christ. And so he thrills to its clarity. He rejoices in its depth of exposition. He seeks the Spirit’s guidance for its application. And for no other reason could he say with the apostle Paul, that he was ἐννομος Χριστῷ,<sup>1</sup> in law to Christ, through the gospel.

He could have said, of course, that he was *in grace* to Christ; and every Antinomian who has ever breathed on the face of the earth could have said *amen*; but must not silence Paul when Paul says that what he is in to Christ, is the *law*.

You see, at the end of the day, Antinomianism is forced into the position that law in the Old Testament always involves Legalism. But in some way or another, the Mosaic Law was a covenant of works, a way of justification. And that is often so, because in his heart of hearts the Antinomian is a Legalist in disguise, trying to struggle free from his awful bonded spirit. And yet, you see, he is mistaken when he binds his legal heart with the chains of Antinomianism. He becomes like the people of Gadara who bound the man possessed with cords of rope and chains of metal; for no natural power can ever chain the legal spirit, only grace, only the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, brethren, I say, again, to you that the Marrow Controversy resolved itself into the controversy of Jesus and the Pharisees, to whom he told this story of a certain man who had two sons: an Antinomian prodigal and who when awakened was tempted to Legalism.

“I will go and be a slave in my Father’s house.”

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<sup>1</sup> 1Co 9:21.

And a legalistic elder brother who thirsted for the Antinomian ventures of his younger brother. Oh, to have a fling like the fling of my brother, and to be free from this awful yoke of my father's law. And between them stood the father of mercies and grace, offering to both free grace — grace which would make a son obedient to his father's law; grace which would give him a liberty in his spirit to be obedient with a thankful rather than with a servile heart; free grace which would produce evangelical obedience and true joy in the father's law as the gracious rule for all his life.

May God help us together so rightly to divide the Word of truth that we may escape from Antinomianism on the one hand, and Legalism on the other; and know what it is to be welcomed at the end into our Father's house, and embraced in that day when we shall all know the liberty of the joy of the children of God. May God bless his Word. Amen.