**The Marrow of Modern Divinity**

Lesson 1 – Introduction

**History of the Book and Controversy**

1. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* first appeared in print in 1645 in London. It was written by an Edward Fisher who was a barber, surgeon, and part-time bookseller. A second part to *The Marrow* focused on the 10 Commandments was written in 1648 and published in 1649. The 2 parts of the book were first published together in 1658. Although there were other editions and printings, the book faded into relative obscurity.
2. In 1700, the Scottish pastor Thomas Boston noticed the book on the shelf of a parishioner during a pastor visit. This elderly parishioner had been a veteran of the English Civil War. Boston records that the reading of this book “brought theological clarity and spiritual relief, lifting him out of personal and pastoral struggle with the application of the gospel, due to the legalism and hyper-Calvinism in the church.”
3. In the early 1700s, the Church of Scotland had a few different parties within her. There were legalists who followed the teachings of Richard Baxter and were called “neonomians” (new law). They believed that faith and obedience were legal works. As one scholar puts it, “For Baxter, God offers grace to sinners by introducing the ‘new law’ of repentance and faith. Consequently, when penitent sinners ‘obey’ this new law, they obtain a personal saving righteousness.” In other words, Baxter and his followers were teaching a form of legalism in which salvation is by obedience to a law of works. Baxter also denied Limited Atonement and taught that Christ’s work was penal (He took the penalty of sin) and vicarious (in the place of others) but not strictly substitutionary; rather, it was universal redemption.
4. Another major party was a group of “hyper-Calvinists” who believed that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could only be offered to people who were showing signs of being one of God’s elect [“preparationism”]. The primary sign that they looked for was a “forsaking of sin.” They argued something like this:
   1. The grace of God saves the elect only.
   2. The elect are known by their forsaking sin.
   3. The grace of God (gospel of Jesus Christ) is given to those who forsake sin.

This in effect was a different type of legalism in that one had to show signs of obedience before being called by the message of the gospel to come to Christ.

1. In 1717 the General Assembly decided against the Auchterarder Presbytery who had added an ordination vow in an attempt to guard against the legalism that was in the Church (Kirk) at large. The vow said, “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us [ingrafting] in covenant with God.” The issue was raised with a young licentiate who changed his mind about signing his name to that vow and the Presbytery revoked his license to preach the gospel. In appeal of this decision, it came before the General Assembly who found in favor of the licentiate against the Auchterarder Presbytery. In fact the Assembly condemned the additional vow and declared that it was “unsound and most detestable doctrine.”
2. At this assembly Thomas Boston was sitting to a minister from that presbytery named John Drummond and Boston told Drummond about the book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Though it was hard to find, Drummond finally tracked it down and it soon found its way into the hands of Rev. James Hog and Rev. James Webster.
3. Within a year, Rev. Hog prepared the book to be published for the first time in Scotland and wrote in his preface, “This excellent and spiritual piece answers the darkening of the glorious gospel, and perversion thereof, by anti-evangelical errors and heresies.” His printing was of the 9th edition from London which contained only the 1st part and not the 2nd part on the 10 commandments.
4. A pamphlet war quickly arose within the Church of Scotland, primarily between James Hog defending the Marrow and Rev. James Hadow, principal of St. Andrews College, attacking the Marrow. Hadow ended up preaching a sermon against the book in 1719 and a formal complaint was sent to the General Assembly against the Marrow.
5. In 1720 the Assembly took up the matter and sided with Hadow who had charged the book with teaching universalism (Christ died for all) and antinomianism (anti-law). The assembly said the book was “exceedingly harsh and offensive” and the Assembly forbade its ministers to recommend the book either in preaching, writing, or printing. They couldn’t even talk about it favorably with others. The Assembly went on to say in its official act that her ministers “are hereby enjoined and required to warn and exhort their people, in whose hands the said book is, or may come, not to read or use the same.”
6. 12 ministers (which included James Hog, James Wardlaw, Ralph & Ebenezer Erskine, and Thomas Boston) supported *The Marrow* drafted a response called “Representation and Petition” to the 1721 General Assembly. According to Dr. William VanDoodewaard, “They argued that condemnation of *The Marrow* was condemnation of gospel truth.” The General Assembly in 1722 upheld the decision of the 1720 Assembly against the book and wrote even more in refuting its doctrine. The 1722 Assembly rebuked the books supporters who had earned the nickname “Marrow men,” but the Assembly did not require subscription to this decision because they were trying to preserve the church from a split. Up to this point, there had never been a split in the national Church of Scotland. But the Assembly did warn that continued promotion of the book and its doctrine would not be tolerated.
7. The following years saw more pamphlet wars, supporting pastors were charged with doctrinal errors at the presbytery level, other supporters were kept from moving to more influential churches, and Thomas Boston printed a new full edition (including part 2) of the book in 1726 with his own explanatory notes to help explain what the book was trying to say.
8. From the hyper-Calvinist party, the Marrow men were called “Arminian” for preaching the free offer of the Gospel indiscriminately to all people. From the Neonomian party, the Marrow men were called “Antinomian” because they preached the free grace of Jesus Christ found in the gospel.
9. In 1731, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland proposed to give absolute rights in the selection of office bearers for local churches to “local heritors [hereditary land owners], magistrates, and town councils.” In other words, the rich and influential people in a town could choose a church’s minister and elders, rather than being chosen by the congregation. This was known as “patronage.” The “patron” who got to choose was required to be Protestant, but nothing more was required. The proposal was enacted in 1732.
10. In the same year, Ebenezer Erskine preached against the Act at a Synod meeting (several local presbyteries). He preached, “As it is the natural privilege of every house or society of men to have the choice of their own servants or officers, so ‘tis the privilege of the house of God in a particular manner.” He went on to preach that this act removed Christ as the corner-stone of the Church and the rich put in His place. He preached, “I say, were Christ here present, I think He would say with relation to that act, ‘In as much as you did it unto one of the least of these, you did it unto Me.’ By this act Christ is rejected in His authority.”
11. The synod was outraged and formally complained against his sermon as soon as the Synod meeting was convened. Refusing to recant of what he preached, the majority of the Synod voted to declare Erskine censurable [church discipline] and he was rebuked and admonished. Erskine appealed the decision to the General Assembly and the Assembly of 1733 upheld Erskine’s rebuke and admonishment. He was not allow to read a formal protest, so Erskine along with 3 of his ministerial colleagues left, leaving their written protest behind.
12. The written protest was read by another minister which eventually led to the men being suspended from ministry in August 1733 and in November 1733 they were declared “no longer ministers of this church” and removed from the Church of Scotland. In response they said they would continue in communion with all those who desired a “true presbyterian, covenanted Church of Scotland, in her doctrine, worship, government, and discipline.”
13. On December 5, 1733, Ebenezer Erskine, William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff, and James Fisher met at Gairney Bridge and formed themselves into the Associate Presbytery. This was the first time there had been any split or secession from the Church of Scotland. Other would join them and would be called “The Seceders.”

**The Format and Content of the Book**

1. The book is written as a series of dialogues. The persons in the dialogue are:
   1. *Neophytus* – a new Christian who is troubled about basic elements of the gospel
   2. *Nomista* – a legalist
   3. *Antinomista* – an antinomian
   4. *Evangelista* – a pastor who counsels all three and responds to their questions and objections
2. The major concerns of the book are:
   1. The free offer of the Gospel
   2. The relationship between Law and Gospel
   3. The role of the Law in the life of the believer
   4. The nature of Christ’s atoning work
   5. Assurance of Faith
3. The major concerns of the pastors who supported the book was how to properly preach the grace of God in the gospel. All of these theological issues and where one comes down on these questions impacts one’s preaching and one’s practice which would also affect the lives of the congregations.

**Why Read and Teach This Book Today?**

1. Philip Ryken writes, “Both legalism and antinomianism are perennial dangers for the church and for individual Christians. When we begin to think of the Christian life primarily as a list of "dos" and "don'ts," we are under the sway of legalism. When we begin to think that it is okay for us to go ahead and sin, because God will forgive us anyway, we are feeling the temptation of antinomianism.”
2. Some churches become legalistic and have a “performance-based” approach to the Christian life. A good Christian is somebody who does certain things while avoiding other things and the only way to gain favor with God is by leading a good life. While other churches tend to be overly permissive. They use their Christian liberty as an excuse for license and sin. Paul asks in Romans 6:1, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” While Paul answers “No!” antinomian churches would answer “Yes!” In other words, God’s grace justifies their bad and sinful behavior. It’s alright because “God has it covered.”
3. The Gospel of Jesus Christ rescues us from both of these dangers and *The Marrow* deals directly with helping us understand all of these issues as they relate to the Gospel and Jesus. This study will help us understand the Reformed faith, including the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, the nature of saving faith, et.al., rightly and help us avoid the dangers of falling into either of these extremes.
4. This book is also helpful to me as a pastor. Ryken says, “This free offer of the gospel is liberating for ministry. For Thomas Boston, it meant that as a preacher he never needed to be restrained in giving people the gospel. Even the most hardened sinners and most improbable candidates for salvation could be called to faith and told that Christ was available to them.”
5. Dr. VanDoodewaard concludes, “Spirits of legalism and antinomianism continue to rise from human hearts. In sin we attempt self-righteousness and pursue self-satisfaction, rather than finding our entire righteousness and satisfaction in and through the Triune God.”