

The Marrow Doctrine and the Extent of the Atonement: Focal Points Within the Context of Some Theological Positions Within Scottish Marrow Theology

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The first English edition of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was published at the time of the Westminster Assembly (1643–1648), the assembly of divines commissioned by the English Parliament to restructure the confession and church order of the Church of England. According to the title page of the first edition, the author of the book is “E.F., Esq.” It is generally accepted that this refers to Edward Fisher (1627–1655). The addition of Esq. (“Esquire”) indicates that he was neither a pastor nor a college graduate. He was a barber–surgeon in London. Research has shown that this Fisher is indeed the author of the book.

The book is written in the form of a dialogue between “Evangelista,” “a preacher of the gospel”; “Nomista,” “a legalist”; “Antinomista,” “an Antinomian”; and “Neophytus,” “a young Christian.”¹ The title page of the first edition gives the contents in a nutshell:

Touching both the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace: with their use and end, both in the time of the Old Testament, and in the time of the New. Wherein every one may clearly see how far forth he bringeth the LAW into the case of Justification, and so deserves the name of LEGALIST; And how far forth he rejecteth LAW in the case of Sanctification, and so deserveth the name of ANTINOMIST. With

1. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, first ed., London, G. Calvert, 1645. William VanDoodewaard concludes that the “barber surgeon” Edward Fisher is the writer. See William VanDoodewaard, “A Journey into the Past: The Story of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*,” in Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 22–25. See also for authorship David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: University Press, 2004), 1–3.

the middle path betwixt them both, which by JESUS CHRIST leads to eternal life.²

What gave rise to the publication of *The Marrow* was a controversy among the English Puritans about the relationship between law and gospel. The Antinomian movement that began to stir in England, especially in the 1630s, criticized what was deemed to be a legalistic approach to the gospel among most Puritans. It placed all emphasis on faith in Christ and rejected the need for repentance before, and after, the justification of the sinner. Richard Baxter (1615–1691) so vigorously opposed their errors that he gravitated toward another extreme: he made the gospel a new law by so emphasizing the need for penitence that believing in Christ was restricted by legal terms. He became an exponent of what later would be designated as Neonomianism.³

Prompted by this conflict, the Puritan Joseph Caryl, in a word of recommendation, stated the intent of *The Marrow* to be that “to reconcile and heale those unhappy differences which have recently broken out afresh among us, about the Points therein handled, and cleared.” Caryl here refers to the controversy regarding the antinomian and legalistic tendencies in the theology of some Puritans.⁴

A year after the publication of the first edition of *The Marrow*, a pamphlet by I.A. was published identifying a number of “errours” in the book. It is directed not against expressions that underscore the universal offer of grace as such, but rather against the statement that repentance is the fruit of faith and does not precede justification. The booklet posits that only penitent sinners are eligible to receive the gift of faith and justification.

The writer also criticizes the fact that *The Marrow* elaborates on faith and justification without in any way referencing the new birth. The critic misses a description of how the Holy Spirit works in regeneration. Furthermore, he maintains that sanctification is not addressed. Everything revolves around the act of faith which the reader is called upon to exercise, without pointing out that it is impossible from the sinner’s side to believe.⁵

2. Fisher, *The Marrow of modern divinity*, first ed., title page.

3. For the Antinomian conflict and Baxter see especially Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study of Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 22–34.

4. Fisher, *The Marrow of Moderne Divinity*, ed. 1645, word of recommendation by Joseph Caryl, May 10, 1645.

5. IA, A MANIFEST AND BREIFE DISCOVERY Of some of the Errours contained in a Dialogue called the *Marrow of Moderne Divinity*. (London: J. Kirton, 1646).

The second edition of *The Marrow*, which was published in 1646, was probably a reaction to the pamphlet by I.A. According to the title page, it is more elaborate than the first edition. For example, included in this edition are the “Places” by the Scottish reformer Patrick Hamilton (ca. 1504–1528), who explained the distinction between law and gospel.⁶ Fisher’s preface to the first edition was enhanced in this edition. For example, he personally mentions some Puritans by name who do not appear in the first edition, namely, John Dod and Thomas Hooker. The author confesses that “by means of conferring with Master Thomas Hooker in private, the Lord was pleased to convince me that I was yet but a proud Pharisee, and to shew me the way of faith, and salvation by Christ alone.”⁷ In this edition, Fisher places greater emphasis on the errors of the Antinomians. Apparently, he intended to be more balanced—also in the dialogue itself—by paying more attention to sanctification.⁸ Then, in addition to Caryl’s preface, he includes some endorsements by J. Burroughs, W. Strong, I. Sprigge, and S. Prettie. These endorsements are followed by an alphabetical list of names of theologians whom the author quotes.⁹

A separate second volume of *The Marrow* was published in 1649. Like the first volume, it consists of a dialogue. Here the author explicitly deals with the Decalogue. All commandments are commented on by “Evangelista;” “Nomologista,” a proponent of the law; and “Neophitus,” a weak believer. The book is dedicated to John Warner, Lord Mayor of London. In addition to Caryl, Ralph Venning, Samuel Moore, and John Cradocot wrote words of recommendation. As he did in the first edition, Fisher uses the initials E. F. He still does not wish to reveal his name. In his preface, dated September 21, 1648, he gives an account of this exposition of the Ten Commandments. He wishes to clarify the place and function of the law. His intention is probably to refute allegations of antinomianism. In the

6. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity... Before the which there is prefixed the commendatory Epistles of various Divines of great esteem in the Citie of London...*, “The second Edition, corrected, amended, and much enlarged. By the Author, E. Fisher.” (London: G. Calvert, 1646).

7. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, second edition, “To all such humble hearted Readers, as see any need to learn, eyther to know themselves or GOD in CHRIST”, n.p.

8. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, ed. 1646, “To all such humble hearted readers, as see any need to learn, either to know themselves, or God in Christ.”

9. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (ed. 1646), ‘A Catalogue of those writers names out of whom I have collected much of the matter contained in this ensuing Dialogue’, “To the Reader”, n.p.

second edition, he indicates that the law has not been set aside for believers, as the Antinomians teach.¹⁰

David Como has discovered that Fisher initially interacted with antinomian groups. Although he had distanced himself from them after the release of *The Marrow*, he had well-known Antinomians Prettie and Sprigge write a word of recommendation for the second edition of the first volume.¹¹

Scottish Editions of *The Marrow*

The Marrow was discovered in 1700—55 years after the publication of the first edition—by the Scottish theologian and minister Thomas Boston (1676–1732), in the home of a church member in Simprin, his first congregation. Given its explanation of the relationship between law and gospel, he deemed it helpful to have it republished. This was prompted by his own lack of insight and the “legalistic” tendencies of his own spiritual life and theological position. The latter was due to the conditional nature of neonomian preaching that was gaining ground in the Scottish church.¹²

In 1718, through the instrumentality of Boston’s friend and colleague James Hog (c. 1658–1734), minister at Carnock, the first Scottish edition of *The Marrow* rolled off the press in Edinburgh. This ninth corrected edition of the first volume includes a preface by Hog, the compiler of this volume. It is not clear which English edition Hog used; it was, at least, not the first edition of 1645. It was probably the third edition of 1646.¹³ James Hog’s name also appears in a critical and anonymous pamphlet, *The Snake in the Grass*, written in response to the Scottish edition of *The Marrow*. In his preface, dated December 3, 1717, Hog indicates that this book is relevant because of the distortion of the relationship between law and gospel that prevailed in the land.¹⁴ In two pamphlets, in which he does not mention his

10. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Moderne Divinity, The second part* (London: J. Wright, 1649).

11. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 60–61, 455.

12. Thomas Boston (George H. Morrison, ed.), *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston, A.M.* (Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Andersen & Ferrier, 1899), 169. On the “discovery” of Boston, and the completion of the new edition, see David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy 1718–1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 201–202.

13. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity: touching both the Covenant of Works, and of Grace...*, The ninth edition, corrected (Edinburgh: J. Mosman, W. Brown, 1718); Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, third edition (London: Giles Calvert, 1646).

14. Anon., *The Snake in the Grass: or, Remarks Upon a Book, entituled, The Marrow of Modern Divinity: Touching both the Covenant of Works and of Grace* (Edinburgh, 1719).

name, Hog addresses the criticism of *The Snake*, as well as comments made by a fellow pastor.¹⁵

The book immediately caused a stir. The primary opponent was James Hadow (ca. 1670–1747), professor of theology at the University of St. Andrews. In April, he spoke against *The Marrow* in a sermon before the Synod of Fife. One point of criticism concerned a passage where grace is offered promiscuously, in the sense of “Christ is dead for him.” He comments on this: “Now, how can Ministers of the Gospel tell every Man, as the Truth of God, that Christ is dead for him, without the Supposition of a universal Redemption?”¹⁶

The Marrow Conflict

This Scottish republication of 1718 sparked a controversy within the Church of Scotland that made its way to the General Assembly. This conflict, having gone down in history as the “Marrow Controversy,” lasted from 1718 to 1723. Twelve ministers, who historically have become known as the Marrow Men, defended the orthodoxy of the controversial book to a majority of the synod. These twelve included Thomas Boston and James Hog. The Assembly condemned the contents of the book based on five identified errors. These alleged errors pertain to the assurance of salvation, the relationship between law and gospel, and the scope, or extent, of the atonement. The committee responsible for reporting to the Assembly concluded that the atonement of Christ and the divine pardon were presented as being universal in nature. The book’s defenders rejected this accusation.¹⁷

This question was also raised during the debates at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, where the book was ultimately condemned. This drawn-out procedure lasted four years. After the Assembly ruled in 1720 that *The Marrow* contained passages contrary to Scripture and the Westminster Confession, the twelve Marrow Men filed a “Representation

15. James Hog, *A Letter to a Gentleman, Containing A Detection of Errors in a Print, intituled, The Snake in the Grass* (Edinburgh: R. Brown, 1719); James Hog, *An Explication of Passages Excepted against in the the Marrow of Modern Divinity... In a Letter to a Minister of the Gospel* (Edinburgh: R. Brown, 1719). The initials J. H. point to the authorship of Hog.

16. This sermon was printed the same year. James Hadow, *The Record of God, and Duty of Faith Therein required* (Edinburgh: J. Mosman, 1719), 27.

17. Main literature on the Marrow Controversy includes: Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy 1718–1723*; Henry F. Henderson, *The Religious Controversies of Scotland* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), 20–43; Thomas M’Crie, “Account of the Controversy respecting the Marrow of Modern Divinity,” in *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor* 3, August, October, December 1831, and “New Series,” 1, February 1832.

and Petition” requesting that the Assembly’s decision be revoked. In addition to Boston and Hog, the brothers Ralph (1685–1752) and Ebenezer Erskine (1680–1754) also belonged to the Marrow Men.¹⁸ They expressed their surprise at the arguments underlying this decision.¹⁹ At the next Assembly in 1721, their gravamen was countered by presenting them with twelve questions to be answered. The answers, prepared mainly by Ebenezer Erskine, were submitted to the Assembly Commission in March 1722.²⁰ The ecclesiastical trial that followed resulted in another condemnation of *The Marrow*. The Assembly of 1722 confirmed the acts of the 1720 Assembly in condemning *The Marrow* and went so far as to forbid pastors to quote passages of the book in the pulpit.²¹

***The Marrow* Republished in two Separate Volumes**

During the Marrow controversy, the second volume of *The Marrow* was republished in Scotland. Hog was probably the editorial compiler of this work also. However, his name is not mentioned—not even in two pamphlets that were published shortly after this and of which he must also have been the author. This probably has to do with the regrettable progression of the controversy in the Assembly for Hog and others. Fisher’s two prefaces and the endorsements, as they appear in the 1649 edition, are followed by “The Preface to this Edition” along with “The Appendix” at the end of the book. It appears that James Hog is the author of both additions, especially considering that he discusses the publication of the first volume. The preface elaborates on the character of evangelical sanctification and the difference between legal and evangelical preaching. The appendix emphasizes the biblical relationship between law and gospel.²² Two pamphlets that were published shortly thereafter deal explicitly with the contents of this edition.²³

Despite the Assembly’s condemnation of the Marrow doctrine, a republication of the first volume of *The Marrow* was made in Scotland in 1726.

18. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 294.

19. Lachman, 296.

20. Lachman, 316.

21. Lachman, 409–18.

22. The English edition is Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity. The second part* (London: J. Wright, 1649). The Scottish edition: Edward Fisher, *The Second Part of The Marrow of Modern divinity...* (Edinburgh: 1722).

23. Anon, *An essay Upon Gospel, and Legal Preaching* (Edinburgh: J. Davidson, 1723); James Hog, *Review of An Essay Upon Gospel, and Legal Preaching* (Edinburgh: James Mc Ewen, 1723).

This contains explanatory notes (“Notes”) by Thomas Boston. Though his name is not mentioned, there is a pseudonym, “Philaethes Irenaeus” (“the truth does not break down”). Boston used one of the Scottish editions of the first volume, the twelfth edition “corrected.” He probably—like Hog—was not familiar with the first English edition of 1645.²⁴ Later Scottish editions consisted of a merger of the first volume with the Boston marginal notes and the second volume, which has no marginal notes.²⁵

Two Main Quotes of *The Marrow Under Criticism of the Assembly*

First Quote:

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, has made *a deed of gift and grant* [emphasis mine] unto them all, that whosoever of them all shall believe in this His Son, shall not perish, but have eternal life. And hence it was, that Jesus Christ Himself said to His disciples, Mark 16:15, “Go and tell every man without exception, that here is good news for him; Christ is *dead for him* [emphasis mine]; and if he will take Him, and accept of His righteousness, he shall have Him.”²⁶

This quote did stir pens and tongues in Scotland. This mainly concerns the accusation of Amyraldism, or the view of the French School of Saumur on the expanse of reconciliation, the so-called hypothetical universalism. The short definition of this doctrine is: Christ has atoned for the whole world, but the atonement will be effected through the application of the redemption of Christ to the hearts of the elect. The question is whether the above translation quote indeed contains traces of Amyraldism. As noted above, the Marrow Men, in their commentary on the Scottish Assembly’s criticism, have refuted this accusation.²⁷

24. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* . . . , with notes by Philaethes Irenaeus, “twelve edition, corrected” (Edinburgh: 1726).

25. This second volume was not published in one volume with the Scottish editions of *The Marrow* until 1789 with the first volume. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, “in two parts” (Falkirk, Scotland: P. Mair, 1789).

26. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.), 126–27.

27. For the different views on the scope of the atonement, as with Saumur, see Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 74–88, “The extent of the atonement.”

After the National Synod of Dort (1618–19), this French Huguenot school tried to bridge the conflicting views of the Arminians and Calvinists by formulating a compromise theology. In this construct, the decree of election follows the decree that God’s Son would make satisfaction for all fallen mankind. Saumur’s exponents were the Scottish professor John Cameron (1579–1625) and his disciple, Moise Amyraut (1596–1664). Both taught at the University of Saumur. They rejected the teachings of Arminius but approximated the view of Arminians concerning the extent of the atonement to the whole world.²⁸

Universal Atonement, or a Universal Gospel Offer?

For our question, “Query X” from the assembly is important:

Query X. 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* [emphasis mine] by sovereign grace? And whether it is absolute, or conditional?²⁹

In their response, the representatives of the Marrow Men dismissed the charge of a universal or general atonement. The passage being challenged, that is, “The Father has made a deed of gift and grant unto all mankind, that whosoever of them shall believe in his Son, shall not perish,” does not refer to a universal or general atonement but rather to the universal offer of Christ to all people.³⁰ They clarify this as follows:

(...) That by the “deed of gift, or grant unto all mankind,” we understand no more than the revelation of the divine will in the Word, affording warrant to all to receive Him; for although we believe the purchase, and application of redemption to be peculiar to the elect, who were given by the Father to Christ in the Counsel of peace, yet the warrant to all to receive Him is common to all. Ministers, by virtue of the commission they have received from their great Lord and Master, are authorized, and instructed to preach the gospel to every creature, that is, to make a full, free, and unhampered offer of Him,

28. For the view of Saumur, and the controversy of hypothetical universalism in France, see Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

29. E. Fisher, *The Marrow* (ed. 2009), 371.

30. Fisher, *The Marrow* (ed. 2009), 371.

His grace, righteousness, and salvation to every rational soul to whom they may in providence have access to speak.³¹

Second Quote:

The context of the cited quote from “act of gift, or bestowal”:

God the Father, as He is in his Son Jesus Christ, moved with nothing but with his free love to mankind lost, has made a *deed of gift* [emphasis mine] and grant unto them all, that whosoever of them all shall believe in this his Son, shall not perish, but have eternal life.³²

Another offending passage condemned by the Assembly is:

And hence it was, that Jesus Christ Himself said unto his disciples, “Go and preach the gospel to every creature under heaven” (Mark 16:15), that is, Go and tell every man without exception, that here is good news for him; *Christ is dead for him* [emphasis mine]; and if he will take him, and accept of his righteousness, he shall have Him.³³

Boston’s “Annotations”

Thomas Boston’s “Notes” (“Annotations”) sheds a brighter light on the author’s intentions in these excerpts. Boston wishes to indicate that Fisher does not espouse a universalist view of the atonement. If the book had included these explanatory notes regarding these excerpts when it was reprinted in 1718, confusion and misunderstanding might have been avoided. The twelfth edition of *The Marrow* (1726), published subsequent to the controversy, did contain these comments.³⁴

Boston’s commentary regarding the controversial passages sheds some light on the allegedly offending statements. As to the expression in the first segment, “a deed of gift and grant,” Boston indicates that this is a quote from a book by the English Puritan Ezekiel Culverwell (ca. 1554–1631). In his “Annotations,” Boston considers the two offending phrases to be paraphrases of the universal offer rather than evidence of a universal atonement. As to the phrase “act of bestowal and gift,” Boston notes, among other

31. Fisher, *The Marrow* (ed. 2009), 371.

32. Fisher, *The Marrow* (ed. 2009), 144.

33. Fisher, *The Marrow* (ed. 2009), 144.

34. Leen J. van Valen, “*The Marrow of Modern Divinity* in historische context,” in Fisher, *Het merg van het Evangelie*, ed. Brevier (2015), 28; E. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Twelfth edition (Edinburgh: 1726). The author and editor, Thomas Boston, is not named. Fisher has the initials E. F. and Boston is with the pseudonym “Philalethes Irenaeus.”

things: “That is, from this deed of gift and grant it was that the ministerial offer was appointed to be made in the most extensive terms” (note 2). “Namely, the deed of gift and grant, or the offer of Christ in the word, (...)” (note 4).³⁵ And some pages thereafter follows a reference to John 3:16, to which Boston adds an excerpt from the Canons of Dort that describes the universal call of the gospel.³⁶

The expression in the second segment—“Christ is dead for him”—is, according to Boston, extracted from a book by the English Puritan John Preston (1587–1628). Boston elaborates on this in detail. First, he quotes the entire paragraph from Preston’s book that contains the phrase. Boston argues that the context reveals that Preston does not teach anything other than that a dead Savior is offered to all people. “A Savior is provided for him; there is a crucified Christ for him, the ordinance of heaven for salvation for a lost man, in the use-making of which he may be saved.”³⁷

Boston’s explanatory notes regarding the Culverwell and Preston passages seek to clarify that they do not imply universal atonement. However, is this indeed the case when we examine these quotations within the scriptural context in which they appear?

David Lachman, who points out in his *The Marrow Controversy* that the Assembly misinterpreted these passages, believes that Boston’s notes accurately reflect Culverwell’s and Preston’s views. This apparently was not the view of their contemporary, Richard Baxter, who lists their names as belonging to those to whom it applies that “this middle way of universal redemption has been by writing and disputing, and preaching maintained.” He agreed with the Amyraldian view of the extent of atonement. Baxter also includes in this list British delegates to the Synod of Dort, such as John Davenant (1572–1641), who had defended the broad view of the extent of the atonement in the drafting of the Canons of Dort. Lachman challenges this conclusion as going too far, especially since Baxter, in his view, does not substantiate his claims from the sources. Baxter himself also supported the broad view of the atonement.³⁸

35. Fisher, *The Marrow*, (ed. 2009), 1442, 4.

36. Fisher, *The Marrow*, (ed. 2009), 152, Canons of Dort, chap. 2, art. 5.

37. Fisher, *The Marrow*, 152, quote 153n.

38. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 24–26, Lachman quotes Baxter from Richard Baxter, *Certain disputations of right to Sacraments, and the true nature of fisherible Christianity* (London: 1658).

We will examine the writings of these two authors as to their intent; that is, whether they espoused a broad view of the extent of the atonement, or whether they should be interpreted according to Boston's "Annotations."

Context of Culverwell's Book The Treatise of Faith (1623)

We will first consider the context of the quote by Ezekiel Culverwell.³⁹ Culverwell was an English Puritan minister in Little Leighs, Essex, East Anglia. The most famous of his writings is *The Treatise of Faith* (1623; 8th edition 1648), which contains the controversial passage.⁴⁰

The quote from *The Marrow* is extracted from the following passage in Culverwell's book:

Now, the matter to be beleaved is here said to be the Gospel. That is, the glad tydings of Reconciliation made by Christ Jesus between God and man, which though it be diversly, and in sundry speeches set out unto us in holy Scriptures, yet all is most sufficiently contained in this one sentence delivered by Christ Himself, Joh. 3.16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; wherein this is evident, that the matter to be beleaved unto salvation is this: That God the Father moved by nothing but his free love to mankinde lost, hath made a part of *gift and grant* [emphasis mine] of His Sonne Christ Jesus unto mankind, that whosoever of all mankind, shall receive this gift by a true, and lively faith, he shall not perish, but have everlasting life.⁴¹

At first sight, it seems from the context of the sentence that this is not a reference to universal atonement but rather a universal offer to a lost human race. Like the opponents of the Marrow Men, there were contemporaries of Culverwell who had difficulty with his broad conception of the gospel. The Scottish minister and physician Alexander Leighton (ca. 1570–1649), who had fled to the Netherlands because of his strict Presbyterian views,

39. E. Culverwell, *Treatise of Faith. Wherein is declared, how a man may live by Faith, and find reliefe in all his necessities. Applied especially unto the use of the weakest Christians* (London: W. Sheffard, 1623).

40. Brett Ussher, "Culverwell, Ezekiel" in *Puritans, and Puritanism in Europe, and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, ed. Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster (Santa Barbara, 2006), 1:69–70.

41. Culverwell, *Treatise of Faith* (ed., 1623), 13, 14.

appears to have published a forty-one page document in Amsterdam in 1624 in which he criticized the booklet of Culverwell on faith.⁴²

Among other things, Leighton objects to Culverwell's view that Christ and all His benefits are offered to all people. He considers this an Arminian error and believes that Christ is only offered to the elect. All people are not chosen, and therefore the offer cannot be extended to all people. As proof texts, he cites Ephesians 1:9 and Titus 2:11. Just because there are "reprobates" under the gospel ministry, it does not mean that the gospel is being offered to them.⁴³

Culverwell responded with a pamphlet in which he points out that he believes himself to be in complete agreement with the Canons of Dort.⁴⁴ He quotes the first articles of this confession, emphasizing that all hearers of the gospel are earnestly called. When he uses the word "offering," he means the "external call of the gospel." He argues that his opponent confuses the word "offer" with the "promise" to receive Christ, for only the elect will do the latter.⁴⁵

Context of Preston's Book The Breast-plate of Faith and Love (1630)

We will now consider the context of the second passage. John Preston was an English Puritan clergyman at Cambridge.⁴⁶ The offending passage appears in his well-known work *The Breastplate of Faith and Love (1630)*.⁴⁷

The above quote from *The Marrow* occurs in the following context of this book:

42. Alexander Leighton, *A Friendly Tryall of some Passages contained in the Treatise of Faith, written by Mr. Ezekiel Culverwell* (Amsterdam [?], 1624). See also Keith L. Sprunger, *Trumpets from the Tower: English Puritan Printing in the Netherlands 1600–1640* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 197.

43. Leighton, *A Friendly Tryall*. "Christ is only offered to those that are elected in Christ; but all are not elected in Christ, and saved by Christ. Therefore the offer is not made to all," 9, 10, 12.

44. Ezekiel. Culverwell, *A Briefe Answere to certaine Objections against the Treatise of Faith, made by Ezekiel Culverwell. Clearing him from the errors of Arminius, unjustly laid to his charge* (London: W. Sheffard, 1626), A5.

45. Culverwell, *A Briefe Answere*. "By offer I meane only the outward calling by the gospel", n.p.

46. Jonathan D. Moore, "Preston, John," in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, eds. Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster (Santa Barbara, 2006), 1:204–205.

47. John Preston, *The Breast-Plate of Faith and Love, A Treatise, Wherein the Ground and Exercise of Faith and Love, as They Are Set Upon Christ Their Object, and as They Are Expressed in Good Workes, Is Explained* (London, 1630).

But, when you hear this righteousness is given, the next question is, to whom is it given? If it be only given to some, what comfort is it to me? But (which is the ground of all comfort) it is given to every man, there is not a man excepted; for which we have the sure word of God, which will not fail. When you have the Charter of a King well confirmed, you reckon it a matter of great moment: What is it then, when you have the Charter of God Himself? which you shall evidently see in these two places, Mark 16:15, “Go, and preach the gospel to every creature under Heaven: What is that? Go, and tell every man without exception, that there is good news for him, Christ is *dead for him* [emphasis mine], and if he will take him, and accept of his righteousness, he shall have it, restrain it not, but go, and tell every man under heaven.”⁴⁸

Then follows the quotation of Revelation 22:17, “And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” To this, Preston adds, “Many other places are in the Scriptures to prove that the offer is universal.”⁴⁹

At first glance, the context seems to indicate that there is no universal atonement here, but rather that Preston is speaking of the universal offer of salvation in the gospel. In what follows, he indicates that although Christ is offered and given freely to all men, God’s purpose is to bestow this salvation by effectually calling only the elect (i.e., to be applied by faith).⁵⁰

English Puritan Universalism

Jonathan Moore wants to prove in his study *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* that there is no linguistic difference between “Christ is dead for him” and “Christ died for him.”⁵¹ It is striking, he says, that Preston nowhere explicitly states in his writings that Christ died for the elect alone. In this regard, he does not adhere firmly to the doctrine of limited atonement, as did William Perkins (1558–1602), following Theodore Beza (1519–1605).⁵²

48. Preston, *The Breast-Plate of Faith, and Love* (ed. 1634, reprint, 1979), 8.

49. Preston, *The Breast-Plate*, 8, “Many other places of Scripture there be, to prove the generality of the offer.”

50. Preston, *The Breast-Plate* (repr. 1979), 9. “Though Christ be offered, and freely given to all, yet God intends him only to the elect.”

51. Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

52. Pieter Rouwendal has shown that Beza deviated from Calvin’s vision. Pieter L.

Moore points out that the universal “gospel call” is a compelling reason for Preston to offer grace to everyone. However, what is the basis for this offer? Is it the fact that Christ has made satisfaction for all men? He admits that Preston was inclined to base the universal gospel call on the assumption of a universal atonement. Moore posits that this is reflected in a sermon Preston delivered at Lincoln Inn in 1625.⁵³ This sermon includes the controversial phrase which Preston directly links to “a conditional Covenant of grace which is common to all.” From this covenant relationship, “the righteousness and salvation” of Christ is for everyone.⁵⁴

Boston views the offending phrase as a paraphrase of the universal offer and not as evidence of a universal atonement. Lachman follows the same reasoning in his book *The Marrow Controversy*. The evidence that he and Boston cite from Preston’s works to show that the gospel offer is not grounded in a universal extent of the work of Christ is not, according to Moore, applicable to said phrase.⁵⁵

While this cannot be inferred from the offending quote, Moore nevertheless argues that the extent of the atonement is wider in Preston than in those who rigorously defend limited atonement. He believes that his conclusions are substantiated by the so-called “York House Conference” held in 1626. Both Calvinists and Arminians were represented at this conference.⁵⁶ The Calvinist Preston, who was initially silent at this conference, was, according to a report, compelled to answer the opposing party’s question whether Christ died for all. He pointed out in cautious terms that “Christ was indeed a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2: 6), but that, on the other hand, he actually bestows salvation only to the elect” which is the extent of the atonement. In fact, this is limited atonement, but the position at the conference was not clearly defined.⁵⁷

Rouwendal, *Predestination and Preaching in Genevan Theology from Calvin to Pictet* (Kampen: Brevier, 2017), 30. “Christ had died sufficiently for all...but efficiently for the elect,” 82. Beza criticized the phrase “sufficiently for the world.”

53. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 98–100.

54. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 117, 118.

55. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 27; Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 118–20.

56. For the York conference, see Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 141–69.

57. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 162.

The Broad View Espoused at the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly

The cited quotes from Culverwell and Preston are not isolated. The Episcopalian Calvinist James Ussher (1581–1656) apparently defended the broad view of the atonement and corresponded with Culverwell on this.⁵⁸ They did not explicitly define that the extent of atonement is not directed to the elect, but to the whole world. According to the broad view, it was based on the general love of Christ to the whole of mankind. In March 1618, Ussher communicated his thoughts to Culverwell in a draft not published until 1656.⁵⁹ According to Baxter, Ussher had influenced the Episcopalian John Davenant.⁶⁰ Davenant was one of the foremost defenders of this broad view of the Synod of Dort. The differences between the broad and narrow view allegedly implied that the Canons of Dort do not explicitly indicate for whom Christ died. In fact, there was a consensus.⁶¹

At the Westminster Assembly, there was a small minority that espoused the view of Davenant and others, the Puritan Edmund Calamy (1600–1666) being the principal spokesman. To the Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), he posited that the “world” of John 3:16 includes not only the elect but all men.⁶²

The supporters of the Ussher and Davenant view certainly did not want to be counted among the Arminians. Nor did they teach the same thing as the “hypothetical universalism” of the so-called French “School of Saumur.” Saumur plainly taught that Christ has *made satisfaction* for all the world, and that goes beyond *dying* for the world. The difference is that the English broad view the atonement is extended to the world in the *preaching*

58. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 175; Richard Snoddy, *The Soteriology of James Ussher: The Act and Object of Saving Faith* (Oxford: University Press, 2014), 52–56.

59. This publication was made after Ussher’s death in 1657. James Ussher, *The Judgment of the late Archbishop of Armagh... Of the Extent of Christ’s Death, and Satisfaction* (London: J. Crook, 1658). See Snoddy, *The soteriology of James Ussher*, 53.

60. Jonathan D. Moore, “James Ussher’s Influence on the Synod of Dort,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt and Aza Goudriaan (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 163–77; Snoddy, *The Soteriology of James Ussher*, 76.

61. For the different positions at the Synod of Dort, see G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1675)* (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 1997), 128–61, 150, Davenant’s position.

62. David L. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville: B&H Academy, 2016), 242. For the discussion at Westminster Assembly see Alex F. Mitchell and John P. Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the sessions of the Westminster Assembly of divines*, (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1874), 152. For a critical assessment see Robert T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* (Oxford: University press, 1979), 184–96.

of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:18–21) but the satisfaction of Christ is only applied to the elect. The minority point of view did not influence the formulation of the confession and the larger and shorter catechisms. The Westminster Confession clearly states that Christ satisfied and died only for the elect and not for the whole mankind.⁶³

Although there are similarities between Ussher and Amyraut with regard to the broad vision, according to Moore these two views are different. In Usher and others, the extent of the atonement is directly associated with the offer of grace while Amyraut, Baxter, and others emphasize the satisfaction of Christ for the benefit of all mankind.⁶⁴ In England, the school of Saumur was mainly espoused by the Puritan Richard Baxter, though he did not derive his view of the atonement from Saumur. He made his own point of view, but he later stated that he agreed with Saumur on this point.⁶⁵

According to the Dutch theologian Gisbertus Voetius, Saumur's theology fits within the parameters of Calvinist theology.⁶⁶ According to Brian Armstrong, it is a reaction to the "extreme position" of Dutch theologians such as Gomarus and Maccovius who opposed the view of Davenant and others. Even the French theologian Pierre du Moulin, who was diametrically opposed to Saumur in the French controversy, labels the position of Dutch orthodoxy as *extreme*.⁶⁷

The Marrow Doctrine in the Scottish Theological Context

How does the Marrow doctrine relate to Scottish theological thinking in the seventeenth century? The Marrow Men, in their defense of the controversial

63. Lee Gatiss, "Shades of opinion within a generic Calvinism, The particular redemption debate at the Westminster Assembly," in *Reformed Theological Review*, 69 (2010), August, No. 2, 101–18. Gatiss indicates the School of Saumur had no influence on the final text of the Westminster Confession.

64. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*, 217–20.

65. Han Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer, Holland: Boekencentrum, 1993), 197–200.

66. Willem J. van Asselt, E. Dekker, eds., *De scholastieke Voetius (The Scholastic Voetius)* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1995), 88–89. Voetius states, "This view [that of Saumur, LJV] [is] not a middle ground between ours and that of the Remonstrants"; 111, "Reformed theology of the seventeenth century has a remarkable variation." See also the conclusion of Richard Muller that Amyraut cannot be called un-reformed. Richard A. Muller, "Beyond Hypothetical Universalism: Moïse Amyraut (1596–1664) on faith, reason, and ethics," in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches: From Henry IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, ed. M. I. Klauber (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 208.

67. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 133.

book, had emphasized that their view does not deviate from the Westminster Confession and representatives of the Second Reformation, such as Samuel Rutherford, Hugh Binning, and James Durham. In his study *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, M. Charles Bell claims that the Marrow doctrine is an extension of seventeenth-century theology. Hadow and others lean towards neonomianism and hyper-Calvinism; they mix law and gospel.⁶⁸

The Scottish lay theologian John Howie (1735–1793) believed that several passages in *The Marrow* deviate from the confession and theology of the Second Reformation. He mentions the formulation of the assurance of salvation and the aforementioned quotations from Culverwell and Preston. When it comes to formulations, Howie's analysis is correct. The only question is whether the Marrow Men drew different conclusions from the same confession. As to the assurance of salvation, they indeed attempted to arrive at a consensus between the Reformers and the Second Reformation. Discerning between faith and assurance can easily result in an unwanted dichotomy. They emphasized in their defense before the Assembly that they had no intention of deviating from the confession. This also applies to their view regarding the extent of the atonement.⁶⁹

In our opinion, there is no substantial difference between the representatives of the Second Reformation and the Marrow Men. There are differences in emphasis. Rutherford and others focus primarily on the Antinomians. They speak of faith and conversion as mandatory conditions on the part of man. Boston, who especially wished to combat the neonomian movement, did not speak of prerequisite conditions for faith in Christ.⁷⁰

According to Moore, the universalist expressions in *The Marrow* influenced the theology of those who wanted to be loyal to the Marrow Men tradition. In the Scottish churches—which originated in the Secession of 1733, when Ebenezer Erskine and others separated from the Church of Scotland—a movement emerged that defended hypothetical universalism. The cause was a one-sided emphasis on the offer of grace, tending toward

68. M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1985). See also John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 143–45.

69. John Howie, "Some remarks on the Marrow of modern divinity," updated November 30, 2021, https://www.truecovenant.com/gospel/howie_footnote_on_marrow.html.

70. For criticism of, or agreement with, *The Marrow's* definition of faith, see Stephen G. Myers, *Scottish Federalism and Covenantalism in Transition: The Theology of Ebenezer Erskine* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 109–10. W. Cunningham rejects it and James Buchanan defends it.

Arminianism and “hypothetical universalism.” Proponents were well aware, however, that the Marrow Men wanted to adhere to limited atonement. Those were not influenced by universalism.⁷¹ Donald Macleod asserts that in mainstream Scottish theology there is a continuing stress on a broad and free offer of the gospel combined with a limited extent of the atonement that pertains only to the elect.⁷²

Conclusion

In summary, I conclude the following:

First, the two controversial passages of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, derived from the abovementioned books of Culverwell and Preston, tended to the broad view that Christ’s atonement extended to the whole world in the preaching of the gospel, but that the satisfaction is only applied to the elect.

Second, Thomas Boston’s marginal notes in the Scottish edition explain the intended excerpts from the perspective of a limited atonement (Christ died only for the elect). For Boston, this could only be the universal offer of the atonement. He explains that the controversial quotes of Culverwell and Preston mean this view. But in the context of the controversy between Preston and the Arminians, Preston did not explicitly state that Christ died only for the elect, as Boston did.

Finally, the sources from which the controversial passages in *The Marrow* are extracted are writings of the English Puritans Ezekiel Culverwell and John Preston, who, based on research by Jonathan Moore, had an affinity with adherents of the broad view as espoused by James Ussher and John Davenant. This does imply that in the *preaching* of the gospel Christ died for the whole world. Boston in his “Annotations” did not declare that Christ died for the whole world, but that Christ is only preached to the world to the *offer* of His atonement. He died only for the elect.

71. Jonathan D. Moore, “English Hypothetical Universalism and Influence on Scottish Marrow Theology,” unpublished lecture of the James Begg Society, May 30, 2008. See also Macleod, “Theology in the Early Days of the Secession,” *Scottish Theology*, 166–88.

72. Cf. Donald Macleod, “Dr. T. F. Torrance, and Scottish Theology: A Review Article,” in *Evangelical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2000): 57–72.