

I believe the Marrow of Modern Divinity will receive some more attention in 2016 due to the publication of Sinclair Ferguson's new book. I have just finished it and in the book, Ferguson makes many wonderful and much-needed pastoral insights.

His book also got me thinking some more about The Marrow. In fact, I think Ferguson's book will get us thinking about some of the more controversial issues surrounding the Marrow. In this post I'd like to highlight some of these issues. They are, in no particular order:

1. Edward Fisher, author of the Marrow, has an interesting history. John Trapp called him a sly antinomian. Now, forgetting the "antinomian" part, what about the "sly" part?

Consider this excellent historical digging by Chad Vandixhoorn:

"It seems to me that Fisher almost certainly knew of some members of the assembly's committee for the examination of antinomians and its activities and appears to have tailored his work to avoid their censure. Quite overwhelming the customary references to Protestant Reformers and the puritan authors of the previous decades, Fisher's opening pages wedge in an unusual number of citations of authors who are members of the assembly's antinomianism committee, such as John Lightfoot and Edward Reynolds. Furthermore, he cites only one author who is a member Parliament, Francis Rous, who is also the only member of Parliament to bring accusations against antinomians. Fisher delicately laces one or two pages with references to the accused antinomians John Eaton and Tobias Crispe only at the close of the 1645 edition of the Marrow. He wisely deletes all reference to them in his 1646 edition, replacing that portion of the dialogue with a lengthy monologue and increasing the number of quotations from Westminster divines" (in 'The strange silence of prolocutor Twisse: Predestination and politics in the Westminster assembly's debate over justification', The Sixteenth Century Journal 40 (2009), pp. 395-418). HT: Patrick Ramsey.

There's a lot more work in recent years that has uncovered Fisher's background. We need to remember that for all his Bunyan-esque brilliance, he was not a trained theologian.

2. How did Thomas Boston's lack of theological training and lack of library resources impact his ability to understand the Marrow in its seventeenth-century context?

I am not sure Boston was able to understand the texts from the previous century very well because he simply did not have access to them like we do today. If he had read more of Preston, for example, he surely would have come to the conclusion that Preston was a hypothetical universalist.

I find it interesting that we rarely critique the historical theology of those from earlier centuries. I think we assume they were right without doing the necessary digging to see whether they actually read carefully. Just read the Preface to John Ball's work (1645) where some Westminster divines admit they had been too busy to read his work as carefully as they ought, but they are commending it anyway! Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

3. Related to #2 above, what do we make of the changing historiography that seems to show that Fisher was a hypothetical universalist?

I know Boston and his friends did not think the Marrow taught hypothetical universalism. And many scholars try with all their might to avoid the implications of this thought, but I simply cannot see how we can deny that the Marrow teaches HU.

The English hypothetical universalists had pastoral concerns behind their view in relation to the Free Offer of the Gospel. Culverwell, whom Fisher quotes in the Marrow in relation to the Fee Offer, held to HU (Ussher convinced him). No particularist at that point in Reformed history (so far as I know) would be comfortable with the language used by Fisher. That later particularists in Scotland aren't uncomfortable with Fisher's language is a very interesting historical point.

So when discussing the nature of the Free Offer in relation to the Marrow, and all of the pastoral issues surrounding this topic, our view of the Marrow controversy in Scotland will in some sense be dictated by whether we believe the Marrow teaches HU or not.

4. Would the Marrow Men be comfortable with Witsius (and others)?

The famous Auchterarder Creed says: "It is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ." In 1716 the Presbytery of Auchterarder gave a series of propositions for candidates to give their assent if they were to be ordained to the ministry. This proposition from the Creed was designed to guard against a type of preparationism.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland considered this phrase as "unsound and detestable doctrine."

So the Marrow Men ended up fighting a battle in order to defend the Auchterarder Creed. But, the big question remains, have Reformed theologians in the past affirmed that one must forsake sin in order to come to Christ?

Interestingly, Herman Witsius, the so-called "middle-man" in the Antinomian-Neonomian debates that emerged in the latter part of the seventeenth century, asks whether repentance precedes the remission of sins.

Does sorrow for sin (repentance) precede justification, "as a disposing condition, prerequisite in the subject"?

Witsius claims that the simplicity of Scripture is to be preferred over the "subtleties of the schools."

When a principle of new life is infused into a sinner by the Holy Spirit, all sorts of spiritual actions take place in the person who has this Spirit of grace. When this happens the soul, "quickened by the Spirit," sees itself as defiled and Christ as full of grace. When this happens, the person is displeased with himself and flees to Christ. "Hence arises the receiving and accepting of Christ, that it may be delivered from the filthiness and guilt of its sins." Here is where it gets interesting:

"Hence it follows, that that act of faith, whereby we receive Christ for righteousness, cannot be exercised, without a previous, or at least a concomitant repentance, and purpose of a new life."

In other words, it is "sound and orthodox" for Witsius to say that an awakened sinner will, in his experience, have a previous (or, concomitant/accompanying) hatred for sin and purpose of a new life before receiving Christ.

Would the Marrow Men be okay with that language? Is this all their opponents were saying? Regarding the former question, I think it would make them uncomfortable. As to the latter, this is where a lot more work needs to be done (and will be done in the near future, dv.).

Faith goes before justification, as does repentance. Repentance, according to Witsius, is a privilege of the covenant of grace; but it is a duty required by God "as an act to be performed" by the sinner "in order to obtain pardon, not that it any how merits pardon...but that at least it shows the man that is effectually called and regenerated..."

There's also the view of Vos: "Without the conviction of sin, the act -- the exercise -- of faith is unthinkable. Also, believing in Christ is something reasonable that occurs in the light of truth, not a blind, mystical urge. Thus it is not subject to any doubt that, in order, repentance and the knowledge of sin precede surrendering faith." (See also Davenant, pt. 5).

5. Is it possible to question the Marrow today without being accused of being a "sly neonomian"?

Thankfully, with the excellent historical work that has been done in recent years by the likes of David Como, Jonathan Moore, Aaron Denlinger, Donald John Maclean, William Vandoodewaard, Richard Snoddy, and Michael Lynch, it means that these types of questions are not the mad ravings of neonomians, but of those who are concerned about what really happened, not what we would like to imagine happened.

Boston had reservations about the conditionality of the covenant of grace, but pretty much every orthodox Reformed theologian I have read affirmed the conditionality of the covenant of grace (e.g., Bishop Davenant; see also ch. 19 of A Puritan Theology). According to Ferguson: "Later, however, [Boston] was of a very different mind: 'I had no great fondness for the doctrine of the conditionality of the covenant of grace'" (p. 67). Boston says also, "I had no great gust for faith's being called the condition..."

The Reformed theologians that I have studied in the seventeenth century were very careful in describing how faith is an antecedent condition for receiving the benefits of the covenant. They had to in order to ward off the Antinomian view that faith was not a condition for receiving the benefits of Christ.

There are many more issues that deserve further consideration; and indeed the questions above are just scratching the surface of the exceedingly complicated history of The Marrow of Modern Divinity.

https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-marrow-part-1.php