

An Interview with William VanDoodeward about his book *The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition: Atonement, Saving Faith, and the Gospel Offer in Scotland (1718-1799)*. Reformation Heritage Books, 2011, 313 pp., paperback.

Interviewed by [Brian G. Najapfour](#)

Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed. As a lover of historical theology, I enjoyed reading your well researched book—the best on the subject.

Here are some of my questions for you about your work:

- 1. Can you please briefly explain to us the terms “Marrow controversy” and “Seceder tradition”? Also, how are these two subjects connected to each other?**

The “Marrow controversy” refers to a theological and ecclesiastical controversy in Scottish Presbyterianism between the years 1718-1726, centering on the republication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* by a gospel-hearted minister, James Hog of Carnock, in response to what he and others saw as a growing tendency towards legalism. A decade later, over a different issue in the life of the church, patronage (which allowed local nobles a key hand in the calling of ministers) several of the ministers who had been involved in the Marrow controversy (including Ebenezer Erskine) became instrumental in forming the Associate Presbytery (the beginning of the Scottish Secession churches). In my work I sought to evaluate whether the theology of the Marrow supporters in the window of the controversy was similar to the theology characterizing the Secession churches during the following century.

- 2. What are the issues central to the Marrow controversy and why are these issues important to us today?**

Issues of legalism and antinomianism were key to the English and Scottish contexts of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, through in the Scottish context it appears the key challenge was error on the side of legalism – particularly a legal preparationism. As Sinclair Ferguson notes in his lectures, legalism and antinomianism are perennial issues of the sinful human heart. We try to establish our own righteousness before God apart from Christ, and we pursue sin and treat his costly grace as through it were a cheap thing, or act as through his holiness, expressed to us by his law, has no claims on us. These two errors often go hand in hand. It is the faithful preaching of the gospel which unmask the ugly reality of both and graciously provides the divine answer in Christ.

- 3. You conclude your book with a quote from Edward Fisher’s *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*:**

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 his righteousness, he shall have it; restraint is

not; but go and tell every man under heaven....A Saviour is provided for him (italics mine).

What do you think Fisher means by the statement: *Christ is dead for him*? And, as far as the gospel offer is concerned, is this expression biblical?

I believe it is fair to state that as Thomas Boston held, Fisher by this statement was describing the fact that in the proclamation of the gospel Christ is freely offered as the all sufficient Savior for any and every sinner. When Fisher's statement is taken in the context of his surrounding writing this does indeed seem legitimate. However, the statement at the same time sounds like a close parallel to the Arminian or proponent of universal atonement who would state "Christ died for you" in preaching to the unconverted. Because of this the "Christ is dead for him" statement was one of the key phrases in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* creating alarm among Marrow opponents.

Among contemporary scholars, Jonathan Moore has recently published a book, *English Hypothetical Universalism* in which he argues there is a tendency in the writings of John Preston (an acquaintance of Edward Fisher, at times cited by Fisher) towards a hypothetical universalism. While this may be the case, it does not necessitate that Fisher held to the same theology that Preston did. Boston and the other Marrow men were very careful to delineate against this as a mis-rendering of Fisher, carefully stating the particularity of the doctrine of the atonement in their own writings, but at the same time understanding this is not a negation of the full sufficiency of Christ as Savior, nor a negation of the free offer of the gospel. When rightly understood, and set in the right theological context the statement coheres with Scripture – though it could perhaps as well have been stated "Christ is raised for him" or "Christ is ascended for him" in relation to the gospel offer, or as Fisher and the Marrow men put it "the deed of gift and grant."

4. What books can you recommend to readers who would like to learn more about the subject of your work?

I would recommend reading the republished works of Thomas Boston (particularly the recent republication of Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* with Boston's notes, by Christian Focus) and Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, along with those by John Brown of Haddington to gain a more immediate acquaintance with this stream of Scottish Presbyterian theology. Among the secondary literature David Lachman's *The Marrow Controversy* remains the most substantial work on the controversy itself, and Ian Hamilton's *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy* is a sober study of the erosion of Reformed confessional theology among the Seceders in Scotland. Philip Ryken's study of Thomas Boston is well worth reading, and Sinclair Ferguson's audio lectures (available at sermonaudio) on the Marrow controversy are well worth listening to.

5. What projects are you currently working on?

Currently I am working on a Bible commentary project on 1 & 2 Peter; further church history projects are in the queue behind that.