

**The History of the Free Offer**  
CHAPTER 6

**The Marrow Controversy**

Prof. Herman C. Hanko

<http://www.prca.org/current/Free%20Offer/chapter6.htm>

In order to understand the Marrow controversy in its historical perspective, it is necessary to make a few remarks about the history of the Reformation subsequent to the Westminster Assembly.

Although the Reformation was never as strong in England as on the continent, due to the efforts in England to make a Protestant State Church from a Roman Catholic Church - which efforts differed from the Reformation on the continent where reformation took place by way of separation from the Romish Church nevertheless, Arminianism itself did not appear in England until 1595, when it was taught by Peter Baro, Margaret professor of Divinity at Cambridge. His teachings occasioned the formulation and adoption of the Lambeth Articles which were added, though never officially, to the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England. *The Lambeth Articles* made specific certain points of doctrine involved in the defense of the truths of sovereign grace over against Arminianism, which were less explicit in the *Thirty-Nine Articles*.<sup>1</sup> In 1596 Baro resigned his position because of his views.

These same views were, however, taught and defended by others. We have noticed earlier how Amyrauldianism came into England and was taught by the Davenant School and represented at Westminster by the men who belonged to this school of thought. But the same ideas were taught by Richard Baxter (1615-1691).

In his doctrine of Christ and the atonement he was Grotian; in his teachings on salvation he was Amyrauldian and Arminian. He believed it his calling to fight a certain antinomianism that had appeared in the church, but he became in fact neo-nomian and taught justification by faith and the works of the new law.

It is of some interest to note in this connection that the charge of antinomianism is often an easy charge to make and was many times brought by Arminians in their opposition of the truth of justification by faith alone. When some in the church lived lax lives, certain opponents of the truth of sovereign grace were quick to find fault with the truth of justification by faith alone and blame this doctrine for wicked excesses among the people, when in fact, the problem lay elsewhere. Already the Heidelberg Catechism addressed itself to this problem in Question and Answer 64: "But doth not this doctrine (of justification by faith) make men careless and profane? By no means: for it is impossible that those, who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness."

It is important to understand this because the question of antinomianism and neo-nomianism occupied an important place in the Marrow controversy.

However all that may be, Baxter was opposed by John Owen, especially in his famous book on the atonement: *The Death of Death In the Death of Christ*.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction referred to in the footnote, J. I. Packer claims that Owen was writing against: 1) Classical Arminianism, 2) Amyrauldianism, and 3) The views of Thomas More. He also claims that Usher, Davenant, and

---

<sup>1</sup> One who would like to consult the details on this question can find them in Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom, Vol. III*.

<sup>2</sup> This book ought to be assigned reading for all who study theology and especially the issues which are a part of the whole concept of the relation between the free and well-meant offer of the gospel and the atoning work of Christ. Of particular significance is the Banner of Truth edition of 1979, because it contains an interesting and valuable introduction written by J. I. Packer, which introduction was later printed separately.

Baxter, while holding to a modified Amyrauldianism, had not yet appeared in print with their views at the time Owen wrote his book. But, Packer insists, and correctly so, the book is not only about the atonement; it is also about the gospel.

“Surely all that Owen is doing is defending limited atonement?” Not really. He is doing much more than that. Strictly speaking, the aim of Owen’s book is not defensive at all, but constructive. It is a biblical and theological enquiry: its purpose is simply to make clear what Scripture actually teaches about the central subject of the gospel the achievement of the Saviour. As its title proclaims, it is a “treatise of the redemption and reconciliation that is in the blood of Christ; with the merit thereof, and the satisfaction wrought thereby.” The question which Owen, like the Dort divines before him, is really concerned to answer is just this: what is the gospel?<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the gospel Owen taught that the preacher may not preach that Christ died for each one who hears and that God’s love is for each one.<sup>4</sup> Man cannot save himself. Christ died for sinners. All who confess sin and believe in Christ will be received. And those who do confess sin and believe in Christ are those whom God has chosen from all eternity. All who hear the gospel face repentance and faith as a duty, but to this is always added a particular promise so that the general command which comes to all through the preaching is always accompanied by a particular promise which is made only to those who repent and believe, i.e., the elect.

The preacher’s task says Owen, is to *display* Christ. In this connection, Packer claims that Owen held to the ideas of an offer and invitation.<sup>5</sup> But this is not entirely true. Owen used repeatedly the word “offer,” but, as we have noticed before, it can be used in a good sense -- as many early theologians used it. He used it in the sense of Christ presented, Christ portrayed, Christ set forth in the gospel -- a meaning which comes directly from the Latin root: *offere*. It is also true that Owen used the word “invitation,” but used it in the sense of the invitation of a king, i.e., the command comes from the King Jesus to all who hear the gospel to repent from sin and turn to Christ. Yet Packer makes a point of it that Owen pressed home the idea, so important a part of Puritan thinking, that God through Christ urges upon all sinners to believe, and does this with the tenderest of entreaties and most urgent pleas.<sup>6</sup> These issues were also to occupy the attention of the men who were involved in the Marrow controversy. And they were of particular concern in connection with the dispute over a book called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which was first published by Edward Fisher in 1645 and republished in 1648 or 1649. The first part of the book, the part which is of particular concern to us, is written in the form of a conversation between Neophytus, a new convert to the faith, Nomista, who represents the position of antinomianism, and Evangelista, a pastor, who speaks the views of the author and expresses what Edward Fisher considered to be the truth of Scripture. It is therefore a discussion about the relation of the gospel to antinomianism and neo-nomianism.

The book did not attract a great deal of attention when it was first published, but came to the attention of the Scottish theologians in the early part of the eighteenth century under rather interesting circumstances.

The Presbytery of the Church of Scotland called the Auchterarder Presbytery was examining a certain candidate, William Craig, for licensure to the ministry. In the course of the examination

---

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> While we cannot go into the question here, it would be extremely instructive for modern defenders of the free offer to read what Owen has to say about those texts which are so commonly quoted in defense of a universal purpose of God to save all men, texts such as 2Peter 3:9, 1Timothy 2:4, etc. He scoffs at the notion that these texts refer to any but God’s own elect.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p.17.

<sup>6</sup> We refrain at this point from entering into a discussion of the question whether this is legitimate preaching. We shall return to it later.

he was asked to subscribe to the statement: "I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ." To this rather strange statement and clumsily worded article of faith William Craig refused to subscribe. Put into a bit more simple language, the expression simply meant that it was heretical to teach that it is necessary to forsake sin in order to believe in Christ. Or to put it yet differently: Orthodoxy says that one can come to Christ without forsaking sin. Because he refused to subscribe to this statement, William Craig was denied licensure to the ministry and the matter came to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for resolution. The statement under question became known as "*The Auchterarder Creed*."

The General Assembly, after long discussion, decided: 1) that subscription could not be required of any statement but what the Assembly itself required. The Auchterarder Presbytery was reprimanded for going beyond anything that the General Assembly had required of her ministers. 2) The creed of Auchterarder was condemned as being antinomian because it taught that repentance was not necessary to come to Christ. 3) At the same time, the Assembly also warned against the evils of denying the need for holiness (antinomianism) and warned against the teaching that good works are the basis for salvation (neo-nomianism).

While the Assembly condemned the *Auchterarder Creed*, the Presbytery itself was not disciplined because the members of the Presbytery gave to the creed a good interpretation, namely, that one must come to Christ with his sins to obtain pardon for them; else there was no point in coming to Christ. While the Assembly accepted this interpretation, it nevertheless insisted that the creed itself was capable of an antinomian meaning and ought to be condemned.

During the course of the discussion over this matter, a delegate by the name of Thomas Boston (famous for his book, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*) leaned over and whispered to John Drummond that he knew a book which answered admirably all the points which were under discussion. He referred to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* that he had picked up at a friend's house and read with great enjoyment. Shortly after the Assembly concluded its meetings those who were impressed with its contents republished the book.

Because of its popularity and doubtful teachings, the book soon became the object of official scrutiny, and the contents of the book were officially treated by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1720. After study, the book was condemned on the following grounds.

- 1) It held that assurance was of the nature of faith.
- 2) It taught a universal atonement and pardon in the cross. (While this point was not specifically discussed in the book, the Assembly considered it a necessary part of the teaching of the book that the universal offer of the gospel was a warrant to each man to receive Christ. It was at this critical point that the whole question of the offer of salvation entered the discussion.)
- 3) It taught that holiness was not necessary to salvation.
- 4) It taught that the fear of punishment and the hope of reward are not allowed to be motives of obedience.
- 5) It held that the believer is not under the law as a rule of life.

While it is clear that the book was particularly condemned for its antinomian teaching, nevertheless, the point of major concern to us is the second point that involves the relation between the atonement of Christ and the free offer of the gospel.

There were many in the church that were dissatisfied with this condemnation of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Twelve such men, later called "The Marrow Men," protested this action of the Assembly. These twelve included, among others, such well-known theologians as Thomas Boston, James Hog, Traill, Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. A commission was appointed to

examine the question. In the course of the investigation it became evident that the “Marrow Men” had, among other things, asserted that in condemning the universal offer of salvation, the Assembly had condemned the divine commission to preach to all men salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> It also became evident that the Marrow Men, while denying that they taught a universal atonement, nevertheless did exactly teach that the atoning work of Christ was universal in some sense. These men distinguished between a giving of Christ in possession and a gift of Christ as warranted men to receive Him. The former was limited to the elect; the latter was offered to all. In connection with this, they maintained that while the statement, “Christ died for all” is clearly heretical; it is sound and orthodox to teach that Christ is dead for all.

The commission reported to the General Assembly in 1722 where the original decision of 1720 was maintained and the Marrow Men were once again condemned for their view.<sup>8</sup>

There have been various interpretations given to the Marrow controversy, some of which we mention here in an effort to highlight the issues which were involved.

Some have maintained that the Marrow Men were concerned with various evils that were present in the church. Among these evils was the evil of legalism that really taught a salvation on the basis of the works of the law. Also among these evils was the error of a conditional grace. Christ, so it is said, was being separated from His benefits in the preaching. The church could not offer the benefits of Christ to all because they had to know who the elect were before these benefits could be offered to them. But those who were elect could be known as elect only by the manifestation of election in their lives. Thus Christ’s benefits hinged upon this manifestation of election in a holy and sanctified life. Hence, the offer was made conditional. One receives salvation only if he is elect, i.e., if he manifests election in his life and if he is assured of his election. Hence all the preaching was made conditional — conditional upon the works of sanctification, which works were the manifestation of election.

The Marrow Men, on the other hand, were interested in grace. They taught that God, moved by love to all, made a deed of gift and grant to all that whoever believed might have eternal life. This, so it was said, was the offer. This was not Arminian or Amyrauldian, but a gospel of free grace, offered freely to all, a grace which was, therefore, not conditional. The defenders of the offer were, therefore, to be considered the orthodox, while the General Assembly and the church (which had rejected the offer) were given over to the legalism of salvation dependent upon the condition of holiness.

This interpretation of the Marrow controversy is, therefore, an attempt to turn the tables: an attempt to charge those who repudiated the offer as being proponents of a conditional salvation, while the defenders of the offer were the ones who taught sovereign and free grace.

This interpretation (and defense) of the Marrow Men is false. While it is a rather interesting (though complicated) attempt to defend the Marrow Men and in this way to defend the offer, the evidence cannot support it. This is true, first of all, because the General Assembly did not teach a legalism, but specifically and concretely warned against it. Who can tell whether there were those in the church who were teaching such views? But if there were, the fact remains that the General Assembly (the same one which condemned the offer) refused to uphold this position and warned against it.

---

<sup>7</sup> It is of more than passing interest that this objection of the Marrow Men is identical to the objection that has been repeatedly raised by the defenders of the offer against those who maintain that the offer is essentially Arminian.

<sup>8</sup> There is here an interesting historical note. It has been pointed out that the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has officially condemned the idea of the free offer of the gospel, and that, therefore, all the Scottish Presbyterian Churches which trace their origin to the Church of Scotland are bound by that decision. Some, in the interests of maintaining the free offer, have denied this; but the evidence nevertheless supports this contention. That decision of 1720, reaffirmed in 1722, has never been retracted.

In the second place, this view is wrong because the General Assembly was never guilty of teaching a conditional salvation. This is simply a misinterpretation of their position. The orthodox did indeed insist that the promises of the gospel were for the elect alone, though they were to be publicly and universally proclaimed along with the command to repent and believe. They maintained a general proclamation of a particular promise, in the same sense as was maintained by the Dort divines.<sup>9</sup>

This has always been Biblical and Reformed, but this is by no means a conditional promise. It is certainly true that the promise of the gospel is for the elect alone. It is also true that a holy and sanctified life is the fruit of election as God works His sanctifying power in the hearts of His people through the Spirit of Christ. We may even go so far as to say that it is only in the way of a sanctified walk that the elect child of God lives in the assurance of His election in Christ. No one certainly would ever dare to say that a person can walk in sin, refuse to confess it, but nevertheless experience the electing grace of God in Christ. But this by no means implies a conditional salvation. On the contrary, it was the Marrow Men who taught a conditional salvation. For if salvation merited in the work of Christ on the cross was publicly proclaimed as being for all, the question naturally arises: How is it to be explained that not all receive it? The only answer that can possibly be given, the answer that was given by the Marrow Men, is that this salvation comes to an individual upon the condition of faith. Only those who receive it by faith become the heirs of salvation.

In the third place, the Marrow Men very clearly taught, in defense of a free offer, that the atonement of Christ, upon which the offer rests, is universal in some sense of the word. Thus the offer expressed God's universal love for all and His desire to save all. The salvation that men receive, therefore, is a salvation dependent upon man's act of faith.

McLeod<sup>10</sup> and C.M. M'Crie<sup>11</sup> take a slightly different position. They maintain that a certain hyper-Calvinism had come into the Church of Scotland from the Netherlands. This hyper-Calvinism had as its chief characteristic that the call of the gospel and its promises were for the elect only. The gospel does not come to a man who will not receive it because responsibility is limited to and by ability. This, according to McLeod, is essentially an Arminian position, except that the Arminians broadened the concept of ability far more than the hyper-Calvinists in the church. Hence, in opposition to this, the Marrow Men taught a universal love of God and a universal offer of the gospel. Christ belongs, therefore, to all, not in possession, but in the free offer.<sup>12</sup>

This interpretation, while presenting the position of the Marrow Men in an essentially correct way, misinterprets the history and occasion for the controversy. There are especially two errors that are made in this interpretation. In the first place, simply without any proof the idea that the promises of the gospel are limited to the elect only is branded as hyper-Calvinism. This simply is not true. And it is not true because this view is the traditional view of those theologians from the time of Calvin on who have maintained the particular character of salvation and grace. If this is hyper-Calvinism, all the fathers at Dort were hyper-Calvinists!

In the second place, it is not true that the orthodox in the Church of Scotland (or at any other time) denied that the gospel comes to all men because it does not come to a man who will not receive it. Nor did they teach that this statement is true because responsibility is limited to and by ability. The Reformed have always maintained that all men are responsible before God for

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., *Canons II*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> John McLeod, *Scottish Theology*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, pp. 133-13, 143-168, 175-180.

<sup>11</sup> Introduction to the 1920 edition of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.

<sup>12</sup> This is also essentially the position of E. F. Kevan in his book, *The Grace of Law*, (Baker Book House, 1965). Cf. footnote 84.

their sin. This responsibility has nothing to do with ability at all. And it is exactly because of this that the command of the gospel confronts all with their obligation to forsake sin and repent at the foot of the cross. The Heidelberg Catechism addresses itself exactly to this question in Question and Answer 9. It has just made a statement concerning the total depravity of man and insisted that man is so corrupt that he is incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness, except he is regenerated by the Spirit of God. The Catechism then asks: "Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in his law, that which he cannot perform?" And the answer is: "Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts."

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia in its pamphlet, *Universalism and the Reformed Churches*, presents a third interpretation, which is also the correct one. This pamphlet maintains that the Marrow controversy was a direct result of the Davenant view of the atonement and the offer, which view continued to be taught in the churches in Britain because the Westminster Assembly did not specifically condemn it.<sup>13</sup> This weakness of the Westminster Confession was corrected by the Church of Scotland in its condemnation of the Marrow Men in 1720 and 1722. The Marrow Men taught, according to this pamphlet, a modified Calvinism, which has been the scourge of the church to the present.

The point in the Marrow controversy that particularly concerns us has to do with the nature of the preaching of the gospel. We must understand that the controversy arose in connection with a view of preaching which was fairly common in Britain especially among some of the Puritans. Already in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Puritans opposed the partial reformation and worldliness in the State Churches. In their opposition to these weaknesses, they tended to stress strongly the subjective elements in the Christian life, and the stress on these subjective elements led to a certain view of preaching which was found in many pulpits.

The following elements especially were included in that view:

In the first place, the Puritans stressed that it was important to preach the law, for this was a means which God used to prepare men for true conversion. While the

Puritans themselves did not completely agree on this and there was a certain development among the Puritans on this matter, some of the later Puritans especially taught that the preaching of the law was accompanied by certain gracious influences of God in the hearts of the unregenerate which God used to bring men to know their sins and recognize themselves as sinners. The preaching of the law was, therefore, accompanied by a certain preparatory grace that was to be sharply distinguished from saving grace. This preparatory grace was given to all who heard the preaching, but did not in itself save. It was necessary to salvation, but did not in itself guarantee salvation. It wrought in the hearer a certain conviction of sin under which a person could labor for a long time, burdened with sin and guilt, troubled by a conscience which plagued him incessantly, and which moved him to seek relief from the grief which his sins brought about.<sup>14</sup>

Boston, e.g., in his book, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, distinguished between an awakening grace and a converting grace. Sometimes these people who labored under the conviction of sin were called "seekers" to emphasize that they were earnestly seeking relief from their anguished grief over sin and looking for that which would bring peace to their hearts. In this state they were enabled to pray even for regeneration and conversion; they were able to go

---

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see the last Chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Helm has a detailed discussion of this aspect of Puritan preaching in his book, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982) See especially pp. 61ff.

to church to hear the gospel as it presented Christ Who had come to save from sin. But, although this seeking could go on for years, yet it could ultimately result in nothing so that the seeker himself would go lost.<sup>15</sup>

The *Canons of Dort* have something to say about this matter in III & IV, B, 4:

...the Synod *rejects* the errors of those who teach: that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God. For these are contrary to the express testimony of Scripture., “Ye were dead through trespasses and sins,” Eph. 1:1, and: “Every imagination of the thought of his heart are only evil continually,” Gen. 6:5, 8:21.

Moreover, to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery, and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed, Ps. 51:10,19; Matt. 5:6.

While the Dort theologians were addressing the Arminian error, which was slightly different from the error described above, nevertheless, it is striking that there is certainly a clear similarity. Both the Puritans and the Arminians ascribed these actions which the article mentions to the unregenerate; and both the Arminians and the Puritans explained these actions by a certain grace of God which was given to all who hear the gospel. Basically, therefore, this view of the Puritans stands condemned by the *Canons of Dort*.

In the second place, it was to this spiritual state of many that the preaching was addressed. Some have called the Puritans the world’s greatest psychologists, and there is a certain element of truth to this. The preaching was often described in terms of an offer in order to encourage those who were under the conviction of sin to embrace the gospel. Through the preaching, God’s mercy was portrayed with the intention of disarming the most alienated mind of his suspicions and to relieve the most troubled spirit of his fears. It was intended to assure the hearers that no sinner had sunk beyond the reach of mercy and no sins were so great that they were beyond forgiveness. Thus earnest entreaties and tender remonstrances were necessary to bring the sinner to Christ.<sup>16</sup>

This idea led in turn to various distinctions. On the one hand, distinctions arose between various degrees of “seeking”. There were those who had a felt need, who hungered and thirsted, who were weary and heavy laden, etc.; and there were those who had not even progressed this far. The first were under far more serious obligations than the second. There were also various degrees in the conviction of sin. The question often arose whether a sinner was truly and sufficiently under the conviction of sin, or whether his conviction was only apparent and not a genuine matter of the heart. On the other hand, there were distinctions made between the assurance of faith. A sinner might, e.g., neither presume to be an elect, nor might he conclude that he was not. And the assurance that he was an elect went through various stages until he stood in the full assurance of his salvation in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

What did all this have to do with the idea of the offer?

The word “offer” had been used frequently prior to the Marrow controversy. It is found, as we noticed, in the *Westminster Confession*; it was used by John Owen and other Puritan divines.

---

<sup>15</sup> An interesting and instructive description of this kind of preaching and the effects of it are to be found in Diary of Kenneth MacCrae: edited with additional material by Ian H. Murray, (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980.)

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (Baker Book House, 1956), pp. 141ff.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to keep these ideas in mind, for we shall have to return again to them when we discuss the idea of the offer as it developed in the Netherlands under the influence of the Nadere Reformatie.

But usually it meant the setting forth of Christ as the One Who had come as the Savior from sin. But as the need for pressing home upon the sinner convicted of sin, the sufficiency of the cross of Christ, the idea shifted to that proposed by the Marrow Men. And so they began to teach that no man need doubt this warrant to receive the Savior's blessings. Everyone who hears the preaching has a warrant to receive and embrace the gospel. No man living has a warrant to refuse. God expressed in the gospel His desire to save all. And, it was believed, this was the only way in which the gospel could be pressed home upon the sinner convicted of sin.

This was somewhat understandable. The unregenerate sinner, who under the preaching of the law, had been convicted of sin, who cried out for relief from the oppression of sin and guilt, had to be assured that Christ wanted his salvation and that the gospel, which presented Christ crucified, was indeed directed to him.

It was precisely this emphasis that led to a certain universality of the atonement.

The original passages in the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* which had come under the scrutiny of the General Assembly read as follows:

God their Father, as He is in His Son Jesus Christ, moved with nothing but His free love to mankind lost, hath made a deed of gift and grant unto them all, that whosoever of them all shall believe in this His Son shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Go and tell every man without exception that here are good news for him; Christ is dead for him, and if he will take Him and accept His righteousness he shall have Him.<sup>18</sup>

C. G. M'Crie says that the Marrow maintained that "Gospel giving is not giving into possession, but giving by way of offer."<sup>19</sup> M'Crie also says that in 1742 these men expressed themselves in these words: "There is a revelation of the Divine will in the Word, affording a warrant to offer Christ unto all mankind without exception, and a warrant to all freely to receive Him, however great sinners they are or have been."<sup>20</sup>

A. A. Hodge defines the issues in the Marrow controversy very clearly. He says that the Marrow Men spoke of a double reference of the atonement. Their desire was to establish "the warrant of faith." The atonement thus had a designed general reference to all sinners of mankind as such. Christ did not die for all so as to save all, but he is dead for all, i.e., available for all sinners if they will receive him. Thus God, out of general philanthropy for all sinners made a deed of gift of Christ and of the benefits of His redemption to all indifferently to be claimed upon the condition of faith. This is God's giving love in distinction from His electing love. Thus the Marrow Men held to a general and a particular love.

Hodge further explains the views of the Marrow Men as including the idea that the deed of gift or grant of Christ is not itself the general offer, but is the foundation of the general offer upon which the offer rests. This grant is real, universal, an expression of love, conditioned by faith. The warrant upon which the faith of every believer rests and by which faith is justified is this deed of gift.<sup>21</sup>

W. Cunningham defines the preaching which characterized the Marrow Men in the following words:

(It proclaims) the glad tidings of salvation to all men indiscriminately, without any distinction, setting forth without hesitation or qualification, the fullness and freeness of the gospel offers

---

<sup>18</sup> M'Crie, editor, (David Bryce & Son, Glasgow, 1902).

<sup>19</sup> *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (Macrieven & Wallace, 1907, p. 125

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953, Grand Rapids,) pp. 380ff.



and invitations - of inviting, encouraging and requiring every descendant of Adam with whom they come into contact, to come to Christ and lay hold of Him, with the assurance that those who come to Him He will in no wise reject.<sup>22</sup>

Guthrie says of the Marrow:

That though none cordially close with God in Christ Jesus, and acquiesces in that ransom found out by God, except such as are elected, and whose heart the Lord doth sovereignly determine to that blessed choice, yet the Lord has left it as a duty upon people who hear his Gospel to close with the offer of salvation, as if it were in their power to do it.<sup>23</sup>

From all this, the central issues in the Marrow controversy are clear.

In the first place, the idea of preaching as generally taught involved a conception of conversion and faith different from historical Reformed theology. Conversion in the line of the covenant is essentially no different from conversion when it is effected among the unchurched. It took place later in life and not in infancy, and it was preceded by a conviction of sin that was not the work of saving grace, but resulted from the preaching and an accompanying preparatory grace. It brought a man into a state of conviction in which he hungered and thirsted for righteousness and sought escape from the burden of sin and guilt that afflicted his tortured conscience.

By this view of preparatory grace, a certain common grace was introduced into the thinking of the church and was made responsible for acts in the unregenerate that Scripture assigns only to the regenerate child of God.

In the second place, the Marrow Men spoke of the offer as necessary to the troubled sinner that he could have no reason why he should not come to Christ. The offer was not merely the proclamation that set forth Christ as the God-ordained way of salvation. The offer was a "warrant" to believe in Christ. The Marrow Men wanted to press home the demands of faith not only, but to do this by giving to everyone the *right* to believe in Christ. Everyone had not only the obligation to believe, but also the right. In this way they thought to urge upon sinners the blessedness of finding salvation from sin in Christ. Thus the offer expressed God's earnest desire to save all. It revealed God's intention to make all partakers of Christ. It spoke of God's love that extended to all.

In the third place, this necessarily involved a conception of the atonement. By their distinction between the statements, "Christ died for all" and "Christ is dead for all," they gave a certain universality to the atonement; for though they denied the former statement, they maintained the latter. The atonement was not only sufficient for all, but it was intended for all by God, for it was a manifestation of a universal love of God for all. It thus established the warrant for all to believe; and in this way it was also made available for all.

In the fourth place, this all involved a certain view of predestination that was essentially Amyrauldian. The counsel of God with respect to predestination contained a determinative decree and a hypothetical decree. The former belonged to God's secret will and the latter to God's revealed will. It was especially the latter that was proclaimed through the preaching. But the revealed will of God expressed God's will as desiring the salvation of all who hear the gospel.

Finally, all this in turn introduced a conditional salvation into the work of God. The Marrow Men claimed that by making this salvation conditioned upon faith, they in fact made the work of salvation particular because only the elect actually came to faith. But the fact is that the whole work of salvation was made dependent upon man's work of faith (even though the Marrow Men

---

<sup>22</sup> William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by McLeod, *Op. cit.*

denied this), because one had to explain how only some were saved when in fact God desired the salvation of all, earnestly urged all to come to Christ, and provided an atonement which was sufficient for all, intended for all and available to all, In fact, this atonement was the *warrant* for a man to believe and gave him the *right* to come unhesitatingly to Christ. Why then do not all come? They do not all come because they do not all exercise saving faith.

It is true that the Marrow Men taught that saving faith was worked in the hearts of the elect of God. And it was in this way that they hoped to escape the charge of Arminianism. But this will not work. And it will not work for two reasons. In the first place, how is it to be explained that God on the one hand desires to save all and expressed this desire in the preaching of the gospel; and on the other hand actually gives faith and saves only a select few? The Marrow Men, as the Amyrauldians before them, resorted to a distinction in the will of God to make this plain, but such a distinction sets God in opposition to Himself as being One Who on the one hand desires to save all, and on the other hand, desires to save only some. In the second place, by making faith the condition of salvation, faith is set outside the work of salvation. If it is true that God desires to save all, but that only such are saved who actually believe, then it is also true that the blessings of salvation are dependent upon faith. Then faith is not one of the blessings of salvation, but is a condition to salvation. One cannot have it both ways. Faith is either the one or the other. It is either part of salvation or a condition to salvation; but both it cannot be. In separating faith from the benefits of salvation, as they had necessarily to do, the Marrow Men made faith the work of man. No pious talk of faith as the work of God would alter this fundamental truth.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia is correct, when it finds these “ambiguities” in Marrow thought:

1. “Christ has taken upon Him the sins of all men” and being a “deed of gift and grant unto all mankind” is not a universal purchase of the death of Christ, therefore it logically follows that -
2. the saving deed of gift and grant of Christ to all mankind is effective only to the elect, i.e., an infallible redemption gifted to all secures only a portion of its objects.
3. “A deed of gift and grant to all is only an offer.” In other words Christ is gifted to all, without that He died for them.
4. Since the gift of Christ to all is not a benefit purchased by the atonement, the substance of the free offer of the gospel does not consist of Christ as Redeemer, but only as a Friend.<sup>24</sup>

The Marrow Men were rightly condemned by the General Assemblies of the Scottish churches. They had attempted to introduce into the church ideas that were foreign to the historic faith of Calvinism and had attempted to bring the church into an Amyrauldian theological position. That the Marrow Men could have had such influence on subsequent Presbyterian thought is hard to understand, especially in the light of the fact that their views stand condemned by the church. Those Presbyterians who have their roots in the Scottish churches ought to take note of the fact that, insofar as they teach the offer as maintained by the Marrow Men, they run contrary to their own adopted theological position.

---

<sup>24</sup> Quoted from a mimeographed paper published by this denomination, referred to earlier in this chapter.