

THEOLOGY OF ASSURANCE
WITHIN THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

by

Gerald L. Chrisco

M.A.R., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2009

A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
Religion
at Reformed Theological Seminary

Charlotte, North Carolina
January 2009

Copyright © 2008 by Gerald L. Chrisco
All rights reserved

ABSTRACT
Theology of Assurance Within the Marrow Controversy
Gerald L. Chrisco

While the source of struggle may differ from one Christian believer's experience to another's, many speak of the presence of doubt and its effect. Pastorally, assurance is a key doctrine for the edification of the body of Christ. Theologically, the topic has been hotly debated across many eras of church history. The 18th Century Marrow Controversy is one such debate that provides an interesting and structured platform from which the doctrine can be examined. This thesis begins the examination with the following proposition:

Although their soteriology in general was condemned by the 1722 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Marrow Brethren's dichotomy of the "assurance of sense" and the "assurance of faith" substantially reconciled their assertion that "assurance is the essence of saving faith" to relevant sections of the Westminster Confession and the teachings of John Calvin.

Utilizing as much primary source material as possible, evidence is presented to show how the words of the Marrow Brethren are compatible with those of Calvin and the major Reformation confessions, particularly Westminster. While their emphases may differ, each of these three viewpoints includes a common dichotomy: the ever present absolute assurance of the truth of the promises of God which is inherent in saving faith and the subjective experiential assurance of a believer which can be shaken by doubt.

to my wife, children, parents, pastors, and friends with praise to God for showing me the
gospel of Jesus Christ through you

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	viii
----------------------	------

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MARROW CONTROVERSY	7
Timeline of Theological Development	7
Teaching of Assurance (John Calvin, From Calvin to Westminster Divines, Westminster Confession, From Westminster to the Marrow Controversy).....	20
3. THE MARROW CONTROVERSY.....	35
Timeline of Marrow Controversy Events	35
A Brief Description of the Five Issues.....	45
Detailed Discussion of Assurance Issues.....	47
4. THE MARROW CONTROVERSY PARTICIPANTS	60
The Accusers of the Marrow Brethren (James Hadow, Thomas Blackwell, Other Marrow Accusers)	60
The Marrow Brethren (James Hog, Gabriel Wilson, John Williamson, Henry Davidson, Lesser Known Brethren, Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph Erskine, Thomas Boston, John Brown of Haddington)	66
5. SYSTEMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF ASSURANCE.....	90
Systematic Theology of Assurance (Berkhof as Representative of Reformed Theology, Acknowledgement of Dissenting Opinions)	90

Biblical Theology of Assurance.....	98
6. SUMMARY OF ASSURANCE VIEWS AND CONCLUSION.....	103
Calvin’s View Versus Westminster.....	103
The Marrow Brethren View.....	105
Conclusions (Lachman, Berkhof and Bavink, Ferguson).....	107
Thesis Conclusion.....	112
Appendix	
1. SUBSEQUENT DEBATES AND CHALLENGES.....	117
Subsequent Debates.....	117
Challenges: From Hoeksema and Hanko to Hodges.....	119
Response to Challenges.....	125
2. PASTORAL APPLICATION TODAY.....	128
3. A CALL FOR GRACE IN THEOLOGICAL DEBATES.....	133
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	136

TABLES

Table

1. Theological Timeline, 16th through 18th Century, with Special
Emphasis on Issues Related to the Marrow Controversy34
2. Timeline of the 18th Century Events Surrounding the Marrow
Controversy in the Church of Scotland..... 58-59
3. “The Dichotomy of Faith”
How Assurance and Faith Have Been Defined from the
Reformation until Today.....102

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From the age of twelve, my interest in the doctrine of assurance has been immense, more personal than scholastic. My failure to understand this truth of Scripture resulted in ten years of guilt, fear, and confusion. It turned the simple and beautiful gospel of childhood into teenage spiritual anxiety.

This thesis is an academic undertaking, and no other portion herein will be as personal and self-centered as that description of my adolescent years. However, the memories of those days are very relevant to the choice of the Marrow Controversy as my thesis topic. The doubts that plagued me into young adulthood, leading to the prayer literally prayed thousands of times, “God, if I have not been saved, please save me now,” are sources of anguish I greatly desire to help others avoid. I hope to use the events and theological issues of this debate in church history to illustrate the true biblical experience of assurance that God intends for his children.

In lieu of my life story, Donald MacLeod’s words below provide a perfect description of the source of my spiritual fragility:

One common cause of doubt is misunderstanding as to the nature of conversion. Indeed, the very argument put forward by [many is] precisely that conversion is always a conscious and memorable experience. Of course, many conversions are like that. We may quote Paul, Luther and Bunyan as examples. Even those who have vivid conversion experiences, however, are not necessarily immune to doubt. Assurance was a real problem to Bunyan and Spurgeon, who could both readily recall their early spiritual development. More important, there is no reason to expect every conversion to be

memorable. What matters is not the way in which we were spiritually awakened or the way our faith began but whether we have faith at all. We know virtually nothing of the early spiritual experience of men like David, or Peter or John or James the Lord's brother. We know even less with regard to those like John the Baptist, Samson and Samuel who were born again so early in their lives that the event was beyond their recall, although its reality was beyond question, clearly demonstrated in the subsequent pattern of their lives. There are many today in a similar position, who cannot recall a time when they did not pray, love the Lord's people, shrink from dishonouring Christ and hunger and thirst for holiness. We have no right to suggest that because they cannot remember when these traits first appeared they must regard their professions of Christianity as false and hollow.¹

I cannot imagine how different my adolescent life would have been had I known this truth.

At the same time, I trust God's sovereign timing in revealing these things to my heart later in life.

For me, the matter of assurance was settled as, I believe, God revealed to me the truth of His word concerning my salvation. Reformed soteriology taught me the peace of God, peace from God. I must agree with John Murray that:

It is no wonder that the doctrine of assurance should have found its true expression in that theology which is conditioned by the thought of the divine atonement or effective redemption, the irreversibility of effectual calling, and the immutability of the gifts of grace.²

While the source of struggle may differ from one believer's experience to another's, many speak of the presence of doubt and its effect. Pastorally, assurance is a key doctrine for the edification of the body of Christ. Theologically, the topic has been hotly debated across many eras of church history. The 18th Century Marrow Controversy is a key example of these

¹ Donald Macleod. "Am I a Christian?" *The Monthly Record* (Sept. 1979): 164.

² John Murray. "The Assurance of Faith," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 43.

debates that provides an interesting and structured platform from which the doctrine can be examined.

Although a number of scholars have researched the Marrow Controversy, no work could be found which adopts the issue of assurance as its primary focus. In fact, some have assumed this facet of the controversy as secondary to the arguments concerning the free offer of the gospel and the universal aspects of the atonement. For example, D.C. Lachman's 1988 work, *The Marrow Controversy 1718-1723*, considered by many as the most definitive work on the subject, treated assurance and the definition of faith as a subset of the *Marrow's* primary doctrine. I believe the question of assurance, along with subsequent similar debates, provides the most significant contemporary pastoral application of all the controversy's issues. No major academic works were found within the last decade dealing primarily with the Marrow Controversy, although Donald J. MacLean's current thesis research on James Durham includes it as a topic. My work will use the writing of the Marrow Brethren themselves, both during and after the controversy, to prove the following proposition:

Although their soteriology in general was condemned by the 1722 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Marrow Brethren's dichotomy of the "assurance of sense" and the "assurance of faith" substantially reconciled their assertion that "assurance is the essence of saving faith" to relevant sections of the Westminster Confession and the teachings of John Calvin.

Throughout this analysis, Reformed soteriology as summarized in the Westminster Confession is considered to be biblically accurate and theologically superior to the Arminianism, Amyraldism, and Legalism to which the Marrow Brethren reacted in their day. It is also assumed, with only a summary level review of recent challenges to the contrary,

that the Westminster Confession, while stressing a different aspect of assurance, was not a significant departure from the teaching of John Calvin on this topic. As such, the work of R.T Kendall, Basil Hall, T.F. Torrance, William Cunningham, Andrew McGowen, and Norman Shepherd will not be discussed in detail.

Given these assumptions, and utilizing as much primary source material as possible, evidence will be presented to show how the words of the Marrow Brethren themselves, when compared to those of Calvin and the major Reformation confessions, particularly Westminster, are compatible. Original works of several of the Brethren, James Hog, Gabriel Wilson, John Williamson, Henry Davidson, Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph Erskine, and Thomas Boston, are included. The original text of the book that ignited the controversy, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, is referenced along with its appendix in which John Brown of Haddington summarizes the defense of the Marrow Brethren before the 1720 and 1722 Church of Scotland General Assemblies. Interestingly, the patron of the *Marrow*, addressed by the book's author in its preface, seems to share many characteristics with the childhood believer described earlier by Donald Macleod:

Be pleased then, most honoured sir, to give me leave to tell you, that your eminency of place did somewhat induce me, both now and before, to make choice of you for its patron; but your endowments with grace did invite me to it, . . . for it has been declared unto me, by them that knew you when you were but a youth, how Christ met with you then, and by sending his Spirit into your heart, first convinced you of sin, as was manifest by those conflicts which your soul then had both with Satan and itself, whilst you did not believe in Christ; secondly, of righteousness, as was manifest by the peace and comfort which you afterwards had, by believing that Christ was gone to the Father, and appeared in his presence as your advocate and surety that has undertaken for you

. . . I have not forgotten what desires you have expressed to know the true difference between the *covenant of works* and the *covenant of grace*; and

experimentally to be acquainted with the doctrine of free grace, the mysteries of Christ, and the life of faith.³

Trusted secondary source material, especially that provided by Lachman, is also used to supplement these primary references. This is particularly true for the writings of some of the Marrow Brethren opposers which were not as readily available in original publications. Lachman's previously referenced work, along with Donald Beaton's articles, also provided the basis for the controversy's timeline of events in Chapter 3. Lachman's book is highly recommended to anyone interested in the other doctrinal issues of the controversy or more historical detail.

Original writings of John Calvin and the Reformed confessions are also cited. The comparisons of the way Calvin and Westminster define the doctrine of assurance provided by Joel Beeke, Robert Peterson, and Randall Zachman proved particularly valuable. Beeke's *Quest for Full Assurance* specifically provides the outline for the Chapter 4 biblical theology. Likewise, Louis Berkhof, with some Herman Bavink supplemental material, is the primary systematic theology source for Chapter 5. Sinclair Ferguson's lecture in defense of the Marrow Brethren is of interest both for its substance and its passion.

Primary sources are also used as often as possible to represent subsequent challenges to this thesis conclusion. The views of Herman Hoeksema, Herman Hanko, David Engelsma, and Zane Hodges are intended to be presented as accurately as possible. Robert Peterson's work in this area is a most helpful response to these challenges.

³ Edward Fisher. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1837), 13.

I believe the evidence presented will demonstrate many similarities between the definitions of faith and assurance of John Calvin, the Westminster divines, and the Marrow Brethren. While their emphases may differ, each of these three viewpoints includes some form of dichotomy: the ever present absolute assurance of the truth of the promises of God which is inherent in saving faith and the subjective experiential assurance of a believer which can be shaken by doubt. I also believe sufficient warrant is given at the end of Chapter 6 to support the thesis conclusion stated herein.

At first glance, the longer length of the three historical sections, chapters 2-4, may seem out of balance compared to the systematic and biblical theology of chapter 5. However, as the reader will discover, the historical accounts are rich with the systematic and biblical theologies of the men involved in the controversy. Taken as a whole, including additional systematic discussions in chapter 6 and Appendix A, the balance of historical, systematic, and biblical theology is evident.

All Bible passage references are quoted from the *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. This collection of Scripture, notes, articles, and confessions was a valuable resource in this pursuit and a personal favorite for daily meditation. Above all, God's Word is the absolute and final authority in these matters.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

Timeline of Theological Development

A brief review of the development of and challenges to Reformed theology during the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries will provide a context for examination of the Marrow Controversy. Special emphasis will be placed upon discussions involving faith or assurance and upon events within the Church of Scotland. The influence of secular philosophy on the development of theological systems will also be noted.

In 1517, Martin Luther wrote and posted his *95 Theses*. While Luther's motivation to challenge the Roman Catholic Church and launch the movement that would come to be known as the Reformation included outrage over papal abuses of power such as the selling of indulgences, the fundamental root of his disagreement was theological. The exclusive role of faith as the means of justification was the core of his "radical" message. Thus, the exact definition of faith in Luther's "justification by faith" theology was destined to become a major issue in the development of Reformed thought.

In the twenty years following Luther's *95 Theses*, contributions to the further development of his ideas came through various sources from Zwingli to Bucer to Calvin. In his 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin sought to refine and consolidate his view of Reformed thought into a comprehensive summary. His writing is both pastoral in its address to the questions and struggles of ordinary believers and apologetic in its imagined dialogue with unbelievers

and those who had perverted the truth. It is here one can first notice Calvin's dichotomy of faith, viewed at once as theoretically fully assured and yet practically struggling to grow and be strengthened. As will be shown, he theologially defines faith with terms of certainty and firmness. At the same time, he experientially speaks of a believer's faith battling doubt and grave terror. This dichotomy in faith's definition will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, in the work of Calvin and that of many others.

Rome's formal response to the Reformation in general and to Calvin's *Institutes* in particular was drafted by the Council of Trent. Among the many Reformation doctrines condemned by the 1545-1563 Council was the idea that assurance of faith and one's acceptance by God could be fully known by ordinary believers. Much of Calvin's subsequent teaching on the subject of assurance responded directly to Trent's refutations.

During this same middle to late 16th Century period, further development of and variations to Reformed theology were seen within the movement itself. Theodore Beza was the first noted theologian who attempted to make Reformation thought academically acceptable. Scholasticism, as his emphasis on natural theology and logical formulations would come to be called, has been considered a departure from pure Calvinism by scholars such as R. T. Kendall. This accusation is particularly present in the discussion of faith and assurance.

While Reformation thought spread and was further developed in many parts of Europe, it came slowly and arduously to Scotland. Other than the limited smuggling of Luther's early writings into the country and the preaching of Patrick Hamilton, which was abruptly ended by his 1528 burning in St. Andrew's, Roman Catholicism maintained full control of Scotland for the first fifty years of the movement. The extreme political

differences between Scotland and England hindered any aid to Reformation minded Scots from the English Church which had broken ties with Rome under Henry the 8th. Thus, John Knox, taking the only path he knew, began his journey to faith as a Catholic priest.

Knox returned to Scotland in 1559 after his conversion to Protestantism had led to over a year in a Scottish galley, service as a pastor in England, and work alongside Calvin in Geneva. His influence helped secure victory for Scotland's Reformation supporters. In 1560 the Scottish Parliament affirmed the political reality of this victory with the treaty of Edinburgh while the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed the Scottish Confession. However, Knox and the other Scottish Reformers were unable to gain Parliament ratification of the "First Book of Discipline" by which they hoped to incorporate Reformed practice into the everyday life of each citizen.

After a brief and unsuccessful attempt by Regent Mary Stuart to reverse Scotland's move toward Protestantism, the Scottish Church grew in power. Andrew Melville assumed the visible leadership after Knox's death in 1572 and engaged in a struggle over his argument for an independent church as opposed to a state controlled one. This issue was still very hotly contested during the time of the Marrow Controversy. It is difficult, at times, to completely separate the political battles in the Scottish Church from the theological ones. These theological battles were varied and included the move by some toward Enlightenment rationalism's Deism and Universalism, disputes surrounding the spread of Federal theology, and the presence of the two extremes of Legalism and Antinomianism.

Facing similar challenges in their region and seeing the need for orthodox consistency, church fathers in the Palatinate were busy drafting what would become the Reformation's first widely accepted catechism, Heidelberg. Therein, assurance seems to be

of the essence of faith but, at the same time, as with Calvin, allowance is made for the struggles of believers to fully experience spiritual victory. The definition of faith is given in

Question 21:

21. What is true faith?

True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.¹

Questions 64 and 86 make it clear that this expectation of full assurance should never result in a lax attitude toward the pursuit of holiness and good works. Questions 56, 58, and 127 anticipate that believers will have moments of weakness and spiritual struggle.

In spite of the Reformers' best efforts to preserve their doctrinal purity, the 17th Century would witness a battle arise against orthodox Reformed theology that is fought to this day. Around 1603 Dutch pastor Jacobus Arminius popularized his free will soteriology which denied the Reformer's doctrine of the sovereignty of God in all things. Arminianism, as his teaching was called, spread quickly into some Reformed churches including several in Scotland. The doctrine of assurance was naturally directly influenced by teaching that placed the choice of salvation into the hands of men.

Reformed leaders responded quickly to the words of Jacobus Arminius. The 1618 Synod of Dort's primary purpose was to denounce Arminian teaching. Secondly, Federal theology was addressed as an "emphasis on a particular redemption was clearly endorsed by

¹ *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. Edited by Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 2144.

the Synod of Dort, which nevertheless also taught a full and free gospel offer to all men.”²

These issues were very relevant to the Marrow Controversy that would transpire one hundred years later. One writer summarized Dort’s position on assurance as follows:

The Canons of Dort were framed in opposition to the Arminians, who moved in the direction of Rome without going to the same extreme. They granted the possibility of the assurance of being in a present state of grace, but denied that believers could be sure of their future salvation without a special revelation, and held that such assurance in believers generally would only lead to carnal security, and would be highly detrimental to a truly pious and holy life. On the other hand the Canons of Dort maintain that believers can, in their present life, obtain the assurance of their future salvation, and that they actually enjoy this assurance *according to the measure of their faith*. This would seem to imply that Christian certitude is of the essence of saving faith.³

A subtler variation to Reformed theology was presented in France by Moise Amyrant. His “hypothetical universalism” or Amyraldism (also Amyraldianism) taught that Christ died for all men even though the elect are the only ones who exercise faith and receive the benefits. A few years later, Richard Baxter adopted a form of Amyraldism that contributed to the rise of “neonomian” influence among Scottish Moderates.

One of Amyraut’s chief opponents during the next few decades would be Francis Turretin. In the Scholastic tradition of Beza, he defended traditional Reformed theology against this new threat. Although more recent scholars have questioned Turretin’s faithfulness to pure Calvinism, he was clearly seen as a Calvin disciple in his day.

² David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 11.

³ Louis Berkhof. *The Assurance of Faith, the Firm Foundation of Christian Hope* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 26-27.

As Amyraut challenged Reformed theology from within, Continental Rationalism attacked it from without. Rene Descartes led the charge to discard tradition and any supposedly divinely revealed truth in favor of human reason. His dualism taught that man should doubt all ideas and perceptions except those which were distinctly his own. Obviously, such philosophy left no room for assurance in faith of any kind.

Spinoza's monism reduced all philosophy to a system of geometric theories or precise axioms. Although differing from Descartes in many ways, Spinoza shared his trust in human reason to determine ultimate truth. Similarly, Leibniz's pluralism saw man as developing his own laws of being while God simply observed. Absolute truth, faith, and assurance were impossibilities in this new era of secular philosophy.

British Empiricism reached the same conclusions from a different premise. John Locke was the first notable philosopher to argue for autonomous sense as opposed to autonomous reason. Common sense, Locke said, would help man filter his experience and determine "probable truth." Later, Berkeley would agree that we can surely know only our own ideas. Hume would add that in the absence of certainty, men must assume some cause and effect relationship in order to function. Man did indeed have a need for faith; however, this faith was in his ability to perceive his own experience.

During these early stages of secular philosophy's challenge to absolute truth, in 1645, the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* was originally published. Its author, initialed "E.F.", believed by some to be Edward Fisher, the son of a knight, and by others to be a Presbyterian Church layman and barber of the same name,⁴ presents a clear alternative. Fully persuaded of

⁴ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 5.

Scripture's supreme authority, he creates an engaging allegory in the form of a dialogue between a Reformed theologian, a young enquiring believer, a Legalist and an Antinomian. The doctrine of faith and assurance that the *Marrow* portrays bears many similarities to that of Calvin's *Institutes*:

It is quite absurd to suggest that it represented a radical departure from historic Calvinism . . . [or from] the school of Westminster. When it was first published [in 1645] it had a recommendatory preface from the pen of no less a personage than Joseph Caryl, a censor of ecclesiastical works appointed by the Westminster Assembly.⁵

A few months later, in 1646, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* was published. It is significant to note that three years earlier the Solemn League and Covenant, an agreement between Scottish Presbyterian Covenanters and the Protestant leaders of the English Parliament, had resulted in the Covenanters' aid to the English Protestants in their Civil War with the Irish Catholic supported Royalist army. Because of this alliance, Scottish Reformers influenced the Westminster divines and the *Confession* itself. Consequently, Scotland readily adopted *The Westminster Confession* as the standard of Reformed thought, and its status as such did not diminish there until the middle of the 19th Century.

The Westminster Confession says that a believer should expect assurance of his faith, but as this is not guaranteed, it is not essential. In fact, a true believer may live in doubt for years without full assurance. Still, as will be shown, the Westminster divines taught a dichotomy, theological certainty alongside this experiential doubt, with similarities to that of Calvin and the *Marrow*. Nonetheless, by the time of the 18th Century Marrow Controversy, some Church of Scotland leaders had adopted a strict legalistic application of the *Confession*.

⁵ Donald Macleod. "Faith as Assurance." *The Monthly Record* (May 1988): 99.

Since the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* did not use the identical Westminster terminology for assurance and other issues, these leaders branded it as heresy.

As compromises from within the Reformed churches and direct attacks from secular philosophy outside grew stronger, Blaise Pascal became the most effective apologist of the 17th Century. Although strongly influenced by Deism and Calvinism, Pascal resisted the de-emphasis of “the heart” or divinely revealed intuitive wisdom. His 1662 *Pensees* describes faith as a gift of God rather than a result of human reason. Faith comes from the heart, so love of God comes before our really knowing Him. Although some would later use Pascal’s teaching to support subjectivism and deny complete assurance, he was a solid defender of orthodox truth in his time.

Around 1680, two forces were at odds within orthodox Christianity. Turretin had taken his Scholastic method of systematic theology to its ultimate form in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Spener, reacting against what he saw as Scholasticism’s cold intellectualism, placed more emphasis on a believer’s change of heart and personal spiritual life which naturally resulted in a change of behavior and zeal for evangelism and missions. Spener’s Pietism, as it would be known, was later advanced by Franke and Zinzendorf. These two forces had somewhat set the would be Marrow combatants at odds several years prior to the actual controversy.

Compounding this tension, Arminian supporters began to gain ground in some Scottish churches. The anti-Calvinist force’s most influential 18th Century apologist was Anglican bishop Joseph Butler. Using his considerable apologetic skill to fight Deism, Butler did so with an Arminian theology in spite of his Presbyterian upbringing. Strongly influenced

by Locke, Butler taught that God could not be well understood by men. Probability is a normative guide to life, and, consequently, assurance of one's faith is unrealistic.

The early 1700's found the Church of Scotland's health threatened in other ways as well. Legalism had spread to the point that many ministers who would have died for the doctrine of Justification by Faith in theory actually preached messages that practically implied works salvation. Antinomianism was so feared, along with the ever growing Deist movement, that heresy accusations abounded concerning these issues.

Deism eventually proved to be the more powerful enemy due to its influence both inside and outside the church. In fact, the heresy trial of University of Glasgow professor John Simson, which began almost two years before the Marrow Controversy, would be the Church of Scotland's "first taste of the encroaching Deism of the eighteenth Century."⁶ The Marrow Brethren were surprised at the Assembly's relative lenience with Simson for what seemed to be a much more obvious and serious violation of orthodox truth when compared to the charges they faced.

While the Church of Scotland leaders were encouraging very legalistic views toward the life of faith in general and toward interpretation of the Westminster Confession in particular, others were pursuing more moderate doctrinal positions in which an optimistic view of natural human ability was replacing the Reformation truth of total depravity. By the early 1700's, the latter were unwilling to engage in the vicious theological battles that had seen Scottish churchmen fight each other even at times to death, while the former sometimes viewed such confrontation as a godly obligation. Thus, both Simson and the Marrow

⁶ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 6.

Brethren faced fierce initial charges of heresy from the powerful traditional Assembly leadership followed by a far more measured final verdict from the full body.

The Marrow Controversy was precipitated by a battle between the Assembly's legalists and moderates over a licensure requirement in the Presbytery of Auchterarder, particularly the necessity of one's forsaking sin in order to come to Christ. Conversations raised by this debate among some of the men who would later be called the Marrow Brethren led Thomas Boston to suggest the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* as a helpful resource. The powerful Assembly voice of James Hadow immediately reacted. Interestingly, given the original Auchterarder issue, the book's "doctrine of assurance was the point at which Hadow first attacked the *Marrow* in print and was the basis of his charge that it taught universal redemption."⁷ Of course, the staunchly Calvinistic Marrow Brethren were shocked to learn that they had been accused of anything even akin to universalism. "All the Marrow men (those like Thomas Boston and Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine who supported the publication of the book and preached its doctrines) were five-point Calvinists, limited atonement and all."⁸

The core doctrinal issues of the Marrow Controversy were never constructively discussed or resolved by the Assembly. The somewhat inconsequential conclusion to the controversy laid the foundation for the 1733 Secession Church decision. While the relation of the Church to the state may have been the primary concern of the populace, the grounds for secession published by the Erskine brothers and other leaders were largely theological. And

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Macleod, "Faith as Assurance," 99.

although the doctrinal discussions involved all the issues of their day, from Legalism to Deism, the most important items presented sounded eerily similar to those unresolved battles of the Marrow Controversy.

The evangelical tones of the Marrow Brethren were similar in some ways to those of John Wesley and George Whitefield. Whitefield, because of his Calvinist soteriology as opposed to Wesley's Arminianism, had the most in common with the Scottish evangelicals. Ebenezer Erskine even mentions Whitefield's fondness of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* in a letter to him.⁹ Whitefield corresponded and even visited Ralph Erskine in Scotland until disagreements over church government and state authority overshadowed their common zeal for missions and evangelism. Another Marrow Brother, Henry Davidson, was able to overcome these differences and participate in a "transatlantic community of saints, . . . the first evangelical network, . . . great things in England, Wales and Scotland wrought, and in America to pass are brought."¹⁰ Surely, many Marrow Brethren sympathizers cheered the Great Awakening.

While evangelicals were thrilled to see the advance of the gospel through the great revivals, another powerful movement was at work within some churches. Gotthold Lessing was promoting critical reading of Scripture and offering "enlightened" minds compelling arguments that no single religion can possess "the truth." Lessing paved the way for liberal

⁹ D. Beaton. "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity' and the Marrow Controversy." *The Princeton Theological Review* IV (1906): 317.

¹⁰ Susan O'Brien. "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 4 (Oct. 1986): 811.

theology's disdain for divine revelation and the view of Scripture solely as valuable ethical teaching.

Immanuel Kant synthesized this liberal Christianity with Enlightenment's Deism and created the framework for most secular philosophy and liberal theology that followed during the 19th Century. His Transcendental Method utilized "rational faith" or the reason of human intuition. Even revelation from God, who is noumenal and does not speak in the phenomenal world, must be verified by human reason. Kant gave future theologians a way to use biblical language in a philosophy that is decidedly unchristian. Faith, for Kant, equals trusting the archetype-ideal "Son of God", the potential for doing good that is universally present in all men. The ultimate end of this view of faith is a form of works righteousness.

Many Christian philosophers, such as William Paley, along with his teleological arguments, attempted to counter the attacks from all the skeptics of divine revelation from Hume to Locke. However, the one Christian philosopher whose influence rivaled that of Hume, Locke, and later even Kant was a product of the unresolved tensions of the post-Marrow Church of Scotland. Just as Kantian frameworks became the foundation for the 19th Century secular philosophy and liberal theology, the system of thought presented by Thomas Reid would guide the great defenders of orthodoxy at Princeton University and Theological Seminary during this same time. Although Reid was a philosopher and not a systematic theologian, Reidian ideas provided the foundation for what has come to be called Classic Reformed Theology.

Reid's "Scottish Common Sense School" of thought reflected his formal training within the Church of Scotland that, as opposed to the more evangelical and pietist influenced Secession Church, had drifted toward Scholastic epistemology. Thus, Reid's common sense

“direct realism”, the idea that challenged the theories of both idealists and skeptics by claiming the mind can trust direct knowledge gained by the interaction of our senses with external objects, was a logical extension of his early training in natural theology. This philosophy that valued the observations and evaluations of common people over the reason of the intellectual elite or the irrationalism of the detached skeptic resonated well in 19th Century America.

At the same time, Reid was not entirely untouched by the more Marrow-friendly aspects of his theological homeland. More so than any of the other leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Hume or Adam Smith, Reid’s philosophy left a vital place for faith in God and the absolute moral law of God. He was known as a Christian philosopher whose “providential naturalism” saw the forces of logic and faith, or divine wisdom and science, as complimentary. In many respects, the tenants of Classical Reformed Theology which he inspired share this philosophy.

Reid was not the only philosopher or theologian who felt the tension of the opposing forces in the 18th Century Scottish Church. The unresolved issues of the Marrow Brethren era influenced both Reformed theology in general and the doctrine of faith and assurance in particular for decades. A more detailed understanding of the historical development of these issues, from Calvin to Westminster to 17th Century Scotland, is needed before one is ready to examine their role within the Marrow Controversy.

Teaching of Assurance

John Calvin

A brief overview of Calvin's definition and explanation of faith will confirm the dichotomy of his ultimate conclusion. He recognized two truths in Scripture: the believer has been given a faith from God that includes full assurance though he does not always feel and live in its power and peace. Calvin states that:

We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Calvin is careful to define the source of this certain faith. "When we call faith 'knowledge' we do not mean comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception."¹² This supernatural aspect of faith is actually a reason for our assurance. Our mind, he says, "is persuaded of what it does not grasp, by the very certainty of its persuasion it understands more than if it perceived anything human by its own capacity."¹³

Clearly, the theologian in Calvin saw assurance as of the essence of faith. Yet, the pastor in Calvin realized another truth:

Still, someone will say: "Believers experience something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as

¹¹ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.2.14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.2.14.

not to seem quite compatible with that certainly of faith.” Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-stated doctrine to stand. Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God’s mercy.¹⁴

This dichotomy, the “difficulty” that needed to be solved, has been the source of much subsequent debate.

Calvin refers to the dichotomy as “this variation” and explains why its existence does not alter his definition of faith and assurance:

In order to understand this, it is necessary to return to that division of flesh and spirit which we have mentioned elsewhere. It most clearly reveals itself at this point. . . . This variation arises from imperfection of faith, since in the course of the present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith. But if in the believing mind certainty is mixed with doubt, do we not always come back to this, that faith does not rest in a certain and clear knowledge, but only in an obscure and confused knowledge of the divine will toward us? Not at all. For even if we are distracted by various thoughts, we are not on that account completely divorced from faith. . . . For the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it.¹⁵

At this point, the link between the peace of assurance and the progressive sanctification of a yielded heart is made clear. While Calvin knows that “a sure witness of God’s good will [which] confidently calls on God as Father . . . is the nature of faith,”¹⁶ he

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.2.17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.2.18.

¹⁶ John Calvin. *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959-1972), 9:59.

admits that “what we say has little weight without a corresponding life.”¹⁷ True believers are never content with their lack of perfect and constant assurance, but rather wish “to cure the disease . . . [and] obtain full faith in his promises.”¹⁸

This dichotomy has caused many to ask, “How can Calvin interweave assertions of faith as definable in terms of full assurance while allowing for some possibility of faith lacking conscious assurance?”¹⁹ In fact, as Calvin worked through this doctrine in later writings, some scholars feel he contradicted himself; “under pressure from the Council of Trent, Calvin remarried justification and sanctification.”²⁰ An even greater number of scholars have come to believe that Calvin disciples, beginning with Beza and culminating with the Westminster divines, redefined his “assurance as the essence of faith” doctrine.

Within the context of this thesis discussion, such matters will not be discussed beyond the fact that both Calvin and Westminster recognized a dichotomy. It is admitted that “in dealing with questions on the relationship between faith and assurance, Reformation and post-Reformation theologians appear to differ considerably.”²¹ Still, the differences are “quantitative and methodological . . . a matter of emphasis . . . rather than qualitative or

¹⁷ Ibid., 12:290.

¹⁸ Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.15.

¹⁹ Joel R. Beeke. “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists.” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 52.

²⁰ Dave Anderson. “The Soteriological Impact of Augustine’s Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism: Part Two.” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002): 24.

²¹ Beeke. “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith?” 45.

substantial.”²² Most importantly herein, as the matter relates to the Marrow Controversy, both the Brethren and their opponents viewed Calvin and Westminster as consistent. The historic record shows each of these groups claimed allegiance to the Reformers and to the Confession as representing Reformed orthodoxy.

It has been said of Calvin that he was able to “discuss repentance and justification in either order, depending upon the needs of the church he is instructing [because] the primary object and basis of faith is neither justification nor sanctification, but Jesus Christ.”²³ Accordingly, assurance of faith rests in the “assurance of the conscience that Jesus Christ dwells in us and we in Christ.”²⁴ The order and emphasis of the doctrine may evolve from Calvin to Westminster, but the basis of faith’s assurance is unchanged.

In summary, Beeke notes that Calvin, along with other,

post-Reformation theologians struggled against Roman Catholicism’s assertion that no forms of assurance commonly belongs to Christians. But they so struggled largely because their supreme goal was allegiance to Scripture and its authority. At root, they were wrestling with biblical data, exegesis, and hermeneutics. Both testaments display a formidable tension: vital faith and some kind of normal assurance (Gen. 15:6; Rom 4:16-22), conjoined with the possibility of lacking assurance (Psalm 38, 73, 88; 2 Pet. 1:10) Specifically, they taught that when properly set in scriptural, Christo-centric, and Trinitarian context, the syllogisms [a conclusion drawn from an action] and the witness of the Spirit have a valid place in the believer’s assurance – valid, that is, as secondary grounds of assurance that do not usurp the primary ground that consists of the promises of God.²⁵

²² Ibid., 48.

²³ Randall C. Zachman. *The Assurance of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 176.

²⁴ Ibid., 183.

²⁵ Beeke. “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? 45.

The dichotomy was not an invention of Calvin or any other man, but rather a sound exegesis of Scripture.

From Calvin to Westminster Divines

It is no surprise that men who developed Reformed theology after Calvin, particularly those who sought a more systematic, scholastic approach, struggled with the dichotomy of faith to an even greater degree. A detailed examination of these men is beyond the scope of this work. A few brief examples will be given as representative of these struggles.

Theodore Beza, because of his scholastic treatment of this issue of assurance and other doctrines, has been accused of turning Calvinism into an unfeeling, rationalistic theology. Some have even reached the conclusion that Beza based assurance of salvation in works rather than in Christ. However, an objective reading of his work within the context of its time reveals a struggle, similar to Calvin's own, with the dichotomy of Scripture's explanation of assurance. The struggle is more evident because of the strict logic required by his scholasticism.

Beza, like Calvin, saw the source of our salvation as our election in Christ and the faith that God subsequently produces in us. Christ is the ultimate ground of our assurance, and this ground is certain. Good works are important as testimonies that assure us that our election and faith are real. There is no evidence that the two men saw their different approaches or conclusions as incompatible.

A lesser known contemporary of Beza, John Bradford, held similar views. He is important in this discussion because of his influence on William Perkins and several

Westminster divines. Some refer to Bradford as “the first English Calvinist.”²⁶ He, too, saw a dichotomy in one’s experience of faith:

Complete peace of conscience is not a constant experience of the Christian’s life, for there is a spiritual warfare taking place within each individual Christian between the old man and the new, the flesh and the Spirit. This strife is but a proof that one is among the elect, and the conflict should cause one to have recourse to the law to keep the old man from carnal carelessness and to the gospel to keep the new man from despair. . . .

. . . To one of his correspondents he urged meditation in the Word in hope of gaining that assurance “whereof the Holy Ghost doth now and then give us some taste and smell, to our eternal joy. . . .”

. . . “First must faith go before, and then feeling will follow.” Nevertheless he maintains the importance of feelings, which he associates with the inward working of the Holy Spirit. It is Word and Spirit combined which is the ideal experience for the Christian, which will bring with it that chief blessing to be obtained in this life, assurance of union with Christ.²⁷

As with Beza, there is no evidence that Calvin saw major contradictions between the words of Bradford and his own.

Born shortly after Bradford’s death and influenced by his writings, William Perkins became one of the key leaders of the Puritan movement in the 16th Century Church of England. He relied heavily on Beza’s systematic Calvinism to fight Arminius in England. His goal to make theology understandable for the common man is reflected in the way he described assurance. Perkins said one can place absolute certainty in the revealed promises of God. These promises are reinforced through the testimony of the Holy Spirit. One can experience this assurance by the evidence of faith seen in a holy life. The words of Perkins seem generally consistent with those of Bradford and Calvin.

²⁶ William S. Barker. “The authority of scripture and assurance of salvation: essential qualities of Reformation piety as illustrated in the life and writings of John Bradford.” *Presbyterian* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

In the middle 1500's some recognized the need for standard Reformed catechisms or confessions of faith. Elector Frederick III, sovereign of Palatinate, asked Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Oleinus to gather input from Reformed scholars throughout Europe and produce a document that would counteract Rome's attacks and reconcile Lutheran and Reformed teachings. The resulting Heidelberg Catechism, as has been previously stated herein, seemed to wrestle with the dichotomy of faith in much the same way as Calvin, Beza, Bradford, and Perkins. The Belgic Confession, written about the same time, speaks of "firm persuasion of faith" in Article 26 and "true assurance" in Article 34 but does not directly address the Marrow relevant issue of doubt versus certainty.

This Belgic Confession, and the Calvinistic position it represented, was a primary target of the 1610 Remonstrance. The Remonstrants were a group of forty-three Dutch ministers who drafted the 1610 document in support of their Arminian theology. As has been briefly described herein, the Dutch Reformed Church, led by Johannes Bogerman, quickly countered with the Canons of Dort. It is important to see Dort in this context, as an answer to the challenges of Arminianism rather than a complete exegesis of Calvinism.

The Canons of Dort do exhibit the dichotomy of faith seen in other Reformed writings of its time. Article 16 of the First Head of Doctrine lists "an assured confidence of the soul" as part of the real saving faith, yet Article 5 of the Fifth Head admits that sometimes believers sin and "lose the sense" of the favor of God and the exercise of faith in their lives. Articles 9 and 10 later add that assurance can be restored and strengthened by our exercise of faith in the promises of God's Word and the testimony of the Holy Spirit along with our pursuit of holiness and good works.

Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession of Faith was drafted by the Church of England's leaders with input from Reformed Scottish theologians. Interestingly, it governed the English Church for a relatively short period of time while it has remained the standard for the Church of Scotland to this day. The Marrow Brethren were accused of violating this standard in five key doctrinal positions.

Westminster clearly teaches that assurance of one's faith is possible. Those who "truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace."²⁸ The grounds of this assurance are very similar to those just reviewed in the Canons of Dort, as are the outward evidences:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God: which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.²⁹

[G]ood works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance . . .³⁰

Likewise, Westminster recognizes the same dichotomy as Dort, saying faith can be,

different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a

²⁸ *Westminster Confession of Faith*. 18.1 (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997), 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.2, 76-77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.2, 68.

full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.³¹

“So,” one might ask, “if Westminster is this similar to Dort which basically utilized Calvin’s teachings to answer Arminianism’s attack, then why would anyone ever accuse the Westminster divines of contradicting Calvin?” The answer lies in these ten Westminster words: assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith. This phrase, found in Westminster’s chapter 18.3, is seen by some as opposing pure Calvinism and would become a major weapon of the Marrow Brethren opponents:

3. This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

4. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God’s withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.³²

³¹ Ibid., 14.3, 64-65.

³² Ibid., 18.3, 18.4, 76-78.

While the dichotomy described here was somewhat consistent and seemingly compatible with the Marrow Brethren teaching, those ten words and particularly “not . . . the essence of faith” would be deemed by some as irreconcilable.

Irreconcilable is certainly not the verdict of Joel Beeke, who may have examined the differences between Calvin and Westminster on assurance more than any recent scholar.

Interestingly, he quotes one of the lead characters in the Marrow Controversy to explain why Westminster is not at odds with Calvin:

Typical of the Reformed majority interpretation is Thomas Boston’s assertion that, while the WCF emphasizes the goal of a developed assurance, the germ of assurance is implicit in the reference to faith “growing in many to the attainment of a full assurance.” Boston quips, “How Faith can grow in any to a full Assurance, if there be no Assurance in the Nature of it, I cannot comprehend.”³³

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that, as John Murray states, “Calvin’s method differs considerably from that of the classic Reformed systematizers of the 17th Century.”³⁴ Murray and many other Reformed theologians do, however, recognize the differences as matters of emphasis driven by the variant theological concerns of the authors:

Consequently, when Calvin defines faith as assurance *simplicitas*, he is not directly contradicting the Westminster Confession’s distinction between faith and assurance, for Calvin and the Confession do *not* have the same concern in view! Calvin is specifically defining what *faith is in its assuring character*; the Confession’s chapter 18 is specifically describing *what assurance is as a self-conscious, experimental phenomenon*.³⁵

³³ Joel R. Beeke. *Assurance of Faith, Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 174.

³⁴ P. Y. Dejong, ed. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*. Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dordt, 1618-19 (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 1.

³⁵ Beeke. *Assurance of Faith*, 62.

By placing a heavier accent than Calvin and the early Reformers on the secondary, subjective grounds, they by no means parted from the company of the Reformers. In fact, their varying emphases are related to the somewhat different questions being raised in the early and later Reformation era. Calvin was concerned largely with the assurance of God's benevolence; the Puritans, with the assurance of personal faith. Calvin focused on the certainty of salvation in Christ; the Puritans dwelt on how the believer could be assured of his own salvation in Christ. It is not surprising that questions raised with different emphases received answers with different emphases.³⁶

Consequently, mid-seventeenth century Puritan preaching often answers the great case of conscience, "How do I know whether or not I am a believer?" by interweaving a series of signs which contain both good works (i.e. *sylogismus practicus*) and steps of grace (i.e. *sylogismus mysticus*), under the unifying rubric, "signs (or marks) of grace."³⁷

The idea that questions with different emphases resulted in answers with different emphases has been a reasonable way for many to categorize both Calvin and the Puritans under Reformed orthodoxy. Obviously, others have felt the need for much stricter lines of demarcation.

From Westminster to the Marrow Controversy

One of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, Samuel Rutherford, tried to reconcile the different emphases given in the definitions of faith by Calvin and the Confession. As a result, he was later "cited by both the Marrow Brethren and their opponents as being of their opinion."³⁸ He speaks of the "first assurance of justification,

³⁶ Ibid., 157.

³⁷ Ibid., 161.

³⁸ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 14.

such as is proper to the light of faith . . . and another sort of assurance, by signs and effects.”³⁹

James Durham, a younger Scottish contemporary of Rutherford, recognized a similar dichotomy but provided an emphasis that lent itself more readily to those who adamantly wanted to detach assurance from faith. “Believers may attain assurance, and clearness anent [about] their interest in him, and may come to know really that Christ is theirs.”⁴⁰ However, “It is not safe to define justifying Faith by Assurance, or to say that wherever Faith is, there is Assurance.”⁴¹ The latter phrase was selectively used by those who pursued the more extreme detachment doctrine. However, an accurate and complete review of Durham’s work reveals his reference both to an active resting through which we commit ourselves to Christ and a passive resting that is a fruit of such commitment.

Some scholars have postulated that Rutherford, Durham, and the Church of Scotland leaders that followed advanced the misrepresentation of John Calvin’s original doctrines in the ultimately devastating direction of Federal Theology toward which it had been originally steered by Beza, Bradford, Perkins, and the Westminster divines. Once again, within the context of this thesis discussion, it is noted that there were differences of method and emphasis which were developed in more detail as theologians addressed the issues of their day. However, both the Marrow Brethren and their Scottish Church opponents, while finding it impossible to agree among themselves, were each able to view their own positions as

³⁹ Ibid., 14

⁴⁰ James Durham. “My Beloved is Mine, and I am His.” *Banner of Truth Trust* 3 (1982): 153.

⁴¹ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 15.

compatible with Calvin and Westminster and the orthodox Church of Scotland because they saw no substantial variation in the three.

It seems that given a greater spirit of grace and a more effective means of dialogue, the Marrow Controversy combatants may have reached the conclusion of many English Puritans as represented by John Owen:

In describing the nature of justifying faith, he includes a trust in God, without which the soul must despair. Whether this trust or confidence is of the essence of faith, or is the first fruit or working of it, he does not think necessary to determine.⁴²

While, in certain details, Owen “objects to the doctrine of the first Reformers . . . [he] accepts the differences as a permissible variation in presenting the truth.”⁴³

The energy spent among the orthodox Reformed camps in Scotland debating Federal Theology and similar “in house” issues may have diverted attention away from other foes: Arminianism, Antinomianism, and Legalism. Each of these three opposing theologies attacked biblical definitions of assurance in its own way. The Arminian belief that salvation could be lost and thus must be constantly confirmed by good works was countered by Turrentin. His definition of saving faith included “a fiducial assent . . . fleeing unto Christ . . . and resting on his merits alone.”⁴⁴ At the same time, he recognized a “confidence which arises from the soul’s having fled to Christ [which] . . . arises from faith, but does not constitute it.”⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 17.

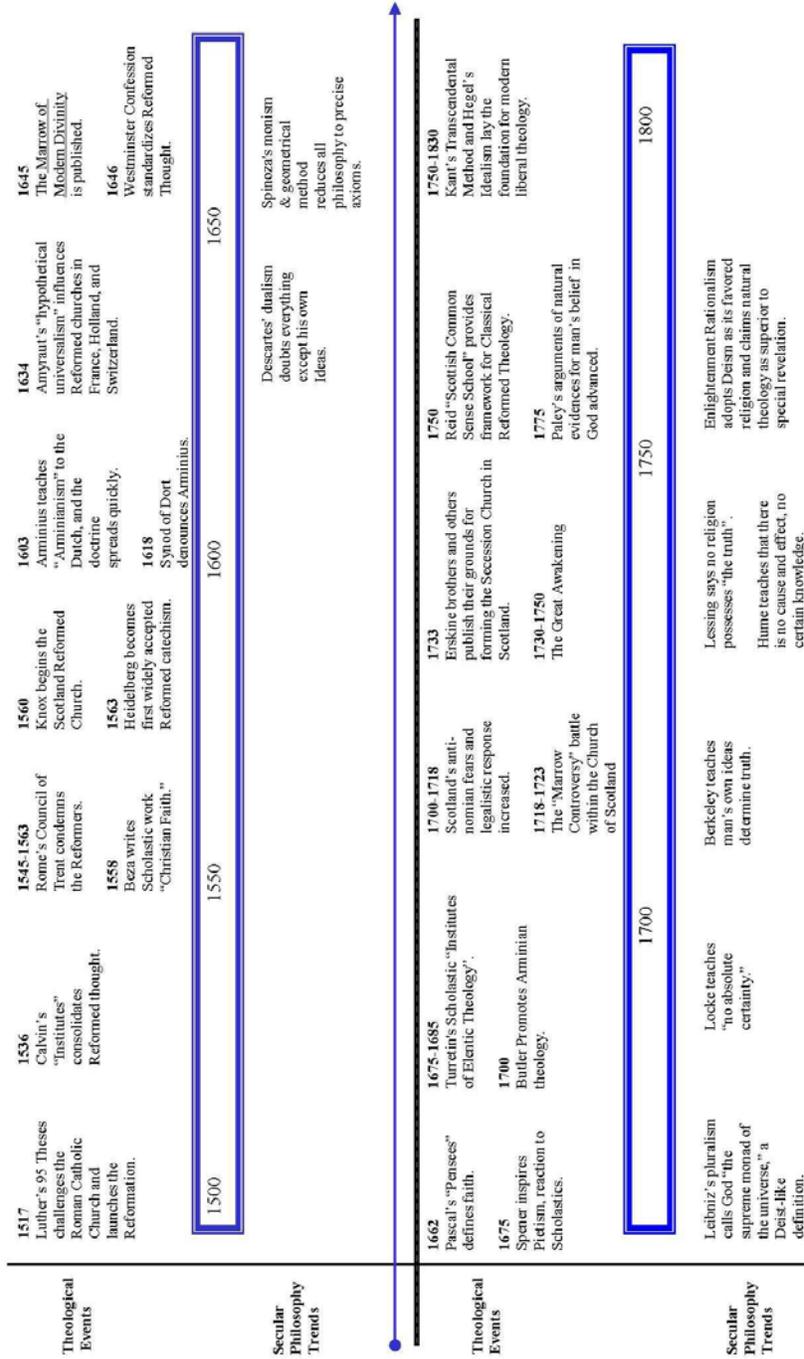
⁴³ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17.

Meanwhile, Antinomians taught that a full and complete assurance was a part of any true saving faith. This assurance rested solely on God's promises in Christ, and neither works nor obedience were involved. Against such an extreme position, the Scottish Legalists felt compelled to overemphasize works to the point that caused some to accuse them of works righteousness. Without the balanced biblical dichotomy present in some form, the definition of faith and assurance seemed destined to drift to one of these extremes or the other.

Theological Timeline, 16th through 18th Century, with Special Emphasis on Issues Related to the Marrow Controversy



CHAPTER 3

THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

Timeline of the Marrow Controversy Events

By 1717 the battle lines within the Church of Scotland were being drawn between those most fearing Legalism and others equally alarmed over Antinomianism. The Presbytery of Auchterarder provided the spark that ignited the fires of theological war by including among the required declarations of its pastoral licensure and ordination candidates the following statement: “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox doctrine to teach, that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in covenant with God.”¹ The intent of this statement, clearly crafted by those who feared Legalism (or what might better be defined as Neonomian theology that made the gospel a new law by requiring faith and repentance before an offer of the gospel), was to clarify that grace must precede faith and repentance. The leaders of Auchterarder wanted to make it clear that repentance is a consequence of grace and never its cause.

Later that year, the Scottish Church General assembly, ruling in favor of a young man who had refused to sign the Auchterarder statement, called it “unsound and most detestable.”² The leaders of the Assembly seemed to fear Antinomianism above all else.

¹ David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 7

They felt that the statement denied the necessity of repentance in the process of one's salvation and that it could even subsequently discourage the pursuit of holiness in the lives of believers. The Presbytery of Auchterarder was told to cease its use of this statement.

Disturbed by the General Assembly's discussion and decision, Thomas Boston recommended a book to a friend while in the meeting. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (afterward herein the *Marrow*), "had had no impact on Scotland in the 1640's when it was originally published and was virtually unknown there"³ by this time. However, this book in which the author desired, in his own words, to walk the true biblical "middle path"⁴ between Legalism and Antinomianism, had deeply impacted Boston. John Drummond, the friend receiving Boston's recommendation, found a copy and later passed it on to James Webster who gave it to James Hog. "Hog was so pleased with the book that he made up his mind to publish it."⁵

Hog's reprint of the *Marrow* resulted in the book being labeled, by some, as Antinomian teaching because of its departure from strict Westminster terminology. Specifically, the *Marrow* was said to "define Faith in Terms which import Assurance."⁶ A "war of pamphlets"⁷ began with Hog erroneously denying that the *Marrow* intended to define faith. This critical early mistake would allow Hog's chief opponent in this battle to

³ Ibid., 201.

⁴ Edward Fisher. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1837), 19.

⁵ D Beaton. "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity' and the Marrow Controversy." *The Princeton Theological Review* IV (1906): 322.

⁶ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 204.

⁷ Beaton, "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity,'" 323.

gain the upper hand in the debate by virtue of this single factual matter which diverted “attention from the substance of the argument.”⁸

James Hadow was the principal of the New College at St. Andrews and one of the General Assembly’s most powerful members. In April of 1719, he “attacked the *Marrow* in a sermon before the Synod of Fife.”⁹ His message was well received there and “afterwards published with the title *The Record of God and Duty of Faith Therein Required.*”¹⁰ The sermon “demonstrates that the *Marrow* does make assurance essential to saving faith”¹¹ and claims that in doing so it must “supposeth some kind of universal Redemption.”¹² This combination of Antinomianism and Amyraldianism [is] inconsistent with the Confession of Faith.”¹³

Hadow and Hog exchanged increasingly personal and derogatory pamphlets in their now public debate. Hadow even writes about a “party in Scotland which desires to promote Antinomianism in the Church of Scotland.”¹⁴ Hog denies this charge and “freely declares that any such ought not to be a minister.”¹⁵ The only real conclusion of this pamphlet war is

⁸ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁰ Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” 323.

¹¹ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 209.

¹² *Ibid.*, 209.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

Hadow's superior logic and writing ability as he "clearly had the better of Hog."¹⁶ In reality, the whole affair,

does not reflect well on either of the protagonists [as] there was considerable theological confusion: terms were not defined, important distinctions, such as that between a full and true assurance, were overlooked, . . . unnecessary personal reflections were exchanged.¹⁷

Much the same can be said for Hog's pamphlet exchange with Hadow's ally, James Adams. Their debate "is not remarkable for a clear presentation of opposing points of view, but rather for its confusion of issues."¹⁸ It is significant for this thesis to note that Adams calls the *Marrow* doctrine of assurance the "most dangerous Part of the Book."¹⁹ In summary, the war of the pamphlets,

tended to bias those who did look into it against the *Marrow* and, in the contributions of Hadow and Adams, it served to formulate the charges against the *Marrow* which were incorporated in the 1720 Assembly's Act against the *Marrow*.²⁰

The Synod of Fife instructed its commissioners to the 1719 General Assembly to make the *Marrow* an issue. In response, choosing not to deal with any single book or person, the Assembly appointed a committee to examine teachings within the Church of Scotland that were inconsistent with the Westminster Confession of Faith and make recommendations about such. James Hadow was appointed to this committee. Almost ten months later, in April

¹⁶ Ibid., 215.

¹⁷ Ibid., 235.

¹⁸ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹ Ibid., 241.

²⁰ Ibid., 256.

1720, Hog and some other ministers were questioned about various matters including the *Marrow*.

Meanwhile, the Synod of Fife had grown impatient with the slow pace of the Assembly process “and initiated two further actions in its October 9 session . . . to suppress the distribution of the *Marrow*”²¹ and to pressure Hog for his failure to attend the Synod meetings as his position would normally have required. It was during this time that Hog and Hadow’s public exchanges grew more bitter.

The April meetings “concluded with some degree of mutual satisfaction.”²² In fact, for all matters under examination except Hog and the *Marrow*, the committee seemed content with the answers provided. Contrastingly, at the 1720 General Assembly, this same group, formally known as the Committee for Purity of Doctrine, reported that the *Marrow* contained “exceeding harsh and offensive”²³ expressions. The Assembly responded by appointing the Committee for Overtures to conduct investigations of these findings. All members of the Assembly were asked to attend. Some “ministers spoke in favor of the *Marrow*,”²⁴ but the reality was that “scarce one of ten members of the Assembly was acquainted with the book.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 269.

²² Ibid., 267

²³ Ibid., 270.

²⁴ Ibid., 272.

²⁵ Ibid., 273.

Having little personal knowledge of their own concerning the *Marrow*, most Assembly members were convinced by the Committee's report and "proceeded to pass a heavy sentence on the book and all who sympathized with its teaching."²⁶ The "ACT concerning a Book, entitled, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* . . . found the five several 'Heads of Doctrine' contrary to Scripture, the Confession and Catechisms."²⁷ The first head said the *Marrow* claimed "that assurance is of the essence of faith and that whoever lacks an assurance or persuasion that Christ is his has not answered the gospel call and is not a true believer."²⁸ This statement and equally serious accusations in the other four heads were given as reasons for the following directive:

The General Assembly do hereby strictly prohibit and discharge all the Ministers of this Church, either by Preaching, Writing or Printing, to Recommend the said Book, or in Discourse to say any Thing in Favours of it; But on the contrary, they are hereby enjoined and required to Warn and Exhort their people, in whose Hands the said Book is, or may come, not to read or use the same.²⁹

After failing in several attempts to ask their local presbyteries to help them appeal the 1720 Act, the group that would come to be called the Marrow Brethren organized several meetings. These gatherings,

were attended by nine ministers: James Kid at Queensferry, Ebenezer Erskine at Portmoak, Ralph Erskine and James Wardlaw at Dunfirmline, William Wilson at Perth, James Bathgate at Orwell, Gabriel Wilson at Maxton, Henry Davidson at Galashiels and Thomas Boston at Ettrick. James Hog did not

²⁶ Beaton, "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity,'" 323.

²⁷ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 274.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

attend these or the subsequent meetings in March, as they felt it to be expedient “in regard of his prefacing the *Marrow*.”³⁰

These men, later joined by Hog, drafted a Representation to be submitted to the next General Assembly. Although others participated, the signers of the Representation became known as the Marrow Brethren:

Messrs. JAMES HOG, Carnock.
THOMAS BOSTON, Etterick.
JOHN WILLIAMSON, Inveresk.
JAMES KID, Queensferry.
GABRIEL WILSON, Maxton.
EBENERZER ERSKINE, Portmoack.
RALPH ERSKINE, Dundermline.
JAMES WARDLAW, Dundermline.
HENRY DAVIDSON, Galashiels
JAMES BATHGATE, Orwel.
WILLIAM HUNTER, Liltiesleaf³¹
(JOHN BONAR – not listed)

These Brethren attested the Representation, answered the five heads of doctrine purported in the 1720 Assembly Act, and requested its appeal.

In May of 1721 the Brethren were ready to take their stand. “To James Kid, ‘a man of singular boldness,’ was committed the task of presenting the Representation of the Committee on Bills and Overtures.”³² Assurance is, once again, a key issue. The Brethren,

freely own, That in latter Times, saving Faith has been well described, especially in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and the Manner of speaking on that Head is much altered from what some Times was in Use, yet we doubt not but the Substance of the Doctrine in that Point, is still the same. The Westminster Confession and catechisms accept and presuppose the received doctrine of the church, including an assurance implied in a receiving

³⁰ Ibid., 281.

³¹ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 370.

³² Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” 325.

and resting in Christ for salvation, ordinarily termed “the fiducial Act, of appropriating Persuasion of Faith.” In contrast to this, the assurance treated of in the Westminster Confession and catechisms is a complex infallible assurance. The Brethren are fully persuaded that the 1720 Assembly would have performed a better service to God and the Church if it had shown “the real Agreement between the more ancient and modern Way of describing Faith, than to condemn the former as Erroneous,” thereby laying a heavy charge on the Reformers and other Reformed Churches, who generally have defined Faith by Assurance.³³

The Marrow Brethren were asked to withdraw the Representation, but they refused. “The Commission of the General Assembly now took up the matter, and after various appearances before them the Representers were asked to answer twelve queries dealing with the controverted points.”³⁴ The meetings between the Commission, which included Hadow, and the Brethren were not substantive doctrinal discussions and usually ended in personal accusations. By August, the Commission had concluded that the Brethren’s answer “clearly loads the *Marrow* with Antinominism.”³⁵

After asking for and being granted several delays in order to prepare their answers to the queries, the Brethren presented such to a Commission sub-committee in March 1722. The sub-committee reviewed the answers and concluded that “though the Brethren pretend to adhere to the Doctrine of our Confession and Catechisms, they have maintained several things not agreeable thereto.”³⁶ It should be noted that there was considerable “dependence on [ministers] from Fife, Logan and Hadow in particular, for the composition of Remarks on

³³ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 296.

³⁴ Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” 326.

³⁵ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 310.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

the Representers' Answers."³⁷ These Commission findings, along with separate motions from the Committee for Purity and Doctrine and the Synod of Fife against the Marrow Brethren, were presented to the May 1722 General Assembly.

The General Assembly then asked the Committee for Overtures, which included Hadow, to meet with the Marrow Brethren to discuss the charges of the various groups. The Brethren "answered in the words of the Confession of Faith and . . . declined to answer queries put to them in regard to persuasion being essential to faith."³⁸ In response, the Committee recommended the Assembly refuse to amend the Act of 1720 and rebuke the Brethren. The General Assembly agreed with 134 of the 160 possible votes supporting the rebuke.³⁹ They confirmed,

the 1720 Assembly's censure of the *Marrow* for making assurance the essence of faith and, pointing out that the Representers do not disown this opinion, assert that they hold to the Confession's doctrine of assurance. Their implicit assumption in this is that the two are incompatible and they do not even refer to the Representers claim that they are in perfect harmony.⁴⁰

It is clear that the doctrine of faith and assurance remained a key factor in this debate.

The Marrow Brethren immediately vowed to disobey the Act and publicly protested. Some members of the Assembly wanted to pursue deposition which "would have certainly meant a split in the national church."⁴¹ Such action may have been considered "but for the

³⁷ Ibid., 321.

³⁸ Ibid., 411.

³⁹ Ibid., 414.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 415.

⁴¹ Ibid., 418.

earnest solicitations of the Government, which dreaded a breach in the Church when the country was threatened with invasion.”⁴² Therefore, the Brethren were sent away with the Assembly’s rebuke and decision to leave any disciplinary actions to the discretion of “local church courts.”⁴³

The Assembly did send letters to all Scottish churches ordering enforcement of the Act of 1720. The Synods of Fife and Lothian complied but the majority “never mention receipt of the two letters in their records, . . . apparently never giving much time to their consideration.”⁴⁴ Heated debates continued in some pulpits, and a few additional pamphlets were exchanged. As early as July of 1722⁴⁵ and as late as May of 1730,⁴⁶ licensure candidates were disqualified due to adherence to *Marrow* doctrine. Some of the Marrow Brethren felt they themselves were subsequently denied ministry opportunities. “But if the Marrowmen suffered persecution from their brethren in the ministry, they were more than compensated by the sympathy of the most pious of the people by the encouragement of the crowds that attended their preaching.”⁴⁷

Several of the Marrow Brethren published books of sermons defending their beliefs during this time. The most direct and extensive was an edition of the *Marrow* to which

⁴² Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” 326.

⁴³ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 419.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁴⁷ Beaton, “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’” 327.

Thomas Boston added his personal notes. However, the Church of Scotland never again officially addressed the matter. In short, the Marrow Controversy was never really concluded. Open dialogue and constructive discussion of the five key doctrinal disagreements never occurred.

The unresolved *Marrow* issues, combined with the concern of the populace over the relation of the Church to the state, eventually led to what is now referred to as the First Secession. Led by Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, a group of churches separated themselves from the Church of Scotland in 1733. To this day, divisions resulting from this dispersion remain among Scottish churches and in Reformed groups around the world. Though the Marrow Controversy itself may be unknown, its five unresolved issues are still contested in many places.

A Brief Description of the Five Issues

Neither the findings of this thesis heretofore nor its ultimate conclusion concerning the one issue upon which it is focused should imply that the Marrow Controversy was theologically inconsequential. The five issues revolved around the heart of the gospel, both its offer to sinners and its outworking in the believer's life. Given the diverse views already present in the 18th Century Church of Scotland, it is doubtful that even a gracious and constructive exchange would have resulted in complete agreement.

In order to highlight the combatants' differences, the most polarizing positions will be presented. It is not at all clear that any of the controversy's primary participants actually held these extreme views. However, as the debate escalated, such accusations were common. (Some terminology used for comparisons herein postdates 18th Century Scotland as subsequent debates have sharpened certain distinctions.)

Concerning the conversion of sinners, the Marrow Brethren were accused of saying repentance was not necessary for salvation. Some would say they taught a form of easy believism that ignored the first half of the biblical call to “repent and believe.” Extreme defenders of the Brethren would counter that their accusers desired a works salvation which encouraged men to look beyond Christ’s righteousness and see the possibility of some qualification within themselves capable of reconciling them to God.

As for the work of Christ, the Brethren were said to teach universal atonement. They have subsequently been accused of being Amyraldian or Arminian at best and Universalist at worst. Some Brethren defenders countered that their accusers preached no gospel at all and ignored the Bible’s free offer of Christ to any who would come. The offer, they would say, is universally given to both elect and reprobate, although redemption is certainly particular.

The wide difference over the free offer provides the foundation for the assurance debate. The Brethren, seeing the gospel freely offered to all and thus each individual having warrant to receive Christ, taught that a real persuasion that “Christ is mine” was a natural part of saving faith. If I know Christ is freely offered to all who will believe and I know I believe, then I am assured that Christ is mine. To not know this on some fundamental level, they surmised, was to not understand and believe the gospel. It is easy to see how, without any constructive dialogue with the Brethren, those holding to a strict and legal interpretation of the Westminster Confession understood them to be in direct contradiction to its “assurance is not of the essence of faith” statement.

Concerning a believer’s life after conversion, the Brethren were accused of Antinomianism or denying the law as a rule of life. Thus, there would be no reason for the pursuit of holiness in a Christian’s life. The extreme Brethren defenders, on the other hand,

branded their accusers as Legalists who failed to discern obvious biblical distinctions. These distinctions included the law of Christ as a mediator versus the Father's covenant of works as a judge, the latter producing legal wrath and condemnation with the former resulting in fatherly displeasure and loving correction.

Finally, and closely related to the law debate, the most polarizing opponents of the Brethren claimed that the *Marrow* teachings denied two vital biblical motivations for obedience: the fear of punishment and the hope of reward. Some Brethren supporters characterized the alternative offered by their accusers as an extension of their works based system of salvation. They feared Legalism would pervert the gospel message of hope in Christ and his righteousness alone, assurance of God's ever present love for His children, and good works flowing from a heart of gratitude.

The conclusion that the two sides should have been able to reach a compromise without violating orthodox truth certainly does not extend to those who might have held the most extreme of the positions just described. It would be a gross oversimplification to characterize the five major doctrinal differences of the Marrow Controversy as simply semantic. Clearly, the theological definition of the gospel, its evangelical offer to sinners, and its pastoral application to the everyday life of believers were all very much at stake in this debate.

Detailed Discussion of Assurance Issues

The most expedient way to address the assurance issue surrounding the *Marrow* is to present, in simplified form, the cumulative explanation of the Brethren as to why the book and their use of it did not violate their vow to the Westminster Confession. Among the

several who have synthesized such an explanation, perhaps Dr. Colquhoun of Leith does it best:

A man cannot have faith without having assurance in it; but he may have faith and not have assurance of it. For, though the mind cannot but be conscious of its own act, yet whether that act have the peculiar properties of nature of saving faith cannot satisfactorily be know by reflection. The assurance of sense or reflection, then, is not a believing in Christ; but it is a believing that we have believed in Him. It is not a direct act terminating on Him, but a reflex act by which we are assured of the saving nature of that direct act. But, although the direct act may be without the reflex, yet the latter cannot be without the former. A man must begin to believe before he can begin to know that he has believed. . . . The assurance of faith is commonly not so strong nor sweet as the assurance of sense which is supported by evidences. By the former, a man trusts upon the warrant of the free offer and promise that Christ will do the part of the Savior to him; by the latter he believes upon the inner evidences of grace, that his faith is unfeigned and operative. . . . the object of the assurance of faith in Christ revealed and offered in the Word; the object of the assurance of sense in Christ formed and perceived in the heart, the former in the root and the latter in the fruit.⁴⁸

This dichotomous definition of faith that seems to have been present in some form from the Reformation's infancy is the basis of the Brethren's reasoning.

Later a more detailed view of several Marrow Controversy individuals' writings will be discussed. First, it will be helpful to understand, in general, why the position summarized by Dr. Colquhoun was rejected by the majority of the Scottish Church leaders. A quick glance back to the 16th Century assurance debate between Rome and the Reformers will provide proper context:

The Romanists asserted that inasmuch as the Reformers were cut off from the infallible Church, they could have no certainty in the truths which they believed. This the Reformers denied, maintaining that by saving faith the believer had a certainty or assurance that he was saved. This certainty is the

⁴⁸ Donald Beaton. "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity' and the Marrow Controversy." *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 1, pt. III (1925): 24.

“infallible assurance” of the Westminster Confession, which it asserts “doth not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long and conflict with many difficulties before he is a partaker of it.”⁴⁹

The battle which Luther and Calvin fought with Rome dictated their emphasis of the “assured side” of the dichotomy.

The Marrow Brethren faced a much different theological battlefield a hundred years later. Their use of the *Marrow* and resulting conflict with some parts of the Church of Scotland parallels the difference in emphasis, recognized in varying degrees, between Westminster and the Reformers:

The Marrowmen were at one with the Reformers in holding that faith include *fiducia*, but when they came to define what was meant by *fiducia* they came into conflict with the dominant party in the Scottish Church. To the Marrowmen *fiducia* included assurance; not the complex or personal assurance of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is not of the essence of faith, but that assurance which is in the direct act of faith. Dr. Cunningham classes the Marrowmen with the Reformers as holding the same doctrine of assurance; but the Marrowmen took particular pains to point out that they did not regard the assurance referred to in the Confession as entering into the essence of faith. Hence their distinction between the assurance of faith, or the direct act of faith (*actio fidei directa*), and the assurance of sense, or the reflex act of faith (*actio fidei reflexa*); the former is essential to faith, but not the latter.⁵⁰

One should be quick to remember that the Brethren themselves did not see their position as substantially different from the Reformers. In fact, they frequently quoted Calvin and others in their defense. Note the acknowledgement as Fisher introduced the *Marrow*:

A Catalogue of those Writers, Names, out of whom I have collected much of the matter contained in this ensuing Dialogue.

⁴⁹ D. Beaton. “The ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity’ and the Marrow Controversy.” *The Princeton Theological Review* IV (1906): 328.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 328.

Mr. Ainsworth,	Mr. Thos. Hooker,
Dr. Ames,	Mr. Laestanno,
Bishop Babinton,	Mr. Lightfoot,
Mr. Ball,	Dr. Luther,
Mr. Bastingius,	Mr. Marbeck,
Mr. Beza,	Mr. Marshal,
Mr. Robert Bolton,	Peter Martyr,
Mr. Samuel Bolton,	Dr. Mayer,
Mr. Bradford,	Wolfgangus Musculus,
Mr. Bullinger,	Bernardine Ochin,
Mr. Calvin,	Dr. Pemble,
Mr. Careless,	Mr. Perkins
Mr. Caryl,	Mr. Polanus,
Mr. Cornwall,	Dr. Preston,
Mr. Cotton,	Mr. Reynolds,
Mr. Culverwell,	Mr. Rollock,
Mr. Dent,	Mr. Rouse,
Mr. Diodati,	Dr. Sibs,
Mr. D. Dixon	Mr. Slater,
Mr. Downham,	Dr. Smith,
Mr. Du Plesse,	Mr. Stock,
Mr. Dyke,	Mr. Tindal,
Mr. Elton,	Mr. Robert Town,
Mr. Forbes,	Mr. Vaughan,
Mr. Fox,	Mr. Vaumeth,
Mr. Frith,	Dr. Urban Regius,
Mr. Gibbons,	Dr. Ursinus,
Mr. Thos. Godwin,	Mr. Walker,
Mr. Gray, jun.,	Mr. Ward,
Mr. Greenham,	Dr. Willet,
Mr. Grotius,	Dr. Williams,
Bishop Hall,	Mr. Wilson ⁵¹

As for the Brethren's call to the great Reformers as their allies, Hadow's Commission responds as follows:

Only the Antinomians still retain the definition given in the *Marrow*. This account of the matter he hopes does not reflect on the Reformers, whom God employed to great and good effect. But the fact of the matter is that their

⁵¹ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 20.

definition of faith had many weaknesses and as a result modern divines, as well as the Westminster standards, have improved upon it. He therefore thinks the Brethren “would be more candid to declare, that they recede from the Standard, and espouse the Definition of Faith that pass’d current at the Reformation.”⁵²

It is only fair to admit that these words lend some support to those scholars who claim major theological differences between Calvin and later Reformation thought. However, such a statement given in the middle of a heated debate does not remove the burden of proving the substantiality of these differences from those who make such claims.

The *Marrow* combatants also disagreed over several key points of the book’s exegesis. This is understandable as the story is an imagined dialogue, almost allegorical in nature, among the following characters:

EVANGELIST, a Minister of the Gospel.
NOMISTA, a Legalist
ANTINOMIST, an Antinomian
NEOPHYTUS, a Young Christian.⁵³

As an example of the exegesis disputes, Hadow and Hog argue if,

Neophytus was a believer at that point in the *Marrow’s* dialogue [where he is urged to] be verily persuaded. . . . Hadow held that he was not, and that Evangelista was urging him to exercise a saving faith which included assurance . . . Hog claimed [he was] ‘a young, but sound believer laboring under doubts and fears’, . . . being encouraged to believe that ‘Jesus Christ is his’ in a reflex act of faith, not in a direct act of faith.⁵⁴

It is easy to see how such disputes over allegorical interpretations, lacking any direct explanation from the *Marrow’s* author, could be irreconcilable.

⁵² Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 379-380.

⁵³ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 20.

⁵⁴ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 219.

Clearly, “the heart of the matter . . . had to do with the nature of the assurance being discussed.”⁵⁵ Since Hadow “did not recognize Hog’s undeveloped distinctions between a full or firm assurance and a true assurance which admits of degrees and does not exclude all doubting . . . [he] labored under a serious misunderstanding of the doctrine . . . taught in the *Marrow*.”⁵⁶ This basic misunderstanding led Hadow to his charge that the *Marrow* was Antinomian. Since “all is made to rest on an assurance which inheres in saving faith, . . . he accuses the *Marrow* of overturning the Necessity of seeking after Assurance, by marks of saving Faith.”⁵⁷ Hadow infers that Hog and his supporters leave no place for the law, good works, and the pursuit of holiness in a believer’s life. In fact, the Brethren state that their doctrine, properly understood, “has the effect of increasing spiritual comfort and gospel holiness, which are always related to faith as effects are to causes.”⁵⁸

An objective reading of the Brethren’s subsequent works shows the Antinomian charge to be pure rhetoric. To be fair to Hadow and others making the accusations, their fears of Antinomian influence within Scotland may have been legitimate although misapplied to the Brethren. On the other hand, the apparent discrepancy between the *Marrow* definition of faith and the Brethren’s vows to the Church’s confession are not so easily dispensed as is the Antinomian charge:

Their most vulnerable point was the doctrine of the Westminster Standards. While both Confession and Catechisms were sufficiently imprecise as to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 373.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 396.

admit diverse interpretation, most ministers in the Church in 1722 were predisposed to interpret them in a way that precluded the Brethren's position, supported by many Reformed Divines or not. Thus, if anything, as the debate stood in May 1722, the Brethren's position on assurance must have seemed doubtful, at least to the majority of the members of the Assembly.⁵⁹

The question that an open, objective, and constructive debate would have asked seems clear. Does the *Marrow*, as the Brethren claim, leave room in its interpretation for the dichotomy of faith and assurance that reconciles it to Westminster, or are its words a precise contradiction to the Confession? The relevant portion of the *Marrow*, subtitled "believing that you have believed," certainly seems to answer this question in favor of the Marrow Brethren. Consider the following exchange in which Neophytus asks how he may be sure of his faith:

Neo. Truly, sir, I was thinking of that place of Scripture, where the apostle exhorts us "to examine ourselves whether we be in the faith or not," 2 Cor. xiii, 5; whereby it seems to me, that a man may think he is in the faith, when he is not. Therefore, sir, I would gladly hear how I may be sure that I am in the faith.

Evan. I would not have you to make any question of it, since you have grounded your faith upon such a firm foundation as will never fail you; for the promise of God in Christ is of a tried truth, and never yet failed any man, nor ever will. . . .

Neo. Sir, I know that the foundation whereon I am to ground my faith remains sure; and I think I have already built thereon; but yet, because I conceive a man may think he has done so when he has not, therefore, would I fain know how I may be assured that I have so done?

Evan. Well, now I understand you what you mean; it seems you do not want a ground for your believing, but for your believing that you have believed.

Neo. Yes, indeed, that is the thing I want.⁶⁰

Such seems to be the thing many believers want today.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 382.

⁶⁰ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 234-235.

Evangelista sets out to help young Neophytus “believe that he has really believed.” He tells him to “look back and reflect upon your own heart, and consider what actions have passed through there.”⁶¹ This suggestion sparks another discussion, this time began by Antinomista:

Ant. But I pray you, sir, is not this his reflecting upon himself to find out a ground to lay his believing that he hath believed upon, a turning back from the covenant of grace to the covenant of works, and from Christ to himself?

Evan. Indeed, if he should look upon these things in himself, and thereon conclude, that because he has done this, God had accepted of him, and justified him, and will save him, and so make them the ground of his believing; this were to turn back from the covenant of grace to the covenant of works, and from Christ to himself. But if he look upon these things in himself, and thereupon conclude, that because these things are in his heart, Christ dwells there by faith, and therefore he is accepted of God, and justified, and shall certainly be saved, and so make them an evidence of his believing, or the ground of his believing that he has believed; this is neither to turn back from the covenant of grace to the covenant of works, nor from Christ to himself. So that these things in his heart being the daughters of faith, and the offspring of Christ, though they cannot at first produce, or bring forth their mother, yet may they in time of need nourish her.⁶²

Nomista now asks if there are not other evidences, beyond inward reflection to aid Neophytus. Evangelista names three: “when he hungers and thirsts after the word, . . . when [he] truly loves the children of God . . . when [he] can truly love his enemies.”⁶³ This answer leads to another revealing dialogue:

Sect. 15 – *Neo.* But, sir, I pray you, let me ask you one question more touching this point; and that is, suppose that hereafter I should see no outward evidences, and question whether I had ever any true inward evidence, and so whether ever I did truly believe or no, what must I do then?

⁶¹ Ibid., 236.

⁶² Ibid., 237.

⁶³ Ibid., 238.

Evan. Indeed it is possible you may come to such a condition; and therefore you do well to provide beforehand for it. Now then, if ever it shall please the Lord to give you over to such a condition, first, let me warn you to take heed of forcing and constraining yourself to yield obedience to God's commandments, to the end you may so get an evidence of faith again, or a ground to lay your believing, that you have believed, upon; and so forcibly to hasten your assurance before the time, . . . but the right way for you, in this case, to get your assurance again, is, when all other things fail, to look to Christ; that is, go to the word and promise, and leave off and cease a while to reason about the truth of your faith; and set your heart on work to believe, as if you had never yet done it.⁶⁴

So, the *Marrow* recognizes the possibility, and even the likelihood, of doubt in the life of a believer. Its introduction even asks the reader, "Where is the man or woman, that is truly come to Christ, that has not had some experience in themselves of such a disposition as this?"⁶⁵ And when these doubts do arise, Neophytus is told to run back to Christ. Our good works are great collateral evidence of our faith when we are spiritually strong and healthy. When we are weak and under attack, these evidences may be hard to see. Then, there is but one place to turn:

Therefore, whensoever, or wheresoever, any doubt or question arises of salvation, or our justification before God, there the law and all good works must be utterly excluded and stand apart, that grace may appear free, and that the promise and faith may stand alone: which faith alone, without law or works, brings thee in particular to thy justification and salvation, through the mere promise and free grace of God in Christ; so that I say, in the action and office of justification, both law and works are to be utterly excluded and exempted, as things which have nothing to do in that behalf. The reason is this: for seeing that all our redemption springs out from the body of the Son of God crucified, then is there nothing that can stand us in stead, but that only wherewith the body of Christ is apprehended. Now, foreasmuch as neither the law nor works, but faith only, is the thing which apprehendeth the body and passion of Christ, therefore faith only is that matter which justifies a man

⁶⁴ Ibid., 239-240.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

before God, through the strength of that object Jesus Christ, which it apprehends; like as the brazen serpent was the object only of the Israelites looking, and not of their hands' working; by the strength of which object, through the promise of God, immediately proceeded health to the beholders: so the body of Christ being the object of our faith, strikes righteousness to our souls, not through the working, but through believing.⁶⁶

This advice to the doubting believer should not be taken, in the least, as an excuse for unholy living or a lack of good works. If your eyes are firmly fixed on Christ as your surety,

an eucharistical love will arise from your thankful hearts, extending itself first towards God, and then towards man for God's sake, and then, according to the measure of your faith will be your willing obedience to God, and also to man for God's sake; for obedience being the kindly fruit of love, a loving soul bringeth forth this fruit as kindly as a good tree bringeth forth her fruit; for the soul, having tasted Christ in a heavenly communion, so love him, that to please him is a pleasure and delight to herself: and the more Christ Jesus comes into the soul by his Spirit, the more spiritual he makes her; and turns her will into his will, making her of one heart, mind and will, with him. . . . If the everlasting love of God in Jesus Christ be truly made known to your souls, according to the measure thereof, you shall have no need to frame and force yourselves to love and do good works, for your souls will ever stand bound to love God, and to keep his commandments, and it will be your meat and drink to do his will. And truly this love of God will cut down self-love and love of the world, for the sweetness of Christ's Spirit will turn the sweetness of the flesh into bitterness, and the sweetness of the world into contempt. And if you can behold Christ with open face, you shall see and feel things unutterable, and be changed from beauty to beauty, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of this Lord, and so be happy in this life, in your union with happiness, and happy hereafter in the full fruition of happiness: whither the Lord Jesus Christ bring us all in his due time.⁶⁷

The *Marrow*, true to its author's stated intent, walks the middle ground, the biblical balanced truth, between the extremes of Legalism and Antinomianism. In the specific application of this biblical balance to the doctrine of faith and assurance, the *Marrow*

⁶⁶ Ibid., 341.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 259.

presents a dichotomy not unlike the theologians and confessions of its generation and those before. That the dichotomy of the *Marrow*, believing versus believing you have believed, is not as scholastically defined as the definition of faith in the Westminster Confession is certain. That the former is an absolute, purposeful, and irreconcilable contradiction to the latter is surely less than certain.

*Timeline of the 18th Century Events Surrounding
the Marrow Controversy in the
Church of Scotland*

Event	Presbytery of Auchterarder adds clause to licensure exam in reaction to legalistic theology seen in the Church.	General Assembly, hearing a case of a licensure candidate who refused to affirm the clause, admonishes the Auchterarder leaders to stop using the "detestable" words.	Based upon a series of personal recommendations beginning with Thomas Boston, <i>The Marrow of Modern Divinity</i> ("Marrow") is reprinted with a James Hog preface.	Hog's "Marrow" reprint creates much debate, and he and fellow "Marrow" supporters are accused of Antinomianism.	Hog publishes one pamphlet, to be soon followed by another, answering the accusations in general and those dealing with faith and assurance in particular.	James Hadow both preaches and prints a sermon in which he condemns the "Marrow" with special attention given to the faith and assurance issue.
Month	May	May	December	September	April	
Year	1717			1718	1719	

Event	Although not mentioned by name, the "Marrow," along with other teachings believed inconsistent with the Westminster Confession, lead the General Assembly to create a committee, which included Hadow, to study these matters.	Fearful of the spreading of false doctrine before the General Assembly would act, Synod of Fife independently takes action against the "Marrow."	Hog and Hadow each publish several pamphlets that do little to clarify positions but instead create great animosity between themselves and many others.	Having done their research, the Committee for Purity of Doctrine, the "Committee", calls Hog and two others to answer charges. All matters resolve quickly except for Hog and the "Marrow."	The "Committee" report to General Assembly convinces a large majority to pass an act that prohibits the use of the "Marrow" by ministers in the Church of Scotland in any way.	The supporters of the "Marrow," Boston, Hog, and the Erskines included, immediately begin plans to make an appeal, a formal "Representation" to the next General Assembly.
Month	May	October	April	May		
Year	1719			1720		

*Timeline of the 18th Century Events Surrounding
The Marrow Controversy in
The Church of Scotland (cont'd)*

Event	<p>Twelve ministers sign the "Representation" appealing the Assembly's stand against the "Marrow" and become known as the Marrow Brethren.</p>	<p>The Marrow Brethren are asked to withdraw the appeal and refuse. Several Assembly leaders, Hadow included, are appointed to study the "Representation" and report back to the next Assembly.</p>	<p>The Assembly appointed group, the "Commission," meets with the Brethren, eventually denying the appeal, appointing a subcommittee which included Hadow to draft such an overture to the General Assembly.</p>	<p>The "Commission" receives a draft of the overture from the subcommittee along with a number of Queries to be asked of the Brethren.</p>	<p>The Marrow Brethren appear before the "Committee" and give answers to the Queries which are, in turn, given back to an expanded subcommittee, Hadow still present for the review.</p>	<p>Three groups present: "Marrow" reports to General Assembly, the "Commission," the "Committee," and the Synod of Fife. All three are given to the Committee for Overtures, Hadow present, which recommends rebuke.</p>
Month	May		August		March	May
Year	1721			1722		

Event	<p>Out of 160 possible votes, 134 support a General Assembly rebuke of the Marrow Brethren, this confirming the original Assembly act of 1720 and also the special emphasis regarding the doctrine of assurance.</p>	<p>The Marrow Brethren immediately vow not to submit to the act. Some want to force the Brethren deposition but others fear a split in the Church, and the matter is left to local church courts.</p>	<p>Two licensure candidates are made to denounce the "Marrow" before approval in Edinburgh while other Presbyteries seem to ignore the Assembly's act altogether.</p>	<p>Thomas Boston publishes an edition of the "Marrow" that includes extensive personal notes.</p>	<p>Hadow wins an Assembly battle with Ebenezer Erskine that ends in the disqualification of a ministerial candidate because of his adherence to the "Marrow."</p>	<p>Some of the Marrow Brethren participate in a Secession from the Church of Scotland with doctrinal issues raised during the Marrow Controversy playing a significant role.</p>
Month	July					
Year	1722		1725		1730	1733

CHAPTER 4

THE MARROW CONTROVERSY PARTICIPANTS

The Accusers of the Marrow Brethren

James Hadow

It is clear from the event summary just given that James Hadow was, by far, the most vocal and aggressive member of the Marrow Brethren opposition. As a faithful servant in his roles at the College of St. Andrews, various local churches, the Synod of Fife, and the Church of Scotland General Assembly, there is no evidence that his primary motivation was anything other than a genuine concern for purity of doctrine and fear of Antinomian, Arminian, and Deist influence. Hadow's own writings, which are found in the appendix of a James Hog novel, illustrate that a perceived Antinomian theology was his primary concern with the *Marrow*:

The Antinomian Scheme was always formerly set forth under the specious shew of a peculiar Zeal for free Grace: and the same Pretext is still the most plausible for the promoting of it.¹

I observe that the Author of the Marrow overturned the Necessity of seeking after an Assurance, by Marks of saving Faith; seeing he placeth Assurance in the Nature and Essence of that Faith, which the Gospel requireth of all its Hearers. He describes believing on Christ to be a Man's persuading himself in his Heart that Jesus Christ is his, and that he shall have Life and Salvation by Him.²

¹ James Hog. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (Peterborough, ON, Canada: Oxford University Press, 1999), 253.

² *Ibid.*, 255.

Surely, some of the statements Hadow makes about the *Marrow* are factually correct. Contrastingly, many of the conclusions he draws from these basic facts are not consistent with the interpretation and application of the *Marrow* by the Marrow Brethren. For example, the Brethren would have been appalled to hear that their words were believed to be,

teaching a believer is not obligated to mourn for sin; and that Faith is not to be tried by distinguishing marks, seeing he makes Assurance to be of the Nature and Essence of Faith.”³

It is difficult to reconstruct Hadow’s complete systematic theology, but it seems fair to say that these “excerpts show an inclination to think of gospel terms and conditions, including faith, repentance, and a holy life, which a person must ‘obtain’ if he is to be saved.”⁴ This tendency, along with his quick condemnation of “any slight variation in terminology from [the] standard,”⁵ immediately set him at odds with the Brethren in general and the imprecise writer Hog in particular.

Some would argue that the following summary is an overly harsh description of Hadow, but it does illustrate how his thought process escalated the controversy:

Regarding himself as defender of Reformed Orthodoxy, he opposed error wherever he found it. It is somewhat surprising that a man with an evidently wide acquaintance of Reformed Orthodoxy should find . . . the *Marrow* so offensive, the objectionable doctrines surely having adequate precedent in the teaching of writers of undisputed orthodoxy. . . . This narrow-minded devotion to his own, often innovative, terminology, coupled with a corresponding incapacity to understand any other, was to be a hallmark of his contribution to the Marrow Controversy. His own theological emphases, while

³ Ibid., 258.

⁴ David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 171.

⁵ Ibid., 175.

essentially orthodox, tended to considerable legalism of terminology, particularly in speaking of gospel terms, including faith, as conditions of salvation. He does make a conditional offer of the gospel to all who hear, but emphasizes what the sinner must do to be saved and not, as did Hamilton, the offer of what God has done.⁶

Thomas Blackwell

There were Marrow opponents with a more systematically developed doctrine of faith. Thomas Blackwell, principal of Marischal College and author of *Methodus Evangelica*, was the most notable. His systematic approach, particularly evident in his description of faith, allowed for “some assurance prior to that which is clear and comfortable; . . . [yet] an assurance of marks seems to be the only assurance he knows.”⁷ If the traditional Reformed dichotomy of faith definition is present at all in Blackwell’s work, it is certainly faint.

This more strictly drawn definition of faith is also seen in his broader soteriology where, similar to Hadow though more precisely, Blackwell “equates faith with repentance and new obedience as equally necessary for salvation and speaks of faith and repentance as precepts peculiar to the gospel.”⁸ There is no doubt that having Blackwell as an ally, especially his ability to systematically articulate their position, was a great benefit to Hadow. This benefit would have proven very valuable among the more scholastic theologians in the Assembly.

⁶ Ibid., 176-177.

⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁸ Ibid., 180.

Other Marrow Accusers

Without question, the “opponents of the *Marrow* cannot be so clearly defined as a group as can its defenders.”⁹ Most of the Assembly who voted against the Marrow Brethren were a “silent majority [of which] . . . we know nothing of their reasons for voting as they did.”¹⁰ We do know that many of them, especially those who led the attack, “seem to have been men of considerable influence in their respective presbyteries and synods.”¹¹ An objective historical review must recognize that the Brethren were clearly at odds with some of the most respected members of the General Assembly.

Of all the *Marrow* opponents, John Willison, may be the most significant for two reasons. First, subsequent to the controversy, he was “a leader of the evangelicals who remained in the Church of Scotland in the years following the Secession.”¹² This fact may be indicative of both his preference for peacemaking and his appreciation of the Brethren’s evangelical viewpoint. Secondly, “although we possess no record of his role at the time of the Controversy,”¹³ he subsequently became a prolific writer and “was almost as well known in Scotland the century following his death as was Thomas Boston.”¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹¹ Ibid., 159.

¹² Ibid., 193.

¹³ Ibid., 194.

¹⁴ Ibid., 193.

Through his later writings, Willison appeared to represent the thought process and conclusion of most of the 1720 and 1722 General Assemblies much more than the systematic and scholastic works of Thomas Blackwell. His objection to the Marrow Brethren was that “they had abandoned what to him were the ‘old approven’ ways of speaking and began using new ones.”¹⁵ The Brethren, he said,

recommended a book which, while not without some value, taught various Antinomian errors and was of some danger to the Church. Although . . . it was surely not as dangerous to the interest of Truth as some others which had been recommended then and since. . . . These errors of the *Marrow* were rightly condemned by the General Assembly.¹⁶

Still, these doctrinal issues were not Willison’s most important reason for the stand he took against the Brethren. Expressing his primary motivation for supporting the Assembly, Willison was most thankful their actions ensured that “Peace and Truth were preserved in the Church at that Time.”¹⁷

As for Willison’s subsequent writings directly concerning assurance, his position seems compatible with that of the Marrow Brethren:

In referring to assurance he says that many times a Believer will come sooner to a clear interest in Christ by direct acts of faith than by the reflex acts. Assurance may be found in insufficiency and weakness. The intention of this seems little different from that of the Marrow Brethren. Assurance is to be had first of all in Christ and not in ourselves. In saying this, Willison surely had no intention of denying the reflex act of assurance or the assurance of marks.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶ Ibid., 194.

¹⁷ Ibid., 195.

¹⁸ Ibid., 196.

In fact, Willison's "presentation of the doctrines of faith, of assurance, of the offer of the gospel, of the Covenants and election and of the place of good works was little different from the presentation of the Brethren."¹⁹

Why, then, did John Willison and the majority of the Marrow Brethren accusers he represented condemn a group of fellow ministers as a result of theological differences he termed "not as dangerous" as those tolerated in other instances? The answer lies in two powerful forces at work in the Church of Scotland at this time: the fear of Antinomianism and the desire to quickly end any disputes that could lead to division. Having no irreconcilable differences,

with the Marrow Brethren, his inability to join them probably came largely from his desire to maintain the purity of doctrine, including what he thought of as the form of sound words, and unity among the ministers of the Church of Scotland; which purity and unity were to his mind no doubt threatened by the dangers of the Antinomian terminology which he thought was used in the *Marrow* and by the Brethren.²⁰

With most of his contemporaries, Willison was proud that the Church of Scotland was "a National Church, that has been, and still is, honoured through the Reformed World." He regretted divisions and controversy among Christians, especially among the Reformed Churches and expressed a desire that the greatest controversy should be as to who should be the most zealous and active to suppress vice and immorality and promote piety and gospel holiness.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 198.

²⁰ Ibid., 198.

²¹ Ibid., 195.

The Marrow Brethren

James Hog

Of the twelve men who came to be called the Marrow Brethren, “only James Hog had published a considerable body of work prior to the Controversy.”²² This appears to be the sole reason for his visible leadership since, in reality, his theological position, of the twelve, was the “farthest from”²³ what would come to be known as the *Marrow* doctrine. This statement should not imply any great differences among these ministers who were considered to be “largely in harmony.”²⁴ As members of “a rather amorphous ‘Evangelical’ party within the church . . . they also tended to take the same positions on the various other major issues of the time.”²⁵ It should also be noted that the “greater part of this party did not take part in the Marrow Controversy.”²⁶

On December 4, 1717, James Hog, seeing what he believed to be Legalistic influences in the Church of Scotland, gave the following reason for his republishing of the *Marrow*:

That the tares of such errors [Legalism] are sown in the reformed churches, and by men who profess reformed faith, is beyond debate. . . . Such dregs of antichristianism do yet remain, or are brought in amongst us. Herein the words of the apostle are verified, viz: “Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them:” and as this renders the essays for a further diffusion of evangelical light the more necessary and

²² Ibid., 123.

²³ Ibid., 156.

²⁴ Ibid., 156.

²⁵ Ibid., 122.

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

seasonable, so there is ground to hope, that in these ways the churches of Christ will gradually get the ascendant over their enemies, until the great antichrist shall fall, as a trophy before a gospel dispensation.²⁷

With these charges from Hog, and Hadow's response, the controversy began.

Hog's primary defense against Hadow's accusations was the *Marrow's* agreement with the Reformers, the Protestant Divines who had followed, and Scripture:

I have often heard that a great stir is made against the Marrow of Modern Divinity. I know also, that by fame it has been treated in such a Manner, as I love not to repeat. Great and eminent Divines, Confessors, Martyrs, Renowned Witnesses, and fame of those eminent Reformers, might have been entertained with Respect.²⁸

The true import of the quarreled Words is really this, namely, That the acceptable Reformation of Life, doth not go before but followeth Faith. There is nothing here, but what's plainly and directly Scriptural.²⁹

Hog firmly believed these trusted sources,

made it clear that the Faith owned by this Church hath Assurance in its Nature. Faith and doubting being opposites, though the believer may be bothered with doubt, it nevertheless belongs to his unbelief rather than to his faith. Although the Assembly denies that assurance is essential to faith, Hog can not accept this. He can not conceive of an appropriation of Christ without an assurance in proportion to it.³⁰

The following words from Hog, written in defense of the *Marrow*, clarify that he clearly acknowledged the doubts that often coexist with such a faith:

Some except against the Author's Advice for recovering Assurance, contained in these Words, *Viz. Let me warn you to take heed of forcing, and*

²⁷ Edward Fisher. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1837), 7.

²⁸ James Hog. *An Explication of Passages Excepted Against in the Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edinburgh: printed by Robert Brown, 1719), 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 435.

constraining your self to yield Obedience to God's Commandments, to the end you may so get an Evidence of Faith again, &c. which is alleged to Favour Laxness. For setting this in a clear Light, View the following Page, where the meaning is more fully opened, *To Wit, That acceptable Obedience cannot go before Faith*, and therefore our Author warneth the exercised Soul to begin with Faith, and then Obedience will follow. . . . The Right Way for you in this Case, to get your Assurance again, when all other Things fail, is, *To look to Christ*, that is, go to the Word, the Promise, and leave off, and cease a while to Reason about the Truth of your Faith, and set your Heart on Work to believe. View more in the forecited Place, and the Conclusion is clear to our purpose in these Terms, *Hold to the Word, go not away, but keep you here, and you shall bring forth Fruit with Patience*, Luk 8. 15.³¹

So, Hog suggested that, while our good works can be an evidence of faith, the ultimate grounds for our assurance must be the work of Christ. He emphasized this point further in the following response to a Marrow Brethren accuser and added that salvation is based completely on the righteousness of Christ:

Our Corrector of the *Marrow*, by his Gospel, renders the Salvation of any one Sinner utterly impossible, in Regard *sincere Obedience* is as truly out of our Reach, as that which is perfect, and sinless. In Opposition to him I assert with Orthodox, *Antipelagian* Divines, That Life is promised in the Covenant of Grace only to perfect and *sinless Obedience*, as giving the Right and Title thereunto, which none have, nor can have of themselves; and therefore the Glorious *Gospel* pointeth it out in the *Mediator* of that Covenant, in whom only it's to be fought and found; and his *perfect Righteousness* imputed to the Sinner, intituleth him to Life in a Sutableness to *Justice*.³²

These excerpts represent what proved to be Hog's inadequate attempt to reconcile his position to the General Assembly. His doctrine of faith and assurance were not nearly as precise as those which Thomas Boston and Ebenezer Erskine would produce in the years

³¹ Hog, *An Explication of Passages*, 19.

³² James Hog. *A Letter to a Gentleman, Containing a Detection of Errors in a Print, Intituled, The Snake in the Grass* (Edinburgh: printed by Robert Brown, 1719), 21.

following the controversy. It is easy to see why the average member of the General Assembly majority would not have been swayed by his arguments.

Gabriel Wilson

In between the two General Assembly condemnations of the *Marrow*, Gabriel Wilson delivered and published a sermon that dealt with some of the controversy's issues. He spoke of the free offer of the gospel and the assurance that comes to a believer who has faith in that offer of Christ:

Doctrine of Christ's Market of free Grace in the Gospel, viz. Of no *Price or Qualification*, being required of lost undone Sinners, as a Condition in Order to their believing in the Name of the Son of God, "in Order" to their being made welcome to Christ, and interested in Him "by Faith."

The Doctrine of the Soul's indissoluble Union with Christ, and of everlasting Deliverance from the Curse of the Law, upon One's first believing; Of living, while we are in the Flesh, by the Faith of the Son of God; Of receiving all, doing all, enduring all in the Way of Trust, Confidence and Dependence on Him in the Promises.³³

Wilson addressed the charge of Antinomianism, which such teaching had met, by affirming that obedience naturally flows from faith:

The *Obedience of Faith*, that we read of, *Rom. 16. 26.* is of the same Import; namely, the Obedience that's inseparable from *Faith*, that natively flows from Faith, that is produced by Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, by a Faith of the glorious Truths of the Gospel:

But till once a Soul be saved by *Believing*, there will not, nor can there be any, whether comfortable or acceptable, *Doing*.³⁴

Disobedience, on the other hand, can result in doubt:

³³ Gabriel Wilson. *Trust, A sermon, at the opening of the provincial Synod of Mers and Teviotdale, at Kelso. October 17, 1721* (Edinburgh, 1723), 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

If a Man make once a Gap in his Conscience, especially by sinning against Light, or doing any Thing doubtingly, with Reference to the Truth, a Thousand to One, without it speedily healed, with an Application of the Blood of Christ, but he loses the Trust out of it, in Whole, or in Part.³⁵

Once again, the ultimate grounds of assurance is known to be in the work of Christ.

John Williamson

Another Brethren's answer to Hadow, that of John Williamson, begins as follows:

When I read Principal Hadow's *Book Intituled, The Antinomianism of the Marrow of Modern Divinity* detected; *I was surpriz'd to observe such an artful and sophistical Way of misrepresenting the Marrow, by his Manner of quoting and using it.*³⁶

Williamson is particularly concerned with Hadow's failure to see the dichotomy in the Brethren's definition of faith and assurance. He explains that the *Marrow's*,

dialogue sustains the Character of a Believer to be verily persuaded in his Heart, that Jesus Christ is his, and that he shall have Life and Salvation by him; and, that whatsoever Christ did for the Redemption of Mankind he did it for him; especially, seeing some *Degree of Evidence*, as to these Things, cannot be denied to belong to the applying and appropriating Assurance of Faith when exerted, tho' the Believer himself may be many a Time under a Cloud by the *Prevalence of Unbelief*. We never say, That a Believer is always assured, for oftentimes he is not exercising Faith: But we say, That some Degree of Evidence and Assurance belongs to Faith when exerted.³⁷

The promise of God in Christ, is of a tried Truth, - and therefore a Man should close with Christ in the Promise; - For there is an *Assurance* which ariseth from the Exercise of *Faith* by a *direct Assurance*, and that is, when a Man, by Faith, *directly lays hold upon Christ*, and concludes *Assurance* from thence. But, because a Man may think he hath believed, when he hath not: Therefore, he should not only have a sure Foundation, whereon to ground his *direct Assurance of Faith*; - but also a Ground to *believe* that he *hath believed*, . . .

³⁵ Ibid., 176.

³⁶ John Williamson. *The Scope and Substance of the Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edinburgh, 1722), 1.

³⁷ Ibid., 26.

And the Way to find out that, is, for a Believer to look back, and reflect upon his own Heart, to consider what Actions have past through there.³⁸

If a Man find these Things, he hath sure Ground to believe that he has believed, . . . *Hereby he may know that he is of the Truth, and may assure his Heart before God. 1 John iii. 19.* [Here, it is plain the *Author* distinguisheth between Assurance in the *direct Act of Faith*, and Assurance by Reflection, and pithily advises unto Self-searching, that a Man may thereby discover the Grounds he hath to believe that he doth truly believe.]³⁹

The following list of such “things” or evidences is provided by Williamson: love of the Word of God, true love of God’s children, love of our enemies, meeting the needs of others, forbearing revenge, and overcoming evil with goodness.

Like other Brethren, Williamson admitted that moments may arise in a believer’s life during which neither outward nor inward evidences suffice:

But the right Way in this Case is, when all other Things fail, to *look to Christ*; that is, to go to the Word and Promise, and to leave off a while to Reason about the Truth of his Faith, but to set his Heart on Work to believe, as if he had never done it.⁴⁰

Taking all these points into consideration, Williamson concluded that the *Marrow’s* words, as interpreted by the Brethren, were consistent with the Westminster Confession:

It is plain here, the *Author* owns, That the Believer may be under Doubts of the Reality of his Faith; and while he is so, he advises him not to hasten his Assurance, *viz.* of the Truth of his Faith in a Legal Way, but by renewing the direct Act of Faith; and so plainly distinguisheth these two Kinds of Assurance. Now, it being of the Assurance, by Reflection whereof our Standards speak, when that Assurance is said not so to belong to the Office of Faith, and not of that which is in the direct Act: There’s no Contradiction between them.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 115.

³⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 119.

Henry Davidson

Two sermons published by Henry Davidson shortly after the controversy discuss a believer's ability to know with certainty the promises of God. Commenting on Psalm 119, he cites, "David's knowledge of the truth, I know it, O Lord."⁴² This knowledge "must not only be the language of the lip, but the language of the heart: I know it, it is my settled sentiment, . . . my most seated thoughts."⁴³

For Davidson, the source of such knowledge is "from principle, the faithfulness of God."⁴⁴ "The Lord has appointed and ordained eternal happiness to his own children, and he has secured that in a way of free, gracious and absolute promise."⁴⁵ Yet, believers' struggles and their desires to respond properly to them are also "proper means and methods to bring about the great end of their eternal good."⁴⁶

So while Davidson did not write specifically about the definition of faith and assurance like some of his fellow Marrow Brethren, his words here are certainly compatible. He recognized the key three components of the Brethren position on this matter. First, God's promises are absolute and sure. Second, believers struggle and do not always experience perfect assurance. Third, evidences, both inward and outward, can be used by God to

⁴² Henry Davidson. *Dark Providences to be Admired, Not Seriously Pry'd Into* (Edinburgh: printed for, and sold by John Duncan, 1767), 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

strengthen our faith, but a focus on Christ and God's promises must ultimately be the source of our assurance.

Lesser Known Marrow Brethren

Before examination of the three Brethren who most influenced the Scottish Church subsequent to the Marrow Controversy, mention will be made of some of the lesser known members of the group. William Hunter came to be known as a man of "great devotion to the work of the ministry . . . [who] died . . . in the sure and certain hope of a joyful resurrection."⁴⁷ James Bathgate was a faithful minister whose death was "much lamented."⁴⁸ James Wardlaw continued his pastoral work until his death in 1742. John Bonar was blessed by God both as a minister and the father of a long line of Scottish pastors and theologians. Andrew Bonar, his great, great grandson, became a leader of the Free Church of Scotland. James Kid, who had been chosen by the Brethren to present their case to the 1721 General Assembly was a preacher of the gospel throughout his life. There is no indication that any of the Marrow Brethren were discouraged from their call to ministry by the events of the controversy.

Ebenezer Erskine

The most influential of the Brethren in ecclesiastical political battles was Ebenezer Erskine. He and his brother, Ralph Erskine, were among the founders of the 1733 Secession Church in Scotland. His balanced approach to ministry that included a deep study of theology, a personal pastoral care of his parishioners, and a life of great character made him a

⁴⁷ Walter Riddell Carre. *Border Memories* (Edinburgh: James Thin, South Bridge, 1876), 201.

⁴⁸ Patrick Walker. *Six Saints of the Covenant* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 170.

leader among the Scottish evangelicals. He was particularly revered by those fighting Legalism and state control of the Church.

Along with Thomas Boston, Ebenezer Erskine produced the most thorough theological work of the Marrow Brethren to clarify their doctrine and particularly to reconcile their definition of faith to the Westminster Confession. He employed a dichotomy, the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense, similar to Calvin and many of his predecessors. The first half of this dichotomy is itself composed of two parts. In the assurance of faith, he wrote,

there is a two-fold certainty or assurance; namely, of *assent* and of *application*. The former necessarily supposes an assurance of understanding or of knowledge.⁴⁹

An assurance of *assent*, whereby the man assuredly believes whatever God has said in his word to be true; and that not upon the testimony of men, of ministers, or angels, but upon the testimony and authority of the God of truth, for whom it is impossible to lie, speaking in his own word, and saying, Thus saith the Lord.⁵⁰

This is so essential to faith, that very commonly under the Old Testament, and frequently also under the New, faith receives its denomination therefrom. Isa. 53:11; Jer. 31:34; John 17:3.⁵¹

Realizing the “essential to faith” phrase would create questions for some strict interpreters of Westminster, Erskine clarified his position in another work:

It is bold and confident grace. Hence we read frequently of the “*boldness of faith*,” and the “*assurance of faith*,” Heb. iv. 16; Heb. x. 22. It is disputed at this day, whether assurance be of the essence of faith. I incline not to call it by

⁴⁹ Ebenezer Erskine. *The Assurance of Faith, opened and applied; Being the Substance of Six Discourses on Heb. X. 22* (London: reprinted by Z. Fowle and S. Draper, 1759), 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

the name of assurance, because some cavil at the word; but I choose rather to call it by the name of the *certainty of faith*. I do not design to enter much upon that controversy at present: all I say of it is only this; that there cannot miss to be a certainty in faith, because doubts and fears vanish before it. “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” How faith can fill the soul with “joy and peace,” yea, with “joy unspeakable, and full of glory,” if it have no certainty in it as to these things in which it rejoices, is what I think no man is able to account for. How a man can rest on Christ, and apply him and his salvation to himself in particular, and yet not believe “that he shall be saved through the grace of Christ,” to me appears a paradox. I do not say that faith excludes doubts out of the believer; but I say, that faith excludes doubting out of its own nature. Light excludes darkness out of its nature; and yet there may be much darkness in a room where there is some light. Certainty may be of the nature of faith, although there be much darkness and doubting in the believer, through the prevalence of ignorance and unbelief that remains in him, and will remain, while he is clogged with a body of death. So, in like manner, love excludes enmity out of the nature of it; and yet, in the believer, who loves Christ, there is much remaining enmity, by which his love is exceedingly weakened: so the certainty of faith is weakened through the remaining unbelief that is still in the believer’s heart.⁵²

The second part of Ebenezer Erskine’s assurance of faith, namely the assurance of application is,

expressed frequently in Scripture by a resting, a trusting, or confiding in the Lord, and in the veracity of his word of grace and promise. By this act of faith the soul takes home the promise, and embraces it as a good and sufficient security to itself.⁵³

I might here demonstrate that our best Protestant divines concur in their sentiments as to this matter: I shall only at present quote the definition of faith given by the great and judicious Dr. Owen in his Catechism, or Principles of the Doctrine of Christ, where, having proposed the question, What is justifying faith? his answer is, “A gracious resting on the free promises of God in Christ Jesus for mercy, with a firm persuasion of heart that God is a reconciled Father to us in the Son of his love.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ebenezer Erskine. *The Whole Works of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine* (Philadelphia: published by Wm. S. & A. Young, 1836), 191-192.

⁵³ Erskine, *The Assurance of Faith*, 53.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

Knowledge and assent are preparatory to that application, wherein lies the very soul of saving and justifying faith. And when we speak of them one after another, it is not as if they were really separate in the soul's exercise; for I regard them as one complex undivided act of the soul.⁵⁵

Erskine's reference to John Owen is significant knowing that the latter's ultimate conclusion is that it is not necessary to determine the exact "essence of faith," seeing the differences raised as permissible variations of truth.

Having described the two parts of the certainty that he views as "of the essence of faith," namely the assurance of faith, Erskine then explained the dichotomy:

There is a great difference between the *assurance of faith* and the *assurance of sense*, which follows upon faith. The assurance of faith is a direct, but the assurance of sense is a reflex act of the soul. The assurance of faith has its object and foundation from without, but that of sense has them within. The object of the assurance of faith is Christ revealed, promised, and offered in the word; the object of the assurance of sense is Christ formed within us by the Holy Spirit. The assurance of faith is the cause, that of sense is the effect; the first is the root, and the other is the fruit.⁵⁶

The assurance of faith will *stand its ground* when the assurance of sense is quite lost.⁵⁷

Once the dichotomy is understood, the coexistence of assurance in the essence of faith and doubt in a believer's life can be explained:

When we speak of the assurance of faith, it is not to be understood as if every one that has faith were perfectly free of doubting. This, I apprehend, is what alarms many at this doctrine of the assurance of faith; they think that if there be an assurance in the essence of faith, then it would follow that every true believer must always have such assurance as to be free of doubting; which is contrary to the experience of the generation of the righteous. But this

⁵⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 60.

objection goes upon a palpable mistake, as if faith and a believer were one and the same thing. We do indeed assert that there is no doubting in faith, for faith and doubting are commonly in Scripture directly opposed one to another; but though there be no doubting in faith, yet there is much doubting in the believer, by reason of prevailing unbelief and indwelling sin.⁵⁸

None of this discussion was seen by Erskine as leading to Antinomianism. While “good works are not at all profitable to found a claim or title to heaven,”⁵⁹ “. . . they are profitable . . . as fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.”⁶⁰ He defends his brothers:

See hence, how unjustly ministers, who endeavour to preach the doctrine of the grace of God, or who preach down works in the matter of justification, are aspersed as enemies to good works and holiness, or as if they separated between faith and good works. This was a calumny cast upon Christ himself, which made him offer that vindication, Matth. v. 17: “I am not come to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil the law.” This was a charge against the protomartyr Stephen, Acts vi. 13, that he “spoke blasphemous words against the holy place, and the law.” And this also was a charge against the apostle Paul and his doctrine: hence it is that he anticipates that objection, Rom. iii. 31; “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”⁶¹

The more the *legality* of the heart is overcome, the stronger is a man’s faith. . . . A vigorous and lively faith overlooks all graces, duties, attainments, and experiences, as grounds of acceptance, and found its confidence wholly and alone upon the blood of Jesus.⁶²

The more *fruitful* a person is in the exercise of other graces, the stronger is his faith. You know the plenty and size of the fruit of a tree flows from the abundance of sap and strength in the root; so here, faith is the radical grace, the root upon which the other graces grow; and therefore, the more a person

⁵⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁹ Erskine, *The Whole Works*, 197.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 198.

⁶¹ Ibid., 200.

⁶² Erskine, *The Assurance of Faith*, 139.

abounds in love, hope, repentance, meekness, humility, and other graces, the more vigorous is his faith.⁶³

There certainly seems to be enough common ground in Erskine's words to open the door of reconciliation. However, 18th Century Scotland was not a politically peaceful place, neither in the church nor in the state. This issue of faith and assurance, the four other Marrow Controversy doctrines, greater Legalism versus Evangelism differences, and battles over state ecclesiastical control all proved to be divisive. Thus, for some, secession was the only answer.

Ralph Erskine

Ebenezer's younger brother, Ralph, was very well known as a writer of gospel sonnets. Although not as widely followed as his brother, some felt Ralph was an even more advanced biblical scholar. In any event, he remained a faithful and respected minister into his old age.

At least one of Ralph Erskine's published sermons dealt with the matters of faith and assurance. He said Christ was the grounds of a secure faith present in every believer:

A Life hid with Christ in God, is a Life of such perfect *Security* and *Stability* as Christ lives, for he lives in God, and their Life is hid with Christ there, where it cannot but be safe and secure, as sure as the very Life of God.⁶⁴

Union with Christ secures the Believer's Life in Christ, for it flows from a twofold Gift of God, namely, his giving them to Christ from Eternity, and his giving Christ to them in Time. God's giving them Christ in the Covenant Transaction before Time, *John* xvii. 6. This is the Ground of their *federal Union* with him; and then his giving Christ to them in the Dispensation of that

⁶³ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁴ Ralph Erskine. *The Best Security for the Best Life: or, a Life hid with Christ in God* (Edinburgh, 1750), 21.

Covenant of Grace in Time, and making them to receive him, *John* vi. 44, 45.
This is the Ground of their *actual Union* with him.⁶⁵

Ralph Erskine, like Ebenezer and his other Marrow Brethren, realized that believers would not always experience this perfect security:

Many Times Believers have Doubts and Fears about their own State, because their Life is so hid that it doth not always appear to themselves. Their Life is a Life of Faith, not of Sense or Sight, and it is the Faith of Things not seen. Herein God designs the Glory of his invisible Perfections, his Faithfulness and Truth particularly, when we trust in him for more than we see.⁶⁶

Finally, Ralph Erskine recognized the value of sanctification and outward means in one's faith as long as these are not confused with the act of justification which is grounded in Christ alone:

The Life the Believer in Christ has, is a Life of Grace or Sanctification, which, though it be inseparable from the Life of Justification; yet it is vastly distinct and different from it.⁶⁷

The true Believer values outward Means, indeed, as the Channel of Life, but he sees this is not the Water of Life; therefore he cannot be satisfied without Union to Christ; for his Life is hid with Christ.⁶⁸

Thomas Boston

Interestingly, Thomas Boston, the most famous of the Marrow Brethren, first believed in Christ under the preaching of Henry Erskine, father of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine. Boston was a conscientious theological student, a dedicated lifelong minister, and the most prolific writer of those who continued to defend the Marrow doctrine after the controversy.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

Maybe because he was the one who had discovered and had been so influenced by the book at a young age, “Boston’s early thought is in substantial harmony with his role in the Marrow Controversy and his later teaching.”⁶⁹

Before the book itself was ever an issue in Scotland, Boston was teaching the free offer of Christ and what he saw as the resulting certainty of faith:

The general offer of Christ in the gospel warrants each and every man to come to Christ, and not only to come, but to come with an assurance that God, who has promised to save all who come, will save him in particular. Later in the same context he deals with the question: ‘How shall I know that I have drawn near to God with a true heart?’, thus demonstrating that for him the assurance which is inherent in saving faith is not incompatible with, but complementary to, that which the Westminster Confession speaks.⁷⁰

Subsequent to the controversy, Boston would feel compelled to more fully develop these ideas in order to defend himself against the accusations of Hadow and others.

A brief review of the issues present in the Church of Scotland at the time of the controversy from Boston’s perspective provides context for the stand he took regarding the Auchterarder licensure demand and his simultaneous recommendation of the *Marrow*. The year in which he wrote the following personal memoirs is footnoted to illustrate the constant and varied pastoral and personal battles he faced before the controversy:

Meanwhile Satan raged in stirring up the sin of uncleanness; so that, by the spring 1709, besides several fornications, there were two adulteries in the parish discovered; and I had heavy work with both. These things often made me look, with a sorrowful heart, on the congregation, as in the case of the

⁶⁹ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 135.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

church of Corinth, burnt up with the fire of division, and drenched in fleshly abominations.⁷¹

This night I had one of the most doleful times I ever had in my life, by reason of the same trial aforesaid. The struggle with my own will was most dreadful, so that I was like to sink under it, and say, There is no hope, while it lay on me as a giant.⁷²

The last week I was at the synod; and seeing all things like to go wrong with the church, I had great desire to be kept straight in God's way. I was not so well provided for my work this day as ordinary, but it went rather better than ordinary with me. I was much affected to think how I would get silent Sabbaths spent, and what reflections such a case might produce.

I think I can say now, that the thing which was once so hard for me to submit unto, the Lord hath been pleased to make more easy and give me some victory over it now, more than these two months, "Blessed be the Lord, who teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to flight."

I proceeded on the subject of the nature and necessity of holiness.⁷³

The first of these times, the stream of influence ran, in wrestling with God for grace towards personal holiness; yesterday, in embracing personally the covenant, or covenanting with God; in the which the Lord was pleased so to blow upon me, that I think, in all my life, I never had more, if ever so much, clear and distinct uptakings of the gospel offer, solid, distinct, and hearty acceptance of it, and confidence in managing it.⁷⁴

Meanwhile scandalous outbreakings in the parish, have abounded more since this business commenced, than for a good while before.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Thomas Boston. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. Edited by Samuel M'Millan (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 12:203. year 1709.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 12:222. year 1710.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12:224. year 1710.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12:288. year 1717.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12:289. year 1717.

Having read these accounts and having considered his preoccupation with personal holiness, it seems most odd that anyone would have prejudged any of Boston's comments or positions as Antinomian.

Boston's memoirs also include voluminous entries concerning the Marrow Controversy itself. For example, see the following:

And here, namely, in the condemnation of that proposition, was the beginning of the torrent, that for several years after ran, in the public actings of this church, against the doctrine of grace, under the name of Antinomianism; and is unto this day overflowing. Meanwhile, at the same time sitting in the assembly house, and conversing with Mr. John Drummond, minister of Crief, one of the brethren of that presbytery above mentioned, I happened to give him my sense of the gospel-offer; Isa. 1v. 1; Matth. xi. 28 with the reason thereof; and withal to tell him of the Marrow of Modern Divinity.⁷⁶

But the publishing of that then obscure book, at that time, having been so remarkable in its consequences, and this to the signal advantage of the truth of the gospel in this church, I could not but rejoice from my heart in that relation, reckoning it a great honour the Lord had put upon me, that by such a beautiful step of providence I had been made the remote occasion thereof.⁷⁷

The act of Assembly condemning the Marrow was, by concert, brought before our presbytery, Mr. George Byres, minister of Lessudden, a judicious, plain good man, being, as I remember, employed to move it. And it was by our Presbytery laid before the October Synod, that they might consider of it. It was put on me to show what was offensive therein, to which was joined also what was offensive in their act for preaching catechetical doctrine.⁷⁸

Now after some time I received from Mr. Ralph Erskine, minister of Dunfermline, and son to the worthy Henry Erskine above-mentioned, an answer to the letter aforesaid sent to Mr. James Hog, and then a return from

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12:291. year 1717.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12:292. year 1717.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 12:322. year 1720.

Mr. Hog himself, bearing their readiness to concur in seeking redress of the injury done to truth by the act of Assembly foresaid.⁷⁹

The first night of the Assembly the meeting was in the same house again, accordingly, and Providence so ordering that I was chosen member of that Assembly, I met with them. Mr. James Hog, whose absence hitherto had been judged expedient, in regard of his prefacing the Marrow, did join us. Moreover, there came into us a goodly company of brethren, with whose appearance I was much encouraged. But, behold, they turned our meeting, designed for prayer, into a meeting for disputing, jangling, and breaking our measures.⁸⁰

On Wednesday we expected, as we had done the day before, that our representation would have come before them; but behold, that day the assembly, in regard of the commissioner's indisposition was dissolved, after they had referred our representation, without reading it, to the commission. Howbeit, the commissioner was present in the Assembly both that day and the preceding, and without his presence they did no business. No man spoke a word against the dissolution; but all was carried on in profound peace. Thus our brethren who reserved their appearing for truth to their management in the Assembly, and would not join us in the representation, had all occasion of saying one word in the Assembly about it cut off.⁸¹

Mr. Hog offered to answer in the time, but a hearing was refused; so they went on without interruption. Thus the cause and we were run down, and the audience impressed, which seemed to be the design of this management. After this we were allowed to speak, before we should remove; and the Moderator desired me to speak; which, lifting up my heart to the Lord, I did for a little; but was quickly answered.⁸²

On the 10th of July, a motion was so made to me by my two friends to write notes on the Marrow, that I was obliged seriously to think of it.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12:324. year 1721.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 12:326. year 1721.

⁸¹ Ibid., 12:327. year 1721.

⁸² Ibid., 12:328. year 1721.

⁸³ Ibid., 12:330. year 1721.

Thus ended that weighty affair, by means whereof I received another sensible increase of light into the doctrine of grace; especially as to the gift and grant made of Christ unto sinners of mankind, and as to the nature of faith. . . . In the beginning of the month last mentioned, I finished the notes on the “Marrow of Modern Divinity;” which afterwards in the year 1726 were printed with the “Marrow” itself.⁸⁴

These recollections of Thomas Boston are representative of the frustrations of all the Brethren with the Assembly proceedings.

Finally, a few memoirs from Boston’s later years of life are provided. His approach to his own personal fears and doubts mirror the doctrines of faith he had developed to teach others:

I have often aimed at embracing the everlasting covenant held forth in the gospel, and saw my welcome thereto; was willing also to betake myself to it, with my whole heart and often essayed it. My defect still lay in the want of that confidence of faith that the covenant should be made forthcoming to me, according to my needs, for time and eternity; fear still prevailing, and keeping me as it were standing on loose ground. But on March 21, betwixt two and four o’clock in the morning, on my bed of affliction, it pleased the Lord to stir me up, and help me to essay it again, and to get that gap in some measure filled up.⁸⁵

I have measure of confidence, that I will get complete life and salvation; but that confidence is not in the flesh; for, God knows I am heartily out with myself, with respect to all the periods of my life, any one of which, I see, would undoubtedly ruin me, and that most justly. So I am razed from off my own bottom, and have no confidence of acceptance with God, but in Christ crucified, who loved me, and gave himself for me.⁸⁶

That in justifying faith, there is a real persuasion in the heart of the sinner, that Christ is his; and that he shall have life and salvation by him, and whatever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for him in particular; which persuasion is founded (not upon the uptaking of one’s real

⁸⁴ Ibid., 12:334. year 1722.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 12:370. year 1729.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 12:399. year 1729.

regeneration, as the reflex assurance is, but) upon the promise of Christ in the gospel, made to sinners of Adam's family as such; and so there is resting upon him alone, for the whole of salvation.⁸⁷

So what was this doctrine of faith that Thomas Boston developed in response to the Marrow Controversy charges and turned to for personal comfort in his own last days? Boston answered this question in his notes to the *Marrow*. He, like so many others, saw a dichotomy with the “assurance of Christ's righteousness [as] a direct act of faith, apprehending imputed righteousness, [versus assurance as] evidence of our justification, . . . the reflex light, . . . [the former] by which we are justified . . . [and the latter] by which we know that we are justified.”⁸⁸ He further explains:

To those who object that this makes assurance to be of the essence of faith, he replies that the author of the *Marrow* did not make assurance as “in our Days” commonly understood to be the essence of faith. For: 1.) he does not teach here the assurance by which believers are “certainly assured that they are in the State of Grace,” which assurance is founded on evidences. Rather, he teaches an assurance in the direct act of faith, which is “a fiducial appropriating Persuasion.” 2.) he does not make this assurance or persuasion to be full, or to exclude doubting. He only speaks of the truth or reality of the persuasion, not the degree of it. One may have this assurance or persuasion and yet not know assuredly that he has it.⁸⁹

Explaining how his doctrine did not contradict the Westminster Confession, Boston stated that while “it is a necessary duty to seek true assurance . . . there may be true faith . . . without this assurance.”⁹⁰ In this context, he was speaking of the assurance founded on

⁸⁷ Ibid., 12:455. year 1729.

⁸⁸ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 235.

⁸⁹ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 443.

⁹⁰ Thomas Boston. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. Edited by Samuel M'Millan (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 7:120.

evidence, the reflex light. Doubts may come as “saints may lose the evidence of grace, so that they cannot discern it in themselves.”⁹¹ When this happens he says, “Stir up yourselves then to seek it. Be frequent in self-examination, cry to the Lord for the witness of his spirit. Believe the word, and be habitually tender in your walk.”⁹² We can rest in the fact that “saints never lose grace totally. Their lamp may burn dim, but it is never quite put out.”⁹³ These words were both taught and lived by Thomas Boston until his life on this earth was ended.

John Brown of Haddington

This recap of the words of the Marrow Brethren will conclude with excerpts from a summary of their response to the 1720 and 1722 General Assemblies written by John Brown of Haddington. Although still a child at the time of the controversy, Brown was deeply influenced by the Brethren’s later teaching. He was a key developer of the Secession Church theology and laid the foundation for many Free Church of Scotland doctrines. His favor toward the Brethren was clear from the summary’s introduction:

While the Church of Scotland was clear and exact in her standards, and many of her preachers truly evangelical, a flood of legal doctrine filled many pulpits about the time of the Revolution.

The Arminian errors of Professor Simpson were also prevalent after this time; but the Assembly used him with great tenderness. However, they were far from being equally kind to such as earnestly endeavoured a clear illustration of the doctrines of God’s free grace reigning through the righteousness of Christ. . . . In order to explain these expressions, Messrs. James Hog, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskines, Gabriel Watson, and seven others, remonstrated to the next Assembly against these decisions

⁹¹ Ibid., 2:33.

⁹² Ibid., 2:19.

⁹³ Ibid., 2:33.

as injurious to the doctrine of God's grace. And in their answers to the Commission's Twelve Queries, they illustrated these doctrines with no small clearness and evidence.⁹⁴

It is clear in Brown's summary that the dichotomy of faith, which would be further developed in the Marrow Brethren's later works, was the foundation of their defense to the charge that their doctrine of assurance was contrary to Westminster. There are "two kinds of assurance: the assurance of faith has its object and foundation without man, but that of sense has them within him."⁹⁵ The two give "evidence to things not seen [and] evidence of things seen and felt"⁹⁶ respectively. The Brethren, quoted by Brown, emphatically stated that of the "full persuasion and assurance, by reflection [of sense], . . . we are far from holding to be of the essence of faith."⁹⁷ However, the assurance of faith "we take to be the very same with what our Confession and Catechisms call accepting, receiving, and resting on Christ offered in the gospel for salvation."⁹⁸ The Brethren were "fully satisfied this is what our fathers and the body of Protestant divines, speaking with the Scriptures"⁹⁹ had intended to teach.

⁹⁴ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 344-345.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 362.

The dichotomy seen in the works of Boston and Ebenezer Erskine, assurance in the essence of faith coexisting with the believer's experience of doubt, is described in detail by

Brown:

There are two things further, concerning this persuasion of faith, that would be adverted to: one is not axiomatical, but real: that is, the sinner has not always, at his first closing with Christ, nor afterwards, such a clear, steady, and full persuasion that Christ is his, that his sins are forgiven, and that he eventually shall be saved, as that he dare profess the same to others, or even positively assert it within himself; yet, upon the first saving manifestation of Christ to him, such a persuasion and humble confidence is begotten, as is real and relieving, and particular as to himself and his own salvation, and which works a proportionable hope as to the issue; though, through the humbling impressions he has of himself and his own guilt at the time, the awe of God's majesty, justice, and holiness on his spirit, and his indistinct knowledge of the doctrine of the gospel, with the grounds and warrants of believing therein contained, he fears to express it directly and particularly of himself. The other is, that whatever is said of the habit, actings, strength, weakness, and intermittings of the exercise of saving faith, the same is to be said of this persuasion in all points. From all which it is evident, the doubts, fears, and darkness, so frequently to be found in true believers, can very well consist with this persuasion in the same subject; for though these may be, and often are in the believer, yet they are not of his faith, which in its nature and exercise is as opposite to them as light is to darkness, the flesh to the Spirit; which though they be in the same subject, yet are contrary the one to the other, Gal v. 17. And, therefore, faith wrestles against them, though with various success, it being sometimes so far overcome and brought under by the main force and much superior strength of prevailing unbelief, that it cannot be discerned more than the fire is when covered with ashes, or the sun when wrapt up in thick clouds. The confidence and persuasion of faith being in many, at first especially, but as the grain of mustard-seed cast into the ground, or like a spark amidst the troubled sea of all manner of corruption and lust where the rolling waves of unbelieving doubts and fears, hellish temptations and suggestions, and the like, moving on the face of that depth, are every now and then going over it; and were there not a divine hand and care engaged for its preservation, would effectually extinguish and bury it. What wonder that in such a case it many times cannot be discerned? yet will it still hold so much of the exercise of justifying faith, so much persuasion. Yea, not only may a believer have this persuasion and not know it for the time, (as say Collius, Roberts, Amesius, and others, who distinguish the persuasion from the sense of it,) but he, being under the power of temptation and confusion of mind,

may resolutely deny he has any such persuasion or conscience; while it is evident to others at the same time, by its effects, that he really has it.¹⁰⁰

Answering the Assembly's Antinomian fears, the Brethren stated, "We cordially and sincerely own a holy life, or good works, necessary as an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, and in obedience to his command, . . . necessary for evidencing and confirming our faith, good works being the breath, the native offspring and issue of it."¹⁰¹ However, they wanted to make certain "we dare not say a holy life is necessary in order to the obtaining of eternal happiness, . . . the more gross sense of the words . . . [having] at least an appearance of evil, . . . towards seeking salvation, not by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, but by works."¹⁰²

Finally, as to this matter, the Brethren pleaded, as did their opposers, that the motivation for their theological fervor was doctrinal purity and preservation of gospel truth:

In which apprehension we are the more confirmed, that at this day the doctrine of Christ, and his free grace, both as to the purity and efficacy of the same, seems to be much on the wane, and Popery, with other dangerous errors and heresies destructive of it, on the waxing; which certainly calls aloud to the churches of Christ, and to his ministers in particular, for the more zeal, watchfulness, and caution, with reference to the interests of truth.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 364-365.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 356.

¹⁰² Ibid., 357.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 357.

CHAPTER 5

SYSTEMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF ASSURANCE

Systematic Theology of Assurance

Berkhof as Representative of Reformed Theology

As evidenced by the preceding history of the development of Reformed theology and the account of the Marrow Controversy, the exact delineation of a particular orthodox doctrine can be much disputed. For the purpose of this thesis and by the author's preference, Louis Berkhof's position, and the works of Kuyper, Bavink, and Vos on which he builds, will represent the traditional orthodox Reformed doctrine of faith and assurance. He frames the issue for us as follows:

Now the question with which we are concerned in this chapter is not, whether a real and living faith involves the conviction that the doctrine of salvation, revealed in the Bible, and all the blessed promises of the Gospel are true. There is no difference of opinion on this point. The question is rather, whether saving faith necessarily includes an element of that subjective personal assurance which engenders a feeling of security and fills the heart with confidence for the future.¹

Berkhof begins his answer to this question by saying "it is abundantly evident from Scripture that faith includes something more than an intellectual conviction, . . . saving faith also contains an element of trust."² Hebrews 11:1 states that "faith is being sure of what we

¹ Louis Berkhof. *The Assurance of Faith, The Firm Foundation of Christian Hope* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

hope for and certain of what we do not see.” (NIV) Then clearly, a “feeling of personal security and safety”³ is implied. “Thus the direct act of faith undoubtedly involves an element of assurance.”⁴

Faith is further defined by Berkhof as including three elements. First, there is “an intellectual element, . . . knowledge . . . in which man accepts whatsoever God says in His Word, and . . . nothing can be more certain.”⁵ Second, one sees in Scripture “an emotional element . . . when one embraces Christ [as] . . . the object of faith [and] feels that it meets an important need in his life.”⁶ Finally comes “the crowning element of faith, . . . a volitional element, . . . matter of the will, . . . an act of the soul going towards its object.”⁷ Faith, with these three elements,

naturally carries with it a certain feeling of safety and security, of gratitude and joy. Faith, which is in itself certainty, tends to awaken a sense of security, and a feeling of assurance in the soul. In the majority of cases this is at first more implicit and hardly penetrates into the sphere of conscious thought; it is something vaguely felt rather than clearly perceived. But in the measure in which faith grows and the activities of faith increase, the consciousness of the security and safety which it brings also becomes greater.⁸

The reference to faith growing leads to another key point. “Scripture clearly teaches us that there are different degrees in faith.”⁹ Romans 12:6 speaks of our “proportion” of

³ Ibid., 39.

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Louis Berkhof. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 503-504.

⁶ Ibid., 504.

⁷ Ibid., 505.

⁸ Ibid., 505.

⁹ Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith*, 72.

faith, II Corinthians 10:15 predicts our faith will “grow,” and II Thessalonians 1:3 is thankful it is “growing more and more.” The apostles request of Jesus, in Luke 17:5, “Increase our faith!”(NIV)

The change in faith’s strength is not always positive. In fact, at times a believer’s faith can be diminished to the point of doubting. “Both Scripture and experience teach [this].”¹⁰“A believer may go without the full assurance of faith for a long time.”¹¹ David cries out in Psalm 31, “I am cut off from your sight,” and in Psalm 42, “My soul is downcast; why have you forgotten me?” In Psalm 77 he faces his lament that “my soul refused to be comforted [by saying,] I will remember your miracles, meditate on all your works.” (NIV)

Later in Scripture believers are told in II Corinthians 13:5 to “examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith,” and in II Peter 1:10 to “make your calling and election sure.” Therefore, good works can combat doubts, being “divinely wrought evidences of a faith that is itself a gift of God.”¹² In addition, I John 3:19,20 says that “Whenever our hearts condemn us, . . . we set our hearts at rest in his presence [and] know we belong to the truth”(NIV) both by reflecting on the miracles of God and his good works done through us:

The opposite of assurance is doubt, and the lack of assurance means the presence of doubt. It is necessary to remember, however, that doubt is not always of the same kind. There may be doubts respecting the objective truths of the Gospel, but also doubts respecting one’s spiritual state. The former are always signs of unbelief, the latter, however deplorable and even culpable they may be, do not necessarily spring from unbelief. They may be merely the result of ignorance.

¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹ Ibid., 74.

¹² Ibid., 68.

In connection with the fact that believers are often weak in faith and distracted by doubts, and that these doubts may in some cases argue the lack of faith, the Bible urges them to examine themselves closely and exhorts them to cultivate assurance.¹³

How can doubt and assurance coexist? Berkhof says,

the direct act of faith undoubtedly involves an element of assurance. This assurance may be implicit rather than explicit in the first act of faith, may not at once reach the level of clear consciousness, and may for a long time be a matter of instinctive feeling rather than of positive knowledge; yet it is destined to grow, and its growth will be commensurate with the measure of faith. The more faith shines in its splendor, the more radiant will be the light it reflects upon itself. He who really believes with a true and living faith will also know that he believes, and will be ready to affirm that he believes, even though he should at times be prompted to add the prayer, “help thou my unbelief.” This does not mean, however, that he will always be clearly aware of the security, the safety, and the joy that is involved in this assurance.¹⁴

Given this description, is assurance, for Berkhof, of the essence of faith? Scripture drives his answer to be a qualified “yes”, qualified by a dichotomy not unlike those before him:

But though there is an assurance that is of the essence of faith, it cannot be said that all assurance of salvation is necessarily involved in faith.¹⁵

Thus the Reformers were led into a discussion of the nature and the grounds of Christian certitude. They claimed that the assurance possible was of the highest and most perfect description, a certainty like that with which men believe the plainly revealed truths of Scripture; that it was necessarily involved in justifying faith, was its distinguishing characteristic, and in fact belonged to its very essence.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

He [Calvin] evidently intends to teach that, though faith contains and always retains the element of assurance, the believer does not always so exercise faith that he is constantly free from doubts and perplexities. In other words, that the sense, the feeling of assurance, increases and decreases with the rise and decline of faith.¹⁷

Berkhof knew this answer gave rise to conflict with the strict interpreters of the Westminster Confession. He even saw himself in a position similar to that of the Marrow Brethren in this regard:

The Westminster Confession apparently sounds a different note, when it says: “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things that are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto.” Presbyterian divines generally interpret this to mean that, though faith carries with it a certainty respecting the truth of the promises of salvation in Christ, it does not include what is usually called “the assurance of salvation,” or “the assurance of hope,” i.e. the personal assurance of being in a state of grace, of having a saving interest in Jesus Christ, and of being an heir of everlasting life. But it is possible to put a different interpretation on the words of the Confession, as was done by the Marrow-men, who were accused in 1720 of teaching contrary to the doctrine of the Confession that assurance is of the essence of faith. It should be noted that the Confession speaks of a complex assurance, resting in part on the promises of God, and in part on the evidence of the inward graces wrought in the life of believers and the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It calls this the “infallible (full) assurance of faith,” and asserts that this is not necessarily enjoyed by believers from the very moment that they accept Christ by faith. So understood the teaching of the Confession does not materially differ from that of the Reformers and of the other great Protestant Confessions, though there is undoubtedly a difference of emphasis.¹⁸

Berkhof concludes that “true faith, as including trust, carries with it a sense of security, which may vary in degree. There is also an assurance of faith, however, that is the

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

fruit of reflection.”¹⁹ This dichotomy is seen as reconciling the Reformers to Westminster and, more importantly, as the balanced teaching of God’s Word.

Acknowledgement of Dissenting Opinions

Within the Christian faith, broadly defined, the Roman Catholic Church holds the most extreme dissenting opinion versus the traditional Reformed doctrine of assurance. Rome “regards personal assurance as undesirable.”²⁰ With words in some ways similar to those of the Marrow opposition, Rome believes assurance can lead to a casual attitude toward holiness. Doubts, on the other hand, can be “wholesome and beneficial for the Christian, . . . and serve as a . . . restraint on the evil passions”²¹ that believers battle.

Even among churches who, contrary to Rome, thought assurance was desired and possible, it was often “regarded as a high and rare privilege.”²² Some sects came to believe it was “obtained only in a special way.”²³ Many believed full assurance was beyond the reach of the common believer.

“Methodism reacted against the prevailing spiritual pessimism of the age [18th Century] . . . , promoting a cheerful and joyous Christian life.”²⁴ Methodists teach the full benefit of salvation is “contracted in a single moment [and] immediately carries with it a full

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 509.

²⁰ Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

assurance.”²⁵ However, the Methodist assurance can be unstable, “an assurance of being in a present state of grace,”²⁶ with no guarantee of final salvation.

As should be abundantly clear from the recounting of the Marrow debate, there are different views of this doctrine among Reformed churches as well. Many would prefer the strict interpretation of Westminster as denying any element of assurance as a part of faith itself. For those holding this “strict Westminster” position, Hebrews 11:1 is the most difficult biblical passage to explain. Some simply state that the assurance and certainty spoken of there is a “result” of faith. This interpretation is dismissed by most theologians as poor exegesis since the verse appears to be a straightforward definition of faith itself.

A much tougher exegetical question is whether the translation of the original Greek version of Hebrews 11:1 should be “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” or alternatively “faith is the substance of things hoped for”:

The difference between these translations arises from understanding the original Greek word *hypostasis* subjectively or objectively. If I am sure of something, I have certainty in my heart. This is a subjective knowledge because it is within me. Assurance, then, is a subjective quality. By contrast, the word substance is objective because it refers to something that is not part of me. Rather, substance is something on which I can rely. As one translation has it, “Faith is the title-deed of things hoped for.” That, in fact, is objective.

To come to a clear cut choice in the matter is not easy, for the one translation does not rule out the other. The translation *confidence* or *assurance* has gained prominence, perhaps because 3:14 also has the same word: “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 31.

²⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁷ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 310-311.

Even if this phrase in Hebrews 11:1 is translated as “substance” and taken in the objective sense, one must still deal with the words that follow:

Although a brief statement on faith consists of only two phrases, they are perfectly balanced. Note the structure:

	Faith	
	is	
being sure of		certain of
what we hope for		what we do not see

In short, assurance is balanced by certainty. These two nouns are in this text synonymous. Certainty, then, means “inner conviction.” The believer is convinced that the things he is unable to see are real. Not every conviction, however, is equal to faith. Conviction is the equivalent of faith when certainty prevails, even though the evidence is lacking. The things we do not see are those that pertain to the future, that in time will become the present. Even things of the present, and certainly those of the past, that are beyond our reach belong to the category of “what we do not see.” Comments B.F. Westcott, “Hope includes that which is internal as well as that which is external.” Hope centers in the mind and spirit of man; sight relates to one of his senses (Roman. 8:24-25).

Faith, therefore, radiates from man’s inner being where hope resides to riches that are beyond his purview. Faith demonstrates itself in confident assurance and convincing certainty.²⁸

It seems to be extremely difficult to reconcile the “strict Westminster” interpretation with these words, and in fact, with any straightforward reading of Hebrews 11:1. Assurance and certainty, in some form, appear to be a part of faith’s definition.

Finally, at the opposite end of the extreme versions of this doctrine from Roman Catholicism lies what some have called the “easy assurance” of Antinomianism. Such a position might proclaim, “Once I have believed, my salvation can never be doubted regardless of my behavior.” In some cases, as will be shown in the PRC example

²⁸ Ibid., 311.

subsequently, faith and assurance are almost considered synonymous, and any doubt is seen as denying the presence of faith completely. As has been previously stated, without the biblical dichotomy present in some form, the definition of faith and assurance seemed destined to drift toward one extreme or the other.

Biblical Theology of Assurance

As God unfolds the story of redemption throughout biblical history, the doctrine of assurance, like so many other ideas in Scripture, is progressively revealed. From the moment God allowed Adam to overhear His sovereign proclamation of defeat spoken to the serpent in Genesis 3:15, the people of God had a clear and absolute promise of which they could be sure. Our “confidence in God’s presence and work in redemptive history is of an assuring nature.”²⁹

The tracing of the biblical development of assurance is easier than that of any other doctrine because Hebrews 11 actually outlines the historical record of those whose faith was, as verse one states, “sure and certain” for us. Abel’s faith commended him as righteous. Enoch pleased God with a faith that believed. Noah became an heir through a faith in things not seen. Abraham considered God, who had made promises to him, to be faithful. Hebrews 11:13 confirms “all these people were still living by faith when they died.” (NIV)

By faith, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph acted toward the future as God directed. Moses looked ahead to his reward and, according to Hebrews 11:27, saw “him who is invisible.”

²⁹ Joel R. Beeke. *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1999), 272.

Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel were all commended for their faith. (NIV)

As great as the promises and assured faith received by these Old Testament saints were, “God had planned something [even] better for us” according to Hebrews 11:40. Faith, with the coming of Christ, “becomes an assurance of present salvation. The Synoptic Gospels and Acts present faith as an assuring trust in the Messiah who grants forgiveness of sins.”³⁰ From the moment He is named by God in Matthew 1:21, “because he will save his people from their sins,” Jesus became the ground of certain and present assurance. Paul and Silas proclaimed this certainty to the jailor in Acts 16:31. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” (NIV)

“The Gospel and Epistles of John point to the full communion with Christ that results from the fiducial nature of saving faith.”³¹ After the feeding of the five thousand, in John 6:37, Jesus speaks to “assure those who believe in Jesus that they will not fail to be eternally saved.”³² “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whosoever comes to me I will never drive away.” Later in I John 5:2, John explains we can increase our awareness of our sure salvation “by loving God and carrying out his commandments.” (NIV)

“James views faith as antithetical to doubt.”³³ When a believer goes to God for wisdom and reassurance in times of trial, James 1:6 says “he must believe and not doubt.”

³⁰ Ibid., 272.

³¹ Ibid., 272.

³² Robert A. Peterson, “Christian assurance: its possibility and foundations,” *Presbyterian* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 15.

³³ Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 272.

Probably, as much as any writer of Scripture, James points us toward good works as an evidence of our faith. “I will show you my faith by what I do,” declares James 2:18. (NIV)

“Peter’s epistles show faith as trustful hope which ushers in love and joy.”³⁴ He says, in I Peter 1, we have a “living hope, . . . an inheritance that can never perish, [to] be proved genuine.” This hope should result in holiness and, as I Peter 1:18 says, in an eagerness “to make our calling and election sure.” (NIV)

“In the Pauline epistles, faith is assured hope based upon divine promises that are completed in Christ.”³⁵ Romans 8:14-16 declares that “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God,” and that the Holy Spirit testifies the certainty of this to the believer’s spirit. Romans 5:5 boldly declares, “Hope does not disappoint us.” Having been justified, according to Romans 5:9, “How much more shall we be saved . . . !” All of redemptive history as revealed in God’s Word allows us to stand with Paul in 1 Timothy 1:12 and say, “I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” (NIV)

So, biblical theology reinforces the conclusions of systematic theology presented earlier. Scripture is a “progressive history of redemptive revelation, . . . [demonstrating the] relationship of faith and assurance.”³⁶ The Old Testament saints testify that “faith relies upon the promises of the covenant God. [Their] faith is commended for its assured trust.”³⁷ The

³⁴ Ibid., 272.

³⁵ Ibid., 272.

³⁶ Ibid., 272.

³⁷ Ibid., 272.

coming of Christ to earth, along with the resulting benefits of the New Covenant which are “based upon Christ’s death and resurrection and the Spirit’s indwelling, indicates that assurance must be a constitutive element of saving faith.”³⁸ Throughout Scripture, this assurance, “whatever form it takes in different stages of redemptive revelation, appears to coalesce with faith.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 272.

³⁹ Ibid., 272.

“The Dichotomy of Faith,” How Assurance and Faith Have Been Defined from the Reformation Until Today

John Calvin	Confessions, Catechisms, and Canons				“The Marrow” and the Marrow Brethren				Subsequent Writers				
	Heidelberg	Dort	Westminster	E.F. from The Marrow of Modern Divinity		Thomas Boston	Ebenezer Erskine	Bavinck	Beke		Zachman	Peterson	
A firm and certain knowledge	A certain knowledge that God's Word is true	Assured confidence of the soul from God's promises	Ever present seed of God, life in faith	Grounded faith in the promises of God	Assurance of faith, the root	Objective assurance of Christ's righteousness	Certainty of faith	The assurance that is implicit in faith	Definition of faith or seed of faith, or faith's being	Knowing what God has done for us	Assurance related to preservation		Assurance related to perseverance
Certainty tinged with doubt, assurance assailed by some anxiety	A hearty trust which the Holy Spirit works as one struggles with weakness	Full assurance struggling against doubt and temptation	Certain and full assurance which may be shaken	Believing that you have believed	Assurance of sense, the fruit	Subjective assurance by a reflex act	Certainty of sense or reflection	The assurance which becomes explicit in consciousness	Reality of faith's well-being	Knowing what God has done in us	Assurance related to perseverance		

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY OF ASSURANCE VIEWS AND CONCLUSION

Calvin's View Versus Westminster

As a theologian, John Calvin, as has been shown, recognized in Scripture a sure witness providing for believers a certainty which is of the nature of faith. This “assurance” is firm and certain just as are the promises of God upon which it is founded. As a pastor, Calvin ministered to true believers who struggled with doubts about their belief. He called this the believer’s imperfection of faith which keeps many from experiencing a perfect and constant assurance. This “assurance” is not of the essence of faith as the lack of it or doubt over it often coexists with true belief. Clearly, because Calvin’s primary theological battle concerning this issue was against Rome’s view that assurance was not possible or even profitable for most men, his most systematic writings emphasized the former, the “assurance” that is of the essence of faith.

It is easy to identify the Westminster “assurance” most analogous to Calvin’s perfect assurance, that which is not constantly experienced by all believers. Chapter 18.3 of the Confession clearly states that “infallible assurance” does not belong to the essence of faith. Admittedly, the language of Westminster that aligns with Calvin’s other “assurance,” a firm and certain belief in God’s promises which is part of the very nature of faith, is not as easily identified. However, the Confession’s chapter 18.4 does speak of the seed of God and the life of faith which is guaranteed to be always present in the true believer. This “assurance,”

as most Reformed scholars through the centuries have thus interpreted these words to represent, allows both Calvin's writings and the Westminster Confession to be accepted as consistent with Reformed orthodoxy:

It is certainly quite wrong to suggest that Westminster Calvinism was hostile to the idea of faith as assurance. The misconception arose only because scholars did not pay careful attention to the language of the Confession. The divines did not say that assurance did not belong to the essence of faith. What they said was that it did not so belong "but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it." . . . This allows that not all believers enjoy an equal assurance of salvation, that not all have it from the beginning and that not all have it all the time. But it also asserts that in some sense assurance is of the essence of faith.¹

Several Westminster divines wrote about this subject in the years shortly before and after the drafting of the Confession. It is obvious from the following excerpts that at least some of them offered this "consistent with Calvin" interpretation from the Confession's earliest days. William Gouge calls faith a full persuasion,

even though it may be mixed with doubting. He gives several reasons for this. A definition should be according to the essential nature of the thing defined and not according to the degree in which it is found in any individual. Doubting is a defect in faith and not of its nature and essence. Therefore faith should be defined in terms of assurance and not doubt. He recognizes that various degrees of assurance will be found in believers according to their measure of faith, but asserts that a definition in terms of full persuasion will provoke men to seek assurance.²

Similarly, English Puritan, Francis Roberts, identifies what he calls the "lowest step" of assurance as,

¹ Donald Macleod. "Faith as Assurance." *The Monthly Record* (May 1988): 99.

² David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 13.

a certainty of Adherence and Application; when we certainly apply and adhere to the promise, and to Christ therein . . . casting our selves upon him for salvation. This is so of the nature of faith, that faith cannot be without it in the weakest believer. Every true believer hath this assurance.³

Alexander Comrie, a leader of the Dutch Second Reformation, adds,

that both positions contained salvageable elements which could be combined in a right understanding of Calvin. Like Calvin, Comrie maintained that assurance certainly belongs to the essence of faith, but also that the faith of Christians did not always actively confirm their personal salvation in Christ.”⁴

The Marrow Brethren View

Some of the Marrow Brethren went to great lengths to formally explain how Calvin’s position, which they held themselves and believed to be reflected in the *Marrow*, was indeed consistent with Westminster. If Calvin’s vague dichotomy emphasized the “assurance” that was of the essence of faith and Westminster’s explanation stressed the infallible “assurance” which is not, then the Marrow Brethren sought to clearly define both. In the Brethren’s definition, assurance of faith, the root, is faith’s being and clearly of its essence. Assurance of sense, the fruit or faith’s well-being, is contrastingly not always present with faith and thus not of its essence. The Marrow Brethren considered this dichotomy to have brought Calvin, the *Marrow*, and Westminster into harmony, both with each other and with Scripture. “They strenuously maintained that the idea that assurance was of the essence of faith was fully

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Joel R. Beeke. “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists.” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 5, no 1 (Spring 1994): 62

compatible with Calvinism and entirely consistent with the teaching of the Westminster Confession.”⁵

Unfortunately, the General Assemblies of 1720 and 1722, so fearful of Antinomian influence, could not objectively consider the Marrow Brethren explanation. Truly convinced that the Church of Scotland’s tendencies toward legalistic doctrines were a necessary development of Reformed Theology given the Antinomian threat, the *Marrow* teaching did appear as heresy to the Assembly:

Equating this development with the thought of the Westminster Assembly, which did not comment on most of the issues involved in the Controversy, either deliberately allowing both opinions to be held by the orthodox or not speaking to the particular point at issue because in the 1640’s the question had not yet arisen, the General Assembly’s interpretation of the Confession and Catechisms was as a result more narrow and exclusive than the Westminster Divines had intended.⁶

Reformed theologians from many camps subsequently have been able to understand and accept the Marrow Brethren position. The following A.A. Hodge commentary on Westminster’s 18.3 is a representative sample:

The phrase full or “infallible assurance,” in this chapter, does not relate to the certainty of our faith or trust as to the truth of the object upon which the faith rests -- that is, the divine promise of salvation is Christ -- but to the certainty of our hope or belief as to our own personal relation to Christ and eternal salvation. Hence it follows that while assurance, in some degree of it, does belong to the essence of all real faith in the sufficiency of Christ and the truth of the promises, it is not in any degree essential to a genuine faith that the believer should be persuaded of the truth of his own experience and the safety of his estate. Theologians consequently have distinguished between the assurance of faith (Heb. x. 22) -- that is, a strong faith as to the truth of Christ -- and the assurance of hope (Heb. vi. 11) -- that is, a certain persuasion that

⁵ Macleod, “Faith as Assurance,” 99.

⁶ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 490.

we are true believers, and therefore safe. This latter is also called the assurance of sense, because it rests upon the inward sense the soul has of the reality of its own spiritual experiences. The first is of the essence of faith, and terminates directly upon Christ and his promise; and hence is called the direct act of faith. The latter is not of the essence of faith, but is its fruit; and is called the reflex act of faith, because it is drawn as an inference from the experience of the graces of the Spirit which the soul discerns when it reflects upon its own consciousness.⁷

Hodge, along with Reformed leaders before and after him, helped harmonize the balanced dichotomy of Scripture itself concerning this doctrine. The Marrow Brethren believed they were doing the same in their day.

Conclusions

Lachman

It seems only fair to present the summary of David Lachman, whose detailed research of the Marrow Controversy seems to surpass all others, first among scholars' conclusions. As to the specific question of assurance and the accusation that the Marrow Brethren had denied their Confession, he states:

For each side has its measure of support. But, as has been indicated, the balance of support is more in favour of the doctrines of the *Marrow* than those of the Assembly. In regard to the doctrine of assurance, the *Marrow* taught the opinion of the Reformers and of the majority of orthodox divines of its own day. Later Reformed opinion, with a few exceptions, denied assurance to be of the essence of faith. The Westminster Confession can not be asserted with confidence to support either point of view.⁸

Lachman places his conclusion in favor of the Marrow Brethren within the context of Reformed history as follows:

⁷ A. A. Hodge. *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1869), 244.

⁸ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 486.

Some Reformed Divines tended to place greater emphasis on the grace of God and others exhibited greater concern with man's response. The former conceived of the Covenant of Grace as a Testament, consisting of God's promises of grace in Christ; the latter conceived of it as a Contract, with mutual obligations on both sides. The former offered Christ freely to all who will have him; the latter to those who are endowed with preparatory qualifications. The former tended to make assurance focus primarily on Christ and his work; the latter on signs and evidences, on the good works of the believer.⁹

Among the former were the bulk of Reformed Divines who wrote prior to 1640, the *Marrow*, a substantial number of the Reformed Divines who wrote in the latter half of the seventeenth century and the Marrow Brethren. The latter position was more the result of the mid-century reaction to Antinomianism, including not only the Baxterians and Neonomians, but also many of much greater orthodoxy.¹⁰

Given this historical context Lachman concludes:

A better case can be made for the Westminster Confession and Catechisms being in harmony with the former [Marrow Brethren] than with the latter. Both sides worked within the framework of Federal Theology. Some were more or less scholastic in their methodology, but this is true of some on both sides. Scholasticism is accidental to and not of the essence of either position. In this light the Marrow Controversy may be viewed as a conflict between the majority in the Church of Scotland who represented in some degree a late seventeenth century tendency toward Legalism, Neonomianism and even Arminianism in Reformed thought (which proved a seed bed for later Moderatism) and the minority who wished to return to what they considered, perhaps rightly, true Reformed Orthodoxy.¹¹

Lachman's ultimate verdict is that "the *Marrow* is not demonstrably in conflict with the Westminster Standards."¹²

⁹ Ibid., 490.

¹⁰ Ibid., 491.

¹¹ Ibid., 491.

¹² Ibid., 491.

Berkhof and Bavink

The phrase, “in harmony with the assertion of the Westminster Confession,”¹³ is Louis Berkhof’s corollary to Lachman’s conclusion. In the Berkhof list of “in harmony” teaching one finds the “note . . . sounded by the Marrow-men of Scotland.”¹⁴ Berkhof, as previously shown, saw in Scripture a dichotomy of faith and assurance not unlike that of the Marrow Brethren:

We should distinguish between the assurance that is implicit in faith and that which becomes explicit in consciousness. The former may be merely a general sense of security, of which the believer does not even give himself a clear account, and that does not yet give him courage to say that his sins are forgiven, or that he is a child of God and an heir of eternal life. At the same time it is of the utmost importance, because it is the germ of all further assurance. Quite different from this assurance that is involved even in the first act of faith, is the certitude that results from the continued and ever increasing activity of faith, that gradually rises into clear consciousness and is often called “the full assurance of faith.”¹⁵

Berkhof recognizes that a strict reader of Westminster will object to the implicit faith he describes as implying that assurance is indeed of the essence of faith:

The argument is that, if it were, believers would be sure of being in a state of grace, and consequently also of their future salvation, from the very moment of their accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour. But both Scripture and experience teach that in reality the situation is quite different.¹⁶

He responds that Calvin, Dort and Westminster agree on the presence of doubt. All of these recognized the believer’s struggle and the need for holiness as a means of seeking greater

¹³ Louis Berkhof. *The Assurance of Faith, The Firm Foundation of Christian Hope* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

assurance. While each accepts the two sides of the dichotomy as “both Scriptural and Reformed, they do not place the same estimate on it.”¹⁷

Like many others through Reformed history, Berkhof saw the differences in these positions as a matter of emphasis driven by the theological challenges and pastoral needs of their respective times. Under his umbrella of Reformed orthodoxy, Berkhof includes “the Marrow-men of Scotland, who were accused of teaching and did actually teach that assurance is of the essence of faith.”¹⁸

It is not necessary to present Herman Bavink’s systematic work on this subject since Berkhof’s is largely a further development of it. Clearly, from the inclusion of the names of the most prominent Marrow Brethren in the following list of doctrinally faithful theologians, Bavink recognizes their teachings as orthodox:

All the sects and religious movements that sprang up during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were more or less Arminianistic in character. This is true in regard to neonomianism, deism, Quakerism, methodism, etc. Only a few theologians stood firm; e.g., Comrie, Holtius, and Brahe in the Netherlands; Boston and the Erskines in Scotland; and especially Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758, in America.”¹⁹

Ferguson

Sinclair Ferguson’s defense of the Marrow Brethren and criticism of their opposers is much more impassioned than those we have heard thus far. He believes the *Marrow* was simply a surface issue with the heart of the gospel and truth of grace being the real battle. He views Hadow and the other opposition leaders as men with “an orthodox head and a legal

¹⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Herman Bavink. *The Doctrine of God* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1997), 367.

heart”²⁰ who used a prejudiced reading of Westminster to preach a salvation dependent upon both works and grace.

Ferguson finds it odd that the Marrow Brethren were accused of three specific heresies that, in actuality, they valiantly fought against. They were said, by some, to be Arminian when their message of “not free will, but free grace”²¹ could not have been more opposite. Some called them Amyraldian although they clearly “held to a doctrine of . . . particular atonement.”²² Finally, the Marrow Brethren were most often labeled as Antinomian even though “they tenaciously believed that the law of God remains as the rule of life for the believer.”²³

Just as Ferguson believes the accusers of the Marrow Brethren confused the fruit of grace with the qualifications for grace, resulting in salvation partially dependent on works, he feels their view of assurance does likewise. It makes all assurance dependent upon the believer’s effort. It leaves no room for what many of the Puritans would term immediate assurance. Ferguson stands with the Marrow Brethren’s view of Scripture as teaching an assurance of sense, rising and falling with the believer’s degree of yieldedness to the Holy Spirit’s work of progressive sanctification in his life, while also recognizing an ever present assurance of faith whose ground is the absolute certainty of the Word of God.

²⁰ Sinclair Ferguson. *The Marrow Controversy*, Banner of Truth Library, Carlisle, PA, Tape B8002 (audiocassette), 2002.

²¹ Ibid., Tape B8003.

²² Ibid., Tape B8003.

²³ Ibid., Tape B8003.

Ferguson's conclusion, summarized below, sounds as if it could have been written by a modern day Thomas Boston or Ebenezer Erskine. He says it is the conviction that every believer can attain assurance,

that marked the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Indeed, in some senses, the Reformation was the great rediscovery of assurance. . . .

The theology of assurance is simple and logical: justification is final. But experiencing assurance can be complex for the simple reason that we ourselves are deeply complex individuals; there may be much in our natural psyche that militates against assurance. It may take time before we who are loved know that we are truly loved, and it may take time before we who are forgiven understand and enjoy that we are indeed forgiven.²⁴

We are prone to confuse the foundation of salvation in grace (justification) with its fruit in our lives (sanctification); we obscure the enjoyment of our privileges by failure to take seriously our responsibilities; we are confused by our afflictions; we fail to appreciate the continuing presence of sin and are destabilized by our own failures; in some instances our natural temperament, our damaged mindset, may be a special hindrance to assurance; an attack of the devil may flood our minds with doubts and fears; our own consciences can hinder assurance by condemning us, and they need to be cleansed. This may all be true. But the seed of assurance that is present in faith will -- as it is nourished by the truth of God's promise, the knowledge of his character, the grace of his Son, and the witness of his Spirit -- press through even the poor soil of our hearts and grow to full assurance of salvation!²⁵

Thesis Conclusion

The selection of Lachman, Berkhof/Bavink, and Ferguson to represent Reformed orthodoxy's conclusion to the Marrow Controversy is certainly not exhaustive. Like the choice of Berkhof to present the Reformed systematic treatment of faith and assurance, this

²⁴ *Assured by God, Living in the Fullness of God's Grace*. Edited by Burk Parsons (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 307.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

representation reflects the thesis author's personal interpretation of the biblical and historical evidence. In fairness, some dissenting views will be subsequently mentioned.

Before doing so, it seems appropriate to first offer a logical proof for the assertion of this thesis that the Marrow Brethren's dichotomy of the "assurance of faith" and the "assurance of sense" substantially reconciled their position that assurance is "inherent in saving faith" both to the teachings of John Calvin and to the Westminster Confession's statement that "infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith." Four reasons are given in support of this claim:

1. All three of the parties, Calvin, the Brethren, and the Westminster divines, struggled to define faith and assurance in simple, singularly exact terms.
2. All three parties tried to reconcile various passages of Scripture that seemed, in the eyes of some, to make contradictory statements concerning assurance.
3. All three parties faced varied theological and pastoral concerns, unique to the time and place God had given them to serve, which caused them to teach the two aspects of assurance found in the Scriptures with different emphases.
4. All three parties were led by their commitment to the absolute authority of the Scriptures to develop some sort of dichotomous definition of faith and assurance.

When the writings of theologians from different eras in church history are compared, one should consider the context in which they ministered. Personal experiences, contemporary theological battles, and pastoral challenges of their day were all sovereignly used by God to mold their perspective of Scripture. If alternative positions are taken and none deny essential or clear elements of the gospel, then one should be very slow to label some as absolute truth and others as heresy. In many cases, unless God's Word provides a definite answer to ambiguous doctrinal issues, one would be wise to follow the previously quoted advice of John Owen to "accept the differences as a permissible variation in presenting the truth."

This principle of gracious interpretation should be extended to all who work within orthodox Christianity, who honor the absolute authority of God's Word, and who do not deny essentials of the faith. The difficulty often involved in seeking perfect agreement on these three criteria for the application of this principle is acknowledged. However, in the case of the Marrow Controversy, both the Brethren and their opposers should have been able to answer these criteria for gracious interpretation affirmatively for all parties: one another, the author of the *Marrow*, John Calvin, and the Westminster divines. This thesis author believes this principle of gracious interpretation provides sufficient warrant to justify the connection of the four reasons presented herein to the thesis assertion.

If this warrant is accepted, the only question remaining is the sufficiency of the evidence provided to affirm the four supporting reasons. The common struggle to construct simple, exact definitions of faith and assurance has been well documented. Calvin saw two truths: the believer's ultimate possession of full assurance and the possible experience of something far different. Westminster recognized an ever present seed of God or life in faith but also understood assurance could be shaken. The Marrow Brethren sought various ways to differentiate between faith's root and its fruit as presented in Scripture. Clearly, none of the three parties formed simple, singularly exact explanations for these doctrines.

The extent to which each party utilized various passages of Scripture, some strongly supporting their particular emphasis on the issue and others requiring great explanation, is easily shown. Westminster's passages listed in support of 18.1 and 18.2 speak of certain assurance while those of 18.3 and 18.4 talk about proof and doubt. The references presented in comparable sections of Calvin's *Institutes* and contained herein are much the same. Boston and Ebenezer Erskine present some verses to support their "assurance of faith" concept and

others for the “assurance of sense.” All three parties sought ways to reconcile tough passages to their positions.

Multiple examples have been given herein to demonstrate the differences in the climate facing John Calvin versus that of the Westminster divines. Calvin fought Rome’s teaching that full assurance of God’s favor was something the common believer should neither ask for nor expect. Westminster, a century later, sought to settle disputes concerning the proper way for the believer to pursue this assurance which the Reformers had already established as desirable. The Marrow Brethren, interestingly, were faced with a question more similar to that of the Westminster divines than that of Calvin. Their issue involved what a convert had to believe or do in order to be assured of salvation. However, because some in the Scottish Church provided legalistic answers to this question which threatened the gospel message of free grace, the Marrow Brethren’s theological emphasis was actually driven more toward Calvin’s teaching that some degree of certainty was inherent to faith itself, a fundamental element of God’s gift of salvation, and apart from any human effort. Each of the three parties faced its own unique theological and pastoral battles.

As demonstrated throughout the text of this thesis and summarized in the accompanying chart, some form of dichotomous definition of faith and assurance is present in every major Reformed confession, the work of John Calvin, and the writings of the Marrow Brethren. Calvin’s “firm and certain knowledge” alongside his “certainty tinged with doubt” parallels the Brethren’s “assurance of faith” and “assurance of sense.” Admittedly, the Westminster Confession’s description of faith does not as readily fit into this dichotomy. The assurance that Westminster directly defines clearly aligns with the Brethren’s “assurance of sense” only. One must be willing and able to objectively see the “assurance of faith” concept

implied in Westminster's "ever present seed of God, life in faith" in order to recognize a similar dichotomy in the Confession. Given the theological context just described, it is reasonable to believe the Westminster divines accepted Calvin's dichotomy while intentionally choosing to emphasize the aspects of it most relevant to their time. As has been shown, some of them, such as William Gouge, actually confirmed such a "consistent with Calvin" position in later writings. If so, then each of the three parties did indeed present some form of dichotomous definition of faith and assurance.

The Marrow Brethren were unwavering in the conviction that their doctrine of assurance was not a contradiction of their sworn allegiance to the Westminster Confession. Their "assurance of faith and assurance of sense" explanation, when viewed in the context of church history, reconciled any alleged contradictions for this thesis author. The four reasons and supporting evidence just presented, along with the principle of gracious interpretation herein stated, provide the objective reader sufficient proof of this conclusion as well.

APPENDIX 1

SUBSEQUESNT DEBATES AND CHALLENGES

Subsequent Debates

Immediately after Louis Berkof stated his balanced, Marrow-like conclusion to this matter, he provided the following caution:

There are two extremes that should be avoided: on the one hand the position that it is possible to have a true living faith without any degree of subjective assurance; and on the other hand the standpoint of Jean de Labadie that no one is in a state of grace who does not have absolute assurance.¹

Both of these extremes, and just about every possible variation between, can be seen within Christian circles today.

The following descriptions of current assurance positions are purposely provided as generalizations, examples, or stereotypes and are not meant to describe any particular church or denomination:

1. Free Grace Antinomian (also called Easy Believism) – teaches it is possible to have believed, see little change in behavior, even fall back into disbelief, but still be assured salvation.
2. Lordship Salvation – teaches every true believer can have full assurance, yet one will know they are true believers somewhat by their behavior.
3. Strict Legalism (also called Works Salvation) – teaches one becomes a believer as their behavior changes, and afterwards one can lose all assurance of this, and even forfeit salvation itself if their behavior reverts.

¹ Louis Berkhof. *The Assurance of Faith, The Firm Foundation of Christian Hope* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 71.

4. Strict Arminianism – teaches full assurance of salvation as one’s free will responds to God’s invitation, but believes both assurance and salvation can be lost if this cooperation does not continue afterwards.

Note that not all of these descriptions directly deal with the most basic point of soteriology:

“Whose choice, God or man, determines one’s salvation?” With this factor added, the permutations seem almost endless: Antinomian Free Grace Calvinist, Lordship Salvation Secure Arminian, Antinomian Free Grace Secure Arminian, Legalistic Strict Arminian, etc. Views of faith and assurance seem almost infinite in number.

Some Christian denominations, particularly many Pentecostals, have come to view assurance as separated from salvation altogether. Contrary to Reformed orthodoxy, Spirit baptism is taught as something that occurs distinct from and subsequent to conversion. This work of God, sometime after salvation, brings assurance to the believer. Even Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose writings on various biblical topics are valued in many Reformed circles, held a form of this “separate assuring act” Spirit baptism view.

As developed in the later writings of some of the Marrow Brethren and further systematized by Reformed theologians like Bavink and Berkhof, the balanced presentation of biblical assurance steers one away from the extreme version of any of these positions. The “assurance of faith” inherent in saving faith and ever present in the believer reflects aspects of the free grace position. Still, its attitude toward the Christian life is anything but Antinomian. The “assurance of sense,” which ebbs and flows with the believer’s degree of yieldedness to the Holy Spirit’s work of progressive sanctification, shares the value of evidences with the Lordship Salvation position. Notwithstanding, its attitude toward the Christian life is anything but Legalistic. The dichotomy developed by the Marrow Brethren

seems to provide a more biblically accurate view of faith and assurance than any of its contemporary or subsequent alternatives.

Challenges: From Hoeksema and Hanko to Hodges

Berkhof, as earlier quoted, chose Jean de Labadie to represent the fifth and somewhat extreme position in this debate:

5. Faith Equals Assurance – teaches that lack of absolute assurance indicates the absence of true faith.

Labadie, a 17th Century former Roman Catholic priest influenced by Jansenism and Reformed Pietism, held this view along with controversial ideas including mysticism, asceticism, and communal living. While Labadie himself was almost universally dismissed by orthodox theologians because of these other issues, views similar to his regarding assurance have persisted to this day.

Within Reformed circles of this modern era, the Protestant Reformed Churches, or PRC, have most visibly represented the “Faith Equals Assurance” position. The PRC was formed in 1924 to fight what their founding leader, Herman Hoeksema, terms “the heresy of the well-meant offer.”² The root of Hoeksema’s disagreement with his church at the time, the Christian Reformed Church, was actually a renewal of one of the elements of the Marrow Controversy in which Hoeksema assumed a Hadow-like role. A brief sample of PRC thought:

When Amyraldus was forty-nine years old, Edward Fisher published *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, in which he put forth the view that the true gospel is this:

² Marc D. Carpenter. “A History of Hypo-Calvinism.” *The Trinity Review* (March-April 1997): 1.

God the 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. . . .

. . . This is nothing more than rehashed Amyraldianism. . . .

. . . Even though the Scottish General Assembly had condemned it as unorthodox, it took fire in Calvinistic circles, even among the Puritans

. . . An inevitable result of compromising the Gospel in this area was an unholy union with the God-hating Arminians. . . .

. . . George Whitefield, who lived during the time when the Marrow controversy was in full force, was struck with the “well-meant offer” virus; this goes a long way in explaining how he could tolerate the blasphemous views of John Wesley for so long, for once again, he and Wesley were saying the same things to their audiences. . . .

. . . In Fisher, Boston, Chalmer, McCheyne, Brown, Whitefield – and in many more, there is a grave compromise with Arminianism. They put forth a “Jesus” who is working hard to woo the crowd, who would be infinitely disappointed if they did not all come, and who is powerless apart from human effort. One cannot come to any other conclusion than that these are the age-old lies of Pelagius and Arminius and that the gospel being preached is corrupt.³

Hoeksema, followed by PRC leaders Herman Hanko and David Engelsma, began a battle that has spread to include some of Reformed orthodoxy’s most well-known modern era theologians. Notice the labeling of Cornelius Van Til’s position as “Marrowist” in the following words defending the PRC. This is a scathing charge given Hoeksema’s statement that “the Marrow Men were Arminian, and they corrupted the gospel of grace.”⁴ Marc Carpenter writes:

What has mainstream “Calvinism” said of Hoeksema and the PRC? They are branded as hyper-Calvinists. In the *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J.I. Packer, Herman Hoeksema is named as “the most prominent recent theologian” to embrace hyper-

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Herman C. Hanko. “The Marrow Men.” *The Standard Bearer* 80, no. 15 (May 2004): 9.

Calvinism. G.C. Berkouwer, in *Divine Election*, specifically denounces Hoeksema's "parallelism" between election and reprobation

. . . By far the most comprehensive attack on the well-meant offer is PRC Professor David Engelsma's Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel. It is a thoroughly devastating treatment. He rightly rejects true hyper-Calvinism (that states that there is not a call to all without exception to repent and believer) and stands for the true Biblical Calvinism against the cavils of the irrational hypo-Calvinists: . . .

. . . To readers who are familiar with *The Trinity Review* and Gordon Clark's writings, the controversy in the CRC and the convictions of Hoeksema and Engelsma sound very much like the controversy in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and Clark's convictions against the Van Tilian (and Amyraldian/Marrowist) notion of the well-meant offer.⁵

Unfortunately, not only the subject matter of this modern debate, but the "graceless" tone as well is reminiscent of the Marrow Controversy. Here is one example:

John W. Robbins states that "the self-professed disciples of Dr. Van Til have continued to slander and misrepresent Dr. Clark" and that "falsification of history has become the stock in trade of some proponents of Van Til and Westminster Seminary". . . . One may sadly say that Westminster Theological Seminary stands for this misunderstanding of the Reformed doctrine since not only John Murray and Ned Stonehouse but also Cornelius Van Til, R.B. Kuiper, John Frame, and so far as we know, all of the faculty, have favored it.⁶

Interestingly, returning to the issue of assurance, the PRC takes a position that would have infuriated the very Church of Scotland it praises for opposing the Marrow Brethren. While Cunningham, as previously quoted, "classes the Marrowmen with the Reformers as holding the same doctrine of assurance," Hanks and the PRC believe even the Marrow Brethren were preaching a "less than Calvin" form of this doctrine, one that had been modified by subsequent Reformed theologians. In the area of assurance, the PRC has adopted

⁵ Carpenter, "A History of Hypo-Calvinism," 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

a view that is much closer to the conclusions of some extreme Calvin interpreters than to any strict Westminster loyalists. Unlike the 1720 Assembly which condemned the Marrow Brethren for contradicting Westminster's view of assurance, the PRC condemns them for straying too far from Calvin towards the Confession on this particular issue. (This thesis author must interject a personal observation here. Witness the futility of drawing such fine distinctions. In all likelihood these dogmatic specifics were not intended or even considered by the early Reformers.)

Notice Engelsma's distaste for many "dichotomy terms" in his "Faith Equals Assurance" doctrinal statement:

True faith is assurance of personal salvation.

Assurance is not the fruit of faith for a few old people after many years of doubt. Assurance is not the "well-being" of faith (for the few believers who are "God's best and dearest friends") in distinction from the "being" of faith.

Assurance is what faith essentially *is*. Personal assurance of one's own salvation by the grace of God in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is the very being, or nature, of faith. Faith knows and trusts Jesus Christ as the Savior of the one who believes. Weak faith is certain of salvation, as well as strong faith. Faith is certain of salvation at the very beginning of the believing life, for example, in a covenant child, as well as faith at the very end of the way, for example in a dying old saint.

Faith *is* assurance.

Denial that faith is assurance was the fundamental cause of the deep, widespread, continuing doubt of salvation that characterized the congregations of the Puritans. It is the fundamental cause of the same doubt in Reformed and Presbyterian congregations today languishing under typically Puritan preaching . . . This error fills churches with doubters – comfortless, terrified doubters. . . .

. . . Recovering the gospel of Scripture, the sixteenth century Reformation of the church taught that faith is assurance of salvation. With one accord, all the Reformers taught that assurance is the very nature of faith. . . .⁷

⁷ David Engelsma. "Faith is Assurance: The Reformed Gospel." *The Standard Bearer* 80, no. 15 (May 2004): 30.

In the language of the warning of the Canons of Dort, by the Puritan doctrine of assurance, particularly denial that assurance belongs to the essence of faith, “the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church.” . . .

. . . Cunningham’s explanation of the Reformer’s doctrine of assurance is mistaken. The Reformers’ doctrine of assurance had nothing to do with their own, allegedly special experience and certainly nothing to do with a special dispensation of grace in the sixteenth century. One could as well explain away their doctrine of justification by arguing that the Reformers were justified in a special way at a special time in the history of salvation.

The Reformers taught that faith is assurance for all believers, *in all times*, because this is what the Bible teaches about faith.⁸

If such classifications are even legitimate, the PRC seems to hold more strictly interpreted Westminster positions than the Marrow Brethren on the free offer question and yet clearly swings further away from the Confession than would the Brethren when defining faith and assurance. It seems likely the PRC would have received the 1720 Scottish General Assembly condemnation alongside the Brethren, if not more quickly, as it related to the doctrine of assurance. The PRC actually does teach “that whoever lacks an assurance . . . is not a true believer,”⁹ whereas the Marrow Brethren were only falsely accused of advancing this position.

The “Faith Equals Assurance” belief is not confined to traditional Reformed and Covenant Theology circles. Zane Hodges, known for his debates against fellow dispensationalist John MacArthur’s Lordship Salvation position, holds an assurance doctrine not unlike that of the PRC:

⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁹ David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 275.

If someone *does* believe the offer of eternal life – as the Bible presents this offer – he will also be sure that he has eternal life. This is what we mean when we say that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith*. . . .¹⁰

The nature of the gospel message is such that, when a person believes it, he necessarily has assurance of eternal salvation. No matter what else he might believe, if he is not assured, he has not believed the gospel. The fact of the matter is that a person may believe certain things about the gospel without actually believing the true gospel. Or he may believe something *very close* to the true gospel which is not, in fact, the gospel. In either case, he will not have the assurance that goes with saving faith.¹¹

Hodges provides the following caricature of what the Marrow Brethren called many Christians’ struggle to “believe I have believed”:

Of course, some people will still try to say, “I believe it is true, but how do I know I really believe it and therefore it is true of me? But no matter who makes this statement it is actually nonsense. It is like saying, “I believe that Elvis is alive, but how do I know I *really* believe it?” We would send a person who said that to see a psychiatrist. But in theology we actually take such a statement as if it were a meaningful observation.

It is not. It is actually the product of years of theological brainwashing.¹²

Hodges called the “standard Reformed teaching on assurance which stresses both objective and subjective grounds for assurance, . . . this false dichotomy.”¹³ His list of current “false dichotomy” theologians includes John Gerstner, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul who, Hodges says, “completely ignores the controversy over the difference between Calvin’s concept of faith and that which is common to most Reformed theologians today.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Zane C. Hodges. “Assurance: of the Essence of Faith.” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (Spring 1997): 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

Hodges reaches the inevitable conclusion of someone who does not allow for different doctrinal emphases, within orthodoxy, driven by the time and place of the theologian. He wrote:

If in fact Calvin held, as I believe he did, that assurance is of the essence of saving faith, then Sproul must pronounce Calvin wrong and post-Reformation Calvinists right, and he must give up the pretense that Evangelicals have a historical unity on the nature of saving faith.¹⁵

Before leaving the presentation of challenges to this thesis conclusion, a few samples of very extreme “Faith Equals Assurance” statements will be listed. These are given to provide an example of the manner in which some expressions of this view could create many destructive and defeating questions for the weak or struggling believer. (These are not listed to imply association of the statements to either the PRC or Hodges or to necessarily grant serious theological debate credentials to the sources.) Try to imagine a new believer, just beginning the process of discipleship, hearing these words:

1. “Believers, like the apostles, are always confident.”
2. “All true believers have full assurance of their salvation.”
3. “Doubting your salvation? The apostles didn’t.”
4. “He that doubts is damned.”

It seems appropriate to follow these statements by once again repeating the assertion that without the biblical dichotomy present in some form, the definition of faith and assurance seems destined to drift toward one extreme or the other.

Response to Challenges

Robert Petersen provides an answer to these challenges and warns against the drift to extreme positions concerning the doctrine of assurance:

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

Many Christians struggle with issues related to the doctrines of preservation, perseverance, assurance and apostasy. Believers may embrace eternal security, but not have considered its correlative, perseverance. Or they hold to the need for perseverance, but are unsure about preservation. Today many are confused about the assurance of salvation. And some overemphasize the doctrine of apostasy, while others hardly mention it. Plainly there is a need for clear, biblically informed thinking on these matters.¹⁶

It is as they persevere that God gives his children *assurance*. Assurance is based on more than perseverance (preservation and the Spirit's witness are important too), but it is not based on less. . . .

. . . As God's children persevere they have no fear of judgment. If professed believers fall away, they lose their assurance and ought to fear God's wrath. If they are saved, God will convict them of their failure to persevere, and they will eventually repent. If they are not saved, they will continue in unbelief, sin, and hatred (unless God converts them).¹⁷

Peterson is careful not to let these words about perseverance, which are similar to those of the Marrow Brethren concerning "assurance of sense," overshadow the biblical teaching of the ultimate grounds of the "assurance of faith" and the aspect of preservation:

The Bible teaches the doctrine of assurance. One of the purposes of Scripture is that believers "may know that" they "have eternal life" (1John 5:13). Assurance means confidence of salvation. God wants his children to be assured that they belong to him.¹⁸

God intends for us to have this foundation under our Christian lives: ultimately he guarantees our salvation.¹⁹

Still, as the Marrow Brethren dichotomy taught, Peterson recognizes that God provides assurance to believers in many ways:

¹⁶ Robert A. Peterson. "Preservation, Perseverance, Assurance, and Apostasy." *Presbyterion* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Christians only have assurance because God *preserves* them. Preservation is thus the foundation of assurance. Without preservation there would be no confidence of salvation. This objective truth has subjective implications, for . . . the knowledge of preservation constitutes one source of assurance. . . .²⁰

In addition God has granted to believers the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to confirm to them that they are his children (Romans 8:16; I John 5:6-10). Directly and inscrutably the Spirit assures Christians of their adoption by God the Father. . . .

. . . God also gives evidences of eternal life – perseverance in faith, obedience, and love. These are evidence of one reality – eternal life (I John 5:1-5). . . . It is an error to claim as Zane Hodges and R.T. Kendall do that there is only one test of eternal life – faith in God’s promise of salvation.²¹

God gives confidence of salvation to those who believe his promises of preservation, who have the Spirit’s inner witness, and who live the Christian life. God has tied assurance to *perseverance*. God does not give assurance to those who deny his Son, or to those who consistently hate, or to those who live ungodly lives. This is not salvation by works; salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is *assurance* of salvation by “works,” which are evidences of eternal life, indeed the fruit of the Spirit.²²

Once again, some form of balanced dichotomy seems to provide a more biblically accurate view of faith and assurance than any other alternative.

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² Ibid., 37.

APPENDIX 2

PASTORAL APPLICATION TODAY

The importance of assurance in the life of a believer is much less debated than its exact definition. Theologians and pastors across a wide spectrum of doctrinal positions could agree with Donald MacLeod's statement that,

the lack of assurance has often been a serious problem for Reformed Evangelicals. Not only have we lacked assurance: we have even tended to cultivate the lack of it. . . . It is all too easy to assume that lack of assurance reflects real humility and, conversely, that assurance is a mark of spiritual pride.

Secondly, because it bears very directly on the quality of our Christian lives. Without assurance it becomes very difficult to serve the Lord. Without assurance it is hard to cultivate sanctification or to mortify sin. Without assurance there is no joy in our discipleship, and joy, remember, is the lubricant of obedience.¹

Many theologians, past and present have agreed. The sermons of both Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon urged their hearers to seek assurance, although they stressed different means: objective and subjective respectively. More recently, John Frame's theology suggests three elements are involved as believers pursue full assurance: normative (objective, Scripture), existential (inner witness, Holy Spirit), and situational (external evidence, perseverance).²

¹ Donald Macleod. *A Faith to Live By, Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 183.

² Robert A. Peterson. "Christian assurance: its possibility and foundations." *Presbyterion* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 22.

Once again, the balanced biblical truth provides the best solution, pastorally just as it did theologically:

The three foundations of assurance must be regarded as inseparable. In this discussion I will use the following shorthand for the three foundations: 1) Word, 2) Spirit, and 3) perseverance. Keeping in mind the epistemological priority of the Word, there are dangers of neglecting any of the foundations. To stress the Word and downplay the other foundations is to risk easy believism and antinomianism. To emphasize the Spirit and minimize the Word and perseverance is to fall into subjectivism and mysticism. To look to perseverance while neglecting the other foundations is to invite merit theology and legalism.³

Not only should pastors strive for biblical balance in directing believers to sources of assurance, they should seek similar wisdom in using their pastoral influence to motivate its pursuit:

There can be no doubt, of course, that if we take the New Testament as our standard assurance is the norm for the Christian. . . .

. . . It follows that lack of assurance is an abnormal condition for a Christian. Not only is it, as a matter of statistics, rare. It is a contradiction of the biblical pattern for our lives. The experience of the apostles is as normative as their teaching: and their experience was one of virtually unflinching assurance. Preaching, therefore, should never encourage doubt. . . .

. . . Yet a Christian may lack assurance. The Old Testament church is portrayed by Isaiah as, on one occasion, walking in such darkness that there was no light (Is. 50:10). On another occasion, according to the same prophet, the church feels hidden from the Lord and passed over by him (Is. 40:27). The author of Psalm 88 speaks of himself as like the slain whom God remembers no more and as one whose soul God has cast off.

The New Testament does not, so far as we recall, contain a single instance of a Christian doubting his own salvation. But it does clearly envisage the possibility. This implied, for example, in John's statement, "These things have I written unto you that ye may know that you have eternal life" (I John 5:13). Some Christians, obviously, had to be helped to know. It was for the same reason that John gave some indication as to how we can assure ourselves that we are saved: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren" (I John 3:14). This assumes that our salvation is not

³ Ibid., 22.

always self-evident. It has to be inferred from the effects of grace upon our lives and characters.⁴

If assurance is *assumed*, pastors build congregations that won't appreciate the depths of Christian experience. If assurance is *compelled*, Calvinism could collapse into neonomianism. If assurance is *ignored*, churches may be reduced to legalistic morality that lack evangelistic zeal for God. But if assurance is *cultivated*, the faith of believers is brought to rest in a faithful God whose grace is mightier than their proneness to backslide (Malachi 3:6; Philippians 1:6).⁵

Pastors today look out at congregations mixed with rationalistic moderns who have been trained to discover the exact scientific solution to every problem and skeptical post-moderns who don't even believe absolutes exist. As young believers, the former would likely overemphasize the objective, the latter the subjective, and both to the exclusion of the other. We must caution the moderns against lifeless intellectual faith as does the book of James. We must caution the post-moderns to distinguish between the battle of doubting themselves, which Scripture anticipates, and the sin of doubting the truth of God's promises, which it condemns.

Reformed pastors may receive questions concerning assurance and doubt that flow specifically from the Calvinistic soteriology they teach. Philip Graham Ryken offers the following answer:

The doctrine of election is a difficult doctrine. . . . Salvation is neither initiated by human choice nor appropriated by human effort; it begins and ends with the sovereign grace of God's electing will.⁶

⁴ Donald Macleod. "Am I a Christian?" *The Monthly Record* (September 1979): 163.

⁵ Joel R. Beeke. *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1999), 281-282.

⁶ *Assured by God, Living in the Fullness of God's Grace*. Edited by Burk Parsons (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 43.

Nevertheless, even though election is a biblical doctrine, it naturally causes people to wonder whether they are among the elect. Indeed, some people experience great anxiety because they fear that they are *not* among the elect.⁷

So how can you be sure that you are among God's elect? Here it helps to remember that the elect are chosen in Christ. . . . Therefore, to ask if you are among the elect is really to ask if you are in Christ. . . . You do not need to read God's mind. . . . All you need is to know Jesus Christ, who is the location of salvation. . . . The way to make your calling and election sure is to be sure that you are joined to Jesus Christ by faith.⁸

Many well-known recent writers, including John Piper, R.C. Sproul, and John Frame, have expressed the certainty of faith that Reformed theology produces and have provided great pastoral tools to aid a believer's search for full assurance. The Marrow Brethren, by their own testimony, had hoped their words would do the same:

Upon the whole, we humbly conceive, were the nature and grounds of faith's persuasion more narrowly and impartially under the guidance of the Spirit of truth, searched into and laid open, it would, instead of discouraging weak Christians, exceedingly tend to the strengthening and increase of faith, and consequently have a mighty influence on spiritual comfort, and true gospel holiness, which will always be found to bear proportion to faith, as effects do to the efficacy and influence of the causes.⁹

Allow me to close the main body of this work with my prayer that the dichotomy of faith and assurance presented herein, which I believe is consistent with Scripture, will prove edifying, comforting and challenging to the reader:

Finally, the doctrine of assurance is personally important. The question "Is assurance of the essence of faith?" is not a mere abstract debate. The *personal* answer of Scripture, Calvin *and* the Calvinists is: organically, *yes*; in actual

⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁹ David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 366.

consciousness, *no*. What unites Scripture, Calvin, and Calvinism on this issue is the organic relationship of faith to assurance, for a Christian may have and grow in assurance, yet not always be aware of possessing it.

In Scripture, the Reformers, and post-Reformation divines, faith operates according to the “already/not yet” dynamic of the New Testament. Even personal consciousness of justification does not mean sanctification is consciously assured. The image of God must be, but is not yet, wholly restored. The reign of Satan is broken, but his armies must yet be swept off the field. Assurance is real but beset by doubts which must yet be conquered. The Christian life includes on going tension between assurance and doubt, notwithstanding that faith’s victory is sure.¹⁰

If you, as the reader, are not a believer, I pray God will bring you to life spiritually, regenerate your heart, and give you the assurance of faith. If you are a believer, I pray God will bless you with a strong and consistent awareness of your assurance as you yield to His work in your life. In either case, I join R. C. Sproul in pointing you to the only source of ultimate truth regarding this matter:

The possession of full assurance of salvation is too important to leave to a superficial search. It must be an earnest quest, fueled by the impetus of the Holy Spirit who impels our souls to seek the truth of our own condition, in that truth that God reveals to us in sacred Scripture. May your journey in pursuit of full assurance be guided at every step by the unvarnished Word of God, by God’s grace and for his glory.¹¹

¹⁰ Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 283.

¹¹ *Assured by God*, 9.

APPENDIX 3

A CALL FOR GRACE IN THEOLOGICAL DEBATES

I believe that God reminded me of an important truth during the course of preparing this thesis that was far from my original focus. The unintended lesson was important enough to warrant this short addendum. I was bewildered by the characterization of George Whitefield's love for John Wesley, by one of the modern day participants in the assurance debate, as "tolerating the blasphemous views" because he had been "struck with a virus of the well-meant offer theology." I had researched and written about the Whitefield-Wesley relationship some years earlier and had reached a quite different conclusion.

Here are the last few paragraphs of that previously written summary. (References available in original work.) Notice the vehement theological arguments between these two men who, before reaching dramatically different soteriological positions concerning which neither was "tolerant" of the other, had prayed for and dreamed of serving the Lord together:

"The gulf between Wesley and Whitefield was immense, [though] some evangelical writers have sought to minimize the division." While there was much common theological ground shared by these two leaders, one cannot harmonize their soteriologies. Wesley left the final decision in the hands of man, and Whitefield saw God's choice as sovereign over all others.

I cannot divorce my personal conclusion from my convictions of Reformed soteriology, which I began and end this research believing to be the true message of Scripture. I believe Wesley's arguments to be based upon his personal experience and logical human reasoning. I believe Whitefield's answers are sound exegesis of God's Word. I must agree with the latter.

I do believe there is a great lesson to be learned from the brotherly love that survived this monumental theological difference. I agree with Iain Murray's citation of the Wesley-Whitefield relationship as a great Christian

example. “Doctrinal differences between believers should never lead to personal antagonism. . . . Whitefield rightly made a distinction between a difference in judgement and a difference in affection.”

More radical followers of either man can point to occasions when one or the other may have been more or less loving and forgiving. Some of these accusations are doubtless true, but in the end, the love of Christ prevailed. Whitefield said of Wesley, “You honestly aim at God’s glory.” “I love and honor you for his sake; and when I come to judgment, will thank you before men and angels, for what you have, under God, done for my soul.” “I love you in the bowels of Jesus Christ, and think I could lay down my life for your sake.” Wesley, speaking at Whitefield’s funeral says, “He . . . astonished the world with his eloquence and devotion, . . . the Christian, the saint of God.” He spoke of Whitefield’s true piety, gratitude, tender friendship, frankness, openness, and integrity. Even with their differences, Wesley proclaimed, “Let us hold fast the essentials of faith . . . which this champion of God so strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places!”

“Therefore, for a time you are suffered to be of one opinion, and I of another, But when his time is come, God will do what man cannot, namely, make us both of one mind.” Whitefield made these words of Wesley the preface of the very letter that refuted his dear friend’s words. Let them serve as a great reminder and challenge to us all.

I cannot read the mind or judge the motives of George Whitefield. Given the depth of his theological understanding and the veracity of his commitment to the truth of God’s Word, I must assume Whitefield’s own “love and grace for a differing brother” explanation over a “grossly misled by heresy” charge leveled by an outside observer.

Lachman speaks of one of the Marrow Controversy participants who expected his own theological views to be accepted by those around him with “a degree of unity which may exist among the glorified saints of heaven, but which certainly has no precedent on earth.”¹ Such a view, he warns,

¹ David C. Lachman. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988), 489.

would tend to ignore very real differences and absolutize one's own views, regarding any deviation from them as a deviation from Reformed Orthodoxy and not, as in some instances they surely were, matters about which eminent Reformed Divines have differed and on which, recognizing such differences, Reformed Confessions have refused to take a position.²

Sadly, I believe orthodox Christianity is filled with such attitudes today. These attitudes divert attention and energy away from the real kingdom battles we face to our internal civil wars. We need the wisdom of G. C. Berkewer, who said, "It is highly regrettable therefore whenever divergences lead to strife instead of to a mutual appreciation of the deepest motives of each."³ We need the humility of a John Owen, who described a non-essential doctrinal opinion differing from his own "as a permissible variation in presenting the truth."⁴ In short, believers need to give each other the same degree of grace that God has given us.

I close with this quote from Thomas Boston:

Thus also I was much addicted to peace, and averse to controversy; though once engaged therein, I was set to go through with it. I had no great difficulty to retain a due honour and charity for my brethren differing from me in opinion and practice; but then I was in no great hazard neither, of being swayed by them, to depart from what I judged truth or duty. Withal it was easy to me, to yield to them in things wherein I found not myself in conscience bound up.⁵

Let this be the prayer of believers everywhere, your prayer and mine.

² Ibid., 489.

³ G. C. Berkouwer. *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1954), 168.

⁴ Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy*, 18.

⁵ Thomas Boston. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. Edited by Samuel M'Millan (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980): 7:446.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source Books

- Boston, Thomas, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. volume II. Edited by Samuel M'Millan. Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980.
- Boston, Thomas, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. volume VII. Edited by Samuel M'Millan. Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980.
- Boston, Thomas, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston*. volume XII. Edited by Samuel M'Millan. Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Calvin, John. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. volume 9. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959-1972.
- Calvin, John. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. volume 12. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959-1972.
- Davidson, Henry. *Dark Providences to be Admired, Not Suriously Pry'd Into*. Edinburgh, printed for, and sold by John Duncan. 1767.
- Erskine, Ebenezer. *Faith and The Assurance of Faith*. The American Tract Society. 1762, somewhat abridged.
- Erskine, Ebenezer. *The Assurance of Faith, opened and applied; Being the Substance of Six Discourses on Heb. X. 22*. London: reprinted by Z. Fowle and S. Draper, 1759.
- Erskine, Ebenezer. *The Whole Works of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine*. Philadelphia: published by Wm. S. & A. Young, 1836.
- Erskine, Ralph. *The Best Security for the Best Life: or, a Life hid with Christ in God*. Edinburgh, 1750.
- Fisher, Edward. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1837.

Hog, James. *A Letter to a Gentleman, Containing A Detection of Errors in a Print, Intituled, The Snake in the Grass*. Edinburgh: printed by Robert Brown, 1719.

Hog, James. *An Explication of Passages Excepted against in the Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Edinburgh: printed by Robert Brown, 1719.

Hog, James. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Peterborough, ON, Canada: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Westminster Confession of Faith. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997.

Williamson, John. *The Scope and Substance of the Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Edinburgh, 1722.

Wilson, Gabriel. *Trust, A sermon, at the opening of the provincial Synod of Mers and Teviotdale, at Kelso, October 17, 1721*. Edinburgh, 1723.

Secondary Source Books

Assured by God, Living in the Fullness of God's Grace. Edited by Burk Parsons. P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007.

Bavinck, Herman. *The Doctrine of God*. Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1997.

Beeke, Joel R. *Assurance of Faith, Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*. New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

Beeke, Joel R. *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*. Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1999.

Bell, M. Charles. *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*. Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985.

Berkhof, Louis. *The Assurance of Faith, The Firm Foundation of Christian Hope*. Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Berkouwer, G. C. *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954.

Bonar, Andrew A. *Reminiscences of Andrew A. Bonar D.D.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895.

- Bromiley, Geoffrey W., Trans. *The Theology of John Calvin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Brown, John. *An Essay, Toward an Easy, Plain, Practical and Extensive Explication of the Shorter Catechism*. Philadelphia: Henry Frick for M'Carty & Davis, 1818.
- Carre, Walter Riddell. *Border Memories*. Edinburgh: James Thin, South Bridge, 1876.
- Cunningham, William. *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*. Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1967.
- Dejong, P. Y., ed. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches, Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dordt, 1618-19*. Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968.
- Hanko, Herman C. *The History of the Free Offer*. Grandville, MI: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1989.
- Helm, Paul. *Calvin and Calvinists*. Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1982.
- Hendriksen, William and Simon J. Kistemaker. *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.
- Hodge, A.A. *The Confession of Faith*. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1869.
- Kendall, R.T., *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Lachman, David C. *The Marrow Controversy: An Historical and Theological Analysis*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 1988.
- Macleod, Donald. *A Faith to Live By, Understanding Christian Doctrine*. Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought, An Introduction*, Third Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1988.
- Murray, John, "The Assurance of Faith," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977.
- NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. Edited by Richard L. Pratt, Jr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John Mcleod Campbell*. London: Continuum International, 1996.

Walker, James. *Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560-1750*. Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982.

Walker, Patrick. *Six Saints of the Covenant*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901.

Zachman, Randall C. *The Assurance of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Secondary Source Articles

Anderson, Dave. "The Soteriological Impact of Augustine's Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism: Part Two." *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002): 25-40.

Barker, William S. "The authority of scripture and assurance of salvation: essential qualities of Reformation piety as illustrated in the life and writings of John Bradford." *Presbyterian*. 5 no. 1 (Spring 1979): 34-43.

Beaton, D. "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity' and the Marrow Controversy." *The Princeton Theological Review*, volume IV. Philadelphia, MacCalla & Co. Inc. (1906): 317-338.

Beaton, Donald. "The 'Marrow of Modern Divinity' and the Marrow Controversy." *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, vol. 1, pt. III (1925): 112-134.

Beeke, Joel R. "Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists." *Master's Seminary Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 43-71.

Carpenter, Marc D. "A History of Hypo-Calvinism." *The Trinity Review*. (March-April 1997): 2-11.

Durham, James. "My Beloved is Mine, and I am His." *Banner of Truth Trust*, vol. 3, (1982):152-158.

Engelsma, David. "Faith is Assurance: The Reformed Gospel." *The Standard Bearer*, 80, no. 15 (May 2004): 30-35.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *The Marrow Controversy*. Banner of Truth Library. Carlisle, PA. Tape B8001-B8003 (audiocassette), 2002.

Hanko, Herman C. "The Marrow Men." *The Standard Bearer*, 80, no. 15 (May 2004): 9-15.

Harper, George W. "Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649: a review article." *Calvin Theological Journal* 20, no. 2 (N 1985): 255-262.

- Hodges, Zane C., "Assurance: of the Essence of Saving Faith." *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, vol. 10 (Spring 1997): 6-18.
- Karlberg, Mark W. "The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Sept. 1999): 228.
- Macleod, Donald. "Am I a Christian?" *The Monthly Record*. (Sept. 1979):163-165.
- Macleod, Donald. "Faith as Assurance." *The Monthly Record*. (May 1988): 99-101.
- Muller, Richard A. "The federal theology of Thomas Boston." *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 175.
- O'Brien, Susan. "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network." *The American Historical Review*. " vol. 91, no. 4. (Oct. 1986): 811-833.
- Peterson, Robert A. "Christian assurance: its possibility and foundations." *Presbyterion* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 10-24.
- Peterson, Robert A. "Preservation, Perseverance, Assurance, and Apostasy." *Presbyterion* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 31-41.