

Christ is risen and that God constantly loves His people are reasons for Christian hope. In this chapter, the author reminds us that a person's death has two sides. The first side is the fear of dying in natural life, while the other side is the hope in the resurrection at the end of the world through God's grace when we will be brought back to life and reformed into new life. God's Kingdom will be fully achieved once Christ comes back again.

In the twelfth and final chapter titled, *The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, the author talks about the doctrine of the trinity. This doctrine represents the mystery of the faith. In doing this, he touches on the First Council in Nice in 325 AD, and the Second Council in Constantinople in 381 AD, where the doctrine of the trinity was affirmed. The author pays special attention to the history of the doctrine of the trinity throughout the centuries until today. The author goes on to conclude that the amazing understanding of God as the Trinity is completely biblical, perfectly reasonable, and of uttermost importance for the life of the church and all Christians today.

The book, *Thinking about God*, is a rounded whole. Considering the subject matter, but also the simple approach to writing, this book challenges every individual to become familiar with the Christian evangelical view of theology. Although we might expect to deal with complex theological terminology, the author was able to bring Christian theology closer to everyone without leaving out any important facts. On one hand, this book is a practical theological guide, and on the other it is a theological textbook for taking the first steps into the world of theology. I believe this book will be eagerly accepted in theological seminaries, as well as useful literature for deepening one's own personal faith in God and for strengthening church fellowship as a whole. I think it is worth having a book like this in one's own personal library.

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Sinclair B. Ferguson

**The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, And Gospel Assurance—Why The Marrow Controversy Still Matters**

Wheaton, Illinois USA, Crossway, 2016, 256 pages

A new book by a theology professor and a former Presbyterian minister, Sinclair B. Ferguson, is a mixture of a historical snippet, a theological reflection about the origin and character of legalism and antinomianism, but also an encouragement to proclaim the gospel and live it through fortifying our hearts in God's grace and love.

Professor Ferguson begins his book with a historical overview of how this book started more than thirty years ago when he was preparing to teach about

The Marrow Controversy, which is then followed by a historical sketch about its beginning in Scotland in 1717. The controversy got its name from a book written by Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The book itself did not cause any controversy. It was more or less unknown in wider circles until 1717 when a Presbytery in the Scottish town of Auchterarder asked a ministerial candidate whether he believed in the following statement: "I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to come to Christ, and instate us in covenant with God" (28). The candidate declared that he did not agree with the statement and so his license to preach the gospel was declared null and void. Nevertheless, he appealed to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland which declared the statement as unorthodox and ordered the Presbytery to restore his license.

Present at the Assembly were ministers John Drummond and now renowned Thomas Boston. Although they thought that the condemned creed was ill written (30), they both agreed that it was true. Boston then mentioned a book which, some fifteen years prior to this event, he had found in the home of his parishioner. This book had "tinctured" the spiritual climate of his ministry and life. Of course, this was the aforementioned book. Soon, other ministers joined Boston and Drummond, there were altogether twelve of them, and they became known as the Marrow Brethren.

The next year, one of the Marrow Brethren, James Hof, reprinted *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland put a ban on the book in 1720, and accused its supporters of antinomianism.

Despite the historical introduction, professor Ferguson's book has managed to break away from the impression that this is only a historical overview. The goal of the book is to present the gospel of God's grace contained in the *whole Christ* shrouded with all his blessings.

Ferguson follows the main contours of the Marrow Controversy. To a large degree, it was about *legalism* and *antinomianism*. In his book, Ferguson refers to four pastoral-doctrinal themes.

### ***"The Gospel of the Grace of God and its Offer to All"***

Fisher's book, the Auchterarder *Creed* and the Marrow Brethren all promoted God's free offer of the gospel to all. It is important to have in mind that this controversy ensued in the context of reformed theology and the Calvinist belief that Christ died exclusively for the elect, the so called "Limited Atonement". Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Marrow Brethren did not believe this point of Calvinism. They had no quarrel with the *content* of its teaching, but with its wrong *application*.

According to them, the problem originated from separating Christ from the blessings that come from his work on the cross in the gospel proclamation. This is

where the title of the book, *The Whole Christ*, comes from, which is a translation of the Latin expression *Totus Christus*, an expression that was dear to both Augustine and Calvin. So, when Christ is separated from blessings that come from his life and death, a rather pragmatic question arises: “How can we receive these blessings?” This causes the consequential separation of the offer of Christ in the gospel from the offer of these blessings only to those who fulfill certain criteria, namely, those who repent.

The Marrow Brethren labored to retain the New Testament stress on the fullness and freedom of grace that is in Christ to all who come to him (42). In the New Testament, Christ is proclaimed to all without distinction. However, in 18<sup>th</sup> century theology, a new trend was set in preaching a doctrine of conditioned grace because it was considered that the blessings of Christ’s life and death can be genuinely offered only to those who will forsake sin in order to receive them. They thought that these blessings of salvation are to be offered only to those who can be certain of their salvation.

It is important to understand the key biblical understanding of a Christian as the one who is “in Christ” (45). The call to salvation is not an invitation to receive some blessings detached from Christ, but a call to receive the whole Christ himself. Moreover, the reason why Christ can be offered to all without distinction is because of the warrant that comes from faith: “Jesus Christ is able to save all those who come to God through him, since his is the only name given under heaven whereby we may be saved. Christ himself is the gospel” (52). The offer of Christ in the gospel does not depend on any conditions since conditions would be opposed to the very nature of God’s grace. The offer of Christ in the gospel is not conditioned even upon “a sufficient degree of conviction of sin” (57). Therefore, repentance is not a condition to salvation, but its fruit. It is a result of our death to sin in our union with Christ for justification (104 n. 15)!

Another important aspect of the offer of Christ in the gospel is this question about God’s love towards sinners. It is very important to know that God did not start loving us because of Christ’s deed on the cross. God the Father gave his Son because he “loved the world.” Ferguson skillfully depicts Eve’s encounter with the lies of the snake in Genesis when Satan presented God as one who is “restrictive, self-absorbed, and selfish...” (69). Many people have this understanding of God as someone whom Christ had to persuade to love us and in whose love we can never be completely certain (66). These truths are especially important for the ministers of the gospel who need to be more “like God, with a heart of grace; someone who sees God bringing prodigals home and runs to embrace them, weeps for joy that they have been brought home, and kisses them—asking no questions—no qualifications or conditions required” (73).

### ***“The Gospel and Legalism”***

In the historical milieu in which Boston and the other Marrow Brethren lived, their labor to preserve the gospel of the grace of God was met with many accusations, the most prominent one being that they were antinomians. On the other hand, they regarded most of those who opposed them as having in them a *spirit of legalism* which they diagnosed first in themselves and were now attempting to defeat.

The whole question of legalism is tricky since it is possible to adhere to the “gospel of God’s grace” doctrinally, but to cultivate a legalistic spirit in oneself. Legalism is much more than a desire to save ourselves through good works (75). It actually reaches much deeper into the human psyche, which may mean that legalism is “a primary, if not ultimate, pastoral problem” (80).

According to legalism, “if you are to receive anything from this misanthropic deity, then it must now be paid for and earned” (81). God is on the far side from it, as his command includes not only the negative, but also the positive side, to enjoy his blessings. The essence of legalism, therefore, is to separate God’s law from his gracious character (81).

This is where legalism is very similar to antinomianism (83). Its opposite is not antinomianism, but “the truth about God,” and when we glorify God, we are supposed to “enjoy him forever,” and with him, we are to enjoy in everything he has given to us” (84). Legalism is not only a matter of intellect, but also of the heart which is instructed by the sinful nature to distort the “*law* from its God-given character and function” (88).

After a brief, but important, qualification of some points of belief held by those who adhere to the so-called *New Perspective on Paul* (namely that it is right in its analysis that doctrinally Second Temple Judaism was not a religion solely based on works, but on grace also, nevertheless that in practice it was based on a legalistic spirit as evidenced by both Jesus and Paul’s description of Pharisaism), Ferguson applies this understanding of legalism to the proclamation of the gospel. He writes that, although in its foundation the “proclamation of the gospel is a repudiation of doctrinal legalism,” because of its encodedness to legalism, the human heart hears a message that, because of its sin, it should try to please God better now. He calls it “experimental legalism,” and he concludes that it is possible to have both “an *evangelical head* and a *legalistic heart*” (94).

In the last analysis, the issue with legalism comes down to *justification by faith alone*. Our understanding of it is integrally related to our freedom and joy in Christ” (108). The reason for this is because justification by faith excludes all boasting since grace excludes any meeting of requirements on our part, that is, it excludes merit. An understanding of God’s grace destroys legalism. Unfortunately, the mere understanding of God’s grace does not preclude legalism from “so easily creep(ing) into our thinking” (110).

Each believer receives the Law as a “rule of life,” and not as a “covenant of

works.” It is the light upon our feet, and not a way to “strengthen justification.” Christ has fulfilled the Law as a covenant of works instead of us. The Marrow Brethren believed that the Law is good and that the moral Law summarized in the Decalogue as a rule of life is being inscribed on the hearts of believers at the occasion of their regeneration (121). Nevertheless, Christians are no longer under the Law, but under grace. They have died to the Law, who was their first husband, and now they live in a second marriage, married to Christ as their new husband. The only cure for legalism is “to live in the awareness that the new husband abounds in more grace than the abusive husband did in condemnation” (122).

In chapter six, Ferguson touches upon the symptoms of “a self-righteous temper” (123). This we can see in the example of a Pharisee in the parable about the Pharisee and a tax collector. We are over-familiar with this parable, and today’s evangelicals might have more in common with the Pharisee than with the tax-collector. “Massive outpourings of God’s grace” are required in order to unmask such a legalistic spirit (126). Jesus achieved this in his parables of the Prodigal son, the Pharisee and the tax-collector, and the workers in the field. This legalistic spirit has many faces and it manifests in thinking about life according to the principles of merit or, at least, recognition for our service, in every form of jealousy, as well as in wrong motives for obedience (127-8).

Legalism, in effect, enslaves the soul. It whispers in its ear that it has sinned and that it does not deserve to be called a believer (133). The only liberation from this bondage is “grace in Christ,” (134) who is “(m)ore full of grace than I of sin” (135).

### ***“The Gospel and Antinomianism”***

The Marrow Brethren were accused of antinomianism, yet they were comforted by the fact that both Jesus and Paul received similar unjustified criticism from their contemporaries.

In chapter seven, Ferguson traces the development of antinomianism in the church after the Reformation. He carefully divides it into three strands: dogmatic, exegetical and experiential. He advocates the division of Old Testament law into three parts or dimensions: moral (Decalogue), civil and ceremonial. This moral dimension of the law was summarized in the Ten Commandments which remain “the rule of life” for New Testament believers. In reformed theology, this is called the third use of the Law.

Antinomianism is not contrasted by legalism, but both legalism and antinomianism are “antithetical to grace.” Therefore, it is wrong to prescribe one “as the antidote for the other.” On the contrary, “God’s grace in Christ in our union with Christ, is the antidote to both” (156).

An antinomian is, essentially, “a person with a legalistic heart,” and usually an

antinomian is a person who is trying to escape this legalism, but goes astray into another extreme (157). In place of running to antinomianism, what is needed is to realize that our relationship to the Law is mediated through Christ (160). Paul never claimed that the Law is bad, but that it is powerless because of sin.

God does not accept us the way we are. On the contrary, God accepts us “despite the way we are. He receives us only in Christ and for Christ’s sake. Nor does he mean to leave us the way he found us, but to transform us into the likeness of his Son” (154). The Law is “spiritual” and it serves the purpose of “the restoration of man as the image of God” (167). It is true that love is the fulfillment of the Law, but it really means that love fulfills what the Law requires since love needs orientation and principles of action. God’s commandments are like “the railroad tracks on which the life empowered by the love of God poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit runs” (168-9). The same Law that Adam heard in the Garden and Moses brought with him from the mountain, hewn on tablets of stone, Jesus Christ sent to his people after he “ascended into the heavenly Mount, but in contrast to Moses, he has sent down the Spirit who rewrites the law not now merely on tablets of stone but in our hearts” (169).

Therefore, in the gospel we see this “full and free offer of Christ, this dissolution of the heart bondage that evidences itself in both legalism and antinomianism, this gracious obedience to God to which our union with Christ gives rise as the Spirit writes the law into our hearts” (175).

### ***“The Gospel and the Assurance of Salvation”***

The final three chapters deal with the question of the assurance of salvation. It is, of course, possible to have a false assurance of salvation. It is also possible that God’s child would have no assurance of salvation. The New Testament and post-apostolic church spoke much about the assurance of salvation. Nevertheless, soon the fear of antinomianism drove the church to look down upon this assurance, and the Roman Catholic Church, after the Council of Trent, determined that it differs from Protestantism the most in the doctrine of assurance.

However, even among reformed Protestants, discussions emerged about whether this assurance is “of the essence of faith,” (182) in other words, whether the assurance of salvation belongs to faith by default or not. The *Westminster Confession* holds that a believer may wait a longer time before receiving this assurance (185). The Marrow Brethren were accused of teaching that assurance is of the essence of faith, which they denied.

Faith in Christ by its own nature contains this assurance because Christ is trustworthy. On the other hand, assurance of faith is not so much a matter of *trusting in Christ*, as much as it is a “reflex act” with the believer him- or herself as its object (186). Therefore, this question of assurance of salvation is not a matter of faith in Christ as Savior, but faith that our *faith* is real (196). It is, then, natural

that believers will, at times, live lives pervaded with doubt (188).

Sanctification does not confirm a believer's assurance in a direct manner, but indirectly – by confirming his or her faith in Christ (190). Assurance of salvation is thus “the fruit of faith in Christ” (197). It never exists outside of faith (197). In other words, we should never seek for it in our sanctification or good works outside of faith in Christ. The absence of salvation may mean that there is an absence of faith. From First John, we see that there are four moral characteristics in a believer's life which encourage assurance: obedience to God's commandments, righteous life, avoiding sin and a life of love (201-3).

Ferguson cites a passage from *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* where the pastor warns a young believer which doubts his salvation that he should never attempt to reach assurance by “forcing and constraining yourself to yield obedience to God's commandments” (203). In other words, we should never try to cure our lack of assurance by good works, but we should seek assurance in our faith in Christ. And, when we trust in Christ, the evidence of our faith will “grow like fruit” (204).

Assurance of salvation is also the fruit of the Spirit's testimony (205) as he cries within us, “Abba, Father!” (208). It is very important since it reflects the believer's instinct, when even in the darkest hour, it calls upon the Father and sees itself as God's child (209-10). This means that “Gospel assurance is not withheld from God's children even when they have not shown themselves to be strong” (210).

Ferguson cites several other reasons why a believer might lose his or her assurance of salvation. Among these are sin, misunderstanding afflictions and a wrong view of sanctification. Even one's psychological profile, like melancholy, can stand in the way of the enjoyment of assurance. It is therefore important to direct believers towards repentance, and to teach them about God's love and acceptance in Christ despite their shortcomings and afflictions, but also about the reality of the battle against sin. More than anything else, it is important to point them to the Savior who is ever near and inviting us to approach the Father in full assurance of faith (219).

Humanity's ancient foe often works to destroy our assurance (220). Paul probably thought of Satan when, in Romans 8:31-39, he asked the question, “who” and not “what” in the context of opposition to God's elect. Our conscience also often battles against assurance of salvation “by restricting our liberty more narrowly than Scripture, and therefore God himself, does.” This leads us to “impute to him the restrictions that our own conscience has unbiblically placed upon our life... A spirit of bondage, rather than the enjoyment of assurance, is the end result” (222).

Finally, we can lose our assurance when we do not use the means God gave us

to bolster it. Those means are the ministry of the Word, worship and fellowship, but also baptism and the Lord's Supper, which gives us "the same Christ better, with a firmer grasp of his grace through seeing, touching, feeling, and tasting as well as hearing" (223).

In his Conclusion, the author repeats the implications of this book. Important questions related to this controversy serve as a litmus test that "increases our sensitivity to and unmasks the depths of the legal disposition that lingers, often hidden, in our hearts" (227). It also encourages us "to reflect on and wrestle with key theological and pastoral issues, and thus leads us to a deeper appreciation of the nature of the gospel and how to live in it, preach, and apply it" (227-8). In a way, this controversy tinctures our lives and ministries, and it bathes our hearts "in a new sense of God's graciousness in Christ." The book ends with an Appendix, "Thomas Boston on Faith," where Boston's own understanding of faith is demonstrated, faith as a firm persuasion that Christ is his own Savior and Redeemer.

*The Whole Christ* is, perhaps, one of the most important books of the decade. It was written from a certain theological perspective, the Reformed perspective, and not everyone will fully agree with it. Nevertheless, this theological perspective is known by its ability to highlight those nuances in its belief which are then greatly reflected in everyday life and ministry. Ferguson argues well and the book is interesting to read. It does seem at times that he tried to say too much in a limited space. There are some lingering questions more theologically minded readers might have. Nevertheless, one compliment in particular can be said to its author, that he succeeded in stimulating and pointing our thinking into a right direction with regards to how to apply what we have learned.

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