“A Truly Great Divine:” The Life and Influence of Thomas Boston

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Introduction and Early Life

Thomas Boston was a Scottish pastor-theologian who lived during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Serving his entire career as a minister to rural parishes of the Church of Scotland, Boston was also a prolific writer, producing a range of works that included evangelistic manuals and theological treatises. He also played a key role in the Marrow controversy of the 1710s and 1720s. Boston's theological emphases and evangelical instincts left a significant mark on both the Church of Scotland and the Seceders. His championing of free grace in Christ and the universal nature of the gospel offer make Boston an essential figure of Scottish Protestant history.

Boston was born in Duns, Berwickshire, on March 17th, 1676, the youngest of seven children. His parents, John and Alison, were Covenanters, defenders of a national Presbyterian church order during the time of English Episcopal rule. For a short time in 1680, authorities imprisoned John for his nonconformity. During his youth, Thomas attended grammar school in Duns and "made rapid progress from the age of eight till he was thirteen," exhibiting academic giftedness.[1]

Due to their dissatisfaction with the preaching they received in Duns, the Boston family regularly attended church in Whitsome, a small village in the Scottish Borders, to hear Henry Erskine preach. It was here that the young Thomas Boston underwent a conversion experience. At age eleven, he heard two sermons by Erskine. The first, preached on Matthew 3:7, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" impressed upon Boston a sense of his own sin and guilt before holy God. The text of the second sermon was John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God." John the Baptist's words held up "before [Thomas's] anxious

[1] George H. Morrison, "Introduction," in *Memoirs of Thomas Boston* by Thomas Boston (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899; Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), xi–xii.

gaze the cross and the Crucified One as the divinely provided means of his deliverance…and brought him into 'the valley of decision.'"[2] Boston recalls this experience in his *Memoirs*: "By these, I judge, God spake to me; however, I know I was touched quickly after the first hearing, wherein I was like one amazed with some new and strange thing. . . . Sure I am, I was in good earnest concerned for a saving interest in Jesus Christ." This conversion experience marked the start of Boston's call to become a minister.[3]

Boston completed his grammar school education in the fall of 1689, at the age of thirteen. In 1691, he began his studies at the University of Edinburgh, focusing on the Greek and Roman classics, logic, metaphysics, natural physics, and ethics. After receiving his Laureation—similar to a modern-day Master of Arts—in 1694, Boston devoted his attention to systematic theology. From there, he entered into a period of examination to become a probationer. This status, also called a licentiate, was the final step before being examined for official ordination in the Church of Scotland. As a part of this probation, Boston preached and wrote theological treatises, with his examiners noting his superior gifts. In the early months of this process, however, hearers felt that his sermons consisted "too exclusively in denunciations of sin and threatenings of divine wrath." This pattern continued until, after one Sunday, a seasoned pastor told Boston to sprinkle more grace into his preaching. This correction had an immediate effect on Boston. From that point onward, Boston resolved, "to season and vitalize all his discourses with the gospel of Heaven's love."[4] The young candidate spent two years in this probationary stage and, toward the end of his studies, wrote a small book called *A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-fishing*. The treatise centered on Jesus's call to Simon and Andrew to become "fishers of men" (Mark 1:16–18; Luke 5:1–11).

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[2] Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: A Heart for Service* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 26.

[3] Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899; Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 9–10.

[4] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 38.

The text reveals that, for Boston, winning souls for Christ means more than powerful preaching and clever tactics. The preacher, he said, must imitate Jesus, "in their character…to make him their pattern."[5]

Ministry at Simprin

Boston became minister of the small parish of Simprin on September 21st, 1699. The congregation's spiritual state quickly disappointed him. After visiting every household and interviewing all seventy "examinable" members, Boston found that most of his congregants focused solely on their work, farming, and were entirely ignorant about even "the simplest elements of divine truth." Only one household practiced family worship, and the congregation had neglected the Lord's Supper for several years. Before the summer of 1700, however, small episodes of awakening occurred. People were developing a taste for the spiritual, which encouraged Boston's efforts.[6]

On July 17th, 1700, Boston married Katharine Brown, a parishioner of Simprin. Katharine was a pious woman, and their marriage was affectionate but filled with trials of sickness and death, losing many children in infancy. Soon after they wed, the Bostons opened their home for any of the congregants at Simprin to attend morning family worship. Many accepted the invitation, and spiritual blessing quickly followed.[7]

One episode during his Simprin years is especially noteworthy for understanding Boston's life: his discovery of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. When he began his ministry at Simprin, Boston had access to few books. He was limited, therefore, in his ability to undertake heavy theological study. One question he could not find a satisfactory answer to was how law commands related to the offer of the gospel: "I had heard Mr. Mair often speak of being divorced

[5] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 43–44.
[6] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 48–51.
[7] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 52–54.

from the law, dead to it, and the like. . . . but then I could not see how to reconcile the same with other things which seemed to be truth too."[8] Boston's most pressing concern was, "Whether or not repentance be necessary, in order to the obtaining of the pardon of sin." On this point, Boston described himself as "confused, indistinct, and hampered…as to the free, open, and unhampered access of sinners unto [Christ]." In 1702, however, in an effort to grow his library, the young pastor received several books from a friend. The gift included various works by Girolamo Zanchi and Theodore Beza, as well as Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. One addition to Boston's library, Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, was particularly enlightening. In his *Memoirs*, Boston recalls the time he found the book:

> As I was sitting one day in a house of Simprin, I espied above the window-head two little old books; which when I had taken down, I found intitled, the one *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the other, *Christ's Blood Flowing Freely to Sinners*. These I reckon had been brought home from England by the master of the house, a soldier in the time of the civil wars. Finding them to point to the subject I was in particular concern about, I brought them both away. The latter…I relished not. . . . The other, being the first part only of the Marrow, I relished greatly. . . . I found it to come close to the points I was in quest of, and to shew the consistency of these, which I could not reconcile before: so that I rejoiced in it, as a light which the Lord had seasonably struck up to me in my darkness.

These resources convinced Boston of one of the doctrines that would shape his ministry and evangelical legacy: "'I will be their God, and they shall be my people,' is not conditional, but absolute. . . . *Ergo*, The covenant is not conditional." For Boston, the Covenant of Grace, being the vehicle through which God grants forgiveness of sins and redemption in Christ, was unconditional. Its blessings required nothing of sinners who wished to appropriate them; the *instrument* for appropriating it was faith. Union with Christ meant that *he* met all conditions.[9]

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[8] Rev. Thomas Mair, minister of a neighboring parish, was a friend of Boston and had married him and Katharine.

[9] Boston, *Memoirs*, 168–71.

The Marrow transformed Boston's ministry. No longer constrained by theological confusion or misstep, Boston enjoyed freedom in delivering to his parishioners a message "which was fitted for all, needed by all, and commanded to be proclaimed to all." His later years at Simprin saw multitudes of people flock to hear him preach, though they could not become members due to the parish system.[10]

Ministry at Ettrick

In early 1706, Boston received a call to minister at the parish of Ettrick, Selkirkshire. Despite Boston's reluctance to leave Simprin, "a people whose hearts were knit to me, and mine to them," his synod transferred him to Ettrick on March 6th, 1707, and his first Sunday was May 1st.[11] The new parish was significantly larger than Simprin, both in terms of land and congregation size. Moreover, it had not had a pastor for four years. This combination created a challenging environment for Boston. As one of his biographers notes, "Ettrick was very liberal to its poor, and very hospitable to the passing stranger; but it was full of pride, and self-assurance, and conceit—the frequent offspring of an isolated life; and…that self-assurance and conceit hampered the work of ministering." Even after eight years of serving his parish, Boston told his wife, "My heart is alienated from this place."[12]

In September 1716, Boston received an invitation from the church of Closeburn, Dumfriesshire, to become their minister. Soon after, commissioners from Closeburn's presbytery visited Ettrick, once again asking Boston to transfer to the Dumfriesshire church. Boston, nevertheless, was immovable from the start. Although he had effected some positive change at the Ettrick parish, he judged it to be incomplete. To switch parishes now, Boston believed, would erase all spiritual progress. For one thing, there was no succession plan at Ettrick—no layman

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[10] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 62.
[11] Boston, *Memoirs*, 211; Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 65–66.
[12] Morrison, "Introduction," in *Memoirs*, xx–xxi.

was fit to lead such a people before the arrival of another minister. For another thing, the congregation had witnessed the spiritual fruits of their minister and his family during times of strife and struggle, especially in the early years of his pastorate. Leaving Ettrick now would obfuscate the witness of Boston's character.[13] Throughout the whole process, Boston's parish observed their pastor's unrelenting commitment to a cold and stiff-necked people. After a passionate speech before the Commission of the General Assembly in 1717, Boston was to remain at Ettrick.[14] As a result of his fidelity, the following Sunday saw hundreds of new parishioners fill the church at Ettrick. The people's relationship with their pastor, moreover, had forever changed: "Coldness and distrust seemed to have vanished. By that disinterested act, in which he had so earnestly pleaded for his retention in Ettrick, he had placed his noble unselfishness beyond doubt, and revealed a love to his people which many waters could not quench. He had won the hearts of all. The people now understood their minister."[15]

In 1720, Boston published *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, a systematic explanation of human nature and salvation in plain terms. Boston wrote the book for catechetical purposes. It quickly became a spiritual classic, with families using it for devotional reading.[16] "There is no book of practical divinity," church historian John MacLeod argues, "that was more read in the godly homes of Scotland than this treatise. It did more to mould the thought of his countrymen than anything except the Westminster Shorter Catechism."[17]

The Marrow Controversy

Perhaps the most historically significant episode in Boston's life was the Marrow Controversy. By the early 1700s, two distinct schools of theology had emerged within the

[13] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 87–88.
[14] Boston, *Memoirs*, 320–328.
[15] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 91–92.
[16] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 95–96.
[17] John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1943; Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 146.

Scottish Church. One of these groups—the Neonomians—was reacting against a perceived antinomianism that had crept into Reformed theology. The Neonomians made the gospel a "New Law."[18] Richard Baxter, for example, taught that faith was not merely the instrument of effecting union with Christ, but a legal condition needing to be met before acceptance by God.[19] Baxter even went as far as to modify the Reformation doctrine of imputation to the believer: "No man is judged righteous by God, that is not first made righteous."[20] The second school was the Hyper-Calvinists. They were those who denied the universal gospel proclamation to all men. Instead, preachers should offer Christ only to those whom God effectually calls—or, those showing outward signs of repentance and *preparedness* to accept Christ. Critics of the Hyper-Calvinists also charged them with minimizing the sinner's responsibility to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith.[21] These two groups, then, the Neonomians and the Hyper-Calvinists, dominated much of the discourse in early-eighteenth-century Scottish Protestantism.

An ordination exam brought this doctrinal unrest to the forefront in 1717. At the time, the Presbytery of Auchterarder required all licensure candidates to affirm the following creed: "It is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ." As MacLeod writes, "This was an attempt on the part of a Presbytery to checkmate legal doctrine. . . . What was aimed at or struck at was the teaching that one has to qualify for coming by faith to Christ by first forsaking sin, as though the coming to Him was not itself a forsaking of sin, and saving faith and true repentance were not inseparable."[22] One student, William Craig, refused to affirm the creed and was thus denied ordination. Craig then reported the Auchterarder Presbytery

[18] MacLeod, *Scottish Theology*, 133–34.
[19] J. Wayne Baker, "Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 1 (1985), https://doi.org/10.2307/2540936.
[20] Richard Baxter, *The Scripture Gospel Defended* (London: Bible and Three Crowns 1690), 7.
[21] MacLeod, *Scottish Theology*, 140–43.
[22] MacLeod, *Scottish Theology*, 156–57.

to the General Assembly, which declared "their abhorrence" of the creed as "unsound and most detestable."[23]

While most ministers at the Assembly supported its condemnation, twelve did not. Among them was Thomas Boston, who admitted that the creed's phrasing was confusing but affirmed it wholeheartedly. During the Assembly, Boston mentioned *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* to one Rev. John Drummond, praising the book for its emphasis on the free offer of the gospel. The book eventually reached Rev. James Hog of Carnock, who reprinted it in 1718. This reprinting caused "a great sir" and led to the General Assembly condemning *The Marrow* in 1720 and prohibiting ministers from recommending it. The "Marrowmen" responded to the Assembly by declaring their subscription to a list of doctrines characteristic neither of Neonomianism nor of Hyper-Calvinism. The Marrowmen affirmed,

I. That the Father hath made in the Gospel a free and unlimited offer of Christ and of salvation to all men, by virtue of which every individual who hears the Gospel has warrant to take hold of the said offer and apply it to his own soul;
II. That an assured persuasion of the truth of God's promise in the Gospel with respect to one's self in particular, is included in the very nature of saving faith;
III. That the believer's holiness is in no way the price or condition of salvation;
IV. That believers in yielding obedience to the law as a rule of life ought not to be influenced either by mercenary hopes of heaven or by slavish fears of hell;
V. That the believer is not in any way under the law as a covenant of works; and
VI. That it is a just and Scriptural distinction which is made between the law as a covenant of works and the law as a rule of life in the hands of Christ.[24]

In 1722, the General Assembly rebuked the Marrowmen, arguing that assurance is not a necessary component of saving faith and that fear of hell and hope of heaven are appropriate

[23] *The Principal Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; Conveened at Edinburgh, the 2d Day of May 1717* (Edinburgh: The Heirs and Successors of Andrew Anderson, 1717), 18–19.

[24] John M'Kerrow, *History of the Secession Church*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Son, 1839), 18.

motivations for holy living. Significantly, the Assembly also accused the Marrowmen of teaching universal atonement and antinomianism.[25]

Boston, for his part, "received the rebuke and admonition as an ornament…for the cause of truth."[26] The pastor of Ettrick was thoroughly committed to the *Marrow* doctrines. In 1726, under the pseudonym of Philalethes Irenaeus, he published a new, extensively annotated edition of the work.[27] Despite the Assembly's prohibition, *The Marrow* became even more popular.[28]

Final Years and Influence

Once the controversy subsided, Boston resumed his duties at Ettrick. From all accounts, church life in Ettrick remained peaceful in the final years of his life.[29] In his final year, Boston published *A Memorial concerning Personal and Family Fasting and Humiliation*, a short book on fasting and prayer.[30] He died on May 20th, 1732, nine days after his last sermon.

Boston's influence was significant. His role in the Marrow Controversy, through which he defended the free offer of the gospel in the face of both Neonomianism and Hyper-Calvinism, secured the existence of an evangelical strain within the Church of Scotland. Boston's theology also shaped the thought of Ebenezer Erskine, leader of the First Secession and forerunner to the United Secession Church, which stood in direct continuity with the Marrow tradition. His *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* spread even to the proto-American colonies. The classic treatise, the appreciative Jonathan Edwards writes, "shows Mr Boston to have been a truly great divine."[31] *The Marrow*, too, reached the colonies. In a letter to George Whitefield, Ebenezer

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[25] Donald Beaton, "The *Marrow of Modern Divinity* and the Marrow Controversy," *Scottish Church History Society* 1 (1926): 115–21.

[26] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 137.

[27] David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy, 1718-1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 433.

[28] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 139.

[29] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 127.

[30] Thomson, *Thomas Boston*, 147–48.

[31] Jonathan Edwards, "Reply to Mr. Gillespie," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (1834; Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), xci.

Erskine writes, "I am glad the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* has been helpful to you, as it has been to many."[32] The three central distinctives of Boston's theology—the scope of the gospel offer, the unconditionality of coming to Christ, and experiential Calvinism—directly anticipated the emphases of later eighteenth-century evangelicalism, especially the American revivals.

[32] Ebenezer Erskine, letter to George Whitefield, quoted in John Brown, *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated* (Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton, and Co., 1831), cited in Beaton, "The *Marrow of Modern Divinity* and the Marrow Controversy," 112.

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