

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston**

A. T. B. McGowan

Carlisle

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Paternoster is to be commended for filling some very large gaps in the publishing of theological books. Besides the republication of older Puritan works, there is little serious theological material being published. In its "Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought" series Paternoster is reprinting books that have not been available for hundreds of years, and providing translations of books that have never been available in English. In such series as their "Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs" and "Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology" they are providing a great deal of interesting theological analysis and debate. One of their recent efforts in this area is A.T.B. McGowan's *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*.

There is nothing else currently available on Thomas Boston and his theology that this reviewer knows of. The book is, therefore, most welcome. It is also welcome, however, for the wealth of information on Boston that it provides and because it is written in an easy and pleasant style without much technical language. Too many books on such subjects as these are far over the heads of the ordinary reader.

Thomas Boston should be of much interest today in light of his involvement in the Marrow controversy. Many of the issues raised in that debate are still around today. Indeed, this is one of the reasons, McGowan tells us, for his interest in Thomas Boston (pp. xvi, xvii). Though we would disagree with him as well as with Boston on these issues, the book is nevertheless a welcome addition to the debate inasmuch as these issues are brought forward.

The book is divided into sections dealing with various aspects of Boston's theology, the Covenants, the Person of Christ, the Atonement, Predestination, Regeneration, Justification, Sanctification, Repentance and Assurance. Generally speaking, however, the book falls into two parts as far as its main theme is concerned. In the first part of the book McGowan is primarily concerned to show that Boston was fundamentally orthodox in his theology. In the last half he attempts to show that Boston did not depart from this orthodoxy in connection with the issues raised in the Marrow controversy.

One of the principle issues in the Marrow controversy, though not the only one, is the matter of the preaching of the gospel in relation to the atonement of Christ. Both *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the book that lay at the heart of the Marrow controversy, and Boston himself, who recommended it and republished it with notes of his own, taught what has come to be known today as the "well-meant offer of the gospel." They grounded that "well-meant offer" in the atonement of Christ, and were, therefore, both then and now accused of denying the doctrine of limited or particular atonement.

In treating Boston's views on this subject McGowan attempts to clear Boston and the other Marrow men of these charges. He suggests that Boston only taught a certain sufficiency of the atonement for all men (p. 54; the traditional sufficiency/efficiency distinction). But from McGowan's own quotations of Boston it is very clear that Boston and the other Marrow men went beyond this and taught a certain reference of the atonement of Christ to the non-elect. Thus we find such statements in Boston:

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the official Saviour, not of the elect only, but of the world of mankind indefinitely; so our text calls him "Saviour of the world". Agreeably to which, God in Christ is called "the Saviour of all men", but with a speciality, "the Saviour of them that believe", I Tim. iv, 10. The matter lies here: like as a prince, out of regard to his subjects' welfare, gives a commission to a qualified person to be the physician to such a society, a regiment, or the like; and the prince's commission constitutes him physician of that society; so that though many of them should never employ him, but call other physicians, yet still there is a relation betwixt him and them; he is their physician by office; any of them all may come to them if they will, and be healed: so God, looking on the ruined world of mankind, has constituted and appointed Jesus Christ his Son Saviour of the world ... so that nay of them all may come to him, without money or price, and be saved by him as their own Saviour appointed them by the Father (McGowan, pp. 41, 42).

Yet, as McGowan shows, Boston did teach the doctrine of limited atonement and its attendant doctrine of divine predestination in no uncertain terms. Indeed, though he recommended and republished the *Marrow*, he himself refrained from using the language of the *Marrow* regarding a certain universality in the death of Christ and the atonement as expressed in its notorious statement:

In his name we can ... say to every man, not: "Christ has died for you", that is to say: the benefits of the gospel are for you; but "Christ is dead for you"—that is, in the fulness of Christ crucified, there is salvation for you through faith in his name (McGowan, p. 44).

This is only to say, however, that Boston's theology runs on two tracks as does the theology of those today who try to hold both Calvinism and to the theology of the well-meant offer together. One cannot, in the end have it both ways. It cannot be true, whatever construction is put on the words, that "Christ is dead" for all men *and* that the atonement is limited. It cannot, without contradicting the simplicity and unchangeableness of God be true that God both desires and does not desire the salvation of the reprobate. It cannot be the case that He well-meaningly offers in the gospel something He does not have to give, as Boston, and the other Marrow men held then, and their disciples today hold.

McGowan himself as much as admits this inconsistency this when he speaks of Boston holding the gracious invitation and predestination "in tension" (pp. 15, 54). He attempts (pp. 45 ff.), too, in this connection, to defend Boston from the charge of Amyrauldianism (the teaching that there is a double reference to the atonement, i.e., both to the elect and to the reprobate). But it is striking, as McGowan shows, that the secession churches which were born out of the Marrow controversy were plagued by Amyrauldianism and were never free from controversy over the doctrine of the atonement.

The inconsistency in Boston must, therefore, be the explanation of the very differing views of Boston that McGowan himself mentions in his "Introduction" (pp. 15, 16). It must also be the reason why, in spite of McGowan's attempts to prove him orthodox, that both in his own time and in the present there continue to be doubts of his full orthodoxy.

In this connection we found it striking that there is in the discussion of Boston's views on predestination, almost no mention of reprobation. Whether this reflects Boston's own theology or not, we do not know, but it certainly is not true of the Westminster Standards. It is, however, true that the doctrine of reprobation almost always receives very short shrift among those who are committed to the well-meant offer. The reason is obvious, for it is the doctrine of reprobation which most emphatically contradicts the theology of the offer. It raises the (unanswerable) question, "How can God sincerely offer what He neither has to give nor *intends* to give?"

That these issues are still alive is also evident in the book. In spite of his repeated

assertions of objectivity (pp. xvii, xviii), a definite bias against Boston's opponents in the Marrow controversy comes out. McGowan repeatedly characterises Boston's main opponent, James Hadow in a negative fashion. He says, for example, that Hadow "was a legalist whose views on repentance represented a significant move away from the evangelical position of Reformed orthodoxy" (p. 182).

Because of the relevance of these controversies we would have liked to have seen, especially in light of the book's title, a clearer and more thorough explanation of the connection between Boston's federal (covenant) theology (which was also the theology of his contemporaries), and the issues raised in the Marrow controversy. We ourselves are certain that there was such a connection, but McGowan spends very little time on that in spite of his emphasis on Boston's federalism.

Though we disagree with McGowan's analysis of Boston's views, the book is nevertheless a very valuable introduction to the thought of Thomas Boston and to the Marrow controversies in which he was involved. Indeed, the book serves not only as a mine of information on Boston, but on many others as well, for in each of the chapters McGowan compares Boston with others, as for example in the chapter on predestination, where Boston's theology is compared with that of Augustine, Calvin, Knox and Westminster. Whether one agrees with McGowan's conclusions and bias or not, then, there is much important information in the book. May there be many others like it from Paternoster.