

# INTRODUCTION

## *THE LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF THOMAS BOSTON*

“If Scotland had been searched,” historian Andrew Thomson wrote about Thomas Boston (1676–1732), “there was not a minister within its bounds who, alike in personal character, and in the discharge of his pastoral function, approached nearer the apostolic model than did this man of God. It is a fact that, even before he died, men and children had come to pronounce his name with reverence. It had become a synonym for holy living.”<sup>1</sup> Boston was an eminent Scottish divine and prolific theological writer. Ordained to the ministry of the Church of Scotland, he faithfully served two congregations, first in the parish of Simprin (1699–1707), then in the parish of Ettrick (1707–1732).

### **Birth, Conversion, and Education**

Thomas Boston was born on March 17, 1676, in Duns, Berwickshire, the youngest of seven children. He was born when his mother was believed to be past child-bearing age, which resulted in some people calling him “God’s send.”<sup>2</sup> His parents, who belonged to the lower middle class, sent Thomas to the grammar school in Duns, where he acquired a love for reading the Bible and was introduced to Latin and New Testament Greek.

John Boston, Thomas’s father, made wooden casks and barrels by trade and was a committed Presbyterian. He was imprisoned for his faith for refusing to conform to the changes in worship and government imposed on the Church of Scotland by the Stuart kings.<sup>3</sup> One of Thomas’s earliest memories was

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1. Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston of Ettrick: His Life and Times* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1895), 12.

2. Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of Mr. Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), 5.

3. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 88.

visiting his father in prison to cheer him up; at the time, he thought that he too might one day be imprisoned for the faith.<sup>4</sup>

After the Act of Toleration in 1687 permitted nonconforming Presbyterians to hold services in private houses, John Boston often traveled several miles with his family to Whitsome to hear the preaching of Henry Erskine, the father of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine.<sup>5</sup> When Thomas was eleven, he heard Erskine preach on John 1:29 and Matthew 3:7 and was deeply moved and spiritually awakened.<sup>6</sup>

Erskine's ministry continued to influence the Boston family. Regardless of the weather, Thomas would walk several miles each Sabbath to be fed spiritually. He later wrote, "In the winter sometimes it was my lot to go alone, without so much as a horse to carry me through Blackadder water, the wading whereof in sharp frosty weather I very well remember. But such things were then easy, for the benefit of the Word, which came with power."<sup>7</sup>

Boston's spiritual life was strengthened during his teenage years by regular Bible study and spiritual conversations with two boys from school. Before long he, as well as his father, felt that God was calling him to the ministry. To meet the cost of further studies, John Boston apprenticed his son to Alexander Cockburn, a notary in the town. That employment continued for two years, and in service to Cockburn, Boston acquired skills that served him well later in life, in both his studies and clerical duties for presbytery and synod.

In 1691 Boston became a student at Edinburgh University. He studied Greek, Latin, logic, metaphysics, ethics, and physics. He studied with such earnestness and lived on such a

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4. Boston, *Memoirs*, 6.

5. Henry Erskine (1624–1696) was ejected from the parish of Cornhill in Northumberland, England, by the Act of Uniformity in 1662. He then returned to his native Dryburgh in Scotland's Berwickshire. After the Revolution of 1688, he preached in the border parish of Whitsome, where Boston heard him for the first time. See Joel R. Beeke, introduction to *The Beauties of Ebenezer Erskine*, ed. Samuel McMillan (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2001), i–ii; and "Memoir of the Rev. Henry Erskine, A.M.," in Donald Fraser, *The Life and Diary of the Reverend Ebenezer Erskine, A.M. of Stirling, Father of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1831), 1–57.

6. Boston, *Memoirs*, 9.

7. Boston, *Memoirs*, 10.

meager income that his physical constitution was weakened, which would affect him for the rest of his life. After earning a master's degree in 1694, Boston received the bursary (a grant of financial aid) from the presbytery of Duns. After spending the autumn in the private study of divinity, he began theological studies at Edinburgh under Dr. George Campbell, who occupied the theological chair.<sup>8</sup> Boston spent one semester there, then completed his studies under the oversight of his presbytery. During this time, he supported himself as a tutor for one year in the home of Andrew Fletcher, the stepson of Lieutenant Colonel Bruce of Kennet, which served as good preparation for the gospel ministry, as he "kept up family worship, catechized the servants, pressed the careless to secret prayer, reproved and warned against sinful practices, and earnestly endeavored the reformation of the vicious."<sup>9</sup>

Boston was licensed by the presbytery of Duns and Chirnside on June 15, 1697. His preaching soon drew crowds and was well received by the laity; however, Boston did not immediately settle in a parish because, though he had the favor of the people, the power to make such appointments was in the hands of the principal heritor, or laird.

In seven parishes where people would have chosen Boston, the laird intervened to prevent it. Boston thus remained a probationer, or intern, for more than two years. Finally, in 1699, the landlord and people of Simprin, Berwickshire, a small parish eight miles southeast of Duns, agreed to call Boston as pastor. Prior to being ordained, Boston renewed his covenant with God, confessing that he was "utterly lost and undone" in himself, stood in "absolute need of a Savior," and "cordially received Him in all His offices, consenting to the terms of the covenant."<sup>10</sup>

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8. George Campbell (1635–1701), professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, "taught a large portion of the first-generation ministers in the post-Revolution Church of Scotland." Cameron, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, 107.

9. Boston, *Memoirs*, 25.

10. Thomas Boston, "Two Forms of Personal Covenanting," in *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston of Ettrick*, ed. Samuel M'Millan (London, 1853), 2:671.

### **Pastorates in Simprin and Ettrick**

Thomas Boston's ministry at Simprin was challenging. The people of his congregation were largely ignorant of spiritual truth and needed to be instructed in the simplest things. They were primarily concerned about making a living rather than attending to the welfare of their souls. Boston was dismayed to learn that only one household observed family worship. What's more, the Lord's Supper had not been administered for several years because of indifference to spiritual things.<sup>11</sup>

Within a year, Boston had reorganized his little flock. He reestablished two services on the Sabbath and lectured on a chapter of the Bible in the morning and preached more freely in the afternoon. In the evening, Boston instructed people in the Westminster Shorter Catechism or on sermons preached that day. The young pastor learned much from questioning his people, as it taught him about the needs of his flock and how he could best meet them.

He set apart Tuesday evening for prayer and praise. Every Thursday he conducted public worship. He regarded pastoral visitation as vital to his ministry and laid it aside only when his health failed him. He spoke intimately with his people and would often urge those who neglected their spiritual state to "close with Christ."

Boston rose early each Monday and devoted hours to prayer and reflection and would pray diligently throughout the week. Throughout his *Memoirs*, his attitude toward life is one of prayerful dependence, laying one matter or another before the Lord. He established regular times for fasting and strove for a life of communion with God. "When his congregation saw him enter his pulpit on the morning of the Lord's Day, they knew that they were looking into the countenance of one who had just come forth from intimate communion with God, and who at once was God's ambassador and their friend," wrote Thomson.<sup>12</sup>

As was the case with many influential divines, Boston was hard on himself spiritually. A typical entry in his *Memoirs*

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11. Jean Watson, *The Pastor of Ettrick: Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1883), 34–45.

12. Thomson, *Thomas Boston of Ettrick*, 173. Cf. William Addison, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Boston of Ettrick* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1936).

reads like this: “Having allotted the morning entirely for prayer and meditation, some worldly thoughts crept in.... In the afternoon I somewhat recovered my forenoon’s loss.”<sup>13</sup> Such entries are often followed by seasons of fasting, intense self-scrutiny, and passionate tears. “Oh, how my heart hates my heart!” he would groan.<sup>14</sup>

Boston remained an arduous student of theology and languages, though his library was modest. It contained less than two hundred volumes at the time of his death, all of which were well read and well digested.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the classical languages, Boston mastered French and Dutch. To compare translations, he often read *De Statenvertaling* (States Bible), the first Dutch translation of the Hebrew and Greek ordered by the Synod of Dort in 1618 and first published in 1637.

Boston’s work as a pastor, which he always performed with intense earnestness, bore much fruit.<sup>16</sup> His flock grew until the church was unable to accommodate the crowds, especially during Communion seasons. After laboring for over seven years, not a single family in the church neglected family worship. Boston could write, “Simprin! O blessed be he for his kindness at Simprin.... I will ever remember Simprin as a field which the Lord had blessed.”<sup>17</sup>

When a call came from Ettrick, the impoverished physical and spiritual condition of the town overcame Boston’s reluctance to leave Simprin. When he arrived in Ettrick, the town had less than four hundred people. The roads were nearly impassable. The parsonage was in disarray. Church services were irregular, and when a service was held, the parishioners would often talk through it. Spiritual barrenness, pride, deceit, swearing, and fornication were rampant.

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13. Boston, *Memoirs*, 97.

14. As quoted in D. J. Innes, “Thomas Boston of Ettrick,” in *Faith and a Good Conscience* (London: Puritan and Reformed Conference, 1962), 36.

15. For a list of volumes in Boston’s library, see Philip Graham Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State* (Carlisle, England: Pater-noster, 1999), 312–19. Approximately one-third of Boston’s library consisted of Puritan literature.

16. On Boston’s work as a pastor, see Stephen Albert Woodruff III, “The Pastoral Ministry in the Church of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century, with Special Reference to Thomas Boston, John Willison, and John Erskine” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1966).

17. Thomson, *Thomas Boston of Ettrick*, 86.

Boston set as his task rebuilding and reorganizing his parish. The first ten years were difficult. After eight years he told his wife, "My heart is alienated from this place," and yet he couldn't leave; he was devoted for better or for worse.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually, the Spirit began to bless Boston's work. His preaching affected increasing numbers of people. After one of his sermons was published, people in Edinburgh began to take notice. Visitors would come from afar to the church. Ettrick soon realized it had a pastor of note. When Boston received a call to Closeburn in 1716, the session at Ettrick called for a congregational fast. That proved to be the turning point for Boston's ministry. For the next sixteen years, he labored on at Ettrick with new authority.<sup>19</sup>

At both Simprin and Ettrick, Boston was cautious in administering the Lord's Supper because of the spiritual condition of the people. He waited for more than three years at Ettrick, then privately interviewed each candidate before recommending whether that person should partake of the Lord's Supper. The first Communion had fifty-seven participants; however, by the time Boston last celebrated it in 1731, there were 777 communicants—which, to his joy, included all four of his surviving children.<sup>20</sup>

God sanctified heavy domestic trials in Boston's life. At age fifteen, he lost his mother, and his father a decade later shortly after settling in Simprin. While in Simprin, Boston married Catherine Brown, the fifth daughter of Robert Brown of Barhill, Clackmannan, in whom Boston saw "sparkles of grace."<sup>21</sup> Boston considered his marriage a gift of the Lord, even though his wife suffered repeated bouts of depression and insanity. From 1720, she was often confined to an apartment called "the inner prison," where she spent months and years without relief, "an easy target for Satan's onslaughts, both concerning her assurance of salvation and her peace with God."<sup>22</sup> He also had to bury six of ten children, two while in

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18. Boston, *Memoirs*, xxi.

19. Donald Macmillan, *Representative Men of the Scottish Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 106–7.

20. John R. de la Haye, "Thomas Boston: At the Borders of Glory," *Banner of Truth* 431 (August–September 1999):18.

21. George H. Morrison, biographical introduction to Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 14–15.

22. For Catherine Boston's trials, see Faith Cook, *Singing in the Fire*

Simprin and four at Ettrick. Then, too, Boston himself was often ill, suffering bouts of pain and weakness.

Though Boston groaned under all these trials, he viewed them as coming from his heavenly Father's loving hand of discipline. That's why he could continue to describe his wife in glowing terms as "a woman of great worth, whom I therefore passionately loved, and inwardly honoured: a stately, beautiful, and comely personage, truly pious, and fearing the Lord... patient in our common tribulations, and under her personal distresses."<sup>23</sup> He wrote to William Hog in Edinburgh, "It is a very sweet view of affliction, to view it as the discipline of the covenant; and so it is indeed; and nothing else to the children of our Father's family. In that respect it is medicinal; it shines with many gracious purposes about it; and, end as it will, one may have the confidence of faith, that it shall end well."<sup>24</sup> Boston felt that God's gracious purposes included "more heaviness in the frame of my heart, more contempt of the world, more carefulness to walk with God, and more resolution for the Lord's work over the belly of difficulties."

Though able as a linguist, thorough as a theologian, and influential as an author, Boston never sought the limelight. Though he never taught in a university, his books and published sermons clearly set forth the basics of Christian theology. His work *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion* is a commentary on the Westminster Shorter Catechism and consists of a body of divinity in itself. His *Human Nature and Its Fourfold State*, published in Edinburgh in 1720, traces the human condition through four states: man's original state of righteousness or innocence; man in the state of nature as a fallen creature; man in the state of grace as a redeemed and regenerated being; and, finally, man in the eternal state, be it heaven or hell.

Philip G. Ryken refers to Boston as "a preacher to his dying day."<sup>25</sup> His life revolved around vigorous theological preaching with piercing application. He sought to assure the regener-

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(Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 122–31; and Maureen Bradley, "A Brief Memorial of Thomas Boston," in Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), viii–ix.

23. As quoted in Cook, *Singing in the Fire*, 122.

24. Boston, *Memoirs*, 499.

25. Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State*, 1.

ate of their salvation in Christ and to see the unregenerate converted to Christ.<sup>26</sup> To reach these goals, he preached a theology of grace: “grace in its sovereignty; grace in its freeness, offered to all without money and without price; grace in its fullness, pardoning, adopting, sanctifying, glorifying; grace in its simplicity, without works of law; grace in its security, ratified by an everlasting covenant; grace in its appointed channels, coming mainly through word and ordinance; grace in its practical fruit.”<sup>27</sup>

Boston died from scurvy on May 20, 1732, at the age of fifty-six. His final sermons, preached from his deathbed, were attended by the people of Ettrick, who had gathered outside of a window in the manse to hear him.<sup>28</sup> He preached from 2 Corinthians 13:5 on the necessity of self-examination, a fitting end for a man who continuously examined himself throughout his life and urged others to do the same.

### Theological Controversies

Boston did not seek out or willingly engage in the theological controversies of his day. He was reluctant to add fuel to the flames of controversy.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, he was compelled at times to defend the truth. On different occasions he preached against the errors of the Cameronians, who willingly separated themselves from the body of other Christians.<sup>30</sup> In his sermon “The Evil and Danger of Schism,” Boston pleaded for Christians to emulate Christ, who attended both temple and synagogue despite the corruptions of the day.

Boston refused to sign the Abjuration Oath, by which officers of church and state and others were required to abjure, or renounce, any claim of King James to the British throne. The oath also reaffirmed previous acts of Parliament requiring that the reigning sovereign belong to the Church of England

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26. Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State*, 178.

27. William G. Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland: From the Sixth to the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 201–2.

28. Boston, *Memoirs*, 477–78.

29. Cameron, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, 88.

30. The Cameronians largely consisted of Covenanters in the southwest of Scotland who attended the ministries of Donald Cargill, Richard Cameron (from whom their name is derived), and Patrick Walker. Cf. P. Walker, *Six Saints of the Covenant*, ed. D. Hay Fleming (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 1:218–36.



and was therefore seen as an endorsement of episcopacy, or the government of the church by bishops. This prompted Boston to publish anonymously his pamphlet *Reasons for Refusing the Abjuration Oath in Its Latest Form*.

The conflict that consumed most of Boston's time, however, was the Marrow Controversy (1717–1723). This brought to the fore differences between parties representing two strains in Scottish theology, the legal and the evangelical.<sup>31</sup> The legal strain, led by Principal James Hadow (1670–1747) of St. Andrews,<sup>32</sup> sought to discredit the “antinomian” teachings of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, a book reputed to have been written by Edward Fisher in 1645<sup>33</sup> that consists of extracts from the works of Reformed and Puritan writers. The evangelicals, or Marrow Men, as they were called, sought to correct a legal strain in Scottish preaching by emphasizing God's free offer of grace and Christ's meritorious work for the sinner.

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31. See John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1974), 139–66; John J. Murray, “The Marrow Controversy: Thomas Boston and the Free Offer,” in *Preaching and Revival* (London: Westminster/Puritan Conference, 1984), 34–56; David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy, 1718–1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988); Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 204–20; A. T. B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1997); Stephen G. Myers, “The Marrow Controversy,” in *The History of Scottish Theology*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1:342–58; and, as a more popular-level appraisal, Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016).

32. Hadow, professor of divinity and principal of St. Mary's College, sought to defend “orthodox” Scottish principles in opposing the *Marrow*. *Dictionary of National Biography*, 23:437.

33. When the *Marrow* was first published in 1645, having been approved for the press by Joseph Caryl, only the author's initials “E. F.” appeared on the title page. Samuel Prittie, one of several divines who added his testimony to the book's third printing, was the first to add a possible surname to the initials, saying, “God hath endued his *Fisher* with the Net of a trying Understanding” (cf. D. M. McIntyre, “First Strictures on the Marrow of Modern Divinity,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 10 [1938]: 61). Anthony à Wood mistakenly identifies the author as a gentleman commoner of Brazenose College, whereas the author of the *Marrow* was likely a “Barber, Mr. Fisher” (see Richard Baxter, *Catholic Theologiae*, 255, marginal note; and his *An Apology for the Silenced Ministers*, 168), though the author's identity has never definitively been proven.

Tension grew as the general assembly of the Church of Scotland debated the action of the Auchterarder presbytery. This presbytery required students applying for a license to adhere to certain propositions that safeguarded their view of the doctrines of free grace. Pejoratively known as the “Auchterarder Creed,” one section reads, “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake our sins in order to our coming to Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Boston saw these words as a muddled attempt to defend free grace rather than to promote antinomianism, but the assembly rejected the proposition. Boston saw the decision as a direct blow to the doctrine of free grace and felt that it denied that saving faith precedes repentance in the Spirit’s work of salvation. Those who supported the “Auchterarder Creed,” though it was awkwardly worded, came to believe that “there was an insipid legalism within the Assembly,” one that needed a quick and sharp rebuke.<sup>35</sup>

In 1717, a new edition of the *Marrow*, printed by James Hog (1658–1734), minister of Carnock in Fife, was issued into an already tumultuous atmosphere.<sup>36</sup> It was immediately assailed by its opponents but well received by its adherents. Its wealth of paradoxical statements, drawn from a variety of Reformed authors and Luther, moved Principal Hadow, Alan Logan, and Robert Wodrow to proceed against it. They succeeded in convincing the general assembly of 1720 that it taught such heresies as universal atonement, that assurance is of the essence of faith, that holiness is not implicit in salvation, and that the believer is not under the law as a moral rule for life—none of which were true—but it nonetheless gave the assembly authority to act against its supporters.

At the assembly of 1721, the Marrow Men responded to their censure with a document titled “The Representation,”

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34. When William Craig, applying for licensure in Auchterarder presbytery in 1717, hesitated to assent to the Auchterarder propositions, the presbytery licensed him but declined to give him an extract of the license. Craig’s appeal to the general assembly was successful, and the assembly forbade the Auchterarder presbytery to ask questions of candidates other than those prescribed by the general assembly.

35. Myers, “Marrow Controversy,” 343.

36. Hog wrote a preface to his 1717 edition of the *Marrow*, which embroiled him in the controversy for the rest of his life. He engaged in several pamphlet wars between Hadow and James Adams of Kinnaird before the general assembly’s condemnation of the *Marrow* in 1720.

which argued against the assembly's earlier condemnation of the *Marrow* and the prohibition it imposed on them (they were not allowed to circulate or say anything in its favor). In 1722 the assembly not only upheld the ban on the *Marrow*, but it officially rebuked the Marrow Men, though they were allowed to continue in their ministries.<sup>37</sup>

Boston reprinted the *Marrow* in 1726, this time with marginal notes and explanations that showed how controversial passages were orthodox and that the *Marrow*'s critics were the ones in error. As the heat of the controversy dissipated in the following years, "suspicion" and "animus" lingered between the two parties for some time. Advancements were blocked, and the conflict eventually led to the formation of the Associate Presbytery in 1733. Within a year of Boston's death, most of the Marrow Men had left the Church of Scotland, thus giving birth to the Secession Church.<sup>38</sup> Reflecting on his time of censure, Boston said that he wore the rebuke as an ornament put upon him for the cause of truth.

Another controversy that Boston had a minor role in had to do with the heresy trials of John Simson, a professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow. Simson, influenced by the theological "innovations" then circulating, was accused of teaching false doctrine twice. The first charge, levied by James Webster, accused Simson of holding to Arminian tenets, to which he replied in a carefully crafted response, "I will not Grant, that a Proposition is Erroneous, because *Arminius* Taught it."<sup>39</sup>

Subsequent charges brought in 1727 accused Simson of denying the doctrine of the Trinity and elevating human reason above faith. Simson seemed to reaffirm his commitment to the Westminster Confession, but there were enough lingering doubts in the orthodox to cause a rift. Efforts were made to come up with a compromise that would satisfy both sides—those who supported Simson and his rational inquiry into matters of faith, and those who held to a more traditional view. At the time, few people wanted a huge rift in the Scottish

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37. Myers, "Marrow Controversy," 344.

38. Myers, "Marrow Controversy," 344.

39. Christian Maurer, "Early Enlightenment Shifts: Simson, Campbell, and Leechman," in *The History of Scottish Theology*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2:46.

church; however, the orthodox were outnumbered, and Boston, who was involved in the deliberations, refused to allow a compromise to be reached. He was given more time for prayer over the matter, but the assembly moved forward and ratified a sentence that had been passed by a prior assembly, thus resulting in Simson's suspension from preaching and teaching in 1729. As had been the case all along, Boston's main concern was for the health, safety, and peace of the Scottish church.<sup>40</sup>

### The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston

Thomas Boston was essentially a parish minister, but he was also a theologian of considerable standing. Perhaps his most significant contribution to theology was his clarification of the covenantal, or *federal* (from the Latin *foedus*, meaning "covenant"), theology of the Westminster Standards.<sup>41</sup> We will briefly consider Boston's view of the covenants and the free offer of the gospel.<sup>42</sup>

#### *The Covenant of Works*

Boston's treatises on the covenants of works and of grace were written as correctives to the Pelagian and Arminian errors of his day.<sup>43</sup> For Boston, proper understanding of the two covenants is necessary because of their role in man's salvation. The first covenant shows our lost estate in Adam, and the second offers the remedy in Jesus Christ.

Boston said that affirming the covenant of works is a prerequisite for a right understanding of Adam's federal headship and thus the imputation of Adam's sin through disobedience. If the covenant of works is discarded as fictitious, as some

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40. Anne Skoczylas, *Mr. Simson's Knotty Case: Divinity, Politics, and Due Process in Early Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 313–21.

41. Donald Jay Bruggink argues incorrectly that Boston's striving for a theology of grace was incompatible with what he views as "the legalistic federal theology of the Westminster Standards." "The Theology of Thomas Boston, 1676–1732" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1958), 84, 138.

42. For lengthier discussions of Boston's view of the covenant, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chap. 8; and McGowan, *Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*.

43. This is the view promoted by Boston's grandson, Michael Boston, in his introduction to *A View of the Covenant of Works* (1798).

covenant theologians maintain, then the imputation of Adam's sin to posterity is fictitious as well, since Adam would have ceased to be a proper federal head.<sup>44</sup> Boston writes, "If the covenant made with Adam was not a proper covenant [of works], he could not be a proper representing head; and if he was not, then there cannot be a proper imputation of Adam's sin unto his posterity." Boston is careful, however, to insist that God could have required absolute obedience from Adam without a covenant.<sup>45</sup> The emphasis here is on God's condescension (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1), not on any obligation on God's part to enter into a covenant.

According to Boston, the covenant God made with Adam in the garden of Eden was a trial of *definite* length, for "this state could not have been forever, without rendering the promise of life fruitless."<sup>46</sup> Two parties were involved in the covenant: the triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as one party; and man, federally represented by Adam, as the other party. God covenanted not just with Adam personally, but with all mankind in Adam. As Boston says, Adam covenanted "not only for himself, but for all his posterity, as the natural father of all, of whose one blood nations of men were to be made."<sup>47</sup>

The condition of the covenant was perfect obedience. For Boston, there were *moral* and *symbolical* aspects required of Adam. This moral law, according to Boston, included all the Ten Commandments, for though they were not yet written on tablets of stone, they were written on Adam's heart.<sup>48</sup> The symbolic law consisted of the command *not* to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree was neutral, but the act of eating was an act of *disobedience*; therefore, it was a law to try Adam's heart to see whether he would obey God.

The life promised to Adam for obedience, Boston says, was a holy and happy estate "beyond the hazard or possibility of

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44. The most notable example in Boston's day of those who thought the covenant of works was fictitious was Professor John Simson, whom Boston mentions in his treatise along with the Arminians. Two modern-day examples are Herman Hoeksema and John Murray.

45. Boston, *Works*, 11:181.

46. Boston, *Works*, 1:232.

47. Boston, *Works*, 1:230.

48. As with other federal theologians, Boston believed that the law given at Mount Sinai was a *renewal* of the covenant of works rather than the *instigation* of it. See *Works*, 11:181–82.

sinning, or forfeiting it.”<sup>49</sup> He adds, “After the time of his trial was over, [Adam] would have been transported, soul and body, into the heavenly places, there to abide forever.”<sup>50</sup>

Like other covenant theologians of his era, Boston speaks of signs and seals of the covenant. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life are two signs of the covenant.<sup>51</sup> They are signs because they point to the *reality* of the covenant.

Adam transgressed the covenant of works, however, thus putting his posterity into a state of spiritual death. The demands of the covenant of works are still binding on man. Thus, all human beings are under the obligation of perfect obedience to the law, although they are unable to meet it. The only remedy is for man to be brought into the covenant of grace.

### *The Covenant of Grace*

The first work of Boston to be published after his death was *A View of the Covenant of Grace* (published in 1734), in which Boston explains the doctrine of God’s gracious covenant with man. The covenant of grace is intended only for the elect and refers to God’s response to man’s breach of the covenant of works. He uses the terms “covenant of redemption” and “covenant of grace” to name the two sides of the covenant.<sup>52</sup> Boston did not believe the covenant of redemption was separate from the covenant of grace, or “a covenant within the covenant,” as some theologians had taught. As with the covenant of works, there are two parties to this covenant: God the Father, representing the offended party, and Christ, the second (or last) Adam, representing the elect.

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49. Boston, *Works*, 1:233.

50. Boston, *Works*, 1:233.

51. The covenant theologian Herman Witsius (1636–1708) taught there were four signs—the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Tree of Life, the garden of Eden, and the Sabbath. *Economy of the Covenants* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1838), 1:81.

52. Boston wrote, “The covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, are not two distinct covenants, but one and the same covenant. I know that many divines do express themselves otherwise in this matter; and that upon very different views, some of which are no ways injurious to the doctrine of free grace.” *Works*, 8:396–97.

The covenant of grace was established in eternity, Boston says, in the council of the Trinity. The plan and the objects of salvation were settled before man was created. The persons of the Godhead have different roles in the plan of salvation. All three persons of the glorious Trinity are at work: the Father elects, or chooses, the objects of salvation; the Son redeems them; and the Spirit sanctifies them, applying redemption to them.

Christ is the representative head of His seed in the same way that Adam was of his seed, Boston says. The conditions of the covenant between the Father and the Son are the *principal* required in the first covenant—perfect obedience—and the *penalty* of Adam’s disobedience to be paid in Christ. Thus, the second Adam entered into covenant with God on behalf of His elect; He stood where the first Adam stood but succeeded where the first Adam failed. Therefore, says Boston, the covenant for Christ’s seed is *absolute* and not *conditional* because the efficacy of the covenant rests in Christ’s role, which He fulfilled.

What of the reprobate who are outside of God’s gracious covenant with the elect? Boston says they have as good a warrant to take hold of the gospel as the elect and will in no wise be excused from everlasting punishment for their failure to do so. This deals more directly with Boston’s concept of the offer of grace, more commonly known as the free offer of the gospel.

### **The Free Offer of the Gospel**

In the last section of his treatise on the covenant of grace, Boston explains how sinners become part of that covenant. Most people are strangers to the covenant of grace and have no saving interest in Christ, but we are allowed to offer the gospel of reconciliation to them.<sup>53</sup> We must, indeed, endeavor to compel sinners to enter the covenant of grace. As support, Boston cites Luke 14:23: “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.”

Our presentation of the gospel must be strictly covenantal, Boston says. We are to proclaim that there is a covenant

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53. For a recent study of the free offer in its historical context, see Donald John Maclean, *James Durham (1622–1658) and the Gospel Offer in Its Seventeenth-Century Context* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), esp. 259–70.

between God and Christ made for sinners of Adam's race ("mankind sinners"). It fully provides for salvation, for restoration of the sinner, and for happiness after a broken covenant of works.

Two things are necessary for entering a gracious state: the faith of the law prior to one's entrance into grace, and the faith of the gospel by which one enters. According to Boston (and many Puritans), "faith of the law" is prerequisite to receiving Christ. Boston writes, "Whosoever...would enter into the covenant of grace, must in the first place have a faith of the law: for which cause, it is necessary, that the law as well as the gospel be preached unto sinners."<sup>54</sup> Sinners, accordingly, must be uncovered, for by nature they hide in the deceits of their sin. Through the preaching of the law, sinners experience three things: first, they come to see themselves as sinners, whereas before they were righteous in their own eyes; second, they see themselves as lost sinners; and third, this leads to believing they are utterly unable to attain a state of grace. Any form of evangelism that bypasses the law is a deterrent to true conversion.

"Faith of the gospel," on the other hand, is synonymous with saving faith, in which one takes hold of Christ. Saving faith has four components: first, faith in Christ's sufficiency, by which sinners believe that Christ is fully able to save men from their sins; second, faith in the gospel offer, by which sinners believe that Christ is offered to sinners such as they; third, faith in their right to Christ, whereby they are encouraged to go to Christ; and fourth, faith for salvation, whereby they appropriate Christ as their personal Savior. These different "faiths," as Boston calls them, are simply descriptions of a sinner's experience of salvation. The more a person understands the operations of the Spirit in conversion, the more he or she is encouraged to discern those operations in his or her heart and thus to embrace Christ as "a deed of gift and grant."

### **Additional Writings of Thomas Boston**

Boston's *Memoirs*, published in 1776 by his grandson Michael Boston as *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings*, consist of two accounts written for Boston's posterity: *A General Account*

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54. Boston, *Works*, 8:582.



of *My Life* and *Passages of My Life*. It remains the primary source of information about Boston's life and is based, as William Blaikie wrote, "on a faith in the particular providence of God, in the intimacy of His fellowship with His children, and in the closeness of the connection between their spiritual and their natural life, the like of which perhaps no man of equal intellectual power ever attained."<sup>55</sup>

Boston's most influential work, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, first published in 1720, consists of sermons preached at Simprin and amplified at Ettrick. A second, revised edition of this work appeared in 1729. *The Fourfold State* has been printed more than one hundred times and translated into several languages, including Gaelic and Welsh. John MacLeod wrote of it, "There is no book of practical divinity, not even William Guthrie's *Trial of Saving Interest in Christ*, nor Rutherford's Letters, 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. It is of this work that Jonathan Edwards says that it 'showed Mr. Boston to have been a truly great divine.'"<sup>56</sup>

In the final months of his life, Boston completed *The Crook in the Lot*, subtitled *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Afflictions of Men, Together with a Christian Deportment under Them*. In this volume, Boston offers insight into a believer's conduct under pressing circumstances. The three themes of the book are, first, whatever crook there is in one's lot, it is of God's doing; second, whatever God mars, no one will be able to mend; and third, seeing the crook in one's lot as the work of God is the only way to true contentment.

Boston's *Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing* was written as a series of personal meditations. He was deeply impressed by Matthew 4:19: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." *Soliloquy* was first published in 1773, forty-three years after Boston's death.

Though Boston initially found the Hebrew language uninteresting, he later devoted much study to the accents in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, calling it his "darling study."

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55. Blaikie, *Preachers of Scotland*, 197.

56. Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 146.

He came to believe that the accents were key to the Hebrew text and were themselves of divine inspiration. He completed a treatise on the subject and translated it into Latin. Published after his death as *Tractatus Stigmologicus, Hebraeo-Biblicus*, the book was embraced by the learned of the day. With the insight he gained from his study of Hebrew, Boston prepared a translation and commentary on Genesis, but they were never published.

Boston's works were first collected and published in 1767 and later reprinted in 1773. *The Complete Works*, edited by Samuel McMillan and published in twelve volumes in 1853, is now reproduced here. We trust that the reading of Boston's writings will cause many to agree with "Rabbi" John Duncan, who wrote that "Thomas Boston was a common place genius—not a common place man but a common place genius"; and in the words of another that Boston did more "to fan the flame of true piety in Scotland than that of any other single minister in his generation."<sup>57</sup>

Above all, may God raise up servants in this third millennium of the Christian era motivated by the things that made Boston such an effective minister: a humble spirituality, a high view of the Christian ministry, a compassionate zeal for souls, and unwearied preaching of Christ.

—Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson

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57. In Thomas Boston, *A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing* (London: Alexander Gardner, 1900), 7.