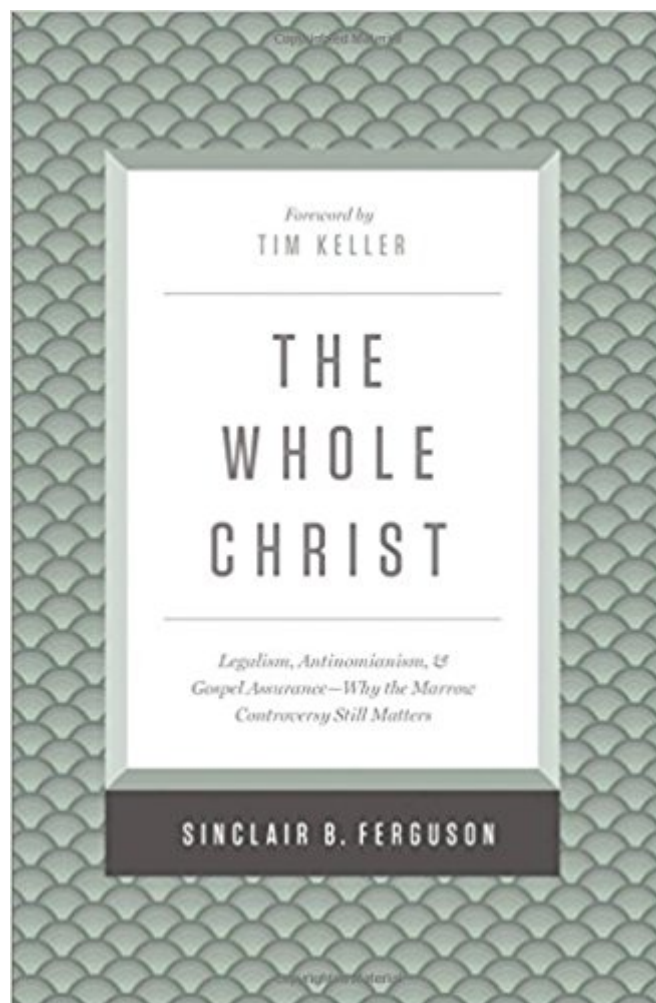




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The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, And Gospel Assurance—Why The Marrow Controversy Still Matters



Synopsis

Since the days of the early church, Christians have wrestled with the relationship between law and gospel. If, as the apostle Paul says, salvation is by grace and the law cannot save, what relevance does the law have for Christians today? By revisiting the Marrow Controversy—a famous but largely forgotten eighteenth-century debate related to the proper relationship between God's grace and our works—Sinclair B. Ferguson sheds light on this central issue and why it still matters today. In doing so, he explains how our understanding of the relationship between law and gospel determines our approach to evangelism, our pursuit of sanctification, and even our understanding of God himself. Ferguson shows us that the antidote to the poison of legalism on the one hand and antinomianism on the other is one and the same: the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom we are simultaneously justified by faith, freed for good works, and assured of salvation.

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Customer Reviews

“The volume in your hands is not just a helpful historical reflection but also a tract for the times. Sinclair does a good job of recounting the Marrow Controversy in an accessible and interesting way. However, his real aim is not merely to do that. Against the background and features of that older dispute, he wants to help us understand the character of this perpetual problem—one that bedevils the church today. He does so in the most illuminating and compelling way I’ve seen in recent evangelical literature.” —Timothy J. Keller, Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; best-selling author, *The Reason for God* “This book has three things I’m very interested in: eighteenth-century Scottish church history, doctrinal clarity on the gospel, and learning from

Sinclair Ferguson. As fascinating as this work is as a piece of historical analysis, it is even more important as a careful biblical and theological guide to the always-relevant controversies surrounding legalism, antinomianism, and assurance. I'm thankful Ferguson has put his scholarly mind and pastoral heart to work on such an important topic.

—Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina

This book could not come at a better time or from a better source. Sinclair Ferguson brings to life a very important controversy from the past to shed light on contemporary debates. But *The Whole Christ* is more than a deeply informed survey of the Marrow Controversy. It is the highest-quality pastoral wisdom and doctrinal reflection on the most central issue in any age.

—Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story*

I know of no one other than Sinclair Ferguson who has the capacity, patience, and skill to unearth an ancient debate, set in a Scottish village with an unpronounceable name, and show its compelling relevance to gospel preaching and Christian living. This may be Sinclair's best and most important book. Take up and read!

—Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

Sinclair Ferguson scratches through the surface definitions of legalism and antinomianism to reveal the marrow, the whole Christ. When we are offered the whole Christ in the gospel, we do not want to settle for anything that undermines the greatness and power of God's grace. Both pastors and lay people will benefit from reading this historical, theological, and practical book.

—Aimee Byrd, author, *Housewife Theologian*; *Theological Fitness*; and *No Little Women*

It is no exaggeration to insist that the issue dealt with in this book is more important than any other that one might suggest. For, as Ferguson makes all too clear, the issue is the very definition of the gospel itself. The errors of antinomianism and legalism lie ready to allure unwary hucksters content with mere slogans and rhetoric. I can think of no one I trust more to explore and examine this vital subject than Sinclair Ferguson. For my part, this is one of the most important and definitive books I have read in over four decades.

—Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

I marvel at Sinclair Ferguson's grasp of historical detail, but I praise God more for Sinclair's love of and zeal for gospel clarity. The grace that saves our souls and enables our obedience is defined, distinguished, and treasured in this discussion about keeping the proclamation of the gospel free from human error.

—Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

In a day when there is so much confusion about sanctification, Sinclair Ferguson cuts through all the noise and provides us with beautiful clarity on

this glorious doctrine of the Christian faith. Without hesitation, this will be the first book I recommend to those who want to understand the history and theology of this most precious doctrine.ââBurk Parsons,âCopastor, Saint Andrewâs Chapel, Sanford, Florida; Editor, Tabletalk magazineââThis great book takes up the perennial issue of how grace and works relate to each other in our salvation. Ferguson begins with an old debate that took place in Scotland. He writes with deep knowledge and acute judgment, bringing clarity and insight to this issue and showing us the way out of our contemporary muddle.ââDavid F. Wells, distinguished senior research professor, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers and Emergents in the Postmodern World*ââWriting with a pastoral heart and scholarly mind, Sinclair Ferguson provides a biblical understanding of grace that sets a solid foundation for life, ministry, and worship. Using the backdrop of the Marrow Controversy, Ferguson exposes the subtle hues of legalism and antinomianism that continue to permeate the church today. I found *The Whole Christ* personally convicting, theologically challenging, and Christ exalting.ââMelissa Kruger,âWomenâs Ministry Coordinator; Editor, *The Gospel Coalition*; author, *The Envy of Eve and Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood*ââOurs is a day when we again hear charges of âantinomianismâ and âlegalismâ thrown back and forth, often between folks who share the same confessional background. During such times of tension, more light and less heat is generally needed. I believe Sinclair Fergusonâs *The Whole Christ* offers us timely perspective, helping us better understand grace, human agency, and gospel assurance. By taking us back to historical debates Ferguson also helps us better understand our own moment, even our own confusions.ââKelly M. Kapic,âprofessor of theological studies, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GeorgiaââItâs easy to cry âlegalistâ or âantinomian,â but the realities are far subtler than we admit. Sinclair Ferguson takes an old Scottish controversy and uses it as a spotlight to illuminate our spiritual struggles today. This outstanding book untangles many a knot about Godâs law and grace and powerfully reminds us that legalism and antinomianism are not opposites, but evil allies in Satanâs bitter war to dishonor the great name of Jesus Christ.ââJoel Beeke,âpresident, Puritan Reformed Theological SeminaryââItâs hard to imagine a more important book written by a more dependable guide. From a seemingly obscure theological controversy, Sinclair Ferguson brings to light issues of fundamental and perennial significance for twenty-first century evangelicals. With deep learning, theological discernment, and pastoral wisdom, he not only exposes distortions of the gospel but also helps us savor the substance of the gospel, which is Christ himself.ââJeff Purswell, Dean, Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastors College

Sinclair B. Ferguson (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is professor of systematic theology at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas, Texas, and the former senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. He is the author of several books, the most recent being *By Grace Alone: How the Grace of God Amazes Me*. Sinclair and his wife, Dorothy, have four grown children. Timothy J. Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. He is the best-selling author of *The Prodigal God* and *The Reason for God*.

If you keep up with Christian publishing for any length of time, you will eventually spot a curious phenomenon. Every now and again a scholarly book will show up and a lot of people will get really excited about it. It will be a book that, under normal circumstances, would be known among only the scholars. And yet this one will be released with accolades assuring the non-scholarly readers (like me!) that they, too, can benefit from it. This year's first such book is Sinclair Ferguson's *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance*. Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters. It has received those accolades and, just like they say, it is definitely worth the read. *The Whole Christ* begins more than 250 years ago with a theological controversy that erupted in a small Scottish town—hardly the stuff of your average Christian book. The Marrow Controversy centered on Edward Fisher's book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and pitted two groups of theologians against one another. The core issue was whether or not a person must first forsake his sins in order to come to Christ. The Marrow Men, those who agreed with Fisher's book, believed that this demanded works as a precursor to faith and was, in that way, opposed to the free offer of the gospel. Their opponents taught that the gospel should only be offered to those who were beginning to show evidence of being among God's elect. This syllogism describing their view may bring clarity: Major premise: The saving grace of God in Christ is given to the elect alone. Minor premise: The elect are known by the forsaking of sin. Conclusion: Therefore forsaking sin is a prerequisite for saving grace. Ferguson points to the subtle movement from seeing forsaking sin as the fruit of grace that is rooted in election, to making the forsaking of sin the necessary precursor for experiencing that grace. But here's the problem: Repentance, which is the fruit of grace, thus becomes a qualification for grace. This puts the cart before the horse. It stands the gospel on its head so that the proclamation of the gospel, with the call to faith in Christ, becomes conditional on something in the hearer. The gospel thus became a message of grace for the credentialed, not an offer of Christ to all with the promise of justification to the ungodly who believes. This was the

starting place for the Marrow Controversy, but as the controversy unfolded it unearthed a whole host of related issues. The Whole Christ navigates them through an extended reflection on theological and pastoral issues that arose in the early eighteenth century, viewed from the framework of the present day. In other words, Ferguson looks at this controversy, dissects it, and then applies it to our day. And, as it happens, we, too, are struggling with issues related to legalism and antinomianism. That makes his book perfectly timed and a valuable contribution to the discussion about the role of the law, the role of obedience, in the Christian life. And this is where his book takes off. Now Ferguson is going far beyond church history and bringing clarity to the way we are to live the Christian life. He is moving beyond history to do the work of a pastor. He carefully discusses how we become Christians, how we live as Christians, and how we can have assurance that we are Christians. With great precision he describes legalism and antinomianism, bringing clarity to their definitions and showing that they are not so much opposites of one another as they are nonidentical twins that emerge from the same womb. Antinomianism is, in its own way, an expression of legalism. The antinomian is by nature a person with a legalistic heart. He or she becomes an antinomian in reaction. But this implies only a different view of law, not a more biblical one. This is a book full of treasures. Some of the treasures are on the surface waiting to be picked up, among them Ferguson's one-line summaries of great truths: It is misleading to say that God accepts us the way we are. Rather he accepts us despite the way we are. and antinomianism and legalism are not so much antithetical to each other as they are both antithetical to grace. Many of the other treasures yield only to care and effort, and in this way the book demands a fair bit from the reader. I suspect I would need to read it through once or twice more to have an advanced grasp of its subject matter. I would like to go back and do that very thing. Ordinarily, we might assign a book like this to the bookshelves of the scholars and enthusiasts of church history. But The Whole Christ has too much to say to us to allow that to happen. It speaks too clearly and too urgently to issues that are every bit important to us as they were in the seventeenth century. I don't think Derek Thomas is exaggerating when he says, "For my part, this is one of the most important and definitive books I have read in over four decades."

This was an excellent book. I know the title is not flashy and would not seem of interest to the average Christian reader, but there is so much profound and practical insight in here for issues that all thoughtful Christians wrestle with. It covers topics such as: What does it mean to be "in Christ"? What is legalism? How does it manifest itself? What are the causes and cures? What place does

the law have in the believer's life? Do I have to obey if my sins are already forgiven? Can I have assurance of faith? Or will that only make me apathetic? At root this book is really about recovering a right view of God's kind and generous heart, and a dissection of all the spiritual evils that result from doubting His goodness. This is a meaty read and that will sadly detract most people from reading this book. But if you are in any form of Christian ministry or counselling, I urge you to read this book. It is so worth the effort. I found every chapter deeply applicable to my own doubts and questions, but also very spiritually refreshing.

Nothing is more grounding than Christ centered theology and this book is a perfect example of what that is. Sinclair Ferguson nails the proper understanding of what it means to be "in Christ", what is doctrinally sound soteriology, and what it means to keep our eyes on the Savior and off ourselves. This is an outstanding book for both the legalist and antinomian. This is a clear exhortation to recognize our shortcomings and realize that it's not about us but Christ alone. This is a great investment for any pastors library. A faithful proclamation of God's amazing Grace.

I was drawn to this book because it's subtitle, 'Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance -- Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters', mentioned legalism and antinomianism - topics of interest to me for many years. Before reading this book, I knew nothing about the Marrow Controversy and only a little about Puritan thought related to these issues. The book is very helpful in these areas. Turns out that the Marrow Controversy, which began with two books written in the 17th century, titled 'The Marrow of Modern Divinity' (author uncertain) turned into a full blown controversy in the 18th century in the Church of Scotland. The history of the controversy is interesting, but not nearly as interesting as the theological issues it addressed: the order of salvation (ordo salutis), the roots of legalism and antinomianism, the nature of grace - and by extension, the nature of God - and with the nature of a Christian's assurance of salvation. Reading the book has helped me to understand and resolve some of my own questions about the nature of salvation and grace.

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