



BOOK REVIEW

## Donald Macleod, *From the Marrow Men to the Moderates: Scottish Theology 1700–1800*

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*From the Marrow Men to the Moderates: Scottish Theology 1700–1800*, by Donald Macleod, has a weightiness to it. Not only is the work the sequel to Macleod's earlier *Therefore the Truth I Speak: Scottish Theology 1500–1700* but it also is the final published work of Macleod's venerable career. Particularly in the preface, Macleod writes as if he is aware that his time is short, and it is clear that he has an agenda. Macleod assumes he is writing for a churchly audience – specifically, pastors – and rather than just surveying a century of Scottish theology, he intends, episodically, to test certain theological claims against scripture in order that those teachings which prove faithful may be pressed upon the church's next generation.

At many points, this task invests Macleod's writing with urgency. He offers an evaluation of the *Marrow* representers' distinction between the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense that genuinely prods one to ask where assurance ought to be located, theologically, between faith and sense. He pushes for the necessity of careful exegesis within theology, both through his own attention to scripture and his treatment of men like John Brown of Broughton Place. Throughout, the keynote of Macleod's concern is church unity. Figures who largely share Macleod's theological commitments, such as Ebenezer Erskine, are criticised for their perceived wounds to the church's unity, while those who have considerable divergences from Macleod, such as Hugh Blair, are assessed favorably for articulating the gospel's core.

In all these sketches, Macleod sets before his reader a vital question. Where does fidelity become censoriousness? Where does charity become surrender? In his own reflection, Macleod offers a complex answer. At times for Macleod, it was the seceders' uncompromising fixity that complicated the witness of an evangelical ministry. At other times, it was the slackening of standards for theological precision amongst ministerial candidates that allowed error to seep into the church. The balance seemed, always, just beyond reach. Then, in considering hypothetical universalism in light of the Westminster Confession, Macleod offers a stimulating case study. After a close reading of the Confession, Macleod suggests that the Confession leans against hypothetical universalism, while shared larger commitments might suggest not enforcing that exclusion. Would this broadness Macleod advocates engender greater gospel unity, or would it be the entrance for precisely the divisions he laments? Macleod never answers that question. He simply presses his readers, with example after example, to consider whether confessional standards should be conceptualised as walls guaranteeing uniformity or nets drawing in a diffuse array.

While Macleod's work thus pushes the reader to helpful reflection, it also contains some limitations likely resulting from the work's forced timeline. In chapters 3–4, dealing with the *Marrow* controversy, and chapters 5–6, addressing the Secession, Macleod stands in an odd relationship with current scholarship. In recent decades, the traditional interpretations of these episodes in Scottish ecclesiastical history have been challenged. These challenges stem from basic questions. If the *Marrow* controversy simply pitted the *Marrow* representers' evangelical commitments against the Assembly's more legalistic ones, why did so many notable evangelicals side with the Assembly? If the Secession was entirely a reaction against patronage, why did many rabid opponents of patronage eschew the Secession? From his previous writings, it is certain that Macleod was familiar with that scholarship; he even cited examples of it in *The Truth Therefore I Speak*. Indeed, some of the conclusions of that newer scholarship seem to have influenced Macleod's judgements about certain issues within federal theology. However, there is no direct interaction in Macleod's account, so the questions raised remain unanswered. Does Macleod's 'traditional' presentation potentially need a bit more nuance? Perhaps Macleod had the nuance to give, but not the time to give it.

Potentially, a reorganising of Macleod's chapters could be constructive. Macleod considers James Fraser of Brae in chapters 7–8; perhaps Fraser would do better, both chronologically and thematically, in chapters 1–2. Held together in the solitary Fraser is the personal rigor, evangelistic zeal, tender conscience, and theological breadth that seem to have exploded in multiform ways in 18th-century Scottish theology. Perhaps such a framing would suggest answers to some of the questions left without complete exploration in the present arrangement.

While Macleod's work rewards throughout, all of it is but preparation for the close. In Macleod's account of Hugh Blair's preaching, there are sublime moments when the line between summary of Blair and homiletics by Macleod seems to have evaporated and the reader is treated to vintage Macleod. Then, in the concluding pages, Macleod considers whether Blair and the Moderatism he represented were the undoing of the Kirk. Macleod's conclusions may surprise many. But in making his compelling case, Macleod produces precisely the clarion call for fidelity to today's church he declared, at the outset, to be his goal. This closing argument, buttressed by all that has preceded, makes Macleod's final work a necessary one for all students of Scottish theology, and all students of theology and ministry more broadly. Even in death, we are in Macleod's debt.

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