

Chapter Three

"The Struggles of the Thirties"

Westminster Seminary in its first years was beset by many serious difficulties. The first session, with an enrollment of fifty students, had commenced just a few weeks before the disastrous Wall Street crash of 1929. A Seminary possessing no capital assets and supported solely by the fees of the comparatively small number of students, could not possibly provide a real alternative to Princeton. That the venture survived, writes Stonehouse, was "due to the extraordinary self-sacrifice of many devout people," including members of the faculty led by Machen. O. T. Allis supplied the property which became the location of the Seminary for its first eight years at a rental of \$1 per year! This was at 1528 Pine Street in the center of Philadelphia.

The youthfulness of the majority of the faculty, though it was to prove of such long-term benefit, was not wholly an advantage at the beginning. With the sudden death of Robert Dick Wilson in 1930, there were only two senior faculty members until R. B. Kuiper returned in 1933. Kuiper was to remain as Professor of Practical Theology until his retirement in 1952.

Ross Stevenson of Princeton, in the letter already quoted, had addressed his farewell greetings to "Professor John Murray." Such was not Murray's title when he came to Westminster. He was only "Instructor in Systematic Theology," and even when his colleagues of comparable age were later given the rank of Assistant Professor, he insisted upon remaining an Instructor. Behind his reluctance lay that sense of insufficiency about which he had written to his father. At Princeton he had had a vision of the true task of the systematic theologian, and he knew that there was no short road to success in that department; for a man must *first* be both an exegete of the Word of God and a biblical theologian. His wish was to be as useful in the Church as B. B. Warfield had been, and in 1930 he felt he was only on the threshold of the hard study necessary to that end. The fact that it was *thirty-six years* later that his second volume on *The Epistle to the Romans* appeared, and that he would never permit the publication of what he considered to be his unfinished and imperfect class lectures on Systematic Theology, is some indication of the high standards which he set himself. Cornelius Van Til has written on this aspect of the career of his friend and colleague:

The most important thing to be said about him is that he was, above all else, a great exegete of the Word of God.

When I say this I mean that he was an expert in the exegesis of the whole of Scripture, of the Old as well as of the New Testament. I can still see him in the faculty room talking about a problem of Old Testament exegesis with Edward J. Young, the Professor of Old Testament. Dr. Schilder once said of Dr. Greydanus that he had crept through the New Testament. Well, Murray had crept through the Old as well as the New Testament. Only an expert, like Joe Young, could get his attention before the faculty meeting proper began.

When I had the appointment to the chair of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary after the retirement of Professor Louis Berkhof, John advised me against accepting it. To teach Systematics properly one must, first of all, be a biblical exegete. After that, one must be a biblical theologian in the way Professor Geerhardus Vos had

been a biblical theologian in his day. *Systematic Theology* must, first, grow out of and be the ripe fruitage of penetrating, linguistic exegesis. Then, secondly, it must be the result of gathering together what biblical theology has found. The "system" of *Systematic Theology* must, therefore, always be amenable to a development that springs from continued study of the Scriptures.

On more personal aspects of John Murray's life in the early 1930's, Allan MacRae writes:

After Princeton, my next contact with John Murray was during the seven years when both of us were members of the faculty of the new Westminster Theological Seminary. We were drawn to each other by our mutual commitment to the Reformed Faith and our solid determination to make the Word of God central in every aspect of life. An incidental factor that also contributed was the fact that except for Dr. Machen, the head of the institution, we were the only members of the faculty who were not married at that time. Consequently we had our main meal together at least three or four times a week and often took long walks in the country. Never in my life have I been associated with anyone with whom I found it more pleasant to discuss all manner of subjects. John had many interesting ideas and could express them with great clarity and insight. He also had the ability to lead one to dig into his own inner thoughts and find there ideas that he had not previously realized he possessed.

John differed from the other members of the Westminster faculty on a number of what seemed to them to be secondary points. He never wavered in his practice but rarely expressed himself on these matters except when he felt it necessary to do so. Sometimes this led to rather amusing situations. Thus once when Dr. Machen and others, including Mr. Murray, were at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Allis for Sunday dinner, the conversation turned to baseball. Dr. Machen and others expressed their ideas about various players and about baseball games they had seen. Then Dr. Allis' sister, observing that Mr. Murray had taken no part in the conversation, graciously turned to him and said, "Mr. Murray, what is your opinion?" He replied, "I never discuss baseball on the Sabbath.

On day John showed me a booklet entitled *May Sabbath-keeping Prevent Church-Going?* and told me that the author, who was a good friend of his, had been expelled from his Church because, though strongly opposed to ordinary use of any public means of transportation on the Sabbath, he had insisted that one should not be condemned for using public transportation as a means of getting to a church service. John evidently admired the spirit of his friend and agreed with his principle. John, himself, when invited to preach at a town a few miles from Philadelphia, would go on Saturday and return on Monday, spending two night there rather than spend twenty minutes travelling each way on the Sabbath.¹ . . .

1 Dr. William Young of Rhode Island University gives the following similar reminiscence: "On one occasion, he was prevailed upon to stay over a weekend with Rev. L. C. Long in mid-town New York City. Sabbath afternoon he was to preach for the O.P.C. meeting I held in the building of the 3rd Reformed Presbyterian Church on Walton Ave. in the Bronx. Rather than take the subway, Prof. Murray set out in the morning and walked the 8 miles to meet his engagement. After the service, however, he had a shorter walk across the Harlem River to the home of Rev. Kenneth MacKenzie, with whom he usually stayed on such occasions."

Since John and I were the two younger single members of the faculty, we were often entertained together at the homes of various other faculty members. Subjects of conversation varied according to the interests of the family where we were visiting, and I always enjoyed seeing the activities of John's mind as he looked at many subjects from interesting viewpoints differing somewhat from those of us who had spent our youth on a different continent from that of his childhood.

One year John decided to spend the summer getting some acquaintance with the German language and German customs. Since I myself had previously spent two years studying at the University of Berlin, I was already adept in the German language, and on this particular summer I was planning to attend courses in Old Testament and Archaeology at the University of Berlin. It was my privilege that summer to explain to John the German customs where they differed from those familiar to him, and to act as interpreter for him on many occasions. After his experience of the bitter fighting in the first World War, he often commented on the contrast between the attitudes of those years and the pleasant relations that we had with the German people, sometimes remarking: "How strange life is. One day you are fighting a man, doing your best to kill him, and the next day you sleep in the same bed!"

No outline of John Murray's life would be satisfactory without some comment on the part he played in the two greatest difficulties through which Westminster Seminary passed in the 1930's. The first concerned the question how far the Seminary, or rather its Board and faculty, was to be involved in taking positive steps to counter the defection in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The second centered upon the issue whether or not the Seminary should make common cause with Fundamentalists in an inclusive evangelicalism rather than maintain a clear-cut commitment to the Reformed Faith.

Upon the first of these questions Murray, whose church membership was still in Scotland, was not himself directly involved. While Westminster was primarily intended to serve the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., it was an institution independent of denominational association. Machen and his colleagues had remained within the old denomination after 1929, though in 1933 Machen took a major step of protest against the Modernism which had captured its foreign missions by forming an Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. For this, action was taken against Machen in the courts of the Church, leading ultimately to his suspension from the ministry. Meanwhile a number, of whom Machen was the leader, resolved in a Covenant Union to make every effort to reform the existing Church organization and, in the event of failure, to be "ready to perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., regardless of cost." The indiscipline of the Presbyterian Church being what it was, the likelihood that the formation of a new denomination would be required if this policy was pursued was clearly seen, and to Machen's "intense pain and heartbreak" a number of his friends, including two members of the faculty and several Trustees of Westminster, disassociated themselves from his policy and those connected with Westminster [and] resigned [from Westminster]. Their attitude, writes Stonehouse, "seemed to add up to a 'stay in [the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.] at all costs' policy . . . they occupied an essentially weaker and more inconsistent position."²

The events of 1935 necessitated, in Machen's view, a new journal, and accordingly he launched

2 *Op. cit.*, 497-8.

The Presbyterian Guardian. In the issue of December 16th, John Murray commenced a series of major articles entitled "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes." The first of these was a terse and trenchant survey of the prevailing defection in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. "It is not exaggeration to say," runs his opening sentence, "that the situation in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. at the present time is unspeakably bad . . . The default in the sacred province of discipline has been colossal. In view of this the whole Church as an organization is involved in the guilt of tolerating the most baneful heresy, a guilt of which the orthodox themselves, we are sorry to say, are by no means free. We have a state of corruption beyond the power of words to estimate, and ruinous in its consequences"

Murray shared entirely in Machen's analysis of the spiritual situation and in the necessity for it to be met by action at church level. Like Machen, he refused to entertain the thought of withdrawal into any independency in church order. The unity of the church -- presbyterian unity -- requires denominations, and denominational affiliation means corporate responsibility.

When the breaking point finally came in the summer of 1936 and a new denomination -- the Presbyterian Church of America (later called the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) -- was formed, John Murray was not long in deciding where his responsibility lay. Thus, ten years after he had originally anticipated, he was ordained to the work of the ministry by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church Presbytery of New York and New England on May 28, 1937, in Calvin Presbyterian Church, New Haven, Connecticut, the sermon being preached by Dr. Cornelius Van Til.

In view of the hostility that was displayed against Westminster Theological Seminary by liberal Presbyterianism and the failure in support from some of the orthodox, it is hardly surprising that there was a temptation for the new Seminary, in the interest of wider unity with other evangelicals, to moderate the full-orbed Calvinism which had been foundational in the old Princeton. In his first address on "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Plan and Purpose" in 1929, Machen had warned of this danger: "We hope that members of other churches, despite our Calvinism, may be willing to enter as students . . . But we cannot consent to impoverish our message by setting forth less than what we find the Scriptures to contain; and we believe that we shall best serve our fellow-Christians, from whatever church they may come, if we set forth not some vague greatest common measure among various creeds, but that great historic Faith that has come down through Augustine and Calvin to our own Presbyterian Church."

"Unfortunately, however," writes Stonehouse, "the full impact of this commitment was not adequately grasped during the early years. The opposition to modernism rather than a positive understanding of the Reformed Faith had come to characterize the evangelicalism of the Presbyterian Church, and in this context the difference between the Reformed Faith and current fundamentalism failed to come to full disclosure and understanding."³

A principal factor in bringing the "full disclosure" was the series of articles, already mentioned, which John Murray began in *The Presbyterian Guardian* at the end of 1935. The second of these articles presented the proposition: "The system of doctrine [in the Westminster Confession] is the Reformed or Calvinistic system and is to be carefully distinguished from, as well as set over against, not only non-Christian systems of thought but also systems of belief that in general terms may be called Christian or even Evangelical." And Murray proceeded to show how both Arminianism and "Modern Dispensationalism" were contrary to the Reformed Faith and the Bible.

3 *Op. cit.* 457-8.

Concerning the former he wrote:

The denial of unconditional election strikes at the heart of the doctrine of the grace of God. The grace of God is absolutely sovereign and every failure to recognize and appreciate the absolute sovereignty of God in His saving grace is an expression of the pride of the human heart. It rests upon the demand that God can deal differently with men in the matter of salvation only because they have made themselves to differ. In its ultimate elements it means that the determining factor in salvation is what man himself does, and that is just tantamount to saying that it is not God who determines the salvation of men, but men determine their own salvation; it is not God who saves but man saves himself. This is precisely the issue.

Not surprisingly these articles by John Murray in *The Presbyterian Guardian* were not universally welcomed, and it was in protest against the policy which they represented that there was a further thinning in the ranks of those associated with the Westminster Seminary. Without question, the seven articles under the title "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes" had Machen's weight behind them, but this is not to say that they owed their inspiration to him. In matters of theology Murray required no leadership from his senior colleague; and it is indicative of Machen's humility that in discussion with him upon the subject of the active and passive obedience of Christ, towards the end of 1936, he came to see that he had not laid sufficient emphasis upon the Saviour's *active* obedience. "The subject," as John Murray later wrote, "formed the topic of one of the last conversations we were privileged to have with our beloved friend." And it meant much to Murray to receive from Machen on January 1, 1937 -- the very day of the latter's death -- a telegram with the words, "I'm so thankful for active obedience of Christ: no hope without it." It was Machen's final word, dictated by him to a nurse, and as Murray said, "We hang on to the last words of our friends."⁴

With so many matters of doctrinal controversy to be settled in the early years of Westminster Seminary's existence, it would have been understandable if the faculty had become preoccupied with the issues of truth and error over which they found it necessary to differ from others. But necessary as the defense of the Faith was, it was not the main end for which the founders of Westminster lived. The positive spreading of the gospel and the proclamation of the whole counsel of God was the chief end in view. If John Murray had been left to his own preference, it would have led him to the pastorate and the constant care of souls which is involved in the ministry of the Word. As it was, he sought to combine the training of students with such opportunities for outreach as were afforded to him, especially in the long vacations from May to September. He looked forward to these months, and when they came he gave himself as eagerly to people as he did to study in the winter. He warned his students against the idea that studies were the end of the gospel ministry: "You must not forget that you exercise this ministry upon earth, in the ministry of the gospel to saved and unsaved men and women who also live in this world with its cares and concerns, joys and sorrows, miseries and disappointments. You must never think that you are a spiritual aristocrat beneath whose dignity and office it is to minister, it may be, in the squalor of the lowest strata of society and in the midst of the discouragements of the lowest

⁴ Dr. Machen's "Hope and the Active Obedience of Christ," *The Presbyterian Guardian*, 1937, 163. Another subject of difference within Westminster in 1936 was the question whether the use of alcoholic liquor should be positively discouraged, if not forbidden, among Christians. John Murray believed keenly that the prohibitionist attitude to liquor amounted to a censure of the morality of the Bible and of Christ himself. For that reason he was strongly opposed to it and played a leading part in settling the faculty's resolution not to commit themselves to the position which was common among evangelical Christians of the Fundamentalist school.

grades of intellectual capacity."

Paul Woolley speaks of love for people as a primary quality in John Murray's life, and he instances how Murray "poured a considerable measure of his talents, time and resources into the rebirth of puritanism in New England through the establishment of Orthodox Presbyterian churches." This particular outreach began in 1936 when a "Committee for the Propagation of the Reformed Faith in New England" as formed with John Murray as chairman. For an average of eleven weeks in the summer of that year, nine men, including Murray, had worked in New England, covering much ground both by car and bicycle and linking preaching with house visitation. Writing on the subject the following Spring in *The Presbyterian Guardian*, Murray expressed the hope that as many as fifteen men might be sent the next summer: "We wish we had sufficient funds and men so that we could send a hundred. Even then we should only be touching the fringe of the need in this greatly unevangelized field. A great door and effectual is opened unto us. We pray for consecration in ourselves. We pray for the same in the men who will be sent, and for the baptism of the Spirit upon them. May they in true apostolic fashion turn that world upside down!"

By the blessing of God the work of this Committee bore fruit in the formation of congregations, and Paul Woolley comments on how there are now five Orthodox Presbyterian churches and one chapel in the State of Maine (the northeastern extension of Massachusetts Bay in Puritan days), where there was originally only one in 1936. John Murray's attachment to New England is the explanation why he was ordained in Connecticut and why, though living in Pennsylvania, he became a life-long member of his denomination's New York and New England presbytery.

It was in view of his known experience as well as of his knowledge of the Word of God that he was, during the first decade of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's life, appointed Secretary of the Committee on Local Evangelism. His influence in that Committee is to be seen in the six reports which were drawn up relative to that subject and sent out under his name to all ministers and sessions of the Church. In one of these reports on "The Open-Air Meeting," after statements on the biblical basis and on contemporary problems respecting such meetings, the following rules are set down and expanded:

1. Go where the people are, not where you hope they will come . . .
2. Go in absolute confidence in the truth and power of the Gospel and in complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit to bless. Only as the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit can we proclaim boldly, convincingly, and winsomely the everlasting gospel. To this end, we need to *pray* that we might be filled with the Spirit. Nothing can draw and hold so well and so surely in an open-air service as the preaching of the Word in the power of the Spirit.
3. There are successful ways of gathering a good audience. One way is to have a nucleus of Christians to go with the minister . . . A method that has been used by some Roman Catholics with real success in drawing a crowd is the question and answer method . . .

These reports give the best kind of directions in evangelism, and it is a loss to the Church that they have been buried in obscurity while far less deserving material has received prominence!⁵

⁵ They were discussed at the Tenth and Eleventh General Assemblies. It might be added at this point that when John Murray undertook his many sea voyages between the U.S.A. and Britain, usually on one of the "Queens" of the Cunard Line, he would obtain permission to put up a notice announcing that he would be conducting Bible studies

It was not until after the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936 that John Murray became committed to one congregation in Philadelphia. In the six years prior to that date he most frequently attended the ministry of his Princeton classmate David Freeman, who was then minister of Grace Presbyterian Church not far from Pine Street in central Philadelphia. The hospitality of the Freemans' home afforded to the two bachelor members of faculty has already been mentioned earlier in this chapter by Dr. MacRae. "I will remember," Murray wrote in later years, "the joy of listening to faithful and impassioned delivery of the gospel message from the pulpit of Grace Presbyterian Church." He was by no means a critic of preachers, but one thing he did require was that a man *felt* what he preached: "To me, preaching without passion is not preaching at all." It was the presence of this qualification which also led him at this period to be present occasionally at the church of a certain black preacher: "He would say some excellent things. Of course, there were some things I could not agree with, but I can take Methodism from a Methodist!"

When after the division of 1936 Dr. Freeman became minister of New Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and later after an interval of a few years of Knox Presbyterian Church, John Murray gave his full commitment. Paying tribute to Freeman many years later he could say: "For more than twenty-five years of his pastoral ministry I could regard him as my pastor. It was a great privilege to be a sharer with him in all the vicissitudes connected with pastoral ministry throughout these years; but above all, to be the recipient in God's gracious providence of gospel ministrations in word, sacrament, and fellowship."

In the last century when Dr. John Duncan attended upon the ministry of Moody-Stuart in Edinburgh, the latter used to comment on how the worship seemed to be enriched. This was also Dr. Freeman's experience with respect to the presence of his friend [John Murray] in the congregation: "He appropriated the worship as his own, as though there was no one else in the place. God was before his mind and eyes. He was *intent* upon hearing the Word read and preached. I never saw anyone enjoying the singing of praise as he did." On those occasions when John Murray preached, Dr. Freeman also recalls "his whole countenance, his whole being, was taken up." But this stirring of emotion was also to be seen in him as a member of the congregation; and on one occasion, as a communicant at the Lord's Supper, his feelings simply overflowed.

During the 1930's John Murray's published writings consisted entirely of forceful, popular articles, contributed mainly to *The Presbyterian Guardian*, dealing with the needs of the day. In 1938, however, there came a major development with the establishment of the *Westminster Theological Journal*, which was intended, like the old *Princeton Theological Review*, to be a repository of Reformed thought upon issues of enduring importance. John Murray was one of the two founding editors; the other was Paul Woolley, who attributes more credit to his colleague than would have been acceptable to him:

He was one of the two editors of the *Westminster Theological Journal* for the first fifteen years of its existence. In that capacity it was he who was the creative figure. He knew what articles needed to be written and who were the best people to write them. He was concerned about the impact of the *Journal* and scrutinized its text with meticulous care. He was not above the ordinary task of reading proof. His principle was that no trouble was too great to undertake if it promoted accuracy in the text and clarity in the thought.

in a room which was allocated to him for that purpose. He was at home in 1933 at the time of his mother's death.

As the 1930's came to their close and the Seminary completed the first decade of its testimony, the general scene in the churches presented no cause for satisfaction. Murray's feelings at that juncture are summed up in these words:

O how crushing is the shame that rests upon the church! Humiliating indeed is our reproach. But by God's grace and Christ's power how glorious our vocation and responsibility! . . . Westminster Seminary raised a banner for the whole counsel of God when concrete events had made it more than apparent that Reformed churches throughout the world had laid in the dust that same banner, defaced, soiled and tattered. When the enemy came in like a flood, God in His abundant mercy and sovereign providence raised up a standard against him . . .

We who are closely associated with Westminster Seminary have to confess that we have come far short of our profession and aim. Indeed, when we think of our own sins and shortcomings, we are amazed that God in His displeasure has not wrenched this banner out of our hands and given it to others more worthy than we. We marvel that God has not removed His candlestick out of our midst.

But surely the facts show that He has not done so. In His abundant mercy He has borne with our sins and faults. I don't think it is presumption to say, and to say it to God's praise, that the banner has not been folded up and laid in the dust. We have not raised it aloft as we should have done, we have not unfurled it as we should. But it has not been lowered or furled.

"Chapter 3" from Iain Murray, *John Murray: of Badbea, and Westminster Seminary*, Philadelphia (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).