

Chapter Five

"The Wider Influence"

Personal factors and spiritual convictions alike prevented John Murray from restricting his interests to the work within Westminster Seminary. Unlike Warfield at Princeton, whose activity beyond the Seminary was very much restricted by the infirmity of his wife, he had no home responsibilities in the United States, and his temperament was such that he enjoyed travelling and meeting people farther afield. In addition, the closeness of his ties with his family meant that he was usually found in Scotland every alternate summer after the close of the Second World War.

Certain spiritual convictions also led him to place much importance upon work outside the Seminary. He took a high view of a Christian's duty to be a member of the most faithful Church that is to be found and to support that Church with sacrificial vigor. In his own case that duty led him to give a great deal of time and energy to the witness of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Whenever possible he was present in the meetings of the Presbytery of New York and New England. He frequently served in the General Assembly of the Church, being appointed Moderator in 1961; and he played a leading part in many of its committees, as for example, the important Committee on Foreign Missions to which he belonged for a quarter of a century. Occasionally committees of short duration were set up to elucidate and report upon particular problems. His work as secretary of the Committee on Local Evangelism has already been mentioned. As Chairman of the Committee on Texts and Proof Texts (in respect of various editions of the Westminster Confession), he submitted to the General Assembly a text derived from the original manuscript written by Cornelius Burgess in 1646 with the proof-texts revised. The purity of the text of the Westminster Confession had long been a matter of great interest to him. He gave much time to the subject, and it was the theme of the first book review he had contributed to the *Westminster Theological Journal* in 1939.¹

A special committee of far-reaching importance was elected by the General Assembly to revise the denomination's Form of Government and Book of Discipline. As Chairman of this Committee, which continued to work for more than ten years, John Murray exercised a major influence in formulating the revisions which were recommended to the Assembly. In an article in *The Presbyterian Guardian* (September 15th, 1954) he shows why some of the recommended changes were needed and emphasizes the necessity for church government to be founded upon the warrant of the New Testament, that is to say, upon the authority of Christ. Popular thought which influences church practice, as for example the idea that "the minister" stands apart from elders, is therefore not to be countenanced:

The committee has endeavored to carry out the presbyterian principle consistently. If the presbyterian form of government is government by presbyters, then all who are presbyters in the New Testament sense exercise this function of government on a parity with one another. The teaching elder, often called the minister, does not have any priority or superiority in respect of ruling in the church of God. Ruling elders and teaching elders have equal authority in this matter of rule. This is exemplified in the committee's version by the provision stated expressly in Chapter IX, Section 2: "it is not requisite that the pastor should be moderator of the session."

1 The book reviewed was S. W. Carruthers: *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1937.

The committee seeks to guard against an unwholesome clericalism which has frequently crept in and which has tended to rehabilitate practical hierarchicalism even in the presbyterian tradition. This emphasis upon the parity of presbyters in the role of the church should minister to the correction of a widespread evil, the failure of ruling elders to appreciate and perform the responsibilities that are theirs in the government of the church. This applies with the session oftentimes, but it is particularly apparent in the higher judicatories.

The work of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in revising its Form of Government and Book of Discipline ought to be far better known than it is. As the above quotation shows, it touches upon issues of general importance in all the Reformed churches today.

Occasionally John Murray's views were not those of the majority of a committee upon which he was serving. This occurred, notably, when the Committee on Song in Public Worship presented its report to the General Assembly in 1947, and John Murray, together with William Young, submitted an eight-page Minority Report detailing reasons why the Book of Psalms should be held to be *the* divinely appointed hymn book for the Christian Church. The minority view was not accepted by the Assembly.

Even when Mr. Murray did not belong to a committee his judgment was not infrequently sought on vexed issues. In 1956 when two sub-committees of the Committee on Christian Education -- struggling to prepare a report for the General Assembly on the question of pictorial representations of Christ -- had come to different conclusions, the matter was referred to John Murray. With his customary clarity of thought and language, his reply in three pages demonstrated why such representations ought not to be employed.

John Murray's influence went, moreover, far beyond the borders of his own denomination. He could not view with equanimity the division of the Church into denominations, and he repudiated the argument that because the unity of the invisible Church is spiritual and has at its center the unity of believer with Christ, therefore the unity of the visible Church is of comparative insignificance. His understanding of the New Testament allowed him to accept no distinction of this kind between the Church invisible and the Church visible. He considered that the spiritual unity of believers with Christ heightens the imperative need for unity of confession and testimony in the world. His convictions on this theme are set down in various articles, of which one of the most interesting, "The Biblical Basis for Ecclesiastical Union," appears to have been written in connection with the uniting of the Bloor Street East Church in Toronto with the Free Presbyterian Church of Ontario. Though it was but a small achievement in unity, judged merely by the sizes of the Churches involved, it meant much to John Murray. Ever since 1926 he had continued to visit with unfailing regularity the Ontario congregations, served by his friend William Matheson of Chesley. In the 1940's for a time, when the Bloor Street congregation was pastorless, he had served as Moderator; and in 1952 he received a call to the pastorate at Bloor Street, a call which he could not have found it easy to decline.

In the article referred to above he writes:

1. The fragmentation and consequent lack of fellowship, harmony, and cooperation which appear on the ecclesiastical scene are a patent contradiction of the unity exemplified in that to which Jesus referred when he said, "as thou, Father, art in me

and I in thee."

2. The purpose stated in Jesus' prayer -- "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" -- implies a manifestation observable by the world. Jesus prays for a visible unity that will bear witness to the world. The mysterious unity of believers with one another must come to visible expression so as to be instrumental in bringing conviction to the world.

This same concern came to expression in his relationships with other Churches in the United States. When, in 1956, the Synod of The Christian Reformed Church took the initiative in seeking to establish closer relations with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, John Murray was active in urging an appropriate response from his own denomination. He had many personal friendships with ministers and students of the Christian Reformed Church and was no stranger to their College and Seminary in Grand Rapids. In an article on the need for closer relationships with the Christian Reformed Church in *The Presbyterian Guardian* (April 25th, 1959) he wrote:

It would be unrealistic, of course, to fail to take account of the differences that exist between the two denominations . . . The differences must be frankly faced and ways and means explored of solving them . . . But the ultimate objective and the obligation arising from it should not be obscured or overlooked. There is the necessity which cannot be suppressed that the unity which belongs to the church as the body of Christ should be brought to expression in every phase of the church's function and, therefore, in government and discipline . . . The church is not ours; it is the church of Christ. And no thing underlies the sanctity of the cause to which we are committed and the obligations inherent in this commitment more than the fact that the church is the body of Christ, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.²

In this same concern for wider Christian unity Murray also gave himself to the strengthening of the witness of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. He was present at the Synod's meeting in Edinburgh in 1953 and thereafter served on a committee appointed to report on the Inspiration of the Scriptures. The forty-page report which this committee presented to the Synod, which met in South Africa in 1958, with its insistence upon the doctrine of inerrancy, is a fine statement of the belief which Murray was so jealously concerned to guard. But the fact that the same doctrine of Scripture was not so unequivocally upheld by the Synod, while causing him regret, did not prevent him from contributing further to its work. A committee on Eschatology had been appointed in 1949, but ten years passed without any report being produced. Finally the committee was reconstituted under the chairmanship of Jim Grier, and he and John Murray together brought out the excellent thirty-one page report which was presented to the Fifth Reformed Ecumenical Synod meeting at Grand Rapids in 1963. This Synod -- at which he was elected "First Assessor" -- was the last at which John Murray was present, but his written work for Synod committees continued, and as late as the summer of 1970, with the compression of which he was a master, he wrote sixteen pages for the consideration of committee colleagues on the subject of "Office in the Church."

As noted earlier, John Murray thought of himself all his life as a Britisher, and we turn now to brief

² For a fuller treatment of this subject see his two lectures, "The Nature, Unity and Government of the Church," 1964. It was never, of course, his view that the interests of unity -- even for the purpose of evangelism -- have priority over the interests of truth. See, for example, his trenchant article, "Co-operation in Evangelism," *The Presbyterian Guardian*, March 10, 1959, subsequently issued as a booklet.

comment on his influence here in his native island. During his visits home in the 1930's his opportunities for usefulness were limited. The pulpits of the Free Presbyterian Church were not open to him and his associations with the Free Church of Scotland were comparatively undeveloped. These were the only two denominations committed to the Reformed Faith in the Scottish Highlands. When, occasionally, he engaged to speak in public halls, under no denominational auspices, it is still remembered that the meetings were crowded. After the Second World War his contacts in the Free Church of Scotland quickly multiplied and his services were eagerly sought at the communion seasons in many Highland congregations -- including the church at Creich. It was a testimony both of personal affection and of regard for the work in which John Murray was engaged at Westminster, when Dr. John MacLeod of Edinburgh invited him in 1946 to take some of the cream of his library back to the library at Westminster Seminary. Two years later John Murray shared in the simple family service which took place at the burial of this Free Church leader.

On occasions when he was home from America, such evangelical organizations as The Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now called I.C.C.F.), The Lord's Day Observance Society, and in later years The Reformation Translation Fellowship, were all eager to employ his services in Scotland.

If the impression of the present writer is correct, John Murray's first speaking engagement in England did not come until as late as 1953. At that date his name was practically unknown in the South of the United Kingdom, even among evangelical Christians.³ The explanation is that Presbyterianism as a vital force was dead in England by that date; and in the capital city, where the Westminster Confession was drawn up, there was only one figure who was commonly recognized as believing and preaching the doctrines which it contained. The prevailing ethos of English Evangelicalism (a modified form of the Fundamentalist ethos of America) and that of John Murray were alien to each other. In 1953, however, Dr. Marty Lloyd-Jones (the London preacher to whom we have just referred), as President of the Evangelical Library, invited John Murray to give the Annual Library lecture on "Reformation Principles." The same year Murray also gave at Cambridge the Tyndale lecture under the auspices of the Theological Students' Fellowship (a brand of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship) on "The Covenant of Grace."

He was next in London, again at the invitation of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, to give the Campbell Morgan Bible Lecture at Westminster Chapel in June, 1958. By this date a remarkable resurgence of interest in the Reformed faith was occurring in England and, notably, through influences stemming from Westminster Chapel where Dr. Lloyd-Jones, who belonged to the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist tradition, had ministered since 1938. In part as a result of these influences, a specifically Reformed publishing house -- the Banner of Truth Trust -- had been formed in 1957; and in the first announcement of the work which this organization hoped to do, the new publishers expressed their indebtedness to the counsel of three men -- Dr. Lloyd-Jones, Jim Grier and John Murray. Professor Murray had written commendations for two of the first titles to appear (Charles Hodge's *Princeton Sermons* and *Jonathan Edwards' Select Works*, volume I).

Through the work of the Banner of Truth Trust, in which he thus shared from the outset, John Murray developed a much closer connection with the situation in England, and within a short time he came to have a strong influence on a number of the younger ministers. These men, who had

3 When a lecture by him on "The Presbyterian Form of Church Government" was published by a recently-formed Evangelical Presbyterian Fellowship in London in 1958, it was considered necessary to explain that "although Prof. Murray has spent many years in the U.S.A., he actually hails from Scotland."

begun to read deeply in Calvin, Owen and Edwards, deplored how the older generation -- with few exceptions -- had treated their writings as non-existent. The eclipse of Calvinism which Spurgeon had predicted so forcefully eighty years before had long become a reality. But in the providence of God, John Murray's coming to England coincided with the re-awakening already mentioned, and it was inevitable that those who had felt the power of the doctrines of grace should gravitate to him. Their reading and, in many instances, the influence of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, had taught them that contemporary Christianity needed to pass through a revolution if it was to be re-adapted to the Word of God. John Murray, then in his full maturity, brought powerful corroboration and gave further momentum to the thinking which was bringing about a new departure in English Evangelicalism.

Very much at the center of this new thinking was the belief that the lack of conviction of sin, observable in the Church, and the absence of an appreciation of the majesty of God, were sure signs of the need for a true revival. But such a revival could not be expected until attention was addressed to certain spiritual realities all-too-commonly neglected in modern preaching -- not only in Arminian circles but also in churches of the Reformed tradition. A change was needed in the pulpit. John Murray had spoken on this theme to the Alumni of Westminster Seminary in 1952 in an address entitled "Some Necessary Emphases in Preaching." The first missing emphasis, he observed, was "the ministry of judgment."

What I have observed as conspicuously minimal in the preaching of evangelical and even reformed Churches is the proclamation of the demands and sanctions of the law of God. To put it bluntly, it is the lack of the enunciation with power, earnestness and passion of the demands and terrors of God's law.

In this same address on preaching he went on to show the seriousness of any failure to press the gospel upon all men without distinction: "If we fail to present this offer with freedom and spontaneity, with passion and urgency, then we are not only doing dishonor to Christ and his glory but we are also choking those who are the candidates of saving faith."

The Rev. J. Marcellus Kik shared John Murray's concern for the restoration of *preaching*, and he thought that graduates of Westminster Seminary (of which he was a trustee) too often shared in the common failure. This whole subject was discussed with Mr. Kik when he was in England in 1961, and as a result he carried back to John Murray in Philadelphia a proposal that a conference should be held for ministers in 1962 concentrating specifically upon the need for a renewal of preaching. Though it should be held in England, it was envisaged that there would be trans-Atlantic support. John Murray was hesitant about speaking at such a conference, for he did not consider himself qualified to give addresses to ministers on the subject of preaching. With characteristic diffidence he wrote to the present writer: "If some themes or theme were proposed within my competence, then I would heartily consent to take part. Of course, apart altogether from my participating, a week of fellowship with men like Marty Lloyd-Jones⁴ and Jim Grier appeals to me very much. I would be a grateful listener and be ready to participate in discussion."

When this conference did meet over four days in July, 1962 at Leicester in England, Professor Murray gave three addresses; and thereafter the dates of the Leicester Ministers' Conference, as it became known, were never settled without consideration being given to his ability to attend. Except for his writings, John Murray's strongest influence in England was to come through these

4 In the event, Dr. Lloyd-Jones was not present in 1962. He spoke in the Conferences of 1964 and 1965.

Conferences, which he attended unfailingly until 1971.

From the third conference in 1965 onwards, it became traditional that John Murray preached at the closing session on the Thursday morning, and from 1967 he and Mr. Grier jointly shared the chairmanship. It was his conviction that the fellowship and cooperation of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists of reformed persuasion, "on the basis of a common confession and declared objectives without giving up their differences on such questions as government and baptism," was "an affiliation in the direction of the unity which is demanded of the body of Christ." Those present at Leicester in John Murray's day will never forget what his presence meant to the Conferences.

In the last place, on the subject of John Murray's influence, it must be said that it reached its widest scope and most enduring form in his published writings. These consisted, speaking generally, of two kinds of material. First, the shorter magazine articles, already mentioned, which were often compelling reading for Christians with no academic background. Probably his only published book in this category is *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans 1955, and Banner of Truth, 1961), the second half of which first appeared as articles in *The Presbyterian Guardian*. Second, there are the volumes which were not intended for popular reading but rather for the aid of serious students. In this group are the books which originated as material in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. *Christian Baptism* (Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1952); *Divorce* (OPC, 1953) and *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Eerdmans, 1959). Reviewing the last-named volume in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Henry J. Knight refers to a section in which "Murray engages in a type of close reasoning which only an alert mind can follow . . . Here is a book that must be studied, not merely perused. It is a great work of a great theologian."

More readily followed, and yet substantial in content, are the two volumes (both originally delivered as lectures), *Principles of Conduct*, 1957 (Eerdmans and Inter-Varsity Fellowship), which was the first book by Murray to be published in the United Kingdom, and *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960).

In a category of its own is his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (first issued in two volumes, 1959 and 1965, Eerdmans and Marshall, Morgan and Scott). In the opinion of Paul Woolley, shared by many, the *Commentary on Romans* "is one of the great works of scholarship of all the Christian period." It is all the more valuable for the fact that its scholarship is not that of the academic theologian but rather of the school of John Calvin, who wrote of one of his expositions, "I have faithfully and carefully endeavored to exclude from it all barren refinements, however plausible and fitted to please the ear, and to preserve genuine simplicity, adapted solidly to edify the children of God."

Reviewing Volume I in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, William Hendriksen concluded, "This is exegesis of the highest rank. The book belongs in every minister's library and in the library of every Bible student." In the same journal the late Dr. Fred C. Keuhner wrote, when Volume 2 appeared:

To write a commentary on any book of the Bible is a solemn task. To write one on the Epistle to the Romans is a task both solemn and arduous. And to write one that explains fully and faithfully the profound message of the Apostle in this letter is a

labor of love demanding one's highest gifts and deepest devotion . . . Those of us who have had Volume I on our shelves since its appearance in 1959 have been waiting expectantly for the publication of Volume II. We have been looking forward to discovering Murray's treatment of the vexing theological arguments of chapters 9-11 . . . But we must not become surfeited with the exegetical delights of these chapters. There is more to come and to be enjoyed. For when we turn to chapters 12-16 of the epistle we are pleasantly surprised to find that Murray [if this were possible] even surpasses Murray! For nowhere in the commentary does the professor write more lucidly or more pointedly than in those sections of the epistle where Paul sets forth the practical application of the gospel to everyday life. Here the professor of systematic theology becomes the professor of Christian ethics. Here the seminary teacher becomes the counsellor of the man in the pew. Here he gives the down-to-earth, almost proverbial, advice, "Few things bring greater reproach upon the Christian profession than the accumulation of debts and refusal to pay them" [p. 159]. And again, "Just as there is to be no social aristocracy in the church, so there is to be no intellectual autocrat" [p. 137]. And, once more, "Pride consists in coveting or exercising a prerogative that does not belong to us" [p. 117]. And, "The love of God is supreme and incomparable, We are never asked to love God as we love ourselves or our neighbor as we love God" [p. 163].

As yet not many of Professor Murray's writings have been translated. Those that have include his lecture, "The Covenant of Grace" (Spanish), *Divorce* (French) and *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Japanese).

If he erred in anything it was in underestimating the aid which his written work brought to others. He was slow to believe that anything he had written justified publication. It is questionable whether he *offered* anything to publishers, and he was known to refuse to allow the publication of material which publishers wished to have. The words which he wrote to a younger colleague in the ministry, A. N. Martin -- whom he had so warmly welcomed to the Leicester Conference in 1967 -- he would not, I think, have disapproved of being repeated here. Mr. Martin had written to him in 1970 to express gratitude for the great help which his books had proved in his own life and ministry. To this John Murray responded on November 26th, 1970:

I received your letter of the 19th yesterday. It is not possible for me to give adequate expression to my appreciation. Furthermore, I have been filled with surprise. For I could not have thought that my writings could have been to you what you have so kindly stated. And that you should have taken the time to write at such length adds to my sense of indebtedness to you. So, my prized friend, thank you.

In all of this we have to realize more and more that God has put the treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. It is cause for amazement that I should be in any degree used to contribute to the advance of the gospel. It is all of grace and only exemplifies what is true of salvation in all its aspects and to its utmost reaches, the praise of the glory of God's grace. Eternity will not exhaust our amazement as it will not exhaust the praise of God's glory in the marvels of redeeming love. Oh, how remiss I am in exploring and appropriating the riches of grace!

"Chapter 5" from Iain Murray, *John Murray: of Badbea, and Westminster Seminary*, Philadelphia (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).