

Chapter Four

"Glimpses of Work in the War Years"

By the last year of the 1930's, a decade of toil had established the foundation for Westminster Seminary's future usefulness; and the removal in 1937 from the old building in Pine Street to a small estate at Chestnut Hill -- where the main house was named "Machen Hall" -- provided the room necessary for expansion.

In April 1939, the Seminary's growing international status was enhanced by the lectures on "Scottish Theology" delivered by John Murray's fellow-countryman, Dr. John MacLeod, Principal of the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, who prefaced his lectures with the hope that the faith of the Reformed Churches will "in days of reviving" have an ample vindication, and in glory and power surpass "the best and brightest days of its past." Two months after these lectures were given, John Murray was again with John MacLeod as they both spoke at "the First American Calvinistic Conference" which met at Paterson, New Jersey. The Theme was "The Sovereignty of God" and it fell to Professor Murray to give the first address. By the standards of the day the subject was hardly appropriate, for the World's Fair was then meeting in New York and man's "achievements" in the 'thirties were the common subject of conversation. Within months, however, as nations toppled before German and Russian armies, and Europe was once again engulfed in war, others were to learn of the need to "take refuge in the absolute sovereignty of the eternal God." As John Murray was to write a few years later: "It is an inexpressible comfort in these days of upheaval and turmoil to know that all events, great and small, are embraced in God's sovereign providence. Present history is not moving toward chaos. It is moving in the grand drama of God's plan and purpose to the accomplishment of His holy designs and to the vindication of His glory."

In the summer of 1939, before the outbreak of war, John Murray was once more home in Scotland. The parting with his family at Badbea before recrossing the Atlantic must have been particularly hard. When he would next return was entirely unknown, certainly he was unlikely to see his aged father again, and the whole future of the homeland to which he was so ardently attached was threatened by the shadow of German aggression. Johan, his sister, had now taken up their father's former role and all family and local news went to John in regular letters. In the midst of such items of information as she knew her brother to be eager to receive, Johan expresses these thoughts on the world scene in a letter of December 21st, 1939:

The poor Finlanders! It is to be feared that their country will be like Poland unless a miracle happens.

Our own navy is putting up a brave fight. We do hope that they will be very successful against such dangers . . .

We are drawing to the close of another year. Many a year has passed and we are still in the land of mercy. O to be made wise, but the things of time seem to be our great concern. We wish you all manner of happiness, dear John, and may God bless your work for His great Name's sake.

With the subsequent entrance of the United States into the Second World War and general

conscription into the Armed Forces, the life at Westminster Seminary was soon affected and the developments anticipated in the late 'thirties had to await the post-war years. At one point the number of students in attendance was even to fall to little more than twenty. The relative quietness at Chestnut Hill was not without its advantages to John Murray, and a considerable amount of written work was done both for the *Westminster Theological Journal* and for other papers. In 1941 he contributed three articles to the monthly *Calvin Forum* in an extended debate with Dr. Albertus Pieters on the question whether the Fourth Commandment is still part of the moral law, and in 1942 and 1943 *The Presbyterian Guardian* carried a series of articles from his pen on "The Westminster Assembly." It was probably at this same period -- the tercentenary of the meeting of the Assembly in 1643 -- that he also prepared his extensive lectures on "The Westminster Confession" which were subsequently taken by many students as an elective course.

One effect which the war had upon the Seminary was to restrict its role almost entirely to that set down in its constitution, namely, "To provide an adequate supply and succession of able and faithful ministers of the New Testament." Before the War, and more so after it, the Seminary offered its facilities to those who wished to study theology without necessarily knowing a call to the ministry, a practice which has not been without its dangers. But while the government was prepared to exempt future ministers of the gospel from military service, it gave no such liberty to those who merely sought to read theology, and consequently Westminster was reduced to those who were genuinely candidates for the ministry.

John Murray made telling use of this fact in welcoming the members of the incoming class in June, 1944. In other years he was to take his turn in giving an address to the new students, but by the nature of the case some of his remarks in 1944 were exceptional and they deserve to be quoted at length:

I take it that all of you who are entering this Seminary today are enrolling for the purpose of preparing for the gospel ministry. Unless you are exempt from the draft regulations on some other ground, and I am not aware that any of you are, the reason why in the circumstances you are able to be here is that you are *bona fide* aspirants for the gospel ministry.

It may have appeared to you that theological study in the quiet of these halls and of this campus is remote from the most practical contribution which you could render in the exigencies of this present time. Unless for some physical reason you are ineligible for military service, I hope you have felt something of the urge to enlist in the services of your country in the present emergency. Indeed, I hope you have felt that urge in a very potent way. I hope you have found it very difficult to take advantage of the opportunities and privileges that are now being given you, when so many of your fellow countrymen have to face the hardship and peril of the field of battle, and face these perils and endure so many hardships for the protection of the many privileges that are now yours. If perchance you have not weighed these considerations then I hardly think your decision to follow the course upon which you have embarked is worthy of your privilege and of the task that is ahead of you.

What I mean is simply this, that I hope it has been hard for you to come here, and hard for the very reason that it offers you an immunity from the hard, bitter and painful ordeal through which many of your fellow countrymen of your age are being

called upon to experience at the present time.

Why then do we welcome you to Westminster? On the assumption that yours has been a painful decision, why do we congratulate you? We do so for this reason. You have come here, we trust, because of divine compulsion. You believe that you have been called by God to prepare yourselves for the gospel ministry. You are under the compulsion of a divine call to the greatest vocation upon earth. Under that compulsion you are here to serve the King of kings and Lord of lords. In a very peculiar and pre-eminent sense you are here as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, and as such you are performing the highest service to God and to Caesar. You are performing, even to your country, to the United Nations, yea, to the world the highest ministry that can be rendered. For you are preparing yourselves in pursuance of a divine call for the ministry of that Word without which the whole world perishes in sin, in misery and death.

It is not often that students entering a Seminary are greeted with an address as solemn and direct as the one from which we have just quoted. Yet the professor who spoke in such tones soon came to be known by each incoming class for those human qualities and notable kindnesses which won the affection of succeeding generations. Paul Woolley, his friend and colleague, writes:

His influence upon the students of Westminster Theological Seminary was very pervasive. As an unmarried man he lived for many years in rooms on the top floor of Machen Hall, which was the student dormitory, and took his meals in a student dining club. As a result, students were able to observe the pattern of his living and note that meticulous scholarship, the mundane problems of contemporary living, and genuine Christian commitment could be harmonious components of a Christian life. His quarters were known as "Murray Heights" by generations of maturing theologians.

We have mentioned earlier John Murray's commitment to the work in Knox Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He practiced his conviction that ministers should be members of local congregations. In this connection one of his most pleasant duties during the war years was to teach a children's class week-by-week at Knox Church. To those who know him only by his writings, it might seem almost incredible that he could be a regular and successful teacher of children; but the fact that it was so cannot be denied. Part of the explanation lay in his attitude towards the younger generation, for in any group of people they were always given the most affectionate of welcomes. "His pats and his squeezes," comments Paul Woolley, "alternately delighted their recipients by their affection and terrified them by their well-intended but painful vigor!" But the teaching which he gave them was also so lucid and suited to their capacity that none was discouraged and, in addition, he favored his children's class with a privilege which he did not encourage at Westminster, namely, a question and answer method of instruction. Through the foresight of a grown-up, there exist verbatim accounts of some of his lessons to the children's class in 1943 and 1944 when they were going through the book of Genesis.

A brief extract from the lesson on the deception which Rebekah encouraged Jacob to practice in order to obtain the blessing Isaac intended for Esau will illustrate how these classes were conducted. After repeating the story, and emphasizing that Rebekah was intent on securing the blessing for Jacob, our Professor addressed a question to Bobby, "Why was she so intent on

securing the blessing for Jacob?" "He was the oldest," the child replied hopefully. "No, Jacob wasn't the oldest. Do you know, Richard? Martha?" Securing no help from his class, John Murray proceeded to explain how Rebekah was influenced by the promise made to her at the birth of Jacob and Esau, "The elder shall serve the younger." At this point a rather difficult question was addressed to David Freeman -- who evidently enjoyed being in the children's class. There followed a question to Bobby, which he was able to answer, "Now, Bobby, do you think that Rebekah was guilty of any deception in this matter?" "Sure, yes." "And should she have practiced that deception?" "No, I don't think so." "What do you think, Martha? Louise? Didn't she have a good reason in view?" "Yes, she had a good end but the end didn't justify the means." "That's the point! That's very good. Did you all get that point Martha made? Rebekah was very jealous for the divine purpose and promise but she resorted to a wrong means, the means of deception."

At this stage in the lesson the teacher took up the interesting but difficult question whether deception is ever justified, and he defined deception as something that is "calculated and intended to create in the mind of the other person an impression contrary to fact." "Now, what about war? Camouflage, is that not deception? You put out a dummy gun, you surround it with a lot of dummy shells and give the impression to the enemy that this is a very important position, and it is not so. Don't you try to create an impression that is wholly incorrect?"

We cannot stop to relate how John Murray went on to encourage in the children their first consideration of the ethical problems related to the sanctity of truth,¹ except to relate how in the course of doing so he drew a distinction between concealment and deception:

Concealment in some instances may be deception. Yes, if you conceal something from a person when that person has a right to know and ought to know, that is deception. Suppose children conceal something from their parents that they ought to know, they are deceiving their parents. But to conceal something from a person when that person has no right to know is not deception. Mrs. Soder doesn't need to tell me how much money she has in the bank. That's none of my business to know and it is no deception on her part that she doesn't tell me. I don't tell Mr. Freeman what my personal estate is even though he is my best friend. He has no right to know. It wouldn't be wrong to tell him, but I'm not under any obligation to tell him . . . And, of course, there are certain things that everyone not only may but should conceal. There are depths of thought in the human breast that no one ought to expose to another . . . There are certain things that I never expect to tell any human being. I confess them to God, I hope, but I don't expect ever to tell them to any human being -- certain thoughts that I have, and certain temptations, and so forth. No! It would be entirely unedifying to expose them but concealment is not deception . . ."

With lessons like this children were both interested and made to think. A few words from another lesson reveal John Murray's conviction on the importance of teaching theology to children. He was speaking on this occasion (April 16th, 1944) of Jacob's God being also the God of his grandfather Abraham. Of course, as he reminded the children, when Jacob fled to Padan Aram, Abraham was dead, for Jacob was then around seventy years of age. "And," he added, "Jacob was a good long while in Padan Aram before he was married . . . So there's some hope for me!" But Jacob was

¹ The reader can pursue the subject further in his book *Principles of Conduct, Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, 1957, chapter six.

around fifteen years old before his grandfather's death: "He probably had become personally acquainted in his youth with the godliness of his grandfather. A boy of fifteen who is very observant will acquire a very vivid recollection of his grandfather if he is acquainted with him, and especially if he was with his grandfather toward the end of his days. My father died two years ago and his grandchildren were pretty close to him in his last few years. I am sure they will never forget his death-bed and his last days!"

This led the speaker, who had earlier quoted Genesis 35:29 ("Isaac died, and was gathered unto his people"), to go on to speak of heaven and the gathering that will take place there at the resurrection. As is liable to happen to all teachers of children, he received a rather off-putting answer from one of his class as he questioned them: "You know, for those who get to heaven it must of course be a supreme joy to see whom, Nancy? What will the supreme vision of heaven? Do you understand my question?" "No!" "If you go to heaven, you expect to go to heaven, you hope to go to heaven, well, when you go to heaven whom do you want to see? Yes, with your physical eye as it were. I am thinking of the resurrection when we will be raised from the dead, when we will go into the final state of glory. Whom do you want to see most of all with your physical eye?" "My mother! -- I don't understand." "Who will be the center of interest in heaven?" "God." "Who will be in heaven in the flesh? Which person of the Godhead? Don't you think of Christ? You see, Christ will have a body in heaven as well as you. He has a body today. Don't you see? God the Father doesn't have a body and God the Holy Spirit doesn't have a body. But the Son does have a body. Do you know the Shorter Catechism? Who is the only Redeemer of God's elect, Martha?" "The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ who being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was and continueth to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever." "Do you know the Shorter Catechism to the end, all through? Do you, Richard? Do you, Martha? You, Nancy? How old are you Nancy?" "Thirteen."

Now everyone of you children should know the Shorter Catechism from the beginning to the end without a mistake by this age. Now that's without joking at all. At the age of twelve you ought to know the Shorter Catechism from beginning to end without even making a mistake. You don't know what you are missing! Get down to learning it, if you haven't already learned it! It will not only give you the most perfect human compendium of Christian truth that there is in the whole world, but it will be the finest mental exercise; and it will lay a foundation in your mind and in your life for a hundred other things as well as for true religion. The mere mental discipline of learning it with exactness down to each preposition is one of the best disciplines that we know of in this world in the field of education. The primary reason is to learn it for the purpose of having in your mind a comprehensive compendium of Christian truth; but even apart from that there are a hundred by-products. It will be invaluable to you through your whole life, and not only in this life but in the life which is to come.

Now, this seems to be far removed from the subject but you can see how far afield you can get in studying text-by-text the Scriptures. This isn't far removed from the subject at all. I started off with this text here at the end of chapter 35 and we began to talk about heaven, and what I said was, or what I was going to say was, that it will be a great joy when we go to heaven, if we get there, to meet Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will not be the center of interest in heaven, great as they were. The center of interest, as Nancy said, will be God; and so far as

physical appearance is concerned, the great center of interest will be Christ Himself, "The Lamb who is in the midst of the throne." Now when we read these Old Testament stories with respect to the deeds of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we should think of heaven because they are in heaven. And we all of us profess to be true believers in Christ; and if we profess to be true believers in Christ, we are professing to be heaven-bound, and therefore some day we are expecting to meet Abraham, Isaac and Jacob face-to-face!

We have given in this chapter a few glimpses of John Murray's teaching work during the war. There is a great deal belonging to this period which it is hoped may be recorded by others. Certainly he gave addresses which were as acclaimed as his Sunday School classes were unnoticed; for example, the memorable address on "God and the War" in the Christian World Order Conference in Cincinnati in 1942, and a broadcast address over the Blue Network in September, 1944, entitled "The Light of the World." But in John Murray's own order of priorities, next to his class work at Westminster he had no regular commitments which he valued more highly than the Genesis lessons at Knox Church. His contact with the children also mitigated the loss he felt at not seeing the nephews and nieces belonging to the family circle at home.

An American chaplain, the Rev. Van Pernis, who enjoyed the hospitality of the London home of Dr. Murdo Tallach (a friend of John Murray's in student days at Glasgow) wrote to his former host in April, 1945:

I have been to see our mutual friend, Dr. John Murray at Philadelphia. He was very happy to learn I had visited you . . .

He is more than anxious to visit his homeland, relatives and friends, but is too conscientious to ask for a special travel permit at this critical hour. I love him for his sincerity, even as his students love him for his efficiency, his devotedness to his task and his godliness. He adorns our Seminary.

Later that same year John Murray was able to revisit home after six years of absence. It must have been one of Badbea's happiest days!

"Chapter 4" from Iain Murray, *John Murray: of Badbea, and Westminster Seminary*, Philadelphia (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).