

# JOHN MURRAY AND THE GODLY LIFE<sup>1</sup>

John J Murray

Professor John Murray (1898-1975) was regarded in his own life-time as one of the leading Reformed theologians in the English-speaking world. Dr J I Packer in a Foreword to the latest edition of Murray's *Principles of Conduct* has said: 'Had John Murray been blessed with the luminous literary grace of a C S Lewis, or the punchy rhetoric of a Charles Hodge, his name would have been put up in lights for the past half century as the finest theologian of our time....Few have yet appreciated him at his true worth'. (1)

He was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1898 in the parish of Creich, which is in the county of Sutherland in the Highlands of Scotland. He was reared by God-fearing parents who by the time of his birth had changed their allegiance from the Free Church of Scotland to the newly formed Free Presbyterian Church. After his higher education at Dornoch Academy, Murray served as a soldier in World War I, losing the sight of his right eye. He studied at Glasgow University where he came to a decision to prepare for the Christian ministry. His Church sent him to study at Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA. Within two years of graduating he was invited back by Casper Wistar Hodge, Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton, to be his assistant. This he did for one year before joining the Faculty of the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. There he taught successive generations of students until his retirement in 1966, when he returned to his native Scotland.

The aim of this study is to examine the godliness that characterized his life

## I THE SHAPING OF THE GODLY LIFE

We look first at the influences that shaped the formation of his godly life

### *1 The spiritual life in the parish in which he was brought up..*

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the parish of Creich had been powerfully affected by the Gospel. This took place under the ministry of George Rainy. A native of Aberdeenshire, he was inducted as minister of the parish in 1771. According to Donald Sage he had a struggle mastering the Gaelic language: 'In other circumstances this drawback would have been fatal to his usefulness as a minister. But Mr Rainy was the very model of a sincere, practical Christian; he preached the Gospel more by his life than by his lips.' (2). It is said that 'over 100 men could openly testify to a personal work of grace and give a reason for the hope that was in them'.

The depth of the religious conviction among the people was revealed when a minister, Rev Murdoch Cameron, was imposed on the parish in 1813. The dramatic events are recorded by Sage: 'The people to a man were opposed to him, and his settlement was one of those violent ones which so much disgraced the Established Church at that period. The parishioners rose *en masse*, and barred the church against the Presbytery, so that the Sutherland Volunteers, under the command of Captain Kenneth Mackay of Torboll, were called out to keep the peace. In the riot which ensued, Captain Mackay got his sword, which he had naked in his hand, shivered to pieces by stones thrown at him by an old woman over seventy years of age'. (3) The people never afterwards attended Cameron's ministry but met for worship on Sabbath at Migdale Rock in the summer, and in a barn in the east end of the parish during the winter months. This arrangement was carried on for thirty years and with true Christian spirit these worthy men and women persevered in prayer for an evangelical minister until in 1843 their prayers were answered. The legislation that permitted the imposition of a minister on an unwilling people led ultimately to the Disruption of the Church of Scotland and the formation of the Free Church of Scotland.

The spiritual health of the work in the parish before 1843 depended on four elders. The minister who was called to the newly-formed Free Church was the Rev Dr Gustavus Aird, later regarded as

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one of the most distinguished of the Free Church ministers in the Highlands. Eight more elders were added to the Session in 1844. They were men of such spiritual calibre that Dr Aird 'often confessed to a sense utter want of fitness to preside over such a session'. John Murray's father, Alexander (or Sandy as he was known), was born at Badbea in 1851. He later recalled how as a youth being able to count 'no less than eight prayer-meetings being held on a Saturday evening in an area of three square miles around Badbea'. It is no small testimony to the esteem in which the congregation held Sandy Murray that he was ordained to the eldership at the early age of twenty-seven.

## *2 The God-fearing parents in the home.*

John Murray was nurtured by God-fearing parents. In particular he was moulded by the example of his father. Asked in later life who had been his greatest mentor, he might have mentioned some of the stars in the theological firmament in the Seminaries at Princeton and Westminster. Instead he replied unhesitatingly, 'My father'. Writing at the time of his father's death in 1942, Murray said: 'Though he was my father I may say that there are few men in the Highlands of Scotland whose life and memory was surrounded by such fragrance, and whose life of consistent godliness claimed such veneration and respect'. Even in the daily round the father was imparting spiritual counsel to his son John Murray once told his nephew that 'he did not witness a greater intensity of spiritual exercise of soul in any other person and his very body moved in sympathy with the inner man.' (4)

Before Sandy Murray died in 1942 he had taken care to secure from his minister a solemn promise that no obituary of him would be published in the Church's magazine. 'He would rather get a slap than flattery', men said of him in his lifetime. In an obituary notice in the *Northern Times* it was said: 'The death of Mr Alexander Murray, Badbea, which took place on 7<sup>th</sup> January, marks the end of an epoch in Highland religious life. The last of the old time saints whose influence was dominant in our communities a hundred years ago. And he was one of the noblest. As an elder in his native parish of Creich from the age of twenty-three until the time of his death in his 91<sup>st</sup> year, he was universally respected, and more than respected, he was revered... the secret of the veneration in which he was held defies analysis. He was a genuine saint, to whom the unseen was closer than breathing, and his religion was as intensely devotional' (5)

In that home at Badbea every morning and evening there was family worship, with psalm singing, Scripture reading and prayer. The Sabbath day, after special preparations on Saturday, was observed with family worship, public worship and private spiritual exercises, like Catechism instruction and the reading of good books. The yearly Communion Season in August, lasting five days, brought godly folk from neighbouring parishes to participate in the services. Badbea, like other homes, was a centre of hospitality and fellowship during the five days.

## *3 The correct doctrinal instruction in his youth.*

John Murray was brought up on the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Use was made of it in the home, in the church and in the day school. It was an educational process of priceless value. Archibald Alexander, who founded Princeton Theological Seminary, where John Murray was later to study and to teach, was also brought up on the Shorter Catechism. The invaluable roll of catechetical instruction in a young child's life is beautifully captured in Charles Hodge's remarks about this important influence in Alexander's childhood, words that could equally applied to the young John Murray: 'The principles of moral and religious truth contained in that sublime symbol, when once embedded in the mind, enlarge, sustain and illuminate it for all time. That God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth is a height of knowledge to which Plato never reached ...A series of such precise, accurate, luminous propositions, inscribed on the understanding of a child, is the richest inheritance which can be given to him. They are seeds which need only the vivifying influence of the Spirit of life, to cause them to bring forth the fruits of holiness and glory. Dr Alexander experienced this benefit in its full extent' (6)

## *4 The spiritual change that came about in his life*

There is no doubt that through the godly example set before him and the teaching imparted to him

John Murray's course of life was set in the right direction. His father was imparting spiritual counsel to him in daily conversation. In later life his wife, Valerie, recalled him expressing the belief that he had known Christ from his childhood.. The minister of the Free Presbyterian congregation at Bonar Bridge was Ewan MacQueen. Murray later recalled how when visiting the home at Badbea Mr MacQueen had the habit of putting his hand on the boy's head and saying a few words to him affectionately about spiritual things. Murray spoke of those occasions as being accompanied by the first stirrings of spiritual emotion which he could recall. He was sensitive about wrong-doing from an early age. There are few incidents recorded of his youth but one concerns his determination not to tell a lie again. It is clear that during his army service in World War I spiritual realities were his main concern. Whenever there was opportunity he would draw aside from his comrades and find some corner where he might read his Bible and pray. He made a profession of faith after returning from his military service.

## II CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GODLY LIFE

We go on to consider some of the characteristics of his godly life

### *1 His life was characterized by a God-consciousness*

Murray was brought up in an atmosphere where the living and true God was a reality. He came, however, through a conversion experience to know that God personally. In adult life Murray was to become an admirer and follower of the Reformer, John Calvin. Looking back at his own conversion, Calvin could write, 'God subdued my heart to teachableness'. Calvin has been described as 'a God possessed soul'. The same could be said of John Murray. He lived and spoke and wrote as a man deeply aware of the presence of God.

Writing in later years about piety, Murray said:

'What is piety? It is godliness. Godliness is God-consciousness, an all-pervasive sense of God's presence, of his judgment, of our relation to him and his relation to us, of our responsibility to him and dependence upon him. This God-consciousness is spoken of as the fear of God, the profound reverence for his majesty and the dread of his judgments. This fear of God is not something abstract – it is a filial reverence springing from a relation that has been constituted by redemption in Christ, justification and forgiveness by his grace, adoption in his love' (7)

In Christian conviction Murray was at one with John Calvin. B B Warfield claimed that 'the central fact of Calvinism is the vision of God'. 'It begins, it centres and it ends with the vision of God in his glory and it sets itself, before all things, to render God his rights in every sphere of life-activity. (8). Casper Wistar Hodge, Murray's teacher at Princeton, reminds us that 'wherever humble souls catch that vision of God in his glory and bow in humility and adoration before him, trusting for salvation only in his grace and power, there you have the essence of the Reformed Faith'. It was that vision which permeated what came to be called the 'Princeton piety' and was at the heart of the 'Highland piety' in which Murray was nurtured.

### *2 His life was characterized by a Covenant-consciousness*

Writing in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century C H Spurgeon said: 'He who understands the covenant has reached the very core and marrow of the Gospel'. Sadly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United Kingdom covenant theology suffered an eclipse. The neglect was observed by Dr J I Packer when he said: 'In modern Christendom covenant theology has been unjustly forgotten'. The turning point can be dated to 6 July 1953 and a lecture which John Murray delivered on the Covenant of Grace in Selwyn College, Cambridge under the auspices of the Tyndale fellowship for Biblical Research. There is no doubt that the publication of the lecture by Tyndale Press in 1954 marked the beginning of a renewed interest in the subject and marked a significant advancement in the comprehension of the biblical concept of the covenant.

The term 'Covenant' has to do with the relationship between God and man. How can sinful man stand before the God of transcendent majesty and holiness? The Biblical answer is that God has been pleased in his sovereign mercy to enter into covenant with man. In seeking to define it Murray said: 'A divine covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and of promise'. It is also 'a relationship with God in that which is the crown and glory of the whole process of religion, namely union and communion with God..... At the centre of covenant revelation as its constant refrain is the assurance "I will be your God and ye shall be my people".' (9) The pulse and heartbeat of the covenant is its 'relational character.' 'According to this the covenant means that God gives himself to man and man gives himself to God for that full measure of mutual acquaintance and enjoyment of which each side to the relation is capable.'

### *3 His life was characterized by the fear of God*

One of the most profound contributions by John Murray to an understanding of the Christian life is his chapter on 'The Fear of God' in *Principles of Conduct*. Asking the question, What is the fear of God? he says that there are at least two obviously distinct senses in which the word 'fear' is used in Scripture. 'There is the dread or terror of the Lord and there is the fear of reverential awe. There is the fear that consists in being afraid; it elicits anguish and terror. There is the fear of reverence; it elicits confidence and love.' 'The fear of God in which godliness consists is the fear which constrains adoration and love. It is the fear which consists in awe, reverence, honour, and worship and all of these on the highest level of exercise'. (10)

True Christianity may be summed up like this: Knowing who and what God is (theology) embracing a right attitude towards Him and doing what he requires (piety). John T McNeill, editor of the Battles' translation of *The Institutes*, claims that Calvin's theology is 'his piety described at length'. 'The whole life of Christians, says Calvin, ought to be a sort of practice of godliness'. In another place Calvin said 'He ought to be reckoned a true theologian who edifies conscience in the fear of God' He saw the task of theology not just to be to convey ideas to the mind but to train the souls of men to obey the Word of God by living a different kind of life. Such was the conviction of Murray.' the Biblical ethic is grounded in and is the fruit of the fear of the Lord' 'Ethics has its source in religion and as our religion so will be our ethic. This is to say also that what or whom we worship determines our behaviour' (11)

### III MANIFESTATIONS OF THE GODLY LIFE

The goal of piety, as well as the entire Christian life, is the glory of God. Murray having imbibed the teaching of the Shorter Catechism lived out the superb answer to that opening question, What is man's chief end? 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever'. Here we have the objective and subjective sides of Christianity. It is in the glorifying of God that we enjoy him. B B Warfield has stated: 'According to the Reformed conception man exists not merely that God may be glorified in him, but that he may delight in this glorious God. It does justice to the subjective as well as to the objective side of the case....No man is truly Reformed in his thought, then, unless he conceives of man not merely as destined to reflect the glory of God in his own consciousness, to exult in God: nay, unless he himself delights in God as the all-glorious One'. (12)

John Owen gives us an excellent definition of true fellowship with God: 'Our communion with God consists in his communication of himself unto us, with our return unto him of that which he requires and accepts, flowing from that union which in Christ Jesus we have with him.' Although the obvious fruits of communion with God were seen in Murray's life he was reticent to speak of his personal experiences. In this he resembled his Princeton predecessor, Archibald Alexander. According to Charles Hodge: 'He seldom spoke of his own experience or of his methods of religious culture. He lived with God: and men knew he had been on the mount by the shining of his

face; but he was not want to tell what he saw, and he made no record'. The attractiveness of this godliness is observed by Dr Packer: 'The experimental piety of the Puritans was natural and unselfconscious, because it was so utterly God-centred, our own (such as it is) is too often artificial and boastful, because it is so largely concerned with ourselves. Our interest focuses on religious experience as such and on man's quest for God, whereas the Puritans were concerned with the God of whom men have experience, and in his manner of dealings with those who he draws to himself' (13)

We can now consider some of the manifestations of that godliness as they were seen in him as a Christian, as a preacher and as a theologian.

### 1 As a Christian

#### *i) This was seen first in God-honouring worship.*

The Puritan George Swinnock wrote: 'Worship comprehends all that respect which man owes and gives to his Maker.....All that inward reverence and respect, and all that outward obedience and service to God which the word godliness enjoins, is included in this one word worship.' True worship is God-centred. It is to fasten our attention on God's glory and grace. And for us to adore that grace and to praise the Lamb it must be Christ-centred.

Reformed divines have maintained that there are three spheres of worship: private, in the secret place; domestic, in the family circle; public, in the local church. That was seen most evidently in Puritan England and in Scotland. Every home was regarded as a church with the head of the house as its minister. Parents attended to the spiritual nurture of their children. All members of the household must be given a time and place to pray and meditate. 'Heart-work' must have priority in readiness for the Lord's Day and for public worship. The Christian Sabbath was 'the queen of days'. Public worship, according to David Clarkson, is 'the nearest resemblance of heaven that earth knows'.

The pattern was clearly evident in John Murray's life. Family worship in Badbea was something to be relished. The pattern remained the same throughout his life. The Sabbath day was solemn yet joyful time. The five-day Communion season was a rich feast. It was such people in such homes that contributed greatly to the benefit of the public ordinances. It was heart-work that made worship fruitful and God-honouring. The contribution that Murray made to congregational worship is recorded by Dr David Freeman, his minister in Philadelphia: '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* on hearing the Word read and preached. I never saw anyone enjoying the singing of praises as he did.' (14) The stirring of emotion was seen in him as member of the congregation and on one occasion as a communicant at the Lord's Supper, his feelings simply overflowed.

John Murray retained to the end of his life a love for the Christian Sabbath. The pattern of observance was set in his youth in Creich and he did not depart from it during some forty years in the USA. Like his godly forbears he refrained from the using the word 'Sunday'. His observance of the day made him stand out in the Christian circles in which he moved. The day was not observed in a legalistic fashion, but rather with the outlook of 'How much of this day can I give to my Saviour?' Among the several addresses he gave on the subject he says: 'The rest of the Sabbath is not idleness; it is activity in the sacred exercise of meditation, contemplation and prayer'.

#### *ii) It was seen also in every day living*

As Murray clearly states in his writings what and whom we worship determines our behaviour. This was seen in the lives of the ordinary folk in the parish of Creich. In the words of Iain Murray: 'The Christians of Creich amongst whom the head of Badbea's household was a leader, were as mindful of their relationship to God when farming land or making roads as they were in church.' It was this fear of God that gave such integration to their daily lives. Their living was all of a piece. There was no distinction between sacred and secular. The daily toil on the land or on the roads was to the glory

of God. Piety and hard work went hand in hand. Dr Aird reported to the Royal Commission in 1884, 'and so far as I remember, I do not know a lazy man in my congregation'. John Murray would come back from the scaling the heights of Reformed scholarship to dig ditches, mend fences and tend to the sheep on the family croft. 'As our religion is so will be our ethic'.

## 2 As a preacher of the Gospel

The spiritual quality of his life was also reflected in his preaching and evangelism. 'By word and example he insisted that the first need in those called to preach is that they should be religious men: "Piety must first burn in the individuality of our own hearts and lives. If there is no cultivation of personal piety, the fervour and effectiveness of our ministry will be stultified'. (15) It is evident from the history of the Christian Church that God prepares men first as Christians before they become effective instruments in the ministry of the Gospel. In the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, 'My people's greatest need is my personal holiness' and 'A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.'

There was a further manifestation of his godly character in his passion. The godliness that manifests itself in zeal for the divine glory has passion. Murray said: 'to me preaching without passion is not preaching at all'. 'Dr Freeman recalls his preaching: 'His whole countenance, his whole being was taken up' He fulfilled the criteria of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' definition of preaching: 'What is preaching? It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology, or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this'. (16)

Godliness was also reflected in the authority with which he spoke. He worked in the God-breathed Scripture texts. He aimed to speak the very words of God. He considered the preacher as a voice to get inside the hearts and wills of the hearers and motivate them to read and do the Word. John Murray, like Calvin before him, had the conviction that the sermon has as its goal the vital confrontation of the hearer with the 'face' of God revealed in Holy Scripture. 'Man before God's face in preaching' was a watchword of the Genevan Reformer. Murray viewed the sermon as the climax of the worship service. The preaching that convicts man of his need is the very instrument to convey to him the wonders of the grace of God. Without a true appreciation of grace, in response to the full orb declaration of it in preaching, there can be no full-orbed doxology in our congregations.

## 3 As a Seminary Professor

It was fitting that John Murray should have studied and taught at Princeton Theological Seminary. From the founding of it by Dr Archibald Alexander one of its guiding principles was that 'a seminary be a nursery of vital piety as well as of sound theological learning'. Alexander began a tradition at Princeton which resulted in an easily identifiable 'Princeton piety'. In the early years of Alexander's life the Presbyterians had shown doctrinal soundness but were singularly deficient in experience. In 1788 Alexander read a book on *The Internal Evidences of the Christian Religion* by Soame Jenyns which produced a profound impression on him. Powerful revivals marked the beginnings and development of Princeton. Dr Samuel Miller, one of the members of a committee appointed by the General Assembly to plan a Theological Seminary, summarized the goals in the following words :

'And they do hereby solemnly pledge themselves to the churches under their care that in forming and carrying into execution the plan of the proposed seminary, it will be their endeavour to make it, under the blessing of God, a nursery of vital piety as well as of sound theological learning, and to train up persons for the ministry who shall be lovers as well as defenders of the truth as it is in Jesus, friends of the revival of religion, and a blessing to the Church of God'. (17)

One of Murray's great concerns was that a Seminary should cultivate piety. At Princeton in its best days the spiritual ethos of the classroom was strengthened by the total life of the Seminary.

Professor B B Warfield speaking on 'Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary' in 1903 could observe that 'Public means of grace abound in the Seminary.' There were not only daily acts of worship, but a Sabbath morning service in the chapel, a Sabbath afternoon conference on experimental religion and a monthly concert for prayer. That was the spiritual environment in which Murray felt very much at home. Provision of these means of grace was much less at Westminster Seminary. 'Too many tended to look upon Murray's piety as something uniquely his own, whereas in truth it was the genuine fruit of that type of Calvinistic faith which had in other times pervaded whole seminaries and considerable areas of the church.

Walter Chantry, a former student at Westminster recalls his impressions of Murray: 'Fear of God dominated Professor Murray's classroom. Each period began with prayer from the Professor's lips which brought all into the presence of an awesome God. Each subject was handled in a dignified and solemn manner that conveyed deep reverence for the Almighty. Professor Murray breathed the attitude that all things in his lectures were holy and majestic. Not a study of the fear of God, but the Professor's visible and audible manifestation of that fear, became a main lesson for his young disciples' (18)

Murray stood squarely in the true Princeton tradition of men like Charles Hodge whose *Systematic Theology* he used as the class textbook in Westminster. What has been said of Hodge by David Wells could equally be applied to John Murray: 'We find his work an almost classic realization of the kneeling as opposed to the sitting theologian. He had seen the grace and glory of God and in his *Systematic Theology* he turns to the world to explain his vision.' (19) With John Murray there was no such thing as a purely academic study of theology. William Perkins described theology 'as the science of living blessedly for ever.' Theological understanding and practical piety are inseparable. This is what Professor Murray demonstrated in his life and teaching. This is what he sought to preserve in an age when the two were being put asunder in the Church by scholarship.

#### IV THE RECOVERY OF THE GODLY LIFE

The examination of the godliness of John Murray gives us occasion to consider the situation in the Church today and what we need to recover:

##### 1 *The centrality of God*

In his perceptive analysis of contemporary evangelicalism David Wells speaks about the 'disappearance of theology' and his research has shown that where this kind of theological character is crumbling, there the centrality of God is disappearing. 'God comes now comes to rest lightly and inconsequentially on the Church.' What a contrast with the great Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which represented a move to place God as he has revealed himself in Christ at the centre of the Church's life and thought. The theologies, the catechisms and the liturgies which flowed from Reformer's pens all indicate that theirs was a piety which was concerned above all with God. The greatest need of the Church today is to recover the sense of the transcendence and holiness of God. There is only one God and he is a God of matchless glory and transcendent majesty. 'Without the holiness of God sin is just failure. Without the holiness of God grace is no longer grace. It is not grace from the God who against his own holy nature, has reconciled sinners to himself in Christ. And without justification there is no gospel and without the gospel there is no Christianity.

##### 2 *The centrality of the fear of God*

In the best days in Scotland and particularly in the Highlands the fear of God pervaded our communities. The fear of God shaped daily life. There was respect for authority and law. There was an ethical code. There was a sense of shame about open sin. Catastrophes were regarded as the voice of God. There was order in the family and in the school. There was integrity and honesty in the work place. It was said of the wicked 'There is no fear of God before his eyes'. In his classic chapter on the 'Fear of God' Murray has some searching words:

'It is symptomatic of the extent to which the concept of the fear of God and the attitude of heart and mind which it represents has suffered eclipse that we have become reluctant to distinguish the earnest and consistent believer as 'God-fearing'. Perhaps our reluctance arises from the fact that believers manifest so little of the fear of God that we scarcely dare to characterize them as God fearing; we may even be hesitant to call them godly. But whatever the reason, the eclipse of the fear of God, whether viewed as doctrinal or as attitude, evidences the deterioration of faith in the living God.

'If we know God we must know him in the matchless glory of his transcendent majesty, and the only appropriate posture for us is prostration before him in awe and reverence. To think otherwise is to deny the transcendent greatness of God, and that is infidelity... Our consciousness is not biblical unless it is conditioned by the fear of God.' (20)

### *3 The centrality of Scripture*

John Murray took his stand on the infallibility of Scripture. He was an exegete of Scripture. He bowed before the Word of God:

'If the testimony of Scripture on the doctrine of Scripture is not authentic and trustworthy, then the finality of Scripture is irretrievably undermined. The question at stake is the place of Scripture as the canon of faith. And we must not think that the finality of Christ remains unimpaired even if the finality of Scripture is sacrificed. The rejection of the inerrancy of Scripture means the rejection of Christ's own witness to Scripture. Finally and most pointedly, then, the integrity of our Lord's own witness is the crucial issue in this battle of the faith' (21)

Murray owed much to the instruction he received from Geerhardus Vos, whom he described as 'the most penetrating exegete it has been my privilege to know'. His approach to the Word of God exemplified the words of Vos: 'To take one's stand upon the infallibility of the Scriptures is an eminently religious act; it honours the supremacy of God in the sphere of truth.' Dr A W Tozer has to be right when he said: 'Let a man question the inspiration of the Scriptures and a curious, even monstrous, inversion takes place: thereafter he judges the Word instead of letting the Word judge him; he determines what the Word should teach instead of it permitting it to determine what he should believe; he edits, amends, strikes out, adds at his pleasure; but always he sits above the Word and makes it amenable to him instead of kneeling before God and becoming amenable to the Word' (22)

### *4 The centrality of a holy and Spirit-filled ministry*

In his book *Pentecost Today?* Iain Murray observes: 'The New Testament shows that the times which saw great ingatherings of people into the kingdom of God were always times when the Word of God was being preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. This was the pattern in Jerusalem, Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica and Corinth. It has been equally true in subsequent history .....when spiritual awakening came it coincided, as in apostolic times, with a change which was first seen in preachers' (23) It was by the Holy Spirit at the time of the Reformation that preaching was again made powerful. The charge of the Reformers against the ministry that preceded them was that it failed to bring men into the presence of God. Calvin's view was that if there is to be a meeting between a holy God and sinful man it must take place in the preaching of the written Word of God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to make hearers conscious of a presence distinct from that of the speaker.

It was such preaching that was instrumental in times of Reformation and revival in Scotland. John Knox in seeking to explain how the Reformation came about said 'God gave his Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance.' Dr John Macleod in surveying the Scottish scene claimed: 'It was the happy lot of the Reformed Church of Scotland to have in the ranks of her ministry not a few of who it was said by David Hume, when he heard John Brown of Haddington preach might be said: "That man preaches as if Jesus Christ stood at his elbow". Preaching of this kind was to be heard not only in ordinary from week to week; it found a special centre around which it revolved in the services of a communion season' (24)



The great need for our evangelical churches today can be expressed in the words of Robert Sample. Writing in 1897 he said: 'The great want of today is a holier ministry. We do not need more stalwart polemics, more might apologists, or preachers who compass a wide range of natural knowledge, important as these are; but men of God who bring the atmosphere of heaven with them into the pulpit and speak from the borders of another world'. (25)

#### Notes

1 John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, (Grand Rapids, reprint), p5

2 Donald Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica* (Wick, 1889), p67

3 *ibid*, p 270

4 Iain Murray, *Life of John Murray* (Edinburgh, 2007), p12

5 Cutting from *The Northern Times* (Golspie,1942)

6 James M. Garretson, *Princeton and Preaching* (Edinburgh, 2005 ), p5

7 *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1976), p183

8 B B Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today* (Edinburgh 1909), p14-15

9 John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London 1954), p 31-32

10 John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p233

11 *ibid*, p 231

12 Carson and Hall, *To Glorify and Enjoy God* (Edinburgh 1994) p115

13 J I Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne 1991), p283

14 Iain Murray, *Life* p 93

15 *ibid* p130

16 D M Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London 1971), p97

17 James M Garretson, *Princeton*, p xxii

18 Iain Murray, *Life*, p93

19 David Wells, *Christianity Today* (August 30, 1974) , p10

20 John Murray, *Principles*, p241

21 *The Infallible Word*, (Philadelphia 1946), p41,42

22 *The Banner of Truth*, No 381, p14

23 Iain Murray, *Pentecost Today?* (Edinburgh, 1998), p80

24 John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh 1974), p96

25 *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* (Philadelphia April 1897), p295

## LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF JOHN MURRAY

John Murray was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1898 in the parish of Creich, in the county of Sutherland. At the beginning of that century the parish had experienced times of gospel blessing. He was reared by God-fearing parents who by the time of his birth had changed their allegiance from the Free Church of Scotland to the newly formed Free Presbyterian Church. After his higher education at Dornoch Academy, Murray served as a soldier in World War I, losing the sight of his right eye. He studied at Glasgow University (1919-23) where he came to a decision to prepare for the Christian ministry. After a year under a tutor, his Church sent him to study at Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA (1924-27). Within two years of graduating he was invited back by Casper Wistar Hodge, Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton, to be his assistant. Liberalism was by then affecting the Seminary and in 1929 three Princeton Professors resigned and formed Westminster Theological Seminary. After one year at Princeton Murray joined the Faculty of the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. There he taught successive generations of students until his retirement in 1966, when he returned to his native Scotland. He passed away in 1975.

### **Lesson 1** The value of a godly upbringing

#### *The community*

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the parish of Creich had been powerfully affected by the Gospel. This took place under the ministry of George Rainy, a native of Aberdeenshire. He was inducted as minister of the parish in 1771. According to Donald Sage he had a struggle mastering the Gaelic language: 'In other circumstances this drawback would have been fatal to his usefulness as a minister. But Mr Rainy was the very model of a sincere, practical Christian; he preached the Gospel more by his life than by his lips.' It is said that 'over 100 men could openly testify to a personal work of grace and give a reason for the hope that was in them'.

The depth of the religious conviction among the people was revealed when a minister, Rev Murdoch Cameron, was imposed on the parish in 1813. The people never afterwards attended Cameron's ministry but met for worship on Sabbath at Migdale Rock in the summer, and in a barn in the east end of the parish during the winter months. This arrangement was carried on for thirty years and with true Christian spirit these worthy men and women persevered in prayer for an evangelical minister until in 1843 their prayers were answered by the Disruption and the settlement of the Rev Gustavus Aird.

The elders were men of such spiritual calibre that Dr Aird 'often confessed to a sense utter want of fitness to preside over such a session'. John Murray's father, Alexander (or Sandy as he was known), was born at Badbea in 1851. He later recalled how as a youth being able to count 'no less than eight prayer-meetings being held on a Saturday evening in an area of three square miles around Badbea'. It is no small testimony to the esteem in which the congregation held Sandy Murray that he was ordained to the eldership at the early age of twenty-seven.

Edmund Clowney spoke of 'the aroma of godliness that is at the heart of his heritage'

#### *The home*

John Murray was nurtured by God-fearing parents. In particular he was moulded by the example of his father. Asked in later life who had been his greatest mentor, he might have mentioned some of the stars in the theological firmament in the Seminaries at Princeton and Westminster. Instead he

replied unhesitatingly, 'My father'. Writing at the time of his father's death in 1942, Murray said: 'Though he was my father I may say that there are few men in the Highlands of Scotland whose life and memory was surrounded by such fragrance, and whose life of consistent godliness claimed such veneration and respect'. Even in the daily round the father was imparting spiritual counsel to his son John Murray once told his nephew that 'he did not witness a greater intensity of spiritual exercise of soul in any other person and his very body moved in sympathy with the inner man.'

A missionary in Africa wrote to Prof Murray 'Ah Badbea! The mouth of my soul waters.'

### *The Christian nurture*

John Murray was brought up on the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Use was made of it in the home, in the church and in the day school. It was an educational process of priceless value. Archibald Alexander, who founded Princeton Theological Seminary, where John Murray was later to study and to teach, was also brought up on the Shorter Catechism. The invaluable roll of catechetical instruction in a young child's life is beautifully captured in Charles Hodge's remarks about this important influence in Alexander's childhood, words that could equally applied to the young John Murray: 'The principles of moral and religious truth contained in that sublime symbol, when once embedded in the mind, enlarge, sustain and illuminate it for all time. That God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth is a height of knowledge to which Plato never reached ...A series of such precise, accurate, luminous propositions, inscribed on the understanding of a child, is the richest inheritance which can be given to him. They are seeds which need only the vivifying influence of the Spirit of life, to cause them to bring forth the fruits of holiness and glory. Dr Alexander experienced this benefit in its full extent'

### **Lesson 2 The vital importance of the fear of God**

Murray was brought up in an atmosphere where the living and true God was a reality. He came, however, through a conversion experience, to know that God personally. In adult life Murray was to become an admirer and follower of John Calvin. The Reformer has been described as 'a God possessed soul'. The same could be said of John Murray. He lived and spoke and wrote as a man deeply aware of the presence of God. It is that God-consciousness that produces the fear of God and true piety or godliness.

He writes of this in later life: 'What is piety? It is godliness. Godliness is God-consciousness, an all-pervasive sense of God's presence, of his judgment, of our relation to him and his relation to us, of our responsibility to him and dependence upon him. This God-consciousness is spoken of as the fear of God, the profound reverence for his majesty and the dread of his judgments. This fear of God is not something abstract – it is a filial reverence springing from a relation that has been constituted by redemption in Christ, justification and forgiveness by his grace, adoption in his love' (Collected)

In the chapter on the 'Fear of God' in *Principles of Conduct* he challenges us: 'It is symptomatic of the extent to which the concept of the fear of God and the attitude of heart and mind which it represents has suffered eclipse that we have become reluctant to distinguish the earnest and consistent believer as 'God-fearing'. Perhaps our reluctance arises from the fact that believers manifest so little of the fear of God that we scarcely dare to characterize them as God fearing; we may even be hesitant to call them godly. But whatever the reason, the eclipse of the fear of God, whether viewed as doctrinal or as attitude, evidences the deterioration of faith in the living God.'

### **Lesson 3** The resulting Christian character and conduct

#### *A profound humility*

He has written 'Humility, contrition and lowliness of mind are of the essence of godliness' and those were the characteristics of his life

He was reticent about speaking of himself, his experiences or his attainments. It was said of the godly in the Highlands 'Surely no race of men ever disapproved more strongly than they of any broadcasting of personal affairs to the world at large'.

#### *A profound contrition*

This came out in his prayers in particular something that struck his contemporaries in the seminaries. On one occasion Dr Freeman's home they were discussing the innate sinfulness of the human heart. Mrs Freeman said 'But Mr Murray we know that you are not as bad as that'. Murray: 'Mrs Freeman if you knew what a cesspool of iniquity this vile heart of mine is you would never say such a thing'.

#### *Meekness*

'He was the man most full of God that I ever met' . 'I never met a man so lacking in envy as John Murray'. Geoff Thomas. His willingness to go long distances to speak to a small gathering. Aberystwyth. The last three years of his life supplying a small congregation of very ordinary folk in Ardgay. Changing his preaching style to be more like what his father was. 'Please understand and remember that the years have taken their toll of my abilities' 1971 73 years

#### *Love*

Love for people was a primary quality in his life. He loved the people of God. He loved the lost as we shall see. Behind the natural reserve of the Highlander and what appeared a somewhat forbidding countenance he was renowned for affection and generosity. Lawrence Eyres writes: 'He was vigorous in returning affection. This was more than the customary warm hand shake. John Murray was known for his lateral squeeze of affection long before that sort of thing became fashionable. He loved children that way, too. Small children, my daughter among them, were a bit afraid of his hugs because of their bone-crushing intensity' (Eyres p437)

#### *Worship*

The Puritan George Swinnock wrote: 'Worship comprehends all that respect which man owes and gives to his Maker.....All that inward reverence and respect, and all that outward obedience and service to God which the word godliness enjoins, is included in this one word worship.' True worship is God-centred. It is to fasten our attention on God's glory and grace. And for us to adore that grace and to praise the Lamb it must be Christ-centred.

### **Lesson 4** The priorities in the ministry

#### *A godly life*

'By word and example he insisted that the first need in those called to preach is that they should be religious men: "Piety must first burn in the individuality of our own hearts and lives. If there is no cultivation of personal piety, the fervour and effectiveness of our ministry will be stultified'. It is evident from the history of the Christian Church that God prepares men first as Christians before they become effective instruments in the ministry of the Gospel. In the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, 'My people's greatest need is my personal holiness'.

### *Passion*

The godliness that manifests itself in zeal for the divine glory has passion. Murray said: 'to me preaching without passion is not preaching at all'. 'Dr Freeman recalls his preaching: 'His whole countenance, his whole being was taken up' He fulfilled the criteria of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' definition of preaching: 'What is preaching? It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology, or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this'.

### *The nature of the sermon*

At a Bible conference in Maine, Lawrence Eyres said to Murray that he appreciated the sermon on the Virgin Birth. Murray corrected him and said it was a lecture for 'a sermon has development and climax, and it is characterized by a passion which is not to be found in a mere lecture.' In the sermon the preacher aims to speak the very words of God. He speaks with the authority of the ambassador of the great King. It is not without significance that pulpits in our Presbyterian churches were high and central. This was for the preacher to be seen but also for the exaltation of the Word. They constructed a pulpit for Ezra - he was above the people. (carry the Bible ahead of the minister). John Murray considered the preacher as 'a voice' to get inside the hearts and wills of the hearers and motivate them to read and do the Word. He, like Calvin before him, had the conviction that the sermon has as its goal the vital confrontation of the hearer with the 'face' of God revealed in Holy Scripture. 'Man before God's face in preaching' was a watchword of the Genevan Reformer.

### *The place of the sermon*

Murray viewed the sermon as the climax of the worship service. The preaching that convicts man of his need is the very instrument to convey to him the wonders of the grace of God. Without a true appreciation of grace, in response to the full orbed declaration of it in preaching, there can be no full-orbed doxology in our congregations.'

### *The balance*

'Some Necessary Emphases in Preaching'. 1 '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 and earnestness and passion of the demands and terrors of God's law'. Not enough law work. This led to the establishment of the Leicester Conference

The balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. 'And the warrant of faith is not the conviction that we are elect or that we are among those for whom strictly speaking, Christ died but the fact that Christ, in the glory of his person, in the perfection of his finished work, and in the efficacy of his exalted activity as King and Saviour, is offered to us in the full, free and unrestricted overture of the Gospel' p136. Read *Arminianism in the Pilgrimage of the Soul*

## **Lesson 5** The marks of the Seminary Professor

### *His exegesis controlled his theology*

Van Til 'The most important thing to be said about John Murray is that he was, above all else, a great exegete of the Word of God' 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'

Greatest influence was Vos 'having a larger bump of reverence than some of his colleagues' (Machen). John Frame 'He showed me that the Reformed Faith was purely and simply the teaching of Scripture. Thus he presented Reformed doctrine in the way most persuasive to Christian minds and

hearts . First question What has scripture to say'.

### *The Seminary must cultivate piety*

One of Murray's great concerns was that a Seminary should cultivate piety. At Princeton in its best days the spiritual ethos of the classroom was strengthened by the total life of the Seminary. Professor B B Warfield speaking on 'Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary' in 1903 could observe that 'Public means of grace abound in the Seminary.' There were not only daily acts of worship, but a Sabbath morning service in the chapel, a Sabbath afternoon conference on experimental religion and a monthly concert for prayer. That was the spiritual environment in which Murray felt very much at home. Provision of these means of grace was much less at Westminster Seminary. 'Too many tended to look upon Murray's piety as something uniquely his own, whereas in truth it was the genuine fruit of that type of Calvinistic faith which had in other times pervaded whole seminaries and considerable areas of the church'.

### *The marrying of theology and piety*

What has been said of Hodge by David Wells could equally be applied to John Murray: 'We find his work an almost classic realization of the kneeling as opposed to the sitting theologian. He had seen the grace and glory of God and in his *Systematic Theology* he turns to the world to explain his vision.' With John Murray there was no such thing as a purely academic study of theology. William Perkins described theology 'as the science of living blessedly for ever.' Theological understanding and practical piety are inseparable. This is what Professor Murray demonstrated in his life and teaching. This is what he sought to preserve in an age when the two were being put asunder in the Church by scholarship.

## **Lesson 6** Good churchmanship

### *A full-orbed confession of Faith*

It is the duty of the church to bear witness to the whole counsel of God. Professor John Murray, in an address on 'The Creedal Basis of Union in the Church' given at the 1965 Leicester Ministers' Conference, asks the question: 'Is it sufficient to have a common denominator confession, general and broad enough, to express the faith of all true evangelical, but lacking in the specifics on which such evangelicals are divided?' He makes a distinction between voluntary organizations and the church and goes on to say: 'The church is not a voluntary organization; it is a divinely instituted organization of which Christ is the head, the assembly of the covenant people of God, the fellowship of the Spirit, and the body of Christ. The witness given to bear and the confession to be made is the whole counsel of God. There is no restriction that may properly be devised, proposed or imposed. Its faith is the whole revealed counsel of God'.

### *The claims of truth are paramount*

The crisis that was sparked by liberalism in the Presbyterian Church and Princeton had another side to it. There was a difference between those holding to the Reformed Faith and the Fundamentalists. e 'tactics'. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church in its inception in 1936 was definitely an American phenomenon. Among those who stood with Machen as contenders for the faith were men of diverse theological stripe. Some were unclear as to the doctrines of grace and the covenant and had dispensational leanings. Murray stood with Machen and brought the impact of the Scottish tradition to bear on it. He defined what the issues were in the struggle with fundamentalists in a very significant series in the Presbyterian Guardian 'The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes'. He showed why the doctrinal distinctions made in the Westminster Confession remained vitally important;

they contained issues closely related to the glory of God and to the life and spirituality of the church.

### *Corporate responsibility*

The concept of the Church as the body of Christ. He speaks of the fallacy of individualism and independentism. 'The corporate witness of the church is our witness and the corporate default of the church is our default.' 'We can never take the position that we can segregate ourselves and bear witness in our own congregation, disregarding what may be happening in the denomination as a whole. That was what Machen ( Mr Valiant for the Truth) fought to a premature death to maintain in the USA and at the end no one was closer to him than John Murray. It was the failure to hold to that principle that led to the ultimate ineffectiveness of the Stillite approach to reform in the Church of Scotland.

### *Evangelistic activity*

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 grades of intellectual capacity.'

It was because of this emphasis in his life that in 1936 he was appointed chairman of a newly formed 'Committee for the Propagation of the Reformed Faith in New England.' According to Paul Woolley ' He 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. He went with the some students each summer to engage in evangelism and church planting.

### *Whole-hearted Church commitment*

'Committee on Foreign Missions'

'Committee to revise the Form of Governement and Book of Discipline'. He was chairman of the Committee which did its work over 10 years. He had a major influence in formulating the revisions – the parity of Presbyters in the role of the Church

'Committee on Song in Public Worship' – presented in 1947 a 8 page minority report by him and Dr Young 'detailing reasons why the Book of Psalms should be held to be the divinely appointed hymn book for the Christian Church

The Free Offer of the Gospel 1948

Murray can also be credited with launching the OPC on the course of producing the Great Commission Sunday school curriculum

Murray's impact on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as a commissioner to its General Assemblies was inestimable. He made a major contribution in the controversy surrounding the licensing and ordination of Dr Gordon H Clark by the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1944. He was also active in the wider Reformed scene and took part in meetings of The Reformed Ecumenical Synod

### **Lesson 7** *Confidence in the Fulfilment of God's Purposes*

The discussions at the Conference centred around the growing interest in Reformed truth and the desirability of united action on the part of those who held to the doctrines of free grace. Professor Murray spoke very movingly about what he had heard and witnessed that day as being the answer to prayer and the fulfilment of a vision he had for the restoration of the Reformation doctrines in the United Kingdom. Many felt that a new day had indeed dawned.

'Faith imbued with zeal for the honour of Christ and the glory of God will have no sympathy with

the defeatism which is, after all, but disguised fatalism. He who is head over all things is head over all things to his body the church. He has all authority in heaven and in earth. And he is the Lord of the Spirit. Implicit in the prayer he taught his disciples to pray, 'thy will be done as in heaven so in earth', is the prayer that the whole earth should be filled with his praise. Nothing less is the measure of the believer's desire. 'And blessed be his glorious name for ever; and let the whole earth be filled with his glory'.