

John Murray

By Danny E. Olinger

On March 6, 1975, Cornelius and Rena Van Til, and their dear friend Hattie DeWaard penned a joint letter to John Murray having heard the news of his suffering from cancer. From the heart they wrote, "It was obvious to all of us that you love your Savior passionately, that you sought to serve your Lord with utter sincerity, and that your ambition was to point out to all men everywhere that only by the 'good pleasure' of God can they be saved from the wrath of God."¹

Fifty-one years earlier, Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, and Hattie's late husband, John DeWaard, were classmates at Princeton Seminary. While appreciative of the entire Princeton faculty, the three future Orthodox Presbyterian ministers found themselves gravitating toward the teachings of Geerhardus Vos and J. Gresham Machen. They not only took as many of Vos's and Machen's courses as they could, but also they embraced the biblically Reformed and confessional Presbyterianism that these professors advocated.

Murray and Machen carried on a regular correspondence after Murray's graduation from Princeton in 1927, and the health of Vos was one of the main topics in Murray's April 2, 1928 letter to Machen. Murray wrote, "It was with a certain amount of apprehensiveness that I learned recently of the ill-health of Dr. Vos. We can only hope that he will yet be spared for some time for further usefulness in the church of Christ. His praise is in all the churches. Without question, through him as instrument, God's truth went into all the earth."² Machen in turn wrote to Vos telling him of Murray's regards and said, "I do feel that the service of

real students like John Murray makes our life at Princeton worthwhile."³

Princeton's Casper Hodge shared this view and invited Murray to serve as his assistant in systematic theology for the 1929–30 school year. Murray accepted the invitation without knowing that Machen was leaving Princeton to start Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

After Murray's year of assisting Hodge at Princeton ended, Machen recruited Murray to teach at Westminster. On June 25, 1930, Machen wrote to Murray to inform him that the Westminster faculty had unanimously voted to nominate Murray to the Westminster Board of Trustees for the position of instructor of systematic theology. Machen pleaded with Murray to accept saying, "I cannot bear to think of even the possibility of our failing to have you next year."⁴

On September 15, 1930, Murray accepted the position, which began his thirty-six year association with the school. Once at Westminster, Murray quickly proved himself in the classroom as a teacher who



John Murray. Used with the permission of the Archives of the Montgomery Library at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia PA.

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1. Iain Murray, "The Life of John Murray", in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982) 3:154.
2. "Life of Murray," 30.
3. "Life of Murray," 30.
4. "Life of Murray," 42.

expertly knew the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards. Although he assigned Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, Murray's students found themselves continually engaged in exegesis in order to understand the basis for a particular doctrine. Iain Murray, the biographer of Murray, believed that it was likely Vos's influence upon Murray that instilled in Murray "the conviction that doctrine must be arrived at through a penetrating examination of the Scriptures in their original languages."⁵

Near the end of his teaching career in 1963, Murray explained his methodology in teaching systematic theology in two articles that appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. Murray contended for a non-speculative, exegetically oriented systematic theology that set forth in an orderly way the truth derived from revelation. For Murray, it was only when systematic theology was rooted in biblical theology that it could exemplify its proper function and achieve its true purpose. Systematic theology "must be concerned to be biblical not one whit less than biblical theology. The difference is merely one of method."⁶ Biblical theology deals with special revelation as it appears progressively in the Bible, which is why the method of biblical theology is historical. Systematic theology deals with the same special revelation, but as it is concerned with the finished product its method is logical. He wrote, "When biblical theology is conceived of as dealing with 'the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible,' it must be understood that this specialized study of the Bible, so far from being inimical to the interests of systematic theology, is indispensable to the systematic theology that is faithful to the Bible."⁷ Murray concluded the article by proclaiming,

We may never forget that systematic theology is the arrangement under appropriate divisions of the total

5. "Life of Murray," 29.

6. John Murray, "Systematic Theology: Second Article," *Westminster Theological Journal* 26 (Nov. 1963): 33.

7. "Systematic Theology," 40.

8. "Systematic Theology," 46.

9. Murray believed Dispensationalism failed to do justice to the unity of God's dealings with fallen mankind in the covenant of grace. See, John Murray, "The Reformed Faith and its Modern Substitutes, Part VI," in *Presbyterian Guardian* 4, no. 2 (May 18, 1936) 77-79.

10. Formed on June 11, 1936, the Presbyterian Church of America was forced to change its name due to the upholding of a complaint filed in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia by the moderator and stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. On February 9, 1939, the name of the church was changed to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

11. "Life of Murray," 157-58.

witness of revelation to the truth respecting God and his relations to us men and to the world. Since the Bible is the principle source of revelation and since the Bible is the Word of God, systematics is the discipline which more than any other aims to confront us men with God's own witness so that in its totality it may make that impact upon our hearts and minds by which we shall be conformed to his image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness of the truth.⁸

The bond between Murray and Machen at Westminster also deepened as Murray became Machen's trusted surrogate in answering theological questions. When Machen and Samuel Craig created the *Presbyterian Guardian* in October 1935, they asked Murray to write a series on "the Reformed Faith and Its Modern Substitutes." In the series, Murray explained the tenets of the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards. At odds with that system of doctrine were anti-Christian Modernism, Arminianism and Scofield Dispensationalism.⁹

Viewing Scofield Dispensationalism as heterodox became a major point of contention at Westminster with faculty member Allen MacRae disagreeing with Murray's assessment. In the newly created Presbyterian Church of America,¹⁰ J. Oliver Buswell and Carl McIntyre shared MacRae's lament. Machen defended Murray and R. B. Kuiper, who had openly applauded what Murray had written and was also under attack. Machen, however, could not stem the discontent of the Dispensationalists who had previously supported him and he was not re-elected to the presidency of the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions in November. After Christmas, Machen left for a preaching tour of the congregations in the Dakotas. Suffering from pneumonia, he was hospitalized in Bismarck. His last words were a message that he directed the nurse to send to Murray, "I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."

Murray would admirably pass on what he learned from Machen and Vos both at Westminster Seminary and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. After Murray's death on May 8, 1975, Van Til, knowing what Machen and Vos had meant to Murray praised his friend by placing him in their company. He wrote, "He (Murray) feared God and therefore feared no man. His reputation as a scholar was never of primary concern to him, so long as by his work, the triune God of Scripture was magnified. In both of these respects, he resembled Dr. Machen and Dr. Vos."¹¹ ■