

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION DISTINCTIVES
FROM THE LECTURE NOTES
GIVEN BY PROFESSOR JOHN MURRAY

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I still look back upon my seminary days at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia with pleasure, and treasure the time I spent there in the fifties, getting my B.D. and Th.M. degrees. In the fifties the original faculty, consisting of men such as Cornelius Van Til, Ned B. Stonehouse, E. J. Young, and John Murray, were at the height of their theological powers, with the fruits of their teaching still valuable today by means of the books of enduring worth that came from their facile pens.

Not all of their teaching, as might be expected, was put into writing, though the valued worth of it lingers in the memories of the fortunate students who were privileged to sit at the feet of these men.

Professor Murray taught a course on the *Westminster Confession of Faith* which I had the opportunity to take. As far as I know, he didn't teach it all that often – I don't remember it being taught more than once during my student days. And although Murray himself told us that up to that point, at any rate, there "has been no adequate expositions of the *Westminster Confession*," he himself (as far as I know) contributed to overcoming this lack only by means of the lectures he gave to his students, which for me survive in forty-four pages of hand-written lecture notes, furiously copied in class. Murray's lecture style was virtually a form of elaborated dictation (which was true for his lectures in Systematic Theology and Ethics also) that students did their best to write down as fully as they could, and by whatever means they could.

Murray's course on the *Confession* was given in the second semester of 1954. In the frame of time given for it, only the first twenty chapters could be covered. Therefore, the distinctives that he brought to our attention are largely limited to this part of the *Confession*. Murray, however, made abundant reference to the

Confession in his other courses, as occasion demanded, so that the benefit of these can also be incorporated in this article.

The edition of the *Confession* which Murray employed for his lectures was the Tercentenary Edition which was based upon the original manuscript which had been written by Cornelius Burges in 1646, and whose superiority largely devolved about the original punctuation of the *Confession* from which, in the course of time, some variations had occurred. There was, in addition, one significant variant to which Murray called our attention. In Chapter XX, 2, Burges' copy has "if matters of faith or worship," which later editions have (inadvertently?) changed to "in matters of faith or worship."

Murray considered the "if" of the original significant, for it meant (to quote him from my class notes) that, "In every sphere and relationship the conscience of man is free in matters not regulated by the Word. And, if matters of faith and worship are involved, the conscience is free not only in matters not regulated by the Word but also which go beyond it." Some students (who were less discerning perhaps?) felt that the same point could be made with the "in" of later editions, but Murray nevertheless maintained that the original "if" conveyed a significant distinction.

Murray was not, however, averse to changes in the *Confession* which he regarded as necessary. In fact, he was made the Chairman of the Committee on Texts and Proof Texts appointed by the Seventeenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (of which Murray was a ministerial member) "to make definite recommendations to the Eighteenth General Assembly [meeting in 1951] regarding the text and proof texts for the *Confession of Faith*." Modifications to the original form of the *Confession*, principally in the interests of maintaining the separation of church and state, had already been made by the Presbyterian Church before the War of Independence (i.e., Chapters XXIII, 3 and XXXI, 2).

A specific change recommended by the Committee, of which Murray was chairman, was to delete the reference in Chapter XXV, 6, where the Pope is referred to as "that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the

church against Christ, and all that is called God,” the full stop for the article to be put at the end of . . . “head thereof.” Murray felt that the original part of the *Confession* could not be squared with Scripture, namely 2 Thessalonians 2, and in his lecture notes which I took on a course he taught in Eschatology, he told his students why. “‘The Man of Lawlessness’ (or Antichrist) is an actual person who appears on the scene of history a short time prior to the second advent of Christ after God has removed the restraint which presently prevents his manifestation (vv. 6-7); when this restraint has been removed, he too (in imitation of Christ?) will have his ‘parousia’ (v. 9), will work miracles by the power of Satan (v. 9), and will be more than an ‘antichrist,’ for verse 4 describes him as anti-God in the sense of putting himself in the place of God. His destruction will be by Christ Himself ‘with the breath of His mouth and the splendor of His [second] coming’” (*parousia*, v. 8).

Murray also pointed out in his lectures on the *Confession* that the proof texts were not originally a part of the *Confession* and did not appear in the first edition of 600 copies of the completed work printed on December 10, 1646, for examination by members of both houses of Parliament. Not until January 6, 1647, was a committee appointed to prepare proof texts which, after their presentation to and debate by the Assembly, were completed and presented to Parliament on April 29. The next edition of 600 copies for the use of members of Parliament duly contained the proof texts. Murray maintained that, “If the proof texts are examined, there is evidence present to indicate both reluctance on the part of the Assembly to add them and then haste in their consequent preparation of them, even though it is true that the entire Assembly debated them.”

The O.P.C. Committee on Texts and Proof Texts, therefore, also had as a part of its mandate the revision of the proof texts in the interests of their being the most appropriate reflection possible of the teaching of Scripture. By the time of the Twenty-third General Assembly (1956), approval by the presbyteries of the Committee’s work had been obtained, and the recommendation of the Committee that the modified *Confession*, together with the revised proof texts, “be adopted as the Confession of Faith of the

Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” was accepted by the Assembly (p. 42, Minutes). During the five year interim, while the Committee was doing its work (1951-1956), a draft copy of the *Confession* and proof texts was published for study by sessions and this was also available to the students in Murray’s class. In fact, I still have my copy which I’ve made good use of in the past when teaching the *Confession*.

What now follows are selected chapters of the *Confession*, together with Murray’s distinctive comments in connection with them.

CHAPTER I *Of The Holy Scripture*

Virtually everyone agrees that the first chapter of the *Confession* consists of one of the finest presentations of the doctrine of Scripture extant. Murray’s words were, “While the doctrine on Holy Scripture was by this time the common property of the Reformed churches, this chapter sets it forth with a fullness and precision that is matched nowhere else.” Thirteen pages of my notes (more than one quarter of the total) are given to Murray’s exposition of this subject. While much of this is superb and a reflection of vintage Murray, space limitations necessitate our being selective in the choice of Murray’s distinctives here.

1. *With regard to the Church as Scripture’s focus:* “Notice that Chapter I,1 tells us that God has directed the special revelation of Scripture to the Church, which is mentioned twice in this article. Already here we have presented to us the high doctrine of the Church, which is characteristic of Reformed theology, beginning with Calvin. Scripture, as special revelation, terminates on those whom God wills and purposes to bring into a right relationship with Himself. The Reformed faith never views Scripture in abstraction from those for whom it has been intended. And it is always sufficient for the purpose for which it has been given, namely, His people’s salvation, sanctification, and ultimately, glorification.”

2. *With regard to the uniqueness of Scripture:* “The fact of inspiration is the distinguishing characteristic of Scripture. All sixty-six canonical books have been given by inspiration. It is this God-breathed quality (θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim. 3:16), that gives every book of the Bible the right of its canonical inclusion. Although they have been transmitted through human instrumentality, their Author is God. Therefore, everything in them is to be believed just because it is none other than God Himself who speaks in them. Notice how pervasive this first chapter is in its references to divine inspiration: ‘All which [the sixty-six books] are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life’ (Art. 2); ‘the books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of Scripture . . .’ (Art. 3); ‘the authority of the Holy Scripture . . . dependeth upon God . . . the Author thereof’ (Art. 4); [its] ‘incomparable excellencies . . . entire perfection . . . infallible truth and divine authority . . . doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God’ (Art. 5); ‘the Old Testament . . . and the New Testament . . . [are] immediately inspired by God’ (Art. 8); ‘the Holy Spirit speak(s) in the Scripture’ (Art. 10); hence, ‘a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speak(s) therein.’ Since inspiration is said to be pervasive, ‘Holy Scripture’ and ‘the Word of God written’ are synonymous. In terms of the *Confession*, we must say not only that the Bible is the Word of God, but vice versa. Moreover, since former ways of God’s revealing His will have ceased (I.1), Scripture alone is God’s revealed will.”

3. *Regarding the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit* (Art. 5): “The *Confession* infers that there is something in our total situation that makes an additional activity of the Holy Spirit necessary for the eliciting of saving faith and consequent full assurance. It makes the point, however, that it is not Scripture itself that is at fault, but the defect is in our situation which requires the complementary activity of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this internal testimony is not abstracted from Scripture but is an inward work of the Holy Spirit ‘bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts,’ which indicates that the Scripture itself is the medium through which this witness is borne.”

4. *Regarding Scripture's self-attestation and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit:* "In these two sections (Arts. 4-5) in particular, we have an enunciation of the two pillars of the faith of the Protestant Reformation, namely, the self-attesting (autopistic) character of Scripture and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. The latter must never be introduced in a way that will prejudice or curtail the self-attesting character of Scripture which of itself it inherently contains. When this is lost sight of in favor of placing emphasis solely upon the Spirit's activity, the inevitable result is to move in the direction of autonomous human subjectivity, an increasing characteristic of our time."

5. *Regarding the perspicuity of Scripture (Art. 7):* "There are degrees of perspicuity as there are degrees of understanding, but the central message of salvation is clearly propounded in some portions of Scripture so that all may attain unto a sufficient and saving understanding of it. 'A due use of the ordinary means' does not exclude the necessary illuminative activity of the Holy Spirit (Art. 6). What is here being referred to is Rome's claim that the extraordinary interpretation of an infallible church is necessary for salvation. What is particularly contested is Rome's doctrine about the obscurity of Scripture and the consequent necessary mediation on the part of the church."

6. *Regarding the interpretation of Scripture (Art. 9):* "The principle that 'the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself' is the corollary of Art.5, 'the consent of all the parts.' This is the principle of the unity of Scripture which, according to the analogy of faith, means that every part of it is to be interpreted in the light of the whole. The statement, 'the full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one)' is directed against Rome's fourfold system of interpreting Scripture (allegorical, figurative, moral, anagogical). While there are a variety of types of Scripture (historical, parabolic, poetic, etc.), what the *Confession* means is that any one Scripture is not capable of a variety of meanings and senses. Calvin's method of grammatico-historical exegesis stands out in flagrant contrast to the church's method of interpretation prior to the Reformation."

7. *Regarding the Church's duty properly to teach and to interpret Scripture:* "Moreover, the church has a right and duty to state what it believes the teaching of Scripture is, doing this not only in particular details, but also with the system of truth that it contains (i.e., 'the consent of all the parts'). A creed, therefore, fulfills a manifold purpose; it is a bond of fellowship, a testimony to the faith, a bulwark against error, and a catechetical device. The persons subscribing to it are bound to adhere to it as long as they enjoy the privileges of it. Elementary honesty would require that they relinquish its privileges if and when they no longer are able to avow its tenets. If the creed is regarded as being in error, the person so persuaded is duty-bound to pursue the ecclesiastical means by which to effect a change that will bring it into harmony with the teaching of Scripture. For the obligation of those who subscribe to the creed must be that it has regulative authority."

8. *Regarding the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture* (Art. 10): "This has been misapplied by some moderns to be a reference to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, or even to the making of a distinction between a possible speaking of the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture as well as in Scripture. There is, however, no warrant for these interpretations. The Divines advisedly chose the phrase, 'the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture,' to express the truth that Scripture is not a dead letter but the living vehicle (voice) of the Holy Spirit, which is an intentional reminder that Scripture is the continuing revelatory voice of God and just as revelatory as when the Holy Spirit spoke to the original recipients of revelation. In Scripture the church continues to have the living voice of God and there alone it hears His articulate voice."

CHAPTER II

Of God, And Of The Holy Trinity

In this chapter we wish simply to refer to Murray's comments on the *Confession's* description of God as, among other things, "*without . . . passions*" (Art. 1). Some regard this term as evidence

that the Divines were under the influence of Greek thinking (Aristotelianism). While they certainly did not think of God as a static, unmoved mover sort of being, changeless but also cold and possibly uncaring, for they were too biblically oriented to have this pagan Greek conception of God; they are nevertheless alleged to betray the influence of Greek philosophy in their thinking at this point.

Murray points out that this is not the case. He suggests two possible ways by which the Divines used this term: “1) while we today identify passions virtually exclusively with emotions, the term could also be used in the seventeenth century to mean the passive quality, property, or attribute of material entities. The passions of a triangle or of water was simply a reference to their properties. Using the term this way for God would fit the context which speaks of Him as ‘*without body, parts, or passions*,’ i.e., He is without extension, weight, etc., as would be true if He had a body. 2) If the Divines used passions in the sense that we understand the term, it would not mean that God is without emotions. The fact that ‘God is love’ already denies this. But what it would mean is that God is not subject to excesses of emotions over which He has no control. Scripture speaks of God’s wrath, but even here His anger is not to be thought of as an uncontrollable outburst of temper. His anger may be characterized as the deliberate, determinate displeasure against sin which is in harmony with His holy nature. However, while this interpretation makes good sense, it is perhaps better to adopt the former understanding of the Divines’ use of this term.”

CHAPTER III *Of God’s Eternal Decree*

Much has been written about this admittedly controversial chapter, made so because the equal polarities of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are the teaching of Scripture. Seeking their logical resolve has led to theological systems which assert the one, but usually at the expense of the other, with deleterious

consequences. For if God's sovereignty alone is stressed, the inevitable result is fatalism and non-responsibility of man for his (sinful) actions; whereas if man's responsibility alone is stressed, the inevitable result is to diminish God's control over the universe He has made, and especially with regard to sin and evil as it has originated in and is perpetuated by created beings, whether men or angels. Can the truth of these polarities be preserved as Scripture without doing injustice to one or the other?

Some regard the *Confession* as being over-zealous in its assertion of God's sovereignty, to the point that God becomes the Author of evil, and man's responsibility is diminished in that he is without say regarding his actions and eternal destiny. Moreover, it would seem that this distorted view of the *Confession's* teaching is, if anything, becoming more prevalent.

How does Murray view the *Confession's* teaching in this regard? Rather than giving an extensive treatment of his lecture notes, we will again be selective, seeking to point out Murray's position and positive regard of the *Confession* as being faithful to the teaching of Scripture.

1. *Regarding God's cosmic decree* (Arts. 1-2): "It is said to originate 'from all eternity . . . by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will . . .'. The decree, therefore, emanates from God's sovereign good pleasure, but it is not arbitrary in the sense of being omnipotent caprice, but it is said to be 'a most wise and holy counsel.' Moreover, it is also said that God has '*freely and unchangeably ordain(ed) whatsoever comes to pass,*' which means that His decree embraces all events which occur in the sphere of His created and providential activity (i.e., His *opera ad extra*). This means that there are no degrees of decretive determination or certainty. If anything comes to pass, however bad or insignificant, it can be said with reference to it that God from all eternity has foreordained it. Any one event is not less decretively willed than another.

But the *Confession* goes on to say that, *yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.* The absoluteness, the

inclusiveness, the certainty of the divine decree nevertheless does not implicate God in sin. While we must maintain that sin was freely and unchangeably ordained, its origin is left with *the liberty or contingency of second causes*, i.e., with the freedom and will of *the creatures*. How can these two statements in juxtaposition be reconciled? The *Confession* does not say. Like Scripture, it simply makes them and does not attempt to alleviate the tension between them by toning down one or the other.

A hint toward the resolution of this mystery is given in the words *the liberty or contingency of second causes* [is not] *taken away but rather established*. Although God is the exclusive Agent in the ordaining of all things, He is not the only agent in the order of reality which He has created. There are '*second causes*' and God's fore-ordination does not interfere with their operation, for it includes the causes as well as the consequent events. In other words, the creature (whether man or angel) is responsible *just because* God is sovereign.

The mystery, however, remains. An increasingly popular vein of theology (Arminianism) has sought to resolve this mystery by limiting God's sovereignty in the interests of asserting the sovereignty (autonomy) of creaturely responsibility. In this view God's fore-ordination would be the result of His prescience, i.e., knowing in advance what the creature will do and as a consequence foreordaining what comes to pass. The Arminian insists that God cannot unconditionally decree the free acts of the creature, for this would contradict man's freedom. Hence, God decrees as He foresees what man will do, His decree being conditioned upon His foresight. Article 2 expressly repudiates this position when it says, *yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon [certain] conditions*. The position of the *Confession* is that God foresees because He has decreed that it should occur, His foresight being consequent upon His decree. Hence, while God decrees the end, He also decrees the means to the end, all events being infallibly predetermined by Him."

2. *Regarding the decree as it respects rational beings* (Arts. 3-4): "the *Confession* allows for only two destinies; life and death. In Article 3 it uses the term 'predestination' for those,

whether men or angels, ordained to life, and ‘foreordination’ for those ordained to death. As far as meaning is concerned, there is no difference here in the way they are used by the *Confession*. It has been argued that ‘foreordination’ includes not only the aspect of non-election but a judicial addition of judgment on the part of God as a consequence of sin (cf. Art.7 where it is used in this way for reprobate mankind). But in the case of angels, their election or non-election would have been viewed by God apart from any redemptive or non-redemptive connotations, for their destiny was fixed by election or non-election, as the case might be. Hence, either term, predestination or foreordination could have been used to describe their respective destinies. However, because the *Confession* does use the term ‘predestination’ with reference to the elect (Art. 5) and ‘foreordination’ with reference to the reprobate (though in Article 7, the word ‘ordain’ is actually used), it is apparent that the Divines, in the interests of consistency, use these two words to designate differing destinies already in Articles 3-4.”

3. *Regarding the decree as it respects men alone* (Arts. 5-8): it is necessary here first to give some theological background before giving some of Murray’s relevant statements. Since God’s decree is both pretemporal and all-embracive, the problem with which supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism is involved naturally arises here. Supralapsarians maintain that in God’s decree election and reprobation precede creation and the fall, whereas infralapsarians maintain that election and reprobation follow creation and the fall. Both are a theodicy with regard to God’s being sovereign on the one hand and not the Author of sin on the other. The infra views God as viewing created man as fallen (hence, man’s responsibility for his sin enters the picture here) before He determines to save a certain number by means of election and redemption. The supra maintains that, since it is God’s pretemporal decree that is in view here, all of its categories (including man’s responsibility and the fall) remain pretemporal and prehistorical. The logical order of the categories, therefore, is: election, creation, the fall, redemption, reprobation, etc.

The supra admits that the concomitant side of election, i.e., reprobation, cannot be ignored when election is placed so early as

God's decree. His answer, therefore, to the problem of how God can condemn the non-elect (reprobate) before they are viewed as fallen sinners without impugning His justice, is that, while in election God's choosing some by definition means that He does not choose others. He does not at this point in His decree condemn them but only passes them by. This, therefore, says nothing about their ultimate fate at this point. Their condemnation first occurs later in the decree when God views them as fallen sinners. While some theologians maintain that this doctrine of preterition is not taught in Scripture, others with equal vigor (even as infralapsarians) see it taught in the Apostle Paul's theodicy in Romans 9-11. Geerhardus Vos even wrote an article in defense of preterition entitled, "*The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition*," and considered its absence of mention in the Presbyterian Church in America of his day (of which he was a member, circa the early part of the twentieth century) as a symptom of its doctrinal decline.¹

While supralapsarians were present in the Westminster Assembly, and the *Confession* does speak of preterition in Article 7 ("... *to pass by*"), Murray nevertheless felt that the wording of the *Confession* carefully left open the supra-infra question and perhaps even to some extent favored the infra position, to which he himself was inclined because he regarded Scripture as always using the term election in the redemptive context of being "in Christ." So he says, regarding the teaching of Article 5, "it might be thought that there is a distinction drawn between '*predestinated unto life*' and '*chosen in Christ*,' as though the former was logically prior to the latter, thus favoring a supralapsarian bias here in that the elect would thus be contemplated by God first as unfallen and then as chosen in Christ after they were fallen. This interpretation, however, is not warranted here. '*Predestinated unto life*' and '*chosen in Christ*' are used synonymously as can be seen in Article 6 where it is said of the elect that '*they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed*

¹*Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 559 pp. Vos' article is found on pp.412-414.

by *Christ. . .*’ The intention of Article 5, therefore, is to unfold the nature, the content, and the end of predestination rather than the steps in the order of divine thought. We should, however, see that, as a sovereign choice by God, election results in a sovereign discrimination between men as the use of the following terms make clear: it is a sovereign choice ‘*in Christ,*’ and ‘*unto everlasting glory*’ and ‘*out of His mere free grace and love,*’ and it is ‘*without any foresight of faith or good works,*’ none of which apply to the cosmic order or to the non-elect.

Not only were supras and infras present in the Assembly but Amyraldians were also there. Consequently, the expression in Article 6, ‘*neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only,*’ received much debate in the Assembly. Amyraldians contend for a double reference in the atonement, namely, while there is an absolute intention by God for the salvation of the elect, so that Christ’s atonement was for all of such; Calamy contended that a conditional intention for the non-elect must also be maintained, in the event that they would believe, or in any case making salvation a possibility for all. Sympathetic consideration was given to the Amyraldian position, for the Assembly was well aware of the universalizing texts of Scripture, e.g., *Christ died for all* (2 Cor. 5:15), *Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all men* (1 Tim. 2:6), *Christ is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe* (1 Tim. 4:10), *Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:2), etc.

This is not the place to go into an exegesis of these passages. Suffice it to say that, in their respective contexts, they may be seen as teaching nothing inconsistent with a particular atonement by Christ for His elect people, or for all whom the Father has given to Him (John 6:37). At any rate, as the above statement makes clear, the Assembly gave no quarter to the (inconsistent) Amyraldian position of both a limited and unlimited atonement.

Few statements of the *Confession* show a greater theological exactness than it does regarding the reprobate in Article 7. While the absolute sovereignty of God is again stressed, as is already true

for Articles 1 and 5, the two important elements, not mentioned in Article 3, but which on the one hand assert God's sovereignty and on the other, man's responsibility, are mentioned here. In election, God '*passes by*' the non-elect in His sovereignty but only '*ordains them to dishonor and wrath for their sin.*' That is to say, it is not because men are sinners that they are passed by, otherwise all would rightly be passed by. That God chooses some by way of His election is due to His grace, and grace alone. But God condemns the non-elect only when He views them as sinners, responsible for their sins, i.e., sin is not the ground of non-election but sin is the ground of the dishonor and wrath to which men are ordained by God. Hence, while the '*passing by*' (preterition) rests upon God's sovereign good pleasure alone, His dishonor and wrath presuppose guilt and sin, being the judicial ground of condemnation.

The construction of the sentence of this article requires the further observation that '*God was pleased*' both to '*pass by*' and '*to ordain to dishonor and wrath for their sin.*' Both sovereign actions are '*to the praise of His glorious justice.*' The intention of the Divines here is to show that the reason why this sovereign pleasure of God is brought to bear upon His ordaining to dishonor and wrath is because both the sovereign good pleasure and the judicial condemnation of God are operative here. While the distinction between the '*passing by*' and the '*ordaining to dishonor and wrath*' is expressly drawn by the ground '*for their sin,*' yet the sovereign discrimination of God is not denied its proper sphere of operation in the counsel concerning the non-elect. In this sense the sovereign will of God is as ultimate in reprobation as it is in election, taking place, not in the arena of history, as Karl Barth would have us believe, but in the sovereign, pretemporal decree of God."

4. *Regarding the proper use of the doctrine of election* (Art. 8): "God has not revealed who the elect are but He has revealed what the duty of all men is, and it is to this latter that they are to attend, for only in this way do they become sure of their election, i.e., '*attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election.*' The

Gospel does not come to us in terms of election or non-election, but rather as lost sinners. And since all are lost sinners, such are duty-bound to respond in repentance and faith to the free overtures of the Gospel, and if they refuse to do so, they have no one but themselves to blame if they are consequently lost. Human thought must work ‘upstream’ with respect to God’s revelation rather than ‘downstream’ which is God’s prerogative alone. What confusion results when this order is not preserved or man tries to arrogate to himself divine prerogatives. Let man therefore give attendance to the revealed will of God and as he does so via the obedience of faith, something of the secret counsel of God will thus also become plain to him, namely, assurance of his eternal election.”

Further notable comments, if not distinctives, could be shared from Chapters IV “Of Creation” and V “Of Providence” but space limitations forbid.

CHAPTER VI *Of The Fall Of Man*

We will only refer to the following distinctives in this chapter:

1. “In Article 1 the language is notably different from what we see in other contexts. The *Confession* does not allow for a ‘permissive’ decree, nor even ‘permissive’ providence (V,4), for Scripture makes clear that God determines and controls all things. But in VI,1 it is said that ‘*God was pleased . . . to permit [our first parents’ sin].*’ The *Confession* does this to remind us that, although even sin comes to pass ‘*according to the wise and holy counsel of God’s will*’ and His providence, God is not the author of sin. Therefore, the decree and providence of God do not in any way interfere with the agency and responsibility of those committing sin, for God does not seduce, induce, or compel man to sin. God sovereignly chose (‘*was pleased*’) to leave man to the freedom of his own will and to permit the fall of our first parents. And even here this is subordinated to that which is the ultimate end and aim of all things, namely, that it was ‘*to His own glory.*’”

2. “In Article 3 a significant omission occurs. While the *Confession* correctly points out how mankind became sinners on the basis of the first sin of their first parents, Adam and Eve, in that ‘*the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the . . . corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity . . . by ordinary generation,*’ one would suppose that it would also have been necessary for the *Confession* to mention the ground of the first sin’s imputation, namely, that Adam was the federal head as well as the natural root of the human race. Why is there no mention of this, when both *Catechisms* explicitly do so (cf. LC, No.22 and SC, No.16)? Cunningham is undoubtedly right when he says,

The *Confession* was completed about the end of 1646, not quite two years after the National Synod of Charenton [which condemned Placaeus’ view of mediate imputation, namely, that the guilt of Adam’s first sin is not imputed to his posterity immediately but mediately as a consequence of the pollution and moral depravity of man’s fallen nature which is the result of Adam’s first sin]. More than a year elapsed between the completion of the *Confession* and that of the *Catechisms*; and we think it by no means unlikely – though we are not aware of any actual historical evidence bearing upon the point – that during this interval the members of the Assembly may have gotten fuller information concerning the bearing of the discussions going on in France, and that this may have led them to bring out somewhat more fully and explicitly in the *Catechisms* the views which, in common with the great body of Calvinistic divines, they undoubtedly entertained about the imputation of Adam’s sin.²

Murray goes on to state, “The omission in the *Confession*, however, does not obscure the main features of the doctrine, namely, that the sin of our first parents had two consequences for

²William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 383.

posterity: 1) the imputation of the guilt of the first sin to posterity; and 2) the conveyance of death in sin and a corrupted nature to all descending from Adam by ordinary generation.”

It is important to insist upon immediate imputation, while rejecting the doctrine of mediate imputation, at least for two important reasons: 1) Scripture teaches it in the parallel between Adam and Christ, Romans 5:12 ff., i.e., as Adam’s sin was imputed so that in him all die, so Christ’s righteousness is imputed so that all who are in Him live; and 2) mediate imputation shifts the focus from sinful guilt in Adam to natural corruption, and in the course of time the latter undergoes increasing “improvement,” with less and less need of a radical, divinely-wrought new birth as the only answer to man’s corrupt, fallen nature.

In effect, it is the first step in the direction of Modernism’s (semi) Pelagian anthropology. This was already seen by the seventeenth century Swiss divines, Turretin and Heidegger, chief formulators of the *Formula Consensus Helvetici*. This confession, among other things, says,

Thus it appears that original sin, by a strict discrimination, is twofold, and consists of the imputed guilt of Adam’s transgression and the inherent hereditary corruption consequent upon this. For this reason, we are unable to assent to the view of those who deny that Adam represented his posterity by the ordinance of God, and, consequently, deny that his sin is *immediately* imputed to them, and who, under the notion of a “mediate” and consequent imputation, not only do away with the imputation of the first sin, but also expose the doctrine of innate and hereditary corruption itself to grave peril.³

³W.G.T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, II (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), pp.160-161.

This semi-Pelagian doctrine led to a split in the American Presbyterian Church in the mid nineteenth century (New School versus Old School) from which it never recovered.

CHAPTER VII *Of God's Covenant With Man*

Murray was in agreement with the *Confession's* position which in Article 2 refers to the prelapsarian state of affairs in Eden as "*a covenant of works,*" even though he had some reservations about "works" being the term for this covenant, for this suggests the idea of merit or something that is earned. Even before the Fall, God's covenant with Adam would have been a matter of His grace. Murray preferred to use the term, "the Adamic Administration," rather than "the covenant of works" which, though perhaps more accurate as a description of the prelapsarian relationship which God established with Adam and his posterity, nevertheless suffers the loss of the term "covenant."

Only two covenants are spoken of in this chapter. After the Fall, the Covenant of Grace begins to operate immediately, which is already seen in the Protevangel (Gen. 3:15) given our first parents. While all of the saving operations of God are performed in terms of the provisions of the Covenant of Grace, the modes of its administration have differed (Arts. 4-6), being the Law and the Gospel. The former comprehends the time elapsing between the Fall and the coming of Christ (Art. 5), with the governing principle being God's grace as well as in the present time of the Gospel (Art. 6). Contrary to Dispensationalism, therefore, "*There are not two [or more] covenants . . . but one and the same under various dispensations.*"

CHAPTER VIII *Of Christ The Mediator*

Murray felt that, "No other chapter, with the exception of Chapter I on Scripture, compresses so much in brief compass as

does this one. It is a jewel of classic, orthodox, Reformed theology.”

In this chapter, he also pointed out three aspects in its teaching of a particular atonement, while again noting how this refutes the universal atonement of Amyraldianism: 1) Christ’s redemption was purchased “*for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him*” (Art. 5); 2) the impetration of redemption and its application are co-extensive and limited to the elect, for if it were universally applied, it would mean that salvation is universal (Art. 6); and 3) the exclusiveness of redemption (cf. Chap. III, 6, “*Neither are any other redeemed by Christ . . . but the elect only*”).

CHAPTER IX *Of Free Will*

Here we simply refer to the way that Murray points out how the Confession defines man’s fourfold state: 1) innocence, with the power to do good or evil (*potestas boni aut mali*, Art. 2); 2) the state of sin, with the power to do evil only (*potestas mali solius*, Art. 3), concerning which Murray says, “Man is under an unholy necessity of sinning which arises from his moral state and condition but not from any absolute (metaphysical) necessity of nature, which is just saying that in man’s natural condition, he regards his sinful course of action as the sensible, proper, or advantageous thing for him to do, with the will of God (the right) being regarded as foolish and improper;” 3) the state of grace, with the power to do good and evil (*potestas boni et mali*, Art. 4), concerning which Murray says, “In innocence, man’s natural liberty could be exercised with alternative possibilities (good *or* evil). In grace it is exercised within the framework of a twofold actuality (good *and* evil);” and 4) the state of glory, with the power to do good alone (*potestas boni solius*, Art. 5), and which is the state of perfect freedom where natural liberty and moral ability are in perfect harmony.

CHAPTER X
Of Effectual Calling

Here we call attention to Murray's interpretation of Article 3. Some have objected to Article 3, considering it too rigid and even unbiblical in the way it refers to infants, regarding some as elect and others by implication as non-elect. Murray defends this article in the following way: "Article 3 occurs in the chapter of effectual calling and is therefore not to be treated in isolation. The extent of infant salvation is not what the Divines were dealing with, for what is in view here is how God's elect can respond to the effectual call, which comes by way of God's Word and Spirit (Arts. 1-2), if and when they are incapable of doing so. Must such be regarded as excluded from God's grace in Christ?"

Two classes are referred to here: 1) infants "*dying in infancy*"; and 2) "*all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word,*" i.e., the intellectually handicapped. Hence, the opposite of "*elect infants dying in infancy*" is not non-elect infants dying in infancy, but rather, elect infants *not* dying in infancy, i.e., who grow up and therefore come under the sway of the Gospel, the ordinary means by which God calls His people unto Himself.

By wording this article of the *Confession* thus, the Divines were zealous to make four important observations: 1) infants dying in infancy belong to the *massa perditionis* in the same way as does the rest of mankind, and so are in need of regeneration and salvation as do others not dying in infancy; 2) if infants dying in infancy are saved, it is because they have been elected to salvation by God's sovereign choice of them; 3) the salvation of infants dying in infancy is realized by the redemption that is in Christ and by the regenerating activity of the Holy Spirit, as is true of everyone else as well; and 4) the Divines here exhibit a proper reserve, not being prepared to state what the extent of the salvation of infants might be. While it may be true that there are some Reformed theologians who are prepared to say that it is highly probable that all infants dying in infancy are saved, it is also true that no Reformed theologian would presume to incorporate such a view in a formal

creedal statement. Scripture is silent on matters of salvation outside the Covenant of Grace (cf. the *Canons of Dort*, I, 17).

CHAPTER XII *Of Adoption*

Murray was not without distinctives in his comments upon Chapter XI, "Of Justification," but we pass them by in the interests of giving attention to Chapter XII, "Of Adoption." Murray considered this a most significant chapter, for he felt that there had previously been a failure in Reformed theological development to give proper distinction to this doctrine. He says, "As this chapter makes clear, adoption is not simply an aspect of justification but much more, for it is one thing to be just with God, as justification teaches, but it is something much more to be a *son of God*."

Adoption, by definition, expresses a relationship which God establishes with His people which is not theirs by natural right. Since the Fall, mankind is in a natural state of alienation from God, Eph. 2:3. Hence, adoption expresses a legal activity on God's part expressed by the Greek term, υιοθεσία, Gal.4:5, whereby a person not a son is made one by being adopted into God's family and given all the rights and privileges of sonship, including that of being given the right to call God "Father."

Adoption is not only important in the formulation of the highest privilege which God bestows on the redeemed; but it is also important negatively in that it exposes the falsity of that notion too frequently substituted for it by theological liberalism and commonly accepted today, namely, "the universal Fatherhood of God." When adoptive fatherhood is lost sight of and replaced by the concept of a universal fatherhood of God, two inevitable consequences take place: 1) all that is distinctively redemptive in the concept of divine Fatherhood is denied, for then all are by nature the sons of God, without need of redemption to secure that relationship; and 2) all the high privileges of adoption must be conceived as belonging to all men by virtue of their createdness. In either direction, the

concept of sonship as it applies to men, and fatherhood in relation to men as it applies to God, is fatally impoverished.

CHAPTER XIII Of Sanctification

Only two of Murray's observations will be noted here:

1. "The *Confession's* statement, '*the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,*' should not be confused with Perfectionist doctrine which teaches that moral or religious perfection (even sinlessness) is not only an ideal toward which to strive, but a goal attainable in this life. The *Confession* recognizes that, while the believer's victory over sin is actual (as the proof texts, Rom. 6:6,14, indicate), allowance must be made for the continued conflict between the new and old natures. The believer, though a new creature in Christ, will not reach perfection until his experience of salvation is complete at the time of Christ's return when he receives his glorious resurrection body.

2. The phrase in Article 3, '*the regenerate part doth overcome,*' is not a felicitous expression, for the believer is not a divided or schizophrenic person in Christ, though '*remnants of corruption*' (Art. 2) still remain in his whole being. It would have been better, therefore, for the framers of the *Confession* to have used the word, 'nature' instead of 'part.'"

While Murray also taught the concept of definitive sanctification, he did not develop it in the class on the *Confession*. In the Systematics class on the Application of Redemption, he elaborated upon the subject and in his *Collected Writings 2*, chapters 21 and 22 are devoted to it.⁴

The following quotation is a brief summary of his teaching on this subject:

The believer is the one who has secured the victory over the world, is immune to the dominion of the evil one, and

⁴*Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 277-293.

is no longer characterized by that which is of the world, 'the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life' (1 John 2:16). It is therefore in these terms that we are to interpret the sin that the person begotten of God does not commit and cannot commit. . . . And on the positive side the characterization is no less significant of the radical differentiation from the realm of the wicked one. The person begotten of God does righteousness, loves and knows God, loves those who are begotten of God, and keeps the commandments of God (1 John 2:3-6,29; 4:7,20,21; 5:2-3) (pp. 283-284).

Toward the end of the semester, it became obvious that Murray would not be able to share with his students all of his insights on the whole of the *Confession*.

One of the chapters upon which he omitted to make comment was Chapter XVIII, "Of Assurance Of Grace And Salvation," not because he considered it of lesser importance (quite the contrary) but most likely because he also dealt with this subject fully in his Systematics lectures in the course on the Application of Redemption. What follows is a condensed summary of my notes on this subject which were taken in that course.

"Louis Berkhof has written a good book upon this subject.⁵ In his *Systematic Theology*,⁶ he correctly points out the two types of assurance connected with faith: 1) *the objective assurance of faith* which is 'the certain and undoubting conviction that Christ is all He professes to be, and will do all He promises.' It is generally agreed that this assurance is of the essence of faith; and 2) *the subjective assurance of faith*, or the assurance of grace and salvation, which consists in a sense of security and safety, rising in many instances to the height of an 'assured conviction that the individual believer has had his sins pardoned and his soul saved' (p. 507)."

"While all true believers, to be such, must have the former, for it is lodged in the objective side of Christ's saving accomplishment

⁵Louis Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 86 pp.

⁶Eerdmans, 1949, 784 pp.

announced in the Gospel, not all believers have the latter, for this aspect of faith, dealt with by the *Confession*, XVIII, concerns the subjective as an additional reflex of saving faith. While present at least is the principle of implicit assurance of being in a state of salvation, mentioned in Articles 1-3; explicit assurance cannot, on the basis of Scripture or experience, be maintained that it is an invariable accompaniment of saving faith. 2 Peter 1:10 would imply the need of attaining to that assurance, hence, Article 4 of the *Confession*.”

“There are six specific exercises of faith by which the assurance of faith is elicited. The first three direct the believer’s faith toward the objective character of salvation upon which his faith rests: namely, 1) an intelligent understanding of the nature of salvation, i.e., God’s grace in Christ wholly apart from human merit; 2) the recognition of the immutability of God’s love in Christ; 3) the recognition that all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20), so that the believer who has Christ has all (1 Cor. 3:21).”

“The further three aspects focus more upon the subjective exercise of faith: namely, 4) obedience to God’s commands (1 John 2:3, where ἐγνώκαμεν, ‘we have come to know [Christ]’ is in the perfect tense), for obedience is not simply the evidence that we love God and are members of His kingdom, but it is the only atmosphere in which this faith may be properly entertained; 5) self-examination (2 Pet.1:10, 2 Cor.13:5), which as it is done honestly and faithfully will not only prevent vain presumption but will, in fact, foster the assurance of faith; and 6) the inward witness of the Holy Spirit with the spirit of the believer (Rom. 8:15-16), whereby he is able to recognize God as Father, address Him as such, and draw near to Him with the confidence of faith and love born of such a relationship.”

“The assurance of faith, therefore, is fostered by due exercise of all the Christian graces by every believer. For the goal of every child of God must be to grow in the knowledge of God by fervency of spirit and diligence in business for the Lord. And becoming more and more like Christ is an increasingly sure evidence that one is a child of God.”

Murray also had distinctive views on other subjects dealt with in the *Confession* but which he developed elsewhere, such as the Sabbath, the Church as visible/invisible, the sacraments, marriage and divorce, synods and councils, etc.

CHAPTER XIX *Of The Law Of God*

We conclude with these final comments of Murray's on chapter XIX:

“The framers of the *Confession*, by referring to the law ‘*as a covenant of works [by which God bound Adam and all his posterity] to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience . . .*’ (Art. 1), have created a misunderstanding that is still present in some circles today, namely, that God gave His law to man by means of the Covenant of Works, thereby implying that the latter is still in force today, together with the former, as a (perhaps only theoretical) means by which salvation might be earned through a perfect keeping of the law. This view was present among some early New England theologians. For example, John Cotton, a Boston divine (1584-1652), while recognizing that the Covenant of Works was incipiently made with Adam and his posterity, nevertheless maintained that it was thereafter to be identified with the Mosaic economy. So he writes, ‘In the Covenant of Works, the Lord offereth himself as a Father, his Son as a Redeemer, his Spirit as a Sanctifier, but this upon the condition of works.’”⁷

“It is not correct, however, to identify the law with the Covenant of Works. While the obligation of the law, originally written on the heart of man as a part of his creaturely constitution and the evidences of which still linger to some degree in the natural state of his creaturely constitution so that he is still accountable to God as a transgressor of it (cf. Rom. 2:14-15); it is not to be identified with the Covenant of Works, for the latter applied only to Adam in his original state of rectitude. After the Fall, the Covenant

⁷*The New Covenant*, London, 1654, p. 39.

of Works was replaced by the Covenant of Grace, which is applicable for the human race thereafter (cf. VII, 3). It is true that the transgression of the Covenant of Works carried the sanction of death, as does transgression of the law continue to do now, since both it and the Covenant of Works are (and were) expressions of sin, the consequences of which is death (Rom. 6:23). But this does not mean that the Covenant of Works is to be identified with the law. The law, with its obligations and sanctions, continues to apply to mankind with a threefold use: 1) as an expression of the will of God; 2) as a tutor to lead to saving faith in Christ; and 3) as a rule of thankful living for the believer (cf. Chap. XIX, 6).”