

imitation of Christ. The spiritual life of converted humanity calls the self to imitate Christ. Christ is truly human, possessing a “completely harmonious character, the masculine and the feminine, the lion and the lamb” (337). Jesus Christ is, therefore, first the turning point of history and the means of salvation and also *the* exemplar of the spiritual life for the whole of humanity, men and women alike.

As is typical of a Bavinck work, the reader cannot help but be impressed by the scale of scholarly interaction with the Greeks, the patristic fathers, the theology of Roman Catholicism in the Middle Ages, the Protestant fathers and their Reformed scholastic progeny, and especially the German, Dutch, and French scholarship of the nineteenth century. Bavinck does indeed reveal some of his own cultural moment in several sweeping statements that would be most unwelcome to the twenty-first century ear: that the sin of the Germanic peoples is drunkenness (119), of the Greeks the lust of the eyes, and of the Romans the pride of life; he also has a somewhat absolute approach to the nature of women and men as, respectively, emotional and reasonable (419). But these moments are brief. One of the most significant benefits of this work is its devotional quality, as well as its service as an aid to the preacher looking for guidance on ethics and application.

Thanks are due to Dirk Van Keulen, John Bolt, and others, for their work translating and editing this significant volume. Besides some editorial oddities in this English edition (like citing Wikipedia on occasion), one of the best decisions was to include the significant original Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, and Dutch terms in the footnotes. This adds immense scholarly possibility to an exclusively English edition and is an addition not present in the *Reformed Dogmatics* in English. The significance of this work is hard to measure. It in a way fills out *Reformed Dogmatics* to bring Bavinck’s theological reflection closer to completion.

**CORY C. BROCK**

First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS  
Belhaven University

---

### John Murray’s *Principles of Conduct*—Some Personal Reflections

I deeply appreciate the invitation from the editors of *Unio Cum Christo* to contribute some brief reflections on John Murray’s book *Principles of Conduct*. It has now been in print for over sixty years. But given the intervening exponential growth in Evangelical publishing (not least *academic* publishing—how impoverished theological students of the 1950s were by comparison!), it is possible that a generation has arisen that “knows not Murray.”

In the interests of transparency, I should “come clean” and acknowledge an immense personal debt to Professor Murray. I was an eighteen-year-old second-year university student when I first heard him speak. He was recently retired from Westminster Seminary, so I was familiar with him only through reading *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied*. He gave an address at our InterVarsity meeting on “The Obedience of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> It proved to be a night of major theological awakening for me. From that point on, I devoured everything I could find by him and with my friends had the privilege of hearing him regularly, if not frequently (how privileged we were!). Checking the date written into my *Principles of Conduct*, it appears my own copy has now celebrated its fiftieth birthday!

On one occasion, we asked Professor Murray to speak on “Christian Ethics.”<sup>2</sup> I recall him stressing at the beginning of his address that we should speak more properly of “the Christian *ethic* [singular].” In other words, there is only one standard for Christian living, one pattern with many applications. Something of that notion is apparent in the book: the subtitle of my edition is “Aspects of Biblical Ethics,” but it is not long before the singular swallows up the plural because one purpose of the studies (a developed form of his Payton Lectures at Fuller Seminary in 1955) was to explore “the basic unity and continuity of the biblical ethic.”<sup>3</sup>

From the outset, Murray thus signaled his debt to the tutelage of Geerhardus Vos (once described by him as the finest exegete he had been privileged to know). He proceeds on the basis of careful exegesis and a sensitivity to biblical theology and the history of redemption. This perspective is coupled with Murray’s rich appreciation of the theological riches of the Reformed tradition. Herein lies its strength.

Murray wrote long before many of the particular ethical debates of our time had surfaced. It might be thought, therefore, that the work is passé. Granted that he provides no discussion of many of the medical-ethical issues of the twenty-first century, or of the specific forms of gender crisis that are now so dominant, his work retains its strengths.

The reason for this is that Professor Murray adopted the approach of the

---

<sup>1</sup> I believe the substance of this address was later published as John Murray, “The Obedience of Christ,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–1982), 2:151–57. But the relatively brief text gives only an impression of the spoken address and its power.

<sup>2</sup> The substance (but again not the extended address) is, I believe, published as John Murray, “The Christian Ethic,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* 1:174–81.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Tyndale Press, 1957), 7. While a teacher of *systematic* theology, Murray had already ventured into ethical debate with his monograph *Divorce* in 1953.

Lord Jesus Christ himself. Asked about the ethical issue of divorce, our Lord responded not with a discussion of divorce as such but by pointing to God's original ordering of life "from the beginning of creation" (Mark 10:6). Following that pattern, the first half of *Principles* is devoted to an exposition and exploration of creation ordinances (chapter 2) and, in particular: marriage and procreation (chapter 3), work (chapter 4), and the sanctity of life (chapter 5). Here Murray exegetes and expounds the fundamental building blocks for thinking biblically and Christianly in any generation. With considerable prescience, as well as a well-honed biblico-theological system, he includes a discussion of the sanctity of truth (chapter 6), before solid chapters on Christ's teaching (chapter 7), and law and grace (chapter 8). Five appendices provide discussions of Genesis 6:1–4; Leviticus 18:16, 18; and 1 Corinthians 5:1, as well as slavery and antinominism. Throughout it is one of the book's virtues that the reader is led on step by step in the thinking process—a great advantage in working through any author's writing, since it enables the reader to follow his or her reasoning and to identify and assess any points of divergence.

All these chapters we might expect in such a work, since such topics are central to ethical discussion in any era, even if some of the questions arising in our day have a new twist. What is noteworthy in *Principles of Conduct*, however, are the two concluding chapters whose themes are much more likely to be overlooked. But they take us to the heart of Murray's thinking on the actual living out of the Christian ethic.

Chapter 9, "The Dynamic of the Biblical Ethic," is a careful exposition of the theme of union with Christ. Readers of *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (which had been published two years previously) would have already been familiar with Professor Murray's emphasis that *unio cum Christo* lies at the very heart of things. Later the theme would re-emerge, especially in the first volume of his commentary on Romans<sup>4</sup> and in his contribution "Definitive Sanctification" in *The Calvin Theological Journal* (1967).<sup>5</sup> But in many ways, the almost thirty pages of exposition in *Principles of Conduct* was a landmark that has often been overlooked. Now, half a century later, perhaps only within the last decade or so has there been a broader revival of interest in the doctrine, producing a bookshelf of literature on the theme. There can be no doubt that to an entire generation John Murray showed the way—albeit leaving us with the intriguing question whether it was for pedagogical rather than theological reasons that his chapter on union with

<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* 2:277–84.

Christ in *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* came at the end!<sup>6</sup>

If I may speak personally, few paragraphs in Murray's works have made a deeper impression on me than his powerful exhortation to "fully appreciate the strength of Paul's statement, 'we died to sin'":

We are too ready to give heed to what we deem to be the hard, empirical facts of Christian profession, and we have erased the clear line of demarcation which Scripture defines. As a result we have lost our vision of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Our ethic has lost its dynamic and we have become conformed to this world. We know not the power of death to sin in the death of Christ, and we are not able to bear the rigour of the liberty of redemptive emancipation, "We died to sin": the glory of Christ's accomplishment and the guarantee of the Christian ethic are bound up with that doctrine. If we live in sin we have not died to it, and if we have not died to it we are not Christ's. If we died to sin we no longer live in it, for "we who are such as have died to sin, how shall we live in it?" (Romans 6:2).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps even more likely to be omitted in a work on developing a Christian ethic today, however, is chapter 10, which has all the quintessentially Murray style, flavor, and yes, *gravitas*. Its simple title: "The Fear of God." To interject a final, personal note, I feel I have gone many miles sustained and challenged by its opening aphorism: "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."<sup>8</sup> The entire chapter is worthy of separate publication and widespread distribution in our churches, for *timor Domini* has itself come to be feared. We have lost a taste for what the early church knew well (Acts 2:43). We have become insensitive to the paradox that it was when "great fear came upon the whole church" and "none of the rest dared join them" that believers were "held ... in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (Acts 5:11, 13–14).

If there is one thing I could have asked Professor Murray to add, it would have been a treatment of the *imago Dei*. There is no discussion of it, and as far as I can recall, the book contains only one reference to Genesis 1:26–28 (and that in the context of procreation). Sixty years on from the publication of *Principles of Conduct* it is apparent that one of the greatest failures in the Evangelical church over the last century and more has been a virtual indifference to this foundational biblical answer to the question, "What is man?" Ink spilled on discussions of the length of the creation days in Genesis 1 makes the attention given to the *imago* seem a tiny raindrop by comparison with an ocean. Yet, clearly, Genesis 1:26–28 is the *telos* to which the whole

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 161–73.

<sup>7</sup> Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 205.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

creation narrative moves. As such, it is foundational not only to our understanding of creation but also of the fall, the history of redemption, the incarnation, as well as regeneration, sanctification, and final restoration. It is not that Professor Murray gave no attention to the doctrine.<sup>9</sup> But I wish he had given us more.

Reflecting again on a book that is now past its sixtieth birthday and perhaps overlooked in favor of contemporary treatments reminds me of the TV advertisement for a well-known brand of cornflakes. A youngster sits at breakfast with a bowl of them before him, takes a mouthful, and comments, “I had forgotten how good they tasted.” Rereading *Principles of Conduct* will have that effect on those who are already familiar with it. And for those who have never read it, the life-changing words Augustine heard in the garden seem appropriate: *Tolle lege*. So, pick it up (or if it is not on your bookshelves, buy it!) and read it.

**SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON**

Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology  
Reformed Theological Seminary

---

<sup>9</sup> See John Murray, “Man in the Image of God,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* 2:34–46.