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Book Review of *Principles of Conduct*

The book entitled, *Principles of Conduct*, is the culminating expression of John Murray's genius in dealing with "Aspects of Biblical Ethics." Murray clearly states that "one of the main purposes" of the book is "to seek to show the basic unity and continuity of the biblical ethic" (7). J. I. Packer, a fine Reformed theologian like Murray, implies in the Foreword of the book that Murray wrote with conscious adherence to three hermeneutical hypothesis:

(1) that a single, perfectly coherent divine-command ethic (the law of God) is taught from Genesis to Revelation, and thus remains in force from history's beginning to its anticipated end; (2) that the grace of God is intended not to lead away from, or beyond, a life of law-keeping, but precisely to enable sinners for it; (3) that law-keeping belongs to the purest expression of pure religion. (6)

Murray wrote with the attempt to apply the biblical-theological method to the ethics of Scripture (7). Murray understands "Biblical Theology in the sense defined by [his teacher] Geerhardus Vos as 'that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self revelation of God deposited in the Bible'." Murray's aim "has been to show how fruitful ethical studies conducted along this line can be and how in this field, as well as in others, we may discover the organic unity and continuity of divine revelation" (7).

With an emphasis on progressive revelation, Murray successfully demonstrated the "organic unity and continuity of the ethic presented in the Bible" (9). Murray regards revelation "as the disclosure to man on the part of God of his mind and will; and progressive revelation means that revelation has a history of increasing and accumulating disclosure until it reaches its finale in the manifestation of the Son of God and the inscripturation embodied in the completed New Testament canon" (8). While ordinary "ethics is concerned with manner of life and behaviour, biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behaviour which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces" (12). As a primary example, Murray shows the continuity in Scripture of the ten commandments, "which furnish the core of biblical ethics" (7).

Murray accomplished his purpose as seen when he applied the biblical-theological method to the study of Scripture to show that "the ten commandments as promulgated at Sinai were but the concrete and practical form of enunciating principles which did not then for the first time come to have relevance but were relevant from the beginning" (7). Moreover, just "as they did not begin to have relevance at Sinai, so they did not cease to have relevance when the Sinaitic economy had passed away" (7). Murray showed that "biblical-theological study demonstrates that these commandments belong to the organism of divine revelation respecting God's will for man" (8).

This writer agrees with the author in all respects and has profited greatly by studying ethics from a biblical-theological perspective. Throughout the book there are intriguing insights into various aspects of biblical ethics. For one of many examples, it is important to note that while a believer should exhibit ethics in conformity with the Bible, "the biblical ethic is not the sum-total of the behaviour of a particular believer, not even of a peculiarly exemplary believer, nor the sum-total of the behavior of believing society" (Murray 13). Every believer is imperfect and sins in various ways. Thus, there will be many inconsistencies in the behavior of believers dealing with various

issues. Instead, the biblical ethic must be rooted in God's will as revealed in His inerrant Word. Murray states, "The biblical ethic is that manner of life which is consonant with, and demanded by, the biblical revelation. Our attention must be focused upon divine demand, not upon human achievement, upon the revelation of God's will for man, not upon human behavior" (14).

Care must also be taken when reading descriptive behavior of God-fearing saints in the Bible. God's stamp of approval on a particular moral action is not necessarily given just because it is recorded in the Bible. This is especially true when the Word gives indications that these human actions are sinful or the Word is silent about their morality. Murray gives an example of this when Jacob untruthfully pretended to be his brother Esau under Rebekah's guidance. Since divine blessing was given to Jacob some might think that God endorsed the deception. "But it is poor theology and worse theodicy that will seek to derive from God's action in the bestowal of the blessing upon Jacob, or in the faith of Rebekah which lay back of her design, a vindication of the method devised by Rebekah and enacted by Jacob" (Murray 137). Since God is truth, a deliberate intent to portray untruth is condemned in the Bible. Murray does concede, based on situations given in the Bible, that "under certain circumstances to conceal or withhold part of the truth" is proper (140). There is justice in the fact that "Scripture warrants concealment of truth from those who have no claim upon it" (146).

Murray has arguably made a good case for showing continuity in the Bible with regards to polygamy. While polygamy was practiced by saints in the Old Testament, monogamy is the ethical standard for the Christians. On the surface these ethics appear contradictory, but upon deeper analysis there is a common biblically approved ethic. Murray believes that polygamy was "permitted or tolerated under the Old Testament, tolerated in such a way that regulatory provisions were enacted to prevent some of the grosser evils and buses attendant upon them, and tolerated in the sense that they were not openly condemned and censured with civil and ecclesiastical penalties, but that nevertheless they were not legitimated" (16). Murray concludes that this practice was "basically wrong" and a violation of a "creation ordinance" established at the beginning and revealed to man. Thus, the action of polygamy was "really contrary to the revealed will of God and rested under his judgment" (16). Murray relieves the tension of views by emphasizing the "fact of progressive revelation" in relation to "God's judgment upon sin" (18). Luke 12:48 says, ". . . And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required . . ." (NASB). Murray applies this verse by stating, "The greater the degree of revelation, the greater the responsibility and the more severe the judgment of God upon the transgression. . . . Hence polygamy, though it was a violation of the original institution and therefore inherently wrong under the Old Testament, would not have involved the same degree of guilt or of punitive sanction which it undoubtedly entails in the clear light of the New Testament" (19). Thus, sufferance was given in the case of polygamy in the Old Testament, "but it was the sufferance of forbearance, not the sufferance of approval or sanction" (20). Murray shows that the creation ordinances of marriage in addition to those of "procreation, replenishing the earth, subduing the earth, dominion over the creatures, labour, and the sabbath are not abrogated . . . by the fall of man" (43-44).

Murray has a firm grasp in reconciling the apparent contradictions between law and grace. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill (Matt. 5:17 NASB). The law and the prophets represents the whole Old Testament canon. Jesus "came to realize the full measure of the intent and purpose of the law and the prophets" (Murray 150). While Jesus did "come to discontinue the observance of the rites and ceremonies of the old economy," he did not abolish them (150). Murray stresses the truth that "if law is conceived of as contributing in the least degree towards our acceptance with God and our justification by him,

then the gospel of grace is a nullity" (182). With this emphasis, it is appropriate as a believer to keep the commandments of God for Jesus Himself said, "If you love me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15 NASB). According to Murray, "the demand of obedience in the Mosaic covenant is principally identical with the same demand in the new covenant of the gospel economy" (199). Similarly, the demand of faith has always been the means to obtaining salvation.

While the Old Testament does not teach that works are the criteria for obtaining salvation, many Jews during and prior to the time of Jesus and Paul were deceived in thinking they were bound to the law for salvation (Murray 188). Although the believer is not "under law", he is not given the license to sin (Romans 6:14-15). Romans 3:31 says, "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law" (NASB). In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, people "were saved by the blood of Christ through the grace of God" and justified by faith (Murray 195). As an expression of faith, believers will desire to meditate and follow in God's laws and ways. In fact, the only way for a person to be empowered to live according to God's ways is to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit as a result of the new birth in Christ as described in John 3:1-8. "If we accept the biblical witness to human depravity and iniquity, then there must be a radical breach with sin in its power and defilement if the demands of the biblical ethic are even to begin to be realized in us" (Murray 203). In conclusion, while salvation (or entrance into the kingdom of God) has always been obtained by grace through faith, "The criterion of our standing in the kingdom of God and of reward in the age to come is nothing else than meticulous observance of the commandments of God in the minutial details of their prescription . . ." (154).

Works Cited

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