

Introduction

Donald John MacLean

It is my pleasure to introduce this *Festschrift* for Ian Hamilton, which explores the theme of ‘*Catholic Calvinism*’. It is fair to say the idea of a generous spirited, outward looking and confessionally robust theology is central to Ian’s ministry and to Westminster Seminary (UK), which Ian has faithfully led for the past few years. As such, as well as honouring a significant milestone in Ian’s life, it is hoped this volume will also serve as something of a window into the pulse beat of the Seminary.

Westminster Seminary (UK)—‘Catholic Calvinism’

All that Westminster does is from a spirit of rigorous *ex animo* commitment to the Westminster Confession. We are unashamed in our commitment to ‘Calvinism’, understood as the doctrine, worship and practice taught in the Westminster Standards. Precisely because of this, our desire is to serve the broader evangelical church. Our doctrinal standards, in faithfulness to Scripture, remind us that ‘All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head by His Spirit and by faith ... being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man’ (Westminster Confession 26:1). We therefore exist to promote the ‘mutual good’ of the church, not simply one corner of it. This is part of our ‘catholic’ spirit.

We are also committed to equipping the church with the riches of the past to enable her to serve in the present. Our theology at Westminster Seminary (UK) is not idiosyncratic, majoring on the emphases of any one particular stream of reformed theology—it is ‘catholic’. Nor is it obscurantist, as if we were preparing for ministry in a bygone age. Rather we aim to prepare men for ministry *today*, by equipping them with the wisdom of the ‘catholic’ church through the ages.

In both these areas Westminster (UK) reflects core commitments of Ian’s life, ministry and thought.

Ian Hamilton as President of Westminster Seminary (UK)

As well as a ‘catholic Calvinism’ two further emphases are embedded in Westminster Seminary (UK) through Ian’s time as President. The centrality of what might be called a personal piety, and of Christ-centred preaching. Regarding the former, Ian has often quoted the powerful words of James W. Alexander,

At judgment I heartily believe that some heresies of heart and temper will be charged as worse than heavy doctrinal errors. To you I may say this, because you understand me as holding, not merely that the tenets of our church are true, but that they are very important. But I see how easy it is to ‘hold the truth’ in rancour, and hate, which is the grand error of depraved human nature; yea, and of diabolism itself.¹

The men Ian, and our seminary, seek to train, are those who heed Alexander’s warning; men who truly love the truth, and therefore are ‘kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness’ (2 Tim. 2:24-25). Men whose lives bring credit to their profession.

There is also a ‘tincture’ that runs through Ian’s preaching and lecturing—the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. What the Synod of Bern said in 1532 could be true of Westminster Seminary (UK) under Ian (and I trust will always be true): ‘We are faithfully to exhort one another, that as the servants of Christ

1. James W. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Familiar Letters of James W. Alexander* (ed. John Hall; New York: C. Scribner, 1860), 227.

we should preach only Him, our Lord, on whom rests the whole counsel of God.²

Catholic Calvinism—The Festschrift

Many of these themes recur throughout this volume: Doctrinal rigour; generosity of spirit; equipping for ministry today via the riches of the past, piety and Christ-centredness. As the chapters span doctrine, practice and history, friends and colleagues of Ian unite around these themes, themes that Westminster Seminary UK stands for as it seeks to ‘prepare leaders to plant churches in every nation and proclaim Christ to the ends of the earth.’

My prayer is that this volume will be used to encourage a commitment to the ‘*Catholic Calvinism*’ that characterises Ian and the Seminary he has faithfully served as President.

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Westminster Seminary (UK)
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2. James T. Dennison, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, Volume 1: 1523-1552* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 237.

Ian Hamilton

A Personal Appreciation

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

We do not always recall first encounters with those who are destined to become long-time friends, but my own earliest meeting with Ian Hamilton—in the early summer of 1971—is etched in my memory. It has been a privilege therefore to have observed, sometimes at close hand, at other times at a distance, the formation and growth of a life committed to Christ, devoted to the people of God and the ministry of the gospel, and marked by grace, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. No doubt the graph of that growth is not one of simple straight-line ascent; the Christian life never is. But about Ian I think we can say with confidence, ‘whose faith follow’ (Heb. 13:7 AV).

A Glasgow Boy

Ian Hamilton was born on 29 March 1950. A glance at the early twentieth-century edition of the mammoth *Dictionary of National Biography* underlines the fact that ‘Hamilton’ is one of the greatest names among the families of Scotland—with somewhere in the region of one hundred pages of entries. Doubtless for Ian the greatest of these would be the brave young Scotsman Patrick Hamilton, whose martyrdom in 1528 John Knox regarded as the real beginning of the Scottish Reformation.

But the young man who would now bear the same surname and confess the same gospel was not born into a palatial Hamilton mansion, but into the urban depression of the Glasgow of the early 1950s. It was the alcohol capital of Scotland (and perhaps all Europe), and known for its areas of deprivation, its gangs, and its heavy industry. It was the most religiously divided city in Europe. The country's two leading soccer teams, Rangers (who at that time had never been known to sign a Roman Catholic player) and Celtic (originally founded by Roman Catholic priests), were the secularised sacraments of a deep religious hostility.

Against that background Ian was born into the only kind of 'mixed marriage' Glaswegians then knew: his father, John, a fireman, was a nominal protestant while his mother, Barbara, had been raised Roman Catholic. Given his father's occupation there is perhaps an appropriateness in thinking of Ian Hamilton as 'a brand plucked from the fire' (Zech. 3:2).

In mid-twentieth century Scotland it was still commonplace for parents who themselves never attended church to send their children to a local Sunday School. Ian briefly attended—until the clear logical thinking that would later mark his ministry led him to inform his parents that since they never went to church it was not necessary for him to attend Sunday School. His only religious connections until his later teens were several devout and kindly Roman Catholic relatives on his mother's side. Those on his father's side Ian has described as 'rascals'!

The Hamilton family lived in Easterhouse, one of the 'housing schemes' established in the 1950s in the East End of Glasgow. Here, in the providence of God, a primary school teacher had an interest in teaching his eleven-year-old charges a smattering of foreign languages, including Scottish Gaelic (then, as now, a 'foreign' language to most Scots). This opened the possibility of attending a select Gaelic-teaching school in the West End—a considerable journey across the city. It proved to be not only a better environment to stimulate the obvious intellectual gifts of the young schoolboy, but a stepping stone towards Christ.

Coming to Faith

Life for Ian then was—as for many youngsters his age—school, soccer, and discos. He was generally unaware of Christians apart from one boy he knew at school who was ‘different’ (he would later become a minister and a moderator). Through a ‘chance’ encounter with him one Saturday, Ian accepted an invitation to go to his Bible Class the next day (after all, perhaps there might be some attractive girls?). It was the first time he heard the words of John 3:16, and the experience led to his coming to a living faith in Christ, and to the subsequent transformation and redirection of his whole life. From that point on Paul’s personal testimony—‘to me to live is Christ’ (Phil. 1:21)—has been written over Ian’s life. That Sunday afternoon the seeds of both new life and his calling to serve Christ were planted deeply in him. It may bring a wry smile to those who have known him only in his adulthood to learn that under the influence of his Bible Class teacher his early Christian life was accompanied by a dispensationalist chart on his wall!

Higher Education

Strathclyde University soon followed. Today that would be expected of perhaps fifty per cent or more of Scottish school leavers. Not in the late 1960s when about only five per cent advanced to university education. Ian was an exception in his family circle. University meant not only the nurturing of his superior intellectual ability but also introduced him to other Christians in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. There he was to encounter biblical teaching and preaching that would further shape his thinking and his personal aspirations. At the same time his theological interests were taking shape. Looking back, it is perhaps no surprise to learn that he managed to persuade his professor to allow him to write the mandatory graduating thesis in Economic History on *‘John Calvin and the Struggle for Reformed Orthodoxy in Geneva with Special Attention to the Doctrines of the Church in Predestination, 1541-1545.’* It was the beginning of a friendship with the Genevan Reformer that has lasted until the present day. For all Ian’s wide

reading, probably no theologian would have more influence on the ministry that lay ahead.

Ian graduated from Strathclyde University in 1972, and with the encouragement of the minister and elders of his congregation in Glasgow matriculated for a B.D. degree at New College in the University of Edinburgh. Here, with rare exceptions, the most conservative members of the faculty were Barthians.

One feature of Ian's character that often strikes people was already beginning to manifest itself: the ability to disagree (which as a student he sometimes did boldly and directly) while maintaining an appreciation of God's common grace in the lives of those with whom he disagreed. What was true at this personal level would also become increasingly true as he reflected on the theologians of the Christian Church. Not all who seemed to be only halfway up the hill of biblical orthodoxy, were hurtling down disastrously to the foot of the mountain. Some were still climbing with few mountain guides as companions to help them.

Graduating with a high-quality honours degree, this time in Ecclesiastical History, Ian proceeded to Aberdeen to serve his mandatory year's assistantship in Northfield Parish Church.

Influences and New Friends

Here we should press the pause button on the narrative to note some of the influences—apart from the beginnings of his lifelong commitment to reading great theological works—that were now shaping his understanding of the work of the ministry in general and preaching in particular.

The 1960s had brought something of a resurgence in Scotland of younger evangelical men sensing a call to the ministry. No doubt an element in this was the growing influence of Inter-Varsity, often introducing them to quality biblical preaching.

More significantly for Ian Hamilton was the example of ministries with which he was now becoming familiar, including his own minister George Philip, in Sandyford-Henderson Memorial Church in Glasgow and his older brother James Philip whose ministry at Holyrood Abbey Church in Edinburgh

Ian would attend as a divinity student. In due season he would come to know (and later succeed) Eric Alexander, minister at Loudon East Church in Newmilns, Ayrshire, and William Still, minister of Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, the father-figure of what became known as ‘The Crieff Fellowship’ (an invited gathering whose list of invitations extended into the hundreds). These men spearheaded a vision for congregational ministry focussed on the consecutive exposition of Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and relatively simple church structures. They were also remarkably diverse in both personality and preaching style—this was doubtless helpful to Ian as he would progressively develop into ‘his own man’ as a minister and preacher. From this womb was born the expository and pastoral ministry that has made him so widely appreciated internationally.

Narrative Resumed

The year Ian spent as an assistant minister in Aberdeen was to have long-lasting consequences in the friendships he made, not least with older Christians. It was one of the mothers-in-Israel at Gilcomston South Church, Vi Robb, who would later enquire (doubtless graciously scheming!), had he met Joan Ross? Joan, from Edinburgh, had come to study Geography at the University of Aberdeen and had been involved in the Christian Union. Happily, they met (I believe at a missionary farewell gathering) and courtship and love would lead to marriage in 1980, and the following year to the birth of their firstborn son, David. Thereafter Jonathan, Rebecca and Sarah joined him. Now the family circle is extended by the addition of six grandchildren.

Once again we have run ahead of the story. Ian received a scholarship to pursue graduate work in the Ecclesiastical History department at Edinburgh University. The fruit of his labours was a dissertation on confessional decline in Scotland, later to be published as *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Drifting from the Truth in Confessional Scottish Churches* (1990). But while he enjoyed academic study, the academy was not his immediate calling. It would be much later in his ministry that he would devote time to teaching theological students.

Minister of the Gospel—Newmilns

The year 1979 marked an ending and a new beginning. Ian graduated with his third degree—an M.Phil, again from Edinburgh University (a fourth would follow in 2012 when he was honoured with a Doctor of Divinity degree by Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in South Carolina). He was called to succeed Eric Alexander in Newmilns, Ayrshire.

Newmilns is a small town in what was once, but no longer, covenanting country. In addition to inheriting members of a well-taught congregation however, Ian found himself sole minister of a church union with 1100 members. The Kirk Session had 42 elders (more than half Moses' number!) by no means all of whom were familiar with the New Testament. It would be an understatement to say there was little or no spiritual superglue to bond the people together. But with 'complete patience and teaching' (2 Tim. 4:2) Ian exercised a careful preaching and pastoral ministry appropriately measured to the capacity of the people. (Jesus himself told his disciples that after three years he still had much to teach them that they were not yet able to bear [John 16:12])

In addition Ian engaged in a strenuous pattern of pastoral visitation and personal care. A young minister in a church today would find it almost inconceivable if he were to be told that in the next two decades he would conduct over seven hundred (yes, 700) funerals, with the attendant burden-bearing and personal visiting of so many families. But this was the pastoral calling for the minister of Newmilns.

Careful teaching, great patience, and much love meant that by the end of the first decade of his ministry the character of the congregation had changed (the eldership was eventually a group of twelve); the gospel was firmly established. In the decade that followed the fruit of Ian and Joan's ploughing and planting, welcoming and loving was apparent—not only in terms of the quality of the eldership and people, but also in the family atmosphere of congregational life, and in the sense of God being among his people in worship.