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R. W. DALE ON THE ATONEMENT¹

by SAMUEL J. MIKOLASKI

PROFESSOR MIKOLASKI continues his study of R. W. Dale which was introduced in the last number of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY.

I. CATEGORIES AND EVIDENCE

OF those writers who take note of Dale's book both his friends and critics acknowledge the strong and diversified rootage of his exposition in the New Testament, but none of these shows sufficient awareness of certain key principles that guided Dale. First, it will be useful to note in a very sketchy manner the broad scope of New Testament teaching that Dale gathers so as to get some insight into his method before comment is attempted on certain theological ideas.

That Dale intended his thesis to rest upon the broad base of New Testament study will be clear to anyone who pauses to note the structure of his book. Of the ten chapters that comprise the book the first six are devoted to discussion of the New Testament evidence, chapters seven and eight argue the historical development of the doctrine and the meaning of remission, and it is only in chapters nine and ten that the whole is drawn together in theological formulation.

Throughout the lengthy discussion of the New Testament writings Dale aimed to show *that the remission of sins was rendered possible by the death of Christ*. So far as the consciousness of Jesus about his mission is concerned, the discussions our Lord had with His disciples both on the last journey and at the Supper show clearly this connection. And this may be viewed, he said, both as the unfolding of events to our Lord and as His awareness of

¹ Quite naturally attention in this essay will be concentrated upon *The Atonement*, the Congregational Union Lecture for 1875. This book went through more than a score of editions. No change was made by Dale in the lectures; however, the seventh and subsequent editions contain a lengthy Preface where he takes into account critics of his theology. The Preface is of great value. It needs stating also that the development of Dale's thought can be traced in the years before 1875. What he said in *The Atonement* is, substantially, in two long extensively documented essays in the *British Quarterly Review*: "The 'Moral View' of the Atonement" (October, 1866), and "The Expiatory Theory of the Atonement" (October, 1867).

His own end in life. Christ foresaw the inevitable if He challenged the leaders at Jerusalem yet His act was His own decision. It was both an inevitable collision and a voluntary act in the will of God, but its objective was His sacrificial death for the remission of sins.² Only this connection can account, he claimed, for Christ's acceptance of John's declaration that He was the Lamb of God and our Lord's claim for coming to give His life a ransom for many. Only this declares the meaning of His climactic cry from the Cross.³

When turning to the Petrine writings, Dale selects the view of Dr. John Young (*The Life and Light of Men*) for evaluation and criticism as representative of a large body of opinion advanced then, and we may add, now. It is that in both the address of Peter following Pentecost and in his epistles the preaching is about the remission of sins in the name of Jesus but not specifically because Christ's death was an expiatory sacrifice. For Dr. Young the omission is inexplicable if the death was in fact expiatory. Dale was quick to point out first that Peter's thrust was upon the magnitude of the crime of unjust crucifixion and, second, that while the evangelical Christian claims the death of Christ to be the objective ground of remission, he does not deny that it is also a spectacle of the divine love. Thus, if Peter is not explicit on an objective atonement, neither does he say anything about the Cross as the spectacle of divine love, and this is more devastating for Young than it is for Dale. He says:

the expiatory power of the death of Christ is effective for all who rely on Him for the forgiveness of sins, even though they may know nothing of its expiatory intention; but the power of the Death of Christ as an appeal of the Divine love to the human heart cannot be felt unless the Death is distinctly recognized as the revelation of that love . . . on Dr. Young's theory Peter's silence was fatal.⁴

But nonetheless Dale's case for the transforming power of Christ's sacrificial act shown in 1 Peter 1: 18-19 is made out well. His discussions of the Johannine literature and of the book of James follow the above pattern.

So far as St. Paul is concerned, Dale said, the connection in the apostle's mind between the death of Christ and the remission of sins is indisputable; thus, the approval by the Jerusalem Council of the work of St. Paul lends credence to the view that the apostle's preaching truly represents the life and teaching of the New Testa-

² *The Atonement*, pp. 77-78.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

ment church.⁵ In *Galatians* and in *Romans* the Cross is the ground of the remission of sins and it is only after this ground has been established in the death of Christ, said Dale, that Paul goes forward to questions of victory over sin in the Christian life.⁶ Whilst satisfied with the strength of this, Dale yet moves forward to encompass the later epistles also in favour of his viewpoint in a rather striking fashion. *Ephesians* and *Colossians* give to us, he said, a statement of Christ's relation to the universe that is indispensable to any theory of the Atonement. The divine goal is the restoration of the universe, perfect in unity and harmony, in Christ. As the reconciliation is viewed in cosmic terms, its ground must be objective. This is the death of Christ upon the Cross. St. Paul came to his understanding, he said, by an orderly process of rational and spiritual reflection upon the meaning of Christ to himself, hence to the world. Thus the point Dale makes is that we should move away from self-centred views of the Atonement to the broader vista of God's purpose in the world.⁷

The foregoing, as inadequate as it is, yet shows that Dale's demonstration of what he calls the fact of the Atonement is not a catalogue of texts, nor the isolation of proof-texts. Rather, he says, on any fair evaluation of the biblical data, so far as the life and unfolding history of the church is concerned, the witness of the apostles cannot be ignored whether they were inspired or un-inspired. The essential elements of the tradition about Christ and the Atonement are of the character that a tradition would be least likely to create.⁸ In fact, he argued, the degree of inspiration needed in preserving the key elements of Christianity is in inverse ratio to the centrality and importance of the doctrines stated by the apostolic writers. The real proof of the fact of Atonement rests in the authority Christ had over the lives of His followers. It is no criterion of the importance or value of a truth to count up the number of important references devoted to it because the churches were least likely to abandon the most characteristic truths of Christianity.

The difference between what the Gospel records are—primarily as a source book of the life of Jesus and His words—in comparison with the epistles heightened this fact for Dale. The entire life of Christ as the revelation of God can be interpreted as act, or

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁸ Preface to the seventh edition of *The Atonement* (henceforth called *Preface*), pp. xvii-xxiv.

a series of divine acts; thus, Dale said, to quote only our Lord's words is to leave out a large part of the revelation. Christ Himself is the Truth; therefore it is not startling that in the Epistles one finds a more fully developed statement of the Christian faith than in the Gospels.⁹ The fact that is of staggering dimensions in the New Testament for the apostles and for us, Dale maintained, is the uniqueness, the exceptional nature of Christ's death. For them as for us it is explicable in no other way than that He "died for our sins." The authority of faith is put therefore in the personal experience of Christ grounded upon the biblical witness and made real in the believer's life by the Holy Spirit, and in the continuing witness of the church to the world of the inscripturated acts of God.

Similarly, in his historical sketch of the doctrine¹⁰ he notes the intimacy of relation claimed by theologians between the remission of sins and the death of Christ. Three key types of theory emerge from his study: the ransom to the devil theory, Anselm's theory of an act of homage to the majesty of God, and the theory of the expiatory sacrifice of Christ that he saw as the footing of the Reformation and of his own view. Dale did not identify the views of Abelard with those of his (Dale's) opponents; in fact he found much value, especially of a devotional nature, in Abelard's exposition. The point demanding an accounting for Dale was the almost universal consensus in the life of the church that the sacrifice of Christ constitutes the ground for the remission of sins. Far from undermining this connection the divergent views testify to its validity.

Theologians did not invent the idea of an objective atonement in order to complete the symmetry of their theological theories. They have invented theory after theory, in order to find a place for the idea. That the Death of Christ is the ground on which sin is remitted has been one of their chief difficulties. To explain it they have been driven to the most monstrous and incredible speculations. Had they been able to deny it, their work would have been infinitely simplified.¹¹

If then Dale agrees with Francis Turretin that the Atonement is the anchor of faith, this can be said only of the Atonement itself and not of any theory about it. And the indisputable fact of the Atonement is the apostolically interpreted fact that "Christ died for our sins"—it is the fact established both in the New Testament and in the history of the church that there is an immediate and

⁹ *The Atonement*, pp. 43-44, 46-49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Ch. VIII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269; cf. p. 309.

intimate connection between the death of Christ and the remission of sins.¹² Faith in the fact is what saves, Dale claimed. It is of significance, then, that only the last two chapters of his book were devoted exclusively to establishing the objective ground of remission, namely, the death of Christ. "I have first to establish a fact," he said, "and then to attempt the construction of a theory."¹³

It will be seen therefore why Dale thought of Horace Bushnell, the American theologian, as his most noteworthy opponent. Remission cannot be mere formality, as Bushnell appeared to say, because the Cross is not incidental to but the key feature of the divine scheme of forgiveness. There is a necessary connection between the death of Christ and forgiveness, not as if the necessity is *a priori* but to us in history and by revelation.¹⁴

Dale was well aware of the ambiguity attached to the terms "objective" and "subjective" when used of the Atonement, but he was not prepared for the extent of the misreading of his book. "You have made the work of Christ so forensic," his critics said, "that human response has been emptied of true meaning." What he had aimed to expose, he wrote later,¹⁵ is that the antagonism of the moral influence theory is shown in its insistence that the *whole* meaning of the Cross is its appeal to human consciousness. He argues that even Bushnell was aware of this, that when the objective element is eliminated or depreciated then the moral power of the Cross over the hearts of men is lessened proportionately. The subjective power of the death of Christ is greatest when its objective value is most vividly present to the heart. The Atonement cannot rest for its meaning only upon response evoked, the response can be evoked because God has acted with finality and victoriously in the Cross. Note may be taken of the word "simply" in the following quotation, but doubtless the fervour with which Dale had for years been writing and preaching against the moral influence theory prejudged to the mind of his readers what he had actually said in *The Atonement*.

The two conceptions—one of which I say we must accept, one of which we must reject—are these: (1) that the Death of Christ has a direct relation to the remission of sins. (2) That it was *simply* a great appeal of the divine love to the human race; *this*, and *nothing more*. That it is *this*—because it was much beside *this*—is the truth which

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3; cf. *Christian Doctrine*, 1895, p. 230; and *The Epistle of James and Other Discourses*, 1895, p. 211.

¹³ *The Atonement*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁵ *Preface*, pp. xlv-lv.

the whole volume was written to illustrate. The Lectures were intended to show that God has manifested His infinite love to the human race, has made a supreme appeal to the conscience and heart of mankind, by atoning for human sin.¹⁶

II. SIN AND ITS FORGIVENESS

Two points stand out here. First, men are sinners, Dale said, because they sin; sin is personal act against God and it has distorted the image of God in man. Second, the guilt of sin attaches to each of us individually and to the race corporately by reason of our racial interdependence.¹⁷ Sin is transgression of the moral law of God. Sin is violation of the duty we owe God, the Moral Ruler of the universe. Sin is our personal resentment of divine authority. He says that the

true self is impatient of divine control; it assumes that whatever our moral character may be, we resist or forget the Divine authority—and that is sin. It assumes that the august sovereignty of the living personal God is rejected in that central region of life which determines what a man really is and what his destiny must be.¹⁸

Like other great preachers and theologians of the faith, Dale was well aware of the nature and consequences of sin for both the individual and humanity. Sin is our personal defiance of God, yet in some terrible way it belongs to the whole race. The importance of this both for the relation of men to the righteousness of God and of Christ to men racially by the Incarnation in the Atonement will be apparent. Sin is more than a succession of isolated acts. Sinful acts disclose a sinful character, and the bent of character that sins is common to the race.¹⁹ Sin is a principle, a power, that makes for unrighteousness, hence Dale's demand for the acknowledgment of the objective atonement. Sin, its issue and power, must be overcome in regard both to the demands of God's righteous law *and* its malignant evil in the world.

The righteous and loving God must judge sin. Only He can mark the true significance of the offence, Dale said, and when men transgress the divine law God cannot aggravate the evil by forgetting or bypassing the righteous penalty. Evasion of judgment is commensurate, Dale argued, neither with the character of personal moral relations in the universe, nor with the identity of the moral law with the nature of God. The law has its life in the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xlvii.

¹⁷ *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1882, p. 162; *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 196-217.

¹⁸ *The Epistle of James and Other Discourses*, p. 185; *The Atonement*, pp. 349-350.

¹⁹ *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 200, 212.

personal, living God; to act sinfully is rebellion against God. Expiation does not propose an antagonism in the being of God; it witnesses to the unity of God's being and action:

the act of God in punishing wrong-doing is an act by which the Creator Himself asserts the authority of the law which His creature has insulted and defied.²⁰

Clearly, then, the judgment of sin by God lies rooted in the principles of His own nature—a fact that much of late nineteenth-century theology tended to forget.²¹ Now this says something rather important, namely, that the only justification there can be for punishment is simply that the punishment is deserved. Whatever reformatory or deterrent value it harbours, punishment is immoral unless deserved. It can be justified neither as an expedient, nor as an exhibition of personal resentment, but only as a moral act, morally conceived, and both vindicating righteousness and rendering just desert. The moral element of the punishment is derived from the person inflicting it.²² Dale writes:

We conclude, therefore, that the only conception of punishment which satisfies our strongest and most definite moral convictions, and which corresponds to the place it occupies both in the organization of society and in the moral order of the universe, is that which represents it as pain and loss inflicted for the violation of a law. If the law is a righteous law, if the severity of the penalty is not out of proportion to the magnitude of the offence, the punishment is just; the offender has deserved what he suffers.²³

If on one side Dale protested against Bushnell's apparent evacuation of the grounds for remission and hence of the importance of remission, on the other he attacked vigorously the notion of Dr. John Young (*The Life and Light of Men*) that because God cannot repeal moral laws remission is impossible, that the last jot and tittle of punishment must be borne by the offender. A distinction must be drawn, Dale said, between remission and escape from penalty and even though sin is forgiven some of the penalties may not be recalled; but, remission must include the cancelling of at least the severest penalties with which unforgiven sin is justly visited.²⁴ Young's view cannot be squared with the facts of experience (forgiveness is both a human and divine reality) and it appears to rest, Dale said, probably upon the ambiguity of which the term "law" is capable.

²⁰ *The Living God the Saviour of All Men*, 1864, p. 24; *The Atonement*, p. 372.

²¹ *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons*, 1880, p. 157.

²² *The Atonement*, pp. 373-376, 379, 386, 390.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 320-321.

The precepts of ethical law are not self-acting ; they require the free concurrence of the human will, and the human will may determine to resist them. Nor has it been proved that the penalties of ethical law are "self-acting"; they may require the free concurrence of the Divine will ; and it seems possible at least that the Divine will may determine to remit them.²⁵

Neither dare we reduce remission simply to terms of the restoration of the divine image in man, as Bushnell did, because while they go together they are not the same.²⁶ As the relations between God and man are personal and moral, the conception of law must bear this out as the living historical acts of God meeting the demands of the divine nature yet all the while operating in terms of dynamic relationships. To the idea that God reacts mechanically in his moral government of the universe Dale reacted negatively:

To these questions the Christian revelation and the irrepressible instincts of our moral and spiritual nature give the same replies.²⁷

III. TRINITY, INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT

Of outstanding significance in Dale's view of the Atonement is his grasp of what Atonement must mean to God. It is safe to say that no theory of the doctrine can succeed in absorbing the evidence of the New Testament unless its categories accept realistically the trinitarian doctrine and life of the New Testament.

Any complete theory of the Atonement must include, Dale said, "a definition of the eternal relations between the Son of God and the Father."²⁸ Experientially, this can stand out for us prominently. To our minds the Father is related most directly to the eternal law of righteousness, Christ to the ideal submission of the race to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to the power enabling us to grasp and do this. If our eyes are too dim to see, yet—

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity answers these questions. The Divine Spirit enables us to see God in Christ and to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.²⁹

But, the Trinity stands for more than certain revealed divine relations to mankind ; it is of the ontological Trinity that he writes. These relations are conditioned by something deeper than themselves for they rest on an "eternal fact in the nature of God."³⁰

Ideally and redemptively man stands related to God in a manner that draws its meaning from and rests upon the relations of the three persons of the blessed Trinity. This is axiomatic for Dale.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 334-335.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 162.

³⁰ *The Atonement*, p. 6: cf. *Preface*, p. xix.

He says:

The relations between man and God have their ultimate ground in the eternal relations between the Eternal Word and the Father.³¹ Hence the solution to some of the obscure puzzles of the doctrine of the Atonement awaits an enrichment of our knowledge of the triune nature of God. The revelation of God stands in the acts of God in the Old Testament, but primarily in the Incarnation and work of Christ in the New. It is in the understanding the church gained of Christ's peculiar relation to themselves by the Holy Spirit that we come to understand in the doctrine of the Trinity what is crucial to our fuller understanding of the Atonement. For Dale the epitome of this is that Christ is the Moral Ruler of the universe. When his discussion of God being the author of the Eternal Law of Righteousness is remembered the several parts of his argument fall into place. It is as follows:

What was disclosed by the Holy Spirit to Paul's insight is that the relations of Christ to the church as Sovereign Head point to the original relation of Christ to the race and to the universe. It is "that the actual relations between the Christian soul and Christ might naturally be developed into the conception of those relations between the whole universe and Christ."³² The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us, first, that Christ is the Moral Ruler of the universe or the Divine Lawgiver and, second, that this prerogative has been His originally as the second person of the Trinity and not therefore that His functions of Judge or Lawgiver were won by Him through, nor that they resulted from, the mediatorial position He took up in the Incarnation. Christ's pre-eminence is original and His relation to the race as its root is likewise original; that is to say, eternal. Christ is the sole ground of the relation of the race to God irrespective of the Fall.³³ The Christian conception of man, therefore, finds its rationale in the doctrine of the Trinity where in virtue of our union with Christ we are made to share Christ's relations with the Father. The Incarnation is the actual realization of this for man and that to which we are redeemed by the Atonement.³⁴ In His assumption of our nature the Eternal Word brought the human race and the Eternal Law of Righteousness into the most intimate and ideal of relationships. The Incar-

³¹ *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons*, p. 150.

³² *Preface*, pp. xxx ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. xxviii-xxix.

³⁴ "Preliminary Essay," C. Schmidt, *The Social Results of Early Christianity*, 1885, p. xvii; *Fellowship with Christ*, 1891, p. 353.

nation is neither a divine afterthought, nor does it eclipse or make unnecessary the Atonement, rather, it is the ground of the possibility of Atonement both as the act of God and in and for the race.³⁵

The way we express our theology will depend, Dale said, on our perspective. Theologically, in terms of depth, the order is Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement; but practically, for us in our sinful condition and as the objects of divine redeeming grace, the order must be Atonement, Incarnation, Trinity. The more inclusive truth is the Incarnation which declares that in His becoming flesh the Eternal Word discloses the ideal relations between God and man, but, "the truth which moves men and converts them is that, having become flesh, Christ died for our sins."³⁶
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(To be continued)

³⁵ Dale refused to make the Incarnation contingent on the Fall, "even if we had not sinned, I suppose that He would have come to us, in order that we might come to Him" (*Fellowship with Christ*, p. 353; cf. *The Old Evangelicalism and the New*, pp. 43-45).

³⁶ *The Old Evangelicalism and the New*, p. 51.