

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*DR. DALE'S THEOLOGY.*¹

THE services which Dr. Dale has rendered to theology and practical Christianity are so many and so great as to insure a warm welcome from those who know them to a new volume of discourses from his pen; and the readers will not be disappointed with those now presented to the public. They are distinguished by the author's qualities of profound and lofty thought, warm Christian feeling, and the power of bringing the doctrines of theology to bear on the practical duties of the Church and of society. They are on various subjects; and among the things that are specially well done I would mention the vindication, in the first of them, of missions to the heathen, even though we do not believe that all who do not hear of Christ are lost, the brief but luminous and suggestive treatment of socialism in that on the "Ministry required by the Age," and the whole of the very useful and beautiful sermon on the "Congregation helping the Minister." But it is not necessary to give an account of the contents of this volume, or to refer more particularly to the good things that are in it. Dr. Dale's writings need no eulogium or description, and these general remarks are meant simply to express high appreciation of them and of this volume as well worthy to stand along with the others.

There are however in it certain uncommon theological views or theories, to which Dr. Dale attaches much importance; and as he has expressed these with great emphasis and decision, respect for him as well as regard for truth makes it proper that they should be carefully examined. They occur in these discourses incidentally in disconnected

¹ *Fellowship with Christ, and other Discourses delivered on Special Occasions.* By R. W. Dale, LL.D., Birmingham. (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1891.)

passages ; but they are parts of a consistent, well thought out scheme of opinion, and can only be fairly judged as such. It will be suitable then, after quoting some of his statements, so as to indicate what is to be examined, to endeavour to trace the connexion and relations of the several points, and to examine their truth in order.

At the beginning of the first sermon, on "Fellowship with Christ," he says: "The root of this fellowship with Christ in His supreme work and in His eternal glory is to be found in Christ's original and normal relations to the human race. . . . The brotherly relation between Christ and us did not begin when He was born at Bethlehem. . . . We are not the brethren of Christ because Christ has assumed our nature ; Christ assumed our nature because we were His brethren. . . . The incarnation was not an after-thought, a Divine expedient to meet contingencies foreseen or unforeseen. It was involved in the creation of man. We were created in Christ" (pp. 4, 5). Again: "We came under law only because we fell away from the ideal of grace, or declined the path which would have led to the attainment of it. . . . We were not created under law" (p. 9). "God chose in Christ the whole race" (p. 10). Christ "atoned for the sins of all. . . . The whole world is not under law, but under grace" (pp. 16, 17). Again: "Christ as the Head of the human race—and, according to the thought and purpose of God, carrying the race with Him—passed into that eternal kingdom to which the race was destined from the beginning" (p. 40). "It is not true that men are in danger of eternal condemnation because they have committed sin ; Christ, apart from their choice, is the propitiation for their sin ; and they are elect in Christ to eternal righteousness and glory ; it is for them, in the power of God's grace, to make their calling and election sure" (p. 64).

Many readers no doubt will be surprised and perplexed

by these and similar statements; but it would be unfair to criticise them in such isolated quotations, or even in the connexions in which they occur in these discourses. We can get a truer idea of their real meaning by endeavouring to discover their organic connexion with Dr. Dale's theology as a whole.

In all his writings, and not least in this volume, Dr. Dale is a most earnest expositor and defender of the great Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation of the Son of God, His vicarious sacrifice as the propitiation for our sins, justification by His righteousness through faith alone, the need and reality of the agency of the Holy Spirit for the beginning and continuance of the new life of faith and holiness, and the final judgment of the world by Christ, with the solemn issues of eternal life and death. On all these essential points he is in full harmony with the faith of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the evangelical preachers of last century. Yet he holds that faith with a certain modification, which he describes in his discourse on *The Old Evangelicalism and the New* (1889, p. 43) as due chiefly to the greater place given "to the fact of the incarnation and to what the incarnation reveals concerning the true and ideal relations between God and man." But the particular way in which he gives more prominence to the incarnation can best be understood by starting from a slightly different point. The idea of that relation of Christ to the human race, which is so prominent in this volume of Dr. Dale's, was stated by him in the last of his Congregational Lectures on "the Atonement," in 1875, as a consideration throwing valuable light on the mystery of His bearing our sins. He is our representative, acting and suffering for us, in virtue of a real though mysterious union. This thought is a thoroughly scriptural one, and helps greatly to explain how our sins were laid on Him and His righteousness is imputed to us. But while making admirable use of it,

Dr. Dale does not distinguish between that relation of Christ to the whole race which is implied in His taking the common nature of all and that relation to believers which is expressed by Paul when he says, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature." A clear distinction of these relations is rendered impossible by the fact that no special reference of the atonement to those to be actually saved is recognised; and it is viewed simply and always as for all men, the whole world. But with his profound and scriptural view of what the atonement is, Dr. Dale cannot take that in the old Arminian sense, that Christ's death has merely made forgiveness possible, in the way of faith being accepted instead of perfect obedience; no, it is a real propitiation, Christ has atoned for the sins of all men, all the world is under grace. Hence those strong statements made in this volume, that God is at peace with all men, not with the penitent only, but with the impenitent (p. 332), and that men are not in danger of death for sin against law (p. 64). Clearly too this cannot apply merely to the time since Christ has actually made the atonement; every thoughtful student of Scripture must believe that that great work had an effect on the sins of the past, even from the beginning. But if the whole race has been under grace, and not under law, ever since the first sin, it is impossible to believe that it was ever in a different state. A reign of law that should come to an end for those under it as soon as ever they transgressed the law is plainly inconceivable. Thus we are led to Dr. Dale's position, that we were not created under law, but only came under it because we fell away from the ideal of grace. Law can only come in as a dispensation entirely subordinate to grace, with those uses that Protestant theology assigns to the law for believers. But if man was in this sense under grace from the first, destined, entirely irrespective of sin, to find his perfection and acceptance with God only in fellowship

with the incarnate Son, the incarnation must have been designed and purposed apart from man's sin, even as foreseen; so that the Word would have become flesh even had man not sinned, though it is in consequence of man's sin that He had to bear sorrow and suffering even to death, the death of the cross. Thus it appears that the various statements to which I have referred are not mere isolated opinions, but logically connected parts of a coherent scheme or line of thought, which forms part of the author's theology, and which he regards as an important and valuable development of the system of doctrine commonly called evangelical.

Let us now examine how far this line of thought is supported by Scripture and is an adequate representation of its teaching on the several points contained in it. The statement on which Dr. Dale insists, that Christ is the propitiation for the whole world, that He is the Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world, that He gave Himself a ransom for all, is quite scriptural and true; for I cannot believe that the interpretations of some Calvinists, that limit the words "world" and "all" in these passages, are fair or natural. But Christ and His apostles as distinctly assert that His sacrifice had a special reference to His own sheep, His Church, those who are certainly saved. Jesus said: "I lay down My life for the sheep" (John x. 15), those who know Him even as He knows the Father, and of whom He says afterwards, "they shall never perish" (ver. 28). Paul says: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it," etc. (Eph. v. 25-27); "Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession," etc. (Tit. ii. 14); "If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom. v. 10; comp. viii. 32).

And in the new song in Revelation v. 9, 10 we read: "Thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with Thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests." These and other passages seem plainly to teach that the sacrifice of Christ, besides being, as sufficient and suitable for all men, the ground of the offer of forgiveness to all, has also a special relation to those who are actually saved, as securing their actual forgiveness. And while the union of Christ with the whole race, which has been effected by His taking on Him the common nature of all men, is the ground of that general aspect of the atonement, as sufficient, suitable, and freely offered to all men, the union that grounds the actual forgiveness and justification of sinners by His blood is not that universal relation, but a more close and spiritual one, in regard to which it is said He is the head of the body, the Church, we are members of His body. This is what has been commonly called by theologians the mystical union, the oneness of believers with Christ as their Lord and Head, which is illustrated by so many figures—that of the vine and its branches, the head and the members of the body, the foundation and the building, husband and wife, firstborn and his brethren—and is indicated by the profound and comprehensive expression, so often used about Christians by Paul and John and Christ Himself, "in Christ." This is surely the ground of that fellowship with Christ spoken of in 1 Corinthians i. 9, the text of Dr. Dale's first sermon in this volume. In this discourse there is a curious fluctuation or confusion between the relation of Christ to the human race and that relationship to Him which, as Dr. Dale puts it, is the condition and assurance of our personal salvation (p. 18). Surely these two things, both true and important, are very different. The former he describes as the root of the latter, as if our spiritual fellowship with Christ was just the realization and practical

consequence of the relation of the whole race to Him. Now no doubt Christ's relation to mankind by the incarnation makes possible His mystical union with His Church; but Scripture represents these two relations as distinct, and each having its own practical consequences. Because Christ is man, He is the one Mediator between God and men, who gave Himself a ransom for all; because He shares our flesh and blood, He sympathises with all men; because He is Son of man, He has received authority to execute judgment. On the other hand, because we who believe are in Christ by a vital and spiritual union, we are blessed with all spiritual blessings, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, we are dwelt in by the Holy Spirit, we are called and enabled to bring forth much fruit.

That this distinction is real and important appears further from the fact, that the neglect of it leads Dr. Dale to make statements about all men being under grace, God being at peace with all men, and men not being in danger of death for sin, which have no warrant in Scripture, and seem even to be contradicted by it. To be not under law but under grace is, according to Paul, the privilege of Christians, which gives them the assurance of victory over sin, and which they have as having died to the law in and with Christ (Rom. vi. 14, vii. 4-6). Paul also declares that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom. i. 18), and that on account of moral offences the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience (Eph. v. 6). How it can be said, consistently with these statements, that God is at peace with the impenitent, I cannot see, nor any Scripture warrant for the latter assertion. That God loves all men, even when dead in sins, and offers peace to all, are precious truths; but they are not inconsistent with men being under His wrath until they turn from sin: and if anything more

is meant by saying that God is at peace with all men, I think it is not true.

Let us come now to Dr. Dale's position that all men were created in the Son of God. This is based on Paul's statement in Colossians i. 16, and on an inference from the argument in Hebrews ii. 10-18. The former passage certainly in terms warrants the assertion that all men were created in God's Son, but only in common with all things, and as part of them. Paul is illustrating the relation of Christ to the whole universe, and to interpret this statement as something peculiar to man would cut the very sinews of his argument. Mankind as part of the whole universe was created in Christ; but does it follow from this that all men, in virtue of their creation, stand in organic relation to Christ? The inference drawn from Hebrews ii. is that in ver. 10 men who needed salvation are described as sons, and that in ver. 11 the reason is given: "for both He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one (Father): for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren." Thereafter the fact that the children are partakers of flesh and blood is given as the reason of Christ taking part in the same; from whence Dr. Dale gathers that before the incarnation He was our Brother. But does the inspired writer mean by "many sons" all mankind? On the contrary, I think he has very carefully marked them out as having a distinctive character. For in ver. 11 they are "those who are being sanctified"; in ver. 12 "My brethren" has for its parallel "the Church"; in ver. 13 "the children whom God hath given Me" are the believing disciples of the prophet; and in ver. 16, "of the seed of Abraham He taketh hold," *i.e.* the spiritual children of the father of all them that believe. The passage teaches a relation of men to the Son of God anterior to the incarnation. Yes, but it is that of those who have been chosen in Christ before the foun-

dation of the world, and predestined to the adoption of sons through Him (Eph. i. 4, 5), those that shall inherit salvation (Heb. i. 14).

But this reminds us that Dr. Dale is led by his views on other points to understand the passage in Ephesians of all men, and to say that all are elected in Christ, inasmuch as it was the Divine idea and purpose that mankind should have all spiritual blessings in Christ (p. 10), but that "God too has His unrealized ideals; He too is in pursuit of an unachieved perfection; He is thwarted, hindered, baffled by we know not what hostile powers" (p. 186). This is to me simply amazing, and I know not what to say but that it seems a *reductio ad absurdum*, both in its extraordinary exegesis of Ephesians i. and in the monstrous conclusion in the statement just quoted. No doubt God's will is disobeyed, and He is truly displeased and grieved by the sins of men; and I would not find fault with vehement and startling expressions of this mysterious truth. But to say that a Divine purpose is baffled and hindered by some unknown powers, until at last "the eternal purposes of His righteousness and His love will be fulfilled," is something quite different, and cannot refer merely to the love of God which is grieved by the sin and ruin of the guilty; unless we are to believe the final restitution and salvation of all men, which Dr. Dale does not accept. The Bible seems to make a plain distinction between the desire of God that all men should be saved, in spite of which many perish by their own fault, and the purpose of God, which is never spoken of as baffled or thwarted. Also the certainty of God's purpose is ever presented as the strongest ground of our faith and comfort, and has been found to be so in the experience of believers in all ages.

Dr. Dale's view that we were not created under law, but only came under it because we fell away from the ideal of grace or declined the path which would have led to the

attainment of it, is grounded on the assertion that it was not "God's purpose that the measures of our eternal blessedness, the nearness of our access to Himself, our rank, if I may call it so, in His eternal kingdom, should be nothing more than the natural fruit and the equitable recompense of our personal obedience" (p. 9). I cordially agree with this statement, and so I think would all the theologians who assert a covenant of works. The very reason for calling that dispensation a covenant is, that man, even by the most perfect obedience, could have no natural or equitable claim to the reward of fellowship with and enjoyment of God as his portion, except for the gracious promise of God. There was grace even in the covenant of works; in fact, we may say the covenant was all grace. It added to the law, which is eternal and necessary, as prescribing man's duty, the element of grace in the free, bounteous promise of reward, so far transcending the deserts even of an obedient creature. Then we cordially agree also that "we were never meant to be mere servants in the household of God, with no wealth but the wages we might earn." But it is a strange idea that we became servants because we fell away from the ideal of grace. To be servants of God is not a punishment, and is never so represented in Scripture; on the contrary, it is a high and blessed honour, only second to the higher honour of being sons of God, for which it was designed to prepare the way. Obedience to law as God's servants was what Dr. Dale calls the path which would have led to the attainment of the ideal of grace; and he could gain all that he desires in regard to the Divine idea of human perfection without inverting the relations between grace and law which theologians have been in the habit of assuming. He has not developed his idea of how law comes in, and it is hard to understand what place law can have in the relations between God and man, unless it is the primary and essential rule of them,

the authoritative expression of that holiness which God must always require of His rational creatures, though in His grace He not only promises a great reward to them that keep it, but to sinners gives what He requires.

I believe as strongly as Dr. Dale that men were created to be not merely servants, but sons of God, and that this sonship was to be a fellowship with the eternal Son of God in His relation to the Father. In this way there is a relation of Christ to man that is antecedent to and independent of the facts of sin and redemption. But whether or not the incarnation would have been necessary in order to this fellowship with the Son of God, had man not sinned, I do not think we are competent to decide. Since that fellowship certainly is realized in a most perfect and glorious way through the incarnation, there may be a presumption that the wonderful union of Deity and humanity in Immanuel was purposed by God apart from a consideration of sin, in order that mankind, had they remained obedient, might have this perfect fellowship with God. But who shall say that this is certain, or that the end could not have been attained otherwise? The Scripture so habitually represents the Son of God as having actually become man for the redemption and salvation of sinners, that I hesitate to accept the theory that He would have done so even had man not sinned; and indeed, when the question is what would or would not have happened if something had not taken place which in fact did take place, it seems impossible to answer it with any confidence either one way or another, especially as it refers to a most wonderful act of God's grace and love. That otherwise the incarnation would be a mere afterthought or expedient to meet an emergency is the reason that seems chiefly to lead Dr. Dale to the view he has adopted. But this does not press so much on those who have a doctrine of God's eternal purpose, according to which He has, with infinite wisdom and love, fore-ordained

all things that come to pass. If this be true, the incarnation and work of Christ were no afterthought, but may have been, according to our imperfect way of conceiving Divine thoughts, even prior in His mind to the foresight of sin. God purposed to bring many sons to glory in Christ, and He created men, and permitted them to fall into sin, because He was able and resolved to overrule their sin to His gracious and glorious end of the saved being brought to a closer union with Himself than could otherwise be, and being the means of preventing sin and promoting holiness in millions of other creatures. I do not say that this view of the order of the Divine purposes can be proved from Scripture, or is free from difficulties; but when pressed by the objection of making the incarnation an afterthought, I am rather inclined to it than to the view that the Word would have become flesh had man not sinned.

It will be observed that, in examining Dr. Dale's peculiar opinions, I have been doing little else than unfolding in succession some of the points of Calvinism. Not that I have taken that theology as a standard, but in comparing the relevant passages of Scripture at each point, these doctrines have spontaneously come out. The fact is, I believe that the rejection of these doctrines has disjointed and disordered the course of Dr. Dale's theological construction from the point where these ought to come in. I regret much that he regards Calvinism as entirely obsolete, a deserted and ruined fortress, which it requires no courage to defy and trample on. I admit that the form in which Calvinism was often put in former times was narrow and harsh, and failed to do justice to some of the most precious aspects of the gospel; and I know from Dr. Dale's *Lectures on Ephesians*, that he has been repelled by the unfortunate language of the Westminster Confession of Faith. That form of doctrine needs to be supplemented, as it is by most of its modern adherents, with the recognition of the

love and grace of God to all men, and the scriptural doctrine that in one aspect the atonement of Christ is for all men. We need also, as Dr. Dale wishes, to give greater prominence to the incarnation; but, after all, I believe that the system called Calvinistic contains important scriptural truths, the rejection of which gives an unfortunate twist to theological speculation in certain departments.

There is a practical point, too, at which this speculation produces confusion, the conception of saving faith to which it leads. This comes out in Dr. Dale's discourse on the theology of John Wesley. He describes very beautifully Wesley's experience, and how he was led to define faith as "a sure trust which a man hath in God that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven," and then how he afterwards came to see that this could not always be insisted on, and recognised a lower kind of faith of adherence, "such a Divine conviction of God as even in its infant state enables every one that possesses it to fear God and work righteousness." But both of these are intellectual acts or states, and how to get at the higher is the question. Dr. Dale accepts the paradox of being saved by believing that we are saved as perhaps truer than it seems, on the ground that God has already given to us, to all men, believers and unbelievers alike, eternal redemption in Christ. But this will not meet the need of a really awakened soul. Whatever you may tell him about God being at peace with him, his conscience tells him that he is guilty, he needs something that will change his relation to God, not to be assured that it is right already. How much better practically the theology that tells him that saving faith is not believing what is true already or will somehow be made true by his believing, but accepting Christ as his Saviour, whereby a new and blessed union is effected, so that he is forgiven and accepted in the Beloved as he was not before.

Dr. Dale's views present an almost exact analogy to those

of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen and MacLeod Campbell, sixty years ago, and are, I believe, to be traced to the same causes. We trust however that they will be treated in a different way from that in which those were by men who were conscientiously opposed to them, and that, instead of being denounced as heretical, they will be calmly and patiently examined. For their author is not an enemy to the gospel of God's grace, but a sincere and intelligent friend and defender of its essential principles; and though I think the Calvinistic doctrines are true and important, I am persuaded also that they should not be made terms of communion or of brotherly recognition. There are difficulties and mysteries on all sides, and probably Christians will continue to be divided on these questions as long as we are in this world. Meanwhile, frank and friendly discussion may do good, and can do no harm; and I trust that the freedom with which I have criticised some parts of Dr. Dale's theology will be recognised as quite consistent with sincere respect and gratitude for his services to the common cause, and hearty admiration and recommendation of by far the greater part of the present volume.

JAS. S. CANDLISH.