

R. W. DALE ON THE ATONEMENT

(Concluded)

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IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A THEORY

An intelligent and spiritually minded Christian faith must demand a rationally constructed account of the Atonement. But the pitfall in constructing a theory is how properly to use the metaphors and images that describe it. We are all acquainted with viewpoints old and more recent that obscure or distort the doctrine because they ignore or reduce to other terms significant biblical evidence, or balloon particular aspects of the doctrine, thus seriously distorting it. If one has read only a moderate part of the myriad of books on the Atonement he ought to be aware before long that the theologian who recognizes this problem deserves respect even if he does not fully grapple with it. Of Dale it can be said that he did both.

The biblical metaphors, however grouped, do not constitute a theory, he said; they illustrate the nature and effects of the death of Christ.

They are analogous to the transcendent fact only at single points. The fact is absolutely unique.³⁷

Our problem is so to conceive of the death of Christ as to account adequately for all the biblical representations of it. The relation between the New Testament metaphors and a theory must be direct. They are of infinite practical value because they constitute the authoritative tests of a theory. Three points emerge here: the aim of a theory is to formulate a logical conception of the Atonement, the conception must rest on facts, and, it must stand the test of the biblical images. And in all of this, not only must the moral perfections of God find their highest expression in the theory, but the deepest necessities of man's moral and spiritual nature (in the Christian consciousness) should be able also to verify it.

For Dale three considerations invest the death of Christ with unique significance. First, it was the death of the Son of God. Second, the death was voluntary—Christ laid down His life freely, and evidently for some particular purpose. And third, immediately before He died Christ knew the horror of severed communion with the Father—He was forsaken of God. Dale does not shrink from the implications of this. He rests his case upon the reality

³⁷ *The Atonement*, p. 358.

IV.

Original article. Now let us look at John 1: 1 from the other side, as it were. The implication of the grammatical arguments of the Jehovah's Witnesses might lead one to suppose that if the article were put before *theos*, then the A.V. translation would be justified. But this is not so. "If the article is used with both predicate and subject, they are interchangeable" (A. T. Robertson, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*, p. 279). An example is 1 John 3: 4, which can be translated either "sin is the transgression of the law" or "the transgression of the law is sin." (This is also the case in John 6: 51 and 15: 1 mentioned above.) So if the article occurred before the predicate (*theos*) in John 1: 1, "God was the Word" would also be a possible translation. This statement is contrary to Scriptural teaching concerning the Trinity, which declares that Jesus is God, but the whole of the Godhead is not Jesus; but this could be the meaning if the article occurred before *theos*.

J.Ws' reply. This person's second paragraph on page 2 is entirely supposition. Summed up, it says that if the article preceded *theos* in John 1: 1 then it would allow a rendering of the verse which would be out of harmony with the trinity doctrine. But, the article is not included. Moreover to contend that the verse supports the trinity because if it were written differently it would not support it, is to use most peculiar, flimsy and very unsound reasoning, especially when so many authorities contend that even in its present form the verse does not support the trinity.

Comment. The J.Ws pervert my argument. Let us try to see the matter clearly. For here an important point arises: assuming the orthodox position to be correct, how would John have written this clause in Greek? To know what the J.Ws would answer to this question, I have twice written to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Now they cannot say that the present Greek text can be translated in a trinitarian sense, because they argue that grammatically such a translation is wrong. Yet in the second reply to me they agree that if the article were put before *theos*, one could not tell "whether *Theos* was the subject of the sentence or whether the Word was the subject." But they do not answer the question. Is an answer to my question possible? Yes—John would have written the clause exactly as it is written! And this the J.Ws cannot admit.

But what an admission they do make. "Grammar and authorities are not always conclusive. They prove very helpful, but consistency, *the internal harmony of the Bible* and many other things

play their part" (italics ours). If grammar is not conclusive, why their appendix, intended to show that their translation is grammatically correct? And if the internal harmony of the Bible is so important, they have much to answer on the score of polytheism. It looks as if they are weakening.

V.

Original article. There are two more points to be mentioned in conclusion. On p. 777 of the *New World Translation* we read: "At Acts 28: 6 we have a case paralleling that of John 1: 1 with exactly the same predicate construction, namely, with an anarthrous *theos* (i.e. *theos* without the article). But there the *King James Version*, *An American Translation*, Moffatt's translation, the *Revised Standard Version*, the *Westminster Version* (1948, Roman Catholic), F. A. Spencer's translation (1946, Roman Catholic), etc., all translate it, not, 'he was God,' but 'he was a god.' With equal justifications from the Greek text of the inspired Scriptures we have rendered John 1: 1 'And the Word was a god.'" This paragraph is entirely misleading. For not only in Acts 28: 6 does the predicate follow the verb, where we would expect the article if it was definite, but the Maltese were polytheists, whereas John was a monotheist. This argument from context (e.g. argument 1 above) is well illustrated from the rendering of the phrase *huios theou* in Luke 1: 35 and Matthew 27: 54 in the *New World Translation*. Note that neither word has the article. The first passage is translated, "God's Son"; the second has "God's Son" in the text, and a footnote: "Or, 'a son of God,' or 'a son of a god'." Why is the translation "a son of a god" rightly mentioned as possible in Matthew 27: 54 but not in Luke 1: 35? Because the centurion was a polytheist, and the angel Gabriel is not. So we see that the principle of translation according to context is recognized by Jehovah's Witnesses. An exact parallel is, however Rom. 8: 33, *theos ho dikaiōn*. Note that *theos* does not have the article, and precedes the subject (the verb is omitted). The literal translation is, "the justifier is God," and the *New World Translation* correctly has "God is the One who declares them righteous." But faithfulness to their rendering of John 1: 1 would demand the translation "a god" here. We see, therefore, that the principles behind the correct translation of John 1: 1 are also recognized by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

We, therefore, conclude that the Jehovah's Witnesses' translation of John 1: 1 is completely wrong, and the arguments used to support it inaccurate and misleading.

J.Ws' reply. The argument about Acts 28: 6 reverts to the

Christ Himself sensed and upon the freedom of God to act in personal ways, not simply as an immanent force.³⁸ But the two important questions this raises for Dale that are the heart of his theory relate to the forgiveness of sins. If there is a relation between the unique death of the Son of God and our sins, then we may ask,³⁹ first:

whether this connection can be explained by the existence of any original relation existing between the Lord Jesus Christ and the penalties of sin, or—to state the question more generally—between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Eternal Law of Righteousness, of which sin is the transgression

and, second:

whether this connection can be explained by any original relation existing between the Lord Jesus Christ and the race whose sins need remission.

It is to the answers to both questions that we now turn.

(a) *Christ and the Eternal Law of Righteousness.* In the Cross, Dale said, is disclosed the moral sovereignty of God because the Atonement is both an act of love and a moral act where love and justice meet in the satisfaction of the demands of God's own nature.⁴⁰ Only God can signify the true nature of the offence and only He can satisfy His own demands.⁴¹ By means of the Cross new relations have been established between God and the world—the world is on a new footing. This is what the earlier theologians called the ground of justification. Since Calvary the moral constitution of the world rests on the Atonement. God Himself has absorbed the issue of sin.

As the rationale of the Atonement Dale rejects such ideas as that the sufferings of Christ *per se* accomplish it or that there occurred the penal crushing of the innocent or that God was filled with wrath against the Son, though in important ways meditation upon the Passion is, he acknowledges, a significant feature of true Christian piety.⁴² So far as rationale is concerned, the moral issues involved in the personal relations of God and man and in God's government of the world hold his attention more. He writes that Christ came into the world "to make the sorrow, and so far as He could, the very sin of the world His own,"⁴³ and that it seems necessary that He should pass through a moral experience like that

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 360; *Preface*, pp. xli-xliii; *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 84.

³⁹ *The Atonement*, p. 361.

⁴⁰ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 261.

⁴¹ *The Living God the Saviour of All Men*, pp. 23-24.

⁴² *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church*, p. 16; *The Atonement*, pp. 101-102; *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 85.

⁴³ *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 85, note p. 77.

of the Garden and the Cross "in respect of our submission to God ; and that while He could not share our sin, He came under its shadow."⁴⁴ How can we interpret this? Only that Christ's submission to the law of God (as a racial submission) stands illumined in the fact that *one divine act is the complement of another*. This we can say only by revelation. God's acts disclose His purpose.

By inflicting the just penalty God declares that sin deserves punishment, Dale said ; but if we ask whether God has forgotten to be gracious our answer comes in the knowledge that His compassion is infinitely more tender than our own. He it is that bears the cost. If there were no cost to Him in the infliction of the penalty then the "profoundest moral element of His acts of retributive justice would disappear."⁴⁵ The Christian witness is to divine acts commensurate with one another and displaying the integrity of God in what is both the revelation of the divine mercy and of the divine righteousness. The following should be noted with some care:

But if the punishment of sin is a Divine act—an act in which the identity between the Will of God and the eternal Law of Righteousness is asserted and expressed—it would appear that, if in any case the penalties of sin are remitted, some other Divine act of at least equal intensity, and in which the ill desert of sin is expressed with at least equal energy, must take its place.

The heart of the whole problem lies here. The eternal Law of Righteousness declares that sin deserves to be punished. The will of God is identified both by the conscience and the religious intuitions of man with the eternal law of righteousness. To separate the ideal law—or any part of it—from the Living and Divine Person, is to bring darkness and chaos on the moral and spiritual universe. The whole Law—the authority of its precepts, the justice of its penalties—must be asserted in the Divine acts, or else the Divine Will cannot be perfectly identified with the eternal Law of Righteousness. If God does not assert the principle that sin deserves punishment by punishing it, He must assert that principle in some other way. Some Divine act is required which shall have all the moral worth and significance of the act by which the penalties of sin would have been inflicted on the sinner.

The Christian Atonement is the fulfilment of that necessity . . .⁴⁶ Now, the Atonement was the fulfilment of this principle in two important respects. First, Christ's sufferings were not suppressed nor held back by love, rather, as the expression of divine love they were asserted in the grandest form possible.

He by whose power the sentence must have been executed—He

⁴⁴ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 265 ; *The Living God the Saviour of All Men*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *The Atonement*, pp. 390-391.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 391, 392.

Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, laid aside His eternal glory, assumed our nature, was forsaken of God, died on the Cross, that the sins of men might be remitted. It belonged to Him to assert, by His own act, that suffering is the just result of sin. He asserts it, not by inflicting suffering on the sinner, but by enduring suffering Himself.⁴⁷

And, second, the moral significance of Christ's sufferings for us is derived from the fact that they are inflicted by the will of God. Because the Law has its life in God, the original relation of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Eternal Law of Righteousness makes it possible for the one who inflicts to endure the penalty. This is the crucial point: Jesus Christ Incarnate, our Lord, is the Moral Ruler of the universe. How is remission possible? Simply because only the author of the Law can satisfy it fully. This is grace, and love, and satisfaction. Dale says:

The mysterious unity of the Father and the Son rendered it possible for God at once to endure and to inflict the penalty, and to do both under conditions which constitute the infliction and the endurance the grandest moment in the moral history of God.⁴⁸

The proposition is self-evident: since the act to impose the penalty is divine the act which provides the ground of remission must be divine also. And who can raise a question about the inequality of divine acts? That punisher and punished are one is a frequently recurring theme in Dale and this makes it all the more regrettable that few of his critics saw it. For instance, he writes, "He resolved not to maintain it [the Law] in this case by inflicting just penalties on those who had sinned, He came into the world Himself . . . the suffering of Christ was the act of the Eternal Spirit";⁴⁹ "the Son endured loss and suffering on account of human sin instead of inflicting them";⁵⁰ "it was greater to endure suffering than to inflict it";⁵¹ and, "instead of fulfilling His high responsibilities by *inflicting* suffering, He has assumed our nature that He Himself may suffer."⁵² Hence the conscience can be at rest because He who is the author of righteousness has himself acted justly to remit sins. It is, in Pauline language, that the one who justifies does it justly. In a poignant phrase Dale wrote:

But when the heart is shaken by fears of future judgment and "the wrath to come," a vivid apprehension of the Death of Christ, as the voluntary death of the Moral Ruler and Judge of the human race, will at once inspire perfect peace. Without further explanation the con-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

⁴⁹ *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church*, pp. 212-213.

⁵⁰ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 83.

⁵¹ *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 83.

⁵² *The Living God the Saviour of All Men*, p. 24.

science will grasp the assurance that since He has suffered to whom it belonged to inflict suffering, it must be possible for Him to grant remission of sins.⁵³

(b) *Christ and the Race.* The foregoing, while of vital significance, is not the whole doctrine for Dale. The New Testament says that in some sense the death of Christ was "for us" and unless some account is given of the way this can be thought of the theory is incomplete. That Dale did concern himself vitally with this is clear from the fact that the two final chapters of *The Atonement* where he builds his theory are devoted the one to the former and the other to the latter aspect. Dale's book is an outstanding example of how the reading of only one part of a theory has prejudiced many minds against the whole. In His death for us, Dale said, Jesus Christ gives the highest expression of the eternal relation between Christ and the race redemptively, and by this act the way is opened for restoration of the divine ideal for the race in men.

If it can be shown that the original and ideal relation of the Lord Jesus Christ to the human race constitutes a reason why He should become a Sacrifice and Propitiation for our sins, the conception of His Death illustrated in the preceding Lecture will rest on more solid and secure foundations.⁵⁴

Jesus Christ came, God incarnate, into the community of inter-dependent human life that comprises the human race as we have seen. Forgiveness is not the sort of thing that happens where a solitary soul chooses certain things out of its environment in an abstract fashion; rather, it rests upon the fact that every man is eternally dependent upon another person for his being and that person is the root of his life. It is because Christ is the root of our life that He can be the propitiation for our sins. I think that here, perhaps unwittingly, Dale says things that resemble very much what Irenaeus tried to say. Notice should be taken of the experiential motif of Dale's development of the idea. For him, just as the Lordship of Christ for the Christian and in the church leads in the chain of thought to the conclusion that Christ is the Moral Ruler of the universe (as Paul develops this in Colossians), so the Spirit-guided conclusions of the Christian, and as illustrated by our Lord in the parable of the vine and branches in John 15, identify Christ as the ground of our life individually and racially. The following bears upon this:

The power and perfection of our moral and spiritual life are a perpetual revelation of the power and perfection of the life of Christ.

⁵³ *The Atonement*, p. 394.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

There is no element of holiness in us that is not derived from Him. As the life of Christ is being perpetually revealed in us in richer and nobler forms, the moral and spiritual glory of Christ is the ultimate ideal to which we are continually approaching, but which we shall never reach. . . . Our own relation to the Father is determined by the relation of Christ to the Father. By no fictitious imputation, or technical transfer, but by virtue of a real union between the life of Christ and our own life, His relation to the Father becomes ours. It is ours with the same qualifications with which His life is ours. In Him both the life and the relation exist in a transcendent form.⁵⁵

These are two grand principles: that the power and perfection of our lives is the life of Christ in us, and that our own relation to the Father is determined by Christ's relation to the Father. And both "were involved in the original and ideal relation of the human race to Himself."⁵⁶ The life of the eternal Son of God incarnate was intended as the life of the race, but now by His redemptive act God aims at the restoration to us of the ideal in Christ. It will be seen therefore that the principles upon which Dale rests his case for the relation of Christ to the race in the Atonement derive from the present relation believers sustain to Christ. Three propositions may now be advanced that cast their light upon the rationale of the Atonement. Dale's appeal is that they find verification in the Christian consciousness both of the New Testament and in our lives.

First, Christ made a frank, real, and unreserved submission to the justice of the penalties from which we have been released by His redemptive act. This is submission conceived as ideal and as taking up the race into it.⁵⁷ The *free* acceptance of the sovereignty of the Father is the characteristic glory of the Son.⁵⁸ Christ's full submission (submission is a morally necessary element for remission to be meaningful) becomes ours not as a formality, but through the law which constitutes His life the original spring of our own.⁵⁹

. . . it is morally necessary, if we are to receive forgiveness, that there should be on our part a frank and sincere confession of sin, a humble submission to the righteousness of God, in condemning and punishing it. In the realms of ethical and spiritual life there can be no effective giving where there is no receiving; and there can be no receiving of the remission of sin where its guilt and ill-desert are not felt. We have access to God through Christ, because Christ, in whom are the roots of our life, submitted to and accepted God's condemna-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 420-421.

⁵⁷ *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 160.

⁵⁹ *The Atonement*, pp. 422-423.

tion of our sin ; and in the power of His submission and acceptance we too accept and submit. This is the spirit in which sinful men should approach God, and in union with Christ this spirit becomes ours because Christ died for our sins.⁶⁰

Second, in His death Christ expresses the truth of our relation to God because of our sin. Our relation to God as sinners is one of death ; thus it would be an incredible fiction to say that the ideal relation of Jesus Christ to the Father expresses the truth of our relation except He die our death. This is not to claim His death as an *a priori* necessity, but that in revelation and as sinners we can now conceive of our becoming rightly related to God in no other way save through the death that is our due. He made our relation to God His own, and this is the ground upon which we recover our original relation to God. Christ was forsaken by God, "and by the Death which followed, He made our real relation to God His own, while retaining and, in the very act of submitting to the penalty of sin, revealing in the highest form—the absolute perfection of His moral life and the highest steadfastness of His eternal union with the Father."⁶¹ He did not share our guilt, but in a very real and deep sense He made the consequences of sin His own. Our personal guilt is in Him the sense of humanity's sin. By the suffering and death of the Cross He put Himself at our side and we can approach God in Him.

Third, Christ not only died our death, but we died in Him ; thus 2 Corinthians 5: 14 is more than a rhetorical appeal. It proclaims an event in our own history. The remission of sins looks also to the death of sin and the guarantee of righteousness in us. The paradox that out of death there issues life is the touchstone of Christian experience, Dale said. But how ?

Perhaps the great moral act by which Christ consented to lose the consciousness of the Father's presence and love . . . rendered it possible for us to sink to that complete renunciation of self which is the condition of the perfect Christian life . . . and it is enough to know the fact that in God's idea, and according to the law of the kingdom of heaven, we are crucified with Christ.⁶²

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⁶⁰ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 270. Note *Preface*, p. lxii.

⁶¹ *The Atonement*, p. 425.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 429 ; cf. *Christian Doctrine*, p. 272, and *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 84.