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PRINCIPAL JAMES DENNEY ON THE ATONEMENT

by SAMUEL J. MIKOLASKI

FROM studying James Denney's general theological position, Dr. Mikolaski now turns to examine his doctrine of the Atonement.

"THE forgiveness of sins is for the Christian mediated through the death of Christ".¹ This, as the cornerstone of New Testament theology, is the theme that pervades Principal Denney's voluminous writings—a conclusion argued with precision, superb clarity, and based upon meticulous scholarship.

He held Ritschl's position that the mind rests in Christ without the necessity of further explanation to be untenable on the grounds both of the New Testament and experience. Some account of the person and work of Christ he maintained is needful, such as that of St. Paul who not only trusted in Christ but held a *form* of doctrine self-consciously as attested by the words "we thus judge".² Denney agreed to distinguishing theology and religion, but not to dividing them; in the cross of Christ, he said, they inextricably involve each other.

There is no such thing conceivable as a fact of which there is no theory, or even a fact of which we have no theory; such a thing could never enter our world at all; if there could be such a thing, it would be so far from having the virtue in it to redeem from sin, that it would have no interest for us and no effect upon us at all.³

As valuable as is Ritschl's attempt to bring the religious significance of Christ's person within our grasp, yet, Denney said, his interpretation of the work of Christ is unsatisfying so far as both the New Testament is concerned and the facts of sin and condemnation to which the human conscience bears persistent witness.⁴ God's righteousness is not synonymous with His grace. Christ's death is unique precisely because it was the death that ours could not be, and "a real propitiation for the sin of the world".⁵ That

¹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, 1903, p. 11; and in many other places.

² II Corinthians 5: 14. Note: *Second Corinthians (The Expositor's Bible)* 1894, p. 314; *The Death of Christ*, 1902, pp. vii, 4, 140-141.

³ *Studies in Theology*, pp. 47-48, 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

God must deal with sin as a moral reality in a manner consistent with the rightness of his own nature, in marked contrast to the love of God theory advanced by Abelard and then more recently by Rashdall, was Denney's point. God's love cannot be interpreted *in vacuo* but by Christ's presence in the world; yet this presence is stamped with a particular moral end, namely a work to be done only at certain cost. Rather than simply exhibiting the freeness of the divine love and forgiveness, the death of Christ exhibits its true character.

To say that it is inconsistent with God's free love to make the forgiveness of sins dependent on the death of Jesus is exactly the same (in one particular relation) as to say (in general) that it is inconsistent with God's free love that entrance into His kingdom and participation in its blessings should only be possible through the presence of Jesus in the world, His work in it, and the attitude which men assume towards Him.⁶

Hence, the Cross ought to be viewed both as an objective work and as an appeal to men. These are the necessary sides of the one truth. God wins men, he says, not by calculating an influence upon them, but by acting in a manner consistent with His own nature; thus, just as faith is the whole of religion on the inner side, propitiation is the whole on the outer. Propitiation and faith, external and internal, objective and subjective are not mutually exclusive ideas but indispensable aspects of the whole. But, the subjective side—the human response—is possible only on the basis of the finished work of Christ. In his last book, published posthumously, he wrote, "reduced to its simplest expression, what an objective atonement means is that but for Christ and His Passion God would not be to us what He is".⁷

⁶ *The Death of Christ*, pp. 57-58; note *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 90-91. When first hearing of Hastings Rashdall's book Denney wrote the following to W. Robertson Nicoll, "Who is Rashdall? . . . I think that line of interpretation has been taken as far as it will go now, and has yielded all it can yield, and that it is time to rediscover the fact that the Apostles in their doctrine of the Atonement were dealing with, something which never comes in Rashdall's (nor Ritschl's) view—namely, God's condemnation of sin as a terrifically real and serious thing" (*Letters . . . to W. Robertson Nicoll*, p. 1).

⁷ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 239; cf. pp. 163-164, 291. Note the following: "The work of reconciliation, in the sense of the New Testament, is a work which is finished, which we must conceive to be finished, before the Gospel is preached . . . The work of reconciliation is not a work upon the souls of men, though it is a work wrought in their interests, and bearing so directly upon them that we can say God has reconciled the world to Himself; it is a work—as Cromwell said of the covenant—*outside* of us, in which God so deals in Christ with the sin of the world, that it shall no longer be a barrier between Himself and men" (*The Death of Christ*, pp. 144-145).

I. SIN AND ITS JUDGMENT

Note should be taken, he said, of the universality of man's sinfulness and of his hopeless condition in it. When Paul indicts sinful man in the Roman epistle he does so in the expectation that conscience will be his corroborating ally.⁸ Sin is possible only where moral law governs interpersonal relations whether between man and man, or man and God; but, finally it must be adjudged, he said, that sin is man setting himself against the will of God, not an abstract law. We violate "the will of the living God, that will in which alone we have eternal life. When we sin we literally sin *against* something. There is something which resists us and which we have to overcome and push out of the way . . ."⁹

The result of sin for man is his alienation from God in a nature, state, or condition touched by sin that is both organic and constitutional: man is not as bad as he could be but sin has touched the whole of him.¹⁰ While man has been the subject of evolution, so that his moral life is erected upon the natural order, yet each man is fallen in ways that his conscience verifies, and no hope for man remains unless in each life there is the frank recognition of sin as personal yet involving us in its own malevolent issue in the world. Sin is individual, but it attests also a common moral life of the race.

What Adam really represents is the unity or solidarity of the human race in sin; and the modern way of expressing this would rather be to say that the unity or solidarity of the human race in sin is involved in the vital, organic connection of all men with each other, and in the disproportion which actually appears, in all men who have come to moral responsibility, between what they are and what they should be.¹¹

Three significant ways in which sin expresses itself in human experience for Denney can be cited. First, the contradiction in our experience between the actual and the ideal, i.e., the disharmony between our nature and our vocation, or our want of conformity to the law of God.¹² Second, culpable ignorance, or the morally deadening effects of sin where man is indictable not for lacking any particular system of ideas about God, but for

⁸ *Romans (Expositor's Greek New Testament, II; 1900)*, p. 606. Note: *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 147, and *Studies in Theology*, pp. 78-79.

⁹ *Questions of Faith*, 1904, pp. 158-160.

¹⁰ *Studies in Theology*, pp. 83, 87-88; *II Corinthians*, p. 354.

¹¹ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 201; see also *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 55-57; *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 93.

¹² *Studies in Theology*, p. 80.

lacking the cardinal virtues that make up goodness such as love, purity, and truth.¹³ Third, final antagonism toward God. This is impenitence, where a man becomes his own God. The only sin Denney saw as unpardonable is the deliberate rejection of Christ.¹⁴

Nor is man's predicament solvable, he said, by invoking sentimental notions of the divine love, because both conscience and scripture attest the reality of condemnation and wrath. The sinner cannot avoid judgment unless forgiveness is granted.¹⁵ If God is living, personal, and active then it is He who gives up men to wrath, as Paul said, when they persist in sin. The reaction of God in His moral law is not abstract or neutral but personal (it is He that judges sin), nor is it simply discrete and individual but total so that the whole world order shows distaste for and judgment of sin.¹⁶ Both physical and spiritual consequences accrue to sin, including death which is not merely physical but human: "sin and death interpenetrate, interpret, and in a sense constitute each other".¹⁷ Here lies for Denney the importance of Christ's work, where our Lord bears the total divine reaction to sin, including not only the consequences of sin for man but the dispersed issue of sin throughout the world. To this work the love of God moves in the death of Jesus Christ, asserting itself over evil as the last reality of the world vouchsafing forgiveness to us "at great cost".¹⁸ This is both the glory and the tragedy of the cross. Forgiveness costs—Christ has given His life for us.

¹³ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, pp. 144, 296.

¹⁴ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, pp. 147, 317; *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 221.

¹⁵ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 292; *Second Corinthians*, p. 213.

¹⁶ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 144, 145, 223; *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 59-62. In the former (pp. 203-204) he says: "The divine judgment is the divine reaction against sin expressing itself through the whole constitution or system of things under which the sinner lives . . . the inmost conviction of conscience itself is that the natural and moral are one, and that the universe is in arms against the sinner."

¹⁷ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 68-69; *Studies in Theology*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁸ *Questions of Faith*, p. 173. Note p. 172: "Real forgiveness, by another whom we have wronged, and in whom there is love, which forgiveness reveals, able at once to bear the wrong, and to inspire the penitence through which we can rise above it, is always tragic; and it is tragic on both sides—to him who has borne the sin which he forgives, and to him who stoops with a penitent heart to be forgiven. What the propitiation stands for is the divine side of this tragedy".

II. APPROACH TO A THEORY

For the Christian the point of departure to understanding doctrine is the Atonement, Denney said, because the deity and supremacy of Christ—the fact that he is to us God and Saviour—provide in faith the ground of Christian theology; but once this has been experienced and grasped, the mind must go further to an elucidation of the essential features of the divine movement in atonement.¹⁹ The atonement is the proper base of the fully developed doctrine of God. God acts in love; He is not passive. He is not the object of reconciliation in Scripture. He takes the initiative; sin is real to Him and He acts to remove it.²⁰

There is every effort by Denney to maintain the supremacy of Christ because only as God acting can Christ redeem; so also when the great apostle thought upon the role of Christ he was compelled to “reconstruct his whole world around Him”.²¹ Denney’s purpose is to recapture the significance of Christ’s incarnate life as both the revelation of God and the ground of anything He does so far as its relevance to man is concerned. Christianity declares that “Christ was both to God and to man what no other could be, and determined all their mutual relations”.²² These references are but a few of many that show the ground of the moral relations between God and the world to be in Christ, and that Christ takes up the human race in His own humanity. No doctrine of the atonement can hope to succeed that does not clearly grasp and relate in a rational fashion these poles of the biblical argument. Nevertheless, it is the atonement that gives the proper accounting of the Incarnation because reconciliation is not the nature of Christ but His task; the Incarnation has happened “in order that the sin of the world may be put away by the offering of the body of Jesus”.²³

Thus no approach to the doctrine can be made except on the fundamental presupposition that in redemption God takes the initiative seeking man.²⁴ Two further points bear upon the theological approach. These are: first, we ought to think that God has entered into the struggle of good versus evil not as a struggling

¹⁹ “Creed,” *H.D.B.*, I, p. 517.

²⁰ Cf. *Second Corinthians*, pp. 210ff.

²¹ *The Death of Christ*, p. 199.

²² *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 408; cf. p. 398. Note: *Studies in Theology*, pp. 68-69, 166.

²³ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 240; cf. pp. 181-182, 286-287; *The Death of Christ*, pp. 125-126, 234, 320.

²⁴ *Factors of Faith in Immortality*, 1910, p. 56.

God but with the inevitable outcome in view—the good shall overcome the evil;²⁵ and second, that the fundamental reality of the world is the love of God seeking and acting redemptively. In the light of these a fourth important characteristic follows: the true doctrine is preachable; the message must be capable of actually reaching men where they are.²⁶

When he says that the cross was necessary in the purpose of God for our salvation, Denney means that it emerges from the free love and will of God to redeem, that it was inevitable (sooner or later the forces arrayed against Christ would unite to crush Him), and that it was indispensable—Christ chose the path of suffering and death in response to an inward constraint of love for us. Of some significance is his point that the truth of the doctrine is not guaranteed by its formal consistency. On the one side the event itself registers the meeting of moral opposites. It is, he says in a cogent word, God taking part with us against Himself.²⁷ But, on the other, a fundamental criterion (encompassing faltering logic that cannot embrace with final consistency all the elements of the event) is that the death of Christ, as the revelation of God, grasps the mind as a thing intelligible in itself.²⁸ And the crucial element of both the New Testament theology and our need as sinners is that He bore our sins; that forgiveness comes to us through the death He died. There is in the cross, he said, a righteousness of God for the ungodly, but as well there can be no gospel unless the integrity of God's character is maintained.²⁹ To the elaboration of this we now turn to show how for Denney the death of Christ reveals, and deals with the demands of, the righteousness of God; and, to show how Christ in virtue of His relationship to the race saves men by that death.³⁰

III. CHRIST AND THE LAW OF GOD

In the first instance the cross must be a response of God to the ethical necessities created by sin in a moral world where God and

²⁵ *Letters . . . to his Family and Friends*, pp. 186-187.

²⁶ *Studies in Theology*, p. 127.

²⁷ *Studies in Theology*, p. 111.

²⁸ *The Death of Christ*, p. 118.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 283; *Studies in Theology*, p. 104.

³⁰ In various places Denney points to the relations between God and man in the cross in terms of categories such as the love of God, the love of Christ, and the sin of man (*The Death of Christ*, pp. 123-219); or he proposes to deal with the death in relation to the love in which it originated and to the sin with which it dealt (*ibid.*, p. 140; note pp. 212-215, 284).

man share a common life. Pre-eminently, then, when it deals with the disordered relations between God and man, the cross removes the condemnation of God. Far from being vapid sentimentality the divine love is the character of the God who is righteous and holy: He is Holy Love.³¹ The problem is judicial and the solution must be judicial. Forgiveness and release from condemnation must proceed, Denney said, not *over* but through the judgment of God.³² Love and morality stand together in the Atonement:

The moral elements in the relations of God and man are unreservedly acknowledged, and it is in the cost at which justice is done to them in the work of redemption that the love of God is revealed and assured. We see then its reality and its scale.³³

In what ways should we regard the Cross which reveals the righteousness and love of God as the counterpart of the condemnation under which the world lies? In three ways primarily; but each is a mode of one general idea. They are: (1) that Christ died the death due to us because of our sins (2) that He bore the consequences of our sins, and (3) that he became a curse under the law for us. In regard to the first, Denney said that, however much moderns cavil at it, for St. Paul death is the doom of sin and Christ became the propitiation for the sin of the world by dying that death:

Death is a word which sums up the whole liability of man in relation to sin, and therefore when Christ came to give Himself for our sins He did it by dying.³⁴

The second is for Denney the most mysterious and fruitful of the three ideas. While the idea occurs frequently in his works I reserve for later notation his conception of the moral life as the channel for good and evil and draw attention here to the way in which for him Christ's bearing of sin (2) is a mode of saying that Christ died the death of sin (1). In every sense and to every extent that love could do so He made our sins His own. No writer of the New Testament questions the possibility of Christ the sinless one bearing sin; throughout the assumption is that the responsibilities

³¹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 16-17, 84. The gospel is more than simple pardon, he maintained; "unless we feel that the very nerve of it lies in the removal of condemnation, we shall never understand the New Testament love in speaking of it" (*Second Corinthians*, p. 123); note also p. 213, and *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 167-168, 228, 327.

³² *Second Corinthians*, p. 220; *Romans*, p. 590.

³³ *The Death of Christ*, pp. 329-330.

³⁴ *The Death of Christ*, p. 138. Note also pp. 212-215; *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 72.

of sinful men have been borne by the sinless Lamb of God. For St. Paul this is not a "theorem he is prepared to defend; it is the gospel he has to preach".³⁵ Thus it is clear, he says, that in Scripture "to bear sin" is not ambiguous; "it means to underlie its responsibility and to receive its consequences: to say that Christ bore our sins is precisely the same thing as to say that He died for our sins; it needs no other interpretation and admits of no other".³⁶ In words calling to mind Forsyth (who wrote later) Denney declared, "instead of saying that *He* could not die the death, which is the wages of sin, it may be far truer to say, none *but* He could".³⁷ Third, Christ suffered the curse of the law as where, for instance, Paul says (Gal. 3: 13) that Christ "became *curse* for us. He made our *doom* His own". Quickly Denney reminds us that Paul does not say "cursed by God", but that Christ voluntarily took our curse upon Himself.³⁸ He agrees with MacLeod Campbell and Horace Bushnell that the bad conscience of the guilty cannot be predicated of Christ; thus we cannot say that the innocent was punished for the guilty, but that the innocent one should voluntarily suffer for and with the guilty vicariously is consistent with morality.

It scarcely needs mentioning here that Denney, whilst maintaining the fundamental moral fabric of the New Testament expressed in the key idea of justification, was mindful and sometimes critical of the forensic modes of the post-reformation divines, including Hooker. Denney argued that the righteousness of God is more than a legal act, it is a morally transforming power. The essential element of the evangel is not a credal statement but simply and pre-eminently the personal presence of the Saviour.³⁹ The traditional metaphors express therefore the moral realities of Christ's work and of our saving relationship to Him. Sacrifice is that divine act dealing with sin and its issue whereby forgiveness is granted and reconciliation achieved; but the reconciliation embraces the entire world order.⁴⁰ Denney resisted the tendency of some to reject the idea of propitiation in favour of mediation. He understood the

³⁵ *The Death of Christ*, p. 99.

³⁶ *Studies in Theology*, p. 104.

³⁷ *The Death of Christ*, p. 129.

³⁸ "In His death on the Cross He was identified under God's dispensation with the doom of sin: He became curse for us; and it is on this our redemption depends" ("Curse," *H.D.B.*, I, p. 535).

³⁹ *The Death of Christ*, pp. 184-5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143-144; *Second Corinthians*, pp. 211-212; *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 5-6.

crucial Romans passage (ch. 3) to say that God set Christ forth in "propitiatory power" so that clearly Christ's act does in some sense vindicate the character of God when sin is remitted.⁴¹ Similarly, in John propitiation stands related both to the law condemning sin and to the divine love.⁴² The essential fact is that we do not propitiate an angry deity, but that God Himself provides the propitiation as His gift of love. Anything less than this inevitably inhibits the reality of the divine condemnation of sin. Sin, love, and propitiation stand together in the atonement. The key to understanding propitiation in relation to sin does not lie, for Denney, in the peculiarities of Jewish customs, but within ourselves where our own moral experience attests the truth that in the "very act in which it is forgiven, as part of the process of forgiving—His sense if its reality must be declared".⁴³ What propitiation stands for in the New Testament, he says, is that Christ has taken to himself fully the consequences of our sins:

Forgiveness, or justification in the new era . . . has come to men in Christ, whom God has set forth in His blood as a propitiation; it has come in One who has realized to the uttermost in His own person all that sin meant, One who has drunk the cup our sin had mingled, One has felt all the waves and billows break over Him in which God's reaction against sin comes home to us sinners. This is the very essence of the *hilasterion* as Paul understands it.⁴⁴

IV. CHRIST AND THE RACE

Denney devotes considerable attention (therefore blunting much ill-founded criticism of him) to the question of how we stand related to Christ racially so that the merits of His work reach us. Men stand in an essential not casual relation to God,⁴⁵ he had said early, and he made a point consistently of the peculiar relationship of Christ to the race as definitive both of the divine ideal for man and the possibility of his redemption. Christ is (a) the root or foundation of the race, "the whole seed of manhood is in man too from the beginning . . . the Christ-life is really primary and fundamental".⁴⁶ Here Denney cites the thought of Dale with approval:

⁴¹ *Romans*, pp. 611-612.

⁴² *The Death of Christ*, pp. 273-276.

⁴³ *The Way Everlasting*, p. 302. Note: *Studies in Theology*, p. 133.

⁴⁴ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 159.

⁴⁵ *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World,"* p. 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38. All human personality is rooted in the Logos, he said, and what man is and shall be is revealed in Christ (*Studies in Theology*, pp. 68, 78-79).

Rather does the whole phenomenon justify us in putting such a question as Dale's: What must Christ's relation to men be in order to make it possible that He should die for them?—a question leading to an essentially evangelical argument, that Christ must have had an original and central relation to the human race and to every member of it. Whether this is the best way to express the conclusion need not here be considered, but that this is the final way to approach the problem is not open to doubt.⁴⁷

(b) Christ is the idea of the race. "He is *not* one thing which we all are; He was *not* a sinner . . . it is the presupposition of redemption". He exhibits in his own person "what He guarantees we shall be".⁴⁸ "It is our life that we see in Jesus, but we see it in its truth and as it ought to be, a life in God, wholly at one with Him".⁴⁹ (c) Christ identifies Himself with us so that, as Hebrews says, there is between us and Him a community of nature. He could redeem us only by being truly one of us; "He claims all modes of existence as His own. Nothing separates us from Him".⁵⁰ (d) Christ makes common cause with us so that incarnation means His sharing of our nature, experience, and interests. As the "Son of Man" He entered into the spiritual conditions of our life.⁵¹

On the ground of this, Christ's death as the saving act is relevant to us in the following three general ways for Denney. (1) He died our death. It is precisely at this point that Christ's work stands related to our sins as a moral act atoning for sin. Denney rejects the popular notion where the life of Christ is eulogized and tied to the moral order whereas the death is left to the natural order of things. Christ's obedience apart from His death, Denney insists, would be insufficient to save us.⁵² His passion is His sublimest action because we know everything when we know that He *died* for our sins, and when this is said Scripture means an interchange of states.⁵³ In probing the nature of this sharing of our interest by Christ, Denney says: "it is not who died instead of us, or even on our behalf (*huper*), but . . . who died a death in which we are concerned".⁵⁴ The key to this is in II Corinthians 5 in the words

⁴⁷ *The Death of Christ*, p. 318.

⁴⁸ *Studies in Theology*, p. 41; cf p. 166.

⁴⁹ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 9; note pp. 249-250.

⁵⁰ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 197; note *The Death of Christ*, p. 235, and *Studies in Theology*, p. 166.

⁵¹ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 242.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 270; *The Death of Christ*, p. 232-233.

⁵³ *Studies in Theology*, p. 110; *The Death of Christ*, p. 149.

⁵⁴ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 196.

“one died for all, so then all died”. Denney takes great care to show the relationship of the death both to the love that sent Christ to the cross and to the sin with which it deals. A brief part of his comment follows:

If we all *died*, in that Christ died *for* us, there must be a sense in which that death of His is *ours*; He must be identified with *us* in it: there, on the Cross, while we stand and gaze at Him, He is not simply a person doing us a service; He is a person doing us a service *by filling our place and dying our death*. It is out of this deeper relation that all services, benefits, and advantages flow; and that deeper sense of “for” to which Christ in his death is at once the representative and the substitute of man, is essential to do justice to the Gospel’s thought.⁵⁵

Further, that death of His in which we all died means for us, first, that we die to sin in order to live to righteousness. Death to sin means discharge from its responsibilities and deliverance from its power.⁵⁶ Second, in Christ’s death we died to the law, that is, in His death Christ does justice to the law so that what condemned the sinner now functions in him inspiring to obedience.⁵⁷ And third, Christ’s death for us was a death to the flesh where flesh means sin in its constitutional and instinctive character.⁵⁸ In other words, the death of Christ for us and our dying in that death is the guarantee of righteousness in us—faith and works go hand in hand.

(2) Christ made perfect submission to God for us. This is the ground of our own submission. No resentment at the divine judgment of sin can be felt, but where we identify ourselves with Him in His death we “submit in Him to the divine sentence upon sin, and at bottom become right with God”. McLeod Campbell’s point that for reconciliation to happen God’s mind about sin revealed in and through Christ must become our own has large significance for Denney.⁵⁹

(3) Christ in His covenant blood is our life with God. Peter’s “sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ”, Denney said, denotes the common life into which God and man have entered by Christ’s sacrifice. Within the covenant, so to speak, God and man have a common life; but our partaking of the divine nature and our becoming fellow-workers with God rests in the covenant made by sacrifice whose basis and being are in the blood of Christ.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Second Corinthians*, pp. 194-195.

⁵⁶ *The Death of Christ*, pp. 100, 186-187.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵⁹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 90; *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 259-260.

⁶⁰ *The Death of Christ*, pp. 90-91.

The foregoing clearly delineates the interpretation Denney gives of certain key traditional terms attached to atonement doctrine, and since detailed notes cannot be given here a brief reference to them must suffice. Christ is our Ransom where its meaning is drawn from the forfeiture of life which is now liberated by the surrender of Christ's life⁶¹. He is our Substitute—not so as to interpret personal relations by sub-personal categories; nevertheless the Christian heart testifies that He bore our sins:

I do not know any word which conveys the truth of this if "vicarious" or "substitutionary" does not, nor do I know any interpretation of Christ's death which enables us to regard it as a demonstration of love to sinners, if this vicarious or substitutionary character is denied.⁶²

Christ's work is also that of our Representative. Objections can be raised against this as against the preceding terms particularly if by it is suggested that salvation is not what Christ does for us but what the race does in Him. We do not produce or put Him forward. In proportion, Denney says, as we see Him standing in our place out of pure love, in that same proportion we are drawn into that relation to Him that makes Him our representative.⁶³ Finally, Christ made satisfaction for sin. When tracing the complex history of the idea of satisfaction⁶⁴ in relation to Christ's work Denney notes just criticism of it where it falls below personal categories. These can be reduced, he thought, to three; namely, that in the Gospel we must postulate grace or merit as the ground of reconciliation in Christ but not both; second, the charge of absurdity when we say that God made satisfaction to Himself in Christ; and, third, satisfaction rests upon an internal conflict in God between His mercy and grace. But Denney's quick rejoinder is that these contradictions destroy only the artificiality of certain technical theological groupings of ideas, not the essential moral elements of the atonement. No rationale that misses the relationship between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins satisfies either Scripture or our own consciences. Forgiveness is costly, not cheap; it comes only on the ground of the death of Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

As in Dale, so in Principal Denney's development of the doctrine, the solution stands in the paradox of God coming and sending.

⁶¹ *The Death of Christ*, p. 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 176; cf. also *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 95.

⁶³ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 97-99, 101.

⁶⁴ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 69ff.

demanding and providing, judging and bearing, loving and satisfying. While not so self-consciously developed as Dale did it, the solution for Denney lies in the Trinity where the relations of the three persons and their activities combine in that mystery which is the Cross. The two sides can be set forward from Denney's writings as follows: (a) God sacrificed His only begotten Son. It is God who made Christ sin for us; the doom of sin falls upon Christ by divine appointment; forgiveness comes to us because the sinless Redeemer entered into the bitter realization of what our sin is. There is a sense in which we can conceive of God the Father accepting the work of his Son.⁶⁵ So much has already been elucidated. But what of the other side? (b) God Himself in Christ bore the evil and sin of the world. This is put by Denney in various ways. First, in Christ God takes the issue of sin; it is God who "comes in Jesus Christ, and makes all its burdens and responsibilities His own".⁶⁶ He says, "the Father and the Son are at one in the work of man's salvation".⁶⁷ Second, in the atonement God takes part with sinners against Himself, that is, not as a contradiction of divine attributes, but that in the cross He takes to Himself the evil, transforming it for good. We cannot, he admits, escape at least the appearance of contradiction but we must remain true to the facts.⁶⁸ Third, the cross is the divine love bearing sin and forgiving it. This is the ultimate reality of the world:

The love which can go out of itself and make the burden of others its own is the radical principle of all genuine and victorious morality in the world. And to say that love cannot do any such thing, that the whole formula of morality is, every man shall bear his own burden, is to deny the plainest facts of the moral life.⁶⁹

Fourth, the cross exhibits the reality of God accepting the responsibility for the existence and the results of the sin situation. This is not to charge God with sin, but to affirm that He is the Creator and the Redeemer in Christ. Denney says that "in the Person of His Son He enters, if we may say so, into the whole responsibility of the situation created by sin—which constitutes the death of Jesus a demonstration of divine love, compelling faith and obedience".⁷⁰ With the stress falling on the word "whole" in

⁶⁵ *Studies in Theology*, pp. 110, 157; *Romans*, p. 613; *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 84.

⁶⁶ *Questions of Faith*, p. 174.

⁶⁷ *The Death of Christ*, p. 125.

⁶⁸ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 142.

⁶⁹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 103, 104-5. Note: *Letters . . . to his Family and Friends*, p. 110; *Studies in Theology*, p. 155.

⁷⁰ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 91.

this quotation, can a more profound or wonderful mystery confront us? At once the moral reality of the universe faces us: the sovereign God creating freedom and accepting the responsibility of His own act knowing that in Himself He has all the resources to achieve His beneficent purposes. Perhaps here for us, as for Denney, the atonement casts a bright light upon the mystery of Creation, Freedom, and Evil:

I have often wondered whether we might not say that the Christian doctrine of the Atonement just meant that in Christ God took the responsibility of evil upon Himself and somehow subsumed evil under good; but that might be to overleap oneself in the opposite direction from those whom you have the prospect of addressing. I fancy it was something like this Calvin had in mind when he said that God did not make His noblest creature *ambiguo fine*, without knowing what for, i.e. He was quite prepared to take all the consequences, and He took them in Christ. But who is sufficient for these things . . . ?⁷¹

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⁷¹ *Letters . . . to his Family and Friends*, pp. 187-188.