

A series of articles on the Biblical foundations of the doctrine of the Atonement by Dr. Leon Morris is appearing in THEMELIOS. Here, Dr. Mikolaski, an Oxford graduate who is now Professor of Theology in New Orleans Baptist Seminary, U.S.A., expounds and criticizes some forms of the doctrine which have been influential in many parts of the world.

THE ATONEMENT IN BRITISH THEOLOGY

by Samuel J. Mikolaski

I
The publication of John McLeod Campbell's *The Nature of the Atonement and its Relation to Remission of Sins and Eternal Life* in 1856 is a

convenient point of departure for this study.¹ More than challenging Calvinism, he brought to public attention, as R. W. Dale did also, the extent to which Christians had shifted

from the theory of limited atonement. It is not easy to state the significance of this reaction without gilding the edges of the reaction and distorting traditional Calvinism. The thought of nineteenth century theologians was profoundly influenced by the Evangelical Revival, but some of the concepts which influenced them made strange bedfellows. While McLeod Campbell stressed that the reign of law provides no place for atonement, nevertheless for him love does not act gratuitously because the Cross viewed only as a spectacle of suffering love is inadequate. That is, if a forensic frame of reference for the atonement is inadequate, the relations between man and God are nonetheless moral; something did happen in the Cross. Everyone will acknowledge that relating the moral to the divine love and grace in forgiveness is as much a problem for us as it was for nineteenth century theologians. And we with them resist the tendency to evacuate normative morality from the universe. Campbell pleaded for men to interpret Christ's work not by law but by the Kingdom of God, not by a predisposing scheme but as a free offer to all men, not primarily in terms of satisfaction and penalty but of spiritual, personal and moral relations.

The point of this is that no final value ought to be attached to the metaphor (in this case a legal metaphor). This does not make the claims of righteousness unreal, but the form of penalty of pain, he said, should be understood as the form of holiness and love that they convey where the Son deals with man on God's part and with God on man's. As to man Christ does the will of God per-

fectly; as to God he utters the perfect Amen to righteousness in the midst of judgment. It is misleading then to say that Campbell advocates vicarious penitence as the idea of atonement, because he specifically rejects the notion that in the confession of Christ in judgment his contrition is vicarious. For a lead he turned to Luther and Jonathan Edwards. Luther, he said, advocated the victor idea (note the anticipation of part of Aulen's interpretation by seventy-five years) not as a legal fiction but as expressing the reality of the moral relations between God and man. In the case of Edwards, he picked up one side of an alternative as the solution he sought. Edwards said that God could be just only by the vindication of Himself in either the infinite punishment of sin or a repentance, humiliation, and sorrow for sin proportionable to the greatness of the majesty despised, and he assumed that the latter was not possible. McLeod Campbell said that Jesus Christ as God incarnate alone could and in fact did make this perfect human response in judgment. He highlights both satisfaction and penitence without which atonement and reconciliation would be farcical.

But the stream of resistance to traditional Calvinism widened to include both the children of that theology (such as R. W. Dale) and its critics (such as F. D. Maurice). The latter, especially in his seventh essay "The Atonement" (*Theological Essays*, 1853), vigorously criticized the penal doctrine but left his own ideas in doubt for the reader. He says that forgiveness cannot be made by exacting a legal equivalent for it;

rather, the sufferings of Christ are not punishment inflicted but an entering into our suffering by him in a moral way. Maurice, too, was attracted to Luther; but he adds that Luther's conscience did not construct a rigid system out of his experience. Nevertheless it will be clear to everyone who reads the essay that Maurice does not abandon the formal relations between God and man, nor the judgment which Christ bears. A more vigorous, if less constructive, attack was made by Benjamin Jowett. Substitution, representation and imputation are fictions and immoralities, he charged, that can never make men right with God. He and other exponents of the moral influence idea of the atonement failed to see that the death of Christ is an integral part of the atonement dealing with evil and sin objectively in a way that is both rationally and morally comprehensible.

A more significant development centered in the studies of New Testament scholars like B. F. Westcott and James Denney. Westcott has in view especially the incarnate life of our Lord, not unlike the earlier approach of Campbell and Maurice, and that of Horace Bushnell the American theologian (whose book, though published in Britain did not significantly influence the main stream of theological development there. Dr. Westcott describes Jesus Christ as "truly man", "perfectly man", and "representatively man" (*The Historic Faith*, 1883, pp. 59-69). Here the universality of Christ's manhood is clear but the role of this manhood in the passion of the Cross is not. Westcott says that what we strive after in human nature we dis-

cover in the Cross given by Christ in his love. The Incarnation was necessary both to fulfill the divine ideal for the race and for atonement because in his perfect humanity Christ bore the "utmost burden of sinful humanity". But it is not within our power to say how Christ's life and death avail with the Father. As later, so here, the theology of the vicarious act eludes our grasp. Three other theologians made a significant contribution to the theology of this period.

They are J. Scott Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (1897), R. C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* (1901), and Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (1919).

Probably no writer of this period developed the "ethical" satisfaction as against the "penal" satisfaction theme of our Lord's passion more comprehensively than J. Scott Lidgett. He pointed to the moral perfection of Christ in His suffering and to the Fatherhood of God, rather than stressing the Father's role as Judge of men. Scott Lidgett argued that we know no higher conception than Fatherhood, and that what this says of the relations within the Trinity speaks volumes about the fellowship to which we are called. But fatherhood mingles the ideas of severity and benevolence; hence forgiveness is irrational, indeed impossible, unless the sanctity of the parental and filial bond (experienced in the law and spirit of that bond) is effectively honoured. This includes the idea of vindicating righteousness and enthroning it in the sinner's life. Divine law and judgment are not expressions of resentment nor harsh

vengeance; rather, just as the law of the family is in the interest of the child, erring or not, so the law of God cannot be waived or ignored. The necessary and beneficent role of divine law and judgment in the purpose of God is to work a change of feeling in the sinner toward God's dealings (note chapter V). Three strands are subtly woven together: the necessity of satisfaction in judgment (remission as the ground of response), the necessity of quickened response acknowledging judgment (response completing the meaning of remission), and the necessity of preserving filial yet formal relations (relations that are both personal and moral) in the atonement which reflect the inner life of the triune God. Scott Lidgett is much indebted to R. W. Dale both as to form and substance of argument, though he puts stronger emphasis upon surrender.

R. C. Moberly built up the doctrine upon the Fatherhood of God and the supremacy of moral values in a manner reminiscent of McLeod Campbell and with a vigorous criticism of penal theories of which he regarded R. W. Dale the chief spokesman. Moberly aimed to preserve in his viewpoint both the judgment of sin and the moral renewal of the sinner. Thus he devotes space to an important discussion of punishment, penitence and forgiveness, concluding (i) that the intention of punishment is reformatory because it is meaningless unless the punished one accepts his due, (ii) that true penitence involves the perfect detestation of sin (only a life entirely free from sin, he says, can know true detestation of and true penitence for sin), and (iii) that for-

givenness is the correlative of penitence answering to the sin-consciousness of the sinner. Let no one suppose that Dr. Moberly takes sin lightly (is there a doctrine of sin anywhere in Hastings Rashdall's theory?), but the object of Christ's sufferings seems to be this: that as the grief of a parent has a *real* influence upon the erring child in his sin, so the passion of Christ has a real influence upon us evoking true penitence. There is a faint trace of substitution here also, for when rejecting penal ideas he says (p. 130), "The perfect sacrifice of penitence in the sinless Christ is the true atoning sacrifice for sin . . . it is the full self-identification of human nature, within the range of sin's challenge and sin's scourge, with holiness as the Divine condemnation of sin, which was at once the necessity – and the impossibility – of human penitence." What is doubtful about Moberly's theory is how the dealing of God with sin is real, especially respecting past sin and guilt, and this same criticism is even more devastating of the "example theory" advanced by Dr. Hastings Rashdall.

No recent foe of penal and objective doctrines of the atonement has been as implacable as or more articulate than Dr. Rashdall. Three points about his work, and that of others who share his viewpoint need to be made at the outset. First, retribution and retributive ideas of justice are for them survivals of primitive modes of thought and inconsistent with enlightened Christian doctrine. This is based on the notion that retribution means only vengeance or spitefulness. Second, there is no need, as they see it, to deal with guilt or sin. "Justice"

and all such notions, including the conception of Jesus Christ as generic to the race, are wrong notions, impersonal, and reminiscent more of Plato's world of abstractions than of personal relations. Third, the passion of Christ can have nothing at all to do with guilt or evil or sin, except so far as the sufferings generate repentance and change of character in men. Rashdall claimed (Lecture VIII) that even in its simplest form atonement formed no part of Christ's teaching, that it originated in a primitive necessity for explaining to the world a crucified Messiah, that no clear substitutionary theory emerges in the church until Irenaeus, and that all penal, substitutionary and satisfaction views are both immoral and irrational. To our Lord the meaning of His death was simply this, that He conceived of Himself as persisting unto death in His task of announcing and preparing the way for the Messianic Kingdom, and that these sufferings are "calculated to awaken in the mind of him who believes that the whole life and death of Christ was one of love for His fellows, and that in Him who so lived and died the love of God was uniquely and supremely manifested." (p. 443). But the valid criticisms of such theories by scholars of all ages can be epitomized in what Dr. Denney and Dr. Leonard Hodgson have to say. Denney insisted that in the light of its place in the New Testament there must be a *rational connection* between the death of Christ as the proof of divine love for the sinful, and the responsibilities which sin involves and from which that death delivers us. Rashdall verbally concedes the importance of this, but he fails to

meet it in his theology. His doctrine is patterned after Peter Lombard, "The death of Christ therefore justifies us, inasmuch as through it charity is stirred up in our hearts." This is blind, says Dr. Hodgson, to the effects of sin outside the sinner's soul, and to the fact that the work of Christ has cosmic relevance. In other words there is in the Cross something finished, something done, upon which the whole world and every sinner stands – it is redemption ground.

II

We must now draw attention to another powerful movement that attempted a realistic conservation of its Puritan heritage as quickened by the Evangelical Revival. Three names stand out sharply for our review: R. W. Dale, James Denney, and P. T. Forsyth.

While three factors bore heavily upon theological development after 1850, namely the Darwinian hypothesis, the rise of the "Higher Criticism", and the influence of German idealistic philosophy, it is important to remember that the theological revolt against the type of Calvinism of the post-Puritan era was well nigh complete by mid-century. R. W. Dale began his ministry in Carr's Lane Chapel in 1854 as sole pastor already oriented differently from his predecessor J. A. James. This is not to say that traditional Calvinism was altogether destroyed nor even that it is an insignificant factor in British theology today.² But the quickened interest in vast new areas of knowledge, particularly of the natural sciences, coloured not only conceptions of the nature of the world but also of man.

Is man's life really qualitatively different from animal life? Has "the moral" normative meaning for men (and this bore notably upon atonement theory) if ethics, as was claimed, is the description of man's upward struggle through mores to standards of which he alone is the measure? The debate was not new and it continues today. Naturalists continue their iconoclasm but theology is entrenched in the revelation of God's righteousness in the Cross of Christ. Added to this were the apparently destructive results of the Higher Criticism. If the Scriptures fall what is left? was asked on all sides. Then too, continental theology seemed much more able to assimilate the new, especially philosophical, modes of thought. Among Baptists the Downgrade Controversy illustrates the tension of those years. Far from being obscurantists the late nineteenth century evangelicals were dedicated well-read men with a large degree of concern for the faith.³ For example, R. W. Dale in his address at the opening of the new Mansfield College building (1889) exhibited balance, intelligence, Christian conviction and willingness to accept new evidence, but he refused to have foisted upon himself and his fellow Christians hare-brained and unverifiable hypotheses. But the unfounded charge, often made patronizingly, that British theology is insular and that British theologians are remarkably immune to the influences of continental theology deserves attention. Of those discussed here, Denney was well versed in the German literature (he translated Delitzsch's *Isaiah* for the English edition) and Forsyth had studied in Germany. Following his

own spiritual awakening, Forsyth frequently jibed at German theologians influenced by idealism, though he also confesses his indebtedness to others (note the prefaces to *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* and *The Principle of Authority*), and any casual reading of *The Clerical Life* (1898) to which Denney contributed, shows a humorous satire on those young Britons who having studied abroad return home aiming to initiate their fellows into the mysteries of continental philosophy and theology. Enlightened Anglican confessionism on the doctrines of the Incarnation, Trinity, and Atonement are the corner-posts of recent British theology, whereas the German theologians – at least that segment of theology reaching English readers – have devoted the lion's share of their attention to the doctrine of Revelation. British theologians have used continental theology as a foil for the development of their own ideas, but British thought has long been characterized by a strong strain of empiricism in philosophy and confessionism in theology. So far as atonement doctrine is concerned, it may be said that from the days of Anselm England has developed an indigenous school of thought.

One must guard against fitting men into neat categories of theology. The theologians of this period have been too wide-ranging to force into traditional theological stalls and this sometimes makes the study of the period as frustrating as it is exciting and rewarding. Attention may be drawn to five elements of theological truth that figure prominently in these years. It will be seen at once that the earlier theologians had in view these

same points and that they underlie contemporary discussions also. They are: an adequate statement or definition of the moral relations between God and man; the relation of the atonement to the doctrine of the Trinity on the one hand and of the Incarnation on the other; the cosmic as well as individual relevance of the atonement; and the importance of the social idea in salvation.

It is a gross distortion of the truth to say that the evangelical writers on the atonement such as Dale, Denney, and Forsyth advance viewpoints predicated upon legalistic relations between God and man. But it is true that these and others like Moberly and Scott Lidgett were concerned about the morality of those relations, and, if unhappily dubbed *legal* they are nonetheless formal. The relations between God and man are moral, they have substance, and it is to these that the atonement is addressed. The law of God, said Dale, is alive, it has its life only in God, it does not stand above God so that a transactional dealing happens between God, the law, Christ, and man, and on this both Denney and Forsyth concur. Evil is a reality and sin is an event. They have happened, and their evil issue must be *dealt with* by God; evil and sin are not ideas to be cured by thought but acts with consequences that can be cured only by divine action. This *objective* dealing with sin by Christ is the problem we have to face in understanding the atonement in relation to the Trinity. Here, all three men achieve insights fundamental to Christianity but which few analysts of their writings have seen. The atonement is God acting in Christ to save the world. It is as

much the vindication of God as it is the self-satisfaction of God, according to Forsyth. Conversely, the atonement bears upon the world and men in the Incarnate life of our Lord, cosmically in the sense that the evil has been atoned for and its power broken, and racially because in Jesus Christ who is generic to the race there has been a racial dealing with sin. He stands related to every man's guilt and to the race as a whole enduring solidary judgment.

Contrary to the notion of many critics of Dale and Denney, (including Moberly and Rashdall) none of these theologians predicated the relation of man to God on purely juridical terms, nor the relation of Christ to the race in terms of abstract platonic universals. The relation is always personal and moral and the one involves the other. The solidarity of the race is not only physical and social but moral and spiritual as well. Thus in Dale, who is probably the most misunderstood of the three, and also in Denney and Forsyth, the word *interdependence* or the idea it expresses has a large place. In Jesus Christ the ideal of God for the race is realized in history. He overcomes the power of evil in life, but particularly in His death (for only He as sinless could know the true meaning of the horror-death of sin). He does in relation to the righteousness of God what was necessary to vindicate righteousness and he binds up in Himself as well the true submission and response of humanity. The metaphors and images cannot at any given point illuminate the whole of the doctrine, but they do light it up for us, and the whole yields the truth that God and man in Christ are related in a personal

and moral way. God judges sin, God forgives sin, and God does it in Christ. It is both true to say that God sacrificed His Son and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This is the fundamental paradox of the atonement but nothing less satisfies the demands of revelation, history or of the Christian conscience.

Further, the atonement is of cosmic dimensions. Dale put it this way: what is expressed depends upon the point of view. From God's viewpoint salvation is of a world in Jesus Christ in which all men may share; as for us, when we look out through the windows of our redeemed souls and comprehend the significance of who Jesus Christ was and what He accomplished then the cosmic relevance of the atonement grasps us. Forsyth said that it took the saving of a world to save a single man's soul. We are thus on the threshold of the doctrine of the Church. We are not saved, they said, to an individual but to a social salvation. The Church as the body of Christ is the community of the redeemed where the very life of God in the interdependence of life and personal communion of the Trinity is the generating power of the personal relations between man and man in Christ. D. M. Baillie has restated some elements in Denney's theology in contemporary form in *God was in Christ*. Rather than our comparing Christ's humanity with ours and declaring His real because we think we know what it means to be human, He was the only one who was ever truly human (we are in various ways sub-personal) and it is God's intention to win us into Christ's image by His redeeming work.

NOTES

¹ A small but not insignificant body of literature is available on the history of the doctrine. R. S. Franks' two-volume *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ In Its Ecclesiastical Development* is a standard work. G. B. Stevens, an American, devotes attention to the British schools, and both J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (Duckworth, 1915) and Sidney Cave, *The Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: University of London Press, 1950) have written useful studies. T. H. Hughes' *The Atonement: Modern Theories of the Doctrine* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949) is the only book on theories of contemporary vintage but regrettably Dr. Hughes tends to force writers into "standard" categories of theories. R. S. Paul's recent book *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1960) is an American work that shows a refreshing appreciation for the late nineteenth century British evangelicals, though the interpretation is strongly conditioned by his interest in sacramental theology. Unquestionably the best book (though not in touch with more recent viewpoints), is L. W. Grensted's *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, first published in 1920 by Longmans Green, and recently reprinted. The value of this study lies not only in the extensive crucial quotations of Greek, Latin and English texts, but also in Dr. Grensted's capacity for penetration of thought and the scrupulous fairness with which he tries to deal with various viewpoints.

² Representatives of orthodox Calvinism in the late nineteenth century are chiefly: G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (1868) and *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by the Apostles* (1870); and, T. J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (1871).