

MARCUS DODS, JOHN McLEOD CAMPBELL AND THE ATONEMENT

MALCOLM A. KINNEAR, NEW COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF
EDINBURGH

John McLeod Campbell was an important figure in theological thinking on the atonement in nineteenth-century Britain. He exerted an influence on a number of later writers, amongst them several New Testament scholars. Marcus Dods was one of these. Dods was a leading figure in New Testament scholarship in the Free Church of Scotland in the late nineteenth century who stood at the forefront of theological controversy. His use of Campbell's theology has not been appreciated in scholarship.¹ Dods' papers, held in the library of New College, Edinburgh, are of immense value for the study of his theological thought. They reveal a dependence on the thought of Campbell on the death of Christ, and help to show how Dods progressed from Calvinism to what may be termed a mediating or liberal position. The influence of Campbell can be discerned within this gradual progression.

Dods' earliest writings contained a conservative penal substitutionary view, which reflected the theological heritage of the Free Church in which he was trained. A sermon dating to April 1860 illustrates his early thought. Our sins, Dods said, were imputed to Christ. Christ was 'punished with the punishment due to us.... He was our substitute and for that very reason, His punishment was no substitute for ours but the very punishment itself.' This punishment received by Jesus was the divine infliction due to us. 'The Lawgiver punished not the sinner but a substitute.' Dods used the language of Calvinist doctrine. 'No alteration of the law was

¹ Dods was the subject of a study by E.J. Sterling, *Marcus Dods: With Special Reference to His Teaching Ministry* (Edinburgh, PhD thesis, 1960), especially pp. 156-9, which misrepresents Dods on the atonement. Likewise the influence of Campbell on Dods has not been perceived by Campbell scholars. For a good general summary of Dods, see the entry by K.R. Ross in N.M. de S. Cameron *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 250.

made, no alleviation', he declared. The death of Christ was 'a true and real equivalent' for the penalty due to us.²

Dods' Movement of Thought

Dods moved away from this Calvinist position. He became keenly aware of contemporary trends in theology. These were years of controversy over Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and over *Essays and Reviews* (1860), a work which Dods, several years later, described as having been of profound importance in Britain.³ At the time, reading the controversial work of Bishop Colenso, he predicted that 'our views of inspiration will be greatly altered in future years. Indeed mine are very different from those I received from Gausson twelve years ago.'⁴

Evolutionary theory and higher criticism were then influential currents of thought which encouraged belief in a progressive development in theology. Dods came to accept that theology ought to develop.⁵ This belief was also espoused by Robert Rainy, minister of the church which the Dods family attended, and a man whom Dods admired.⁶ Dods read works which moved away from strict orthodoxy. In an early venture in scholarly writing, he contributed editorial notes to Lange's *The Life of the Lord Jesus*. These testify to a growing acquaintance with continental biblical scholarship.⁷

As a result of all this, his own views were beginning to change. In 1863, referring to Calvin, Dods wrote to a

2 New College MSS, Dods MSS, 'Sacrifice I, April 1860'.

3 Dods MSS, 'The Development of Biblical Interpretation in Britain in the 17th and 18th Centuries' (c.1906), p. 4.

4 *The Early Letters of Marcus Dods* (London, 1910), p. 266. Louis Gausson's book, entitled *Theopneustia, The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, first published 1841, was a standard work reflecting the conservative position.

5 Dods, *Erasmus And Other Essays* (London, 1891), p. 237.

6 *The Early Letters of Marcus Dods*, p. 334; R. Rainy, *The Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1874).

7 J.P. Lange, *The Life of the Lord Jesus*, ed. Dods (Edinburgh, 1864). More generally, on his wide reading, cf. Dods, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', *British Weekly*, 4 Feb. 1887.

correspondent that 'he has put me further wrong than I was before. He is far more lax than Dr Arnold.' He had evidently noticed the distance between Calvin and scholastic Calvinism.⁸

Despite drawing occasionally on more progressive thinkers in sermons, his book on the Revelation of John published in 1867 was still conservative.⁹ His sermons and addresses from this period, however, reveal a rewriting of the atonement theology in the vein of Campbell's *The Nature of the Atonement*.

Thus, speaking of the sacrifice of Christ, Dods stressed that in the atoning act, Christ 'said Amen to the condemnation pronounced on sin, as He bowed his head to the punishment, acknowledging thereby its justice, the exceeding evil of sin'.¹⁰ This is reminiscent of Campbell, who spoke of 'a perfect Amen in humanity to the judgement of God on the sin of man'.¹¹

Later, in 1870, when some of his congregation were finding the doctrine of the atonement difficult, Dods decided to present his own version of the orthodox view, suggesting that this might perhaps help to allay some of their difficulties. He now placed emphasis upon the attitude in which Jesus accepted his sufferings rather than the infliction of sufferings or the punishment itself as the essence of atonement. Dods wrote that 'Christ's pain was not in itself a pleasure to the Father but it was infinitely pleasing to Him to find in Humanity "a broken spirit" about sin'.¹² His language was again reminiscent of Campbell's conception of 'a perfect repentance in humanity for all the sin of man', and his offering as a 'holy sorrow', which was 'due on our behalf though we could not render it'.¹³

Both Campbell and Dods conceived of the atonement as a representative acceptance of the Father's mind. Echoing

⁸ *The Early Letters of Marcus Dods*, p. 195.

⁹ Dods, *The Epistles of Our Lord to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Edinburgh, 1867).

¹⁰ Dods MSS, 'Sacrifice, II' (1866).

¹¹ J.M. Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (London, 1856), p. 134.

¹² Dods MSS, 'Lecture on the Atonement', Jan. 1870.

¹³ Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, pp. 134, 138.

Campbell, Dods spoke of it as a 'spiritual sacrifice': the legal relationship had disappeared. Christ offered a representative acceptance of God's judgement upon sin.¹⁴ 'He accepted with a holy, reverent submission all the appointments of Divine justice...he agreed perfectly with God about what is merited', Dods added. It was a good paraphrase of Campbell. It is true that the themes of Christ's self-surrender, submission to God's wrath and acknowledgement of its validity as constituting the atoning act feature also in the thought of F.D. Maurice. Dods, however, was rather critical of Maurice as a theologian, and his own views seem closer to those of Campbell.¹⁵

By the 1880s Dods was becoming more public in his pronouncements. In *Christ's Sacrifice and Ours* he argued that the essence of the atoning act was not the suffering but the submission of Jesus. In his description of the atoning act Dods is particularly reminiscent of McLeod Campbell. It was, 'in humanity, a *perfect* response to His own feeling against sin, and a perfect return to Him.... In Christ there was a perfect hatred of the sin for which He made atonement, a perfect conformity of spirit to God's judgement regarding sin.'¹⁶

Dods also spoke of the Christian's participation in sacrifice, drawing on a theme in more recent discussions.¹⁷ His thought was to diversify, and Dods took ideas from writers other than Campbell, but still remaining true to much of Campbell's theology.

Dods' Later Work

This continuing similarity to Campbell's theology is seen in Dods' later work after 1889, when Dods was Professor of New Testament at the Free Church College in Edinburgh,

¹⁴ Dods MSS, 'The Desolation on The Cross' (1870).

¹⁵ F.D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (Cambridge, 1854), pp. 132-44. On Dods' views of Maurice, see his essay on Maurice, in Dods, *Erasmus And Other Essays*, p. 229.

¹⁶ Dods, *Christ's Sacrifice and Ours* (Edinburgh, 1883), p. 10.

¹⁷ H. Scott Holland, *Logic and Life* (London, 1882), S.D.F. Salmond, 'The Christian's Sacrificial Service in Terms of the Mosaic', *Homiletic Quarterly* 5 (1881), pp. 410-16.

which became the United Free Church College with the church union of 1900.

For example, in his lectures on the theology of Paul, Dods followed Campbell's idea of Christ providing a penitential confession. In the lectures he talked of a representative penitential acknowledgement and return to God in which we partake in union with him. He described it in these words:

Christ became one with us, not only by assuming a human nature, but by entering into a true and perfect sympathy with us, so that he felt ashamed for our sins, grieved over them... acknowledged the righteousness of the law in inflicting death as their penalty... (and) uttered to God a perfect human penitence.¹⁸

This had validity, Dods argued, as we accept this act as our own. In union with Christ we adopt Christ's spiritual submission to the just penalty. 'We must in our own spirit pass through an experience parallel to that which Christ passed through on the cross... by having something of the hatred of sin, something of the acceptance of its penalty.'¹⁹

Dods made a similar observation in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* on John 6:55ff., on the theme of feeding on the body and blood of Christ.

Not the external sacrifice of His body, but the spirit which prompted it was efficacious. The acceptance of God's judgement of sin, the devotedness to man, and perfect harmony with God, shown in the cross, is what brings life to the world, and it is this Spirit men are invited to partake of.²⁰

This is not all that far from Campbell's position. According to Campbell, we participate in all that Christ's death means, as a death to sin and as a homage to God's law. The atonement was 'a transaction in humanity, contemplating results in man, to be accomplished by the revelation of the elements of that transaction to the spirit of man, and in a way of participation in these elements on the part of man'.²¹

Campbell also held that Christ honoured the law of God in submitting to death. 'For thus, in Christ's honouring of the righteous law of God, the *sentence of the law* was included,

18 Dods MSS, 'Paul, The Work of Christ' (1904), p. 470.

19 Dods MSS, 'Paul', p. 468, on Gal. 2:20.

20 Dods, 'The Gospel of John', *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London, 1897), p. 759.

21 Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, p. 373.

as well as *the mind of God* which that sentence expressed.’²² Dods followed Campbell in this, suggesting that it was not simply penitence that mattered, but an acknowledgement of the claims of law on sin in death. Christ’s death was itself a homage to law, he said, adding that ‘we die to sin in Christ’s death in the sense that we allow the law to inflict upon us this penalty’.²³

Some of what Dods was saying remained more or less in tune with the earlier teaching of Campbell. However, much of it reflected more recent writings which he himself used. When, for example, Dods said that the idea of union with Christ in his death was the key to Pauline soteriology, his remark was not foreign to the thought of Campbell, but he was reflecting what a number of scholars were saying. Reuss’ study, which he used, had pointed in this direction.²⁴

Dods drew on the idea of the representative second Adam who exemplified an ideal response in death. In union with him, sin is condemned and annihilated. We share in this representative death to sin. This idea can be found in Campbell, but Dods was following later nineteenth-century biblical scholarship.²⁵

Dods’ understanding of the central passage at Hebrews 2:10-17 is a further case of this. On Hebrews 2:17, *hilaskesthai*, ‘propitiation’, Dods, quoting Westcott, noted the present infinitive form and said that this suggested the ongoing cleansing or removal of that which offended God. Campbell had made the same point. Dods also used William

22 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

23 Dods MSS, ‘Paul’, p. 468.

24 Dods MSS, ‘History of Criticism’, 4 (c.1904), p. 12, where Reuss receives a warm recommendation. Cf. E. Reuss, *History of Christian Theology in the Apostolic Age* (London, 1874), II, p. 149 and *passim*: D. Somerville, *St Paul’s Conception of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1897), p. 101.

25 ‘Paul’, pp. 472-3, Rom. 6:12-13, Rom. 8:3, with a quotation from Pfleiderer. Cf. F.C. Baur, *Vorlesungen über Neutestamentliche Theologie* (Leipzig, 1864), p. 161, R. Schmidt, *Die Paulinische Christologie* (Göttingen, 1870).

Robertson Smith who had a similar understanding.²⁶ By the same token, Dods was following a line of thought which can be traced through all three writers when he stressed the meaning of priesthood and sacrifice in terms of keeping us in covenant fellowship. This is seen in his comment on Hebrews 10:11, 'In the one sacrifice of Christ', he wrote, 'there is cleansing which fits men to draw near to God, to enter into covenant fellowship with Him, and there is also ground laid for their continuance in that fellowship.'²⁷

Going Beyond McLeod Campbell

In some respects, however, Dods went wholly beyond anything Campbell said. For example, in a passage in his earlier commentary on the Fourth Gospel he described Christ as having taken into himself the curse so exhaustively so as to have virtually become it (Gal. 3:13). Christ had so identified himself with sin in his death (2 Cor. 5:21) that sin itself was slain: 'All the virulence and venom of sin, all that is dangerous and deadly in it, our Lord bids us believe is absorbed in His person and rendered harmless on the cross.'²⁸

This is an important remark, which suggests an emphasis other than the removal of guilt by satisfaction. It looks forward to the kind of interpretation of Pauline soteriology recently advanced by J.D.G. Dunn, who using a medical analogy argues that the death of Christ has the capacity to immunise us against the malignant effects of sin.²⁹ Dods probably found the inspiration for his idea in continental scholarship. Baur and Schmidt held that Christ identified himself with sin, and that sin was slain in his death. The French scholar Sabatier was close to this when he suggested that sin was taken into Christ's person and exhausted in his death. 'Christ resumes humanity in himself and allows this

26 Dods, 'The Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London, 1910), p. 270, 264ff.; Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, pp. 191ff.

27 'The Epistle to the Hebrews', p. 344.

28 Dods, *The Gospel of St John* (London, 1891), I, p. 124.

29 J.D.G. Dunn, 'Paul's understanding of the Death of Jesus', in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Exeter, 1974), p. 139.

fatal development of the life of sin... to be reproduced and exhausted in his person.'³⁰

Diversifying further from Campbell, Dods recognised a number of other soteriological themes in Paul, including a form of penal substitution, but felt it important to remember that 'this theory of Paul needs guarding'.³¹ In line with many exegetes he emphasised the theme in Romans 3:25 of a necessary demonstration of God's righteousness as an illustration of God's utter hostility to sin.

A further divergence from Campbell's theology concerns the manner of construing union with Christ. In Campbell the idea of participation is linked to a close fellowship, but for Dods union with Christ is more definitely a moral identification. The relationship with Christ tended to be seen as external. 'To abide in Christ', Dods wrote, 'is to abide by our adoption of His view of the true purpose of human life.'³² Dods saw this in moral terms. Unity with Christ was a unity of moral purpose, and was achieved by allowing our moral nature to be 'penetrated by His Spirit'. It was achieved, he said, 'only by adopting His aim in life, and by nourishing your spirit on His'.³³

The rejection of mystical union reflects the teaching of a number of scholars, including Ritschl. There are echoes of Ritschl's teaching on the Christian community and the work of Christ in Dods' teaching in the 1890s. Christ, Dods said, founded 'an invisible community and we receive the benefits of Christ's death no otherwise than as we are members of this people or family'.³⁴ This was Ritschl's view. He had suggested that the forgiveness of sins could be appropriated by the believer only by faith, trust, and 'the intention to connect himself with the community of believers'.³⁵

30 A. Sabatier, *L'Apôtre Paul* (Paris, 1882), p. 280.

31 Dods MSS, 'Paul', p. 385.

32 *The Gospel of St John*, II, p. 190.

33 Dods MSS, 'John 13 and 15, Footwashing and Vine', c.1904, p. 20.

34 Dods, *The Gospel of St John* (Expositor's Bible, London, 1891), I, p. 386.

35 A. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (English translation, Edinburgh, 1900), p. 111.

As a consequence of his understanding of moral union with Christ, Dods attributed great importance to the fitness of Christ's work to exert a sufficient influence on us to cause us to repent and to adopt as our own his principle of self-sacrifice. Dods' teaching was generally characterised by a strong moral emphasis, which had been remarked upon some years earlier.³⁶

Dods moved towards a theory of moral influence. When we see Christ suffering the penalty for sin, he said, we are moved to repent, and to adopt as our own Christ's representative attitude and surrender. The cross produces penitence and a healthy moral attitude which makes it safe for God to forgive. Dods was to make a great deal of these ideas in his contribution to a series of essays entitled *The Atonement and Modern Religious Thought*. He argued that the cross produced adequate penitence and respect for righteousness.

If it is inconceivable that God should forgive the impenitent, it is equally inconceivable that He should not forgive the penitent... true penitence is, in short, irresistible.³⁷

It needed Christ to enable such penitence to occur. 'Repentance can never be adequate until the perception of God's righteousness is adequate', he wrote.³⁸

This theme was central for the later Dods. His lecture material reflects this approach. 'Proclamation of universal pardon without any accompanying exhibition of the sacredness of law and the holiness of God must have resulted in a lowering of all sense of right', he suggested.³⁹ Thus the atonement was a matter of ensuring the necessary public respect for law. This was reminiscent of some of the concerns of the school of governmental Calvinism, though Ritschl also

36 This was noted by a hearer of one of his sermons: see 'Here and There Among the Churches', *British Weekly*, 20 May 1887, p. 37.

37 *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought* (London 1900), pp. 182-3.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

39 Dods MSS, 'Salvation and Christ's Death – Its Necessity', (c.1900).

used the idea of God ruling according to public moral interests.⁴⁰

In line with this development, in his commentaries on John and on Hebrews, Dods showed that the cross had the necessary power to attract believers, and draw them into the spirit of self-sacrifice.⁴¹ The ignominy of the cross of Christ added to this. 'The utmost that man inflicts upon criminals he bore. He was made to feel that he was outcast and condemned. But it is this which wins all men to Him.'⁴²

Despite this change of emphasis, there was nonetheless some similarity to Campbell. Campbell had argued that an important feature of Christ's death was its ability to influence us towards a correct filial response and draw us into the divine self-sacrifice. Campbell wrote that 'the virtue required in the blood of Christ is seen to be necessarily spiritual – a power to influence the spirits washed in it by faith... to cleanse our spirits from that spiritual pollution which defiles rebellious children'.⁴³ What for Campbell was but one aspect of the atonement became for Dods a feature of vital importance.

Conclusion

If we take the evidence as a whole, Dods' use of Campbell, particularly in the early stages, was marked. The idea of an expiatory confession and submission to God's judgement in which we participate was particularly important to both writers. Given all this, Dods' failure to refer directly to Campbell's book is surprising. In earlier years Dods perhaps sought to appear orthodox both in the pulpit and in the ecclesiastical world, where he faced considerable hostility from the traditionalist wing in his church. Even among his own flock, there might have been reason to guard against

40 J. Gilbert, *The Christian Atonement* (London, 1854), p. 237. This was a book which Dods had read. Cf. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, pp. 89ff.

41 Dods, *The Gospel of St John* (London, 1891), 'The Gospel of St John', *Expositor's Greek Testament* (London, 1897), cf. particularly p. 844; 'The Epistle to the Hebrews', *Expositor's Greek Testament* (London, 1910).

42 'The Epistle to the Hebrews', p. 378, on Heb. 13:12 and 12:2.

43 *The Nature of the Atonement*, pp. 182-3.

appearing to endorse Campbell, the known 'heretic'. Campbell was for many years the pastor of a small independent chapel in Glasgow, not very far from Renfield Free Church, where Dods was minister. Campbell's name would certainly have been familiar, whether or not he was regarded sympathetically. Later, when Dods taught New Testament, reference to Campbell was perhaps less appropriate, and more recent books represented many of the things he was saying.

It is clear that Dods' own theological development had been very pronounced. In later years Dods seemed to pass through a crisis of faith, in which his beliefs were subjected to some questioning. He confided particularly in his female correspondents. On one occasion he wrote:

One who can believe in God should be very thankful. Very often, I may say commonly, I cannot get further than the conviction that in Christ we see the best that our nature is capable of, and must make that our own.⁴⁴

However, Dods recovered his sense of faith, and his mature thought has a consistency of its own. His teaching on the atonement suffers from a moralistic emphasis which is not altogether satisfactory. Nonetheless, Dods made a very significant attempt to get at the heart of the biblical doctrine. Both he and Campbell used biblical study to redefine the theology of the atonement. Spurred on by Campbell's book, like several other writers of the period, Dods believed the key to the atonement to be a spiritual attitude which we find in Christ.

⁴⁴ *The Later Letters of Marcus Dods* (London 1911), pp. 101-2 and *passim*. The anonymity of these correspondents was maintained.