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THE THEOLOGY OF PRINCIPAL JAMES DENNEY

by SAMUEL J. MIKOLASKI

FROM R. W. Dale Dr. Mikolaski now turns to James Denney, considering first the general outlines of his theology, which will be followed by an examination of his doctrine of the Atonement.

JAMES DENNEY, that delightful Scot, was born at Paisley on February 5, 1856, to parents of moderate social standing and financial resources. Following grammar school (The Highlander's Academy, Greenock) he entered upon a distinguished academic career in the University of Glasgow where he read philosophy under Edward Caird, though he never accepted Caird's viewpoint, and classics under Dr. Jebb. In 1879 Denney graduated with the rare honour of a double first and then, in the company of two friends, he spent several months in Germany on language study. In the autumn of that year he enrolled in the Free Church College, Glasgow, to read theology, graduating in 1883. When he was not chosen for a teaching post in the Free Church College, Calcutta, Denney turned to mission work in Glasgow and it was not until the spring of 1886 that, at the age of thirty, he was ordained to the ministry of the East Free Church, Broughty Ferry. During that summer in July he was married to Miss Mary Carmichael Brown of Glasgow, and together they spent eleven years of happy pastoral ministry at Broughty Ferry.

Always keenly interested in whatever he did—especially in the preaching of the Gospel—Denney was clear in thought and incisive in speech, and there is little doubt but that his wife, whom he loved dearly, influenced his faith profoundly. Through her he was brought to strong evangelical convictions—chiefly, it seems, through the published sermons and books of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Denney expounded the theology of the Cross as God's sacrifice for the sin of the world indefatigably. The conviction and warmth of his own experience of Christ the Saviour dominates his extensive writings. It was during the quiet years of ministry at Broughty Ferry that Denney laid the foundation in biblical study for his later life of lecturing and writing. He translated Delitzsch's com-

mentary on Isaiah into English and prepared his own commentaries on Thessalonians, II Corinthians and Romans (the first two were published in the *Expositor's Bible* and the last in the *Expositor's Greek Testament*). Notable recognition of his contributions to biblical scholarship came in 1894 when, at the invitation of the Chicago Theological Seminary, he visited the United States with his wife to deliver the lectures later published as *Studies in Theology* and to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. After this began his intimate association with W. Robertson Nicoll who, as religious editor for Hodder and Stoughton, leaned heavily on Denney for books, and reviews and articles for the *British Weekly*.

In 1897 he was elected to the chair of Systematic Theology in the Free Church College, Glasgow (which became the United Free Church College after the Union of 1900), but in 1899 he transferred to the chair of New Testament Exegesis and Theology. From 1899 to 1904 he and James Orr edited the *Union Magazine*. Without doubt his distinguished colleagues, including T. M. Lindsay, J. S. Candlish, A. B. Bruce, James Orr, and James Moffatt, stimulated him and he them. In 1905 he visited the United States again, lecturing in several places, and in 1909 he traversed Canada by rail to lecture at the Presbyterian College in Vancouver. His greatest sorrow was the untimely death of his wife in 1907, which he mourned sorely until his own passing in 1917. Upon the death of Principal Lindsay, Denney was elected to the Principal's Chair by the General Assembly of the United Free Church. His heart was always out amongst the churches to which he gave valuable service in many ways but especially as Convener of the Home Fund Committee. Toward the end of his distinguished career he held strong views for closer relations between the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland.

I. THE NATURAL ORDER

In a casual remark Dr. Denney reminded his readers that while free-thinking has had an evil name in the church no men were ever so free as those who wrote the New Testament.¹ Christianity wins the allegiance of men to Christ alone, and this end can be achieved only where inquiry is based upon fact whether for science or theology.² While Denney had no doubt that the criterion for grasping the sense of God's activity in the world both as Creator

¹ *The Way Everlasting* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), p. 268; cf. *Jesus and the Gospel* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 382.

² On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World" (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1885), p. 16.

and Redeemer is the Cross, certain other ideas he held will interest, if not surprise, some readers. He believed in the evolutionary development of the world, and he felt that if one knows what science and history are then neither can be imagined to be in the first three chapters of Genesis. An historical interpretation of these he did not think to be essential for Christian faith.³ His point seems to be that God as Creator has not fashioned the world as a closed system but that He as Creator continually shows His hand, especially, for Christians, in the *charismata*.

It is natural for an unbeliever to misunderstand even New Testament miracles, because he wishes to conceive them, as it were, *in vacuo*, or in relation to the laws of nature; in the New Testament itself they are conceived in relation to the Holy Ghost.⁴

If Principal Denney did not construct a metaphysical system yet two points of view against which he developed polemics can highlight for us his philosophical approach. The first was the attempt to define the spiritual in terms of the natural; the second the attempt to bifurcate the historical and experiential.

The first is in view of Denney's earliest work⁵ published under the pseudonym "By a brother of the Natural Man" as a criticism of Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. Drummond tried to relate the spiritual elements of experience to natural law in such fashion that the distinction was actually destroyed. It was an attack on freedom and moral responsibility, Denney claimed, and he rose to the defense of freedom. In reply to Drummond's challenge that someone exhibit one law in the spiritual realm qualitatively different from natural law, Denney replied in words reminiscent of Kant:

Everything works according to laws; only the rational being (or, if you please, the spiritual being) has the capacity of acting according to the idea of the law . . . according to principles.⁶

Thus, the use of scientific method in handling facts, he is saying, can justify neither the scientist nor the theologian in reducing the natural and the spiritual to terms of the one or the other. The reduction, therefore, of the elements of life to natural terms (in-

³ Note the following: *Studies in Theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), p. 78; *The Atonement and the Modern Mind* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1903), p. 69; "Fall (Biblical)", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (1908), Vol. V, p. 701.

⁴ *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (The Expositor's Bible, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894), p. 359; cf. *Gospel Questions and Answers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1896), p. 49 and *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 119.

⁵ On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World".

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

cluding the moral elements of conscience, righteousness, sin, love, obedience, and self-denial) is "both irreligious and unscientific".⁷

Conversely, he resisted the tendency, chiefly of the school of Ritschl and Harnack, to bifurcate the experiential and historical from the spiritual and eternal. In the end one cannot divide science and religion, natural and supernatural, history and theology, natural and moral. The world is a unity and is comprehended as a unity. "The idea of God", he says, "must be related to *all* we know; *all* our knowledge must have something of revelation in it, and must contribute to our theology", and through the true idea of God "both nature and history may really be made His instruments . . . they are embodiments of divine truth".⁸ The epitome of this oneness is man who is tied to both worlds and exhibits in his nature, as a creature of the world yet a spiritual being, the oneness of the world as God's handiwork. Scripture teaches, he declared, that man is a piece of nature; the two words "spiritual being" highlight man's spiritual and natural elements; and this unity both of man's life and of the world order as essential to the Christian view of things can be shown in the following:

the God who has established the moral order in which man lives, has established the natural order as part of the same whole with it. In some profound way the two are one.⁹

Now, the implications of this for Denney's theology, and especially for the Atonement, are crucial and some further elucidation is needful. Conscience, he said, shows that the power by which it acts is the same power revealed in nature; thus we have witness to the fact that "there is a moral constitution . . . even of the physical world".¹⁰ Nature is not morally neutral, rather it is the "manifestation, the organ, the ally of God . . . the natural and the spiritual worlds interpenetrate".¹¹ He states the rationale of this in various ways: the moral world has risen on the basis of nature and is set in the perspective of a general doctrine of evolution. Nature is not merely a stage of the moral; it is in some sense its soul. Belief in God means belief that what we call the physical world is caught up and integrated into a system which is spiritual. The whole world, including man, is a process ascending biologically and morally, and this is not to diminish moral responsibility (which

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ *Studies in Theology*, pp. 13, 16.

⁹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 58, cf. pp. 23-24. Note also *Studies in Theology*, p. 74; *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 61-62.

¹¹ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), p. 202.

happens if we look backward but not if we look forward) ;

but when we look *forward*, if we acknowledge responsibility at all, as everyone does, whatever his philosophy, then our responsibility is increased.¹²

Observation can be made of two striking elements: first, Denney sees the whole of nature under the hand of God continually, that is, not simply as the stage where the action takes place but as a part of the drama. Whatever elements of deism continued to shelter in Christian theology, particularly in popular orthodoxy, he rejected. And second, the Atonement, as we shall see, simply must be an objective atonement and the act of God to deal with the whole world (including man) and the effects of evil dispersed throughout the world (including human sin). The world is God's and the Atonement is of cosmic dimensions. For these reasons Denney saw the interpenetration of nature and spirit in such statements as "the wages of sin is death", and, "Christ died for our sins";¹³ but more than this, they identify also the moral and historical environment in which the atonement is accomplished and the medium by which it is applied.

II. MAN AND THE MORAL ORDER

Yet without entertaining either the reduction of the natural to the spiritual and ideal or the denigration of the natural, the moral element of the world, of which human moral experience is a part, is the key feature of the world as we know it, he said. The highest end to which we move in the divine purpose is a moral union with God and to say this is to declare that the union is personal, discrete, and rational. The mystical side of the believer's union with Christ is neither irrational nor can it evacuate morality from the relationship. "The truth is that what is above morality is below morality",¹⁴ written early in his career, remained for him axiomatic.

For Denney, the image of God in man is man's capacity for moral action. The biblical writers, he said, uniformly regard man in nature akin to God, capable of fellowship with Him and designed for it, conscious of moral freedom and responsibility, and therefore morally responsible and free.¹⁵

The question of the nature of man is not settled by haggling over what Adam was (which, he said, is obscure to us) ; rather, man's nature is disclosed by the history of his actions but "interpreted

¹² *Letters to W. Robertson Nicoll* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920), p. 29. Note also the following: *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 195-220, 270; *The Way Everlasting*, pp. 91-98.

¹³ *Letters to W. Robertson Nicoll*, pp. 32, 202.

¹⁴ *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"*, p. 39.

¹⁵ *Studies in Theology*, p. 75.

by the course of God's dealing with him"¹⁶ Man is a spiritual creature because he is made for life in a morally constituted universe and with the power to act morally. In this sense the image of God in him never becomes extinct, "you can lay your hand on every man and say he is organic to the life of God".¹⁷ Man's end is a life in God exemplified in our Lord's incarnate life and in that life conscience is progressively trained to new ranges of sensitivity to the will of God. By the power of conscience (which is a form of love) we put ourselves in others' places and the divine law that addresses us as the ideal through conscience imposes upon us an unconditional obligation.¹⁸ Every man is both free and tied to the moral constitution of the world. Responsibility and the divine act of redemption are consistent with the character of God only if freedom is real. We need entertain the destruction of freedom neither from the side of determinism nor from the side of any doctrine of election.¹⁹ The essential and just claim of Calvinism is that salvation is of God alone. But we need to see the world as made up of forces or channels of good and evil, and ourselves as adding will to will and power to power for good or for evil. On the side of evil this is the secret of its malignant power and spread, whilst on the side of good this is how the efficacy of Christ's Cross is poured into the wounds of the world and the spirit of man. Act for act, will for will, power for power—man acts, yet God triumphs finally to bring our wills into subjection to His own in Christ. Denney says:

When we do what is right we take Christ's side in a real struggle ; when we do what is wrong, we side with Satan. It is a question of personal relations ; to whose will do I add my own ? to whose will do I oppose my own ? And the struggle approaches its close for each of us as our will is more thoroughly assimilated to that of one or other of the two leaders.²⁰

God is the supreme moral Ruler of the universe who acts not arbitrarily but rightly, and who may be called the "Living Law of Righteousness and Love".²¹ The righteous moral law that

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁷ *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"*, p. 31.

¹⁸ *War and the Fear of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916), pp. 107-108 ; note also *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 223.

¹⁹ *Gospel Questions and Answers*, pp. 139-140 ; *Studies in Theology*, p. 84 ; *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (The Expositor's Bible, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892), pp. 343, 349.

²⁰ *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 105. Note also *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 193-194 ; and *On "Natural Law and the Spiritual World"*, p. 48.

²¹ *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"*, p. 53 ; cf. p. 47.

conscience acknowledges is, in fact, the living God and His will. Wrongly, the natural mind tries to depersonalize the law of God ; rather, it is the revelation of the "living, acting, personal God".²² Law, for Paul and in Scripture generally, is neither religious formalism and moralism, nor is it presupposed that "the constitution under which God deals with men is forensic, nor that the moral order of the world is that of an abstract inexorable legalism".²³ God and man are related personally and morally. To say the one is to say the other.

But if there is a God at all, a living, personal God, the wrong, upon reflection, may well seem to be the other way. There is nothing good in the world but a good will, and nothing bad but a bad will ; there is nothing moral at all but the exercise of will. Moral consequences are consequences determined by a moral will, whatever the means employed to work them out, and we cannot hide from the will of God behind the very means which He is employing to express His will.²⁴

Rightly, Denney claimed that apart from personal and moral relations where the law of God has the character of universal validity the relations of rational creatures could have no meaning, neither could such conceptions as righteousness and sin, nor yet atonement and forgiveness. Law thus universalized "ceases to be legal ; it is not a statute, but the moral constitution of the world".²⁵

In a manner similar to Dale's insistence on "interdependence" Denney maintains the moral solidarity of the race. Men, though individuals, are not self-contained, he said, they are essentially related to one another in the unity of the race.²⁶ Any doctrine of the Atonement must presuppose the unity of human life in a common and universal responsibility.

There is no such thing as the absolutely individual man with whose acts, as something between himself and God, we have been dealing. All men are members of a society in which they live and move and have their being morally and in all they do, of right or wrong, they

²² *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 144.

²³ *Studies in Theology*, p. 117.

²⁴ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 145.

²⁵ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 50. On p. 45 he says, "The relations of God to man, therefore, are not capricious though they are personal ; they are reflected or expressed in a moral constitution to which all personal beings are equally bound, a moral constitution of eternal and universal validity, which neither God nor man can ultimately treat as anything else than what it is". Note also *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 168, where law "is the very element of the spiritual life which is common to God and man".

²⁶ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 45 ; cf. *Thessalonians*, p. 92.

both affect and are affected by the body to which they belong.²⁷ Christians declare, therefore, "that the unity or solidarity of the human race in sin is involved in the vital organic connection of all men with each other"²⁸ A society has a certain "spirit" or "mind" that fashions the character of its members, in other words, none of us has anything but what he has received.²⁹ These principles mark the existence of a community of moral life in which God and man share and of which sin is the disturbing, destroying element.

In the widest sense of the word, sin, as a disturbance of the personal relations between God and man, is a violence done to the constitution under which God and man form one moral community, share, as we may reverently express it, one life, have in view the same moral ends.³⁰ Experience joins with Scripture in concluding that men as sinners share responsibility corporately and individually for the "kingdom of sin on earth"³¹ so that however mysterious the problem is, the facts of history and experience are clear. The moral life of the race is a unity into which each individual pours his own acts for maximizing either good or evil. The redeeming and reconciling work of God in Christ is for that reason larger than we usually think of it, because God embraces in the Cross not only the individual but also society and the unmeasured consequences of sin in this world.³²

(To be continued)

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²⁷ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 191; note also *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 22.

²⁸ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 201.

²⁹ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. vi; *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"*, p. 41; *The Church and the Kingdom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), p. 154.

³⁰ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 54; note also pp. 22-26.

³¹ *Studies in Theology*, p. 86.

³² But "the existence of a common or corporate conscience, of which individual conscience for better or for worse is a constituent, implies also the existence of a common moral life, with channels through which reconciling as well as disintegrating influences may flow (*The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 193; note also *The Church and the Kingdom*, p. 154).