
The Preacher and Public Duty

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The Congregationalist Dr RW Dale of Birmingham was a man of truth and action, exemplifying the sense of public duty in Victorian England.

Background

By the time Dale was at the height of his ministry in the 1870s, the decisive change in English life had come about, the secular spirit had begun to invade the middle classes. PT Forsyth, Dale's spiritual heir, reminds us that the middle classes had risen and secured their position under the influences of Calvinism. That meant they regarded man as there for obedience to God, rather than God being there for the service of man. The erosion of this dimension in our national life led to the marginalising of evangelical influence in Britain.

Two strands of unbelief contributed to middle class opinion being decisively secularised:

1. The first could be called *a secular sense of history*. It was not science itself but science interpreted as history that upset the orthodox view of the world. Geology claimed the earth existed æons before man and therefore disproved the creation/flood story of the Bible. What scientists claimed to do was to offer a picture of history, not only in the past, before man was supposed to have existed, but in the future. Auguste Comte, the high priest of rationalism, argued that truth evolved and it was evolving away from Christianity. Thoughtful Victorians were being bombarded by claims that the facts of Christianity as described in the Bible might not be true. Dale began his ministry in these early days of historical criticism of the Bible and geological conflict with Genesis. It left its mark on him.

2. The second followed the line that *much of Christian dogma was immoral* (eg Francis Newman). Some of the truths that lay at the root of the biblical view of God and man: original sin, predestination, atonement, eternal punishment etc., men like John Stuart Mill, described with such terms as "horrifying". The rationalists lapped this up, though strangely they recognized the moral fruit that Christian faith had produced. They had to. Evangelicalism was, even by the crudest of Benthamite principles, seen to be useful. People could see that it was daily changing the face of England – making people more sober, more respectable and more humanitarian.

The rationalists never seem to have seen their own dilemma here, that they admired the fruits of something whose roots they laboured to destroy. The atmosphere behind the 19th century rejection was that there was a higher belief than Christianity. These moral unbelievers said, "Let us be good for good's sake, not for God's". "A man" the agnostics argued "can be moral and yet not acknowledge Christian doctrine". And so, they claimed, can a society and nation. Without the apparent scientific base provided by evolutionism their arguments would have cut no intellectual ice.

Furthermore, a high moral seriousness ran through the Victorian era, almost to the

end. If matters of faith led to conflict, there was still consensus in the area of morals. This gives us the clue to one of the major emphases of Dale's life. If there were these strands of unbelief which Dale tried to battle against intellectually, there was also a strain of moral enthusiasm, which affected the whole temper of the times, with which Dale felt he could cooperate. He identified with many of the political and social aspirations and exertions of the day. There was a moral focus in the public mind. The Nonconformist conscience was its most intense expression, but not its isolated representative. The bond could join High Churchman but Liberal party leader Mr Gladstone to his nonconformist followers – Dale is an example. But the consensus was wider still. Unbelievers shared in this moral solemnity. John S Mill and his utilitarian friends believed earnestly, so we are told, in the importance of being earnest (Wilde 1895). This accumulation of a Christian and moral consensus can be traced back to William Wilberforce's publication in 1797 of *A Practical View of Real Christianity*.

Shaftesbury worked wholeheartedly with reforming unbelievers. Edwin Chadwick was a utilitarian, entirely single-minded in his hatred of dirt, disease and selfish obstruction. Shaftesbury's motivation in joining completely with him in his attempts to eliminate it he expressed like this:

If Saint Paul, calling our bodies the temple of the Holy Spirit, said that they must not be contaminated by sin, we also say that our bodies, the same temples of the Holy Spirit, ought not to be contaminated by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled by unnecessary suffering.

In RW Dale, as “an unworldly man of the world” and an “advocate of Christian worldliness” we see the same passion as we see in Wilberforce and Shaftesbury.

While revolutions raged on the Continent, Victorian England progressed by peaceful reforms. The religious background which formed such leaders as Bright, Shaftesbury and Gladstone produced the acceptance of common moral ideals which is the basis of the Victorian solution. Elie Halevy reminds us that the spiritual energy accumulated by a century of intense Christian effort came to the surface. The Victorian Age was able to apply the accumulated reserves of its Christian tradition to its social problems. But, it failed to preserve those resources. The world of ideas changed. The culture lost its spiritual strengths. The moral consensus disintegrated.

At this point of crisis the ideas changed. Protestantism was attacked, not only from without by unbelief, but also from within. Not only was the Scripture mangled by men, but the Scripture's view of God was miniaturised. Dale was both pressurised by this background and stood out against it as Mr Valiant for Truth.

He had wide ranging interests, eg the social responsibilities of Christian citizenship, his attempt to grapple with higher critical questions, his commitment to the Liberal Party as the trustee of the Nonconformist Conscience, his preaching power and commitment to his own congregation, his failure to hold to an inerrant scripture, and his attempts to cope with and help his congregation with the avalanche of unbelief that came with the evolutionary popularisers.

His Early Life

Dr RW Dale was born in 1829 and in 1853 he began his ministry at Carrs Lane, Birmingham, the same year as Gladstone presented his first budget, and Charles

Spurgeon began preaching in the Exeter Hall. He died in 1895, the year that the Niagara Bible Conference defined the fundamentals.

1 His Conversion

He was converted within the context of Congregationalism. Today it is something of a hole in the corner affair. Not so in Dale's day and for long before. Many such sailed as Pilgrim Fathers. Congregationalism shares with the Baptists the glory surrounding the name of John Bunyan, and has as much claim as anyone to John Milton. Oliver Cromwell the great Independent is writ large in the history of England. John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge, John Howard and David Livingstone, and preachers like William Jay. In the later 19th century the name of RW Dale had the stature to live in such company as thinker, theologian and public figure.

At 14, showing something of the bent of his mind, Dale was engrossed in Butler's Analogy. About 13, "a sermon suggested thoughts about God and my relation to Him which awakened anxieties which lasted for many months". He turned to John Angel James' *Anxious Enquirer* and read it on his knees in keen distress about his personal salvation. But still assurance was withheld. "Was his belief of the right kind?" he asked himself. "I began to think that perhaps my belief was powerless because it was the result of education and not independent enquiry. Under this impression I turned, in my boyish simplicity, to Paley's *Evidences*, hoping that when I had verified for myself the historical foundations of Christian truth, my belief would rest on a right basis ... This set me off on metaphysical adventures which yielded no discoveries of the kind I wanted. At last, how I cannot tell, all became clear. I ceased thinking of myself and of my faith and thought only of Christ, and then I wondered that I should have been perplexed for even a single hour." The living Christ was his stay.

2 His Early Ministry

He trained at the University of London, where he gained a first in Philosophy and the gold medal for his MA. "Germanism" as he called it early became a trial to him. As a student of 22, he lost his hold on the doctrine of scripture, although he never faltered in his belief in the supernatural, or in preaching the great doctrines of the faith. He became assistant to John Angel James at Carr's Lane and then succeeded him. It was to be a life-long pastorate.

His early ministry is the unhappy and confused part of his life as he tried to cope with the secular offensive we referred to at the beginning. He faced this battle twenty years or so before most Nonconformists. It is part of the stature of Dale that he realized so quickly in the 1850s that he was living at a turning of the tide. To all appearances the tide of Christianity was still coming strongly in. But he felt a decisive undertow of unbelief and anti supernaturalism. For Dale, the battle had to do with the very truth or falsity of the faith and its future. He searched about for a rock to stand on to save him being swept away. He retreated from verbal inspiration and took, as his last line of defence, the historical trustworthiness of the Four Gospels' testimony to Jesus as Son of God and Saviour.

His struggles over authority were not helped by the tensions he produced in his congregation, long used to the warm-hearted Calvinism of JA James. "Dale ceased to

be a Calvinist without ever becoming an Arminian”, says AM Fairbairn. When he came to expound Romans 5 he denied that Paul taught the imputation of Adam’s sin. But he certainly should not be seen as accepting a low view of sin. He was appalled by sin. His preaching burns against it. “For myself”, said Dale, “I stand by the ancient faith, and believe the indifference with which the forgiveness of sins is regarded in these times is no evidence of the progress of religious thought but a result of the decline of faith in the living God.” “Man is bad, not only because he voluntarily says and does wicked things, but because he himself is wicked, his very life is corrupt.” “The race itself is fallen – not merely individual men; and from this fall the race needs redemption.”

But he was heading for crisis. As a young minister he had no relaxations. Walking was his only exercise and that too often left the mind in the study while the body was out abroad. He began to feel he was no use. He spoke of hours of despondency, assailed by shadowy fears that his intellectual powers might before long, lose their clearness and vigour. And all the while he was hurling himself into his ever widening work load. His lectures at the Independent College, later Mansfield College, Oxford, were on English literature, logic, philosophy and homiletics.

He launched, in 1855, into open air evangelism, preaching in the open air four nights a week. “I enjoy it amazingly”, he said and the local press noticed that most of the men who attended these open airs were not church-goers. Up to 2,000 gathered round the cabinet maker’s cart which served as the speaker’s platform.

The subjects that recur during his first two years’ preaching were regeneration, justification, sanctification, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the deity of Christ, judgement to come, faith. But very soon there are indications too that his equally life long emphasis on Christian duties come out in practical sermons on justice, kindness, industry, courage, contentment and so on.

As he became more familiar with his people, he saw the urgency of speaking to them where they were. He set himself to gain a thorough knowledge of the details and methods of the workings of shop, office, factory and business. He astonished people who consulted him as minister on his practical knowhow.

Human life, as I know it, is the life of Birmingham manufacturers, merchants and tradesmen and of working people who work in iron and brass and tin, who make pens and guns and jewellery, hardware of all sorts and beautiful things in silver and gold. I think of the troubles and temptations which come to them in their trade.

The discovery that some resented sermons on what they called “weights and measures”, made him even more determined to speak on these matters. When some people were excluded from the church because of business irregularities it deepened his desire to drive home to the conscience that faith and fraud are incompatible. The only way to prevent corruption in society were men who concentrated the hours of business as fully as the hours of prayer, and who carried on their secular calling as the servants of Christ.

By the time he was 30 he suffered serious collapse. Three months break restored him. But was he going to be able to carry on as before?

His Widening Ministry

1. In 1862, Dale embarked on a controversy which launched him permanently into the British public eye. The year 1862 marked the bicentenary of the Great Ejection. The

Evangelical Alliance, which James had been instrumental in founding, wanted it to have no controversial application, for EA was sensitive to the growing impetus of the disestablishment movement. An Anglican Evangelical Vicar in Birmingham, though recognizing the folly of 1662, thought the bicentenary idea would hardly further unity.

But it went ahead and Dale's address at the Birmingham Town Hall was sensational. Many of the seats had to be removed to allow people to stand shoulder to shoulder. Hundreds were turned away. More than once Dale brought the audience to their feet in excitement. He always drove home his nails so hard he sometimes split the wood. For example, he said that the truest fulfilment of the bicentenary would be for the eight to ten thousand evangelical clergy who agreed with the 2,000 over baptismal regeneration should come out. A pamphlet of what he said ran right throughout the country.

2. When Carr's Lane Chapel was closed for building alteration, Dale moved his congregation to the Birmingham Town Hall. Men and women came who never darkened a church door. Many years later, Cardinal Newman, regretting his own and other people's failures to reach people, referred with thankfulness to the hold Dale had upon the city and the force with which he preached the gospel. These services gave an example of that. This is his final call to his hearers:—

Once more, and for the last time, in the presence of Him who became man for us sinners and for our salvation, who died, the just for the unjust, rose again to be the Prince and Saviour of men, I implore you not to neglect the critical duties which determine your present relation to God and your future eternal destiny. Many of you, I know, will never come to hear me preach again. This, this is my final message to you – God became man and died on the cross that he might rescue you and me from sin and wretchedness. To be ungrateful for His love, to reject his mercy, is wilfully to put away from you a life of communion with God on this side of death, and immortality and holiness and glory in the world that is to come.

3. In 1869, Dale was elected President of the Congregational Union – at 39 the youngest to hold the office. He was now at the height of his powers. Exhaustion and uncertainty were behind him. His presidential address was entitled *Christ and the Controversies of Christendom*. "Preach Christ", he urged, "Let him speak for himself". It was the only answer, 1. to the resurgence of Rome, 2. to the devaluation of man inherent in the positivism of Comte, 3. to the rising discontent in the working classes, 4. to the way that the revolt against revelation had led to a contemptuous rejection of the supernatural. It was a spirited assault on the destructive tendencies of the German critics. Yet, even though he had satisfied himself thoroughly, with the help of Westcott and Lightfoot, on the historical trustworthiness of the Gospels, his stand was not on the verbal authority of the Bible, but on the living Christ and his work in the believer. His transformation in personal certainty is so radical that it must have a key. Surely it lies in what Dale tells us happened one Easter morning around that time. Half-way through his preparation the thought of the risen Lord broke in upon him as it had never done before. It was an experience that sent him out into the world reinvigorated within. I quote him:

Christ is alive, I said to myself. Then I paused – alive? Then I paused again – alive! Can that really be true? Living as really as I myself am? I got up and walked about. I repeated,

“Christ is living – Christ is living”. At first it seemed strange and hardly true. But at last it came upon me as a burst of sudden glory. Yes, Christ is living! It was for me a new discovery. I thought that all along I had believed it. But not until that moment did I feel sure about it. And then I said, “My people shall know it. I shall preach about it again and again until they believe it as I believe it now”.

4. The Moody Mission of 1875. For a while Dale saw what he had always longed to see – men and women pressing into the kingdom, not as solitary souls, but by scores and hundreds. Up to 200 were admitted into Carr’s Lane in that period, 75% standing well. In 1873/74 Dale’s articles in *The Congregationalist* had been on Revival, and how the power of the Spirit of God had been manifested in striking ways, bringing new epochs in the life of the Church. He was confident God would move again. But when a movement of the Spirit did come, causing those increased numbers of conversions, it was not Revival and not what Dale expected, for Mr Moody was not at all the kind of man for whom he had been looking! But he came deeply to value him. After a few nights he was amazed and delighted. 12,000 a night crowded the Bingley Hall Dale wrote:

Moody’s address was simple, direct, kindly, hopeful, a touch of humour, a touch of pathos, lit up with a story or two that filled most eyes with tears. There was nothing very remarkable about it. Yet it told. It told ... There was sunlight in it. I told Mr Moody that the work was most plainly of God, for I could see no relation between him and what he had done. Mr Moody laughed cheerily and said he would be very sorry if ever it were otherwise.

When Moody was abused and misrepresented, Dale met scorn with scorn and fought with his whole heart in the conflict, taking issue among others with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

5. Dale was, above all, a thinker and a theologian – he produced 18 large books. In 1875 he began to deliver in London his Congregational Union lectures on the Atonement. It is what Dale is mainly remembered by.

John Stott quotes his work on nine occasions in *The Cross of Christ* and says:

RW Dale’s great book *The Atonement* was written in order to prove that Christ’s death on the cross was objective before it could be subjective, and that “unless the Sacrifice is conceived under objective forms, the subjective power will be lost”.

One indication of the relevance of what Dale had to say on this to his generation was the fact that 23 editions appeared in less than thirty years. Stott also shows the influence Dale’s book had on the young Martyn Lloyd-Jones in 1929. Lloyd-Jones was preaching the new birth but had been challenged that “the work of Christ” appeared to have little place in his preaching. So he asked the proprietor of a second hand book shop for the two standard books on the Atonement. The man produced Dale and Denney. After locking himself away to study them, Lloyd-Jones emerged claiming to have found the real heart of the gospel. It changed the focus of his preaching.

So, Dale’s heart and preaching were full of the living Christ and his cross and he deeply grasped the link between the NT doctrine of atonement, justification by faith and the believer’s joy. Nothing showed this more clearly than his observations on Moody’s second visit to Britain in 1883/84 which happened to be around the time of the 400th anniversary of Luther’s birth.

Has it ever occurred to you that justification by faith has lost its great place among us? Depend upon it, Luther was right in insisting upon its supreme importance. It lies in immediate and vital contact with the atonement. I should like to tell you of something much in my thought – during the recent Luther celebrations. Nine years ago people said Mr Moody did not preach repentance, he taught men that they were saved by believing. During his present visit, no such criticism has been made. He's insisted very much on repentance and on it in the sense in which the word is now used by evangelical as well as other divines – as though it were a doing of penance, a self-torture, a putting on of a spiritual hair shirt instead of a *metanoia*. Now observe the effect of this. Crowds went into the enquiry room as before. But the results have been inconsiderable. I have seen none of the shining faces that used to come to me. In 1875 I received about 200 converts. As yet, I have not received a dozen. In 1875 Moody preached in a manner which produced the effect produced by Luther. And received similar criticism. Why? He exulted in the free grace of God. His preaching of grace led men to repentance, to a complete change in life. His joy was contagious. Men leapt out of darkness into light and lived the Christian life afterward. But “do penance” preaching has had no such results. I wrote to Moody about it and he said it had set him thinking. In parting with the Lutheran truth concerning justification by faith, you part with the springs of gladness.

The Ministry of Christian Worldliness

In an enormous cascade of energy which spanned 30 years Dale lived a paradox – an unworldly man of the world, playing a distinguished part in its great movements, yet utterly untouched by the taint of its spirit.

The MP for Birmingham was John Bright who first took Dale to the Commons in 1862. He sat under the spell of Gladstone's pleasant tenor voice and was amused by the rough boyish wit of Sir Robert Peel.

Early in 1864 Birmingham put on a special tribute to Bright in the Town Hall. The speech fell to Dale and he dealt with one theme – the responsibilities of Christian Citizenship. “Of all secular affairs, politics, rightly considered, are amongst the most unworldly and, as such, a man devoted to political life ought to be seeking no personal or private good. The true political spirit is the mind that was in Christ Jesus, ‘Who looked not unto his own things but also on the things of others’.” “I can never listen to RW Dale without thinking of the church militant,” John Bright said, “There is an ardent conviction about him, whether he's preaching the gospel or whether he is declaring his convictions in the political sphere.”

Dale never meddled in the rough work of election contests, but he never kept secret his Liberal party loyalties. When the Reform Bill of 1867 was being contested, and the theme “we must educate our masters”, ie the working classes began to emerge, it was Dale who was asked to deliver the first of their special series of lectures in Birmingham.

Three years of preparatory debate before the controversial Education Bill of 1870 saw him live in the thick of the action. No government could conceive a means of setting up a national education system that would offend neither dissenters nor establishment. Dale was on the Royal Commission as the nonconformist representative for the working of the Education Act. It involved enormous work, twice a week for eighteen months.

So active was Dale in the education debate that some wanted him to stand for parliament. But he would not listen, then or ever. The House of Commons was

incompatible with the pastorate and would have been a step down from the pulpit. But the education debate did not leave Dale where it found him. "You see what a power you are", said one of the education commissioners.

The value his own civic community put on him emerged when he had a call to a pastorate in London. The city of Birmingham united to put a restraint upon him, an effort, described by the *Birmingham Post* as without precedent. A letter signed by all the leading men of the city urged him, on public grounds, to remain. "All who care for the intellectual, moral and political life of Birmingham share our apprehension." Especially did they ask Dale to retain his public interest.

His church also urged him to stay, you'll be glad to know! They expressed their appreciation of the spiritual strength and joy in Christ that his ministry gave them with great force.

He stayed, and became even more involved in municipal life. People would sometimes say to him: "There are no politics in heaven". "In heaven" he said, "there is no poverty, no crime, which unjust laws help to create." He refused to accept that religious devotion could excuse neglect of public duty. God's commandments cover the whole of our life. When a prominent Roman Catholic said to him, "When, Mr Dale, are you going to look after your soul?" he replied, "I have given my soul to Christ to look after".

Civic righteousness became a passion. When he pulled off his coat to speak in the Town Hall, it was a sure sign of what was coming. If the meeting was tempestuous, he ploughed along with the steady rush of an Atlantic liner shouldering its way through blustering seas. He would fight night after night, formidable as an antagonist, for major housing reconstruction, for slum clearance, public health, free libraries, art galleries, speaking on all with an exact knowledge. "There was nowhere", says the *Birmingham Daily Post*, "that his vigorous personality was not manifested. There was hardly any part of our public life which he did not touch, and in touching, elevate, strengthen, and brighten." Dale himself said, in his Yale lectures on preaching:

For men to claim the right to neglect their duties to the state, on the ground of piety, while they insist on the state protecting their homes, their property and protecting from disturbances even their religious meetings in which their exquisitely delicate and valetudinarian spirituality is developed, is gross unrighteousness.

This dictum expresses the rule of his public life. If it was clearly for the public good, he felt it was his Christian duty to support it.

It may not surprise you that one of the factors that led to Dale's withdrawal from the secular arena was the intractable issue of Ireland. The resignation of Joseph Chamberlain, Dale's own MP, from Gladstone's cabinet over the Prime Minister's plans for Irish Home Rule was a sign of what would eventually split the Liberal party.

Ministry in the Light of Heaven

Here then is Dale, an unworldly man active in the world of men. How did he continue as a spiritual, Biblical man in the pulpit?

In his last years, a haunting feeling arose that he had given too much attention to political and social affairs. He writes to the acting Governor of South Australia in 1894: "It is a cowardly thing perhaps, but, as the shadows lengthen, I am glad to be wholly out of politics. It is late to have made the discovery, but there is something startling in

the sudden extinction of the fires that burnt during the Commonwealth. 20 years after Cromwell, the first vigour and zeal were almost gone. 20 years still, they had quite vanished. The question assailed me, whether the explanation did not lie, in part, in the premature attempt to apply to the political order the laws of a diviner kingdom, and to do it by direct political action.”

When the Free Church Council was formed in 1892 as a kind of church pressure group on moral, political and social issues, Dale stood against it from the first. He was always convinced that the Church was a spiritual institution and social and political reforms were not the object of the Church’s activity. “I look back some twenty years. I remember a successful movement for reform in Birmingham. The individual men who took part in that movement had certainly learned the principles, and derived their spirit, largely from the nonconformist churches in the town. I do not believe however, that if the nonconformist *churches* of Birmingham had been organized to secure such results in municipal reform, their efforts would have been in any way effective, as the efforts of their individual members were as Christian citizens in the community.” This theme of motivating Christians to be salt and light as citizens he never qualified. We can learn a lot from him.

We would be entirely mistaken, however, if we thought these years were spent in passive regret. Far from it. They were marked by a rekindled longing for the salvation of men. In 1891, when he was 61, he took a cottage in north Wales and there he would read his Bible, book by book, with minute care, noting the truths it seemed to him he had dwelt too lightly on. Preaching, he now felt, should be perhaps his sole work. His failure to reach men as he had seen Moody reach them, weighed upon him.

I have been thinking much about my preaching. It has a fatal defect. I fear that the truth occupies too large a place in my thought, and that I have been too little occupied with the actual persons to be restored to God. This comes from a moral and spiritual condition which involves serious guilt. God forgive me. It is want of conformity in me to the mind of Christ, a hardness of heart which must be subdued and melted by the grace and truth of God, if the remaining years will have a different character from those that have gone before.

A member of the congregation, at the close of an hour’s sermon preached in a most painful stillness, a sermon on the awfulness of sin and the glory in Christ, protested: “If Dr Dale continues to preach like that I shall not come. I cannot stand it. It goes through me.” “Ah yes”, said Dale. “but it was more awful to me. It is hard to preach like that, but it must be done.”

Then he had a heart condition and was brought close to death. At first:

I was too weak to find direct consolation in the eternal springs of joy ... But God was there. When I became stronger, the sense of justification has given me great bliss. The great words “as far as the east is from the west, so far hast thou removed my transgression from me” gave me more than peace. At times they filled me with light ... Had great peace last night in a vivid sense that redemption began on Christ’s side, not mine. That my safety was the fulfilment of His work.

His letters show his yearning to convey the gospel of the grace of God. “Forsyth said a good thing the other day. He said the time had come to bring back the word grace into our preaching.” “The trouble is,” said Dale, “the impressions of God’s transcendent

grace, which have come to me during the past few months, are not to be translated into words. I feel like a dumb man ... If God would but touch my lips!"

George Barber, his assistant, speaks of their prayer times together in the last three years of his ministry. "How earnestly he would pray that God would save the unsaved. He would make me almost oppressed with a burden to save sinners. No one could have listened to such prayers and not have felt that to save men was the height of all Dr Dale's life and work."

He died on Wednesday, 13 March 1895. On his desk lay a sheet with its last sentence broken off in the middle. It states the principle by which he lived; its incompleteness suggests the mystery of the great hope he had entered. Its theme has bearing on our subject:

"UNWORLDLINESS" does not consist in the rigid observance of any external rules of conduct, but in the spirit and temper, and in the way of living created by the vision of God, by constant fellowship with Him, by a personal and vivid experience of the greatness of Christ's redemption, by the settled purpose to do the will of God always, in all things, at all costs, and by the power of the great hope – the full assurance – that, after our mortal years are spent, there is a larger, fuller, richer life in ...

Always a philosopher, it was the mystery of pain that he pondered as death approached. But there was much more!! Peter Taylor Forsyth tells us that in his last illness Dale said that it never came home to him before, as it did in his extreme pain that Christ was not only his Saviour but his King, who had he right to exact anything and everything from him in His silent discretion.

His Ministry Assessed

What, in the end, disturbs us about Dale is that in the heat of conflict over the reliability of the scriptures, he moved his ground and sought verification of Christian truth in our experience of Christ rather than in an inerrant scripture. In his search for ultimate authority he gave up far more than he need have, and therefore rescued less than he might have. In *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels*, published in 1890, though the volume is a tough-minded and confident demonstration of the historical trustworthiness of the Gospels, it is not the Four Gospels as such that form the basis of his confidence, but the believer's experience of "the living Christ, who ever since his resurrection has been saving and ruling men." (Final page, LCFG) The foundation for authority on which he settles was what Forsyth later called "the infallibility of the gospel", what God in Christ accomplished for sinners.

But Dale's view of authority and experience must be kept in perspective. What helped him out of his earlier crippling uncertainty were the following considerations:

1. That the power of the true preacher of the Christian gospel is the power of the truth and of the Spirit of God. The Christian preacher has never had to rely on the authority of scholars to bring home the reality and glory of Christ's redemption. The apostles were witnesses of Christ and their testimony has come down to us and we have experienced the same salvation. Like the apostles, the Christian believer is grounded firmly in Christ.

2. That when the historical trustworthiness of the records is assailed by scholars using all their ingenuity to destroy their authority, we have no option but to respond with scholarship. We believe that the story of Christ, which the church received from

the apostles, has been held fast to ever since. However, when assailants compel us to discuss questions of literature and history, those questions must be determined by literary and historical evidence.

3. That this controversy does not touch the faith of Christian men in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of men and the Way to God. Faith in Christ does not ask for the protection of friendly scholarship; and the assaults of hostile scholarship do not reach it. It needs neither Tacitus nor Pliny, Justin Martyr, nor Irenaeus. It is in actual possession of the salvation which Christ has achieved for mankind. By means of this argument Dale made the problems raised by higher criticism subordinate issues.

4. But, the assault of unbelief is a serious one and the Christian scholar discharges an honourable service. It is within his province to show that our Lord's earthly history is not, the deliberate invention of imagination, but is the story which was told by the elect friends of Christ, whom he trusted to make his gospel known to all nations and that it was after this manner that the Son of God lived among men."

5. It is also noteworthy that what our age means by experiences would have been foreign to Dale. Everything Dale conveys is a massive objectivity. "The poles between which his life ever moved," says Fairbairn "were the awful majesty and attractiveness of God and his own unworthiness of the God who so irresistibly attracted him".

The Bishop of Winchester wrote of Dale's section in his book *Christian Doctrine* where he asks "For whom does the word God stand? I doubt if there is another man living who could have written that passage – nor many dead."

Furthermore his view of the exceeding sinfulness of sin explains the emphasis on the objective atonement as the grounds of the sinner's forgiveness. When he speaks of experience this is the way he puts it: "The Christian life is originated and sustained in activity by the actual experience of the objective reality of God's righteousness and grace and the power and glory of Christ as redeemer."

Conclusions

1. If the decisive change that came over the middle class was the secular spirit of unbelief, the decisive change that came over protestantism in the 19th century was the subjective spirit of liberalism, with its anthropocentric idea of God as tributary to man. That view of God was not the living and true God Dale preached about and obeyed and knew in experience. God was not, to Dale, man's first asset and benefactor, the offerer of experiences. Man was God's first subject and servant.

2. Dale's deficient doctrine of Scripture is a parallel with those Victorians who retained the moral consensus but rejected the gospel. The next generation found it was impossible to keep the moral fruit without the gospel root. Dale's position on Scripture underlines the fact, that, if we are to retain the objective truths of the gospel for which he so signally fought, we must also fight for the authority of the Scripture where God has preserved those very truths for the running generations.

No gospel, in the end, no moral dynamic

No authoritative Scripture, in the end, no objective gospel.

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