

Enlightenment and Modern Period

Donald Baillie (1887–1954)

George Newlands

I. The Early Years

Donald Baillie was born on November 5, 1887, 18 months after his brother John, also to become a distinguished theologian. From Inverness Royal Academy, Donald went on to a First in philosophy at Edinburgh and an assistantship in the philosophy department. He studied theology in Edinburgh, Marburg, and Heidelberg, and after a brief period with the YMCA in France, was inducted at the parish of Bervie in 1918.

The Bervie period saw the publication of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith in Outline* in 1922. When the full *Christian Faith* was published in translation in 1927, the first 32 paragraphs were translated by Donald. In 1920 he had published an article in *The Expositor* entitled "What Is the Theology of Experience?" based on Schleiermacher and critical of James and Russell.

In 1923 he moved to St John's, Cupar, and thence to Kilmacolm and eventually to St Andrews University. Throughout his life people testified to Donald's sense of humor and his great capacity for building friendships. He was said to be a man with no enemies.

II. Faith in God

The year 1927 saw the publication of *Faith in God and Its Christian Consummation*, based on Kerr Lectures delivered in Glasgow. The book was concerned, like all Donald's work, with the relation between faith and experience. Faith, experience, and practice are integrally related. The book was of first-rate quality, but the thesis about the relation between faith and morality was very controversial, then and now. After much criticism, his basic argument has become more popular again in recent writing. It can be said that Donald's name was not well known until the appearance of *God Was in Christ* 20 years later.

Part I sets out from a chapter on faith, authority, and reason. Faith is not dependent on custom, authority, or suggestion. It is not dependent, either, on reason or philosophy. On the contrary, it is now seen that philosophy is dependent on faith. Faith is "reason's highest exercise." It is often held that faith is based upon religious experience (Schleiermacher)—but belief and religious experience are the same thing; or that faith is based on an empirical psychological investigation of the religious experience of mankind (James)—but this is not faith's own testimony. Empirical psychology has a real though limited value in assessing belief. There is a revolt against experience in Brunner and Barth, which is of some value if not overdone.

The will to believe is impossible. Faith has to be waited for as a gift from God. But James has taught us that faith is somehow conditioned by the will. The next chapter covers faith and moral conviction. The way out of doubt to faith is by the moral consciousness. If morality means anything, it ultimately means God. Good men have an unconscious faith—this is the religious a priori. Tyrell and others are adduced in parallel: "True spiritual religion is a development, not of magical religion, but of the moral life." Morality without religion is meaningless.

The last section of Part I is entitled "Faith and the Knowledge of God." This chapter deals with objections that the account given is too irrational—religion in fact arises from fear; but that is not true. Religion is more than morality, but not separate from morality.

Part II is entitled explicitly "Christian Faith." How is faith related to history? "The historical fact of Jesus becomes certain to us in kindling our faith in God." This is faith in God through Jesus Christ. "The object of Christian faith is neither God apart from Christ, nor God and Christ, but God in Christ."

We come to “Faith and the Gospel of Jesus.” There is much recent concern with faith healing. In fact “suffering, nobly borne, has a peculiarly refining influence on character.” It can be accepted in faith as part of “the mysterious discipline of pain” (p. 290). “Thus the cross of Christ became for all time the supreme example of God’s paradox.” He ends with these lines, which in many ways encapsulate his whole understanding of the Christian life:

We must be neither too impatient of antinomy nor too tolerant of it, if we are to advance to a clearer understanding of the deep Christian secret. Yet it is not altogether by thinking the matter out, but by living it out in daily Christian faith and love, that we shall arrive at a deeper insight in which the paradox will be less acute. And a book about hope cannot end better than upon this note of hope and expectation (p. 308).

In 1930 Donald left Cupar and moved to moved to Kilmacolm. In 1934 he became Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of St Andrews. Though he had done academic work, he had not worked in an academic context before. This pattern was not untypical before the advent of the modern career structure of lecturer to professor; the scholar/minister brought his parish experience to academic life and the education of the ministers of the future.

III. A Preaching Ministry

Much of Donald’s literary legacy consists of unpublished sermons—often models of theological refinement and literary art. Donald had political views, notably on the need for social justice, in relation to the miners’ strike. But the sermons are concerned largely with individual faith and morality. Though Donald knew Niebuhr, there is little on the complexity of the modern industrial world, the grey areas of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. His world was largely that of the small town and the university in delightful rural settings. From St Andrews he was often at Swanwick, at Student Christian Movement (SCM) conferences. He was involved in much discussion with student groups—this in some ways was his great strength.

IV. The Later 1930s

The year 1935 saw him in Germany, leaving St Andrews on July 31 on a nostalgic journey via Cologne to Marburg, during which he appears, as we

shall see later, to have attempted to liaise with members of the Confessing church and to find out what was going on. On July 26 there is a letter from Rudolf Bultmann, thanking him for his hospitality in St Andrews and looking forward to seeing him in Marburg. There is a postcard from Marburg on August 7. By August 9 Donald is writing from the Hospiz St Michael, Wilhelmstrasse 34, Berlin. He has come from Marburg and a stay with the Bultmanns. Of the Bultmanns he writes that “he and his wife were kindness itself” and contributes a poem to their visitors’ book: Bultmann arranged for him to meet Von Soden, Hermelink, and Frank, who was Paul Natorp’s successor. “It is somewhat thrilling to be in Berlin, and I’m looking forward to exploring it—seeing such legendary places as Unter den Linden, and the Brandenburger Tor and the Tiergarten.” On September 19, replying to a letter from John written from Hohenschwangau, he mentions a service in the Old Catholic Church in Heidelberg: “But at several points the priest had to pause for quite a time owing to the deafening noise made by brownshirts marching outside ... He was about as pro-Nazi as anybody I met in Germany.” He adds: “I hope you are enjoying Munich, Nuremberg, Wurzburg and Brussels.”

The year 1936 was to be eventful. In the 1930s he was much involved in SCM work in Scotland and England. He travelled to Marseilles, and represented the church at the Geneva celebrations of the Reformation and at the Faith and Order Committee in Lausanne. On May 8 he has a conversation in Lausanne with Tillich. Tillich thinks the Germans very pro-Nazi. Donald is not so sure, from conversations in Berlin, Marburg, and Munich. Writing on May 26 from Lausanne, he says that the Nazis are acceptable to some in Germany because they saved Germany from communism. “I was thinking last night that it is extraordinarily difficult for anyone living on the Continent just now to be other than pessimistic.” By September 12 he is writing from St Andrews: “I think I am very much the better of my five and a half months away from Scotland ... I’m much interested to hear that you visited Niemoeller in Dahlem. I’ve read more than a third of Barth’s *Word of God* in English. It really is a terrible book.”

In 1938 Donald was again on the Continent. A postcard from Berlin on August 27 comments: “Last night at Frau N’s house. Lunch today at home of As [mussen]. I’ve learned a very great deal about things.” In a note from Karlsruhe on the 29th he says that he had spent a fortnight in 1910 “bei Fraulein Zeiss” in Jena. “I am now more convinced that criticism and discontent are far more widespread and acute than ever.” He then he travels to Geneva, spends a few days in Heidelberg and is back home on September 6. On the 10th he writes: “I have on my mantelpiece a beautiful photo of

Niemoeller that his wife gave me.” On March 18 he had written to John about, “Non Aryans who are hoping to come to Edinburgh.”

V. 1939–54

Donald and John remained very close, not least on social issues. On November 18, 1941 he reminds John of the need to stress more of the social challenge of the gospel than he has done to date. On May 12, 1943 he made a broadcast in German on “Die Hoffnung des Evangeliums,” in a very irenic tone. This continues—Donald to John, November 12, 1944: “It seems to me that public utterances are getting foolisher than ever about ‘what to do with Germany’ and with hardly a voice raised against them, except that of the Bishop of Chichester (who has perhaps spoilt his chances of succeeding at Canterbury by his brave utterances).”

In 1946 Donald was chairman of the Communion and Intercommunion section of the preparatory committee for Amsterdam. He was prepared to speak when necessary in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. On May 26, 1946 he seconded an amendment to a motion by his friend Nevile Davidson to limit the spread of the atom bomb: “To have any bombs already made dismantled ... would have an immense effect on international affairs.” The motion was defeated.

The year 1948 brought his masterly *God Was in Christ*. The American response was very positive. There is a good review in *Time* of August 23, 1948. On October 20 James McCord wrote to Scribners (with a view to an American edition) that, “In every respect I believe that it is the most significant book in the field of christology, at least for a decade.”

Pit Van Dusen called it, “incomparably the most satisfactory interpretation of the person of Christ published in this century” (in *Christianity and Crisis*, December 25, 1950). *God Was in Christ* was completed in July 1947, but includes material from 1942 and reflects a theme on which Donald had been working for many years before. It was beautifully and clearly written. And for many people it struck just the right note in christology. It defended historical criticism. It preserved the mystery of the incarnation in the tradition, under the banner of paradox.

The first section of chapter 1, on the end of Docetism, firmly settles for the centrality of Jesus’ full humanity. The case is substantiated in the next chapter. But more is necessary. Why a christology? (chapter 3). “We shall never do justice to the love of God if we leave out the supreme paradox of the

Incarnation . . . A true Christology will tell us not simply that God is like Christ, but that God was in Christ” (pp. 65f.). Christology is a check on modern misinterpretations of history.

Chapter 4 offers a critique of christologies—anhypostasia, kenosis, leadership, and lordship. We might wonder if he would have found in Rahner a view of kenosis very similar to his own outlook—God is the one for whom to be is to give oneself away to others—but that was not then available. His own favored concept was of course paradox (chapter 5). We have seen that he had spoken of paradox years earlier. The fundamental paradox in Christian life is “Not I, but the grace of God” (p. 122): this is a reflection of the incarnate Christ. A toned-down christology is absurd. “It must be all or nothing—all or nothing on both the human and the divine side” (p. 132). This was the vision which Donald pursued, sometimes painfully but always unswervingly, in his own life.

Chapter 6 develops the Godward side of incarnation, in a chapter on incarnation and Trinity. A succinct discussion of Barth and Hodgson leads to reappraisal. Experience of grace is experience of God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Trinity is central to faith and devotion. But Christian experience is not neutral. It is rooted in the framework of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation, hence atonement (chapter 7). People may lack a sense of sin, yet suffer from all sorts of mental complexes. They are looking for acceptance, by themselves and others. In addition, our actions often hurt others. Reconciliation in depth is costly—hence the cross, and (the next chapter) the Lamb of God. The death of Jesus shows the essential nature of God’s love. Atonement is both objective and subjective. Atonement renders the incarnation comprehensible to us, through the forgiveness of our sins. A short epilogue on the body of Christ stresses the importance of Christian community: a society of sinners forgiven becomes the nucleus of a new humanity.

Karl Barth was to raise a question about a central area of the book in his *Church Dogmatics* (KD 4.2.60, (1955) = CD 4.2.55–6):

As he sees it, a text like Gal. 2.20, “Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,” is not merely a statement about the being of the apostle or the Christian, but it offers a *schema* for the knowledge of Jesus Christ himself . . . And somewhere along this way the question will always arise whether the relationship between the *unio hypostatica* and the *unio mystica* may not be reversed; whether it is better reversed, whether the *unio mystica* is not to be understood as the true and basic phenomenon . . . and the *unio hypostatica* as the secondary . . . the representation or mythological copy of the religious happening as it takes place in us.

From Barth's perspective this was the Achilles heel of religious neo-Protestantism yet again. But Baillie too had reservations about aspects of mysticism, and might perhaps have responded that the faith-creating presence of God is as objective as anything in the created order, while the Chalcedonian formula is as much a cultural construction as it is a revealed blueprint of the divine nature. All our concepts remain limited eschatological suggestions, as Barth once famously put it.

The year 1950 brought the publication of *David Cairns: An Autobiography*. The "Memoir" contributed by Donald in some ways echoes his own life. The great man had serious doubts and imperfect health: "Again I have a vivid snapshot of myself standing beneath a flaring gas-jet in my bedroom in Lonsdale Terrace, absolutely dismayed . . . I remember how cold the starlight seemed on those winter nights" (pp. 10–11).

VI. Theology of the Sacraments

This book (1957) is the posthumously published course of Moore Lectures delivered in San Anselmo, California in 1952. The introductory chapter explores "Sacrament, Nature and Grace." Today there is a rediscovery of biblical theology, and it would be good to have a rediscovery of the sacraments. The word is important. But ours is a sacramental universe, and sacraments operate through human faith. We then come to "The Sacraments and Sacred History." What can we say of the dominical institution of the sacraments? They go back "right into the life and ministry of Jesus." There is a continuity between the incarnation and the sacraments. They also have an eschatological reference, pointing forward to the Kingdom.

We come to "The Sacrament of Baptism." There is a connection between the ministry of Jesus and a baptismal rite of repentance and cleansing and initiation (1957, 77). In baptism children are brought into a new environment. God's initiative precedes our faith (89).

Chapter 4, "The Real Presence," goes back again to the Highland communion season. "The most objective and penetrating kind of presence that God can give us is through faith." The feast is a memorial feast but it is also more. The fifth chapter deals with "The Eucharistic Offering." All our worship is an offering to God, in which we offer ourselves, but "we can only make an offering in union with Christ's eternal sacrifice" (116). This involves the whole church. "May it not be that both the doctrine of the Real Presence and the doctrine of the eucharistic offering, begin to come right

and to take their true shape when they are controlled by the idea of the sacrament as a corporate act of the one body of Christ?" (124). In dealing with the sacraments he starts out, as often, from human nature and human experience. On the Trinity, too, he affirms that, "the main truth is that the doctrine is based on history and experience."

Something should be said here of John's biographical essay on Donald at the beginning of the *Theology of the Sacraments*. A main theme of the essay is that "Donald especially was from an early age haunted with religious doubts. The strain on his spirit was acute. His only confidante was his mother" (15). Stress and depression often reappeared. He suffered from chronic asthma. "He would put to himself and to me the question as to whether the extreme bodily lassitude was the cause or the result, or merely the accompaniment, of the darkness of soul" (21). The other side of all this was his charm and generosity, the "gentleness, wit and piety" of which his pupils were so often to speak, the "I yet not I" of the paradox of grace which he so profoundly instantiated in his own person. Donald would appear to have been one of those highly talented individuals for whom great achievement is linked inexorably with suffering. The deep shadow of the Calvinist culture in which he was brought up was perhaps a burden that alternately stimulated and crushed his creativity.

VII. What Is the Church?

Donald's commitment to ecumenical causes was deep, but it was not uncritical. At the General Assembly of 1953 Donald presented the report of the Inter-Church Relations Committee. He stressed that the ecumenical movement was increasingly important, though still in its infancy. The task of the church regarding refugees (an old concern of Donald's) was still very important. There was a need for more study of christology and ecclesiology, "because it was by going deeper that the Christian churches came nearer to each other in Christ."

Donald Baillie died in October, 1954. C. B. Ketcham, an American graduate student, wrote in a letter: "We came expecting to be impressed, but we were overawed. We came expecting to be friends, but we were loved. Great men and great scholars may come to St Mary's College, but no man can ever take his place in our hearts" (Baillie Papers, University of Edinburgh).

The German translation of *God Was in Christ* appeared in 1954. Rudolf Bultmann wrote to John on December 27, 1954: "Es ist das bedeutenste

Buch unserer Zeit ueber das Thema der Christologie. Zu dieser Interpretation, das ich in meiner Terminologie also 'existentielle' bezeichnen moechte, fuehle ich mich tief mit ihm verbunden und reich gefoerdert'' (It is the most significant book of our time on the subject of Christology. I feel myself deeply identified with and richly encouraged by this interpretation, which I might call in my terminology "existential.")

VIII. The Sermons

Donald gained a reputation for being an outstanding preacher, yet he never published his own sermons. His sermons, rather like Newman's, tended to be concerned for the individual in concern for other individuals. *To Whom Shall We Go?* was published in Edinburgh in 1955. *Out of Nazareth* appeared in 1958. Another area to which Donald gave much attention was prayer. This dimension lent a stability and a catholicity to his work which was a source of theological freedom.

IX. Conclusion

Taking as a whole the testimony of written and oral evidence, it would seem that if twentieth-century Presbyterians could be saints, Donald Baillie came about as close as anyone to that category. He seems to have been universally liked and respected, loved by many. His friendship was hugely valued by those who knew him best. He was modest, genuinely humble, intellectually brilliant. He was imaginative—perhaps sometimes too much so for his own good. He was certainly a man of flesh and blood, sometimes frustrated, angry about what he regarded as unfair practices, with distinctive theological and political views. He struggled against debilitating illness for most of his life. He devoted himself to others—to his mother, to his congregations, to his students—in ways which might not always have been in his own best interest. His published work was neither voluminous nor encyclopedic in its range, nor even always strikingly original. It was always perceptive, judicious, creative. It represented an open Christian faith which sought inclusivity and hospitality, which recognized weakness and suffering for what they are, and pointed to faith and love as ways of coping with any circumstances.

References

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