

– Ford’s teacher during his time at Yale. A word more about the title of Professor David Ford’s new book: ‘Christian Wisdom’ may not be perceived in the greatest possible profundity or sympathy, but its particular import may very well reside in its cool certainty, in the face of much ‘scientific’ opinion to the contrary. But we must remember that in any vaudeville dialectic the intellectual upper hand always resides with the seemingly obtuse or the primitive. Ford shows us that such folly and the people who dare to perform its language – let us call them Christians – still have a responsibility to challenge the secular in its peculiar amoral inertia.

Sang Y. Cha,
University of Cambridge



James Denney (1856–1917): An Intellectual and Contextual Biography, James M. Gordon, Bletchley: Paternoster, 2006, pp. xvii, 286, ISBN 978-1842273999. £24.99

Few Scots who are at all interested in the life of the Church or the task of theology can fail to have heard of James Denney’s great work *The Death of Christ*, though few perhaps will have read it – more’s the pity. The great virtue of James Gordon’s excellent book is that it places that work – and Denney’s thought in general – firmly in the context of the theological and cultural developments of late Victorian and Edwardian Scotland. Great figures and issues flit through the pages as Gordon recounts Denney’s life and context. Thus we read of Robertson Smith and the vexed question of the nature of scriptural authority. Of Henry Drummond and his attempted reconciliation of theological and scientific world views. Of A. B. Bruce and his contention that Christianity ‘is essentially an historical religion’. All of these issues were to influence the development of Denney’s thought – positively and negatively.

Gordon effortlessly recalls a lost Scottish ecclesiastical world as he explores the religious roots of the Denney family in the Reformed

Presbyterian Church of Greenock. This denomination traced its roots back to the Covenanters of the seventeenth century and championed a strict orthodoxy in terms of religious outlook. Gordon notes that although Denney was marked in a decisive way by his ecclesiastical origins it was but to a limited extent. Thus Denney did not think that orthodoxy was to be found in ‘credal fixity, or determined adherence to past articulations of the Faith’ (p. 212). So too with the matter of trustworthiness and reliability of scripture – a burning matter in Denney’s student days due to the Roberston Smith affair and one which Denney’s theological teachers were heavily involved in on both sides of the argument. In later years Denney was to counter the then prevalent Princetonian ‘infallible/inerrant’ view of the authority of scripture with a view much closer to that of the classical Reformed position of Calvin which relied upon a ‘dynamic interaction of biblical word and the Holy Spirit’ for its claim to authority. Gordon quotes Denney’s 1904 defence of his position to Glasgow Presbytery to telling effect on this point:

It is quite possible for me to profess my faith in the infallibility of Scripture. I believe if a man commits his mind and heart humbly and sincerely to the teaching and guidance of Holy Scripture, it will bring him right with God and give him a knowledge of God and of eternal life. But literal accuracy and inerrancy are totally different things; and we not believe in that at all.
(p. 216)

Given that *The Death of Christ* is Denney’s most famous work it is surprising that Gordon’s treatment of it is so brief – a mere three or so pages concluding simply that the major themes of Denney’s soteriology are found therein: ‘sin, atonement, broken and restored relations, God’s love as foundational, propitiation, personality, assurance – each of them key motifs in Denney’s theology’ (p. 162). However, Gordon returns to Denney’s atonement theology at various points throughout the book and rightly notes Denney’s claim that ‘Not Bethlehem, but Calvary is the focus of revelation’, and Gordon further demonstrates Denney’s credentials as a theologian of the atonement by showing

that “From his earliest sermons to his final volume he expounded the death of Christ as the ‘centre of gravity’, ‘the diamond pivot’, ‘the very incredibility of the gospel [that] makes it credible’” (p. 221).

Gordon draws on a great variety of material – published and unpublished – to offer his account of Denney’s life, and a fulsome account it is. This is the type of theologian that Scotland once seemed effortlessly to produce. Intellectually rigorous, insightful, possessed of great integrity and not a little warmth, Denney emerges very much as a figure of his time involved in many of the great issues of the day – including the preparatory work on the proposed union between the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland. Initially sceptical of the intentions of the ‘established Kirk’, particularly on the issues of ‘spiritual liberty’ and ‘credal conformity’, nevertheless Denney eventually became more committed to the cause of union, but never uncritically so.

Gordon is particularly good in his analysis of the role of experience in Denney’s later thought, particularly as it works out in his book *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*. Here themes that were always present in Denney’s approach come to take centre stage in his mind and the privileged place of personal spiritual experience is strongly emphasised. ‘The basis of all theological doctrine is experience, and experience is always of the present ... it is to the fact and experience of reconciliation ... that we owe the very idea that God is love.’ (p. 205). This was not an unproblematic approach even then – and perhaps even more so now in these post-liberal times, but Gordon skilfully shows how Denney clearly argued that traditional abstract concepts of the atonement such as sin, righteousness, satisfaction, imputation, law, penalty and wrath remain ungrounded unless they are related directly to a subjective appropriation on the part of the believer. It was almost universally agreed by critics of this work that Denney had conceded too much to the category of experience, but Denney was not to know this as he died of pneumonia before the work was published.

James Gordon has produced a sensitive and insightful account of Denney’s life and work. And although he is not always uncritical of

Denney's approach, nevertheless his appreciation of Denney's legacy shines through at every point. Theology – more than most disciplines – is a discipline of fads and fancies and in the current climate there is a tendency to overlook or even diminish the contribution of scholars of that period such as Denney, Orr, Bruce, Drummond and others of that ilk. To be sure the questions that they faced are not the questions that we face, but we have more to learn than perhaps we think from the way in which Denney and his contemporaries combined both critical and engaged scholarship with commitment to the historic substance of the Christian faith in their attempts make faith meaningful for their age. James Gordon has done the church community in Scotland a great service in reminding us of the importance of Denney's contribution to the ongoing conversation that is the discipline of theology.

Peter McEnhill,
Kilmacolm Old Kirk



God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics, Samuel Wells, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. viii, 232, ISBN 978-1405120142. £19.99

All personal letters are interesting. The letters of the Church Fathers naturally have an especial attraction, for in these epistles we are confronted with a lively – if not intimate – fullness of wisdom that continues to speak to us through the stories of the Church. Sam Wells' book is an attempt at such an epistle. That he has written in such a mode makes it impossible to think of Wells only as a theologian – inevitably we think of him as something even more interesting than a theologian, we think of him as a *companion*, and as a certain kind of companion: a minister. That is, we cannot think of Wells as a companion without thinking of him in his vocation of a minister. At the same time, when once we have read these stories as letters, we cannot help knowing that his being a minister *is* his chosen way of being a companion.

The manifest charm of Wells' stories is vast, and we can scarcely outline it wholly or to name all its joys. Yet we can be sure that some