

The Theology of the Gospels  
James Moffatt  
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Dr. Moffatt at the outset finds it necessary to justify his use of the term theology in connection with the Gospels, which so many at present consider a refuge from all theology. He has sympathy with this frame of mind and half apologizes to it for the scientific compulsion he feels under to recognize in the Gospels the presence of this unpopular ingredient. It is amusing that after some rather hard words about the scholastic type of theology, he borrows from the greatest of the schoolmen his characterization of what the ideal of theology should be. The existence of theology in the Gospels is based on the principle that the personal belief in Christ voiced in them carries with it convictions of the early believers' relations to God and the world, convictions which are organic to the religious experience. For this theology a distinction is to be drawn between what was time-conditioned and accidental and what was classical and fundamental, and this applies not merely to the Gospel-tradition and the Evangelists but equally much to Jesus himself. There are elements even in Jesus' teaching that cannot be incorporated into our world view and as such the demonology and eschatology are specified. What the norm is for distinguishing between the accidental and the fundamental does not become clear. The divine revelation made through Jesus Christ lies back of the theology of the Gospels, but the term revelation receives a very subjective coloring being made to consist in "the character and purpose of Christ, His personality, His disclosure of the divine nature in word and deed, the experiences to which his Spirit gave rise." But while this was undoubtedly essential to the theology of the Apostolic age, it remains an open question whether Troeltsch is not correct in maintaining that from the standpoint of modern theology Christocentric views may be as logically superseded as geocentric conceptions in cosmology or anthropocentric ideas in metaphysics. It all amounts to this that the theology of the Gospels, even of Jesus, is not the norm, but the reflection of religion and no objective standard remains by which to regulate the religious consciousness.

Much more satisfactory than this introductory chapter are the four succeeding ones dealing successively with the Eschatology of the Gospels, the God of Jesus, the Person of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus. Here the author is on exegetical and historic ground. The authenticity of the eschatological element in the teaching of Jesus is fully recognized. At the same time it is maintained that Jesus' conception of God and His own Person and the Kingdom involve a religious attitude towards the future which did not find congenial or complete expression in the apocalyptic categories of the age. With this we heartily agree if the implied conflict be found merely between the Jewish Apocalyptic and the teaching of Jesus. The Jewish Apocalyptic knew nothing of any gradual preparation for or anticipation of the eschatological order of things. And Dr. Moffatt most admirably shows that the idea of a present, gradually coming Kingdom cannot be eliminated from the Gospels. But if the conflict between the catastrophic and the gradual is conceived as immanent in the mind and teaching of Jesus Himself, we must beg leave to dissent. Where is the proof that the eschatological statements exclude the presence in Jesus' mind of any antecedent gradual development? That in their sublime absolutism they treat this element as for the moment negligible affords no proof of its absence from the mind of the Speaker in its larger compass. The only proof available for this purpose would have to lie in the alleged affirmations of the immediate nearness of the eschatological catastrophe as excluding time for preparatory development, but even if the reference of such passages to eschatology proper is not challenged and the point of chronology pressed to the utmost, it hardly

follows that Jesus must have deemed the intervening period too brief to find room in it for the developments which the present Kingdom requires. On the other hand the present Kingdom is never so represented as to preclude the idea of a catastrophe at the end. It is scarcely correct to say on the basis of the parable of the imperceptibly growing seed that the denouement is "the end of an inward development". The parable itself does not represent the harvest as the organic uncatastrophic result of the ripening process but reads "As the fruit is ripe, he putteth forth the sickle because the harvest is come" and these latter words leave room for all the eschatology of the other class of sayings. Nor can it be claimed that the ethical teaching of Jesus, simply because it is not in each instance correlated with the eschatological hope, is for that reason internally detached from or indifferent to such hope. The two had their higher unity in Jesus' insistence upon the glory of God as the supreme end of His mission. Precisely because He was an ethical teacher in the service of God, and an eschatological enthusiast for the sake of God, these two motives could not clash in His mind. Had He been an eschatologist for the sake of eschatology, as Schweitzer and others make Him out, the case would have been different. But Dr. Moffatt admirably brings out the supremacy which the idea of God held in Jesus' mind with references to both poles of His teaching. "It is His conception of God (which) renders it impossible for us to believe that His teaching upon character and conduct was transitory and subordinate in principle to the eschatological hope of the coming Kingdom."

In the chapter on God the writer falls into the modern fault of one-sidedly emphasizing the benevolent, paternal aspect of Jesus' conception of God. This is done not merely to the neglect of the opposite side, the sovereign, authoritative, retributive character everywhere ascribed by Jesus to God, but even to the point of denial of the retributive element, when this is represented as merely another form of God's paternal attitude, thus reducing all punishment to the category of fatherly discipline. It is, of course, easy enough to subsume authority in general under the idea of fatherhood, but when the authority expresses itself in the infliction of eternal punishment the category of fatherhood has plainly been transcended.

In the chapter on the Person of Jesus the ultimate dependence of the Messianic consciousness on the consciousness of Sonship is duly insisted upon. We doubt, however, whether it is in accord with the Gospels to call the former a mere modification of the latter, as is done on p. 131. The two remain distinct relationships and only objectively, not subjectively, psychologically, is the official relation represented resting on the more fundamental one. We are glad to see that the author gives to the Sonship which lies back of the Messianic vocation a deeper, more solid content than that of a perfect ethico-religious communion with God. It is something unique not merely in degree but in principle. "It is not inaccurate to state", the writer says, quoting Dalman's words, "that nowhere, even in the synoptic tradition, do we find that Jesus called Himself the Son of God in such a sense as to suggest a merely religious and ethical relation to God—a relation which others also actually possessed or which they were capable of attaining or destined to acquire". But this falls still short of the recognition that the Sonship of Jesus transcends the sphere of the vocational and lies in the region of the ontological. According to Dr. Moffatt the Sonship is in itself a relation pertaining to the sphere of function, at least on p. 130 the consciousness of it is described as a consciousness of purpose, a consciousness of being sent to fulfill the ends of God on earth. While, therefore, differing from the Messiahship in content, it would not seem to differ from it in the general plane on which it moves, and it is not clear, what greater depth and richness are imparted to the consciousness of Jesus, by making it center in Sonship than in Messiahship. It would be difficult to show that Jesus' conception of Messiahship

was not sufficient to cover even the highest that is subsumed under the filial relationship if the latter be defined not in terms of being, but of vocation and purpose.

The concluding chapter on the Spirit of Jesus largely deals with the Fourth Gospel. The writer, while not recognizing the authentic character of the discourses in John, seeks to bring out the continuity that exists from a religious point of view between the historical significance of Jesus viewed under other categories and the ideas here developed under the category of the Spirit. The historical Jesus promises the Spirit “not as the principle of a new life, but as a special equipment for emergencies.” It is quoted as proof of the authenticity of the synoptic tradition in general, that it does not follow Paul in grouping the whole ethico-religious content of the Christian life under the Spirit.

There are some things in Dr. Moffatt’s book with which we find ourselves unable to agree. But we are in full accord with his ideas so far as they are the legitimate elaboration of the view stated in the concluding sentences: “There are methods of treating the religious ideas of the Gospels, within as well as outside of the church, which render them practically a blank page for faith. One is the tendency to explain the Christian ideas independently of a historical Jesus, or to minimize the cardinal and creative significance of His personality for the beliefs which are associated with His name. Another is to confine His religion to a literal, historical reproduction of what He said and did on earth, identifying Him with some eschatological or humanitarian propaganda of His own age. Such methods by minimizing or exaggerating the historical significance of Jesus, are untrue to the standpoint of religious faith from which the four Gospels are written, faith in the Living Lord, who said according to the Fourth (17:26), *I have made known to them thy name, and I will make it known.* Theologies can be got from other standpoints, but none of them will be a theology of the Gospels, and it is very doubtful if any of them will prove to be much of a gospel at all.”