

Jesus and the Gospel
James Denney
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Dr. Denney's latest book puts us under the strange necessity of heartily praising its contents and at the same time deploring most deeply the main purpose for which it was written. We confess to having seldom read a book productive of such a sudden and painful revulsion of feeling, from a sympathetic and enthusiastically admiring state of mind to one of sharp protest and radical dissent, as the work before us. Dr. Denney's style and manner of presentation are so brilliant and yet so warm and genial, he carries us along so easily, so absolutely compels our belief in the irrefutableness of his argument, that, when he proceeds to make the disagreeable application, we find it more than ordinarily difficult to arrest the momentum of conviction acquired and turn our minds all at once in the opposite direction. The sense of disillusionment at the close is so poignant that it inevitably gives rise to the question, whether perhaps the profound agreement in which we imagined ourselves to be with the writer was not after all a delusion, arising from a misinterpretation on our part of the real drift of the discussion, so that, if we had only read more carefully and between the lines, we would have disagreed from the beginning. Whether the case lies actually as just stated or whether it is a simple instance of *non sequitur* between approved premises and a false conclusion, we find it extremely difficult to decide.

Dr. Denney sets himself to answer the following two questions: *First*, "Has Christianity existed from the beginning only in the form of a faith which has Jesus for its object, and not at all in the form of a faith which has had Jesus simply as its living pattern?" And *secondly*, "Can Christianity, as even the New Testament exhibits it, justify itself by appeal to Christ?" The timeliness and pertinence of these questions will be immediately recognized by everyone who is not a stranger to the critical discussions and religious movements of the day. For these discussions and the resulting movements have, so far as the Person of Christ is concerned, all narrowed down to this, whether Jesus historically claimed for Himself and actually received from the very first in the apostolic church a place as the object of religious devotion, or whether He simply meant to take His stand, *primus inter pares*, as the subject of religion, the model of faith among His followers, and was, at least for some time, treated in the apostolic church as entitled to no higher rank and no different position than this. It is in modern form the old, ever-recurrent question, whether, in the religious concerns of the soul with God, Jesus stands on the side of deity and humanity both, or of humanity alone, whether He is the object of worship and the ideal worshiper in one or the latter only. It will be noticed that it is not a question of either the one or the other, but of both together or merely the one. Everybody recognizes that, inasmuch as Jesus was a true man who exercised faith and prayed and gave glory to God, He *had* religion. But not all are willing to admit that, side by side with this, Jesus knew Himself and the church from the beginning knew Him in another aspect, in which He did not practice but *received* religion. Compared with this fundamental question all other problems connected with the life of Jesus and the history of the early church dwindle into insignificance. It will be still further noticed that, strictly formulated, the question is not whether Jesus claimed to be the Messiah or was recognized from the beginning as the Messiah, for this question may be answered in the affirmative and has as a matter of fact been answered in the affirmative without compelling the further admission that Jesus meant to offer Himself as an object of religious devotion. The conception of the messiahship is more or less flexible. It may be so construed as not to place the Messiah on the side of God but on the side of

man. All depends in this respect on the definition of the messianic functions. If these are conceived as strictly mediatorial and in connection with this the messiahship is thoroughly spiritualized, it will, of course, become apparent that the Messiah cannot be kept outside of the range of faith and worship as their proximate object. But when the mediatorial aspect of the messiahship is less emphasized, it is possible to avoid this. Harnack, e.g., finds that even the earliest accessible sources of the gospel tradition are pervasively messianic, and nevertheless he also holds that in the gospel as preached by Jesus, which these sources disclose to us and of which this messianism was an ingredient, there is no place for Jesus Himself as an object of religion, but only for the Father. The problem, therefore, must be so formulated as to open up through and beyond the messiahship the inquiry into that higher and more definite aspect of the Savior's significance from which His position as the recipient of religion is no longer separable. On the other hand, it must be remembered that, while in the abstract Jesus might have been the Messiah in his own estimation and that of His earliest followers, and yet not have been the object of religion, He could not under the given circumstances have claimed or received such a transcendent religious significance without being at the same time the Messiah. Those who attack the historicity of the messianic consciousness of Jesus thereby *ipso facto* also undermine the claim of Jesus to the place and rights of deity. Dr. Denney's mode of putting the problem and of solving it admirably keeps these distinctions in mind. His argument is many sided, calculated to meet the contentions of Wrede and Harnack alike.

The two main questions are dealt with in succession. Book I is devoted to the inquiry into the attitude of the New Testament church towards Christ. Here the Christianity of Peter (in Acts), of Paul, of the epistle to the Hebrews, of the first epistle of Peter, of James, of 2 Peter and Jude, of the Synoptic Gospels (as distinct from their record of the teaching of Jesus), of the Apocalypse, of the epistles of John, and of the Fourth Gospel is dealt with. The presentation of the evidence is masterly, and we do not hesitate to say overwhelming. It is clearly brought out that there is no process of gradual deification or of an increasing tendency to draw Jesus within the scope of religious veneration observable anywhere, but that from first to last the attitude of the apostolic church is unwaveringly and undifferentiatedly the same. Dr. Denney has put all lovers and defenders of the faith under obligation by writing this clear and cogent summary of the facts. And, be it observed, this is a summary whose convincing force is independent of any particular position in regard to literary problems in New Testament criticism. The New Testament documents from the least to the most Christological among them are at one in this, that they make the religion of the believer terminate in Christ. He is the object of faith and trust throughout in such a high sense that no distinction is drawn between God and Him. This attitude is inherent in Christianity from the first. A different kind of Christianity has never existed. The advocacy of a different kind, as being the true Christianity after the mind of Christ, is equivalent to asserting, as the writer pointedly puts it, that the history of the Christian church duplicates the history of the world, in that it presents the spectacle of a fall almost immediately after the beginning of things.

In the second book Dr. Denney puts the more fundamental question, whether the facts of the life and the mind of Christ are such as to support this historical attitude of Christianity. Did Jesus claim such a place in religion for His own Person? Here again the evidence is admirably arrayed. The author takes due account of the apologetic necessities of the situation. He does not draw his arguments indiscriminately from the Gospels or even from the Synoptics, but draws upon the sources which, according to the current two-document hypothesis, are believed to underlie the

Synoptics. The treatment of these, however, is prefaced by an inquiry into the historical evidence for the resurrection. In this inquiry the share which the purely historical data, and that which moral and spiritual predispositions respectively contribute towards the production of belief, are carefully distinguished and the reasonableness of their joint operation is acutely vindicated. The self-revelation of Jesus, according to the Logia source (or Q), so far as its contents are common to Matthew and Luke, is then first discussed, and afterwards the same thing is done with reference to the Gospel of Mark. Here again every unprejudiced reader must receive the impression that the evidence sweeps away all doubt as to the substantial basis which the attitude of the apostolic church had in the mind of Jesus concerning Himself. With cumulative force after the examination of each piece of testimony the author brings down the sledge hammer of his argument to the conclusion that the faith of the church was fully justified by Jesus' own consciousness, a conclusion recurring at the end of each section with the effect of a sort of refrain, all the more impressive because of the monotony of its repetition. The too often prevailing notion, as if the larger part of this apparent support could be placed to the account of the dogmatizing productivity of the early church, and thus eliminated from the actual history of Jesus, is shown to break down at each point when tested by the concrete facts. The author professes his willingness to admit, and in regard to some points actually does admit, the modifying influence of the later church faith in the shaping of the gospel tradition, but he contends, and that with irresistible force of logic, that to explain the messianic and divine consciousness attributed to Jesus *as a whole* from such a source is nothing short of preposterous. In practically all cases where this is attempted, it rests on the *petitio principii* that, because the attitude and statements of the gospel Jesus bear resemblance to the role played by Him in the belief and worship of the early church, therefore the former can be nothing else but a precipitate of the latter carried back into the life of Jesus. The possibility of a true historical continuity and causal connection, which is after all the first and most plausible hypothesis to suggest itself, is thus ruled out from the beginning. Perhaps the most delightful portion of the argument is that in which Wellhausen's view in regard to "the nest of the Gospel" in Mark (8:27-10:45) is subjected to criticism. Wellhausen contends that the Jesus of this section is essentially different from the Jesus of the rest of Mark, and would explain this difference on the principle that here the gospel about Jesus and the religion of Jesus, as produced by the early church, are thrown back into the story of the Savior. The Jesus of the earlier chapters is a Jew, here the Christian Jesus appears, the representative of the religion of the cross. Dr. Denney shows how utterly unnecessary and baseless such a construction is, and how naturally the change in attitude and program on the part of Jesus here noticed, so far as a real change exists, can be explained from the historical situation at this point of our Lord's career.

The reviewer sincerely regrets that he cannot here bring his remarks to a close, but is bound to say a few words about the anticlimax which Dr. Denney has prepared for his readers in the last chapter. This chapter explains the purpose to which he would have us put the result of his historical investigation. The purpose is twofold. On the one hand he wishes his conclusions to stand as a barrier and protest against every form of religion which would evacuate Christianity of the divine Christ as an object of trust for salvation and an object of worship. He claims, and rightly claims, that these things are essential to the Christian religion, and that where they are eliminated Christianity has ceased to exist. But on the other hand—and if we may judge from relative emphasis and insistence, the author has most at heart this second consideration—he also wishes to show that the whole essence of Christianity lies in this, and accordingly makes a somewhat impassioned plea for requiring nothing more than the profession of this as a test for membership and ordination to the teaching office in

the Christian community. He even proceeds to formulate this essential and sufficient content of the Christian faith in a brief symbol: "I believe in God through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord and Savior." From the adoption of this as the only creed, he expects the deliverance of the church from its present intolerable situation. To the creeds at present in force Christian people are becoming more and more averse because they trammel their intellectual and spiritual freedom. The trouble is not merely that these creeds are too elaborate, so that a return to the more ancient and simple symbols, say that of Nicea, could afford the needed relief. As between the Westminster Confession and the Nicene Creed, Dr. Denney would favor the former, because it contains less metaphysics and more practical religion in the prominence it gives to the *ordo salutis*. The objection is not a matter of degrees, it is one of principle: the confession should be no creed in the sense of a statement of truth believed, but a simple declaration of a practical religious state of mind. And be it noted, Dr. Denney wishes his new declaration of faith to be restricted to what the bare words affirm; it alone, not its implications and presuppositions, is to be the bond of Christian fellowship.

What shall we say to these things? Perhaps the *first* and most obvious thing to be said is what has already been intimated at the beginning of this review, that by these statements the impression is created as if Dr. Denney had not quite meant what the unsuspecting reader would naturally take him to mean in the body of his book. Can we be sure, after this, that when he interprets the New Testament as placing Jesus on the side of God this is meant in the sense of full essential deity? May it not perhaps be meant in the Ritschlian sense of a value judgment, or at least intended to leave room for this as a recognized Christian attitude falling within the terms of the proposed confession? The mind putting this question will naturally recall certain statements here and there cropping out in the earlier discussion, in which the author reveals his aversion to metaphysics, and more particularly one statement in the closing chapter to the effect that the difference between Arianism and Athanasianism lies wholly outside of the sphere of the Christian faith in the fiduciary sense. Yet we are loath to believe that this is Dr. Denney's personal position. When he affirms that Christ stands on the side of deity, this means more for him, we take it, than a value judgment. It carries metaphysical implications. Unless we are mistaken, his own theological conviction is that of an Athanasian. But for all we can see he has surrendered the mind of the church into the hands of the Ritschlians. To the confessing church the confession which he puts into its lips can, if we understand his statements aright, be hardly more than a value judgment. It is something, he tells us, from which all metaphysics must be on principle excluded, something to be kept so absolutely untheological and undoctrinal that it may not even carry its own implications and presuppositions. In other words, as a church member Dr. Denney wishes his faith to be voided of all doctrinal content. But this does not prevent that in another capacity he may retain and even cherish the metaphysical implications and presuppositions. He himself professes to attach considerable importance to the speculative problems and discussions of theology. This would certainly seem to bear out the correctness of our belief that his own intellectual standpoint is not that of Ritschlianism. It is only the confessing consciousness of the church that he would make agnostic to metaphysics. His exclusion of metaphysics has a practical religious, not an epistemological, basis.

In the *second* place, we must ask whether such absolute divorcement of the Christian confession, even in its simple, most practical form, as a test of church membership, from all theological content is possible? In our opinion, it is not. There can be no declaration of practical faith at all which shall be workable as an objective test for inclusion or exclusion in a religious community, except in some

terms of belief. It is in regard to this matter, as with the Kantian categories, if we may be excused for quoting such a metaphysical analogy; as without these there can be no sense perception, so there is no recognizable Christian experience or expression of experience without at least a modicum of Christian belief. The doctrine may be simple and primitive, but once given it does not differ any longer in principle from a formal creed. There is a fundamental metaphysics which it is not possible to keep out of any creed, however brief and practical. The religious consciousness can no more slip out of the intellect as its normal organ of operation and expression than a man can slip out of his skin. Dr. Denney's own proposed confession does not escape from this necessity. It may exclude the anti-Arian implication, but it cannot exclude a number of other implications equally theological, if not so palpably metaphysical. To speak of a "Savior" implies sin, and "Savior" itself is a term back of which there is a certain theological perspective. On Dr. Denney's own showing "our Lord" implies belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which, by the way, we think it illogical to make a condition on the wide basis of mere trust in Christ as divine. When Dr. Denney seems to take the ground that religious belief, doctrine is always the precipitate of religious life, we would place over against this the view that a certain amount of it is the indispensable prerequisite and inevitable concomitant of religious life in the conscious sphere. In many cases it does not follow life but precedes it and enables it to become conscious of itself. It is simply not true that the Christian faith is always primary and the Christology always secondary. Without a rudimentary Christology there can be no Christian faith, and therefore we are not able and have no right to recognize such faith and leave the Christology wholly out of account.

In the *third* place, Dr. Denney overlooks that this unity which he would produce by his simplified confession needs no longer to be created, because it already exists in the invisible church, in which all Protestants believe. It rests on a bond deeper and closer than any confession can make. But what is superfluous from the point of view of the invisible church becomes wholly inadequate from the point of view of the visible church. No visible church organization can lead a normal healthy existence on such a basis. Even in the apostolic age there was a large background of authoritative doctrine behind the practical faith in Christ. Nor is it desirable that the visible church should divest herself of the right to formulate and proclaim her belief in the form of a creed. Dr. Denney asks this sacrifice of the church in the name of spiritual and intellectual freedom. This demand for freedom, be it noted, is not in itself a specifically religious demand. It is simply an expression of the *Zeitgeist*. In many of its modern manifestations it reveals even a pronouncedly antireligious spirit, and assumes the character of a protest against all authority as such, in religion as well as in other spheres, divine as well as human. And in the name of this demand for freedom the church is asked to surrender her organic function and her time-honored rights in the matter of confessing her belief in the great truths of the Christian religion! Instead of following Dr. Denney's advice, it is our duty to emphasize, especially as Reformed believers, that submission to the revealed truth is of the very essence of the Christian religion, being one of the fundamental aspects of that absolute dependence on and surrender to God in which true religion consists. Because we wish to be more fully religious, religious in our intellect as well as in our will, we desire a creed, in order that our acceptance of the truth may be articulate.

Fourthly, Dr. Denney's conclusion does not follow with logical stringency from his premise. That a certain thing is of the essence of Christianity gives us no right to conclude that the church should subsist on no more than this essence. While this might be a debatable question so far as ordinary

members of the church are concerned (even then debatable only if the essence be taken in a solid, doctrinal, verifiable sense), we think it impossible to extend this to the office-bearers of the church in their teaching capacity. Who can seriously propose that the church shall put this unnatural restriction upon her life in the sphere of belief, and muzzle herself, while all forms of error are rampant and mordant round about her? And, apart from this apologetic necessity of a common confession, it is to ignore the church's right to development and progress in faith, thus to tie her down to the level of what in all parts and at all times have been the common essence, the minimum, of her faith. What conscientious believer in the Reformed truth would want to entrust the teaching of his children to one the sole guarantee of whose soundness was subscription to such a formula as Dr. Denney proposes? He endeavors to show the reasonableness of his plan even for church teachers by the observation that the men who made the creeds exercised such freedom in the very act of making them, because previous to their making the creed there was as yet no creed to bind them, and applies this line of reasoning specifically to the Westminster Confession. But he overlooks that in the very quotation made by him the members of this assembly solemnly bind themselves to abide by what was to them the strictest of all creeds, of not merely human but divine obligation, the Word of God. To them such freedom was possible because they were in their consciences bound by the Scriptures. Under the author's plan it is not possible, because we have reason to fear that he would not contemplate such an obligatory submission to the Bible as the Word of God.

This leads us in the *fifth* place to our concluding remark. We cannot but feel that an insufficient recognition of the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation, the acceptance of the authority of Holy Scripture, lies in the last analysis at the root of the false position Dr. Denney takes. Because the Christian church is and always historically has been a church which believed in the Bible as an authoritative revelation, as well as a church trusting in Christ for salvation, because the former was recognized to be as much of her essence as the latter, therefore she has from early times felt in duty bound to act as a professing, creed-making church. Where this belief in the Bible is in principle abandoned, or in the same degree that it is weakened and represented as immaterial, a lack of interest in and finally intolerance of creed must of necessity result. We trust, however, that the evangelical, especially the Reformed, churches are not yet sufficiently loose from this their scriptural foundation to regard Dr. Denney's proposal as within the realm of possible experiment.