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The Place of Christ in New Testament Faith

by James Denney (1856-1917)

The following article is taken from the introductory chapter of Denney's book, *Jesus & The Gospel*, originally published in 1908 (Eaton & Mains, NY). James Denney was a prominent New Testament scholar and theologian of the United Free Church, Scotland. His other books include, *The Death of Christ* and *Studies In Theology*. This present essay is in the public domain, and the original pagination has been kept intact for purposes of reference. The electronic edition of this article was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal. It may be copied and distributed without restriction.

When we open the New Testament we find ourselves in presence of a glowing religious life. There is nothing in the world which offers any real parallel either to this life, or to the collection of books which attests it. The soul, which in contemporary literature is bound in shallows and in miseries, is here raised as on a great tidal wave of spiritual blessing. Nothing that belongs to a complete religious life is wanting, neither convictions nor motives, neither penitence nor ideals, neither vocation nor the assurance of victory. And from beginning to end, in all its parts and aspects and elements, this religious life is determined by Christ. It owes its character at every point to Him. Its convictions are convictions about Him. Its hopes are hopes which He has inspired and which it is for Him to fulfil. Its ideals are born of His teaching, and His life. Its strength is the strength of His spirit. If we sum it up in the one word faith, it is faith in God through Him--a faith which owes to Him all that is characteristic in it, all that distinguishes it from what is elsewhere known among men by that name.

This, at least, is the *prima facie* impression which the New Testament makes upon a reader brought up in the Christian Church. The simplest way to express it is to say that Christianity as it is represented in the New Testament is the life of faith in Jesus Christ. It is a life in which faith is directed to Him as its object, and in which everything depends upon the fact that the

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believer can be sure of his Lord. Christ so conceived is a person of transcendent greatness, but He is a real person, a historical person, and the representations of His greatness are true. They reproduce the reality which He is, and they justify that attitude of the soul to Him which the early Christians called faith, and which was the spring of all their Christian experiences. This, we repeat, is the impression which the New Testament makes on the ordinary Christian reader, but it is possible to react against it. In point of fact, the reaction has taken place, and has been profound and far-reaching. Two main questions have been raised by it which it is the object of the present work to examine. The first is, How far is the description just given of the New Testament correct? Is it the case that the Christian religious life, as the New Testament exhibits it, really puts Jesus into the place indicated, and that everything in this life, and everything especially in the relations of God and man, is determined by Him? In other words, is it the case that from the very beginning Christianity has existed only in the form of a faith which has Christ as its object, and not at all in the form of a faith which has had Christ simply as its living pattern? The second question is of importance to those who accept what seems at a glance the only possible answer to the first. It is this: Can the Christian religion, as the New Testament exhibits it, justify itself by appeal to Jesus? Granting that the spiritual phenomenon is what it is said to be, are the underlying historical facts sufficient to sustain it? In particular, it may be said, is the mind of Christians about Christ supported by the mind of Christ about Himself? Is that which has come to be known in the world as Christian faith-known, let us admit, in the apostolic age and ever since-such faith as Jesus lived and died to produce? Did He take for

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Himself the extraordinary place which He fills in the mind and the world even of primitive Christians, or was this greatness thrust upon Him without His knowledge, against His will, and in inconsistency with His true place and nature? We are familiar with the idea that we can appeal to Christ against any phenomenon of our own age which claims to be Christian; is it not conceivable that we may have to appeal to Him even against the earliest forms which Christianity assumed?

No one who is familiar with the currents of thought whether within or without the Church can doubt that these questions are of present and urgent interest. To some, indeed, it may seem that there are questions more fundamental, and that when men are discussing whether Jesus ever lived, or whether we know anything about Him, it is trifling to ask whether the apostolic faith in Him is justified by the facts of His history. No serious person, however, doubts that Jesus existed, and the second of our two questions has been stated in the most searching form conceivable. It raises in all its dimensions the problem of the life and mind of Jesus, and in answering it we shall have opportunity to examine fully the sources on which our knowledge of Jesus rests. For those who stand outside the Christian Church, this second question is naturally of greater interest than the other, yet

even for them it is impossible to ignore the connection of the two. For it is in the Church and through its testimony to Jesus that whatever knowledge we have of Him, even in the purely historical sense, has been preserved. But for those who are within the Church, the first question also has an interest of its own. To ask whether the prima facie impression which the New Testament makes upon us is verified by a closer examination -- whether the interpretation of Christ which is current in the Church is that which is really yielded by the primitive

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witnesses -- is to ask in other words whether the Church's faith to-day is continuous with that of apostolic times; and there can be few Christians who are indifferent to the answer. But though the profession of indifference would be absurd, it is not absurd to aim at sincerity and truth. No one can be more anxious to know the truth than the man to whom it means a great deal that the truth should be thus or thus. It we could imagine a person to whom it was a matter of indifference whether the Christian Church of to-day understood rightly or wrongly what the New Testament means by Christian faith, or who did not care in the least whether the historical facts about Jesus justified that faith or not, we should have imagined a person not ideally competent but absolutely incompetent to deal with either the one question or the other. The writer does not wish to disguise the fact that he is vitally interested in both, for he is convinced that on no other condition is there any likelihood of the true answer being found. But he disclaims at the same time any 'apologetic' intention. There is no policy in what he -has written, either in its manner or its substance. Nothing, so far as he is conscious, is set down for any other reason than that he believes it to be the truth, and nothing is to be discounted or allowed for as though he were mediating or negotiating between the progressive and the stationary elements in a Christian society, and would have said more or less if he had been free to speak without reserve. To the best of his knowledge he speaks without reserve, and has neither more nor less to say. This does not exclude the intention and the hope to say what may be of service to Christian faith and to the Christian Church; all it excludes is the idea that Christian faith or the Christian Church can be served by anything else than simple truth.

The two questions with which we have to deal are

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in one important respect of very different character. The first is quite simple: Is the conception of the Christian religion which prevails and has always prevailed in the Church borne out by the New Testament? As we know it, and as it has been known in history, the Christian life is the life of faith in Jesus Christ: is this what it was in primitive times? Does the New Testament throughout give that solitary and all-determining place to Jesus which He holds in the later Christian religion? This is a simple question, and no difficulty can be raised about the proper method of answering it. All we have to do is to go to the New Testament and scrutinize its evidence. The laws of interpretation are agreed upon among

intelligent people, and no difficulty about 'presuppositions' is raised. But the second question is of a different kind. It has to do with what is historically known of Jesus, and here the difficulty about 'presuppositions' becomes acute. It is possible to argue that much of what the New Testament records concerning Jesus cannot be historically known--that it transcends the conception of what is historical, and must either be known on other terms than history, or dismissed from the region of knowledge altogether. It is not necessary at this stage to raise the abstract problem; when we come to the second question it will be considered as far as the case requires. Here the writer would only express his distrust of *a priori* determinations of what is possible either in the natural or the historical sphere. There is only one universe: nature is not the whole of it, neither is history; and neither nature nor history is a whole apart from it. Nature and history do not exist in isolation; they are caught up into a moral and spiritual system with which they are throughout in vital relations. It is not for anyone to say offhand and *a priori* what is or is not naturally or historically conceivable in such a system. Its possibilities,

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in all likelihood, rather transcend than fall short of our anticipations; we need not be too much surprised if experience calls rather for elasticity than for rigidity of mind. If anything is certain, it is that the world is not made to the measure of any science or philosophy, but on a scale which perpetually summons philosophy and science to construct themselves anew; and it is with the undogmatic temper which recognizes this that the problems indicated above are approached in this book.

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