

THE THEOLOGY OF PRINCIPAL JAMES DENNEY

(continued)

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THIS instalment of Professor Mikolaski's survey of Dr. Denney's theological career begins with a reference to his translation in 1899 to the New Testament Chair in Glasgow's Free Church College (now Trinity College).

III. THE USE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Denney's move from the Chair of Systematic Theology to that of New Testament Studies early in his professional career shows what his labour of love was. And the scope and vitality of this interest is shown by the large body of his writings (of books, commentaries, and articles) on the New Testament text, its exegesis, and its theology.

His freedom of mind as a scholar may be seen in the following that he wrote to his family during the summer of language study in Germany prior to his entrance upon the study of theology:

But perhaps I should not say that I won't be a minister, till I see whether they will have me or not ; and, to tell the truth, I am afraid the very reverend the Presbytery of Greenock will be trying me in their Hebrew scales and finding me wanting, unless some miracle happens. But if the Free Church or any other Church thinks that the orthodoxy of its students can be secured in this way, or that anything at all can be secured by making it impossible for its students to hear from their professors what it is impossible for the students to be students and not hear of somehow or other, then it is mightily mistaken.³³

The sense of freedom intensified his regard for the authority of Scripture heightened during the years of his scholarly labours. He combined in his work the keen mind of the competent scholar and the warmhearted, pious fervour of the believing Christian. On the broader base of thought he could appeal to the general New Testament teaching and authority against the Socinians and as the foundation of Christian ethics,³⁴ with the confidence that, just as our Lord looked to the Old Testament as a true revelation of the nature of God, our trust in Scripture will not fail us.³⁵ Unconcerned about the original autographs of Scripture for an

³³ *Letters to his Family and Friends*, p. 4.

³⁴ *Studies in Theology*, p. 131 ; *War and the Fear of God*, p. 16.

³⁵ *Studies in Theology*, pp. 209-212.

apologetic or polemic, he claimed that constructive criticism would inspire confidence in the "trustworthiness of the Evangelic representation".³⁶

Similarly, he was unconcerned to frame a theory of Inspiration, yet what he does say coincides with what I believe to be his doctrine of revelation. He rejected what he knew of both verbal inspiration and dictation theories.³⁷ He did not think it necessary to claim knowledge that everything in the gospel is true and he suggests that our Lord and the apostles were not speaking with the servile precision of some modern scientists but were "people with what Plato calls a gentlemanly freedom in the use of words".³⁸ Positively, inspiration is attested to in the unity and message of the Bible. Of course, these are like the two sides of a coin. The unity is attested to not by the accuracy of detail in the Testaments and between them but by the inner witness of the Spirit that vouchsafes to us the reality of the message, and the message at once bars criticism that denies the supernatural on principle.³⁹

Denney felt that more attention should be given by Protestants to their Catholic heritage particularly where an artificial separation is made between Scripture and tradition. In the first instance, he said, the Bible itself is "a part of tradition; it is handed down to us from those who have gone before; it is delivered to us as a sacred deposit by the church".⁴⁰ Sectarianism destroys the historical sense of the church and it is clear that the Reformers saw themselves in the catholic tradition of apostolic Christianity. The Bible is first a means of grace. It must be known in its character of God communicating to man before its inspiration becomes meaningful to us and a claim upon us. He illustrates the point by citing how the statement on Scripture differs in the Scots Confession of John Knox as against the Westminster Confession:

in the original Confession of the Reformed Church in Scotland, drawn up by John Knox in 1560, it stood very much later: it came in, indeed, in subordination to the doctrine of the Church under the heading of the means of grace. That, I think, is its true place, and ought to secure for it a treatment which, while rigorously scientific, will always be controlled by recognition of the avowedly practical end which the Scripture has to serve.⁴¹

³⁶ "Preaching Christ", *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (ed. Hastings), II, p. 399; *Studies in Theology*, pp. 213, 215.

³⁷ *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Expositor's Bible, 1894), p. 126.

³⁸ On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World", p. 63.

³⁹ *Studies in Theology*, p. 206; in *The Death of Christ* note p. 316.

⁴⁰ *Thessalonians*, p. 350; note p. 396.

⁴¹ *Studies in Theology*, p. 21; note also pp. 202-203, and *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 18.

The authority, finally, of Scripture is not the text but the message addressed to the conscience; it is internal not external; it is experiential, of the Holy Spirit, and self-authenticating. Questions such as the relation between what our Lord actually said, the apprehension of the true meaning by the apostles, and its transmission in the texts of the biblical books, are matters of historical research and weighing of evidence, but the crucial answer comes in the conviction of Christian experience which, having known Christ, testifies that these things are true. The authority is not in the letter but the Spirit witnessing to us through Scripture. The promises of Scripture have significance not as dead letters in an ancient scroll but as the present words of the living God who in Jesus Christ confirms them all. It is a question, then, not of external but of internal authority; of whether there is an authority which can impose itself, which can freely win the recognition and surrender of the mind and heart of man:

No Christian questions such a proposition as this, that God actually speaks to man through the Scriptures and that man hears the voice and knows it to be God's It is really a doctrine of the Word of God, or of the divine message to man; but it is too apt to be construed as if it were a doctrine of the text of Scripture.⁴²

IV. REVELATION

It remains for us to fix attention upon what has already been adumbrated, namely, Denney's doctrine of revelation. He rejected the Ritschlian two-source theory of knowledge whilst demanding a doctrine of truth embracing natural and supernatural, historical and spiritual, fact and theory, science and religion:

the mind cannot have two unrelated experiences of the same thing, it cannot interpret it, in the first place religiously and in the second scientifically, without being compelled to define the connection of the two interpretations with each other.⁴³

The New Testament gives to us the person of Christ in whom the historical and the eternal are joined. The gospel narrative witnesses to the self-consciousness of Jesus on His own identity and on the nature of His work, but in and through the interpretation given to us by the apostles. *Jesus and the Gospel* develops this theme at some length where, while he does take into account the textual

⁴² *Studies in Theology*, pp. 204 f.; note also pp. 206-209, 219-221. Extensive citations of these ideas in his writings can be made including: *The Literal Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 32, 50; *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 8-9, 18-19; *Gospel Questions and Answers*, p. 92; *Letters to his Family and Friends*, p. 23; *Letters to W. Robertson Nicoll*, p. 1.

⁴³ *Studies in Theology*, p. 9; note pp. 1-13, and *The Death of Christ*, p. 4; *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 2, 4-5.

problems, Denney finds in the inner life of Jesus a self-guaranteeing power that assures us we are in contact with reality.⁴⁴

The true authority to the mind is only the truth and to this the Scriptures give witness in Jesus Christ; thus, "once the mind comes to itself, there can be no such thing for it as blank authority even though this be the word of an apostle or the word of our Lord. The final authority is the truth, self-authenticating truth." Our faith is in "God as a living, acting, personal God".⁴⁵ This idea of revelation being the activity of God in history, the meaning of which was disclosed to men by the Holy Spirit and given to us in scripture, can be given extensive documentation from Denney's books. As inspiring and divine as are the teachings of Christ in the Gospels, he said, the central fact of His reconciling power is that in His relation to sinners "He appears in act as the minister and mediator of reconciliation, and when we realize what He is doing, the possibility, the reality, and the nature of reconciliation are made plain to us".⁴⁶ Here the stress falls upon "when we realize what He is doing" as the self-authenticating character of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ conveyed to us in the apostolic witness. The Word of God is actual to us and the proof of it comes not before but after it is received; thus an appeal to Scripture is also an appeal to experience, involving a constant renewal of its vitality and authority. "Scripture", he says, "would lose its authority if the experience it describes were not perpetually verified anew".⁴⁷ The point at which we grasp the revelation and are grasped by it is there where the word of the living God concerning the crucified and ascended Christ is mediated to us by the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit as He was known by the apostles but now by each of us. For us as for them the historical and eternal join in Christ:

The Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word of the evangelists in our hearts, gives us, independently of any criticism, a full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the revelation of God made in Him . . . there is a point, viz., the life of the Son of God in our nature, at which the spiritual

⁴⁴ *Jesus and the Gospel*, pp. 378-379; cf. "Preaching Christ", *op. cit.*, p. 399. In *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, p. 32, he writes: "are we not forced to the conclusion that here a new spiritual magnitude has appeared in history, the very *differentia* of which is that it has eternal significance, and that it is eternal life to know it . . . ?"

⁴⁵ *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 144.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Note also *Thessalonians*, pp. 55, 93; *The Way Everlasting*, p. 4; *On "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"*, pp. 32, 64; *Studies in Theology*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁷ *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, pp. 38-39.

and the historical coincide, and at which, therefore, as the very purpose of revelation requires, there can be a spiritual guarantee of historical truth.⁴⁸

So far as the mode of grasping or receiving the revelation is concerned, broadly three lines of thought are followed by Denney. First, the divine revelation as self-authenticating is apprehended intuitively. For instance, a gospel of salvation from sin, he says, does not allow rest to the mind in any conception omitting atonement because "the simple Christian spirit which has the anointing of the Holy One . . . knows instinctively whether that by which it lives is present in the message it hears or not".⁴⁹ Second, revelation is grasped as rational insight, for example, where the spiritually illumined mind grasps the sense (exposition) of a passage which may not always be apparent in its technical treatment (exegesis). It is, he points out, not hard to furnish an exegesis or a statement of the church's teaching on a point; but what is difficult is "to say precisely what is of faith in the matter, what is made sure to the heart by the witness of the Spirit".⁵⁰ Revelation and insight are but the divine and human aspects of the one relationship between God and the believer. He writes: "the only religious convictions which are ultimately superior to doubt . . . are revelations on the one side, and discoveries, or insights, on the other".⁵¹ And third, he introduces also the idea of correspondence with, or relevance to, need. What constitutes the death of Christ the supreme revelation-act of God and appeal to man, he says, is its answer to the problem of sin:

The atoning Death of Christ as a revelation of God, is a thing itself so intelligible, so correspondent to a universal need, so direct and universal in its appeal that it must be the basis of a universal religion It is the very heart of the revelation itself.⁵²

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⁴⁸ *Studies in Theology*, p. 207.

⁴⁹ *The Death of Christ*, p. 284, cf. pp. 285-6; cf. *Studies in Theology*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ *Studies in Theology*, p. 229.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁵² *The Death of Christ*, p. 118.