

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

CHRISTIANITY AND THE HISTORICAL CHRIST.

Not long ago the favourite cry in advanced theological circles was Back to Christ. Christ, it was taken for granted, was the only authority and the only guarantee for Christianity. The religion which traced its origin to Him had become entangled, in the course of its history, with much which was indifferent or alien to the mind of the Master ; and the one conclusive way of getting rid of all this was to return to the Master Himself. When it began to be realised that much of the theological lumber, as it was called, which some people wished to get rid of, had unquestionable roots in the New Testament, there were timid minds which began to have misgivings ; but the bolder spirits in the new movement rather enjoyed the audacity of disparaging the apostles in the name of the Lord. What they wanted was to get behind them all, behind Peter and Paul and John, to the very man of Nazareth ; the historical Jesus was their watchword ; everything in the Christian religion was to be legitimated by appeal to Him alone.

Well, times change. There is no doubt something comforting in this idea of basing religion on the historical Saviour. History, we say to ourselves, is the region of fact, as opposed to speculation—of reality as opposed to fancy. When we are dealing with history we know where we are ; we come in contact with things which make their own appeal, and evoke an appropriate but free and rational response. But when the mind devotes itself to history, in the sense of that which simply happened in the past, it has disconcerting experiences. Such experiences, which greatly disturb the assurance with which it embarked on the return to Christ, can be put in three ways.

(1) The sense of distance, which grows upon the mind as it thinks of things or persons simply as historical, weakens the impression they make on us, and therefore their value for religious purposes. As a historical person Jesus lived far away and long ago. Even if the gospel story of His life is literally true, how distant He is. He lived in the ancient world—further back than our national life or our language reaches, behind modern science and civilisation, behind the barbarian invasions and the fall of the empire, ever so far away. The sense of this, if it is left to itself, diminishes and may even extinguish any religious impression made on us by the historical Jesus; in spite of the hope with which we set out to return to Him, the end of our voyage finds us far from home; and no historical imagination, be it ever so lively, can bring us into a religious relation to a purely historical person. We can no more catch the glow of faith from a past so remote than we can warm our hands at the stars. A Christian reader of the gospels, of course, does not use them in this purely historical way. Christ is not for him a person who had His being in the past and who exhausted it there; He is a living and present person, with whom he enters into direct and immediate fellowship through the gospel story; it is not a distant past he is dealing with, but a present and eternal life. This, however, is a point of view which mere history cannot attain.

(2) But there is a second point of consequence here. To the merely historical student, there is no such thing as absolute certainty. *Ex hypothesi*, everything historical is problematical. It is a question as to what testimony is available, and no testimony amounts to demonstration. Whether Jesus spoke any given word, whether He did any given act, whether He had any given experience, is open to the same kind of historical uncertainty as if, instead

of Jesus, we were to put into such sentences Pericles or Julius Caesar. It may be quite true to say with Butler that probability is the guide of life; but we know very well that it was not historical probabilities about Jesus by which Christianity was inspired from the beginning, and that it is not such historical probabilities by which it is sustained now. That in our reading of the gospels historically we continually have to weigh evidence and balance alternative possibilities is quite true; but every Christian knows that the religious value of the gospels depends on something else. Whatever the historical explanation of it may be—and of that, meanwhile, I say nothing—he comes into an immediate fellowship with Christ through them in which there is nothing problematic: a fellowship in which everything in his life is involved that transcends doubt or questioning. This, again, is something beyond the reach of mere history.

(3) And to come to the third point, even if our knowledge of the past were complete and sure—even if we knew all about the historical Jesus with a certainty beyond the reach of doubt—we are haunted by philosophers who are themselves haunted by the relativity of everything in history. All that takes place passes. The past has had its day. It was there to be transcended, and it has been transcended. Nothing in it abides, nothing has absolute worth. Even if you got back to Christ ever so surely, it would be no gain; you would be face to face with something which had its value and significance for its own place and time, no doubt, but something which, like all things historical, has no more than a relative and transient importance, and cannot therefore supply the basis and rule of religion which you crave.

In one way or another, considerations of this kind have made their way into the common mind, perplexing it,

and damping its enthusiasm for history. Instead of staking everything on the historical Jesus, many people seem concerned to find a type of Christianity which shall be entirely independent of history. There has been a distinct revival, I will not say with greater insight, but with a greater parade of philosophical and historical demonstration, of Lessing's famous aphorism, that accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason. The assumption that the Christian religion consists of necessary truths of reason is perhaps pardonable in philosophers, who are naturally embarrassed by facts, but it is very astonishing to find it accepted by theologians. It is more than astonishing to find theological professors, men whose business it is to train the members of the Christian Church for its ministry, proclaiming and arguing that what they call Christian faith is not dependent on the historical Christ, and that it would make no difference to their faith though it were to be proved that Christ never existed. This has actually happened. Men who have given themselves to what they call the purely historical study of the gospels have been in some cases so disenchanted with the result that they have felt inwardly impelled to find a basis for their faith less open to disturbing questions. They started on the back to Christ adventure. Their idea was to make the historical original of Christianity its standard and its basis. As opposed to modern and even to apostolic conceptions of Christ they would have nothing but the historical Jesus Himself; and now that they have had their way, the historical Jesus Himself is no better than an encumbrance to them. What they really want—or so it seems to them—is not a religion which owes all its contents and power to historical facts, but a religion which has nothing to do with history. It is some kind of absolute idealism they believe in, or want to believe in

—some system of thoughts which can be realised for all it is worth quite apart from the contingencies which are the warp and woof of history. What are we to say to this curious situation, to this complete swing of the pendulum, which has made men who once, in their religion, staked everything on history, now crave in their religion to be emancipated from history ?

To begin with, it is worth remarking that it is not the first time that historical religion has had this battle to fight. It is older even than the Christian era. When the religion of Israel came into contact with the higher mind of Greece, this was its position. The Greeks, in spite of their intelligence, in spite even of Thucydides, had no proper conception of history. Thucydides wrote memoirs of extraordinary political penetration, but the Greeks had no idea of a continuous and progressive purpose which was being wrought out in their national life and in which all those relations of man to God and of God to man were involved, which constitute religion. Their highest religious ideas were connected not with history but with nature, and with the conception of God as the soul, and the supreme law, of the world. They were metaphysical rather than ethical. But Israel's God was the great Being who had called the fathers, who had delivered the nation from Egyptian bondage and given it an inheritance in Canaan, who had taught it His law and through all the proud and all the dark hours of its life had dealt with it in justice and in mercy. It was tempting, and the attempt was made, to come to terms with the higher Greek religion by identifying the law of God as historically revealed to Israel with the life in harmony with nature as understood, e.g., by the Stoic philosophy ; in other words, it was tempting to let the historical religion melt and disappear in a religion of ideas. But though much Jewish-Hellenistic literature

represents a tendency of this kind, it was foiled in the long run. There is something irreducible and refractory in facts which gives them a value all their own, and in spite of what might seem contingent and dubious the events of Israel's history, understood as revealing God, had an endurance, a vitality and an inspiration in them with which no unhistorical metaphysic could long compete. And if we have to contemplate in our own day tension between an idealistic construction of religion, which makes it independent of uncertainty by making it independent of history, and the historic faith of Christians to which facts have hitherto been essential, I have no doubt we may look confidently to its having a similar issue.

Further, I think we may fairly point out, whether to theologians or philosophers who take this line, that Christianity is itself a fact, and a fact which fills a great space in human history. It does not remain for any one at this time of day to invent it, or to define it at discretion. Whoever deals with Christian religion or with Christian faith, deals with a *datum*; and it is not open to question that that *datum* involves matters of fact and history. It ought to be clearly understood that when anything is proposed to us in which no matter of fact or history is involved, whatever its value or respectability may be, it is not Christian faith; its sponsor has overlooked the *datum*; his eye is not on the object. We have every right to be suspicious when we are asked to recognise as genuinely Christian, ideas or convictions or faiths or whatever they are called whose representatives are nervously anxious to prove that they hold them without being in any sense debtors to a historical Christ. Probably in most cases they are simply mistaken: many a man is unconsciously Christ's debtor, like the man in the gospel of whom it is said, "He that was healed wist not who it was"; but it

is an ungrateful and unhappy ignorance, not a more spiritual mode of Christian faith.

Further still, we are entitled to protest, in the name of human nature and human worth, against that extraordinary disparagement of time, and all that men experience and learn in time, which is involved in the exclusion of history from religion. Time is evanescent, it is true, but it is also continuous; we can see that something is taking place in it which accumulates; literature is evolved in it, and art and science, and political and spiritual life; evanescent as the past is, it is not lost; it leaves something behind it which can be caught up and assimilated by the present and which can continue its life there; and it is on this that life depends for all that makes it rich. If you want a picture of spiritual beggary, contemplate the mind of man stripped of all its historical accumulations and sitting naked among the eternal truths of reason. This consideration should dispose us to caution when we are asked to believe that man's supreme interests and his final destiny cannot be supposed to depend on anything historical, but must be determined solely by ideas in which contingency has no place. As mere matter of fact, we do not know anything of such ideas unless perhaps in mathematics and formal logic, and no one has so far suggested that these interesting sciences contain the sum of saving knowledge. *All* our ethical and spiritual convictions have been historically mediated to us. But for the history whose heirs we are, we should have none of them; and if the past has this real relation to the present, this real place in it, throughout its whole extent, we have surely reason to hesitate if we are told that the very heart of the present, the religious faith which where it exists at all is the life of life and the dearest of all our possessions, must be independent of all historical relations. I admit

that to say this does not fix the place of the historical Christ in Christianity. It does not define the place He ought to hold, but it prohibits any one from saying that He has no essential place at all, and that His history, as such, has no religious interest. To say this, as I have already observed, is simply to overlook the *datum*. The facts recorded in the gospels—and we may summarily comprehend these as the fact of Christ—have had and have still an importance for Christian faith which cannot be overestimated. This is the fact about them, let them be on other grounds as distant, as problematic, as relative as you please. They have been the seat of spiritual life and force from the beginning, and they are so to this hour. There is a power of inspiration and of appeal in them with which nothing can compare. The gospel history was transacted far away and long ago, but it is not lost in time. The virtue has not gone out of it with time. Something appeals to us from it, which, though manifested at a given time, is independent of any particular time—in a word, is not merely historical, but superhistorical, not merely temporal, but eternal. This is the *datum* of Christianity, and when we are trying to determine the place of Christ—I mean the historical Christ—in the Christian religion we must not let it fall out of mind.

I will venture to use an illustration which any one who likes may deride, but which will nevertheless serve as a starting point for what I want to say about the peculiar place of Christ in Christianity. When I was in the University I read what is now, I suppose, a rather antiquated book, Merivale's *History of the Romans under the Empire*. I remember still the rather pompous sentence in which the author brings upon the stage "Caius Julius Caesar, the greatest name in history." Perhaps this description is justified. Certainly the first of the Caesars was an extraordinarily

great man. But in spite of the greatness of the man, in spite of his immense achievements, in spite of the vivid account of some of them which we have from his own hand, in spite of the fact that his name is the greatest name in history, it has become a proverb to say "as dead as Julius Caesar?" The influence of his life and work, like the influence of the life and work of the meanest of his contemporaries, who has no name in history at all, no doubt survives into our time, but no effort of imagination or enthusiasm can ever bring him from the past into the present. He is a great historical character and nothing else. But neither history nor philosophy nor profanity has ever been able, or ever will be able, to put into proverbial currency such a phrase as—"as dead as Jesus Christ." It is not a matter of opinion, but a matter of fact, that to read Caesar's Commentaries is one thing, and to read the gospels another; the relation of the reader to Caesar is a relation to a person who is historical and no more; his relation to Christ is a relation to a person who is historical, certainly, and who certainly died, but who is certainly not "as dead as Julius Caesar." He is far more living than that. In some way or other He belongs as truly to the present as to the past. The most stolid soul is conscious as he reads his history of incurring responsibilities the like of which he does not incur to any merely historical character. And this is just another way of saying that the historical Christ is more than historical: it is as present and eternal that He evokes repentance and faith in the soul, and asserts His abiding and essential place in the spiritual life. This, I repeat, is the *datum* of Christianity; and the man who disregards it is really not speaking of Christianity, but of something quite different. He may call it by the same name, but that does not make it the same thing.

Now what is the explanation of this more than historical character which attaches in Christianity to the historical Christ? How is it that He belongs, as ordinary historical characters do not, to the present as well as to the past? Partly it is due to the fact that the moral atmosphere in which we live in Christendom has been largely created by Him. It has come into existence through the lives and sacrifices of men who called Him Lord, and we feel instinctively as we contemplate Him in the gospel that it can only be maintained and purified—as it ought to be maintained and purified—by men who still take the same relation to Him, and recognise His personal supremacy as it was recognised by His earliest followers. This is one way in which we feel that Christ is not remote but intimately near, a historical person no doubt, but one to whose significance even in history time makes no difference. And this itself is explained in the New Testament by the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, and by the working of His Spirit. This is what gives to the historical person a superhistorical importance, a present and eternal place in religion. There are those, of course, who tell us that the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus are ideas of which history, as such, can take no cognisance; they carry us out of the very world within the limits of which the historian works. If this were the final truth, we could only say, So much the worse for history. But it is not the final truth. It is only a matter of arbitrary definition. The one haunting error of all students of the special sciences—and history in the sense assumed is a special science—is that they unconsciously elevate that part or aspect of reality in which they are interested to be the measure of the whole. The physicist often thinks of the world in a way which makes history and morality, which nevertheless exist, inexplicable and impossible; and the historian,

in the case we are supposing, thinks of the world in a way which makes the Christian religion, which also nevertheless exists, inexplicable and impossible. But physicists must apply their categories with the limitations which leave room for history and freedom, and historians must apply theirs with the limitations which leave room for the presence and spiritual action of Christ in a mode transcending time : they must do this, or the actual world of Christian life, the reality they have to deal with, will be left unexplained. That the category of posthumous influence can take the place of the resurrection of Jesus and the operation of His Spirit let him believe who can.

After all this preface, which will no doubt seem superfluous to those who are not in the fight, it is possible to come closer to the place of Christ in Christianity. It is a historical Christ we are concerned with, but one who belongs to the present though He was manifested in the past ; and the question assumes this form—What is it which is vital to our religion in the present, but which we only know and possess through its historical manifestation in Jesus ? The answer, it seems to me, is very simple : it is Jesus Himself in His relations to God and man. We cannot know Jesus except through His history, but it is not necessary that we should know everything about Him and be acquainted with all the details of His history. As far as we can be informed about these they have interest, and they may, though we cannot say they must, have religious value. He Himself laid stress on the value of the passing hour. “As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.” It is through what He did in the days of His flesh, through the whole life which He lived then, and so far as we know through nothing else, that He illumines the world now. Still, the significance of His acts lay in the revelation they gave of His own character,

and of His relations to God and man. What we need now for our spiritual life is not information about the contingent details of His history, but knowledge of what He essentially was in these two vital relations. We can only get such knowledge through the gospels, but subject to the moral conditions under which alone it can be apprehended, we do get it in this way. We see Jesus; and to borrow an expression of Herrmann, to see Jesus is to see "the only untroubled manifestation of that which has full power over the soul." I was going to say we must admit, but perhaps I should rather say we are bound to assert, that history alone cannot give any man this vision. It is sadly possible to read the gospels and not to see Jesus as the apostles saw Him. Most of us who have read much in this field have read books which tempted us to say that the authors saw everything in the gospels except Jesus. They went over the canvas inch by inch with the microscope, saw every unevenness in the fibre, every grit in the pigments, but never had a glimpse of the picture. This is possible and we cannot explain it, any more than St. Paul could explain the melancholy fact which confronted him when He wrote—"All men have not faith." The want of faith or the blindness of some men, whatever its explanation—and it is not for us to judge them—or whatever its cure—and purely historical study will not cure it—cannot be pleaded against the experience of those who see. The Christian Church through all generations has seen Jesus in the gospels, has seen Him there only, and has seen Him in that very character His presence in which makes Him essential to Christian faith. I will venture to refer to the main elements of truth included [in this vision—truth historically given in the life of Jesus, though the historian may be blind to it, yet raised above the reach of historical doubt, because not shut up to a distant past but present in a power which still reaches the soul.

(1) In the first place we see Jesus as the Son of God—Jesus manifesting the ideal relation of man to God by Himself living in it. This is not essentially a matter of titles or designations, it is a matter of fact. It is quite true that Jesus gave expression in words to His sense of His filial relation to God ; but what made His words convincing to those who heard them, what makes them overpowering still, is that there is no schism between His words and His being ; they are not, like our highest words about the spiritual life, a profession of what we would be or should be ; they are a revelation of what He is. It is a revelation I should never dream of reducing to a systematic form, or of binding down to particular words of Jesus, impressive and irresistible as these may be ; it has in it the variety and infinity of His whole life. There is not a word nor an act of Jesus, there is not an hour of temptation or of passion, in which He is anything else than the Son. It is this greatest of all truths about Him, the truth which makes us feel that our ideal relation to God is the filial relation, which we know most surely and, I venture to add, which we most truly understand. We may not know exactly what it covers, nor how we are to adjust our minds to it, when Jesus is represented as the Son of David, or the Messiah, or even as the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven ; but we have an intuitive comprehension of the Son *simpliciter*, and our minds open through it to faith in the Father. To say this is not to give up the case which I am arguing for the essential place of the historical Christ in Christianity. Faith in the Father is not independent of Him in its origin, and it never becomes independent. The very same experience in which we see that sonship is the ideal relation of man to God shows us that it is a relation realised in Him, but waiting to be realised in us through Him. Jesus is conscious of the distance of other men from

God, but there is no trace anywhere of any consciousness of distance on His part. He is here to bring us to the Father. That this is one element in the broad truth of the gospel, which is spiritual indeed and eternal, but depends for its power to strike into our sinful souls on its flesh and blood reality, no one, historian or philosopher, who sees what is before our eyes in the evangelists, can possibly deny.

(2) In the second place, to bring out more distinctly another essential element in the truth, we see Jesus in the gospel as the Saviour of sinners. It is the historical Jesus we see in this character. Whatever the witnesses might have been mistaken about they could not be mistaken about Jesus' attitude to themselves in this particular. They could not possibly be misrepresenting Him when they represented Him as receiving sinners. There may indeed be people to whom this is of no interest, but for men convinced of sin it is the only interesting thing in the world. Life is worth nothing to them till they can get the conviction that sin is not final, that there is something in God which can deal with it and overcome it, that it does not permanently annul sonship and for ever exclude from the Father; and they get this conviction as they watch the Son of God receiving sinners. It is through Him they believe in forgiveness; it is through Him they receive it. This is the very thing for want of which they are perishing—a holy one who is as untouched by sin as God Himself and as inexorable to it, but who makes their sad case His own, and in a passion of love they can never fathom receives them to Himself and restores them to the Father. There may be righteous persons on whom this revelation is thrown away, but it is not thrown away on men with the sense of sin. Dr. Chalmers had a noble appreciation of the Pauline gospel that God justifies the ungodly, just because he had the simplicity to say What could I do if

God did *not* justify the ungodly? and a corresponding simplicity and humility are wanted to see that on one side the sum of the gospels is Christ receiving sinners. It is through this vision that faith arises in the characteristically Christian form of faith in Christ as the Saviour, and such faith depends absolutely on the representation of Christ by the evangelists. It attaches itself to something historical and clings to it, for that is the only reality which has an anguish in it answering to its own. What is absolute idealism, what are eternal truths of reason, to a man shut out from God by a bad conscience, and lost if he is left to himself? But to such a man the Son of God in flesh and blood receiving sinners like *him* is salvation; his conscience gives him an eye for the history and its meaning, and the inward and outward witness unite in an assurance which has history at its heart yet can never be impaired.

(3) And finally, one element of the truth which we see in the gospels, and without which the Christian religion could not be, is that Jesus in relation to men is not only Saviour but Lord. This, again, is a point on which no mistake of the witnesses is conceivable. They simply could not be under any misapprehension as to the attitude which Jesus assumed toward them or the attitude which they felt bound to adopt towards Him. It is not a question of particular claims made on one side, or particular responses on the other; it is not a matter of words or of occasions at all; it is a matter of the whole life of Christ and His whole attitude to men. His sovereignty is not claimed or asserted here or there; it is not acknowledged or disputed here or there; it is assumed and exercised from first to last in every word and act of His life. And this again is not a matter of titles, but a matter of fact. The indirect expressions of it in the evangelists are far more impressive than the direct. It is felt and acknowledged

perpetually where there is no explicit assertion of it, and though the consciousness of it, like that of the Sonship and the saving power of Jesus, is morally conditioned—for no man can call Jesus Lord but by the Holy Spirit—its historical certainty is entirely indubitable. And it is in the history of Jesus that its grounds, its meaning and its obligation are to be sought, just as it is in the same history that we are to find out what is meant by speaking of Jesus as the Son of God or the Saviour of men. One is almost ashamed to say such things, but it is not without cause. People for whom the obvious is uninteresting, no matter how true it may be, are busy persuading us just now that a great part of what is meant by the Son of God is to be traced to the *Divus* or *Divi filius*, applied to Roman Emperors, dead or living—that the conception of Christ as Saviour is to be connected with the application of *σωτήρ* to the gods of Greek mythology or the kings who were deified in the flattery of Egyptian and oriental courts—nay that the Lordship of Christ is not without relation to the *Dominus* applied to persons like Domitian. The late Dr. Davidson said the best thing to do with some propositions was just to deny them. But for propositions like these, this seems hardly adequate: one would like to throw them over the window. On the plea of finding out the historical relations of Christianity they are overlooking what is vital and indubitable in the historical fact of Christ, and what for that very reason must always be central and essential in the Christian faith.

The more we become familiar with this whole field of study, the more clearly the lines of cleavage in it appear. There are those who, to make Christianity independent of history, turn it into or rather replace it by an absolute idealism in which Jesus of Nazareth has no essential place. This is simply to ignore the *datum*, to shut our eyes to the

28 HISTORIC SETTING OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

whole of the fact we pretend to explain. There are those, again, who, in order to give history all its due, shut up Jesus of Nazareth into a past growing continually more remote, and while they admit His posthumous influence do not distinguish Him otherwise from all who have lived and died upon the earth. This does not ignore the *datum* so completely as a pure idealism, but it does ignore a vast proportion of what it has to explain. And there are those who, in order to do justice to all the phenomena with which we have to deal, lay equal emphasis on the historical Jesus and on His exaltation into eternal life, and His perpetual presence with us through His Spirit in the very character which His history reveals. In the former cases, there is no Christianity at all; all that has ever been known to history under that name—the whole *datum* in the case—disappears. In the last, Christianity subsists on the same historical basis on which it has always rested, and the place of Christ in it is not doubtful. Still, as at the beginning, He fills all things. Unto Him be glory for ever.

JAMES DENNEY.

*THE HISTORIC SETTING OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES.*¹

In certain respects these Epistles are second in value and interest to none in the New Testament. They are not, indeed, equal in quickening religious power to the earlier Pauline letters. But in historical suggestiveness, in the light they cast upon the problems which emerge after the first or evangelistic stage of the Gospel's progress gives place

¹ The substance of a lecture given at the Oxford Summer School of Theology on July 25, 1912, an origin which may perhaps be allowed to excuse the personal note which appears in certain passages.