

JAMES DENNEY'S DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN RELATION TO THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

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James Denney was born on the 5th February, 1856, at Paisley, near Glasgow, and grew up in the seaport of Greenock, on the Firth of Clyde, where, at the Highlanders Academy, he received his early education. This large school provided a thoroughly sound but plain education at low cost, and he later became a pupil teacher there.¹ He matriculated as an Arts student at Glasgow University in November 1874, took an eminent position from the beginning, studied there for five years, and had the rare distinction of gaining a 'double first' honours degree in Classics and Philosophy. This was followed by four years' theological training at the Free Church College, later Trinity College, Glasgow, where he acquitted himself well in his studies. His teachers, under whose stimulating instruction he came, included Professors A. B. Bruce, J. S. Candlish and T. M. Lindsay, though it was perhaps Bruce who most influenced Denney.²

During an eleven-year ministry at Broughty Ferry, Dundee, he wrote his commentaries on *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1892) and *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (1894) and gave his theological lectures in Chicago, which were later published in 1895 under the title *Studies in Theology*. He was then elected to the chair of Systematic and Pastoral Theology in the Free (later United Free) Church College, Glasgow in 1897, and two years later transferred to the New Testament chair, which was his field of specialism. Then followed his commentary

¹ An appreciation of Denney by W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Letters of Principal James Denney to W. Robertson Nicoll, 1893-1917* (London, 1920), p.xiii.

² *Ibid.*, p.xv.

on the Greek text of *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (1900), *The Death of Christ* (1902), *Jesus and the Gospel* (1909), and many other books, plus articles and reviews in numerous magazines. He occupied his chair until his death in 1917, and was also Principal of the College for his last two years.

James Denney has had much influence for good in his capacity as a writer, and is widely quoted in numerous scholarly books and journals. Yet whilst his works have provided intellectual stimulation for many theologians and preachers down the years, his doctrine of Scripture is somewhat unorthodox. He tried to hold to a middle way between an orthodox understanding on the one hand and the findings of nineteenth-century higher criticism on the other.

I wish in this article to set out Denney's doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and in so doing to demonstrate the inter-relatedness between this and his doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Denney's doctrine of Scripture seems to be that it is 'inspiring' rather than 'inspired' in the sense of having been 'breathed out by God'.³ He defines inspiration as 'the power Scripture has to lodge in our minds Christianity and its doctrines as being not only generally but divinely true'.⁴ Inspiration is thereby defined in terms of the function of Scripture. It is only as we *use* Scripture that its inspiration becomes clear. For him, it is our experience of the power of Scripture that gives words like 'inspiration' any meaning. But this is something that could equally well be said of the 'scriptures' of any of the world's great religions. If, as we read them, our minds and hearts are gripped by their power, then we may conclude that they, too, are inspired. But by whom? Denney's theology at this point robs Christianity of its distinctiveness, uniqueness and exclusiveness.

³ *Theopneustos*, 2 Tim 3:16.

⁴ *Studies in Theology* (London, 1895), p.204.

J. I. Packer and C. H. Pinnock hold the view that contemporary conservative evangelical scholars need to give much more place to the work of the Holy Spirit in their formulation of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture than has normally been done. The tendency has been, and to some extent still is, to deal with this crucial subject in such a way as virtually to eliminate the Spirit's work altogether. This omission is not a new one, however, for in his understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, Denney also sought to exclude the ministry of the Holy Spirit from his doctrine of Scripture. Now the problem is compounded when we study Denney's doctrine of the Holy Spirit, for he is somewhat unorthodox at this point in his theology as well. It is of note that theologians whose doctrine of the Holy Spirit is orthodox, and who have written on the inspiration of Scripture, have generally produced an orthodox understanding of Scripture at the end of their studies, without incorporating in their work any major treatment of the Holy Spirit. The reason seems to be that since their basic convictions were right, and in due biblical proportion, the end result was also right. Their understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit evidently so permeated their entire theologizing of Scripture to make any explicit mention redundant. This observation also explains why the Westminster Divines did not include a section in their Confession and Catechisms on the person and work of the Holy Spirit; they knew that his presence suffused all their thinking and writing.

However, when Denney's understanding of the Holy Spirit is grasped, one is amazed that he remained as theologically conservative as he was. His doctrine of the Holy Spirit, then, must be examined as an integral part of his belief about the nature of Scripture.

Denney's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

In order to grasp what is meant by the inspiration of Scripture, there is need for a clear understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, who was instrumental

in the production of Scripture. These two doctrines cannot be separated without a resultant loss in our comprehension of the biblical doctrine and the biblical balance. To this particular matter we now turn in our investigation.

Denney surprisingly does not come to an orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit from his study of Scripture. At times he refers to him as 'it', and does not acknowledge his personal being; rather, he is viewed as being 'equivalent to divine'.⁵ The Spirit is an exhaustive description of God, who alone is holy. To Denney, the Spirit is merely divine activity, God at work, the Spirit of Jesus.⁶ He is prepared to assert that the New Testament is the work of the Spirit.⁷ He holds that the Spirit is a divine power or influence, but he stops short at this, and generally refuses to attribute to the Spirit the nature and characteristics of God himself. So, for Denney, it was this divine power that gave the Scriptures to us, but not God the Holy Spirit. This explains why Denney was unable and unwilling to embrace the orthodox doctrine of Scripture as held historically.

William Cunningham writes:

[there was a] constant maintenance, during the first three centuries, of the supremacy and sufficiency of the sacred Scriptures, and the right and duty of all men to read and study them. There is no trace of evidence in these first three centuries that these scriptural principles were denied or doubted, and there is satisfactory evidence that they were steadily and purely maintained.⁸

Cunningham also states that the same could be said, without exception, of the writings of many succeeding

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.186.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.159.

⁸ *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh, 1862), Vol. 1, p.185.

centuries.⁹ In those days, he says, it was the heretics who were accustomed to decline or evade an appeal to Scripture, by denying their genuineness or authenticity; or by alleging that they were corrupted or interpolated. The fathers of that period, in other words, all referred to Scripture as the only real standard of faith and practice, and asserted, both directly and by implication, their exclusive authority, and their perfect sufficiency to guide men to the knowledge of God's will; 'the exclusive supremacy and perfect sufficiency of Scripture' is a commonly expressed sentiment among the biblical theologians at that time. This was so because of the biblically-balanced and proportioned theology held by these divines. Those who held a deficient view of the Holy Spirit correspondingly held a deficient view of Scripture, and *vice versa*. At least in Denney's theology he was consistently in error with regard to these two cardinal and necessarily related doctrines.

Denney draws attention to the fact that in the historical Christian confessions, the Holy Spirit has been merely mentioned. He contends that the only basis of union broad enough and solid enough for all Christians to meet upon is the confession: 'I believe in God through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord and Saviour.'¹⁰ It will be noticed that in this minimal confession of faith, no mention is made of the Holy Spirit. However, Denney formulates his position in this manner because he believes, correctly, that 'the ultimate object of faith is always God'; but what he refuses to acknowledge is that the Holy Spirit is truly and fully divine, and is one of the three persons in the Godhead. Scripture presents the Holy Spirit as a real and divine person who speaks (Heb. 3:7), with whom believers can have intimate fellowship (2 Cor. 13:14), who can be grieved by disobedient Christians (Eph. 4:30), lied to as to God (Acts 5:3,4), who leads God's people (Rom.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.185, 186.

¹⁰ *Jesus and the Gospel* (London, 1909), p.398.

8:14), searches human hearts (1 Cor. 2:10), prays for the saints (Rom. 8:27), gives testimony to the truth (Rom. 8:16), is to be pleased by God's people (Gal. 6:8), teaches them (1 Cor. 2:13), has desires (Rom. 8:5), and so on. All this accumulated scriptural evidence proves the personality of God's Holy Spirit. But furthermore, God's Word also states in Hebrews 3:7 that the Spirit is truly and fully God, where the words of Psalm 95 are equated with the speech of the Spirit; and also in this verse, the words of the Spirit are regarded as the very words of God himself. When one considers the solemnizing teaching of Jesus on the awful possibility of sinning against the Holy Spirit and thus committing the unpardonable sin, the eternal consequences of such persistent resistance of the Spirit places him in exactly the same category as God himself (Mk. 3:29). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is an expression of defiant hostility toward God, removes one forever beyond the sphere where forgiveness is possible.¹¹

Since the Spirit is God, he then belongs to the same essence as the Father and the Son, and is to be worshipped and honoured together and equally with them. Denney refuses to go this far in his understanding of the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit. Therefore he fails to attribute to him the same characteristics as he attributes to the other two persons of the Trinity. This also explains why he does not see that since God has revealed himself mysteriously as a Trinity of persons, the Holy Spirit is also, in a certain economic sense, the object of the believer's faith. He chooses to hold that 'Christian faith in God is faith which is determined by Christ, and which would not in any respect be what it is but for him'. Denney is correct in this assertion. His justification for adopting this position is that 'faith in God must be so described as to bring out this specific character. It must be defined as

¹¹ W.L.Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, 1974), p.145.

faith in God through Christ.' This Christ so described 'is to God what no other can be; ...He is also what no other can be to man.' God was to him Father, and he was to God Son.¹² The relationship was and is truly filial.

But no place is given to the Holy Spirit in these statements. Denney foresaw that certain objections would arise in many minds at this point, but these would be 'mainly due to prepossessions or assumptions which reflection will lead us to discount.'¹³ Denney was obviously unaware of the depth of opposition that this position would provoke, and was somewhat naive to dismiss it with such brevity.

The matter needs further investigation. Denney concedes that believers from the earliest days of the church have been baptized in (or, into) the triune Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whereby they are united in the one family of God. This unity is dependent upon the one Spirit, because there is but one Body. Denney points out that it is the unity of the Spirit that the New Testament exhorts us to maintain. He does not wish to minimize the importance of this truth, and explains his approach not so much as one of antagonism, but of order. He points out that 'the New Testament nowhere speaks of faith in the Holy Spirit'.¹⁴ It is to faith in God through Christ that sinners are called in the proclamation of the gospel, not to faith in the Holy Spirit. The expression 'I believe in the Holy Spirit' is never found in the Bible. He takes the statement in Acts 19:2 as a further justification for his position, and makes the point that the apostles never asked, 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?', but 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' – believed, that is, in Jesus. Denney rests his case on the biblical evidence here, saying, somewhat disarmingly, that

¹² *Jesus and the Gospel*, p.398.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.399.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.400.

'it is better, in thinking of what is essential to a Christian confession, to keep to New Testament lines'.¹⁵

What do the Ancient Creeds Teach?

Denney proceeds to call in other witnesses allegedly to strengthen his argument, and enlists the help of the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds, which, says he, 'all betray a certain degree of embarrassment in their treatment of the article on the Spirit which they nevertheless agree to introduce.'¹⁶ But what Denney evidently forgot was that these creeds, together with the other catechisms and confessions, were utterly bound up with their scriptural foundations, making the authority of the Bible, if not a soteriologically indispensable belief, then certainly an epistemologically crucial belief.¹⁷ Without belief in the authority of the Bible, there would not have been any credal backbone to the Christian movement. The measure of the seriousness of the debate with Denney, and with later theologians, may be gauged by the fact that belief in the atonement and resurrection of Christ unquestionably stands or falls with belief in the reality of the Bible's authority. Denney's grasp of the doctrine of the atonement is masterful, generally speaking, yet his grasp of Scripture's own nature has been missed amid all his undoubted excellence. Let us examine briefly these historical creeds and confessions in turn.

The Apostles' Creed, the most ancient of the extant creeds, has definite affirmations and expansions to make about the Father and the Son, but, argues Denney, when it comes to the Spirit, it has not a word to add, simply the bare statement, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost.' John Burr, in his book, *Studies on the Apostles' Creed*, says that in dealing with the Holy Spirit, the compilers of this ancient

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.401.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See C.H.Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (London, 1985), p.x.

credal formulation, after affirming their faith in the Holy Spirit, go on to spell out the administration of the Spirit in terms of his being

sent to build up and sanctify human character, to bind men together in the fellowship of the Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints – the Church visible and invisible, Militant and Triumphant, and so bring home forgiveness to the hearts and consciences of men, that they may have peace with God here, and may in their flesh see God hereafter, and be prepared for fellowship with Him eternally.¹⁸

This sets out the position of the Apostles' Creed on the Holy Spirit in a clear manner, and enables what follows the simple statement 'I believe in the Holy Ghost' to be related to the soteriological work of the Spirit. So the Apostles' Creed says more about the Holy Spirit than Denney is prepared to admit, despite his concession that what Burr has written, he also holds.¹⁹

A similar position was originally taken in the Creed of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) at this point, which simply ended with the words, 'and in the Holy Ghost'. A decisive expansion of this statement was advanced by the Constantinople text (A.D. 381), '(I believe) in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and the Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the Prophets.' Denney describes these additions to the creed (our Nicene Creed) as 'haphazard and incongruous' and needing no comment.²⁰

But the matter just cannot be dismissed in such a cavalier manner. Denney descends to the very thing that he abominates in others – an arbitrary selectivity in dealing with historical documents. His preference for the earlier version of this creed was evidently a deliberate

¹⁸ London, 1931, p.173.

¹⁹ *Jesus and the Gospel*, p.402.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.401, 402.

decision to back up his own opinions and to enable him to give a semblance of historical substantiation to his own views.

The Nicene Creed cannot be employed to teach that the Holy Spirit is not co-equal or co-eternal with the Father and the Son, for this clearly is the case. His person and position are set out in terms that are reminiscent of those used in dealing with the Father and Son. In fact, this creed follows the Apostles' Creed, where in each case, the verb 'believe' is followed by the object of faith – the Father and the Holy Ghost. Faith in the Son is associated with faith in the Father. If any of the three persons were to have their deity questioned on the basis of statements in these two ancient credal documents, that of the Son could well be. But Denney accepts the full divinity and humanity of Christ as taught in the Bible and in these historical documents. Therefore, he is logically if not morally bound to accept the equal status of the Spirit on the same grounds.

It is one thing for Denney to marshal arguments from those ancient documents that suit his purpose; but it is quite another to neglect the rest which do not. An examination of the third of the classical and ecumenical creeds of Christianity, the Athanasian Creed, which may be dated about the late fifth or early sixth century AD,²¹ will reveal that great care is taken to state what its authors believed about the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to believe that Denney was unaware of this document, and therefore one must assume that his decision not to use it was deliberate. The precise formulation of the creed was designed on the one hand to exclude unorthodox viewpoints, and on the other to express the insights explicit in the church under Augustine's influence.²²

21 J.N.D.Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (London, 1964). Denney accepted an earlier date, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p.401.

22 J.F.Johnston in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W.A.Elwell (Basingstoke, 1985), pp.94, 95.

What do the Reformation Documents Teach?

The Belgic Confession (1561, but revised at Dort) is not called by Denney as a witness, yet it is to be observed that it has a brief article on the Holy Spirit,²³ where the teaching is in complete harmony with other Reformation documents. There are references to his person and work in the Confession (Art. IX), and his deity is affirmed. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), also neglected by Denney, has no article on the Holy Spirit, though reference to him is scattered liberally throughout the document. He is viewed consistently as fully God,²⁴ is the author of prayer, of faith and of the new birth, is promised to adult and infant members of the covenant of grace,²⁵ assures the believer of eternal life, and enables him to live for Christ. So references to the Spirit are neither lacking nor embarrassed.

The Canons of Dort (1618-19) had their origin during a period of controversy in the seventeenth century, when a section of the church drew up a set of propositions which were then rejected by the divines who met in this Dutch village. Their purpose was two-fold: to present the clear teaching of Scripture in answer to the propositions set forth by the Arminian party, and in so doing, to refute their errors of understanding and interpretation of Scripture. Consequently, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was not at issue, though the work that he was sent to do was. Hence, no separate section on the Holy Spirit was deemed necessary. That is not to say, of course, that he is not mentioned in the course of the document. Like its other Reformed companions, it, too, breathes the Spirit of God continually. His work of regeneration is emphasized, as is his operation in the sinner's heart through the word or ministry of reconciliation. It is he who illuminates the

²³ Questions 24, 25, 53.

²⁴ Question 74.

²⁵ Art. XI.

minds of the elect that they might rightly discern the mind of the Spirit of God.

When the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1643-7) are examined, the same absence of a formal treatment of the Holy Spirit is to be observed. But like the other confessions referred to, there are numerous references to him in the queen of confessions. For example, the opening chapter describes the Holy Spirit as the one who speaks 'in the Scripture'. His personality and divinity are clearly affirmed, and he stands in juxtaposition with the Word, effectually calls and sanctifies the elect, and so forth. These documents experience no embarrassment whatever in dealing with the Spirit, but rather confidently affirm who he is and what he came to do.

Denney's Explanation of the Apparent Absence of the Holy Spirit from these Documents

What Denney is arguing is that the lack of specific treatment of the Holy Spirit in these great creeds and confessions implies that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not to be made an article of faith for the church. He claims to be following the New Testament in this, and therefore declines to set the Spirit apart for special discussion. It is true that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is self-effacing, his role being to glorify Christ, and not to draw attention to himself.²⁶ So successful has he been that in the church he has virtually been forgotten altogether.

While there is certain credibility in Denney's viewpoint, it leaves the church in the potentially dangerous position of having no doctrine of the Holy Spirit at all. This comes out clearly in Denney's doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Because the person and work of the Holy Spirit do not have much place in Denney's thought, his thinking on Scripture is to that extent defective. Yet, the

²⁶ Jn. 15:26; 16:13, 14.

interesting thing is that Denney's practice, or use, of Scripture is superior to his theory.

For Denney to have excluded any treatment of the Holy Spirit in his understanding of the inspiration of Scripture was, therefore, not to have adopted an unusual practice at that time or since, yet such a discussion would have thrown much light on his somewhat unorthodox views on God's Word. In fact, in his *Studies in Theology*, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not dealt with at all, and anything he has to say about this subject has to be gleaned from his writing on various subjects in this and his other books.²⁷ Since he views the Holy Spirit in such an inadequate manner, it is to be expected that his resultant understanding of the Scriptures as a theological doctrine is similarly deficient. How Scripture can demonstrate the authority of Christ to the believer's consciousness, when no room can be found for the personal and necessary activity of Christ's Spirit in the production of those Scriptures, is difficult to see. Yet this is the unhappy position in which Denney leaves us.

Also, the fact that he did not separate these two notions in his own thinking bears eloquent testimony to the truth that the one is indispensable to the understanding of the other. Had Denney held to a true position on the nature of Scripture, he would have espoused an equally true position on the author of Scripture and *vice versa*.

²⁷ For example, see *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London, 1892), pp.233-247.