

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 Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Sacramental Word.

Principal James Denney's Attitude to the Bible.

BY THE REV. R. E. HIGGINSON, M.A.

JAMES DENNEY was born in Paisley, Scotland, on February 5th, 1856. The greater part of his early life was spent at Greenock, where his father was in business as a master-joiner. Even as a boy he excelled at school, and as a youth acted as a pupil-teacher. Two years of waiting were spent in a shipping office before proceeding to Glasgow University. The Arts Course there was marked with exceptional brilliance and he was the foremost student of his day. Theology was studied later at the Glasgow Free Church College. In later years he became a Professor there and eventually rose to be the Principal of his *Alma Mater*. At thirty years of age he accepted his first call to a Church, and succeeded Dr. A. B. Bruce at Broughty Ferry, Dundee. During the eleven years' pastorate there his name became widely known through his two volumes in the "Expositor" Series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 2 Corinthians, which were originally pulpit expositions. International fame came his way at this period through the series of lectures delivered in Chicago Theological Seminary in 1895, better known in printed form as "Studies in Theology." In 1897 he was invited to succeed Dr. A. B. Bruce as Professor of Systematic Theology in the Glasgow College. The connection between these two men is singular. Denney was a student under Bruce, and succeeded him in one pastorate and two divinity chairs! Bruce was "the true master of Denney's mind," and the latter could say of his teacher's commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, "He let me see Jesus." Three years later Denney accepted the Professorship of New Testament Literature, Language and Theology, which became his true vocation in life. In the Glasgow College he enjoyed the company of Principal T. M. Lindsay, the great Church Historian, George Adam Smith, and James Orr. What a band! What inspiration they gave one to another. In 1915, on the death of T. M. Lindsay, who was forty years as head of the College, Denney became Principal. It was a popular appointment. But his first illness in 1917 led to a premature death at the age of 61.

Unquestionably the strongest influence in his life was his wife, Mary Carmichael Brown. This devoted helpmeet led him into a more pronounced Evangelical faith, and induced him to read Spurgeon's sermons. These were not without their influence on his mind and message. His spiritual debt to this splendid woman was undoubtedly great. She was spared to him eleven years, during the Broughty Ferry pastorate. This was the happiest period of his life.

All those who knew this great man best speak with united voice as to his character as a Christian: a man of talent, power, and versatility, who impressed his generation as few other men did. "His humility and true piety were remarkable, notwithstanding his immense learning and towering intellectual superiority" (F. H. Walker,

a Memoir and Tribute). From first to last he was a preacher of the Word and of the Christ—and Him set forth as crucified. Calvary was the central point of his theology, and theology was nothing to him if it was not *preachable*. "The simplest truth of the Gospel and the profoundest truth of theology must be put in the same words—'He bore our sins.' If our gospel does not inspire thought, and if our theology does not inspire preaching, there is no Christianity in either" (*Death of Christ*, p.283). In the pulpit he was full of purpose and intensity, an "evangelist-theologian," aiming at decision for Christ in his hearers as the message of "full salvation now" was declared. Someone has described the style of the one volume of published sermons, "*The Way Everlasting*" (1913) as "clear cut as a Damascus Blade." He was primarily an expositor and combined a fine scholarship with spiritual passion, and to the end of his days he preached twice on a Sunday generally. At the end of his pastorate he burned all his sermons! While as a teacher of theology the main intention was to make not scholars, nor even ministers, but *believers*. In the classroom he created a feeling of reality as he dealt inimitably with the innermost, deepest, and most sacred truths of the Christian Faith—the holiness and love of God, the riches of the great salvation, the authority and decisiveness of the voice of Christ, the ineffable worth and incomparable happiness of the Christian life, the wonder of the immortal hope.

His passing was a great blow to the Church in Scotland. Carnegie Simpson in *Recollections* (1942) describes the reaction to the news of his sudden death. "A pillar on which we had all leaned had been taken from us." Sir Wm. Robertson Nichol wrote in 1917, "He seemed destined to guide thought and action in the difficult years to come as hardly anyone could but himself . . . His loss is irretrievable." F. H. Walker, in his singularly brief, but beautiful, *Memoir*, has described Denney engaged in prayer at a devotional meeting. "Everyone felt himself in the presence of a man to whom the Saviour was a living reality, and whose name he would not pronounce without an obvious throb of emotion and subdued tones of pathos, witnessing to the touch of Christ's Spirit on his own." The Greek Testament was constantly in his hand, even to the very last, and he quoted as freely from it from memory as from the A.V. ! In any assessment of his attitude to the Bible this must be borne in mind. It was the strength with which he held fast to the things at the centre which freed him from all anxiety as to what was happening at the circumference. He was—and his published works still are—a foremost champion of the central verity of the Historic Faith, the Divinity and Atoning Sacrifice of our Blessed Lord. This was due to the fact that he remained to the end essentially a man of one book, and that the New Testament in Greek, although widely versed in other literature. (He knew seven languages and was no mean authority on Shakespeare, Burns, and Dr. Johnson.) This devotion to the Word made him prefer the chair of New Testament Literature, Language, and Theology to that of Systematic Theology, although some of his friends thought otherwise. Principal Clow states that "one thinks of him pre-eminently as the great exponent of the Cross." Indeed, the Atonement as set forth in the New Testa-

ment was to him "the focus of revelation" and "the key to all that precedes." "The nature of the unity which belongs to Scripture has always been a perplexing question—so perplexing, indeed, that the very existence of any unity has been denied; yet there is an answer to it. Scripture converges upon the doctrine of the Atonement; it has the unity of a consentient testimony to a love of God which bears the sin of the World. 'To Him give all the prophets witness' . . . This is the burden of the Bible, the one fundamental omnipresent truth to which the Holy Spirit bears witness by and with the word in our hearts. This, at bottom, is what we mean when we say that Scripture is inspired" (*Death of Christ*, p.313). "It is in its testimony to this (i.e., the Atoning Sacrifice and Substitutionary Sin-Bearing by Christ) that the unity of Scripture and its inspiration consists, and whoever believes in this believes in inspiration in the only sense which can be rationally attached to the word" (*Death of Christ*, p.317).

It will thus be seen that Denney was not a man to rest content with a traditional statement of great doctrines. His keen, logical mind, while remaining true to the Evangelical Faith, sought to present the Message in living, contemporary terms. This will be realised by comparing his *Studies in Theology* with the doctrinal compendiums of his predecessors in Scotland. The dead hand of the past did not lie heavily upon him, although he was no iconoclast. In the opinion of his friend Dr. Carnegie Simpson, of Westminster College, Cambridge, "There was no ignorant narrowness about Denney. He was as critical as he was conservative."

Evangelicals during the past forty years or more, have treasured most of his published works, especially *The Death of Christ, Atonement and the Modern Mind*, and *Studies in Theology*. His other works, *Jesus and the Gospels* and *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, are lesser known. Sixteen books, beside numerous articles and contributions to joint books, flowed from his pen. He wrote no paradoxes, to him all epigrams had falsehood within them (what a contrast with Peter Taylor Forsyth!) In all his works there is what J. K. Mozley aptly describes as "the power that flows from the correspondence of word with thought." A great debt is owing to this Doctor of the Church from the whole Evangelical World. Most Evangelical students have been mastered by *The Death of Christ*, or at least greatly helped.

Can the same help be given in solving the problem of the Evangelical attitude to Higher Criticism? The clearest statement is the 9th Lecture in *Studies in Theology*, although it is the hardest chapter to read in the book. As he explains in the preface to that book, this lecture had to be re-written in view of the keen discussion it aroused in the circle to which it was first addressed. This caused a "fluttering" in the ecclesiastical dove cots in Scotland. Later, in the Glasgow Presbytery, the charge was made against him by a certain church in the city of teaching heretical opinions because of a public denial of the Davidic authorship of the 110th Psalm. (The defence given on that occasion will be stated later in the paper.) What, then, is his attitude to this burning question?

I.

The primary issue which determines, in some measure, the answer, concerns the cardinal doctrine of the Christian Faith. Is the chief head of the Faith the *record* of the Revelation, or the Revelation itself? Is it the Bible, or what is enshrined within the pages of the Bible? Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas in *Principles of Theology* affirms that the Bible should be placed at the head of any confession of belief because it is the source and authority of the Christian Faith. The same position is adopted in the Westminster Confession, where the Holy Scripture is the subject of the first chapter. On the other hand, the 39 Articles of the Church of England place the Holy Trinity, the Person and Work of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, prior to any doctrine of the Bible, which is given in Article VI. This was the order adopted by John Knox in 1560. The matter might be put more pointedly in this way. Was the Early Church right in omitting any reference to the Holy Scriptures in the Apostles' Creed, or should the first clause have read, "I believe in the Infallibility, Supreme Authority, and Plenary Inspiration of the Bible"?

The implicit assertion of the creeds, and the explicit affirmation of Denney, are that the Bible is *sacramental* in its nature. The Holy Scriptures are a means of conveyance, a means of grace, the title deeds of faith, "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." In its essential character the Written Word of God resembles the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to point away from Himself to Christ. The Written Word directs attention to the Living Word. "The Bible is, in the first instance, *the* means of grace through which God communicates with man, making him know what is in His heart towards him. It must be known and experienced in this character before we can form a doctrine concerning it. We cannot *first* define its qualities, and *then* use it accordingly: we cannot start with its inspiration, and then discover its use for faith and practice. It is through experience that words like inspiration come to have any meaning" (*Studies*, p.202). The burning question then, is, "What has God given us in the Bible?" The right answer is in the process of being found. James Denney had a contribution to make, perhaps not a *final* word, but most certainly a forceful one which needed to be said. It is the *Sacramental Word*, the emphasis resting on its conveying value and power rather than upon a static dogma of its supremacy, infallibility and inerrancy. Possibly Karl Barth oversteps the extent of Denney's concessions when he declares, "Holy Scripture is a *token* of revelation. The Scriptures are not the Revelation itself, Jesus Christ is the Revelation, but they are an indispensable token of the Revelation. Unbelief is possible even when confronted by this token. But there has never yet been a faith in the Revelation which has passed by this token, a faith which was not rather awakened, nourished, and controlled precisely through the instrumentality of this token." And yet there is much in common. It is a middle ground between idolising the Written Word and becoming a devotee of Bibliolatry, and the opposite extreme of the supremacy of reason over Revelation. Denney carefully avoided any doctrine of the *text*—the bare letter—of Holy Scripture, and clung to the Reformed position of *testimonium*

internum Spiritus Sancti. "This record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to me" (*Studies*, p. 208). This means that the test of inspiration is the power the Word has, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to assert authority over the believing reader.

The root of the matter may well be a question of interpretation. The place of the Bible in the Christian life and in the experience of the Church is assured when it is regarded as *the* Sacramental Word of God to the soul. The field of Interpretation of the Bible is a neglected one in theological studies, and yet a fundamental issue in any attempt to understand the nature of Biblical authority.

II.

The second issue relates to the vexed and perplexing question of the Inerrancy of the record of Revelation. The complementary question of the province of Higher Criticism is involved. Denney felt that there was a proper sphere for literary and historical criticism, and that it had a due province in Biblical research, although many scholars had transgressed the limits of a legitimate criticism. In his own work *Jesus and the Gospel* (1908) he outlined a theory which aimed at solving the Synoptic Problem. "Christian men do differ about numberless questions of Source Division, but we ought to be able to say boldly that though all these be left out of view, nay, even though in any number of cases of this kind the *gospels* should be proved in error, the *gospel* is untouched; the Word of God, the Revelation of God to the soul in Christ, attested by the Spirit, lives and abides. Revelation is ultimately personal, as personal as faith. It is to Christ we give our trust, and as long as the gospels make us sure of what He is, they serve God's purpose and our need" (*Studies*, p.209).

Although he was thus prepared to *concede* many points to the Higher Critics, such as a Second Isaiah, different strata of oral and written testimony in the Gospels, the influence therein of the second generation, the possibility of apostolic error in eschatological prediction (*cf.* his volume in Expositor series on Thessalonians, and Lecture X. in *Studies*), yet he resolutely *condemned* any denial of the supernatural in the revealing process, any undermining of Christ's Divinity, any adulteration of the authenticity of Apostolic testimony. What a conservative Old Testament scholar has said in discussing this question of discrepancy he would endorse: "Such errors as this (referring to 1 Samuel vii. 19) to which the text of any ancient book is liable in the process of transmission, do not affect the general historical trustworthiness of the narrative, and the freest acknowledgement of them in no way precludes a full belief in the Inspiration of Scripture." Thus when Denney was challenged by the Presbytery about his denial of Davidic authorship of Psalm cx he replied: "Christ did not teach anything about the authorship of the psalm. He spoke as everyone else in His time would have spoken. He taught that He was what He was—the Christ, not in virtue of a particular relationship with David, but in virtue of a particular relationship to God. This was what Christ was teaching. The question of authorship did not touch

the unique relationship between Christ and the Father" (*Memoir*, p.91, abbreviated). Then he went on to affirm how far he was prepared to go. "It was quite possible to profess his faith in the infallibility of Scripture. He believed if a man committed his mind and heart humbly and sincerely to the teaching and guidance of the Holy Scripture, it would bring him right with God and give him a knowledge of God and eternal life. But literal accuracy and inerrancy were totally different things; and they did not believe in that at all." In this way in the opinion of many the attitude here expressed was sane and open-minded championship of essential orthodoxy, commendable to the modern mind.

III.

Many Evangelicals to-day, who have come under the spell of the Barthian Theology, claim to be "*not Biblical Fundamentalists but Theological Fundamentalists.*" Denney would have been at home in their church gatherings, or they in his! The briefest but most pregnant description of his position is that of the *Sacramental Word*. The Bible is the Divine means of grace *par excellence*. "That, I think, is the 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 Scripture has to serve" (*Studies*, p.21). "God speaks to the heart and conscience of men through the Biblical record: it does not guarantee that in this record we shall find nothing but what is historical in the modern and scientific sense of history" (*Studies*, p.216). Indeed, one finds a reflection of the position adopted by James Orr in *Revelation and Inspiration*, especially in regard to the Old Testament. "It is the contents of this message also which we use, *without misgiving*, in constructing our theology, for these contents are authenticated by the witness of the Spirit"—not the mere letter of Holy Scripture, but the "Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (Westminster confession). "I do not think it is worth while to discuss beforehand, in this abstract way, what authority the apostolic theology can have, or ought to have. We wish our doctrine of God to rest upon the authority of God: and the Holy Spirit does not bear witness *before* the Word, but *by* and *with* the Word, in our hearts" (*Studies*, p.221). Again: "the perennial impulse which Scripture and Scripture alone communicates to spiritual life and spiritual thought is always sealing its pre-eminence anew" (*Studies*, p.226).

In conclusion, Dr. James Denney was a lover of the Cross as radiated in the New Testament. His heart and mind dwelled continually there and were never moved from that anchorage. This was his standard for judging all systems of theological thinking. "The New Testament is not simply a document to be examined under the microscope of the scholar; it is the record of an abounding life, which in a hundred varying accents of love and gratitude bears tribute to the Christ who redeemed it and reconciled it to God." He passed on to Glory with the Greek New Testament by his side, the unfailing inspiration even during his one and only illness. James Denney's mission consisted in proclaiming the evangel to Christendom.