

# *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/robbadshaw>

---

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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

“THE MIND OF THE MASTER.”

DR. WATSON'S volume is another sign of the extraordinary interest which has been evinced of recent years in the study of the teaching of Christ. The historical investigation of Christianity led us up to the commanding personality of its Founder as the secret of its spiritual life and of its spiritual triumphs. In consequence of the fresh attention directed to the unique rôle played by the historical Christ in the “origins of Christianity,” a fresh impetus was given to the study of the life of Christ. For more than half a century, lives of Christ have been amongst the most interesting of theological writings, both for the Biblical student and for the devout Christian reader. It was inevitable that the renewed study of the life of Christ should issue in fresh attempts to get at “the mind of Christ.” Such studies as *Ecce Homo* and Dr. Bruce's *Training of the Twelve*, indicated the growing interest in the great thoughts of God and of human life which lay at the heart of the wonderful story of the life of Christ. Since these books were published, the teaching of Christ has been investigated with a thoroughness never before exemplified in the study of the subject. It is not, perhaps, too much to say, that at the present time there is no problem in the sphere of Christian theology which excites more interest than just the determination of Christ's own thoughts regarding God and men's relations to God and to each other in God. The eagerness with which the translation of Wendt's *Lehre Jesu* has been received by English readers is an evidence of the wide-spread interest in the subject. Within recent years, there has been quite a number of little volumes—Mr. J. W. Mackail's and Mr. Elliot Stock's being amongst the best of them—which reproduce the sayings of Christ in the Gospels

under various heads of doctrine and conduct. And from many another quarter evidence is supplied to us that the teaching of the Master is receiving special study, and is gaining for itself special authority.

The title of Dr. Watson's first chapter, "Jesus our Supreme Teacher," indicates the dominant contention of the volume, that the supreme authority on questions of Christian doctrine and Christian life is to be found in the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. This principle is winning more and more the suffrages of Christian men. It may seem strange that any other principle should ever have been recognised in the Christian Church. . Yet it is only in recent times that the validity of this principle has received recognition, if it can even yet be said to be recognised. The Westminster Confession of Faith gives no suggestion that the words of Christ have a supreme regulative function in the construction of doctrine. Christ's words are on a level with other words in the inspired writings.. In the chapter entitled, "Of God and of the Holy Trinity," no reference is made in text or proofs to Christ's teaching on the Fatherhood of God. Of the fifty-six passages of Scripture adduced in support of the statements in this chapter, only three are words of Christ, and these are adduced merely to prove that God is "spirit" and "hath life." In the chapter on the Law of God, there is not one word to suggest that Christ has given us a deeper conception of the law of God than the Decalogue. Stranger still, though Christ has repeatedly declared His mind regarding the Sabbath and the observance of the Sabbath, no reference whatever is made in text or proofs to His teaching in the chapter entitled, "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath-day." These are but specimens of the way in which the teaching of Christ is kept in the background, or at least denied the position of supreme authority. Nor is this attitude towards the teaching of Christ peculiar to the

Confession of Faith ; it is the general attitude of the doctrinal symbols of the Protestant Churches.

As long as it was assumed that every part of the Bible was equal in its inspiration, and therefore in its authority on questions of doctrine and life, it was natural that texts from the Old Testament and from the Apostolic writings should have as much weight attached to them as the very words of Christ. But that old view of inspiration is no longer tenable, at least for those who accept the modern methods of interpreting the writings of the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament religion is a growth ; the history of its development can still partly be traced. There is growth in the ideas of God and duty. And in different books of the Old Testament, there are represented different stages of this growth. There is no one unvarying system of doctrine, and no one unvarying moral ideal. Doctrines and ideals are different at different periods, and different at the same period in different writers. Even in the New Testament, there are different types of doctrine. John, Paul, Peter, and James have their own individual and, in some respects, divergent ways of interpreting the revelation of God in Christ. If the progress of Biblical science has made it impossible to regard the Bible as pervaded throughout by one uniform doctrine of God, and one uniform moral ideal, if the progress of Biblical science has revealed inside the Bible development, with the imperfections and immaturities involved in development, the question is forced upon us : By what standard are we to judge the contents of the Bible?<sup>1</sup> How are we to determine what belongs to the immature stages of development, and what is of abiding worth ? How are we to determine what parts of the teaching are of primary importance, and what of secondary importance ? Amid the variety of teaching disclosed by Biblical science, how are we "to find our bearings in the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wendt's *Die Norm des echten Christenthums*.

Bible?" Such a question presents little difficulty to the Roman Catholic theologian, who can summon to his aid Councils and Pope to guide him in determining what the Scripture teaches on doctrine and duty. The High Church Anglican with his appeal to the teaching of the historical episcopate is also provided with an instrument for the interpretation of Scripture. But if we hold with the Reformers that the teaching of Popes, Councils, Creeds and Churches, needs to be judged by Scripture, and take our stand solely on Scripture, what resource is left to us for estimating the importance to be attached to the different parts of its varied teaching? Are we at the mercy of individual caprice? Are we free to take our own favourite doctrines and make these the norm for our interpretation of Scripture? Can we, for example, take up the position of theologians who tell us that "the apostolic doctrine of Christ's work in relation to sin is the thing which gives one his bearings in the Bible?" Must our standard be chosen in this subjective fashion? Or is there some objective standard to which we can appeal?

To this question Dr. Watson replies that there is such a standard in the teaching of Jesus. For every Christian, there is surely intrinsic reasonableness in such a standard. The Christian Church confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, in closer fellowship than any other with the Father, more at home than any other in the spiritual world. It is the contention of the Christian Church that Jesus is *the Revealer of God*. To claim supreme authority for the teaching of Jesus, is only to give effect to what the Church holds regarding His relation to God and His understanding of the mind of God. It is strange, indeed, that with her doctrine of the Person of Christ, the Church should ever have consented to let His teaching occupy any other than the foremost place as an authoritative standard for doctrine and duty.

---

Dr. Watson is perfectly unambiguous in assigning supreme authority to the teaching of Jesus. Such a frank acceptance of a supreme authority within the Scriptures has evoked a considerable amount of adverse criticism. Not unnaturally, for the acceptance of the supreme authority of the teaching of Christ in the Gospels may carry with it changes in theological thought and in the ideals of church life. As soon as the conception has become dominant that the great thoughts of Christ are to be our supreme standard for the interpretation of the rest of Scripture, for the construction of Christian theology, and for guidance in Christian duty, it is inevitable that the old order will change, "giving place to new." I have little doubt that the new position will finally commend itself to the minds of Christian men who, in conformity with the fundamental principle of Protestantism, emphasize the supreme authority of the Bible rather than the authority of the Church and tradition, but, at the same time, it is natural that, in view of its far-reaching consequences, it should be canvassed with a considerable amount of uneasiness.

The principle for which Dr. Watson contends would be robbed of its significance if the apostolic teaching were held to be the teaching of Jesus in such a sense that as great authority attached to the words of the Apostles as to the words spoken by Jesus Himself and recorded in the Gospels. On the old theory of inspiration it was reasonable to put the words of Jesus on no higher level of authority than the words of His Apostles, for the whole Bible was equally inspired and equally authoritative. But if we accept a theory of inspiration more in harmony with the results of the scientific investigation of the writings of the Old and New Testaments, it is less easy to refuse to the words of Jesus a position of supreme authority even in relation to the words of the Apostles. It is true that Christ promised the Spirit of Truth to His disciples, and it is true

that in fulfilment of this promise many words have been spoken by His disciples for the illumination and inspiration of the Church. But can it reasonably be held that the mind of Christ is better made known to us in the words of the Apostles than in His own words? However precious may be the spiritual teaching of the Apostles, surely no interpretation of the promise of the Spirit of Truth to the disciples can lead us to believe that we are to make apostolic doctrine regulative for the interpretation of Christ's words, rather than Christ's words regulative for the interpretation of apostolic doctrine. Of course, if we held a mechanical theory of inspiration, which would make Paul as really the mouthpiece of the Spirit of Christ as Jesus Himself, the authority of an Apostle might well be as great as that of the Master, but such a theory of inspiration lies outside our consideration.

Dr. Watson has rendered good service by his pleading without reserve for the supreme authority of the teaching of the Master. This may be found to be the most valuable feature in his volume. The book has, of course, many claims on the attention of readers interested in theological questions. But, instead of dwelling on the rich suggestiveness and literary brilliance of its chapters, I propose in the remaining part of this article to draw attention to some of Dr. Watson's positions which seem to me to invite friendly criticism.

1. Some of Dr. Watson's critics have complained that he has said too little about the Person of Christ. It was scarcely within the scope of the task which he set himself to discuss the doctrine of the incarnation; and in a volume that does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of Christ's teaching, the author may be forgiven for not giving us a more thorough study of Christ's teaching regarding Himself. At the same time, the unique teaching is so distinctly the outflow of the unique personality that the key to

---

the teaching may best be found in the spiritual experience of the Teacher. The consciousness of Sonship with the Father was a cardinal element in this experience. The consciousness of sonship was dominant with Him even in boyhood. "Wist ye not," said He to Joseph and Mary, "that I must be about *My Father's* business?" All through the years He lived and worked, suffered and sorrowed as a Son of the Father, one with the Father in the fellowship of life and love. In this central element of His experience is found the clue to His teaching about God, about Himself and His mission, about righteousness, sin and salvation. This central element of His experience carries with it the Fatherhood of God, and the thought of God as a Father explains much of the teaching on the love, brotherhood, and social service of the Kingdom of God. If one may borrow a phrase from Immanuel Kant, the Fatherhood of God is an *architectonic* doctrine, and this doctrine has its roots in the unique religious consciousness of the Teacher. So important for the study of the teaching of Jesus is the personality of the Teacher.

2. "The Sovereignty of Character" is the first topic handled by Dr. Watson after the two introductory chapters. This chapter contains many things finely said, and not only finely said but needing to be said. We need to be reminded that Christ attached quite a supreme importance to character, that His whole mission had reference to character, that it was in the interests of character He demanded faith in Himself, and that He constituted character the final test of a man's worth or worthlessness for the Kingdom of God. The "Sovereignty of Character" is without doubt a capital feature in Christ's teaching, and on the ground of Christ's teaching Dr. Watson is justified in the vigorous protest he has made against the acceptance of correct opinions as a *substitute* for good character. But there is no incompatibility between the "sovereignty of

character" and the importance of creeds, as some of Dr. Watson's critics, misled by one or two incautious phrases, have understood him to maintain.

Dr. Watson uses strong language in rebuking various abuses of creeds, but in more than one eloquent sentence he traces the profound influence of creed on character. "History proves the necessity of a creed; experience proves its effect. . . . The whole energy of a human life, however it may have been fed on the way, and whatever common wheels it may turn, arises from the spring among the hills. Belief gives the trend to politics, constitutes the rule of business, composes the atmosphere of home, and creates the horizon of the soul. It becomes the sovereign arbiter of our destinies, for character itself is the precipitate of belief" (pp. 249, 250).

At the same time, Dr. Watson introduces an element of confusion into his discussion of the relations of creed and character. "No Church since the early centuries has had the courage to formulate an ethical creed. . . . Imagine a body of Christians who should take their stand on the sermon of Jesus, and conceive their creed on His lines. Imagine how it would read, 'I believe in the Fatherhood of God; I believe in the words of Jesus; I believe in the clean heart; I believe in the service of love; I believe in the unworldly life; I believe in the beatitudes; I promise to trust God and follow Christ, to forgive my enemies, and to seek after the righteousness of God. . . .' Who would refuse to sign this creed? . . . For three too short years the Church of Christ had none else, and it was by holy living and not by any metaphysical subtleties the Primitive Church lived, and suffered, and conquered" (pp. 20, 21). Was the early Church founded on an ethical creed—a declaration of the virtues its members were to practise? Is the creed of the early Church not rather to be found in St.

Peter's exclamation, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"? Surely personal devotion to Christ was the basis of the Church, and one has only to read Dr. Watson's own chapter on the "Dynamic of Religion" to see how the creed of St. Peter is the best guarantee for the attainment of the Christian character sketched in the Sermon on the Mount.

3. Had the chapters on "the Fatherhood of God," and the "Dynamic of Religion" preceded the chapter on "The Sovereignty of Character," and that which contains the plea for an "ethical creed," Dr. Watson would have been less tempted to use the phrases in apparent depreciation of creeds which have called forth animadversion. At any rate these two chapters provide the necessary correction of these phrases. A similar remark might be made regarding the chapter on the Culture of the Cross in relation to that on the Dynamic of Religion. "The cross may be made into a doctrine, it was prepared by Jesus as a discipline" (p. 120). Statements like this in the first of these chapters tend to suggest that Christ is little more than a teacher of the necessity of self-sacrifice for the salvation of the soul. But one has only to read the second of these chapters to be assured that this is far from being Dr. Watson's meaning. "The beginning of the religious life was . . . to break up a man's former environment and to follow the lead of Christ. 'Believe in Me,' and 'Come to Me,' He was ever saying as if it were natural to trust Him, impossible to resist Him" (p. 184). "It is not the doctrines nor the ethics of Christianity that are its irresistible attraction. Its doctrines have often been a stumbling block, and its ethics excel only in degree . . . The life-blood of Christianity in Christ" (p. 188). "The eternal Son of God gave Himself without reserve, and anticipated that to all time men would give themselves for Him. He proposed to inspire His race with a personal devotion, and that pro-

found devotion was to be their salvation" (p. 190). One does not quite understand why Dr. Watson should treat of "The Culture of the Cross" before giving us his study of Christ's teaching on Himself and His significance for the spiritual life of humanity. Had this study come first, "the Culture of the Cross" would have had its natural place in the life of discipleship, and one or two of Dr. Watson's sentences would have been so turned as to disarm criticism. In a collection of separate papers or discourses one ought not to expect the same degree of systematic thoroughness as in a professedly scientific study, yet the "Mind of the Master" is likely to be best understood if we bear in mind that there is an organic unity in the teaching of Christ, grounded in His unique personality.

4. Some of the chapters of "The Mind of the Master" appeared in the EXPOSITOR under the heading "The Premier Ideas of Jesus." Chapter xi., "Optimism the Attitude of Faith"; and chapter xiv., "The Foresight of Faith," could scarcely be legitimately brought under such a heading. Dr. Watson has given us a most suggestive study of the optimism of Jesus; but, as he himself shows, the optimism of Jesus is the corollary of His teaching on the loving will of God, on the affinity of men for God and on His conception of man's true good. Dr. Watson has also given us many fine suggestions in chapter xiv. on prudence or foresight in the spiritual life; but all this part of Christ's teaching is rather an application of His premier ideas than the promulgation of new thoughts.

5. There are other two chapters in the volume which suggest a danger to be avoided in the exposition of the teaching of Jesus—the danger of putting doctrines congenial to ourselves into the mouth of Jesus. A preacher who selects a text out of the sayings recorded in the Gospels may be pardoned if he stretches the text to give countenance to his own favourite ideas, but in discourses which

---

profess to be an exposition of the Mind of the Master we are perhaps entitled to look for a more objective method of handling the sayings of Christ. In the chapter on sin, Dr. Watson has given us a needful reminder about the reticence of Christ on the origin of sin, and has besides given us many helpful suggestions; but I question whether the statement that sin is selfishness or an act of self-will is in any peculiar way the teaching of Christ. In the chapter on Faith the Sixth Sense we meet with many striking sentences: "Any one who shifts the centre of his life from the world which is seen to the world which is unseen deserves to be called a believer" (p. 139). "It is the part of faith to gather those hopes and feelings which lie outside the intellect, and faith must not be hampered by reason" (p. 160). "For the phenomena of the universe we look to science; for the facts of the soul to faith" (p. 151). One may reasonably question whether in this chapter Dr. Watson has not read into the teaching of Jesus more than can be discovered by objective interpretation.

6. The fact that what Dr. Watson considers one of the cardinal points in the teaching of Christ—the kingdom of God—is handled in the last chapter is a sufficient indication that it has been no part of his plan to take up his topics in logical order. A reader cannot tell to which of Christ's two great thoughts—the kingdom of God and the Divine Fatherhood—Dr. Watson assigns the highest function in explaining the mind of the Master. "The Kingdom of God" is often taken to be the fundamental thought. But a good deal can be said for beginning with the Fatherhood. The consciousness of Sonship was earlier awake in Jesus than the consciousness of Messiahship. It was indeed the consciousness of His unique Sonship which led Him to the conviction that He was the Christ of God. It was natural that He should begin His preaching with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, for it was along that line He would

---

best find amongst the people a point of attachment for His message. But what was first in His preaching was not necessarily first and most fundamental in His own thoughts. The Fatherhood, moreover, explains better than the Kingdom of God, Christ's teaching on other subjects, e.g., His teaching about Himself as Son of God and Son of Man, about man and man's *summum bonum*, about brotherhood and social service, about the true nature of piety and worship.

7. There is nothing more striking in Dr. Watson's chapter on the Kingdom of God than his insistence on the truth set forth in Christ's words, "the Kingdom of God is within you." "The Kingdom consists of regenerate individuals, and therefore He was always trying to create character. . . . The reformer . . . approaches humanity from the outside, and proceeds by machinery; Jesus approaches humanity from the inside and proceeds by influence" (p. 324). "He had a wide horizon. He was not content to change their circumstances, He dared to attempt something higher—to change their souls" (p. 330). In view of the emphasis which Dr. Watson lays on this aspect of Christ's teaching on the Kingdom, one finds it the more difficult to understand why he should hint that Paul and the Christian Church generally should have unduly neglected Christ's doctrine of the Kingdom. It can hardly be said that either Paul or the Christian Church has overlooked the need of a change of soul for the Kingdom of God, and it can as little be said that in his teaching on the Church Paul has thrown into the background the idea of a social organism with its links of sympathy and service. There were good grounds why the Apostles should make less use than their Master of a Jewish phrase like the Kingdom of God, but that does not hinder them from emphasizing the ideals of the Kingdom of God not only with reference to the Church but also with reference to

---

other aspects of the social life of men. Dr. Watson reminds us that the Kingdom of God is wider and greater than the Church as a visible institution, but the relations of the two are not quite happily set forth in such a sentence as this: "The characteristic product of the Church is ecclesiastics; the characteristic product of the Kingdom is philanthropists." The Church has been guilty of aberrations and shortcomings, but the Church can also boast of faithful service and splendid achievement even in the realization of the Kingdom of God outside the ecclesiastical sphere. The domestic, social, and political life of Christendom owes an incalculable debt to the Christian Church.

D. M. Ross.