**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**12. DEGREES OF REALITY IN REVELATION AND RELIGION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth."*

*1 John 5:6 f*

There are three different connexions in which John emphasizes water and blood in a way resembling that which strikes us here. First, there are the two chapters in his Gospel - the third and the sixth - with their reference to the Christian sacraments. "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, ye have not life in yourselves." In the sacraments of Baptism and the Supper, the water and the blood are symbolized, and their virtue is perpetuated for the Church. Then there is the singular passage in which an incident of the Passion is specially emphasized. "One of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and straightway there came out blood and water." That the evangelist attached some strange and extraordinary importance to this is apparent from the solemnity with which he attests it. "And he that hath seen hath borne wit ness, and his witness is true; and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye also may believe." And finally there is the passage in the epistle which we have taken as a text.

The point emphasized in this last passage is that when we think of Jesus Christ the water and the blood are not to be separated: Jesus came, not in one only, but in the other also. The key to this puzzling statement is to be found in chapter four, at the third verse. There we read in our English Bibles, that every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God; but as the margin of the Revised Version tells us, some ancient authorities read, every spirit which annulleth Jesus is not of God. Annulleth is the rendering of the Latin solvit, a word which occurs in all Latin manuscripts but one, and which points quite distinctly to a separation of elements in the being or experience of Jesus analogous to that which is forbidden here. In point of fact we know on other grounds that there were those who made such a separation. Among the contemporaries of John at Ephesus there was a prominent teacher called Cerinthus who taught, to put it so, that Jesus came with the water only. He held that all that was Divine in Jesus descended upon Him when He was baptized, and that all that He did in virtue of the power with which He was then invested was Divine. The new teaching which so impressed men with its authority - the words of eternal life by which the souls of men were quickened toward God - the mighty works which delivered men oppressed and enslaved by the devil: all these were Divine, but these only. Whatever was of God in Jesus, whatever constituted Him the Son of God, withdrew from Him as Calvary came near. The Son of God did not come through blood. The Christ did not really pass through the degrading and squalid tragedy of the Crucifixion. He left the mere man Jesus, or perhaps a mere phantom, to undergo the passion; but all that was Divine was absent then. This is what John so emphatically denies. As against all such separations he protests that the Son of God came by water and by blood. That strange and moving incident at the cross re minds us of it. The sacraments are a perpetual wit ness to it. Something vital goes out of our religion if it is denied.

Possibly there are some who can hardly take the trouble to understand this: it seems to them so crazy, remote, and unreal that their minds refuse to attend to it. But this is a mistake. It raises an extremely serious question, a question never more keenly discussed than at this hour, though under other forms. It may be put somewhat in this fashion. We who are Christians believe that in Jesus Christ the love of God has been revealed for our salvation, and the question is, What kind or degree of reality belongs to that love? John's answer is emphatic. It is no less real than our own life and death; it is as real as blood. And the immediate inference is that the religion which is our response to this revelation must have a corresponding reality. Hence there are two subjects, or rather two aspects of one subject, suggested by this text; (1) the reality of God's redeeming love, (2) the reality of our response to it.

**1.** The reality of God's redeeming love. It is easy to puzzle the mind with questions about reality, especially where God is concerned. Everyone has heard of the astronomer who swept the heavens with his telescope and found no trace of God. That is not very disconcerting. We do not ascribe to God the same kind of reality as we do to the stars, and are not disappointed if the astronomer does not detect him as he might a hitherto unnoticed planet. M. Renan somewhere speaks of God as "the category of the ideal"; that is, he ascribes to God that kind of reality which belongs to the high thoughts, aspirations, and hopes of the mind. Certainly we should not disparage the ideal or its power, and still less should we speak lightly of those who devote themselves to ideals and cherish faith in them. But to redeem and elevate such creatures as we are, more is needed; and what the Apostle is so emphatic about is that God has come to save us not with the reality of ideals, but with the reality of all that is most real in the life we live on earth, in the battle we fight in the flesh, in the death that we die- He has come with the reality of blood. The Christian religion is robbed of what is most vital in it if the historical Christ and the historical passion cease to be the very heart of it.

Sometimes this robbery, by which the faith is ruined, is perpetrated on philosophical principles. The import ant thing in the Gospel, we are told, is the ethical principle of it - the idea that we must die to live, must sacrifice the lower life for the sake of the higher; grasp this, and everything else becomes indifferent. Jesus may have been the first to grasp it clearly, but it is not dependent on Him; and once we have clearly grasped it, we are not dependent on Him either. On the contrary, it enables us to understand Him, to appreciate what He has done for the common good, to assign Him His due place among the great men who have contributed to the enlightenment and uplifting of our race. I say again, we have no need to disparage ethical principles and those who strive to regulate their lives by them; but the very meaning of the Gospel is that we have more than ethical principles, however true and lofty, to look to. We have the passion of the Son of God. I had rather preach with a crucifix in my hand and the feeblest power of moral reflection, than have the finest insight into ethical principles and no Son of God who came by blood. It is the pierced side, the thorn- crowned brow, the rent hands and feet, that make us Christians - these, and not our profoundest thoughts about the ethical constitution of the universe. "I write unto you, little children," says the author of this epistle, "because your sins are forgiven you." Where does the forgiveness of sins come from? Is there any ethical principle from which it can be deduced? Are there any fine ideas or combinations of ideas from which we can derive the assurance that there is in God - not in idea but in reality - a love more wonderful and powerful than sin, a love that bears it in all its crushing weight, and enables us to triumph over it? No, it is no principle or idea which yields an assurance like that. "Your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." It is through the passion of the Son of God, through the death that He died on the cross, and through nothing less awfully real, that such assurance establishes itself in the heart.

Sometimes, again, it is not philosophers but historians who lapse in this unfortunate direction. We are all familiar with what is known as historical criticism, and especially with its application to Scripture. We know that it has affected our estimate of many things, and that it has been attended in the Church with much alarm and apprehensiveness as to its results. There is one way of meeting this situation - one way of attempting to soothe the apprehensions of timid Chris tians - with which also we are familiar, but which needs to be more seriously thought of in the light of this text. How often we hear it said, "All this nervousness and anxiety about the results of criticism is beside the mark. It is quite true that everything which claims to be historical is subject to criticism, and that any alleged historical fact may prove unable to stand critical tests; but why should anyone be spiritually perturbed for that? It has nothing to do with religion. Facts and faith move on different planes. They never touch. We may come to any conclusion whatever about facts without making the smallest difference to faith. Faith stands on its own basis. It does not de pend on facts; it can assert itself in despite of them. It is sheer unbelief which inspires these fears." What are we to say to this line of argument?

If we agree with the Apostle we must say that it is false. The Christian religion, as he at least understood it, was not this pure and sublimated spirituality to which facts are indifferent. Nor is it so to Christians in general. It is saying little to say that the specious consolation just described never consoled anyone who was really alarmed. Indeed to most people it is so far from bringing consolation that they feel it is adding insult to injury. A sound instinct tells them what it means. It means that faith henceforth is to have the reality of ideas - of high and noble convictions or aspirations of our own - but not the reality of blood. And such faith, they know, is not real enough to overcome the world. We do not need to say that it is atheism, but neither is it faith in God through Him.

In true Christianity, everything depends on the facts - on Jesus Christ who came by water and blood; not with the water only, but with the water and the blood. Our sound course is, not to say that no matter what comes of the facts the Christian faith is secure, but to point out the entire security of the facts on which that faith reposes. Consider, for example, the evidential value of the sacraments as it is suggested by this very passage. There is nothing in Christianity more primitive than the sacraments. They were celebrated universally in the Church before any part of the New Testament was written, and they still bear unequivocal witness to Him who came in the water and in the blood. Every one of the countless millions who from the day of Pentecost to this day has been baptized in the name of Jesus is a witness to the baptism of Jesus Himself, to His experience at the Jordan and its sequel in His Spirit-filled life. Everyone who since the night on which He was betrayed has eaten the bread and drunk of the cup in the Lord's Supper is a witness to the reality of His Passion. These things cannot be shaken, and it is absurd to speak of them as if they could be, and leave our faith secure. Without them it could never have come into being, and would speedily cease to be. Without a historical foundation as real as life and death, preaching is vain and faith is vain: there is not a love of God known to us on which we can lean as Christians have leaned hitherto on the passion of their Lord.

**2.** Let us turn now to the other aspect of the truth: the reality of our response to God's love as manifested in the life and death of Jesus. Such love claims an answer in kind. There must be an. intensity in the religion corresponding to that of the revelation: there must be the reality of blood in both.

Every reader of the Gospel knows that nothing is so abhorrent to Jesus as a Laodicean attitude on the part of disciples. When He was on His way to Jerusalem, Luke tells us, "great multitudes followed Him; and He turned, and said unto them, If any man come to Me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple". It was as though it tried His patience beyond endurance to be attended by multitudes who could not find it in their hearts to answer His passion with any corresponding passion of their own. He was going up to Jerusalem to die, and they were going up to gaze, perhaps to admire or to applaud, certainly not to share His cross. It is at the close of this passage that He says to these insipid followers, "Salt is good; but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor yet for the dunghill: men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." What is salt? What is the saline property in human character which makes it valuable and serviceable to Jesus, and the want of which makes Him pronounce on men the appalling sentence - "good for nothing"? It is the power of self-denial, of doing violence to nature and its impulses, of meeting the passion of Christ with responsive passion, of giving blood for blood. If it is not in men to do this, even in presence of the cross, Christ declares them "not fit for the Kingdom of God". It follows from this that no deliberate seeking of a sheltered life is truly Christian. The Son of God came in blood. He faced the world as it was, the hour and the power of darkness; He laid down life itself in pursuance of His calling; and there must be something answering to this in a life which is genuinely Christian. Yet we cannot help seeing that in different ways this conclusion is practically evaded. It is evaded by those who aim at cultivating the Christian life solely in coteries, cliques, and conventions of like-minded people; by those whose spiritual concern is all directed inward, and whose ideal is rather the sanctification of the soul than the consecration of life to Christ. There are so few people who make holiness in any sense whatever the chief end of life that one shrinks from saying anything which might reflect on those who do pursue it, even in a mistaken sense; but who has not known promising characters fade away and become characterless, through making this mistake? Who does not know how easy it is to miss the Gospel type, the type of Jesus, and actually to present to the world, as though with his stamp upon it, a character insipid, ineffective, bloodless? Nothing has a right to bear His name that is not proved amid the actualities of life to have a passion in it like His own. But far oftener than by any mistaken idea of sanctification is Christ's claim for reality in religion evaded by mere selfishness. In how many homes is life narrowed to the circle of the domestic affections, and how often precisely such homes are thought of as among the happiest triumphs of the Christian religion! No one need undervalue the domestic affections: they are among the dearest and best gifts of God to man. But if life is shut up within them, as it often is, then no matter how amiable, how refined, how pure, how happy they may be, it is a bloodless life. In many a happy family, which would be amazed to hear itself spoken of as unchristian, the conflicts of the world are ignored. The Lord's battle is going on all around it against pride, sensuality, greed, drunkenness, spurious patriotism; and they are not in it. There is no real response in their lives to that which Jesus was, did, and suffered. But He came by blood; He longs to see of the travail of His soul; and there is nothing to satisfy soul-travail in the blame less happy life of many so-called Christian homes. Their religion may be real, but it is not real enough for Him; it has no passion in it answering to the Passion of the Son of God who came in blood.

I can understand anyone seeing both aspects of the truth on which we have been dwelling, and the correspondence of the one to the other, and yet feeling unable to realize their connexion in experience. "I can see the passion of Jesus, and I acknowledge that it should evoke a responsive passion in me, but it does not. It is too far away. I apprehend it as a fact, but somehow it does not operate as a motive. Why is this, and what ought I to do?" The answer to such questions, I believe, is suggested by the next words of the Apostle: "It is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth". There is a point of mystery in all religion - not the point at which we know nothing, but the point at which we know everything and yet nothing happens - the point at which we are cast absolutely on God. But the mention of the Spirit reminds us that though the Christian experience depends absolutely upon God, it is not for that reason blankly mysterious. The Spirit is a witness; he takes the things of Christ and shows them to us, and under his showing they become present, real, and powerful. This is his work - to make the past present, the historical eternal, the inert vital. When the Spirit comes, Christ is with us in all the reality of His life and Passion, and our hearts answer to His testimony. We read the Gospel, and we do not say, He spoke these words of grace and truth, but He speaks them. We do not say, He received sinners and ate with them; but, He receives sinners and spreads a table for them. We do not say, He prayed for His own; but, He ever liveth to make intercession for us. We do not even say, He came in blood; but, He is here, clothed in His crimson robe, in the power of His Passion, mighty to save. Have we not had this witness of the Spirit on days we can recall? Have we not had it in listening to the word of God this very day? We know what it is to grieve the Spirit; we know also what it is to open our hearts to Him. Let us be ready always to open our hearts to His testimony to the Son of God - to Jesus Christ who came with the water and with the blood; and as the awful reality of the love of God in Christ is sealed upon them, let us make answer to it in a love which has all the reality of our own nature in it.