

Sermons I: The Leadership of Jesus

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The question of the proper conception of Jesus, and his place in Christianity, is one which is of prime interest to many of the men in the Divinity School and causes not a little thought and discussion. Closely following this there arises another question of no less importance, viz., the proper spirit in which to present Jesus and his teachings to men with whom we may come in contact. What I may say is simply the way the problem presents itself to me. I present it not as an exposition, but rather as an interrogation. All may be considered, as one question asked for the express purpose of bringing forth answers.

The rise of the question in my mind dates from a specific event, which, with some hesitation, I relate to you. A few months ago, at the funeral service of a very dear friend, the opportunity came for seeing from another's point of view the conception of Christ. After the usual exercises, when all but two or three of the friends had left the house, I found myself in the room where the casket still remained. The father, mother and a friend were the only ones in the room besides myself. The mother knelt before the casket and in a simple prayer, addressed in part to God and in part to Jesus the Christ, besought Jesus to come for her only son upon whom she was looking for the last time. To her, Jesus was the nearby friend who would help her and sustain her in trouble, who would care for her son. God was far away, [a] transcendent God, but I could almost see Jesus standing opposite her looking upon the sorrowing mother with compassion and love in his face. He was the friend and source of strength.

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<sup>1</sup> This is from a collection of manuscripts—mostly class papers—written while Davis was a student at Harvard Divinity School, 1902-1904. This manuscript has "Sermons I (14)" on the top of the first page. On the back side of the last page: "Read before the Harvard Unitarian Club meeting at the home of Wm. Liffany, Feb. 19, 1903."

For the first time in my life, I understood what Jesus Christ means to those who thus believe in him; the nearby friend and helper, showing the compassion and love which belong to the nature of God. He was the interceder between God and man.

I came away from that home asking the question, "Can Unitarianism overcome such a faith?" My question went unanswered for many a day, but at length I began to satisfy myself with an explanation.

I believe that this particular event simply represents an inherent demand in human nature for a conscious knowledge of a close relationship between God and man. Man feels that he is akin to God, and this sense of relationship demands some adequate expression either in symbol or in thought. I would call this inherent sense of the nearness of God and man, the Christ Idea. Either in thought or in symbol this idea must be satisfied.

The general movement of history, from a religious point of view, is a series of confirmations of this demand in human nature for the satisfaction of the Christ Idea. It is one constant conflict between the conception of God as Transcendent and the conception of God as immanent.<sup>2</sup> Not only is it shown in specific events as narrated in history, but the general characteristics of periods indicate it.

In the early history of the Jewish people, we find, as the accounts indicate, a belief that in specific events from time to time, God came down to the earth and held council with men. Exodus is full of such traditions. Here the Christ Idea is satisfied by a symbolic event.<sup>3</sup> Again in the 2<sup>nd</sup> period God speaks through the prophets, and thus indicates his nearness to men. But during the third period of Jewish history God is represented as being displeased with the Jewish people. They consequently feel his aloofness. The transcendent God no longer shows his nearness to men by special events, the Christ Idea gives rise to the messianic hope.

Into the midst of these conditions comes Jesus of Nazareth with his great insight into the needs of the human heart. He was

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<sup>2</sup> The professor has underlined the word "immanent."

<sup>3</sup> The professor has put a mark in the margin beside this line.

indeed the Messiah, for his doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, the close relationship between God and man, answered the inherent demand of the Christ Idea. But the people were unable to comprehend his teaching in full. They still clung to their conception of a transcendent God who could show his intimate relations with men only by some specific revelation. Now in their confusion of these two ideas, 1<sup>st</sup> the transcendent God, and 2<sup>nd</sup> the immanent God, they misapprehended the true nature of Jesus' teaching. They knew that his teaching of the Fatherhood of God satisfied the Christ Idea, but because of Jesus' life of service and love, because most fully he lived the life of his own teachings, they, influenced by their idea of a transcendent God, looked upon Jesus as a special and peculiar revelation of God. They crowned him with the Christ Idea.

Then followed the period in which year by year Jesus became more and more an historic figure. Disputes arose concerning his nature and centered about the question of a special revelation of a transcendent God on the one hand, and a natural revelation of an imminent God on the other. Out of the confusion of this period in which Jewish, Greek and Oriental ideas were ??? intermingled, we emerge in 325 at the council of Nicaea. Here the ideas of a transcendent God prevailed, the idea of an imminent God is forced into the background, and Jesus the man and his teaching are lost. Jesus Christ is declared to be nothing less than God himself living upon the earth as a human being. It is the old Jewish idea of a transcendent God again. God had been to earth and revealed himself again in the person of Jesus Christ. But in the death and resurrection of Jesus he had returned again to his heaven.

Here they were indeed in a dilemma. The inherent Christ Idea must be satisfied, but Jesus and his teaching of the Fatherhood of God, of an imminent God, had been lost in the Christ of dogma, and the Christ of dogma was lost in the declaration that Christ, and such a person as the Christ of dogma is represented to be. The Christ of dogma arose to meet the demands of the Christ Idea under a transcendental conception of God. In other words, the Christ of dogma takes his place beside the infallible church, and the infallible Bible, as symbol made use of to satisfy the Christ Idea of the human heart.

Thus far then we have 1<sup>st</sup> that [the] Christ idea [is] inherent in man, which must be satisfied. 2<sup>nd</sup> an immanent God, our Father,

the God of love and justice. 3<sup>rd</sup> Jesus of Nazareth, the man who has realized most fully the true conception of the relation of man to God. Now I believe that any preaching, if it is to be successful, if it is [to] satisfy the religious feelings in men, must meet fully and satisfactorily this inherent demand of the Christ Idea. Either by symbol or by thought, we must satisfy this feeling of relationship with God. I cannot see how any church can long be successful and ignore this fact of religious life. It is evident that Unitarians cannot hope to satisfy this demand through Jesus. It seems very clear to me that if we present what is the logical and rational conception of Jesus of history, we shall fall far short of any adequate satisfaction of this demand of the Christ Idea. As a redeemer of the world, in the sense in which the Christ of dogma has been presented to people, we cannot with honesty present Jesus. It would be mere playing with words, and such devices are deplorable. The demand of the Christ idea cannot be met by any honest conception of Jesus.

But I still believe that the Unitarian point of view offers by far the most adequate satisfaction of this demand. The Christ is but a symbol of the same nature as the infallible church, and the infallible Bible. But in the Unitarian conception of God, God's immanence, we can meet this demand with a real truth, not a truth which rests upon a symbol, but a truth which is vital, and answers to man's inner feelings, and meets the facts of religious life. I believe that this conception of the immanence of God is the teaching of Jesus. God the Father, God of love and justice. This is the one great truth of Unitarianism. Upon this truth and its significance, we must dwell continually. Upon this truth we must put our emphasis. When we can make people feel the full meaning of the Fatherhood of God, God in the soul of man, the close personal relations of God and man, then we shall meet the demand of the Christ idea in a way which no creed can meet it by symbolic teaching. In short, first and foremost and forever, we must preach the Fatherhood of God as the one great truth of all religious life.

When this is accomplished, when people come to see the true relationship of God and man, then, as a natural and logical outcome, they will learn to distinguish between the Christ of dogma, a symbol for satisfying the Christ Idea, and Jesus of Nazareth, who taught a truth which satisfies it in fact. Under the conception of the Fatherhood of God, the Christ of dogma no

longer has a place in religious teaching, and Jesus of Nazareth will again assume his proper place in the history of the world as the greatest prophet, the man of greatest spiritual insight. Under such a conception we will see Jesus, as a man who was born and lived and died, in very much the same way as others; as a man who was tempted and struggled against his temptations, as we do, but I think that everyone will say with a greater success; they will see a man of great personality, with wonderful wisdom.

Under these conditions we may speak of the Leadership of Jesus. He is our leader because he saw the great truth of the Fatherhood of God, of the immanence of God. He is our leader because in him we see a man who comprehended the social, moral and political conditions of his time, who crystalized the thoughts of his age, and made his own great contributions. He is our leader because he formulated a truth which every century of history is confirming. He is our leader because he lived more in accordance with the Divine law of love to God and love to man. As our leader we look to him for guidance, but that guidance is not to be found in a specific set of laws, not in specific directions, not in specific modes of action under special circumstances, but in the spirit of his life. Behind his doings and sayings, behind the traditions of his doings and sayings, there is a man whose point of view in life, whose attitude towards life, whose spirit in living, stands out like a beacon light upon a rocky coast. That is the Jesus we want to find, and that is the Jesus we want to present to the world as our leader.