



THE PRINCIPLE STATED:
THE CONJUNCTION OF THE PRESENCE
AND THE HISTORY



‘The book of the generation of Jesus Christ’ (Matt. 1: 1).



‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world’
(Matt. 28: 20).

If the opening words of Matthew’s Gospel—‘The book of the generation of Jesus Christ’—might be regarded as a title prefixed not only to the first chapter but to the whole work they would be equivalent to the more modern expressions—the memoirs, or biography of Jesus Christ. But when we find these memoirs closing with such an utterance from the person who is the subject of them, as this—‘Lo, I am with you always’—we instinctively shrink from speaking of them as the memoir and remains of Jesus Christ. Such a designation, we feel would be indeed out of place as applied to the biography of him who cannot only say, ‘I am he that liveth, and was dead and, behold, I am alive for evermore,’ but who closes the record of his life upon the earth with the matchless declaration ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ These are not the memoirs and remains of Jesus Christ; for, lo! He is with us himself.





THE ABIDING PRESENCE

It is proposed, in these pages, to consider the exact value, the specific and distinct peculiarity, which the closing promise of his presence attaches to the biography of Jesus.

For, surely, the promise not merely exalts this history above all other histories to a place of unparalleled and unapproachable importance—the subject, the mere theme alone, would secure that. But it assigns to the history a use, a practical improvement, altogether singular and unique.

The biographies of others are valuable—the serviceableness or practical worth of them comes out—when the persons are themselves with us no more; when personal fellowship with them has become henceforth in this world impossible. The biography of Jesus—terminating as it does with the astonishing assertion: Lo, I am with you still; ‘Lo, I am with you alway’—seems to be the very means whereby we are consciously admitted to his presence, and enabled to maintain with him a personal and living intercourse. I take up the memoir of any other friend with the melancholy feeling: Alas! He is gone, and this is all that remains; and, as I look upon it or peruse it, it reminds me of my loss and makes me feel my brother’s absence. But this memoir I may rather take into my hands as the means of causing me to realize my Elder Brother’s presence; for it breathes the closing promise that he will never leave me. By the necessary omnipresence of his godhead (but especially by the sovereign and gracious presence of his Spirit) He, whose biography is now before us, is himself with us; and the record of his doings and his doctrines, his life, and death, and resurrection, is thereby no dead history, but a living biography—a biography which, like him of whom it testifies, ‘liveth and abideth for ever.’ Rather, a biography in which he liveth and abideth for ever; ‘with us alway’ in ‘the book of the generation of Jesus Christ.’

Let us ponder well the marvellous advantage of possessing this presence and biography unitedly.

Suppose them separate, and consider the two cases that arise. First, suppose that we had the biography, without the presence, of Jesus. And, secondly, suppose we had his presence, but not his biography.





THE PRINCIPLE STATED

GIVE ME HIS BIOGRAPHY ALONE

Give me his biography alone. It is full of marvels. It is interesting beyond measure. I read, and re-read. And if I render it the tribute of my belief, I feel as if I never could have enough of it.

But if this is all, I feel also that I am dealing merely with a history, a record of what is long past and gone—of events that are very interesting in themselves, but in which I can assert or make out no direct, personal, present interest of mine. I may envy those who actually listened to the gracious words, or saw the glorious ‘Works of power and mercy, here recorded. And, very specially, I may envy those to whom testimonies or messages of personal love were delivered, or on whom deeds of healing virtue and of sanctifying grace were achieved. Oh! would that I had been there! Thou Friend of grace, thou King of glory, will that I also may be clean! Command this evil spirit, this strong corruption, to come out of me and enter into me no more. This, also, I would that thou shouldst do unto me, even that I may receive my sight. Blessed Master, question me also, as with thy searching loving eye, thy piercing tender voice: ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?’ Enable me also to say unto thee, ‘Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee.’

Alas! it is but a fond imagination. It is but the keen and quickened action of the fancy. At the best, I can only form a very vivid conception of the scene which the record commemorates, and delude myself with the pleasing dream that I was there. And as I awake from my dream, I feel painfully that I am alone, with a dead history of the past in my hands.

Give me the biography alone—and the more my heart were adequately moved in reading it, so much the more mournfully would I regret that all these sayings and doings of Jesus are numbered among the things that were.

But do not give me the biography alone. Let me have the promised presence, ‘Lo, I am with you alway’—and I am delivered from all these mournful regrets, and from all





THE ABIDING PRESENCE

reasonable ground for entertaining them. Let me by faith realize that he of whom the biography testifies is himself actually with me while I peruse it; let me, in and with the biography, possess and enjoy the presence of Jesus; and then the biography is no dead history, serviceable at the utmost as a means of quickening my fancy to conjure up what, to me now, could be nothing more than an imaginary conjuncture, a shadowy, unreal scene. Instead, it has become replenished with all the original historical reality of that which it commemorates, instinct with present life and truth, lighted up with fulness of grace and glory. In the biography now, we have the very Christ himself—the living Saviour—still speaking to us as never man spake, still going about doing good.

GIVE ME THE PROMISED PRESENCE ALONE

Or, secondly: Give me the promised presence alone. Let me know that a living, but invisible person is present with me. And suppose that this is all I have the means of knowing. I am solemnized. I am filled with awe. But how exactly to conceive of him who is thus with me, I am at a loss. Assure me merely of his presence—and all is vague and hazy, very solemnizing, and (if I have confidence in his friendliness) very encouraging and consoling; but very indefinite also; and, withal, somewhat ghostly. A weighty—almost an oppressive—sense of that unseen presence may be upon my heart: no clear, impressive view of it can be before my mind. I am left very much to my own discretion in trying to conceive of him who all the time is actually present with me. But then, it is just from my own discretion that I crave in so solemn a matter to be thoroughly set free. For I cannot consent to invest this unseen one with the forms of my thoughts which are not as his thoughts—my emotions, imaginations, and conceptions, which are not as his. I know that I cannot but fall over into mere pietistic, sentimental conceptions of his presence, and perhaps into fanatical emotions begotten of the belief that he is present with me. The more, therefore, I have cause to adore and love him; the more I need intelligently to appreciate and trust him; so





THE PRINCIPLE STATED

much the more must I shrink from clothing him, to my own apprehension, with any ideal character of my framing—an ideal that could be framed only from the elements of my own character, and that could not possibly transcend the utmost of my own powers of conceiving the beautiful and good. To abstain, on the other hand, from seeking any clear conception of his presence, is to acquiesce in the painful alternative of regarding the most glorious privilege I can possess as the most indefinite, vague, and indistinct of all things.

Oh! would that I had but some means of forming an exact and worthy conception—an authorized and true idea of him! Would that there were but some mirror in which I might behold his glory well-defined; where I might see the exact features of his character; where, especially, I might read the outgoings, in precise and definite action, of his disposition and desire towards me—some radiant mirror where I might see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; some lively oracle where I might hear his very voice in articulate discourse and converse with me!

With his sure and spiritual presence, then, let it be my privilege to possess his clear and definite biography. Give me the presence of the Lord—not vague, indistinct, and ghostly; silent, oppressive, and almost appalling—but as uttering the very sayings, and achieving the very works of grace and love that the biography details. Let me hear this Saviour, present with me, saying (as in this history) to Peter and James and John, ‘What I say to you I say to all’ so that I am entitled to hear it as said to me. Let the ever-present Christ make his presence with me definite, intelligible, and most distinct, by proffering to me—as still full of spirit and life, of grace and glory—the very words he uttered and the works he did in the days of his flesh. Let him enshrine his promised presence within the very lineaments and limits of the biography: and I no more complain that his presence with me is indefinite, intangible, vague; difficult of apprehension; destitute of use; incapable of being practically improved, or rationally conceived of and asserted, or validly defended. No, he is present with me now in all revealed distinctness and precision. His own blessed voice speaks with me in the lively oracles. His own blessed face looks





THE ABIDING PRESENCE

forth upon me from the now living picture of his biography. By an arrangement that leaves nothing for imagination to attempt (and therefore no room for imagination to misconceive), and nothing for sentimentalism to supply (and therefore no scope for sentimentalism to pervert), by an arrangement that leaves me no discretion whatsoever, but calls on me simply to receive the heavenly revelation that is given, *the Lord himself is with me*—not to my fancy, not to my pious sentiment, but with me verily and in very truth; present with me for most intelligible converse, for most distinct and blessed action—to cleanse my leprosy; to cure my blindness; to save me in the storm; to rebuke me when my vigilance slumbers; to reprove me with his silent glance if I deny him; to restore me when I repent, restoring to me, also, the responsibility and privilege of feeding his lambs and sheep.

Thus the presence gives reality, present reality, and life, to the biography: the biography supplies to the otherwise indefinite presence distinct manifestation, action, and utterance. The biography is enlivened by the presence: the presence is defined by the biography. The biography is very life-like; but without the presence it is not living. The presence, on the other hand, is living; but without the biography it is far from life-like. Yet what Christ by his promise hath joined, let not unbelief put asunder. Let the biography and the presence be conjoined and coalesce. The biography, then, is not dead; the living one lives in it. The presence is not mysterious and vague; for he is present as in the mirror of the biography, and according to the well-defined, reflected glory there. The biography is more than a biography now. It is—*the life of Jesus*.

