

**THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF
CHRIST: ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE IN
THE HISTORY OF RELIGION, EXPANDED
FROM A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE
INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CONGRESS
AT AMSTERDAM, SEPTEMBER 1903**

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The Early Christian Conception of Christ: Its Significance and Value in the History of Religion,
Expanded from a Lecture Delivered Before the International Theological Congress at
Amsterdam, September 1903 by Otto Pflleiderer

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SEPTEMBER 1903**

BY

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THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

It is to the great and abiding credit of the scientific theology of the nineteenth century that it has learned to distinguish between the Christ of Faith and the man Jesus of history, two entities which have been identified by ecclesiastical dogma. By means of careful and toilsome critical investigation it has been shown how the dogma of the God-man gradually took form, precipitated as it were from the intermingling of religious ideas of various origin with the reminiscences of the early Church concerning the life of her Master. An attempt has then been made, by means of

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separating away later accretions and by falling back upon the oldest historic sources, to approach as nearly as possible to the historic truth concerning the Founder of our religion, and to present His form, in its simple human grandeur and stripped of all mythical accessories, as the ideal of a lofty and noble religious hero worthy of the veneration of the mind and heart of the modern world.

The value of this attempt is incontestable, even though, upon calm reflection, one must confess that many illusions are current as to the significance of the results that have been thus obtained. In glancing at the numerous Lives of Christ, it is impossible to suppress the question whether these attempts to reach the basis of historical truth can ever result in other than hypothetical conjecture—whether it is not true that the sharper the definition we attempt to give to our portrait of the Founder, the more we lose firm foothold upon historical testimony and are carried aloft into the region of ideal fiction. One can scarcely avoid

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answering this question in the affirmative when one glances at the vital differences in the so-called historical results obtained by the different authors of Lives of Christ. Can we indeed expect that it should be otherwise, when we reflect that the earliest records betray the most evident tokens that in them history is interwoven with ideal motives, whether of legend or of apologetics or of dogmatic speculation? Jewish prophecy, Rabbinic teaching, Oriental gnosis, and Greek philosophy had already mingled their colours upon the palette from which the portrait of Christ in the New Testament Scriptures was painted. And so all that can be determined with certainty from these writings is only that conception of Christ which was the object of the faith of the early Christian communities and their teachers. It is true that the reminiscences of the first disciples concerning the life and death of their Master have contributed a most important element to this conception, which was from the first very complicated and many-sided, an

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element indeed which, although it formed the nucleus round which all crystallised, was nevertheless only one element among many others. But the question as to how much of the New Testament conception of Christ is due to genuine historical reminiscence, and how much is derived from other sources, is a problem which can never be solved with absolute certainty.

How then does it come about that the eyes of so many are blind to the recognition of a fact so indisputable as this? Without doubt it is because of the supposition, which in these days seems to be regarded as an axiom, that intimate knowledge of Christianity stands and falls with exact historical knowledge of the personality of its Founder. But is not this supposition again only an illusion? It is evident that the Christian religion and the Christian Church are based upon that early belief in Christ to which the New Testament and contemporary Christian literature bear witness. This alone is the established fact,

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which is in no way affected however the answer to the question concerning the origin of this belief may fall. It makes no difference whether historical tradition concerning Jesus of Nazareth has contributed more or less to this belief, or whether this contribution has been direct or indirect, or even—which is of course most improbable—if it has contributed nothing at all; the content of that belief, and consequently the essential character of Christianity, abide the same.

It follows therefore that scientific theology cannot remain true to her function—the investigation of the nature of Christianity—if, instead of inquiring into the whole content of the New Testament idea of Christ, she emphasises only the phases of that conception which are acceptable to the thought of to-day; if she overlooks all other phases and adds much of her own invention in order to construct an ideal of Christ in accord with modern taste. Such procedure is in these days most common and in great favour—who