

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/robbradshaw>

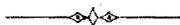
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

and, under all circumstances, to unite heartily and affectionately with them in prayer."

Thirty years ago the young vicar of a northern town was invited to attend the anniversary meeting of one of the Non-conformist congregations. He argued thus with himself: "If some of my parishioners will not meet me in church, but wish to meet me in the town-hall or in a school-room, why may I not deliver my message to them there?" He went, was welcomed, and was unconstrained in speech and sympathy. A similar welcome was offered at other anniversaries until it became a habit to attend them. Only goodwill came of it. The morning after such a meeting, an old member and former deacon of the most influential congregation of Dissenters in the town said to his minister, a strong and determined liberationist: "If you ask the vicar to attend our anniversary, you will have to give over preaching about the disestablishment of the Church."

ALFRED OATES.



ART. V.—HUMILITY.

I. "TRULY this man was the Son of God!" So said the Roman soldier, the representative of the proudest race of mankind, as he stood beside the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, and saw him die in forlorn ignominy, the object of the hatred, scorn and derision of the authorities of Church and State in His own nation. And it is one of the subsidiary thoughts which lead us to the same tremendous conclusion, that we find our Lord with such quiet, persistent, unhesitating originality always laying stress on the primary importance of the unpopular virtue of humility.

By experience and reflection man has found out this importance to be true, but it was not previously a received opinion. It is only a Christian who can say: "Humility is the greatest of virtues, for all others follow where it is found, and fly away where it is not; it is a plant that was little known among the ancients, and first grew to perfection, violet-like, in the retired and shady hills of Judæa. Without it, ambition, always aiming at great fruits, finds them, when they come to maturity, to be full of bitterness and ashes. Without it learning is full of presumption. Without it that which is called 'glory' is nothing more than inflated vanity and lollow-hearted applause. Without it we have the strange spectacle of many ancient and renowned heroes of antiquity

believing themselves to be gods, and worshipped as such, when they were little better than monsters and demons. Humility is the beauty of life, and the chief grace and perfection of the soul."

I do not mean that humility was never praised at all by ancient moralists; what is true is that it was only occasionally admired, and hardly entered into their scheme of morals. It was said, you will remember, by Bion that "Humility is a voluntary inclination of the mind grounded upon a perfect knowledge of our own condition; a virtue by which a man, in the most true consideration of his inward qualities, makes the least account of himself." It was said by Confucius that "Humility is the solid foundation of all the virtues." It was said by Demosthenes that "happy is that man whose calling is great and spirit humble." Demosthenes also remarked acutely how "pride, perceiving humility to be honourable, desires oftentimes to be covered with the cloak thereof; for if left appearing always in his own likeness, he should be little regarded." But you will remember also how one of Aristotle's ideals was the great-minded man, who values himself highly, and at the same time justly; contrasted with the man who estimates himself lowly, and at the same time justly, and is therefore merely modest; and with the man who values himself below his real worth, who is small-minded. The great-minded man is described as in the mean or fit place, as regards propriety, and everybody in excess or defect of him as more or less imperfect. And you will also remember that with Aristotle meekness, as a virtue, is only a quality of temper, not of intellectual attitude, and is a mean between anger and pusillanimity. The high estimate of self, justly founded, was the aim of antiquity.

"Come unto Me," said Christ, "all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." It has been pointed out by Lardner and Paley that this, as a primary factor in a system, as a predominant motive of action, was teaching that was unique. The Gospel did indeed bring forward virtues which possess the highest intrinsic value, but which had been commonly overlooked and condemned. I do not think that Paley is right in saying that Christ did not exemplify or emphasize friendship, patriotism, and active courage; on the contrary, he was the completest and noblest embodiment of all three. When it was necessary, He was vigorous, firm and resolute, dauntless and active, quick in His sensibilities, tender in His attachments, inflexible in His purpose, strong in His indignation at wrong and injustice. But where His mere personal earthly interests were concerned as a member of society, He was at the same

time of altogether a new type ; and that type was all the more remarkable and impressive because it was obviously the result of voluntary self-restraint, and when occasion arose He could be so very different. In personal relations He was certainly meek, yielding, complying, forgiving—not prompt to defend Himself, but willing to suffer ; silent and gentle under rudeness and insult ; ready for reconciliation where others would demand satisfaction ; giving way to the pushes of impudence ; conceding and indulgent to the prejudices, the wrong-headedness, the intractability of those with whom He had to deal.

This personal attitude, Paley rightly says, is the subject of His commendation, His precepts, His example. In emphatic paradoxes He told His disciples not to resist evil—to turn the right cheek to the smiter ; to offer the cloak to the spoiler who used the law for depriving them of their coat ; to go two miles with a man who inconveniently impressed them for one ; to love their enemies, bless them that cursed them ; to do good to them that hated them, and to pray for them that spitefully used them and persecuted them. Lardner proves, in contradiction to first impressions, to popular opinion, to the praises of orators and poets, and even to the dictates of historians and moralists, that the character that is personally humble, rather than the one that is always battling for self-expansion, self-expression, and self-supremacy, is the one that possesses most of true worth, both as being most difficult either to be acquired or sustained, and as contributing most to the happiness and tranquillity of social life. If this disposition were universal, he says, it is at once obvious that the whole world would be a society of friends ; whereas, if the other temper were general, it would produce a scene of universal contention. The world could not hold a generation of such men. And, again, even if the humble disposition be but partially realized, if few be actuated by it, amongst a multitude who are not, yet in whatever degree it does prevail, in the same proposition it prevents, allays and terminates quarrels, the great disturbers of human happiness, and the great sources of human misery, so far as man's happiness and misery depend upon man. Without this disposition, enmities must not only be frequent (as they were in the ancient world), but, once begun, must be eternal ; for, each retaliation being a fresh injury, and consequently requiring a fresh satisfaction for personal pride, no period can be assigned to the reciprocation of affronts, and to the progress of hatred, but that which closes the lives, or at least the intercourse, of the opponents. "Where there is charity," said St. Augustine, "there is humility ; where there is humility, there is peace." "It is in vain," said Erasmus, "to gather virtues without humility ; for

the Spirit of God delighteth to dwell in the hearts of the humble." "Religion, and that alone," said Robert Hall, "teaches absolute humility: by which I mean a sense of our absolute nothingness in the view of infinite greatness and excellence. That sense of inferiority which results from the comparison of men with each other is often an unwelcome sentiment forced upon the mind which may rather embitter the temper than soften it; but that which devotion impresses brings peace and delight." "If thou desire the love of God and man," said Francis Quarles, "be humble; for the proud heart, as it loves none but itself, so it is beloved of none but by itself. The voice of humility is God's music, and the silence of humility is God's rhetoric. Humility enforces where neither virtue, nor reason, nor strength, can prevail."

II. But humility is not only the truest, most hopeful, and most fruitful moral attitude for us wretched little human beings, with all our sins, follies, degradations, and imperfections; it is also our wisest and most becoming mental and intellectual posture. All the teachings of our Lord are in absolute harmony with what we know of the laws of the universe.

Conceive for a moment what we are. The globe on which we insignificant atoms crawl about for a few years is one of the smallest members of one of the smallest systems in those boundless regions of the eternal expanse of the heavens that are within our limited ken. The mighty orb of Uranus is sixty-four times our size; that of Saturn about 1,000 times; and that of Jupiter about 1,200 times. The farthest planet of our system, Neptune, which is about seventy times the size of the earth, is 2,688 millions of miles away from us. These are our neighbours. But our great telescopes can show us fifty millions of suns, at distances beyond all belief, each attended by his system of planets, which, having no light of their own, are invisible to us across such inconceivable depths of space. Sirius is about one million times as far from us as the sun, and is at least forty-eight times brighter than our great luminary. The distance of the star 61 Cygni is forty millions of miles from the sun. The light of some stars takes hundreds of years to reach the earth, though it travels at the prodigious speed of 180,000 miles a second. The 1,000 and more nebulae seem to indicate vast universes of their own, which are at too appalling a distance for us to detect more than a few points. If we could plant our greatest telescope on the farthest orb which can be detected, analogy and appearance suggest that we should see new heavens, new millions of constellations. Apparently it would be the same for ever and ever, through the endless and illimitable realms of eternal space. What an

awful glimpse does this give us into the stupendous majesty of the eternal, omnipresent Mind, in whom all things for ever and ever, in space as well as in time, live, and move, and have their being! What a glorious sense of His power, and plan, and operation, and of our allotted part in it, do we get when we are told that our whole solar system, including the sun in the centre (which, after all, is nothing but an insignificant star in the universe), with his attendant planets, and the comets, and the incredible host of minute bodies which are our solar companions, are all together bound on a stupendous voyage throughout space! The sun requires almost two days to move through a space equal to its own diameter. Every two days he is about a million miles away from the spot he occupied before; every two days the solar system accomplishes a stage of about a million miles in its terrific journey towards the mysterious constellation of Hercules. In a single year you have travelled 182 millions of miles through the awful regions of space. If you are fifty years old, you have already journeyed 9,100 millions of miles on that orderly and systematic, but most appalling route. When these facts and thoughts come before us, we may well exclaim: "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon, and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou visitest him?"

The extraordinary insignificance of man in these stupendous surroundings need not in the least distress us, when we recollect that the Eternal Spirit which originates, inspires, and controls all these indescribable, immeasurable, and unimaginable forces, is omnipresent and omnipotent, and co-relates His action to the needs, conditions, and stages of life of the innumerable results of His Divine mental activity. It was Kant who said: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the oftener and longer we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within." The one is as indisputable a phenomenon as the other. Not even the loftiest and noblest astronomer could extol the glories of his mental voyages through the brilliant wonders of space with stronger conviction or more earnest enthusiasm than the philosopher displays when he speaks of duty as the sublime and great name, merely presenting a law which of itself finds universal entrance into the mind of man, and which, even against the will of man, wins his reverence, if not always his obedience—a law before which all inclinations grow dumb, even though they secretly work against it. The inward experience is as sure a witness as the outward splendour. Both prove to us the Divine power

which is through slow but steady stages making for perfection without and for righteousness within. Just as our knowledge of the one action is incomplete, so our realization of the other is blurred by our own limitations, by the waywardness of free-will in process of discipline, and by our practical and incessant imperfections.

But while we are not stunned by a nearer view of omnipotence and eternity, we are brought in a thoroughly wholesome way to a sense of our very real restrictions. As a matter of fact, we know very little. We know nothing about the origin of all things, the birth of matter, the purpose of creation, the source of life, the essence of life, the meaning of electricity, the condition of the countless millions of orbs by which we are surrounded, the presence of organic life in other planets or constellations, the laws of gravitation, the duration of the earth, the age of man on the earth. We are surrounded with mysteries which we cannot penetrate; in science as well as in theology we are always learning. Humility is our only possible attitude, if we are not to make ourselves ridiculous to our contemporaries as well as to posterity.

Consider what mistakes we have made. Our greatest men have supposed that the earth was but 6,000 years old; they have believed that it was made in six literal days; they have held that geological deposits were placed in their strata by the Creator as a trial of our faith; they have declared that the earth was flat; that the sun moved round it; that the idea of antipodes was an impiety and an impossibility. Against such a notion Gregory Nazianzen, Lactantius, Basil, Ambrose, Augustine, Procopius, Cosmas, Isidore, brought their learned thunder. They have attacked the heliocentric theory; it was condemned not only by Papal science, but by Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Horne, Horsley, Forbes, Wesley. As late as 1616, Galileo was imprisoned and condemned by the Roman Inquisition for declaring the motion of the earth. They have denounced the discoveries of geology; they have attributed storms to diabolical agency; they have solemnly burned harmless old women as witches in league with the devil; they have combated every step of patient scientific discovery. Why have we to make these humiliating confessions? It was because all these different generations of over-confident theorists assumed a scientific certainty in regions where they had no claim to such enlightenment. They were lacking in intellectual humility. Disregarding the plain declarations of Holy Scripture as to its own scope, they arrived at the unwarrantable conclusion that it was meant to supersede and control scientific investigation. What said St. Paul? "All Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable

also for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." The revelation made to the Hebrew people was moral and religious. These great men made the incautious mistake of inferring that the sacred writers were commissioned to teach ontology, zoology, geology, astronomy, and every branch of science. On mere passing, local, accidental expressions they built up severe and fantastic theories. Intruding into domains where they had no guarantee of guidance, they imperilled the character and credibility of Christ's spiritual kingdom of righteousness upon earth.

Nowhere is the attitude of intellectual humility more natural than in a great and historic university, teeming in every generation with earnest mental activity. Startling indeed are the contrasts of the opinions here vigorously maintained at different epochs.¹ Here the new learning was denounced; here it was extolled. Here Cranmer and the Reformers were condemned with every conceivable degree of certitude and solemnity; here the primitive and anti-Roman doctrines were enforced with untiring zeal. Here Calvinism was preached every Sunday, and then in their turn the larger and more reasonable theories of Arminianism. Here, in 1805, the verbal theory of inspiration was maintained against the beginnings of geology. Here the supreme authority of the Fathers has been upheld; here their natural mistakes and the errors incidental to their age have been demonstrated. Here one year Short insisted on the trustworthiness of tradition, and the next Shirley argued for its insecurity. Here different and often opposite theories have been urged on the nature of the Church, Baptismal Regeneration, the Sacraments, the theory of Holy Communion, the theory of Inspiration, the authority of the Bible, the nature of the Atonement. All this is what we should expect in a great centre of thought. It neither discourages nor perplexes us, nor drives us towards a sophistical scepticism. It is good for us to believe with all our hearts whatever we hold to be true. Truth is eternal and unchangeable; but in the confusions, errors, streams of tendency, prejudices, prepossessions, to which we are all subject, we cannot expect that all of us should see it in the same light. We have no right to expect that all our opinions should be perfect, and free from error, so that we should give them out with joyful certitude, especially where they are of a new kind, and on tentative and hypothetical ground. The

¹ This is the substance of a sermon preached before the University of Oxford on February 27, 1897.

one great lesson of these differences is that, however firmly we hold our beliefs, we should hold them in humility, remembering our proneness to error, and should express them with gentleness, forbearance, courtesy, and charity.

Some things there are which have so high a degree of probability that we may look for a general agreement. It was likely that the Eternal, Omnipresent, Omnipotent Spirit would reveal Himself from time to time, and in particular at length through some chosen member of the human race in such form and manner as the rest of the human atoms on the globe should be able to understand His message. It was Socrates who said: "It is necessary for us to wait until someone can learn how we ought to behave towards God and towards man," with the pathetic rejoinder: "Oh, when will that time come, Socrates? and who is he who will teach us? Sweeter than anything on earth, I think, would it be to see that man, and to know who He is!" Yes, we have good reason to believe that we have seen that man, and that we know who He is. We have good reason to assure ourselves that the world has had a message in varying and increasing degrees of clearness from the Omnipresent Eternal Being.

The Bible (says Bishop Westcott) contains in itself the fullest witness to its Divine authority. If it appears that a large collection of fragmentary records, written, with few exceptions, without any designed connection, at most distant times, and under the most varied circumstances, yet combine to form a definite whole, broadly separated from other books; if it further appears that these different parts, when interpreted historically, reveal a gradual progress of social, spiritual life, uniform at least in its general direction; if without any intentional purpose they offer not only remarkable coincidences in minute details of facts (for that is a mere question of accurate narration), but also subtle harmonies of complementary doctrine; if in proportion as they are felt to be separate, they are felt also to be instinct with common spirit; then it will be readily acknowledged that, however they came into being at first, however they were united afterwards into the sacred volume, they are yet legibly stamped with the Divine seal as inspired by God in a sense which can be said of no other writings.

And, secondly, it is in the highest degree probable that when the Divine Messenger had come, and had founded His kingdom of heaven on earth, that Church, as long as it continued to be guided by His words and to rely on His Spirit, would have true notions in the main as to the will and revelation of God. The limit would be that it should not intrude into matters where assurance had not been given; that it

should be humble and charitable in all its assertions ; that it should in no case assume the rôle of absolute infallibility ; and that it should be chary of defining and commanding merely on its own authority. The creeds of the universal Church appear to fulfil these conditions, and they are certainly in harmony with the recorded teaching of the Divine Messenger and of the chosen companions whom He instructed. You will remember that it is assent to these two great creeds that is all that is required of her lay members by the branch of Christ's Holy Catholic Church which is settled among the people of this country.

Thirdly, we may remind ourselves that the vast majority of Christians do agree, in spite of all their fancied differences, in plain, simple, fundamental truths ; the Fatherhood of God, the Divinity of our Lord, the work of the Holy Spirit, the redemption of the world, the initial rite of baptism, the covenanted presence of the Lord in Holy Communion, the future life with its happiness and retribution, the power of prayer, the need of Divine grace, the necessity of repentance, the acceptance of the example of Christ as our code of morals, the life by faith, the membership of the Christian fellowship, the paramount principles of benevolence and self-sacrifice. It is only by some strong individual leadership that sects have occasionally been led aside from these broad and acknowledged outlines. Codes of theology and multitudes of definitions have indeed grown out of these fundamental notions of Christianity. It is right that each of us should explain and apply them according to what light God bestows on our own consciences, and in accordance with the system which appears to us to be true ; but it would be well for us all if we at all times bore in mind that the principles themselves are simple, and the less we obtrude our own views of them upon those who disagree with us, the better it will be for ourselves and the Christian Church. Here, again, humility is of primary and momentous importance ; for in religious and ecclesiastical matters it is extremely difficult to "speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men."

Lastly, as to our own attitude in daily life and conversation. The great thing we have to avoid is ostentation, and disdainful assumption of superiority. Almost everybody thinks that he excels in something—at any rate, in regard to some few of his friends and acquaintances. What is commoner than the instinctive sneering expression, or the spontaneous note of disdain and scorn, when ignorance or inferiority is displayed in matters where we think we have knowledge or ability ? What is commoner than the bullying, overbearing disposition that is born of a sense of some eminence, however small ? Part

of the Christian ideal is to make this life smooth and pleasant for others, as well as to obtain the blessed promises of the life to come; in all things the servant of Christ will exercise himself to keep clear of pride, and to be free from all suspicion of contemptuous arrogance.

It is only by humility that we can hope to ensure steady progress in character. A general confession of sin is of no use unless we are stern with ourselves in convincing ourselves of our own faults, investigating them, searching out their causes, and exercising ourselves diligently to remove them from our hearts and minds. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. If we confess our sins, we are only hypocrites if we do not earnestly claim God's promised help to cleanse us from all unrighteousness; not merely, that is, to do away with the offence of it, but as with the kindly knife of the surgeon to purify our natures from its poisonous corruption.

"Humility," it has been said, "is not to be considered as some bitter potion which you can swallow in a large dose, once for all, and have done with it; but rather as a long course of alterative medicine, to be taken daily, and drop by drop.

"You must study daily to be open to conviction, patient of opposition, ready to listen to reproof—even when you are not convinced that it is deserved—ready when you are convinced at once to confess an error, and glad to receive hints, suggestions and corrections, even from your inferiors in ability, and never overbearing or uncharitable towards those who differ from you.

"All this will be a more laborious and difficult task than to make speeches about your ignorance, weakness and sinfulness; but it is thus that true humility is proved, and exercised and cultivated."

Our Lord, being perfect man, shone in this exquisite and beautiful grace as in all other virtues. "I am meek and lowly of heart." "It is the humble man," said Thomas à Kempis, "that God defends and frees; it is the humble man. He loves and comforts; to the humble man He bends, to the humble man He gives abundance of His favour, and when he is cast down, He lifts him up to glory. To the humble man He shows His secrets, and sweetly draws him to Himself, and bids him come. The humble man, though he may meet with shame, is yet well enough at peace, because he stands on God, not on the world."

WILLIAM SINCLAIR.

