

The Trinity

by
Edward Henry Bickersteth

Chapter V

[Return to Bickersteth Page](#)

I proceed, therefore, to my fourth proposition:--*That Scripture, in the Old and the New Testament alike, presents to us the incarnation and the mission of the Saviour as the extremity of condescension in Jehovah, that thereby he might exalt us to everlasting life.*

(1) The Scriptures already cited prove beyond contradiction the co-equal, co-essential, co-eternal Deity of the Son. And here we have attained that vantage ground from which, I am persuaded, we may most safely with the adoring angles stoop down and look into the humiliation and the humanity of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:12).

Let us only follow the pathway along which Scripture does, as it were, lead us by the hand. Let us acknowledge the infinite perfections of him who is the alone Supreme Jehovah. Let us confess the infinite demerit of rebellion against him. Let us admit that he has opened to us in his word a way of access whereby we, the sinful and the sunken, may be brought nigh to him, the absolutely Holy and Good One who is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity" (Hab. 1:13). Let us remember that this reconciliation is spoken of as a salvation; which, to accomplish, Omnipotence travels in the greatness of its strength (Isa. 63:1), and which Omniscience declares to have been a mystery hidden in God from the beginning of the world (Eph. 3:9); and that [in order] to fulfil this word we find a wondrous mission revealed, in which the Lord God and his Spirit send forth, and the Eternal I AM is, the sent One (Isa. 48:16). Let us then on the sure testimony of Scripture acknowledge that all the attributes, the honours, and the rights of Jehovah are ascribed to this Sent One whose name is called Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21); who claims himself equality with God as his only-begotten Son; and who is associated with God in every supreme office of Deity.

And lastly, let us accept the simple fact, as recorded in the Bible, of Christ's descent from above; [1] that he, the Word, who in the beginning was with God and was God, (John 1:1,14), was made flesh and dwelt among us; [2] that he came down from heaven (John 3:13); [3] that he proceeded forth and came from God (John 8:42), forsaking the glory which he had with the Father before the world was; [4] that being originally (ὁπάρχων) in the form of God, he emptied himself, and took upon him the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6,7), and was made in the likeness of men; [5] that by him the universal Creator--by him incarnate and crucified--it pleased the Godhead to reconcile all things unto himself

(Col. 1:19,20); [6] that he--"being the brightness of his [the Father's] glory, and the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3), "in bringing many sons [of God] to glory" (Heb. 2:10), forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood"--"also himself likewise partook of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their life subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:10,14,15).

Now our whole souls are filled with one thought--the condescension of God. Now we shall not stumble at passages which speak of the exceeding humiliation to which he stooped. As we assign no limit to the height of his glory, we shall assign none to the depths of his grace. Yea, so far from taking offence at the inferiority of the position which he assumed, the very lowliness of his incarnation and the very degradation of the death he died will kindle in us a brighter and more burning gratitude when we remember that though [he was] rich, it was for our sakes he became poor (2 Cor. 8:9); and that for us, his wayward and wandering sheep, the chief Shepherd offered up himself as the Lamb of God, laying down his life of his own accord and taking it up again to die no more.

(2) Perhaps to some minds it might have seemed more congruous with the Divine Majesty, supposing it needful for our salvation that God should humble himself at all, that the descent should have been less steep and the humiliation less lowly. They would have chosen not come little insignificant planet like earth as the scene of his self-abnegation but some central orb of metropolitan grandeur, and would have gathered the whole intelligent creation as spectators around the splendid arena. They would fain have had him assume not the body of our abasement but haply an angelic nature, wherein, as some seraph of surpassing brightness, he should have wrought deeds of miraculous beneficence. And chiefly, they would have shunned for him the ignominy of the cross and have selected what they deemed some more glorious method of self-sacrifice, whereby he should have paid the price of our redemption. This they would have called a salvation worthy God.

But surely, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are the ways of Jehovah higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts (Isa. 55:9). His work is perfect. Let us remember that whatever of material and physical glory we add to the mission of Christ beyond what is needful for the evidence of that mission, we subtract from its moral and spiritual glory. Between the unapproachable splendors of the Godhead and the various forms of created intelligence there is a distance absolutely immeasurable. For the increate [uncreated] Jehovah to have assumed the nature of the highest archangel would have been an infinite descent. Let us thus far confide with childlike confidence that herein was manifested omniscient love when God chose the world--this little world of ours--to be the theatre of the mighty conflict, and sent his only-begotten Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to suffer death upon the cross and to be the propitiation for our sins (Rom. 8:3; 1 John 4:9,10).

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." There is a majestic condescension in these few words that nothing can equal. He was made man. By himself, by his friends

and disciples, by his enemies and persecutors, Jesus Christ was spoken of as a proper human being. His childhood was adorned with filial affection and the discharge of filial duty. His intellectual powers, like those of other children, were progressive (Luke 2:40-52). In his earliest years he embraced with eagerness the means of improvement. He had large experience of human suffering. His lot was one of severe labour, poverty, weariness, hunger, and thirst. He affected no austerity of manners, nor did he enjoin it upon his followers.

While he mingled in the common sociability and the innocent festivities of life, he sustained a weight of inward anguish which no mortal could know. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He looked forward to the accumulation of suffering, which he knew would attend his last hours, with feelings on the rack of agony, with a heart exceedingly sorrowful even unto death; but with a meek and resigned resolution, a tender and trembling constancy unspeakably superior in moral grandeur to the stern bravery of the proudest hero. In his last hours, with a bitterness of soul more excruciating than any bodily sufferings, he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," while yet he promised heaven to a penitent fellow-sufferer, and died in an act of devotional confidence, triumphing that his work was finished. Thus he died, but rose again, that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living; and he ascended to his Father and our Father, to his God and our God. This was the man Christ Jesus, a man demonstrated from God by miracles and prodigies and signs which God did by him (Acts 2:22); a man ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 17:31).

It is delightful to dwell on the character of this unrivaled man; not only because in no other since the foundation of the world has the intellectual and moral perfection of our nature been exhibited, but because the contemplation of such excellence refreshes and elevates the mind and encourages to the beneficial effort of imitation. He always did the things which pleased his heavenly Father. Love, zeal, purity, a perfect acquiescence in the Divine will on every occasion, and the most exalted habits of devotion, had their full place and exercise in his mind. The most refined generosity, but without affectation or display; mildness, lowliness, tenderness, fidelity, candor, a delicate respect for the feelings as well as the rights and interests of others, prudence, discriminating sagacity, the soundest wisdom, and the noblest fortitude shone from this Son of righteousness with a luster that never was impaired.¹

Believe me, we yield to none in the strength of conviction with which we hold to the humanity of Jesus Christ. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). We take our stand fearlessly on this. This unlocks all those texts on which Unitarians are

1 I make no apology for condensing and abstracting the two preceding paragraphs from the profound treatise of Dr. Pye Smith to which I have frequently referred on "Scripture Testimony to the Messiah" (vol. ii. 334-337). Permit me to take this opportunity of urging any who need a calm and candid investigation of this momentous subject to study his noble apology for our faith. Most thankful should I be if my humble essay formed the stepping-stone which should lead any to that truly great work.

wont to insist, asserting the inferiority and subordination of the Son of man to the Father. We do not hide these truths. We do not gloss them over. We do not explain them away. They are essential to our faith. As combined with the revelations of his essential Godhead, they form that inimitable grace which is our salvation. The foot of the ladder must rest on earth, as the top of it reaches to heaven (Gen. 28:12; John 1:51).

If our doctrine is the truth that [1] there subsist in the essence of One Jehovah three who are called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, coequal and coeternal; and [2] that it is the design of the Father and the will of the Son with the consenting pleasure of the Holy Spirit that the Son (for the recovery of fallen man) should empty himself, not of his Deity (which were impossible) but of his glory, and take our human nature into mysterious union with his Divine nature so that God and man make one Christ; and [3] if this is spoken of in Scripture as the extremity of Divine condescension and humiliation, devised and accomplished, that hereby guilty men might have a medium of access to the Holy Deity (or rather, foregoing abstract terms, that we might have a mediator between us and God, one with God by reason of his eternal essence [and] one with us by reason of the humanity he deigned to assume), [then] how otherwise could such a relationship have been expressed than in such or such like words--"There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5,6)? Or [how could] such a salvation be described [in words other] than--"This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3)?

Looking forward, as the man Christ Jesus, to his translation from this world of suffering to the glory of his Father's throne, (remember he had emptied himself, taken upon him the form of a servant, humbled himself, [and] if these words mean anything, they imply a spontaneous descent from the higher to the lower), how otherwise could he describe his return from that present estate of afflicted humanity than in such or such like words--"If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said I go unto the Father; for my Father is greater than I" (John 14:28)? Having descended with the express design of doing his Father's pleasure, of serving a perfect service, of rendering a spotless obedience to the law, of exhibiting a Divine model of self-denial, how otherwise could he declare his mission than in these or similar terms--"I came down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38)? Standing forth [as] the Author and Finisher of the faith (τῆς πίστεως), the example of that faith we are to copy; AS MAN, working his miracles not by virtue of his Divinity ever inherent in him but by virtue of a perfect faith in the power of the Father, that faith which with us is intermittent and often overborne being with him constant without defect and victorious without defeat; how otherwise could he reveal the secret and entire dependence of his soul on God than in language such as this--"I can of my own self do nothing" (John 5:30), "The Father who dwells in me, he does the works" (John 14:10)?

(3) These passages affirm his proper humanity and his humble mission as a servant. This

humanity we assert as strongly, this mission we believe as verily, as yourselves. All that faith requires is to act upon the great principle of comparing spiritual things with spiritual. And wherever we find any assertion of his *subordination as man*, if we can place by its side a parallel assertion of his *supremacy as God*, faith demands nothing more. Often the immediate context will supply the corrective and adjust the balance. If not, we shall never consult in vain the whole counsel of the lively oracles of God.

Thus [we find] in the Old Testament, [that] *as man* the seed of the woman is bruised in his heel; *as God* he achieves a victory surpassing human strength, [when] he bruises the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). Against him *as man* (we read in the second Psalm) the kings of the earth set themselves; [but] to him *as the anointed Son of God*, Divine royalty is ascribed and universal trust attracted (Ps. 2:2,7,23). *As man*, he appears at the close of the 110th Psalm like a weary traveler, drinking of the wayside brook and revived therewith. But the opening verses describe him as the *victorious Lord* of all on the throne with Jehovah (Ps. 110:1,7). If you regard his *humanity*, [we read], "Unto us a child is born" (Isa. 9:6); [and] if you regard his *Deity*, his name is the Mighty God. *As David's son*, he is the rod out of the stem of Jesse. *As David's Lord*, he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked (Isa. 11:1,4). In respect of his *manhood*, he grows up as a tender plant, despised and rejected. In virtue of his *Godhead*, he bears the iniquity of us all, and with his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:3,6). *As man*, he is the pierced, smitten shepherd. *As God*, he is Jehovah's fellow (Zech. 12:10; 13:7).

And when we come to the new Testament, the evidence is yet more abundant. Space forbids to do more than place side-by-side, with a very few remarks, those Scriptures which reveal the characteristics of his manhood and his Godhead. Those on the left hand will record his functionary subordination as man; those on the right his essential supremacy as God.

I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me (John 6:38).

Father, I will (θέλω) (John 17:24)
The Son will (βούληται) reveal him (Matt. 11:27).

His will, therefore, as man, was subjected to that of his Father. As God, [it] was ever in perfect harmony with his Father's will, but was self-existent, free, efficacious.

Of that day and hour knows no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father (Mark 13:32).

The Father shows the Son all things that he himself does (John 5:20).
As the Father knows me, even so know I the Father (John 10:15).
Lord, thou knowest all things (John 21:17).

Just as we read Jesus increased in wisdom (Luke 2:52), and therefore there were subjects unknown to him at twelve years of age (which were acquired by him or revealed to him afterwards), so in Mark 13:32 Jesus is speaking in his human nature. This point was not made known to him *as man* by the Spirit. And since his manhood is spoken of as a condition of his prophetic office (Deut. 18:15, *of thy brethren*), he is declaring as an ambassador what lay within his commission, and this day and hour he was not empowered *as Prophet* to reveal.² The contrast verses sufficiently prove he shared the infinite counsels of his Father, comprehended the Incomprehensible, and is himself Omniscient.

I go unto the Father; for my Father
is greater than I (John 14:28).

Making himself equal with God
(John 5:18).

Inferiority of rank as man, as mediator, as the apostle and servant of his Father (having for us spontaneously stooped from the throne of his glory) is asserted in the first quotation. Equality of nature as to cooperation, self-existence, infinite knowledge, [and] universal trust is proved in the second.

The very texts which most strongly declare the humanity of Jesus are sufficient, as Coleridge somewhere observes, to refute those who from them would deny his Deity. How could a mere man, without absurd presumption, solemnly announce that God the Father was greater than he? How could he be made flesh? How could it be a proof of his humility that he was made in the likeness of man?

This may be the fittest opportunity to say a few words on the answer of Christ to the ruler, "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God; but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:16,17). This young man, coming to Christ and exclaiming, "Good teacher, what good thing (διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ τί ἀγαθόν) shall I do that I may have eternal life," manifestly only recognized him as a human teacher, and as such called him good; nay, [he] put his own good works on the same level of merit. The Lord refused such homage. It was founded on false assumptions. Its acceptance would have strengthened a yet unhumiliated self-righteousness. "Why," he asked, "Why callest thou me good?" The stress is on the "why." The answer to that "why" would discover [reveal] an unsuspected depth of self-ignorance. But the Lord proceeded to probe the young man's heart, and tried him by the second table of the law wherein he rested. The ruler was found wanting. We know not his after [later] history. But thus, at least, one barrier was broken down which, unremoved, must have ever kept him from confessing his need of an atonement for sin, from imploring the advocacy of Jesus Christ the righteous, and from trusting in the perfect goodness of him before whom unconsciously then he knelt, Jehovah our righteousness. But to resume.

To sit on my right hand, and on my left,
is not mine to give, except to those for

To him that overcomes will I grant
to sit with me in my throne

² Read this footnote at the end of the chapter.

whom it is prepared of my Father
(Matt. 20:23).

(Rev. 3:21).

The translation given above of our Lord's reply to Salome simply omits the words which are not in the original.³ The promise to the church of Laodicea sufficiently proves that in respect of heavenly dignities, Jesus Christ does as he wills with his own.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son (John 3:16).
It pleased the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief. When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin ... (Isa. 53:10).

Whom God has raised up, having loosed the pains of death (Acts 2:24).

He (the Father of glory) set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power (Eph. 1:20,21).

Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for her (Eph. 5:25).
I lay down my life that I might take it again. No one (οὐδείς) takes it from me. I have power⁴ to lay it down, and I have power to take it again (John 10:17,18).

Destroy this temple (his body), and in three days I will raise it up (John 2:19).

He ascended up on high, he led captivity captive (Eph. 4:8).
Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly (Col. 2:15).

In these passages you will observe that on the one hand the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as man, being subordinate to the Father and at his disposal, are said to have taken place at his Father's ordination; while on the other hand, as God, Christ gives himself, raises himself, ascends in his own might, and as the King of glory, the Lord of hosts mighty in battle, enters the everlasting doors.

And now, Lord ... grant ... that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus (Acts 4:29,30).

Aeneas, Jesus Christ makes thee whole (Acts 9:34).

If the first exalts the Father, [then] the second as distinctly exalts the Son as the immediate Author of miraculous healing.

Forgiving one another, even as God for

Forgiving one another, even as Christ

3 Cf. Scholefield's "Hints," and Alford; and for construction [of] ἀλλ' οἷς ἠτοιμάσται, compare precisely [a] similar idiom in the previous chapter, ver. 11, ἀλλ' οἷς δέδοται, where it is properly translated "save."

4 Unitarians object to ἐξουσία being here translated "power" (they would prefer "authority"); but it is so rendered of the Father's power, Luke 12:5, Acts 1:7, and (as they would add) Jude 25. The previous clause declares the spontaneity of the gift.

Christ's sake has forgiven you (Eph. 4:32). forgave you (Col. 3:13).

Now the Father, now the Son, is referred to as the first cause of forgiveness.

To us (there is but) one God the Father, of whom (ἐξ οὗ) are all things, and we unto (εἰς) him (1 Cor. 8:6).	And one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom (δι' οὗ) are all things, and we by him (1 Cor. 8:6).
--	---

On this Dr. P. Smith says, "Lord is not put as a designation secondary and inferior to God. It attributes dominion; and the extent of the dominion must be according to the nature of the case in any given instance. Is there anything, then, in this case to direct our conception? Yes; all things are 'by him,' or 'through him,' as their immediate and efficient Cause. The identical phrase is used, which is twice by the same writer employed with regard to the Eternal Father (Rom. 11:36; Heb. 2:10): by whom (δι' οὗ πάντα) are all things." To me who believes the reference to be to Deut. 6:4, as stated p. 76, no proof could be stronger than this of the Divine Supremacy of the Messiah. But at all events, "the *Deity* of Christ can no more be denied because the Father is here called the 'One God,' than the *dominion* of the Father can be denied because the Son is called the 'One Lord.'"⁵

Ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's
(1 Cor. 3:23).

I am in the Father, and the
Father in me (John 14:10).

5 There are two other passages to which Unitarians sometimes refer, but the deduction they draw from this is in each case refuted by the context. (1) "The firstborn of all creation" (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) or "of the whole creation" (Col. 1:15). But the apostle continues: "For by him were all things created" (ver. 16). If you regard the word *firstborn* in its general acceptation among Eastern nations, it imports lordship, excellence, dignity; and as such the clause might well have been translated here "The chief of all creation." But if you press for a more exact significance, it absolutely resists the interpretation that Christ is himself a creation of God, for then it would have been πρωτόκτιστος, first created, as Chrysostom observes (see Scott), not πρωτότοκος, firstborn. The -τοκος guards this, and the πρωτο, so far from assuming him to be the *first* creature, declares his pre-existent priority to all creation, according to the well known Greek usage of the superlative for the comparative (see John 1:15), ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν, for he was before me); and the clause might have been rendered by that in our version of the Athanasian creed: "Begotten before the worlds." Thus the phrase by itself is an unambiguous testimony to his Deity; and the succeeding clauses ascribing to him the creation of all prove him increate [uncreated]; for if [he was] a creature, [then] he made himself, which is absurd. (2) The beginning of the creation of God, ἡ ἀρχὴ (Rev. 3:14). Compare with this, "I am, saith the Lord, the beginning and the end," ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος, (Rev. 1:8; 22:6; 22:13). The above comprise all the instances of the use of ἀρχὴ in the Apocalypse, and sufficiently prove that as used in chap. 3:14, it regards the pre-existent eternity, the "from everlasting" of the Lord, and as such declares him to be the beginning or origin, or originator, or precisely as we say, *the First Cause* of the creation. of God.

The head of Christ is God (1 Cor. 11:3).

Then comes the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

Then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

He (the Son) is the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18).

Of his (Christ's) kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:33).

The everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:11).

Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever ... Thou art the same ... Sit on my right hand (Heb. 1:8,12,13).

Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11).

From these passages, on the one side, we learn that Jesus Christ as the Last Adam, the federal Head of his church, in ascending to our God and Father has ascended to his God and Father; and that as our surety he does his Father's will; and that a time will come when he will no longer exercise his mediatorial office by pleading the virtue of his blood for penitent sinners (seeing that sin and death are forever abolished), but as the representative of us--his blood-bought children (for the memory of his dying love shall never fade throughout eternity)--will keep his Father's commandments and abide in his love; and that thus forever and forever Jehovah shall fill the universe with the unclouded effulgence of his everlasting name and essence, LOVE.

On the other hand, we learn that Christ and his Father are one; that he has a real and undivided supremacy; that his kingdom shall never wax old, his glory never pale, his royalty never pass away; and that for the endless ages of immortality in heaven and earth, the manifestation of the love of God shall be through him who is the brightness of his Father's glory and is seated on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

I append only one couplet more, for the same principle applies to all the passages which have been, or can be, brought forward to prove the subordination of the Son.

In the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain (Rev. 5:6).

A pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1).

Do you gather from the first passage that in Christ glorified there are ineffaceable traces of Jesus and him crucified? From the last you learn that the perennial and transparent stream of felicity--the joy of the Holy Ghost--flows equally and coordinately from the eternal Father and the eternal Son.

I have now, I believe, brought forward the principal of those passages on which Unitarians rely. Is there anything in any one of them, or in all collectively, to prevent our reposing supreme confidence in Jesus Christ? Do they rebuke our absolute dependence upon him?

Do they warn us against loving him with every affection of our soul?

The Scriptures adduced in the last two chapters brought before us one of such Divine perfections that, if he were not God, not the object of supreme reliance, we should at least have needed a caveat [caution] every few lines: "Are you tempted to worship him? See you do it not. Though the instrument, he is not the author of eternal salvation. Though Godlike, he is not God. Though wearing vice-regal honours, he is not king. Be on your guard. Control your feelings. Curb your affections. Moderate your admiration. Keep your trust in check. He is only a creature after all. Beware of idolatry; and again I say, beware."

Now I ask, do the passages affirming his subordination as man contain that caveat, or anything like such a warning, or any--even the faintest--intimation of the possibility of loving him too much or trusting in him too entirely? You must confess they do not. Yea more, as you stoop down and look into these mysteries of his humiliation, they touch deeper and deeper springs within you, they awaken the finer sensibilities of your nature. And when you believe that he who was in the form of God emptied himself for you and took upon him the form of a servant, confidence and affection alike reach a standard that nothing can transcend. You trust him, you love him, you adore him supremely for that exceeding great and costly love wherewith he loved you and gave himself for you (Gal. 2:20).

And now every generous feeling within you brands it as the basest ingratitude to allege these proofs of his humanity in disproof of his Deity; to trample on his lowliness that you may pluck the diadem from his brow; and to find cause in the true sympathy of him who was in all points tempted like as we are and touched with the feeling of our infirmities, for denying the excellence of that glory which he had with the Father before the world was. If a sick and suffering prisoner in Newgate (nursed and tended and taught by the philanthropic Howard) had argued, from the self-devotion of that noble man spending long hours in the loathsome cell, that he could not possess a princely mansion and fortune of his own, and even if he had reproached that ministering angel [Howard], saying, "You must surely be a wretched convict like myself," we might pity his infatuation and pardon his ingratitude. But can we forgive ourselves if we deliberately select the instances of our Lord's lowest humiliation and cast them in his teeth as proving that he never dwelt from eternity in the light that no man can approach unto, nor inhabited from everlasting that shrine of unfathomable delights, the bosom of his Father?

Let us beware, my friends, and remember the solemn warning of Jesus: "Whosoever shall fall on this stone (himself in prostrate humility) shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall (himself returning in glory), it will grind him to powder" (Matt. 21:44).

(4) The Word was made flesh. Oh, wondrous humiliation of the Creator! But this is not all. "He came," and "as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God" (John 1:11,12). Oh, wondrous exaltation of us his creatures! They are two

mysteries, of which the second is only less marvelous than the first. He, the Infinite One, stooped to the extremity of woe that he might elevate us to the highest life which a created being can enjoy--the life of God. And this explains another series of truths, which (I blush for myself and for human nature to confess) once troubled my peace, and is, I know, at the present moment darkening the faith of many. I mean the exalted expressions which Scripture contains of our privileges in Christ:--

[1] What argument, UNBELIEF SUGGESTS, can you draw from the infinite mutual love of the Father and the Son when Jesus says, "*As the Father loved me, so have I loved you*" (John 15:9)?

[2] Or from the infinite knowledge possessed by the Son of the Father, when he says, "No one knows the Father, save the Son, *and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him*" (Matt. 11:27)?

[3] Or from the Son being the express image of his person, when it is said, "*we are changed into the same image from glory to glory*" (2 Cor. 3:18)?

[4] Or from his Divine nature as the Son of God, when "*we are joint heirs with him who is the firstborn among many brethren, and are ourselves partakers of a Divine nature*" (Rom. 8:17,29; 2 Pet. 1:4)?

[5] Or from his words, "I and my Father are one," when he prays for his people "*that they may be one even as we are one*" (John 17:22)?

[6] Or from his own mighty miracles, when he promises his faithful disciple, "*Greater works than these (of mine) shall he do*" (John 14:12)?

[7] Or from his session on the eternal throne, when he says, "*we shall share his throne*" (Rev. 3:21)?

[8] Or from his saying, "He that has seen me has seen the Father," when he also says, "*He that hears you hears me*" (Luke 10:16)?

[9] Or from his assurance, "As the Father knows me, even so know I the Father," when Paul says in the confidence of faith, "*Then shall I know even as also I am known*" (1 Cor. 13:12)?

[10] Or from the infinite comprehension implied in the words, "The Father shows the Son all things that himself does," when Jesus says, "*All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you*" (John 15:15)?

[11] Or from the name of Jesus, "The Saviour of the world, who shall save his people from their sins," when among the Old Testament saints we find there were "*saviours who saved*

them" (Neh. 9:27); when Paul says, *"I became all things to all men, that I might by all means save some"* (1 Cor. 9:22); and when James avers, *"He that converts a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death"* (James 5:20)?

[12] Or from the express definition, *"The Word was God,"* when Christ declares, *"He called them gods, unto whom the word of God came"* (John 10:35)?

[13] Or from the solemn affirmation, *"In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,"* when Scripture records the prayer, *"that ye might be filled even to all the fulness of God"* (Eph. 3:19)?

Oh, base unbelief! Oh, hateful suspicion! If I have done wrong in giving consistent expression to thoughts [of unbelief] which have been flung as fiery darts against the shield of faith, the Lord pardon his servant in this thing. But the answer [to such faithless thoughts] is conclusive, and the suggestion [resulting from such unbelief], [if left] unanswered, may rankle in many breasts. I do not now insist on the exceeding ingratitude of the return [retort], *"[Is it not] to take advantage of the infinite love of Christ, and [to] say the believer is advanced to so high a dignity and is admitted to such Divine delights [that] there can surely be no difference between him and the eternal Son of God?"* But, I ask, what saith the Scripture to this objection of the glories of Christ and of his redeemed being from time to time described in apparently similar terms?

In the first place, most of the attributes and names of Christ are never predicated of his people. They are his own essential prerogatives; they are incommunicable. Then if we take up one-by-one those passages whose force is thought to be neutralized by the corresponding privileges of saints, we shall see how in each case the privilege of the believer is derived from Christ, or from the Father through Christ (the context compelling this), and is limited by the finite capacity of the creature; while the supereminent glory of Christ is either underived, eternal, increate, or, if given, is expressly given to him in his subordinate character as Mediator. And, lastly, no pretension of trust in any saint or saints is founded on the privileges conferred on him or them in the gospel.

As to the first point, you may easily verify it for yourself by referring to chapters iii and iv. Where is any saint said to be the only-begotten Son of God, the First and the Last, from everlasting, the same yesterday, today, and forever, omnipresent, omniscient, infinitely good, the Creator and preserver of all things, the chief Shepherd of the flock, the one Master and Lord, the Bridegroom of the bride, Jehovah? Nowhere. Therefore setting these disputed passages aside for awhile, even without them the proof remains incontrovertible.

Secondly, let us examine this alleged similarity more closely. But to deprecate a hasty conclusion from a bare resemblance of words, I would remind you there are a few instances in Scripture in which the same phrase denotes a prerogative of the Supreme Father and a privilege of his believing child. Thus we find, *"With God all things are*

possible" (Matt. 19:26). And again, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). Would you, because of the sameness of the terms employed, deny the omnipotence of God or ascribe omnipotence to the believer? Again, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Would you, because of the perfection of the saint, deny the infinite goodness of the Father; or because of the absolute perfection of the Father ascribe illimitable goodness to the saint? Here, indeed, "Knowledge is easy unto him who understands" (Prov. 14:6). Let us, however, proceed to examine them:--

The Father loves the Son, and has given all things unto his hands. He that believes on the Son has everlasting life (John 3:35,36).

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love (John 15:9,10).

In the first quotation, supreme authority is assigned to Christ as the heir of all things for his church; and the trust of mankind centres on him. In the second he is urging his disciples as defectible [imperfect] beings, by the plea of the infinite fulness of his love towards them (infinite so far as regarded himself), to abide in that love from which without him they would assuredly fall. "For without me," as he had just said, "ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

All things are delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father; neither knows anyone the Father except the Son (Matt. 11:27).

And he to whom the Son wills to reveal him (Matt. 11:27).

The first part is again accompanied by the declaration of the Son's unlimited inheritance of all things. The second is qualified by the previous assertion that these things were revealed to babes, and their finite knowledge of the Father is granted through the Son as the efficient cause.

The express image of his person (Heb. 1:3).

Changed into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18).

The first clause is extracted from that chapter which so illustriously proves the Deity of Christ. The second refers all the transformation to the view "of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6), revealed progressively by the Lord, the Spirit.

Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? (Heb. 1:5).

Sons of God (Rom. 8:14).
Joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
[The firstborn] among many brethren (Rom. 8:29).

We have here another testimony to Christ, which connects itself with all those passages

affirming that in a sense peculiar to himself he is the Son of God; standing forth as the Son, the only-begotten of the Father, the Son of his love, his own Son, the Son of the living God, the Son of the Blessed, the Son of the Highest (John 1:14; Col. 1:13; Rom. 8:32; Matt. 16:16; Mark 14:61; Luke 1:32). From a cursory glance into the eighth of Romans, we see how infinite the difference between that essential Sonship and our privileges as adopted sons, which are only ours in Christ; and thus it is, as Peter writes, through the righteousness of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, that we become partakers of a (not *the*) Divine nature.

I and my Father are one (John 10:30).

That they may be one, even as we are one (John 17:22).

On the first hangs the security of the church universal, which is safe whether held in his hand or, to vary the aspect of truth, held in his Father's hand. Equally safe, for he and his Father are one in essence, power, operation, and will. From the second we learn how intimate is the union of the saints with each other and the Lord. But unutterably glorious as are the privileges besought by Christ for his people in that sublime prayer, they all flow equally from the Father and from himself (v. 3) as the one fountain of eternal life.

The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness of me (John 10:25).

Greater works than these shall he do (John 14:12).

In the former, the works are appealed to as proof of his right to be the Shepherd of his flock and the Messiah of Israel. In the latter, all the miracles, as he had just stated, are wrought by faith in him: "He who believes on me, the works that I do shall he do also."

To the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever (Heb. 1:8).

To him who overcomes will I grant to sit with me in my throne (Rev. 3:21).

It only needs the collation of the verses to see the immeasurable difference between the universal supremacy belonging of right to Christ forever and the favour granted by him to his people of reigning with him.

He that has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9).

He that hears you hears me (Luke 10:16).

The first explains how knowledge of himself embraces knowledge of the Father and vindicates his claim to be "the way, and the truth, and the life." The second clothes his messengers with an ambassador's official authority, as speaking *in loco regis*.

As the Father knows me, even so know I the Father (John 10:15).

Then shall I know even as also I am known (1 Cor. 13:12).

The good Shepherd, who is to know thoroughly all his sheep (John 10:14), needs

omniscience. This the first proves. From the second we are assured that in heaven our knowledge will be not fragmentary as here but, *so far as it extends*, will resemble Christ's knowledge of us, being perfect, symmetrical, unperplexed.

The Father shows the Son all things
that he himself does (John 5:20).

All things that I have heard of
my Father, I have made known
unto you (John 15:15).

The first is accompanied with every Divine claim. The second is qualified by the quickly succeeding assurance, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12).

Christ, the Saviour of the world
(John 4:42).
Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath
to come (1 Thess. 1:10).

Thou gave them saviours, who
saved them (Neh. 9:27).
He who converts a sinner ... shall
save a soul from death (James 5:20).

It needs only a glance at the parallel passages to see how infinite is the difference between him who stands forth emphatically [as] the Author of eternal salvation and those who were deliverers of their country from oppression, or were instruments as the ministers of Jesus Christ in the salvation of souls.

The Word was God (John 1:1).

He called them gods, to whom the
word of God came (John 10:35).

In the first, the context compels us to understand (Θεός) God, when applied to the Word, in the same sense as when immediately before and after applied to the Father. The Word is essentially God, the Creator of all. The second, conceding indeed that there is a lower sense in which men were sometimes officially *called* gods (though the passage adduced marks their mortality--they shortly die like other men), contrasts with this the Divine Sonship of the Messiah.

In him dwells all the fulness of the
Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9).

That ye might be filled even to all
(εἰς πᾶν) the fulness of God
(Eph. 3:19).

The first affirms the incarnate Deity of Christ as the One in whom (see next clause, v. 10) we are complete, for he is the head of all principality and power. The second (somewhat obscured by the received translation) imports that we may be filled "each in our degree and to the utmost bound of our finite capacity, even as God is full, with Divine goodness." And this again flows from our knowledge of the illimitable love of Christ.

The difficulties, when fairly tried by the context in each case, crumble into dust; and the

formidable line of objections founded on them melt like embankments of snow when exposed to the full light of other Scriptures which assert the true Deity of the Son.

But now, I ask, do these contrasted truths divert us from reposing supreme trust in Jesus Christ? Do they, even so far as this, confuse our confidence by setting up any other as the recipient of equal honour? Because the saints are loved with Divine love, know God, are changed into his image, are called his sons, are made one with the Father and with Christ, work mighty works by his power, are raised to Christ's throne, shall hereafter possess a perfect knowledge, are made acquainted with the mysteries of gospel grace, may even officially be called gods, and, what is a far higher privilege, be filled with all Divine goodness,--is [there then] any claim set up on their behalf for trust or worship? Gather together all the privileges of Christians here set forth, entwine them into one radiant crown [and] place that crown (as you are perfectly warranted in doing) upon the head of some eminent saint--Peter or Paul or John, or even of the church catholic [universal], the Bride--is there in all these lustrous glories any temptation held out to confide in absolutely, or supremely to love, that saint or that church?

We acknowledge the extremity of abasement to which Jesus descended. We believe the summit of glory to which he will raise his people. We accept the simple declarations of Scripture with regard to both these facts. But for a man to take his stand alternately on the lowest step of Christ's humiliation and on the highest step of his children's exaltation, and thence to deny the Supreme Deity of him who stooped so low that he might draw us up so high, seems an ingratitude of which our dealings with our fellowmen afford no parallel.

We referred before to the opening of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Scripture does not contain a more rich exhibition of those things which are ours in Christ. Now if Paul had closed that chapter by arrogating Christ-like honours or Christ-like homage to himself and his brethren, there would have been some ground for alarm that the dignities of his people were eclipsing the supremacy of their Lord. How different is the spirit breathed through his glowing prayer!

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And he put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:17-23)

Behold, the Son is on the everlasting throne, and we are under his feet. Moved indeed by Divine compassion, he once forsook that throne and came forth from the bosom of his Father that he might gather together the children of God which are scattered abroad and present them as one family before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. Is your trust weakened in him because of his exceeding humiliation? Or do you think the less of him for the glory to which he elevates his people? Nay, verily. Gratitude can find no words to express itself when we believe on him who, being "over all, God blessed forever," partook of our flesh and blood, and now seated far above all principality and power is not ashamed to call us brethren (Heb. 2:11).

FOOTNOTE 2

I think we may safely draw here a parallel between the omnipotence and omniscience of Christ. We have seen that no exception can be taken against his Almighty power *as God* from the words, "I can of my own self do nothing," because *as man* he wrought his miracles not by virtue of his Deity (which was ever inherent in him) but by virtue of a perfect faith in the power of the Father (through the plenitude of the Holy Ghost). Though *as God* [he was] ever and always able to do all things, he of his own Divine will resolved not to exert this personal omnipotence between his incarnation and his crucifixion. This resolution was part of the *κένωσις* spoken of (Phil. 2:7). Therefore, with respect to the exertion of power by his spontaneous act of self-emptying, "the Son was able to do nothing of himself." His might was his Father's might. And the mean of its exertion was his own unfaltering faith. We have an illustrious example of this in his thanksgiving prayer when raising Lazarus from the dead: "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always" (John 11:41,42). So [also] with regard to this other attribute of Deity--omniscience. No exception against his infinite wisdom *as God* can justly be taken from the words, "The Son knows not that day or hour." At his incarnation he of his own accord resolved not to use, *as man*, during the days of his humiliation, the knowledge which his omniscience as God would afford. That resolution again was part of the *κένωσις*. The wisdom he used was the illumination of the Spirit given to him without measure. The means of its acquirement were diligence and prayer.

All human illustrations of this great mystery must fail. But have we not heard (in chivalry) of a warrior, in order to meet a partially disabled adversary on equal terms, allowing his own right arm to hang unemployed by his side? Have we not heard (in diplomacy) of an ambassador, with sealed instructions which he is only to open at his discretion, conducting a negotiation without knowing the mind of the senate he represents though the means of knowing it were ready to his hand in his portfolio? That warrior could use his arm; and yet by his own resolution he could not use it. That ambassador could break the seals; and yet in the best exercise of his judgment he could not do so. The one would truthfully declare, "I cannot stretch forth the right hand of my power"; and the other, "I do not know the counsels of my state." The one fights as if he had no right arm, and the other negotiates as if the will of his country had not been confided to his keeping. I offer these illustrations with much diffidence, knowing how far short every earthly figure of these heavenly mysteries must fall. But if it be possible for finite man in all sincerity to declare when physically able, "I cannot act," and when the means of knowledge are his, "I do not know," how much rather may these things be in the mission of the Infinite Son of God!

There are precipices on the right hand and on the left. Let us not go a hair's breadth beyond the declarations of Scripture; but at the same time let us accept with confidence and candor all those declarations. From everlasting to everlasting, before, during, and after his humiliation, Jesus Christ was,

and is, and is to come, the Lord God Omnipotent and Omniscient. "Power belongs unto God" (Ps. 62:11). "Wisdom and might are his" (Dan. 2:20). They are the inalienable attributes of Deity. They could never be laid aside. They could never cease to exist in God.

But we must not confound *non-existence* and *non-exertion*. Thus the patriarch argues, "Will he plead against me with his great power? No" (Job. 23:6). Thus the Psalmist records, "He did not stir up all his wrath" (Ps. 78:38). And thus the prophet solaces us, "He stays his rough wind in the day of the east wind" (Isa. 27:8). These words indicate that Jehovah did not put forth all his almightiness and all his holy indignation. That is to say--to use the language of men--that these attributes were in part unexcited or unexerted. Omnipotence restraining itself is not therefore a view of the actions of Deity unwarranted by Scripture. Why then should we stumble at these expressions of the God-man regarding himself?

Nay, so far from being staggered at these things, the considerations which they suggest are of the utmost value, when we contemplate Jesus as our example: "Who in the days of his flesh offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears to him that was able to save him from death; who was in all points tempted like as we are; and who, in that he has suffered being tempted, is able to succour them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:18; 4:15; 5:7). He put himself as far as possible on a level with us, for "in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren" (Heb. 2:17). We feel all the persuasive attraction of sympathy. We acknowledge all the power of the example of our elder Brother. We may draw from the same Fountain from whence the man Christ Jesus drew. The way of access through his blood is open to us. The Spirit is willing to strengthen us with might in the inner man. Yea, God in Christ is himself our wisdom and our strength. We have all the consolations of his perfect humanity. But these truths do not diminish aught from his perfect Divinity. Nay, they glorify it with new beauties, where we see how--in the weakness of human flesh but in the might of Divine faith, in the gradual development of human powers but in the full enlightenment of the Divine Spirit--his absolute indefectible goodness, the goodness of infinite love, proved him to be the only-begotten of the Father, God of God, Light of light, very God of very God.

[Return to Bickersteth Page](#)