

"The Humiliation of the Man Christ Jesus"

by
Herman Melvill

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

We bring before you a well-known passage of Scripture which forms the epistle of the day, and which furnishes some of our strongest arguments against those who deny the divinity of Christ. It cannot be disputed that St. Paul speaks of the mediator in three different states: (1) a state of glory, when he was "in the form of God," (2) a state of humiliation, when he assumed "the form of a servant," and (3) a state of exaltation, when there was "given him a name which is above every name."

It is further evident that the state of glory preceded the state of humiliation, and therefore Christ must have pre-existed in the form of God and not have *begun* to exist when he appeared on earth in the form of a servant. Indeed, the apostle is admonishing us to embrace humility, and he is enforcing his exhortation by the example of the Savior: *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."* You can require no proof that the strength of this exhortation lies in the fact that Christ displayed a vast humility in consenting to become man, for otherwise the example would lose all power and meaning. No individual can set an example of humility by merely being a man. But if one who pre-exists in another rank of intelligence becomes a man, then, but not otherwise, there may be humility, and his manhood would consequently become an example.

We can, however, only suggest these points for your consideration, and ask that you give the whole passage the attention which it singularly deserves. Our attention now will be focused on that single verse, *"And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."*

The verse refers to the Redeemer in his humiliation, but it cannot be fairly interpreted without taking for granted his pre-existent glory. St. Paul speaks of Christ as "found in fashion as a man," and as *then humbling himself* so as to become "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." It will be well that we advance a few remarks on the phrase "found in fashion as a man" before we consider that act of humility here ascribed to the Saviour.

The true humanity of the Son of God is as fundamental an article of Christianity as his true divinity. You would demolish our religion as effectually by proving that Christ was not real man as by proving that Christ was not real God. But we will not, and we cannot, allow

that there was in Christ that fountain of evil which there is in ourselves. He was like ourselves in all points except sin. His flesh could be lacerated by scourging, wasted by hunger, and torn by nails. His soul, like mine, could be assaulted by temptation, harassed by Satan, and disquieted under the hiding of his Father's face. He could suffer everything we can suffer, except the remorse of a guilty conscience. He could weep every tear which we can weep, except the tear of repentance.

Now it is remarkable, and could only be with design, that St. Paul uses words which do not go directly to the fact of the reality of the humanity of Christ but which might almost be thought to evade that fact. He does not roundly assert that Christ was man. He takes what may be called a circuitous method, using three expressions all similar but none direct-- "*took upon him the form of a servant,*" "*was made in the likeness of men,*" "*being found in fashion as a man.*" There must have been some weighty reason why St. Paul should have avoided the distinct mention of Christ's manhood and have employed language which, to a certain extent, is ambiguous.

These expressions, however vague and indefinite they may seem, could never have been intended to bring into question the reality of Christ's humanity, for the apostle employs precisely the same kind of language in reference to Christ's divinity-- "*who being in the form of God.*" If "*the likeness of men*" or "*the form of a servant*" implied that Christ was not really man nor really a servant, then "*the form of God*" would imply that he was not really God. The several expressions must have a similar interpretation. We are certain therefore that St. Paul intends nothing at variance with the doctrine of the real humanity of the Saviour. He points him out as actually man, though for reasons which remain to be investigated, he adopts the phrase "*the fashion of a man.*" Now it cannot be doubted that a contrast is intended between the expressions "*in the form of God*" and "*found in fashion as a man,*" and we shall understand the intent of the latter only through possessing ourselves of that of the former.

If you consult your Bibles, you will perceive that St. Paul states that it was "*the form of God*" of which Christ emptied himself, or which Christ laid aside when condescending to be born of a woman: "*Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation (literally "emptied himself"), and took upon him the form of a servant.*" It was therefore the *form* of God which Christ laid aside. He was still God, and could not for even an instant cease to be God. But he did not *appear* as God. He put aside, or veiled, those effulgent demonstrations of Deity that had commanded the homage and called forth admiration of the celestial hierarchy. And though he was all the while God-- God as truly and as actually as when in the might of manifested Omnipotence he filled infinite space with glorious masses of architecture--still he so restrained the blazings of Divinity that he could not, in the same sense, be known as God. Divesting himself of the form of God, he assumed in its stead the form or fashion of man. Up to this time he had both been and appeared to be God. Now he was God but appeared as a man.

We are told that Christ "*emptied himself,*" so that "*though he was rich, yet for our sakes he*

became poor." But of what did he empty himself? Certainly not of his nature or his attributes. It must be blasphemous to speak of properties of Godhead as laid aside or even suspended. Whatever he was as to nature and essence while appearing among the angels in the form of God, that he continued to be when walking the scenes of human habitation. But Christ "emptied himself" of the glories and the majesties to which he had claim, and which he possessed in unmeasured abundance as he sat on the throne of the heavens. It was poverty, that the Creator should be moving on a province of his own empire and yet not be recognized nor confessed by his own creation. It was poverty, that when he walked among men scattering blessings the anthem of praise did not float around him, but the air was often pierced with curses and blasphemy. It was poverty, that as he passed to and fro among the men he had made and whom he had come down to redeem, scarce a solitary hand was stretched out in friendship and scarce a solitary roof ever offered him for shelter.

When you contrast this deep and desolate poverty with that exuberant wealth of angelic anthems, the bowing of sparkling multitudes, and the glowing homage of immortal hierarchies, you cannot fail to perceive that in taking upon him flesh, the Eternal Son descended most literally from abundance to want. And though he continued just as mighty as before, just as infinitely gifted with all the stores and resources of essential Divinity, the transition was so total that we may assert, without reserve and without figure, that he who was rich became poor for our sakes.

We will now pass on to consider that act of humility ascribed in our text to Christ Jesus: "Being found in fashion as a man, he *humbled* himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Now observe that the apostle is here speaking of what Christ did *after* he had assumed humanity, and not what he did *in* assuming humanity. There was, indeed, an act of humiliation that mortal thought cannot comprehend in the coming down of Deity and tabernacling in flesh, but it is not to this act of humiliation that our text bears reference. After humanity had been assumed, when Christ was "found in fashion as a man," he yet further humbled himself. And it is on this fact that we would fasten your attention.

You are to view the Son of God as having brought himself down to the level of humanity, as having laid aside his dignities and taken part of the flesh and blood of those whom he yearned to redeem. But then you are not to consider that the humiliation ended here. You are not to suppose that whatever came after was encompassed in the original humiliation and thus nothing more than its fuller development. There was yet a lower depth to which this first humiliation did not necessarily carry him. And the apostle does not leave us to conjecture in what this second humiliation mainly consisted. He represents it as *submission to death*, "*even the death of the cross.*" So that after becoming man, it was "humbling himself" to yield to that sentence from which no man is exempted. It was "humbling himself" to die at all. It was "humbling himself" still more to die ignominiously. We will examine these statements and the conclusions to which they naturally lead.

First, it was humility in Christ to die at all. Who then was this mysterious man of whom it can be said that he humbled himself in dying? Who can that man be in whom that was humility which in all others is necessity? Has there ever been an individual among the natural descendants of Adam of whom we could say that it was humility in him to die? It would be as just to say that it was humility in him to have had only five senses. The most exalted piety, the nearest approaches to perfection of character, the widest distances between himself and all others of the race would never induce us to harbor for an instant the thought that a man stood exempt from the lot of humanity, or that it was left to his option, in any sense, whether or no he would die.

If it were humility in the man Christ Jesus to die, then there must have been a power in him of refusing to die. There can be no debate that his dying was a voluntary act, and had he chosen to decline submission to the parting of soul and body, he might have continued to this day unworn by disease and unbroken by age, an immortal man. It would have been quite possible for the Mediator to have upheld his humanity undecayed through long periods of time, and to have preserved it staunch and unbroken while generation after generation rose, flourished, and fell. From the fact that the man Christ Jesus humbled himself in dying, it is therefore a necessary deduction that a nature higher than human belonged to his person. We can advance no other account of such an act of humility.

Returning for a moment to Christ's humanity, we must affirm that he was not what is termed a fallen man. When we say that Christ's humanity was unfallen, we are far from saying that his humanity was the same as that of Adam before Adam transgressed. Christ took on humanity with all those innocent infirmities, but without any of those sinful propensities which the fall entailed. There are consequences from sin which themselves are perfectly guiltless. Sin introduced pain, but pain itself is not sin. Therefore Christ, being of the substance of his mother, derived from her a suffering humanity, but as "conceived by the Holy Ghost," he did not derive a sinful one. Fallen humanity denotes a humanity that has descended from a state of moral purity to one of moral impurity; and as long as there has not been this descent, humanity may remain unfallen and yet pass from physical strength to physical weakness.

This is exactly what we hold concerning the humanity of the Son of God. We do not assert that his humanity was the Adamic humanity, that is, of Adam while still loyal to Jehovah. Had this humanity been reproduced, there must have been an act of creation, whereas Christ was "made of a woman" and not created by an act of omnipotence. And allowing that Christ's humanity was not the Adamic, of course we allow that there were consequences of the fall of which it partook. We divide, therefore, these consequences into innocent infirmities and sinful propensities, from both of which Adam's humanity was free before transgression but endowed with afterwards.

Now Christ took humanity with the innocent infirmities. These he derived from his

mother. Like her he could hunger, thirst, weep, mourn, suffer, and die. But while he took humanity with the innocent infirmities, he did not take it with the sinful propensities. Here Deity interposed. The Holy Ghost overshadowed the virgin, and allowing weakness to be derived from her, forbade wickedness; and so caused that there should be generated a sorrowing and suffering humanity, but nevertheless an undefiled and a spotless one; a humanity with tears but not with stains, accessible to anguish but not prone to offend, allied most closely with misery but infinitely removed from the producing cause. There is no sin in dying; it is a consequence of sin. And consequences may be endured without share in the cause.

And herein lay the alleged act of humility. Christ was unquestionably mortal, otherwise he could not have died at all. It also cannot be questioned that he must have been more than mortal, otherwise death could not be avoided; and where can be the humility of submitting to that which we have no power of avoiding? But "he humbled himself" and became liable to that death which he might forever have arrested, and died not through any necessity but through the act of his own will. He died inasmuch as his humanity was mortal, and died voluntarily inasmuch as his person was divine. The one nature might have eternally kept up the other with fresh supplies of vitality, giving perpetual youth to the corruptible. But how then could the Scriptures have been fulfilled, and where would have been the expiation for the sins of a burdened and groaning creation?

Therefore, when you would describe the humiliation of the Son of God, do not think that you have opened the depths of his abasement when you show him exchanging the throne of light and the glory which he had with the Father for a tabernacle of flesh and companionship with the rebel. He went down a second abyss. From heaven to earth, who shall measure it? But when on earth as man, there was the whole precipice of God's curse, not one hair-breadth of which he was necessitated to descend. And when he threw himself over this precipice and sank into the grave, who will deny that there was a new and overwhelming display of condescension, an act of self-humiliation to which we can find no parallel? "Being found in fashion as a man, Christ *humbled* himself, and became obedient unto *death*."

But this is not all. You have not yet completed the survey of the Mediator's humiliation. It was astonishing self-abasement that Christ should choose to die. But the manner of the death makes the humility a thousand-fold more apparent: "He became obedient unto death, even the *death of the cross*."

We wish you to see that Christ Jesus was not insensible to ignominy and disgrace. He submitted, but he felt acutely and bitterly the shame. You cannot cause a sharper pang to an honorable and upright mind than by the imputation of crime, for the consciousness of innocence only heightens the smart. It is the guilty man who cares only that he has been condemned; the guiltless is pierced through-and-through by being accused. And let it never be thought that the humanity of the Son of God, holy and undefiled as it was, did not

possess this sensitivity to disgrace. "Have you come out, as against a *robber*, with swords and clubs?" This was a remonstrance that clearly showed he felt keenly the shame of unjust and brutish treatment. If it were not humiliation enough to die, shall Christ, with all this sensitivity to disgrace, also die that death which was above all others ignominious, a death appropriated to the basest condition of the worst men and unworthy of a freeman, whatever the amount of his guilt? Shall the separation of soul from body be effected by an execution to which none were doomed but the most abandoned of criminals, by a punishment too inhuman to find place in the Jewish code?

We boldly declare that after the condescension of Jesus in becoming man, and after the condescension of the God-man in consenting to die, there was this other condescension, and one scarce inferior to the others, that of "the death of the cross." St. Paul writes, "He endured the cross, despising the shame." He felt the shame, otherwise there was nothing memorable in his bringing himself to despise it. He took no account of it when set against the glorious results which its endurance would effect. It was not only necessary that he should die, it was necessary that he should die ignominiously, *as a criminal*. He was to die as man's substitute, and man was a criminal, yes, the very basest.

In conclusion, we urge the exhortation of St. Paul: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." He died to make atonement, but he died also to set a pattern. Shall pride be embraced after you have seen Deity humbling himself by becoming man, and then abasing himself till there was no lower point to which he could descend? Shall we be proud when we recognize that he did all this for us--the vile, the reprobate, the lost? Oh, the neglect, the contempt, the coldness, the formality which he receives from our hands! Who of us can say he has faithfully followed Christ's pattern? Who of us has mastered and cast out pride? Let us meditate on the humility of the man Christ Jesus that it might leave us more humble, more self-denying, and more disposed to bear one another's burdens. Let us write it more deeply than ever on our hearts, that our Mediator was perfect God and perfect man, for the doctrine of the atonement is the basis of our hope and the motive to our holiness.

Sermon IV from *Sermons* by Henry Melvill (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1833). **Note:** This sermon has been condensed and moderately rephrased for clarity.