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OUR LORD'S STATE OF HUMILIATION.

BY THE REV. JOHN R. PALMER, LITT.D.

IN connection with the profoundly mysterious subject of our Lord's state of Humiliation, it seems to the present writer that there is a tendency in some quarters to relax certain points of vital importance. And not only is this observable in sermons and discourses, but also in many of the more systematic, theological treatises, in many Commentaries of the highest excellence, and even in works which profess to treat of every part of the subject. The oversight is, in many cases, unintentional, but in not a few it appears to be due to a feeling which, however commendable it may be in some respects, is little calculated to serve the highest interests of Truth, namely, the feeling that certain truths clearly revealed in the Word of God, or which may be derived from its teaching by reasonable and impartial inference, need to be so toned down as to become practically non-existent. With regard to such treatment of any truth of Holy Scripture, we believe that the good which is thus aimed at is likely to be more than overbalanced by the disturbing influences which are likely to ensue. A true acquaintance with the meaning of many passages of God's Word connected with the subject before us is sufficient to make plain the essential importance of much that is more or less explained away. And whilst fully admitting that loyalty to Truth never renders unnecessary the exercise of discretion in its presentation, we as fully believe that a real *suppression* of any part or aspect of it cannot eventually subserve its true interests. A complete presentation of the substance of Truth is compatible with the utmost discretion. We are not serving the cause of Truth, however we may try to persuade ourselves that such is the case, when from a groundless fear of the dangers to which it may be exposed, we set ourselves to mutilate its fair proportions, or to *so* present one aspect of it as to throw others equally important into the background. Moreover, we are not serving its sacred cause when we allow ourselves to regard those who call for a *fuller* treatment of Truth as manifesting any sign of "latent iniquity of heart, or of presumptuous abuse of the understanding." Such devotion

to Truth is unworthy of its sacred character, and cannot but hinder, even while it professes to be desirous of furthering, its advancement. It has been said that "the errors of Theology, as well as those of Theologians, have been the direct cause of much irreverence towards the Bible." It may also be said that a *partial* treatment in one quarter of some great truth has not seldom been the cause of its still worse depreciation in another. Neither can evasion, any more than a certain uninquiring reverence, increase that respect for Truth which those who prize it most highly would have all men to feel for it.

It is not by any means from love of "the gloriously curious or curiously glorious" conjectures of a merely speculative spirit that the present writer ventures to discuss certain points in connection with that state of Humiliation upon which our blessed Lord voluntarily entered. He, moreover, is aware that it is a subject the depth of which we cannot fathom, and the boundaries of which we cannot measure; and he fully acknowledges, in the consideration of such a subject, that the Word of God illumined by the Living Personal Spirit, under whose inspiration it was written, must, necessarily, be our chief guide. But he also believes that any matter upon which the Holy Scriptures throw light, and into the "truth" of which the Holy Spirit may reasonably be sought to lead the devout "learner," may be regarded as a subject of reverent inquiry (Rom. xv. 4; 2 Tim. iii. 14-17; St. John xvi. 13, 14; Rom. viii. 14). In accordance with this belief and a sincere regard for what he holds to be the truth, and without abating in the least degree his assent to the doctrine of our blessed Lord's true and proper Divinity, he not only ventures to discuss and support the view of our Lord's Peccability, but also proposes to consider in the same spirit other points connected with that voluntary Humiliation upon which our Lord entered when He became Man. Apart from the circumstances of that Humiliation men could not have borne the profoundly mysterious truths which He taught them. Their cry would have been like that of the Israelites at Sinai: "Speak thou"—one "like unto" ourselves—"with us, and we will hear: but let not *God* speak with us lest we die" (Ex. xx. 19; Heb. ii. 17). As it was, there were those who could not receive His words, who failed to grasp the deeper parts of His teaching, who stumbled at the Divine truths which He taught them with His *human* lips (St.

John vi. 26-69). Did He not recognize this fact, and with infinite condescension adapt His teaching upon more than one occasion to the weakness of His hearers, sparing them any further strain: "I have yet many things to say unto you, *but ye cannot bear them now*" (St. John xvi. 12)? Did He not endeavour to forearm them against that shock to their faith which came from the unexpected accomplishment of "the things concerning Himself" (St. John xiv. 29; St. Luke xxiv. 27)? How gradually did He unfold to them the events of His Passion! What condescension, what wisdom, what love was there in all this! He might have compelled the attention of His hearers. He might have been regardless of their mental infirmities. But how differently did He behave towards them. He was not only tenderly mindful of their mental weaknesses, but He even thought of and provided for their *bodily* needs (St. Mark viii. 2, 3; v. 43). How does this principle of accommodation again and again appear in the actual exercise of His sacred Ministry? Was it the consideration of this striking feature of our Lord's dealings with men that led His Apostle to adopt a like tender regard for their weaknesses? (1 Cor. ix. 19-23; 1 Cor. iii. 1, 2; cf. 1 Cor. iii. 2 with St. John xvi. 12).

May we not, too, venture to say that this Divine consideration, this willingness to meet the needs of Humanity, arising out of its natural infirmity, is involved in and expressed by the actual form, so to speak, of our Lord's Humiliation. It would have been an act of infinite condescension, if the Son of God had appeared among men in angel-form, and in that form for three and thirty years had ministered to all the needs of their earthly existence. But in this way He could neither have atoned for men's sins nor saved them "from their sins" (St. Matt. i. 21). He could not have effected any permanently saving work in the spiritual sphere. His ability to turn men "from their sins" to the righteousness of God would have been as transitory as that of the Theophanies of which we read in the Old Testament Scriptures. But there would also have been lacking another motive power inherent in the Incarnation, a power which appeals irresistibly to the heart of man, when conscious of his own weakness—the exhibition of a definite and real *participation* in the natural weakness of Humanity. As the poet well says:

“ Could not the Lord from heaven give aid ?
 Why was He born of the mother-maid ?
 Only *the Son of Man* could be
 Touched with man's infirmity.”¹

The Incarnation, then, and that alone, could meet all these requirements. Nothing else could have afforded any solution of the problem of man's need so far as to effect his restoration to the Divine favour.

Now these and other considerations lead us to believe that where Scripture speaks of our blessed Lord's Humiliation, it indicates nothing less than an intense and profound *reality*, not such as may be adequately grasped by human thought, but which nevertheless was in no sense or degree merely docetic. To the same extent as we admit the theory of *semblance* in the interpretation of any part or element of our Lord's *Humiliation*—His weakness, sufferings, or self-sacrifice—to that extent we undermine the Christian system, and open the door to unbelief in it *as a whole*. Besides, the depth of our blessed Lord's Humiliation was necessary in a sense to the height of His subsequent Exaltation (Is. iii. 13, 14; liii. 12; Acts iv. 12; Phil. ii. 6-11; Heb. i. 4).

But in emphasizing the profound reality of our Lord's Humiliation, we do not for a moment subscribe to the view that He possessed only a semblance of *Deity* during “the days of His flesh” (Heb. v. 7). The true view, we believe, is that of the proper Deity of our Blessed Lord, as existent in His sacred Person, but as subject, so to speak, from His Nativity to His Resurrection to certain voluntary *limitations* necessary to the Divine plan of Redemption (Heb. ii. 17; cf. St. John viii. 28, 29; xiv. 28; Heb. v. 8).

JOHN R. PALMER.

(*To be continued.*)

¹ An able and instructive article, *On the title Son of Man*, from the pen of Dr. Sanday, appeared in *The Expositor*, January, 1891.

