

CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

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John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* quotes two church fathers with approval: Chrysostom writes, “The foundation of our philosophy is humility,” while Augustine writes, “If you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, ‘humility.’”¹

Humility is an important subject for the Christian to study and, above all, to practise. The Bible is filled with warnings against pride and exhortations to humility.

In fact, there is nothing more odious and unbecoming for a Christian than to be proud and to behave proudly. Paul writes about Christian love, “Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up” (I Cor. 13:4). Paul warns, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth” (I Cor. 8:1). In Philippians 2:3, Paul exhorts, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves,” where “vainglory” is an empty pride and “lowliness of mind” is humility. In Romans 12:3, Paul writes, “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” Not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to think is to be humble; it is not to be proud.

Christian Humility: What It Is

Jonathan Edwards defines humility as “a sense of our own comparative meanness with a disposition to a behaviour answerable thereto.”² John Calvin defines humility in these words: “an unfeigned submission of our heart, stricken down in earnest with an awareness of its own misery and want.”³ The

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.11; vol. 1, pp. 268-269.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 140.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.12.6; p. 760.

Greek scholar, Richard C. Trench in his book, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, explains humility in these words: “the esteeming of ourselves small, inasmuch as we are so; the thinking truly, and because truly, therefore *lowlily*, of ourselves.”⁴ Joseph Thayer in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* explains the word “humble” in these words: “not rising far from the ground.”⁵

If we combine those definitions, we see that humility is “to be low and to know oneself to be low.” It is to be low and to know oneself to be low with respect to God and with respect to other people.

Low Before God

No one can truly be humble who does not view himself as low with respect to God. The more greatly God is exalted in your thinking, the lower you will be in your own eyes. When you understand who God is, you will despise yourself in comparison to Him. Consider Psalm 113:4-6:

The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high, Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!

If we take those words seriously, we will not be surprised by verse 7: “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill.” If God is infinitely exalted above the creation, the only position we can occupy is the dust or the dunghill. Or consider Isaiah 57:15:

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

If God is “the high and lofty One,” then, of course, we must be of “a contrite and humble spirit.” How could a *proud* man dwell in the presence of the high

⁴ Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1969), p. 150; italics mine.

⁵ Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1984), p. 614.

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and lofty One? Remember what Abraham said, “I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27) or remember the words of Job: “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay my hand upon my mouth” and “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 40:4; 42:6).

Two truths cause us to be humble before God.

First, our smallness as creatures humbles us. What are we in comparison to God? What have we done in comparison to what God has done? What knowledge or wisdom do we possess? What power do we wield? We are nothing before Him, even less than nothing, empty vanity, a breath or a vapour, or dust and ashes. When we consider that, we ought to be humble—we ought, as Thayer puts it, “not rise far from the ground.”

Even the angels, who are much more glorious creatures than we are, exercise this humility before God. They cover their faces in the presence of the blazing glory of the Lord of hosts. If the angels are humble, how much more reason have *we* to be humble? If creatures of the light are humble because they live in much greater proximity to God, how much more must we creatures of the dust be humble? If the dwellers in heaven are humble, how much more must we dwellers of the earth be humble? If a proud angel is an odious thing to imagine, how much more odious is a proud man? Indeed, there was a proud angel—Lucifer through pride ruined himself and his followers, and became Satan or the devil. Paul alludes to this in I Timothy 3:6 where he warns the novice, “lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.”

Second, our sinfulness as fallen creatures further humbles us. It is one thing to be a creature of the dust or a creature of the earth—that is humbling! It is even worse to be a sinner—that is even more humbling! To be sinners makes us worse than the loathsome creeping things of the earth—snakes, toads and spiders have not rebelled against God! Snakes, toads and spiders do not break God’s commandments or live in depravity! Snakes, toads and spiders are not subject to the curse of the law or worthy of the fires of hell! But we are!

Sinners have no reason—and no right—to be proud. Humanity created in innocence and in the image of God forfeited His good gifts. Now we are not

only guilty before God for the transgression of Adam and for our own sins, but we are also by nature totally depraved: our hearts, souls, minds and wills are corrupted—totally corrupted. We are by nature wholly incapable of doing anything good and wholly inclined to all wickedness. Our hearts, if any man knew it, are veritable cesspools of iniquity, spewing forth all manner of filth, much of which finds manifestation in our words and actions. Job declares of mankind, “How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water?” (Job 15:16).

And then we ought to compare ourselves with God. God is holy, spotlessly pure light and in Him is no darkness at all. He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and cannot look upon sin. Even the angels are not pure in His sight—we are a stench in His nostrils, more disgusting than a vile toad is in our sight. When we appear before Him in our natural depravity, even attempting to clothe ourselves with some of our pathetic moral deeds, He sees us dressed in “filthy rags” and views us as “an unclean thing” (Isa. 64:6).

And even when God saves us, as He does in His rich mercy, we are *still sinners*. Even the holiest member of the church is very unholy—depravity is still present in our hearts, depravity that is so vile that it shocks us, horrifies us and shames us; depravity that is so vile that it would repulse your neighbour, your closest friend and even the members of your family if they could see it. A sense of our sinfulness drives us again and again to seek cleansing in the blood of Jesus. A sense of our sinfulness makes us humble.

The Reformed confessions speak of humility in several places. Such humility, says the *Heidelberg Catechism*, is necessary for “acceptable” prayer: “that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty” (Q. & A. 117). Such humility is the fruit of justification, according to *Belgic Confession* 23: “And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are.” The *Canons of Dordt* also derive humility from a sense of our depravity: “Hence spring daily sins of infirmity, and hence spots adhere to the best works of the saints, which furnish them with constant matter for humiliation before God” (V:2). The Reformed “Form for the Administration of Baptism” reminds us of this also: “This,” says the Form, “the dipping in or

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sprinkling with water teaches us, whereby the impurity of our souls is signified, and we admonished to loathe and humble ourselves before God, and seek for our purification and salvation without ourselves.”⁶ The “Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper” makes a similar point: “That everyone [should] consider by himself his sins and the curse due to him for them, to the end that he may abhor and humble himself before God.”⁷

Humility is not merely, or even mainly, external. In fact, so perverse are we that we can put on an outward show of humility while our hearts are full of stinking pride. The Bible identifies humility as “humbleness of mind.” In Philippians 2:3, Paul exhorts us “in lowliness of mind [to] esteem other better than [ourselves].” In Colossians 3:12, he commands us to put on “bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, [and] longsuffering.”

This teaches us something important about humility. Remember what the various authors that we quoted earlier wrote: “*a sense* of our own comparative meanness” (Edwards); “an unfeigned submission of *the heart*, stricken down ... with *an awareness* of its own misery” (Calvin). Humility is, therefore, a spiritual, heartfelt, sincere awareness of one’s own lowness. It cannot be manufactured—it can only be *felt*. In fact, a manufactured humility is easily recognized and will disgust people. There are some who try to appear humble: they want to be recognized and even praised for their humility, but that is not humility.

The story is told of a woman who, in order to demonstrate her piety, told Charles Spurgeon that she was a very bad sinner. With deep sighs she insisted that she was the greatest of all sinners, worse than Paul and not worthy to be called a Christian. Quite bored with her whining, Spurgeon said, “You did not need to tell me all of that, Madam, because I knew it already. Other people have told me what a sinner you are.” Then the penitent sinner flared up, “How does anybody dare say such a thing about me! Who said it?”⁸

⁶ “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), p. 258.

⁷ “Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Confessions and Church Order*, p. 268.

⁸ Andrew Kuyenhoven, *Comfort and Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids

Some people are self-deprecating: they will openly criticize themselves, lamenting some fault that they have, but their real motive in so doing is to have others flatter them. Others compare themselves with others, saying that others are better than they are, but their real motive is envy, discontentment and self-pity. “He is better educated than I am. He has a better job than I do. He has a happier life than I have.” A humble man recognizes the gifts and graces of others, praises God for them and is content to take a lower position, if such is the will of God. A proud man envies the gifts and graces of others, is resentful and is unhappy to be in a lower position. Although perhaps he cannot change his low position, he is not content to remain where God has placed him. That is not humility but a subtle species of pride.

Humbling Doctrines

Christians are humble because of Christianity, for Christianity is designed to make us humble. The doctrines of the Word of God are an assault upon the pride of man because, as I Corinthians 1:29 expresses it, “no flesh should glory in [God’s] presence.” God detests pride; therefore, He seeks to humble His people.

First, the doctrine of God humbles us. In this connection, the absolute sovereignty of God humbles us, especially the truth of unconditional predestination. Unconditional election teaches us that God, without regard to any merit of ours, for we have none, chose us before the foundation of the world to be His children. We are, therefore, no better than anyone else. We cannot boast that God chose us for our piety or even our potential piety! If we understand this, should we not be humble? The *Canons of Dordt* insist that we are: “The sense and certainty of this election afford to the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before Him” (I:13).

Hence they to whom so great and so gracious a blessing is communicated, above their desert, or rather notwithstanding their demerits, are bound to acknowledge it with humble and grateful hearts, and with the apostle to adore, not curiously to pry into the severity and justice of God’s judgments displayed to others, to whom this grace is not given (*Canons* III/IV:7).

MI: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 303.

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Matthew Barrett in his book, *The Grace of Godliness*, expresses it this way: “Biblical Calvinism is not a vehicle for pride and arrogance, but for humility and a Christ-like meekness.”⁹ Later, he writes, “Election, if truly understood, does not leave the believer with a smug attitude of self-importance, but a humble, meek, and awe-stricken attitude of reverence before a sovereign God.”¹⁰

Second, the doctrine of Christ humbles us. No Christian, who considers what Jesus suffered on the cross and who understands that the cause of those sufferings was his *sin*, can be proud. Isaac Watts put it well in his hymn (although we do not sing man-made hymns), “When I survey the wondrous cross ... I pour contempt on all my pride ... forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God!” Shall we who are so guilty and sinful that only the death of the Son of God could save us be proud?

Third, the doctrine of man humbles us. As we mentioned earlier, man is a creature and a sinner, two great truths that greatly humble us. If the doctrine of total depravity does not humble us, I do not know what else could.

Fourth, the doctrine of salvation humbles us, for we believe in salvation *by grace alone*. Grace, when it comes to us, is God’s unmerited, even forfeited, favour. To be proud of grace is not only absurd; it is wicked and abominable. It is the man who teaches and believes in salvation by works who is proud. The man who teaches and believes that salvation is by grace alone without his own works is profoundly humble and profoundly thankful. He expresses his thanks by his humility. Thus Paul reminds the church in Ephesus, “[It is] not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9). Thus Paul explains the example of Abraham: “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God” (Rom. 4:2). And thus Paul exhorts the Corinthians: “For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (I Cor. 4:7).

In other words, if the doctrines of the gospel do not make you a humble person, you have not understood them. Listen to Matthew Barrett again:

⁹ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort* (Kitchener, ON, Canada: Joshua Press, 2013), p. 4.

¹⁰ Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness*, p. 26.

The doctrines of total depravity and sovereign grace do not produce pride, but humility. Those who have had their eyes opened to the omnipotence of regenerating grace see the King high and lifted up. Witnessing the majesty of a sovereign God does not lead one to be puffed up in himself, but cast down to the ground, to his knees, in gratitude and self-effacement.¹¹

Consider this exhortation from Jonathan Edwards in his *Charity and Its Fruits*:

Seek for a deep and abiding sense of your comparative meanness before God and men. Know God. Confess your nothingness and ill desert before Him. Distrust yourself. Rely only on God. Renounce all glory except from Him. Yield yourself heartily to His will and service. Avoid an aspiring, ambitious, ostentatious, assuming, arrogant, scornful, wilful, levelling, self-justifying behaviour; and strive for more and more of the humble spirit that Christ manifested while he was on the earth.¹²

How Humility Manifests Itself

If we are humble, we will have a low opinion of ourselves. This is not because we are lacking in self-esteem, but because we understand who we are in light of the truth that we are both creatures and sinners. This humility will produce a certain kind of behaviour with respect to both God and men.

Peter describes this humility in I Peter 5:5-6: “All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.”

A humble person is content to be under God’s hand. God’s hand refers to His power exercised in providence, especially when His hand afflicts us and brings us low. The calling is to “humble yourself:” God has brought you low but are you humbled in your heart? Sometimes we are in a humble position

¹¹ Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness*, p. 95.

¹² Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, p. 159.

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but we are not humbled: we resent our low position; we squirm under God's hand; we struggle to be content because we are proud.

A truly humble man will have a low estimation of himself in light of the glory, majesty, power and goodness of God. He will say, "Who am I, that I would question God's ways with me? I am only a creature of the dust. If God wants to make His hand heavy upon me, He must have a reason. Since He is God, it must be a good reason, a *very* good reason. Besides that, I am a sinner. Whatever affliction I endure is much less than I deserve. And if God desires to correct me, who am I to squirm under His hand? More than that, do I not have the promises of God? Has He not promised never to forsake me, to provide for me and to love me? Do not all things work for my good? And is the hand under which I find myself humbled not the hand of my Father? Therefore, I make myself low."

A humble person does not complain about God's ways; he is content to trust God and to rely upon Him for all things. A proud heart complains about God's ways. Such a heart needs to be humbled, often through affliction.

Humility Before Men

A humble person is also humble with respect to others. Peter says that we are to be clothed with humility in order to submit to and serve others. That expression, "clothed with" refers to apron strings, which someone ties around his waist in order to do some lowly, menial task. Jesus did this when He girded himself with a towel in John 13:4 in order to wash the disciples' feet. Paul writes in Philippians 2:3, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."

A humble person has and exhibits a certain attitude toward unbelievers. It is a very sad fact that many Christians come across to unbelievers as proud, arrogant and self-righteous. Some of this might be the fault of the unbeliever, but the Christian must be very careful in his tone, mannerisms and speech not to come across as proud. And he must guard his heart from pride. The *Canons of Dordt* warn against this:

And as to others, who have not yet been called, it is our duty to pray for them to God, who calls the things that are not as if they were. But we are in no wise to conduct ourselves

towards them with haughtiness, as if we had made ourselves to differ (III/IV:15).

If I asked your unbelieving colleagues at work, your fellow students at school, your unbelieving family members and the people of your neighbourhood, would they describe you as humble or haughty? What attitude do your words online, on Facebook, for example, communicate—humility or haughtiness? How do you behave at home, at school or at work—with humility or haughtiness?

Remember what Paul writes about Christian love, “Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up” (I Cor. 13:4). To be “puffed up” is to have an over-inflated sense of your own importance. To “vaunt oneself” is to *show* by your speech and behaviour that you have an over-inflated sense of your own importance. A Christian must have a sense, as Edwards put it, of “his own comparative meanness,” both of his littleness and his vileness, with “a disposition to a behaviour answerable thereto.” A humble heart produces humble behaviour; a proud heart produces proud behaviour. In Philippians 2:3, Paul calls it “vainglory” or empty pride, which is a desire for self-promotion and a desire to outdo others around you so that you, and not they—and not God—are praised. Such “vainglory” leads to “strife” because, when two or more over-inflated egos collide, the result is conflict.

If you have a humble opinion of yourself, you will not view certain tasks to be “beneath you” or “beneath your dignity.” A Christian husband will not think it beneath his dignity to work in a menial job in order to support his family and church. A Christian wife and mother will not think it beneath her dignity to cook, clean and look after the children, which is not a job with much glamour. A Christian young person will not think it beneath his dignity to help around the home and garden, to do his schoolwork or to get a part-time job to learn how to work. A Christian pastor will not think it beneath his dignity to visit the sick and elderly or to be a pastor to a small, less prominent church. A proud man will refuse to wash the disciples’ feet because it is beneath his dignity, while a humble man will serve the church because he esteems the other members better than himself.

A similar idea is expressed in the word “meekness.” Meekness is similar to humility, although it is not an exact synonym of it. Meekness is submissive-

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ness under provocation; it is a willingness to suffer injury patiently rather than to inflict injury. A meek person will yield to the needs of others, rather than insist on his own prerogatives. When a meek person is crossed, he will not lash out in anger but he will submit. A proud person cannot be meek, for a proud person will be offended, will seek to justify himself, and will seek to assert his rights and authority, when someone opposes him. He will react in this way because he believes himself to be important. In II Corinthians 10:1 Paul beseeches the church “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” In Galatians 6:1, Paul urges the saints to restore erring members “in the spirit of meekness.” In Ephesians 4:2, Paul beseeches the believers to walk “with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.” In Colossians 3:12, Paul calls Christians to put on “bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, [and] longsuffering.” In II Timothy 2:25, Paul exhorts Christian pastors to instruct those who “oppose themselves” in contradicting the truth “in meekness.” Finally, in Titus 3:2, Paul writes, “Speak evil of no man ... be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.”

If, therefore, you are humble, you will not think others to be beneath you, so that you act haughtily toward them and refuse to serve them. Instead, you will think yourself to be beneath others, so that you will act in lowliness of mind and will gladly serve them.

The Pattern for Our Humility

Jesus taught us what true humility is. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus calls out, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me: for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” What an astounding statement—the Son of God is lowly and meek! The Son of God is highly exalted; He sits on the throne; He dwells in the bosom of the Father. Yet He is lowly in heart.

Paul explains this in Philippians 2:5-6: “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.” Jesus is God but He did not seek to hold on to His equality with God. He did not say, as He could have said, “It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to become a man. It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to be born to poor and sinful parents.

It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to be born in a stable and be laid in a manger.” Instead, He made Himself of no reputation.

And His humbling was not finished in Bethlehem’s stable. He humbled Himself even further: “he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (v. 8). He did not say, as He could have said, “It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to die. It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to be crucified. It is beneath my dignity as the Son of God to bear the wrath and curse of God against sin.”

The Son of God consented to become low, very low, the lowest of the low. He did that so that we, who are very low, low in our littleness and low in our sinfulness, could be exalted. He tells us in John 13:13-14: “Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet.”

Our Lord and Master humbled Himself. Shall we, His servants, be proud? Shall we have a high opinion of ourselves and shall we carry ourselves as if we had a high opinion of ourselves? Shall we who are creatures of the dust, sinners and debtors to the grace of God be proud?

Let us learn humility. Let us have a sense of our own comparative meanness and vileness with the disposition to a behaviour answerable thereto.