

On Knowing Christ after the Flesh

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Sermon Number Sermon 117

Sermon Title On Knowing Christ after the Flesh

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition) PLYMOUTH-DOCK, August 15, 1789.

Sermon Scripture "Henceforth know we no man after the flesh; yea, though we did know Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more." 2 Cor. 5:16.

I 1. I have long desired to see something clearly and intelligibly wrote on these words. This is doubtless a point of no small importance: it enters deep into the nature of religion; and yet what treatise have we in the English language which is written upon it? Possibly there may be such; but none of them has come to my notice, no, not so much as a single sermon."

2. This is here introduced by the Apostle in a very solemn manner. The words literally translated run thus: He died for all, that the who live", all who live upon the earth, might not henceforth from the moment they knew him, live unto themselves seek their own honour, or profit, or pleasure, "but unto him," in righteousness and true holiness. (2 Cor. 5:15) "So that we from this time," we that know him by faith, "know no one," either the rest of the Apostles, or you, or any other person, "after the flesh." This uncommon expression, on which the whole doctrine depends, seems to mean, we regard no man according to his former state, -- his country, riches, power, or wisdom. We consider all men only in their spiritual state, and as they stand related to a better world. Yea, if we have known even Christ after the flesh, (which undoubtedly they had done, beholding and loving him as a man, with a natural affection,) yet now we know him so no more. We no more know him as a man, by

his face, shape, voice, or manner of conversation. We no more think of him as a man, or love him under that character.

3. The meaning, then, of this strongly figurative expression appears to be no other than this. From the time that we are created anew in Christ Jesus we do not think, or speak, or act, with regard to our blessed Lord, as a mere man. We do not now use any expression with relation to Christ which may not be applied to him not only as he is man, but as he is "God over all, blessed for ever."

4. Perhaps in order to place this in a clearer light, and at the same time guard against dangerous errors, it may be well to instance in some of those that in the most plain and palpable manner "know Christ after the flesh." We may rank among the first of these the Socinians; those who flatly "deny the Lord that bought them;" who not only do not allow him to be the supreme God, but deny him to be any God at all. I believe the most eminent of these that has appeared in England, at least in the present century, was a man of great learning and uncommon abilities, Dr. John Taylor, for many years pastor at Norwich, afterwards President at the Academy at Warrington. Yet it cannot be denied that he treats our Lord with great civility; he gives him very good words; he terms him a very worthy personage;" yea, "a man of consummate virtue"

5. Next to these are the Arians. But I would not be thought to place these in the same rank with the Socinians. There is a considerable difference between them. For whereas the former deny Christ to be any God at all, the latter do not; they only deny him to be the great God. They willingly allow, nay, contend, that he is a little God. But this is attended with a peculiar inconvenience. It totally destroys the unity of the Godhead. For, if there be a great God and a little God, there must be two Gods. But waiving this and keeping to the point before us: all who speak of Christ as inferior to the Father, though it be ever so little, do undoubtedly "know him after the flesh;" not as "the brightness of the Father's glory, the express image of his person; as upholding," bearing up, "all things," both in heaven and earth, "by the word of his power," -- the same powerful word whereby of old time he called them all into being.

6. There are some of these who have been bold to claim that great and good man Dr. Watts, as one of their own opinion; and in order to prove him so they have quoted that fine soliloquy which is published in his posthumous works. Yet impartial men will not allow their claim without stronger proof than has yet appeared. But if he is clear of this charge, he is not equally clear of "knowing Christ after the flesh" in another sense. I was not aware of this, but read all his works with almost equal admiration, when a person of deep piety as well as judgment was occasionally remarking that some of the hymns printed in his *Horae Lyricae*, dedicated to Divine Love, were (as he phrased it) "too amorous, and fitter to be addressed by a lover to his fellow-mortal, than by a sinner to the most High God." I doubt whether there are not some other writers who, though they believe the Godhead of Christ, yet speak in the same unguarded manner.

7. Can we affirm that the hymns published by a late great man (whose memory I love and esteem) are free from this fault? Are they not full of expressions which strongly savour of "knowing Christ after the flesh?" Yea, and in a more gross manner than anything which was ever before published in the English tongue. What pity is it that those coarse expressions should appear in many truly spiritual hymns! How often, in the midst of excellent verses, are lines inserted which disgrace those that precede and follow! Why should not all the compositions in that book be not only as poetical, but likewise as rational and as scriptural, as many of them are acknowledged to be?

8. It was between fifty and sixty years ago that by the gracious providence of God my brother and I in our voyage to America became acquainted with the (so called) Moravian Brethren. We quickly took knowledge what spirit they were of, six-and-twenty of them being in the same ship with us. We not only contracted much esteem, but a strong affection for them. Every day we conversed with them, and consulted them on all occasions. I translated many of their hymns for the use of our own congregations. Indeed, as I durst not implicitly follow any men, I did not take all that lay before me, but selected those which I judged to be most scriptural, and most suitable to sound experience. Yet I am not sure that I have taken sufficient care to pare off every improper word or expression, -- every one that may seem to border on a

familiarity which does not so well suit the mouth of a worm of the earth when addressing himself to the God of heaven. I have indeed particularly endeavoured, in all the hymns which are addressed to our blessed Lord, to avoid every fondling expression, and to speak as to the most High God, to him that is "in glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal."

9. Some will probably think that I have been over-scrupulous with regard to one particular word, which I never use myself either in verse or prose, in praying or preaching, though it is very frequently used by modern divines both of the Romish and Reformed Churches. It is the word dear. Many of these frequently say, both in preaching, in prayer, and in giving thanks, "Dear Lord," or "Dear Saviour;" and my brother used the same in many of his hymns, even as long as he lived. But may I not ask, Is not this using too much familiarity with the great Lord of heaven and earth? Is there any scripture, any passage either in the Old or New Testament, which justifies this manner of speaking? Does any of the inspired writers make use of it, even in the poetical Scriptures? Perhaps some would answer, "Yes, the Apostle Paul uses it. He says, "God's dear Son."" I reply, First, This does not reach the case, for the word which we render dear, is not here addressed to Christ at all, but only spoken of him. Therefore it is no precedent of, or justification of, our addressing it to him. I reply, Secondly, it is not the same word. Translated literally the sentence runs, not his dear Son, but the Son of his love, or his beloved Son. Therefore I still doubt whether any of the inspired writers ever addresses the word either to the Father or the Son. Hence I cannot but advise all lovers of the Bible, if they use the expression at all, to use it very sparingly, seeing the Scripture affords neither command nor precedent for it. And surely, "if any man speak," either in preaching or prayer, he "should speak as the oracles of God."

10. Do we not frequently use this unscriptural expression, of our blessed Lord in private conversation also? And are we not then especially apt to speak of him as a mere man? Particularly when we are describing his sufferings, how easily do we slide into this! We do well to be cautious in this matter. Here is not room for indulging a warm imagination. I have sometimes almost scrupled singing (even in the midst of my brother's excellent hymn,) "That dear, disfigured face," or that glowing

expression, "Drop thy warm blood upon my heart," lest it should seem to imply the forgetting I am speaking of "the Man that is my Fellow, saith the Lord of Hosts." Although he so "humbled himself as to take upon him the form of a servant, to be found in fashion as a man;" yea, though he was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross;" yet let it ever be remembered that he "thought it no robbery to be equal with God." And let our hearts still cry out, "Thou art exceeding glorious; thou art clothed with majesty and honour."

11. Perhaps some may be afraid lest the refraining from these warm expressions, or even gently checking them, should check the fervour of our devotion. It is very possible it may check, or even prevent, some kind of fervour which has passed for devotion. Possibly it may prevent loud shouting, horrid, unnatural screaming, repeating the same words twenty or thirty times, jumping two or three feet high, and throwing about the arms or legs, both of men and women, in a manner shocking not only to religion, but to common decency. But it never will check, much less prevent, true scriptural devotion. It will rather enliven the prayer that is properly addressed to him who, though he was very man, yet was very God; who, though he was born of a woman, to redeem man, yet was "God from everlasting and world without end."

12. And let it not be thought, that the knowing Christ after the flesh, the considering him as a mere man, and, in consequence using such language in public as well as private as is suitable to those conceptions of him, is a thing of a purely indifferent nature, or, however, of no great moment. On the contrary, the using this improper familiarity with God our Creator, our Redeemer, our Governor, is naturally productive of very evil fruits. And that not only in those that speak, but also to those that hear them. It has a direct tendency to abate that tender reverence due to the Lord their Governor. It insensibly damps That speechless awe which dares not move, And all the silent heaven of love It is impossible we should accustom ourselves to this odious and indecent familiarity with our Maker, while we preserve in our minds a lively sense of what is painted so strongly in those solemn lines: -- Dark with excessive bright his skirts appear, Yet dazzle heaven, that brightest seraphim Approach not, but with both wings veil their eyes.

13. Now, would not every sober Christian sincerely desire constantly to experience such a love to his Redeemer (seeing he is God as well as man) as is mixed with angelic fear? Is it not this very temper which good Dr. Watts so well expresses in those lines: Thy mercy never shall remove From men of heart sincere; Thou savest the souls whose humble love Is join'd with holy fear?

14. Not that I would recommend a cold, dead, formal prayer, out of which both love and desire, hope and fear, are excluded. Such seems to have been "the calm and undisturbed method of prayer," so strongly recommended by the late Bishop Hoadly, which occasioned for some years so violent a contest in the religious world. Is it not probable that the well-meaning bishop had met with some of the Mystics or Quietists (such as Madam Guion, or the Archbishop [Fenelon] of Cambray;) and that having no experience of these things he patched together a theory of his own as nearly resembling theirs as he could? But it is certain nothing is farther from apathy than real, scriptural devotion. It excites, exercises, and gives full scope to all our nobler passions; and excludes none but those that are wild, irrational, and beneath the dignity of man.

15. But how then can we account for this, that so many holy men, men of truly elevated affections, not excepting pious Kempis himself, have so frequently used this manner of speaking, these fondling kinds of expression; since we cannot doubt but they were truly pious men? It is allowed they were; but we do not allow that their judgment was equal to their piety. And hence it was that their really good affections a little exceeded the bounds of reason, and led them into a manner of speaking, not authorized by the oracles of God. And surely these are the true standard, both of our affections and our language. But did ever any of the holy men of old speak thus, either in the Old or in the New Testament? Did Daniel, the "man greatly beloved," ever thus express himself to God? Or did "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and who doubtless loved his Master with the strongest affection, leave us an example of addressing him thus even when he was on the verge of glory? Even then his concluding words were not fond, but solemn, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

16. The sum of all is, we are to "honour the Son even as we honour the

Father." We are to pay him the same worship as we pay to the Father. We are to love him with all our heart and soul; and to consecrate all we have and are, all we think, speak, and do, to the THREE-ONE GOD, Father, Son, and Spirit, world without end!

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