



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 138

States of Christ – Another way by which theologians speak of the work of Christ is what is known as the “states” of Christ – His humiliation and exaltation. These refer to Jesus’ states of existence as the God-man, looking at His relationship to His heavenly glory, privileges and honor; the use of His divine attributes; and His relationship to the law. These states are affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 8, Section 4), presenting a summary of the life and work of Christ (1 Peter 1:10-11).

Humiliation of Christ – Reformed theology identifies five stages in the humiliation of Christ – His incarnation, suffering, death, burial, and descent into hades. The key passage on this is Philippians 2:6-8.

Incarnation – Christ’s humiliation began with His incarnation. At a particular point in history the Son of God, equal with the Father and Spirit, did not consider His equality with God as something to gain or grasp, but emptied Himself (doctrine of kenosis) and assumed a human nature. Contrary to what some teach, this does not mean that Christ emptied Himself of His divine nature and attributes; for then He would have ceased being God (John 5:18; Colossians 1:15, 19; Hebrews 1:3). Rather, this means that Jesus set aside His heavenly glory, honor, and authority, and was born into a state of poverty and obscurity (Matthew 2:6; Luke 2:7; 9:58). He also relinquished the voluntary display and use of His divine attributes. Christ set aside His exalted status and became a bond-servant, fully submitting to the plan and will of the Father (Isaiah 42:1; John 4:34; 6:38; 17:4-5; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Hebrews 10:5-9).

Suffering – Jesus further humbled Himself by being born under the law (Galatians 4:4-5). The one who was the supreme Lawgiver, placed Himself under the law; first with respect to its obligation unto obedience, and secondly with respect to the curse of the law against sin. He did this voluntarily and vicariously to redeem His people (1 Corinthians 15:21; Galatians 3:13). Christ’s sufferings began at His incarnation, and continued and grew in intensity throughout His life (Isaiah 53:3). He suffered in body and spirit; He suffered due to His human limitations; He suffered at the hands of sinners, enemies, demons and Satan. These were all judicially orchestrated and caused by God as penal sufferings.

Death – Christ’s humiliation continued even further, as His supreme act of obedience was His death. His sufferings reached their full realization as He faced one of the cruelest, most painful and shameful punishments possible, dying on the cross. Though Christ suffered such intense torment, the uttermost point of His sufferings was the spiritual sufferings inflicted by His Father, who forsook Him on the cross, pouring out the curse of His wrath upon Him for the sins of His people (Matthew 27:45-46).

Burial – Jesus’ humiliation continued further with His burial. As part of the curse on man after the fall, in Genesis 3:19 God told Adam that after death man’s physical body was to return to dust, undergoing corruption (Psalm 16:10; Acts 13:34-37), itself a punishment for sin and a further degree of humiliation. Thus Christ’s humiliation continued with the burial of His body into the grave, into a state of corruption; though the Bible teaches that His body was kept from any corruption (Acts 2:27, 31).

Descent into hades – The words “He descended into hell (hades)” come from the Apostles’ Creed and refer to the final stage in Christ’s humiliation. As seen in previous studies, all such descriptions seem to be further elaborations of the general notion of Christ’s suffering, death and burial, rather than a further stage in His humiliation. All such views attempt to convey the notion that Christ stooped to the lowest and deepest level of humiliation, as He temporarily remained under the state of death.

Such humiliation manifest Christ’s immeasurable love and grace towards us, who came into this world as a man, as a servant, placing Himself under the law, to rescue us from eternal damnation. This is truly and unfathomably a humiliation of the utmost degree, for which we will praise Him in all eternity.