

The Larger Catechism

Questions 46-48

46. **Q. What was the estate of Christ's humiliation?**
A. The estate of Christ's humiliation was that low condition, wherein he for our sakes, emptying himself of his glory, took upon him the form of a servant, in his conception and birth, life, death, and after his death, until his resurrection.[186]
47. **Q. How did Christ humble himself in his conception and birth?**
A. Christ humbled himself in his conception and birth, in that, being from all eternity the Son of God, in the bosom of the Father, he was pleased in the fulness of time to become the son of man, made of a woman of low estate, and to be born of her; with divers circumstances of more than ordinary abasement.[187]
48. **Q. How did Christ humble himself in his life?**
A. Christ humbled himself in his life, by subjecting himself to the law,[188] which he perfectly fulfilled;[189] and by conflicting with the indignities of the world,[190] temptations of Satan,[191] and infirmities in his flesh, whether common to the nature of man, or particularly accompanying that his low condition.[192]

Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[186] **Philippians 2:6-8.** 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. **Luke 1:31.** And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. **2 Corinthians 8:9.** For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. **Acts 2:24.** Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. [187] **John 1:14, 18.** And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.... No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. **Galatians 4:4.** But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law. **Luke 2:7.** And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. [188] **Galatians 4:4.** But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law. [189] **Matthew 5:17.** Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. **Romans 5:19.** For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. [190] **Psalm 22:6.** But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. **Hebrews 12:2-3.** Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. [191] **Matthew 4:1-12.** Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil, etc. **Luke 4:13.** And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season. [192] **Hebrews 2:17-18.** Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. **Hebrews 4:15.** For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. **Isaiah 52:13-14.** Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.

About Humiliation

Our catechisms utilize traditional theological language to describe the various stages of Christ's life and ministry. His entire life on earth before the

resurrection is considered a part of his estate of *humiliation*. Questions 46-48 comprise his life on earth. Questions 49-50 address the humiliation involved in Jesus' death. The stage after his death is denoted as the estate of *exaltation*. This distinction was introduced in question 42.

The term "humiliation" means that Christ humbled Himself when he became a man. The entire incarnation was an act of humility on the part of our Lord. He who is God became a man without ceasing to be God. This was not a lateral move but an act of extreme condescension. So the study will depict the various stages of this humiliation. We must ponder all that our Lord underwent in our behalf so that our hearts may be gripped by His graciousness.

The Estate of Humiliation

Question 46 states that the entire life was one of humiliation: his conception, birth, life, death, and the moments after his death. Philippians 2:5ff. states that Jesus "humbled Himself" when he became a man and gave himself up to die. Jesus made himself nothing "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (v. 7). To become incarnate was an act of humiliation. That is the whole point of the Philippians passage, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is your in Christ Jesus..." (v. 5) Jesus' birth, life and death are all expressions of the Jesus' humility and the entire period is an act of humiliation.

However, some have asked, "Is it true that the incarnation itself an act of humiliation?" Does this question matter? If we do not emphasize this element, we open up ourselves to all manner of follies. Men have grown discontent with the Biblical teaching and have speculated and gone beyond this simple point.

J. A. Dornier and others did not believe that incarnation was per se an act of humiliation. In nineteenth century, some have suggested that the incarnation was a necessity in creation and that sin was not a determining factor. "This is the truth, that the incarnation of God in Christ had not its sole ground in sin..."¹ B. F. Westcott said that "the incarnation was independent of the Fall."² The incarnation was "the pre-destined climax of creation, independently of human sin."³ What this meant for many of these writers is that the incarnation was the inevitable process of history, i.e., it was going to happen anyway. In addition, Christ's incarnation was cosmic in the sense that Christ was infused into history and emerging in the historical process (as it were).⁴ A philosophical view of history and nature under girds these aberrant views.

There is also a theological explanation for this position which Herman Bavinck provides.⁵ Under the influence of the Lutheran doctrine of the

¹ J. A. Dornier, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, translated by William Lindsay Alexander, Div. 2, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1863), 236.

² Cited in Michael Ovey, "Is Christ's Incarnation the Consummation of the Cosmic Process?" in *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation*, ed. David Peterson (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003), 6.

³ J. R. Illingworth, "The Incarnation in relation to Development," in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, ed. Charles Gore (London: John Murray, 1904), 136.

⁴ Of course this is not all that different from Hegel's theory of the *Geist* (Spirit) and his dialectic philosophy.

⁵ Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:277ff.

communication of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*),⁶ theologians surmised that human beings are capable of divine nature. Up to this time, theologians rightly argued that the finite is not capable of the infinite. But once old principle changed, many began to argue that the incarnation must have been necessary for men. The incarnation was seen as God's self-communication and man's susceptibility to God. Sin was strictly secondary to the incarnation.⁷ Let me illustrate this. It is like a young college student saying that his mother was intending to visit him in college in the Fall but since he fell ill, she arrived sooner than expected. She did not come because of the illness since she already planned to come but the illness ended up playing an important role for her arrival though that was not the original intention. Nineteenth-century divines said that God was going to become incarnate anyway but our sin made it that much more necessary. Like the mother coming to visit her sick son, so the Lord's incarnation also helped to heal and rescue us but that was not the original or necessary condition.

What therefore is the significance of all this? If the incarnation was necessary from the start, then it is no longer an act of humiliation but a necessity on the part of God. In other words, the incarnation is what is owed to man and not what was graciously given. But to step down from glory to become a man was no small fete. Paul says, "though he was in the form of God...made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6). The entire act of becoming a man was a condescending act on the part of the second person of the Trinity. It was voluntary; it was an act of humility; it was an act of grace.

In addition, if the incarnation is seen as the inevitable outcome and does not have in view man's sin, then Christ's death is entirely unnecessary. If the incarnation itself could save then Jesus' birth saves and not his death.⁸

The catechism adds: *emptying himself of his glory, took upon him the form of a servant...* As the hymn says, "O sacred head, what glory, What bliss till now was thine!" We rejoice on account of Jesus' birth not because he inevitably came as the climax of a historical process but because he condescended to becoming a man to redeem us.

Question 47 develops this more fully: "Christ humbled himself in his conception and birth, in that, being from all eternity the Son of God, in the bosom of the Father, he was pleased in the fulness of time to become the son of man..." The stark contrast is delineated. Christ "from all eternity the Son of God, in the bosom of the Father...[became] the son of man." We can only imagine the blessedness and the sheer bliss of His divine existence. Quite telling is his prayer (the High Priestly Prayer) in John 17:5, "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." The Son yearned to return to the glory He had with the Father "before the world

⁶ This doctrine emerged in debates over the Lord's Supper. Reformed divines argued that the elements could not really become Christ's flesh and blood because Jesus' body cannot be present in every celebration of the Lord's Supper. Lutherans responded by teaching that Christ's divine nature communicated some of His divine properties to his human nature which enabled every church to have Christ's body and blood during communion.

⁷ Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:278-9.

⁸ This is brought out in David Wells's critique of Schillebeeckx, see *The Person of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 169.

existed." Jesus was acutely aware of the glory He left behind. He "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" or (KJV) — He "thought it not robbery to be equal with God." This is well paraphrased by Donald Macleod, "Although He was in the form of God He did not cling to being equal with God but made Himself of no reputation."⁹ Though Jesus yearned for it while on earth, He gladly set it aside and made Himself nothing.

Were we to see a king or president set aside his royal or presidential prerogatives and labor in the ghettos without having access to or utilizing his prerogatives, we would find that to be an extreme act of humility. Rarely is something like that done. Could you see one of the princes of Saudi Arabia lay aside his powers and riches and live and labor among the common people? It just does not happen. But wonder of wonders, our Lord Jesus did not cling to His prerogatives as God but instead set them aside to dwell among us and to redeem us.

For Our Sakes

The famous ecumenical creed says that the incarnation was "for us and for our salvation" (Nicene Creed, 325 A.D.). Our catechism says the same — *wherein he for our sakes*. The estate of humiliation into which our Lord entered was for our sake. Paul says in 2 Cor. 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, *yet for your sake* He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." The angel said to the shepherds, "For *unto you* (ὑμῖν) is born this day..." (Lk. 2:11). Jesus was born for us. Remember Phil. 2:5, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." What is that mind? Verse 4 explains, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Christ came for our interests, for our benefit, for our salvation.

Conception and Birth

Furthermore, the catechism states that it was *that low condition...the form of a servant*. Jesus was declared a King at birth (Mt. 2:2, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?") but born as a servant, in a low condition. He was not born into wealth, power, or prestige. He was born into a low condition.

Jesus was *made of a woman of low estate and born of her*. Even the family into which he was born was of low estate. Mary did not possess great power or hold a regal position. She was simply a young lady, most likely a teenager. It is the sacrifice they offered at the Temple (Luke 2:24) which reveals Mary's low estate. Mary and Joseph presented their son with a sacrifice, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Lk. 2:24). The reference is to Lev. 12:8: "And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean." She could not afford a lamb which clearly suggests her poverty. (For the phrase "born of her" see our study LC #37.)

Lastly, we read *with divers* [that is, manifold, numerous, etc.] *circumstances of more than ordinary abasement*. Regarding the conditions of his birth, we are told a few things in Lk. 2:7: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped

⁹ Donald Macleod, *The Humiliated and Exalted Lord* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 15.

him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." The birth may have been in a stable, in the open area or in a humble house. Remember Jephthah's vow (Judges 11)—many lived with their animals under the same roof. Early church history suggested that it was a cave (Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* 78). Since Jesus was kept in a feeding trough, it suggests that he was actually in an animal room. The word for "inn" (καταλύματι) is not our typical formal inns. Their inns were two stories, the first had animals and the second took in travelers. The word for that kind of an inn is used in this verse. "On this reading it is best to think of an overcrowded Palestinian peasant home: a single-roomed home with an animal stall under the same roof (frequently to be distinguished from the family living-quarters only by the raised platform floor of the latter)."¹⁰ Either way, it was of humble circumstances. The "swaddling cloths" were strips of clothes bound around the child to keep the limbs straight. We must remember that the manger and the swaddling clothes were not accidental; they also served as identifying markers for the shepherds (Luke 2:12).

Humiliation During His Life

The answer to question 48 lists several ways in which our Lord's life demonstrated humiliation. We have seen that the incarnation and the circumstances surrounding his birth clearly depicted his estate of humiliation but he fared no better in the rest of his life on earth. The Shorter Catechism says that his humiliation consists in "undergoing the miseries of this life." That is exactly what He did.

The first thing we read is that our Lord humbled himself *by subjecting himself to the law, which he perfectly fulfilled*. Gal. 4:4 states that Christ was "born of woman, born under the law..." In order to save us, our Lord had to come under the demands of the law in order to redeem those under the sentence of God's holy law. In coming under the law, He acted as our representative rendering perfect obedience. The law demanded perfect obedience. Christ complied. The law demanded justice for infraction. Our Lord complied.

The lawgiver submitted himself under the law. He was "by nature above the law. By nature he was not under the law, but the Author of the law. In becoming man, he laid aside his heavenly glory, and took the form of a servant, under the law." (Vos, 108) For this reason, coming under the law was an act of humiliation.

What parts of the law Christ obey? He obeyed every part of the law that pertained to Him. Even his circumcision was an expression of that obedience (though it happened through the obedience of his parents) as well as His baptism.

His circumcision (Luke 2:21) served as proof that he was truly human and the offspring of Abraham, that as such he was a member of the community of our sin and had to receive the sign signifying the cutting off of our sin...His baptism, which as the Holy One he needed for himself no more than he did circumcision (Matt. 2:14), took place...because it was fitting for him as mediator 'to fulfill our righteousness,' to satisfy all the

¹⁰ John Nolland, *Luke, 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35A (Waco, TX: Word, 1989).

claims of the law, and to accomplish all the righteousness required of him by the law...¹¹

Christ was also subject to the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..."). "As he obeyed what the law enjoined, so he suffered what it threatened as a punishment due to us for sin."¹²

The burdens of the law cannot be overlooked (cf. Acts 15:10). Though our Lord delighted to do the will of the Father who sent Him, we must also remember the demands of the law were heavy. So it cannot be said that Jesus knew nothing of the heavy burden of the law. Since He fulfilled all its demands, it becomes clear that if we have him by faith, then it would be the height of folly to trust in our own obedience to the law.

Our Lord also faced humiliation *by conflicting with the indignities of the world*. This way of stating it may not immediately make sense. The divines were simply saying that our Lord did not live in a bubble, protected from all the wickedness of the world. He may have had loving parents and good education (we can only surmise) but the world was not kind to him. He came unto His own and it did not receive Him (John 1:11). He made the world but the world did not know him (Jn. 1:10). Herod sought his death (Mt. 2:13): "No sooner was he born, and the thing made known to the world, but that his life was sought for by the malice and craft of Herod."¹³ He was persecuted and hated by the world (Jn. 15:18, 20).

The other phrase listed in the catechism is the *temptations of Satan*. None of us have faced the full force of Satan's temptations as our Lord did. He overcame the adversary: "and he even humbled himself so far as to endure the assaults and temptations of the devil. He did all this, that he might extract the sting from the afflictions of his people, and know, even by experience, how to sympathize with them."¹⁴ Satan did not appeal to a sinful tendency in our Lord when he tempted Him. The prince of this world had no claim on our Lord, that is, there was no lust or sinful tendency in Jesus to draw out: "for the rule of this world is coming. He has no claim on me..." (Jn. 14:30). Then what did Satan work on?

Part of the answer is that although Jesus had no vices he did have sinless human weaknesses. He could be tempted (and clearly was) through hunger, through the fear of pain and through love for a friend. It is not a mark of fallenness to feel any of these, and yet each of them could generate strong pressure to deviate from the path prescribed for him.¹⁵

¹¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:408.

¹² Ridgeley, 1:581.

¹³ Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity consisting of ten books, wherein the fundamentals and main grounds of religion are opened ...* (London: Printed by A.M. for William Lee ... 1662), 594.

¹⁴ Ashbel Green, *Lectures on the Shorter Catechism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work 1841), 1:350.

¹⁵ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 226. See also our study of LC #37 where we also deal with another element of Christ's temptations.

Remember, because he was sinless, he dealt with more of the powers of Satan's temptation. The Devil did not give a small dose of his tempting powers; he unleashed it all. "Precisely because he did not yield easily and was not, like us, an easy prey, the devil had to deploy all his wiles and use all his resources. The very fact that he was invincible meant that he endured the full force of temptation's ferocity, until hell slunk away, defeated and exhausted. Against us, a little temptation suffices. Against him, Satan found himself forced to push himself to his limits."¹⁶ We tend to think it was easy for our Lord but none of us have faced the full power of Satan's devices.¹⁷ Jesus did not wear Teflon; he had a weak human nature which was without sin. "He stood only by the power of the Holy Spirit: not by some effortless, Samson-like omnipotence, but by the power of a relationship with God which was moral and personal and which meant that he was invincible in faith, hope and love."¹⁸ Jesus was not shielded from the malice of Satan; He knew far more of its heat and power than you and I can imagine. That was part of the humiliation he underwent so that it could be said, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15)

The last clause of the catechism pretty much includes everything else: *and infirmities in his flesh, whether common to the nature of man, or particularly accompanying that his low condition*. This last phrase may be difficult to ascertain. For example, some have argued that Christ was never sick.¹⁹ We cannot be certain about that. But we know that he was weary (Jn. 4:6), that he hungered (Mt. 4:2), wept (Jn. 11:35), sighed (Mk. 7:34), was sorrowful though interestingly, it is never said that he smiled or laughed. He was a man acquainted with grief. But there is still more to consider.

The indignities of this life must be studied in the light of the person of our Lord. Our experience is ordinary but for our Lord, taking our common lot is an act of infinite humility on his part. Remember, Jesus is God but He voluntarily took on our nature and labored as an ordinary man. Edward Leigh beautifully captures this aspect of our Lord's humiliation:

He that was sufficient to have governed all the monarchies under the sun, to have ruled the whole world, to have led mighty armies, and to have read a Lecture of Wisdom to angels and archangels, he was servant to his father [i.e. Joseph], a carpenter, and spent his time obscurely in a manual occupation, handling the mallet and chisel, and doing the work of a mean laborer, burying as it were all his Divine Excellencies under the thick and

¹⁶ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 227-228.

¹⁷ For example, a newborn lion cub can resist a hyena but for a short while before he is destroyed. Little effort is required of the hyena before he conquers the baby cub. Greater effort is required of the hyena before he can (possibly) subdue a lion cub six months old. However, how much effort would be required of the hyena before he could destroy a full grown lion? Well, it would take everything the hyena had though it would still prove ineffectual. The hyena would have to exert all its malignant wrath against a full grown lion if it wanted to defeat it. The older lion would have felt the full power of the hyena.

¹⁸ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 226.

¹⁹ H. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 401: "No, this does not mean that He was subject...even to the common sicknesses of mankind."

dark cloud of a poor trade, and not showing forth so much as a glimpse of his heavenly glory, but that at one time at the age of twelve years he peeped a little out of the cloud, when at a feast in Jerusalem he disputed with Doctors, to the astonishment of all the hearers and beholders. He was cast down from all honor, and made to inherit contempt and baseness.²⁰

So, if asked how living an ordinary life was considered an act of humiliation, we can say, "Because the indignities of the world were contrary to his holy nature, and because they were contrary to the peace, order, and reverence of heaven, whence he had come." (Vos, 108)²¹ Remember 2 Peter 2:7. Lot was "great distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)." If Lot's soul suffered on account of what he witnessed, how much more did our Lord? Our Lord was more innocent and purer than any man. Or as Hoeksema said, "Add to this that He suffered the contradiction of sinners against Himself, that He dwelt among men that love darkness rather than light, with whose enmity against God and against one another He came into daily contact..."²² We might feel somewhat comfortable with the ways of this world (which says something about us) but our Lord knew what was in man and His pure soul could not embrace the wickedness that prevailed on earth and we can only imagine how much it pained the Holy One of Israel.

²⁰ Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity*, 594.

²¹ Leigh again provides an insight that aptly illustrates this point: "Let a virtuous and honorable matron be shut up so many days together in one room with a base and loathsome adulterer, there to suffer all his impure solicitations, will not her misery be so much the greater in sense by how much her self is more shamefaced and honest, and more abhorrent from all such impurity? So it was with the soul of our blessed Savior." (p. 594)

²² H. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 401.