

THE PERSON OF CHRIST: THE KENOTIC THEORY

by

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In the nineteenth century, the rise of new scientific theories, including the biological theory of evolution as well as the rapid development of biblical criticism, contributed to the formation of some new viewpoints concerning the person of Christ. Usually these interpretations were intended to make the miracle of the incarnation more reasonable or more acceptable to the scientific mind of that century. One theory, which received widespread emphasis and acceptance in the late nineteenth century and whose influence is still felt today, is the so-called "kenotic theory" of the person of Christ. The name "kenotic" comes from the Greek word *kenoo*, used by Paul in Philippians 2:7 to describe the action by which Christ "emptied" himself, taking the form of a servant, when he came incarnate into the world. In order to understand the tremendous importance of this theory and its widespread influence even today, it will be necessary to survey briefly the historical background and then concentrate upon a biblical exposition of those passages which have been crucial in the discussion of kenosis.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

Apparently, Theodotion¹ is the first to use "kenosis" as a theological term in his translation of Isaiah 34:11. However, both Gregory Nazianzus² and Cyril of Alexandria³ use the term in the technical theological sense to express the action in Philippians 2:7 by which Christ "emptied himself."⁴ The Latin Vulgate renders this phrase "*semetipsum exinanivit*,"⁵ while Terullian used the phrase "*exhausit semetipsum*"⁶ in his *Adversus Marcionem*. The real point of concern for each of these thinkers, as for us today, was this: "Of what did Christ empty himself?"

A secondary question for these early Christian writers, and a question which came to the fore in the Reformation period, was this: "Exactly *who* is the subject of the verb *emptied*?" Is it the pre-existent Son of God, who by sovereign choice divested himself of some of the prerogatives of deity in order to become incarnate; or is it the incarnate Son, who, in the days of his flesh, was involved in a kind of repeated or continual emptying of himself in order to fulfill his mission as

1 Second century.

2 Fourth century.

3 Fifth century.

4 Greek, *heauton hekenosen*.

5 He emptied, i.e., *desolated*, his very self.

6 He exhausted, i.e., *completely emptied*, his very self.

the Servant of God and submit even to death on the cross?

The Synod of Antioch (341 A.D.) had spoken suggestively and pointedly on both questions with these words: *kenos as heauton apo tou einai isa Theo* (emptying himself of "the being equal with God"). It was stoutly maintained that Christ was fully divine, having given up temporarily not some portion of his deity, but rather the status or position at the right hand of God, which was his by right, in order to become the suffering Servant.

Medieval theology was concerned with the attempt to define more explicitly what attributes of deity were laid aside in the incarnation, or what actual limitations were experienced by Christ *during* his incarnate life. During the Reformation period the discussion centered upon the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Much of this discussion was rather barren, because it often degenerated into an exercise in imagining certain characteristics of deity which might be laid aside without seriously impairing essential deity.

The discussion moved on into the seventeenth century with bold assertions that Christ certainly was, according to the Scriptures, less than divine. Some tried to soften this heresy by maintaining that Jesus actually possessed the divine powers all the time, but kept them under a conscious restraint. Others supposed that he actually had the divine attributes in all their fullness, but that he was unaware of the extent of these powers and therefore lived his incarnate life within the limits imposed upon any creature.

With such an unfortunate pilgrimage throughout Christian history, the whole idea of kenosis might have been summarily dropped as a dangerous and confusing concept for Christian faith, except for something which happened in the nineteenth century. This great century of scientific discovery, historical investigation, and biblical criticism brought about a rediscovery of the real humanity of Jesus. Against the background of the Darwinian theory of evolution, the Graf-Wellhausen school of Old Testament history, and the radical Tübingen school of New Testament criticism, a group of English theologians fought valiantly to save the central dogma of the unique divine humanity of Jesus Christ. Bishop Gore, along with many other scholars, published the symposium on incarnation theology entitled *Lux Mundi*, which went through twelve editions between 1889 and 1891. This book did much to popularize the concept of the divine kenosis. This zenith of the doctrine in the whole history of Christian thought can best be understood by turning to the biblical evidence which they are attempting to expound.

THE BIBLICAL DATA

The Bible certainly does not elaborate a doctrine of kenosis, but it does set forth the data with which serious biblical theologians have developed the doctrine of the divine "self-emptying." Basic elements of the scriptural evidence are easily categorized:

- (1) The divine relationship or unity between Father and Son.⁷
- (2) Closely connected with this explicit claim of unity with God is the expression of limitations upon this relationship.⁸

⁷ John 1:1-18, 10:30; Heb. 1:1-4.

⁸ John 5:19, 30; Matt. 27:46.

(3) Also, there are specific statements of Jesus in regard to limitations upon his knowledge and pre-incarnate glory.⁹

(4) The emphasis of New Testament writers upon the real humanity of Jesus can be seen in the account of his temptations,¹⁰ his growth and development in wisdom and stature,¹¹ and his learning by the suffering which he endured.¹²

(5) Finally, the most important passage of all, the one which actually contains the term which carries the central idea of the doctrine of kenosis, is Philippians 2:5-11. This is further amplified by the Pauline statement in II Corinthians 8:9, which Albrecht Oepke calls "the best commentary" on the Philippian passage.

THE CENTRAL PASSAGE: PHILIPPIANS 2:7

In the Philippian context, Paul is urging the Christians to practice unselfishness and humility. In order to illustrate this, he turns to the supreme example: "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."¹³

While most commentators have agreed on the subject of the verb "emptied," that is, the pre-incarnate Christ who emptied Himself, they have had differing ideas as to *what* he emptied or *of what* he divested himself. In 1880, H. Crosby set forth the idea in *The True Humanity of Christ* that during the whole period of the incarnation, although the essential deity must have necessarily existed without interruption, yet his conscious and active deity was entirely quiescent. Only at the Resurrection did he reassume the full power of deity.

Bishop Charles Gore in *The Incarnation*, 1891, maintained that the Son of God voluntarily surrendered or abandoned certain natural prerogatives of external attributes of God, while he yet retained the essential, ethical attributes of truth, holiness, and love. A similar idea was advanced by A.M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Thought*, 1893, and by a host of others in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Other kenotic theologians carried the speculation to even more extreme lengths. W.N. Clarke in *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 1898, suggested that on the basis of an original kinship between God and man, God became man in the incarnation by self-limitation. Henry Van Dyke in *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt: The Human Life of God*, 1897, also sought to make the incarnation more acceptable to human reason upon the assumption of an original kinship between God and man. This would suggest that the incarnation was the most perfectly natural thing in the world, offering no affront to human reason. Modern psychology was called to the aid of the theory by R.H. Hutton in *Essays Theological and Literary*. He recalled the capacity of the conscious mind to deposit a portion of its contents in the subconscious mind, suggesting a pattern by which conscious deity may have become unconscious deity.

9 Mark 13:22; John 17:5.

10 Matt. 4:1-11.

11 Luke 2:52.

12 Heb. 4:15; 5:7, 8.

13 Phil. 2:5-7.

Perhaps the most constructive suggestion in all this period of kenotic speculation came from D.W. Simon in his *Reconciliation through Incarnation*, 1898, which states: in the creation God certainly limited Himself with reference to future choices and deeds of free moral beings. If men have any true freedom, it must be because of divine self-limitation which chooses not to determine every action of His creatures but, rather, gives them the responsibility of making real choices. The incarnation then becomes a further and supreme example by which God limits Himself in relation to His creation--He actually comes into His creation, accepting the limits of creaturehood.

EVALUATION

In all this theological speculation, which often rambled far from the Pauline passage, the commentators seemed compelled by some hidden force to interpret the passage only in one way: What did Christ give up? Of what was he divested when he became incarnate? The Greek scholar William Hersey Davis cut through this Gordian knot by suggesting in his lectures that Paul is not talking about what the Son gave up, but what he gained; not the royal status he forsook, but the role of the Servant which he chose. This is certainly the point of emphasis Paul is making to the Philippians; they are to have the mind of the Servant of God; they are to be filled with humility rather than lording it over one another. Davis even went so far as to suggest that *kenoo* should be understood in the sense of emptying the contents of one vessel into another vessel, so that it was a matter of pouring the same content into another form: Christ emptied himself (i.e., poured himself) into the form of a servant. Whether Greek grammar requires, or even permits, this interpretation, it is clear that the context emphasizes the change of *form*, not the change of *content*, of the Divine Being. He did not give up deity, but he gained humanity. There was no attribution of the divine nature in the incarnation; his life incarnate, containing the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was offered for man's redemption.

Although the main thrust of the kenotic theory led into some barren speculation, it is well to note positive contributions which the theory has made to the doctrine of the incarnation:

- (1) Kenosis does emphasize the divine initiative. With the few exceptions indicated, the kenotic theologians have proclaimed a salvation which comes from above rather than from below, from God rather than man.
- (2) Kenosis emphasizes the free, voluntary act of the pre-incarnate Son in choosing the path of humiliation. Not of necessity, but out of the sovereign choice of love, he gave up heaven's glory for the way of the cross.
- (3) Closely related to this is the emphasis laid upon Christ's conscious restraint in the use of divine powers during the days of his flesh. Surely, as the Gospels testify, Jesus had powers upon which he could have called to deliver himself, but he refused to use them. We must admit that this continuing voluntary element is of supreme importance in our understanding of the person of Christ. Without it, Christ would become the helpless victim of the incarnation, once the original decision was made; and the significant, repeated, voluntary submission of Christ to suffering and death would be destroyed.
- (4) Kenosis emphatically preserved the doctrine of the real humanity of Christ against all Docetic attempts to undermine it. The basic motivation behind most kenotic interpretations is clearly to

provide a pattern of thought in which one must take seriously the actual lowliness, condescension, and humiliation of Christ.

The most serious criticism of the kenotic theory is the one which may be leveled at Arius, Eutyches, Nestorius, and the long line of theologians who were rejected by the main stream of the Christian community: all of these made the fatal mistake of trying to rationalize the supreme miracle of the incarnation, to make intelligible by analogy and illustration that event which is absolutely without parallel, the coming of the Divine Being into the world as a real man.

Closely connected with this criticism is another: kenotic thinkers often fell into the hopelessly negative position of trying to define the divine nature in less and less essential terms, until they might at last squeeze the residue into a human personality with no strain at all.

While we can be grateful for the kenotic defense of the humanity of Christ, we can be just as thankful that we are not required to defend this doctrine on such misleading grounds. We can proclaim the humanity he gained, without attempting to define certain aspects of deity which he could have given up; we can certainly bow before that throne to which he was exalted by the way of the cross.

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