

THE EMPTYING OF CHRIST:
AN EXAMINATION OF KENOSIS IN CHRISTOLOGY

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Introduction

Christology is an integral part of Christian doctrine. Not only that, Christology must also be a central component to Christian living. The *kenosis* not only establishes the divinity and humanity of Christ but it also guides a believer in living for and like Christ.

Semantic Range of Kenosis

The term *kenosis* comes from the Greek verb κενόω (*kenoō*), which, at its most basic level, carries the idea of “to empty.”¹ Other expressions within its range of meaning are: “to divest one’s self of one’s prerogatives,” “abase one’s self,” “to deprive *a thing* of its proper functions,” “to show to be without foundation,” “falsify.”² Kenosis Christology is based on a conjugation of κενόω found in Philippians 2:7. The verb is often translated by moderately literal translations as “made . . . of no reputation” (KJV and NKJV);³ these apparently see the meaning as abasement. Translations that hold to a stricter literal translation philosophy follow the more customary definition and translate κενόω as “emptied” (NASB) or “did empty” (Young’s Literal Translation). The New Living Translation, based on a thought-for-thought method, follows after the idea of divestment: “gave up . . . divine privileges.” Most other modern English translations are close to one of these three renderings.

As evidenced by the variations among translations, each translation group employs different aspects of the semantic range in communicating the idea of *kenosis*. The lexical

1. Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 236.

2. Ibid.

3. All Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1982) unless otherwise indicated.

possibilities of kenosis are not sufficient to help one to understand how Paul uses the term—nonetheless, these definitions supply a starting point for further direction and exploration.

Kenosis in Christology

Christology is the study of the work and the person of Christ. Such a study seeks “to interpret the significance and meaning of Jesus Christ for our own times in light of biblical and historical developments.”⁴ To do this, the believer investigates the person of Christ. Inevitable in Christological study is reflection on the incarnation of the Son. Inquiry into this realm leads one to think upon the two natures of Christ and their relationship to each other.

The kenosis is about the incarnation event. It is about the person who existed in God’s form and emptied himself (Philippians 2:6-7). The emptying of Christ is the heart of the incarnation, speaks to the subject of the dual nature of Christ, and is the contribution of the kenosis to Christology.

Historical Interpretations

Systematic Christological formulations based on the kenosis developed late in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth. Various ways in which the kenosis has been articulated have arisen as theologians and thinkers began to think on the kenosis and further explore it. Some have postulated a kenotic theory on a biblical basis. Others have sought to understand kenosis predominantly from a philosophical approach, with the two natures of Christ as a starting point.

In an exegetical study on Philippians 2:5-11, Ralph R. Martin describes various perspectives on the kenosis verse. These Christologies are expressions of the kenosis from a

4. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 9.

plethora of angles: kenosis as a vacating of God's form (Gore), as the poverty of Christ (Dibelius), in terms of sociology (Bornhäuser and Maurenbrecher), as the result of a decision prior to creation (Michaelis), as a surrender to demonic powers (Käsemann), as a statement about the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Robinson and Jeremias), and as a characterization of the one called to suffering because of righteousness (Schweizer).⁵ Each of these understandings is established largely on the content of 2:7.

Erickson's sizeable volume on Christology has a section devoted to kenotic Christology. In it, he presents a synopsis of the more philosophical formulations of theologians Thomasius and Forsyth. For Thomasius, who is said to have developed the "classical formulation" of kenotic Christology,⁶ central to expounding the kenosis was the divine attributes of God. Thomasius attempted to deal with the logical issue of Jesus being both finite and infinite. In Erickson's words, Thomasius proposed that

each of the divine attributes can be classified as either immanent or relation. The immanent attributes of God are those which he has in and of himself, independent of the creation. . . . They are basic or essential attributes, those which make God what he is. The relationship attributes, on the other hand, have to do with God's relationship to the creation. They are not essential to God in himself. . . . What the Logos did in becoming incarnate was to give up the relational attributes, while retaining the immanent attributes.⁷

The emptying, then, in Thomasius' view, was a relinquishing of attributes known by *omni-* prefix.⁸

5. Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 169-194. Martin also gives an ample critique of each exposition.

6. *Ibid.*, 67.

7. Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 82.

8. *Ibid.*

Forsyth, on the other hand, rejected Thomasius' theory that the Logos had given up any attributes.⁹ Forsyth's focus was directed toward Christ's divine and human consciousness. The divine consciousness was intentionally limited in becoming human. However, Forsyth argues that "self-limitation is not a diminution of divinity," an idea he appropriated from Thomasius.¹⁰

A more recent development in kenotic idea comes from philosopher Stephen T. Davis. The kenotic form Davis propounds is similar to that of Thomasius. Like the theologian, Davis sees two sets of attributes. He calls them "essential" and "accidental";¹¹ they seem to parallel "essential" and "relational" of the older model. But unlike Thomasius, who seems to categorize only the divine attributes, Davis also differentiates between the essential and accidental attributes of humanity.¹² Out of this differentiation, Davis posits concepts he calls *truly human*, *merely human*, *truly divine*, *divine simpliciter*.¹³ *Simpliciter* is qualified as "being divine without being human" and has certain essential properties such as the *omni*- attributes, while *merely human* is "being human without being divine"—that is, contingency, finiteness, and non-*omni*- qualities are essential to it.¹⁴ Applied to the incarnation,

God gave up any divine attributes inconsistent with being human, which would necessarily be accidental, while he retained all essential divine attributes. Similarly, he did not assume any human attributes inconsistent with being divine, which would

9. Ibid., 85.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 553-554.

12. Ibid., 554.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

necessarily be accidental, while he assumed those attributes which are essential to humanity.¹⁵

Davis's endeavor is an admirable one and will direct future work in an apparently promising direction. Erickson, however, points out that problems exist in distinguishing between true divinity and divine simpliciter.¹⁶

All the historical kenotic statements mentioned are commendable. Expositors and theologians have sought to produce coherent declarations about the dual nature of Christ, from either a textual view or a philosophical one. The problem, however, as Erickson has observed, is the historical interpretations have neglected "intensive literal exegesis" and as a result have failed "to extract from the text an explanation of what 'emptying himself' means, in what it consisted, and how it was accomplished."¹⁷

Interpretive Considerations

The verse in which κενόω is found occurs in the larger segment of Philippians 2:5-11. The way a particular word is used is determined with more than a few considerations. Ponder the large range of meaning of many words. How a particular word is to be understood is influenced by its grammatical relation to other words, form of communication, tone, and cultural and literary contexts, just to name a few factors. In his classic work on biblical exegesis, D. A. Carson closes the chapter on word-study fallacies with a stress on context and its significance. He writes that "the heart of the issue is that semantics, meaning, is more than meaning of words.

15. Ibid., 554-555.

16. Ibid., 555. Some have not some of the philosophical problems with Davis's approach. For a philosophical rebuttal of Davis, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122-139.

17. Erickson, *Word*, 552.

It involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style.”¹⁸ For this study, literary context, genre, and grammar will suffice.

Genre

Scholars virtually agree that Philippians 2:6-11 is a Christian hymn. Still debated is the question of the hymn’s structure and author.¹⁹ Ernst Lohmeyer’s take on the structure is the most popular;²⁰ he sees the passage as “a Christological hymn set in rhythmical form and composed of six strophes, each with three lines.”²¹ This arrangement lends weight to the hymnal structure of the kenosis passage.

Others have come to similar conclusions regarding the hymn form and structure. Martin, for example, structures the verses into “six pairs, and arranged in such a way that they could be chanted in an antiphonal manner.”²² Other divisions considered by scholars are three, four, and five strophe divisions.²³

Literary Context

A kenotic theme runs throughout these verses as a whole. Millard Erickson notes that Donald G. Dawe sees a “kenosis motif” run throughout Christian literature, with which Erickson

18. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 66.

19. For a more detailed outline of the various analyses of the structure and for various authorship theories than given here, see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, rev. and exp. Ralph Martin, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 2004), 100-103.

20. Martin, 36.

21. *Ibid.*, 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 36.

23. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 100-101.

includes the Philippians passage.²⁴ The presence of the motif in these verses indicates that the ideas found therein are significant as a whole to kenosis Christology. Language such as “form of God” (μορφῆ θεοῦ—*morphēi theou*), “did not consider it robbery” (ἀρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο—*harpagmon ēgēsato*), “equal with God” (ἴσα θεῷ—*isa theōi*), and “form of a servant” (μορφὴν δούλου—*morphēn doulou*) are key elements to a greater understanding of the kenosis. The idea of kenosis must be understood in light of the surrounding verses.

Grammar

This section will examine only the necessary grammatical elements for coming to a definite idea of kenosis. To ease comprehension, individual verses will be analyzed.

Verse 5. The verse begins with ὃς (*hos*), a relative pronoun referring back to Christ Jesus (Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ—*Christōi Iesou*). The word translated “being” (ὑπάρχων—*hyparchōn*) is a present participle and occurs at the same time of the verb “consider” (ἡγήσατο—*hēgēsato*).²⁵ The idea is that at the time Christ did not consider equality with God to be robbery, he existed in the form of God.

Verse 6. The verse begins with ἀλλὰ (*alla*) and indicates a strong contrast between what preceded it and what follows: “the two verses are expressing a real contrast.”²⁶ In the phrase “made Himself of no reputation,” Henry Alford notes that “Himself” is emphatic.²⁷ This conveys a focus on the person, not the action.

24. Erickson, *Word*, 78n37.

25. See Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek*, rev. Thomas Sawyer, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 97.

26. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 116.

27. Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, vol. 3, 4th ed. (London, UK: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1865), 168.

The text further describes how Christ made himself of no reputation: “by taking the form of the a bondservant.” Wallace categorizes the participle “taking” (λαβών—*labōn*) as a participle of means, meaning it

indicates the means by which the action of a finite verb is accomplished. . . . In some sense, the participle of means almost always defines the action of the main verb; i.e., it makes more explicit what the author intended to convey with the main verb.²⁸

Emptying, therefore, is connected with the form of a servant.

A Sustainable Interpretation

Having expounded the principal aspects of the text—genre, literary context, and grammar—the next step is to interpret the data and draw the appropriate conclusions that can be drawn without going too far past the text.

The issue in the passage pertains to Christ’s emptying. Hawthorne asks, “Of what did Christ empty himself?”²⁹ As noted previously, many scholars have interpreted Christ’s emptying in different ways. The attempt here will consider a couple of points: (1) the extent of genre influence on the text, and (2) the connections between the grammar and context that revolve around kenosis.

The influence of genre on words is important. Whether they do this consciously or not, most will interpret non-prose in a different way than prose. Poetry is understood to be metaphorical in nature, unlike prose. Most scholars, notes Martin, accept the hymnic composition of Philippians 2:5-11, and believe that the passage is to be understood in a different manner:

28. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 628-630.

29. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 117.

It has become a *sententia recepta* of literary criticism that Philippians ii. 6–11 is clearly to be distinguished from the neighbouring verses of the Epistle; and its language and style must be treated as totally unlike the language and style of epistolary prose.³⁰

Furthermore, on his comments on the kenosis verse, Martin himself concludes that the idea of emptying is metaphorical and not metaphysical.³¹ A metaphysical view of kenosis seems to see the object of the emptying as the divine μορφή—or at least divine attributes. Crisp critiques ontological kenotic Christology in his work on kenosis.³² Martin argues for a metaphorical view on the grounds of the linguistic connection of the Greek with the Hebrew through the Septuagint that leads to the “postulated identification of Jesus in the form a servant with the Servant of Yahweh in the Isaiah songs.”³³ The evidence to take the kenosis as metaphorical is reasonably strong.

Within the text itself, one will find clues to the meaning of kenosis. To recall previous points, Christ existed in the form of God. He did not think of equality with God as robbery. In contrast to this, however, he emptied himself. He took on the form of a slave.

The “form of God” must be further clarified. In his commentary on the New Testament, Craig S. Keener remarks that some see “form” as having to do with “God’s image.”³⁴ Such an idea is too vague to fit the text here, and Keener is not clear what is meant by “image.” Hawthorne writes in a short essay that “Christ had no other manner of existing . . . apart from

30. Martin, 28.

31. Ibid., 194.

32. Crisp, 122-139.

33. Ibid., 168.

34. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 560.

possessing the rank, status, position, condition, function of God.”³⁵ Erickson notes that the equivalent of μορφή for the early church was οὐσία (*ousia*—essence). The form of God speaks of Jesus’ nature. Therefore, μορφή speaks of essential form.

Hawthorne makes an interesting observation regarding emptying. He observes that the participles indicate that “Christ’s self-giving was accomplished by taking, that his self-emptying was achieved by become what he was not before, that his kenosis came about not by subtraction but by addition.”³⁶ Taking the form of a servant involved coming in the likeness of humanity.³⁷

Erickson approaches the kenosis from a different angle but ends in the same place with Hawthorne. Erickson also sees the participle as “an explanation of how Jesus emptied himself.”³⁸ While for Erickson there is an emptying, this emptying is of equality and not form—the kenosis is an “addition of human attributes.”³⁹

Conclusion

Paul exhorted his audience to have a kenosis mind. Christ existed and continues to exist as God. Yet, he decided not to exercise his divine rights in becoming fully human. Instead, the Lord became a humble servant. Followers of Christ, though privileged to be children of God, must serve one another in love.

35. Hawthorne, “In the Form of God and Equal with God (Philippians 2:6),” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 104.

36. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991), 207.

37. Ibid.

38. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 751.

39. Ibid.

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