

He Emptied Himself: A Study of the Kenosis of Christ

Selected Scriptures

Mike Riccardi – Shepherds' Conference 2017

Introduction

Kenosis

- The term *kenosis* derives from the verb *kenoō*, which Paul uses in Philippians 2:7 to speak of the humility of Christ.
- Philippians 2:5–7 – Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself (*heauton ekenōsen*), taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men.

The Miracle of All Miracles

- James Ussher: The incarnation is “the highest pitch of God’s wisdom, goodness, power, and glory” (*Immanuel, or, The Mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God*, 1647/1810, p. 2).
- Mark Jones: “The incarnation is God’s greatest wonder, one that no creature could ever have imagined. God himself could not perform a more difficult and glorious work. It has justly been called the miracle of all miracles” (*Knowing Christ*, 25).
- Jonathan Edwards: “The Admirable Conjunction of Diverse Excellencies in Christ Jesus”

The Mandate to Study

- Our praise to Christ soars only as high as our understanding of His glorious person and work is rooted in the truth. The heights of our worship will not exceed the depths of our theology. Therefore, the worshiper must always be the *student*.
- John Murray: “It is high and heavenly doctrine and for that reason of little appeal to dull minds and darkened hearts. It is the mystery that angels desire to look into. But it is also the delight of enlightened and humble souls; they love to explore the mysteries which bespeak the glories of their Redeemer” (“The Mystery of Godliness,” in *Collected Writings*, 3:240.).

Outline:

1. The Church's Formulation
2. The Historical Challenges
3. The Theological Evaluation
4. The Biblical Kenosis

I. The Church's Formulation

- Christ is God (Matt 8:26–27; John 1:1; 2:25; 8:58; Phil 2:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3)
- Christ is Man (Matt 4:2; 8:24; Mark 13:32; Luke 2:7, 52; John 4:6; 19:28, 30, 34; Gal 4:4; 1 Tim 2:5)
- Heretical Attempts at Reconciliation
 - Adoptionism – Denied true deity
 - Docetism – Denied true humanity
 - Arianism – Denied full deity
 - Apollinarianism – Denied full humanity
 - Nestorianism – Divided Christ's natures (two persons)
 - Monophysitism – Confused Christ's natures (*tertium quid*)
- The Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451)

“We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess *one and the same Son*, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [or rational] soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared]

concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.” (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds* [New York: Harper and Row, 1877], 62–63)

- Against Adoptionism & Arianism
 - “truly God”
 - “perfect in Godhood”
 - “of the same nature of the Father”
 - “begotten from the Father before the ages”

- Against Docetism
 - “truly man”
 - “perfect in manhood”
 - “consubstantial with us”

- Against Apollinarianism
 - “truly man, of a rational soul and body”
 - “in all things like unto us, without sin”
 - Gregory of Nyssa: “Now it was not the body merely, but the whole man, compacted of soul and body, that was lost: indeed, if we are to speak more exactly, the soul was lost sooner than the body. . . . He therefore Who came for this cause, that He might seek and save that which was lost, (that which the shepherd in the parable calls the sheep,) both finds that which is lost, and carries home on his shoulders the whole sheep, not its skin only, that he may make the man of God complete, united to the deity in body and in soul” (*Against Eunomius*, II.13).
 - Gregory of Nazianzus: “That which He has not assumed He has not healed” (*Letter to Cledonius*).

- Against Nestorianism
 - Two natures “without division,” “without separation,” “concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the Same Son”

- Against Monophysitism
 - Christ “to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change”
 - “the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved”

- Implications of Chalcedon
 - The subject of the incarnation was the *person* of the divine Son, not the divine nature.
 - Christ did not assume or become a human *person*, but assumed a human *nature*.
 - A ‘rational soul’ is a predicate of nature, not personhood. That is, the mind, intelligence, consciousness, and will are properties of *natures*, not *persons*. Subsisting in two natures, Christ therefore had two minds, two consciousnesses, two wills.
 - Charles Hodge: In teaching, therefore, that Christ was truly man and truly God, the Scriptures teach that He had a finite intelligence and will, and also an infinite intelligence. In Him, therefore, as the Church has ever maintained, there were and are two wills, two *energeiai* or operations. His human intellect increased, his divine intelligence was, and is, infinite” (*Systematic Theology*, 2:389–90).
 - Donald Fairbairn: “Because the same person, whom we now call Jesus Christ, was both divine and human, he was able to live on two levels at the same time. He continued to live on the divine level as he had done from all eternity—sharing fellowship with the Father, maintaining the universe (see Col 1:17) and whatever else God does. But now he began to live on a human level at the same time—being conceived and born as a baby, growing up in Nazareth, learning Scripture as any other Jewish boy would, becoming hungry, thirsty and tired, and even dying” (*Life in the Trinity*, 140).
- Jonathan Edwards: “There do meet in the person of Christ such really diverse excellencies, which otherwise would have been thought utterly incompatible in the same subject; such as are conjoined in no other person whatever, either divine, human, or angelical; and such as neither men nor angels would ever have imagined could have met together in the same person, had it not been seen in the person of Christ” (“The Excellency of Christ”).

II. The Historical Challenges

- The Rise of the Kenotic Theory
 - Coincident with the rise of Enlightenment rationalism
 - How can one person have two consciousnesses?
 - Jesus must have emptied Himself (cf. Phil 2;7) of at least some of His divine attributes in order to become truly human.
 - Wayne Grudem: “It just seemed too incredible for modern rational and ‘scientific’ people to believe that Jesus Christ could be truly human and fully, absolutely God at the same time. The kenosis theory began to sound more and more like an acceptable way to say that (in some sense) Jesus was God, but a kind of God who had for a time given up some of his Godlike qualities, those that were most difficult for people to accept in the modern world” (*Systematic Theology*, 551–52).
 - For a thorough summary of the history of kenoticism, see A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (T&T Clark, 1905). For an up-to-date overview, see Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate* (Crossway, 2017).
- German Kenoticism
 - Gottfried Thomasius – Christ surrendered “relative” attributes (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence), but retained “essential” attributes (e.g., holiness, love).
 - J. H. Ebrard – Christ retained all divine attributes, but in a “scaled-down” form consistent with humanity.
 - Others – Christ possessed His attributes but wasn’t conscious of them; He had only a human consciousness.
 - W. F. Gess – Christ metamorphosed into a human soul, surrendered *all* of His divine attributes, relinquished all divine consciousness which He only gradually regained.
- British Kenoticism

- Charles Gore – Held that Christ laid aside His omniscience, and so could be wrong on matters “proven” by historical criticism.
- P. T. Forsyth, Hugh Ross Mackintosh, Vincent Taylor – Christ retained His attributes, but rendered them *potential* rather than actual.
- Functional Kenoticism within Evangelical Circles
 - Attributes fully possessed, but not exercised (some say never, others say rarely)
 - Gerald Hawthorne, Klaus Issler, Garrett DeWeese, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, Millard Erickson, Bruce Ware.
- A Summary of the Kenotic Theory

Louis Berkhof: “The Kenoticists take [“the Word became flesh”] to mean that the Logos literally became, that is, was changed into a man by reducing (depotentiating) Himself, either wholly or in part, to the dimensions of a man, and then increased in wisdom and power until at last He again became God. ... It aimed at maintaining the reality and integrity of the manhood of Christ, and to throw into strong relief the greatness of His humiliation in that He, being rich, for our sakes became poor. It involves, however, a pantheistic obliteration of the line of demarcation between God and man” (*Systematic Theology*, 310).

III. The Theological Evaluation

A. Undermines the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

- Definition of divine simplicity: God is not compounded; He is not made up of parts. Therefore, His attributes are identical to His essence. All divine attributes are *essential*. Jesus cannot be less than the totality of divine attributes without being less than God.
- There is no such thing as a “potential” attribute. David Wells argues that to posit that Christ’s divine attributes are only potential is to posit that Christ’s deity is necessarily *passive*, and not active. And “in practice, a necessary passivity is an operating impotence” (*The Person of Christ* [1984], 139).

B. Undermines the Doctrine of the Trinity

- If the Father and the Spirit retain all the divine attributes as they have done from eternity, and the Son is deprived of those attributes (even temporarily), the three Persons of the Trinity cannot be said to be “of the same substance.”

C. Undermines the Continuity between Preexistent and Incarnate Christ

- Donald Macleod: “Up to the moment of his enfleshment, according to this theory, the Son was omniscient. At that fateful moment, however, his knowledge suddenly contracts: from infinity to that of a first-century Jew. That represents a degree of amnesia to which there can be no parallel. He forgot virtually everything he knew. . . . After an eternity of divine self-awareness he would suddenly not know who he was. Indeed, considering the importance of memory to personal identity, he would not even *be* who he was” (*The Person of Christ*, 210).
- Jesus is conscious of His Deity (Luke 2:49; John 8:58; 10:30; 17:5)

D. Undermines the Distinction between Christ’s Humiliation and Exaltation

- Stephen Wellum: “If it was necessary for the Son to give up certain divine attributes (or not to exercise them) in order to become incarnate because divinity was inconsistent with a truly human life, then the exalted Son either still lacks these attributes (or does not exercise them) or he is no longer truly human” (*God the Son Incarnate*, 417).

E. Is Irreconcilable with Chalcedonian Christology

- Chalcedon teaches that mind and will are properties of nature, and since Christ had both a divine and a human nature, Christ possesses both a divine mind and a human mind, a divine will and a human will, a divine consciousness and a human consciousness.
- Kenoticism rejects this outright: “There could not be two wills, or two consciousnesses, in the same personality, by any psychological possibility now credible. We could not have in the same person both knowledge and ignorance of the same thing” (Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 319).
- John Calvin: “They fasten on the attributes of humanity to destroy his divinity. . . . But what else is this than to contend that Christ is . . . not God because he is man” (*Institutes*, 2.14.4).

- Herman Bavinck: “Related to this Monophysitism, in modern times, is the kenosis doctrine. . . . Now whether, as was done in the past, one lets the human nature change into the divine, or, as is done today, one lets the divine nature empty itself down to the level of the human, or lets the two natures merge in whole or in part into a third, mixed something—always, in pantheistic fashion, the boundary between God and humanity is erased and the idea of the ‘God-man’ is falsified” (*Reformed Dogmatics*: 3:303).
- “The language of kenoticism is monophysitic. . . . An authentic human life is possible on such terms only at the expense of the divine: if he was man, he could not have been God. From this point of view, the price paid for an authentic humanity was too high. Christ had the human property of ignorance, but not the divine property of omniscience. How, then, can we speak, with Chalcedon, of ‘one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man’ or profess that each nature, the divine as well as the human retained its own distinctive properties even in the hypostatic union? An incomplete godhead is as incompatible with Chalcedon as an incomplete manhood” (*The Person of Christ*, 209–10).

F. Is Incompatible with the Biblical Presentation of Christ

1. He is called God explicitly (John 1:1, 18; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1), even during His incarnation (Matt 1:23; Col 1:19; 2:9)
2. He is conscious of His deity (John 5:17; 8:58; 10:30)
3. He exercises divine prerogatives
 - a. He sovereignly gives eternal life to whom He wishes (John 5:21)
 - b. He Himself *is* the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)
 - c. He forgives sins (Luke 5:20)
 - d. He delivers revelation on His own authority (Matt 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)
 - e. He possesses a unique sovereignty (Matt 11:27; John 10:17–18)
 - f. He receives worship (Luke 7:38; John 20:28; cf. Rev 19:10)
4. He exercises divine attributes
 - a. Omnipresence (Matt 28:20)

b. Omniscience

- i. Reads the Pharisees' minds (Luke 5:22 / Mark 2:6)
 - ii. Knows Nathanael's character without having met him (John 1:47–49)
 - iii. Knows the Samaritan woman had five husbands (John 4:18)
 - iv. Knows Lazarus is dead while still far off (John 11:14)
- Objection: Supernatural knowledge doesn't imply omniscience, but Spirit-dependence.
 - Response: John 6:64; John 2:25; John 16:30; John 21:17
 - Objection: What about Mark 13:32?
 - Responses
 - Calvin: "There would be no impropriety in saying that Christ, who knew all things, was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man" (*Institutes*, 1.3.1).
 - Gregory of Nazianzus: "We are to understand the ignorance in the most reverent sense, by attributing it to the manhood, and not to the Godhead" (*Fourth Theological Oration*, 15).
 - Jesus is ignorant according to His humanity, but omniscient according to His deity.

c. Omnipotence

- i. Cosmic function: sustaining the universe (Col 1:16–17; Heb 1:3)
 - ii. Divine miracles (e.g., Matt 8:26–27; 14:15–21; John 2:1–11; 11:43–44)
- Objection: Jesus performed these miracles not by His own divine power as God the Son, but, similar to the prophets, only by the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - Responses
 - The disciples beheld in Jesus a unique glory—not glory as of one of the Spirit-filled prophets, but glory as of the only begotten from the Father (John 1:14). That unique, divine glory was specifically manifest by His miracles (John 2:11). Jesus called people to faith in Him as the divine Messiah on the ground of the miracles that manifested His divine glory (John 10:37–38; 14:10–11).
 - John Calvin: "How clearly and transparently does this appear in his miracles! I admit that similar and equal

miracles were performed by the prophets and apostles; but there is this very essential difference, that they dispensed the gifts of God as his ministers, whereas he exerted his own inherent might” (*Institutes*, 1.13.13).

- Donald Macleod: “It was from such evidence, pointing clearly to the conclusion that Jesus saw himself as divine, acted as one who was divine, portrayed himself as divine and was seen as divine, that the church derived its belief in the deity of Christ. That belief is essential to the life and worship of the church and fatal to the Kenotic Theory. Whatever the lowliness into which Christ stooped by his incarnation it was not such as to prevent his disciples from seeing his glory—” i.e., glory as of the only begotten from the Father (*The Person of Christ*, 210–11).

IV. The Biblical Kenosis

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

A. The Glory of the Eternal Son (v. 6a)

- “Existing” (*huparchōn*) – points to eternal pre-existence (present active participle), and shows that the *person* of the Son, Christ Jesus, was the subject of the incarnation
- “in the form of God” (*en morphē theou*)
 - Homer Kent: The outward manifestation that corresponds to the inward essence, the external form that represents what is intrinsic and essential (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 123, 126).
 - Moulton & Milligan: “A form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it” (*VGNT*, 417).
 - *Morphē* is not strictly synonymous with *ousia* or *phusis* (“essence,” “nature”), but necessarily implies them. Only God Himself can exist in the form of God. Only God can manifest all the perfections of God.

- “equality with God” (*isa theō* [dat.])
 - If (a) no one can be equal to God but God Himself, and (b) Christ is equal to God, then (c) Christ Himself must be fully God.
 - The “form of God” refers to the dignity of the Son’s *essence*, while “equality with God” refers to the dignity of the Son’s *station*, or *position*.

- Divine Glory
 - If *morphē* refers to the outward manifestation of the inner essence and nature, what is the outward manifestation of the inner essence and nature of *God*?
Answer: glory.
 - Hebrews 1:3 – And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.
 - 2 Corinthians 4:4, 6 – . . . the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.
 - John 12:41 – These things Isaiah said because He saw *His* [i.e., Jesus’] glory, and he spoke of *Him*. Cf. Isaiah 6:1–3.
 - Equality with the Father; ruling creation in majesty; receiving the worship of the saints and angels; unencumbered by life in a fallen world or the difficulties of a genuine human existence; immune to pain, hunger, thirst, weakness, fatigue, sorrow, and humiliation

B. The Humility of the Eternal Son (vv. 6b–7)

- The Nature of His *Kenosis* (“He emptied Himself” [*heauton ekenōsen*])
 - *Kenóō* does not mean “to pour out;” *ekcheo* would have been a suitable word for that (cf., e.g., Luke 22:20; Rom 5:5; Titus 3:6).
 - *Kenóō* is always used figuratively in Scripture (Rom 4:14; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor 9:3; LXX: Jer 14:2; 15:9).

- *Kenóō* means “to nullify,” “to bring to naught.”
- The Object of His *Kenosis*
 - Christ Himself is the object of this nullification. He did not empty Himself of something (e.g., His divine attributes or prerogatives); He emptied *Himself*.
 - KJV: He “made himself of no reputation;” NIV: He “made himself nothing.”
- The Manner of His *Kenosis*
 - He “emptied Himself, *taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men.*”
 - Not by subtracting from His divine nature, but by adding a complete human nature
 - John Murray: “It is sometimes thought that, when the Son of God became man and humbled himself, he thereby ceased to be what he was and in some way divested himself of the attributes and prerogatives of deity, that he changed the form of God for the form of man. He became poor, it is said, by emptying himself of divine properties, became poor by subtraction, by divestiture, by depotentiation. The Scripture does not support any such notion. ... Even in his incarnate state, in him dwelt all the fullness of Godhood (Col 2:9). When the Son of man became poor, it was not by giving up his Godhood nor any of the attributes and prerogatives inseparable from Godhood. When he became man, he did not cease to be rich in his divine being, relations, and possession. He did not become poor by ceasing to be what he was, but he became poor by becoming what he was not. He became poor by addition, not by subtraction” (Murray, “The Riches and Poverty of Jesus Christ,” in *Collected Writings*, 3:231).
- *Kenosis* as *Krypsis* (i.e., concealment, veiledness)
 - John Calvin: “Christ, indeed, could not divest himself of godhead, but he kept it concealed for a time, that it might not be seen, under the weakness of the flesh. Hence he laid aside his glory in the view of men, not by lessening it, but by concealing it” (*Philippians*, 56–57).

- Herman Bavinck: “He laid aside the divine majesty and glory . . . in which he existed before the incarnation, or rather concealed it behind the form of a servant in which he went about on earth” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:432).

C. The Humility of the Incarnate Christ (v. 8)

- Not just a man, but an *obedient* man (cf. John 5:30; 6:38)
- Not just obedient, but obedient to the point of *death*
- Not just obedient to death, but obedient to death on a *cross*
- Not just obedient to death on a cross, but undergoing the curse of divine wrath (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13)

Practical Applications

1. Trust in the incarnate Christ for salvation.
2. Pursue humility; have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.
3. Understand the inextricable link between theology and practice.

John Murray: “The most transcendent of mysteries of our holy faith are the fountain springs of the most common and practical Christian duties. The streams of Christian liberality are fed from the ocean of the mysteries of God. If we evacuate thought and interest and faith of the mystery of godliness we lose not only the fountain of faith but we dry up the streams of practical grace” (“The Riches and the Poverty of Jesus Christ,” in *Collected Works*, 3:235).

4. Worship God the Son incarnate, by the power of the Spirit, to the glory of the Father.

Stephen Charnock: “What a wonder that two natures infinitely distant should be more intimately united than anything in the world . . . that the same person should have both a glory and a grief; an infinite joy in the Deity, and an inexpressible sorrow in the humanity; that a God upon a throne should be an infant in a cradle; the thundering Creator be a weeping babe and a suffering man; [the incarnation astonishes] men upon earth, and angels in heaven” (*Existence and Attributes of God*, in *Works*, 2:150).