



A Critical Assessment of Kenoticism: Person of Christ Who Became Jesus

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ABSTRACT

Kenotic theologians attempt to reconcile the contradictory claim that Jesus was both human and divine by developing the notion of kenosis. The humility of Christ was used as an aid to help the individual live a life of humility and self-sacrifice. The touchstone of kenoticism is the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 which speaks of Christ emptying himself. To get around this, kenotic theologians would have to make imaginative moves which would push the bounds of credibility to their limit. His kenosis was not a subtraction of aspects of His divine nature but the addition of human nature that consisted of a real human body and a rational human soul. The Son's self-emptying is a rather contested notion where some interpret Christ's kenosis as a complete divestiture of his divinity while others see an abdication of only some of his divine attributes. The historical development of kenotic Christology was observed as a kenotic theory by a variety of factors in an attempt to make logical sense of the incarnation in the light of modern philosophical and historical developments such as omniscience and omnipotence was divested for Christ to acquire essential human properties. In conclusion, the wide range of Kenotic views regarding the Incarnation of the God-man provide a powerful understanding of the mystery of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

A perspective known as "kenoticism" was created in the nineteenth century (from kenosis, the Greek word for emptying; Philippians 2:5-8). The main principle of kenotic Christology is that God the Son deliberately and actively entered the stream of human life on earth. According to kenoticism, the Son retained all the moral traits that are legitimately divine while enunciating all the distinctly metaphysical aspects of deity for his sojourn among

us. The concept of kenotic Christology was first viewed by German theologian Gottfried Thomasius based on the notion that Jesus genuinely gave up some of His divinity to become more resemblant of us ordinary humans. The proof text for this claim is Philippians 2:6-7, which claims that Jesus "emptied" Himself of His divine characteristics. The kenotic theologians used the kenotic theme to accommodate as well as defend the divinity of Christ. Kenotic Christology is an attempt to

confront critiques of orthodox Christianity, take advancements in biblical criticism and psychology seriously and defend the conventional belief that Christ was truly divine and human (Berkhof, 1939). Lutheran theologians denote the self-limitation of God-man whereby He laid aside the actual use of His divine attributes.

In the teachings of the Kenoticists, it signaled the doctrine that the Logos at the incarnation was denuded of His transitive or all His attributes was reduced to a mere potentiality and the human nature developed again into a divine-human person. The main problems with kenosis centre on its construction and implications. Erickson (1991) stated that the passage in Philippians is not subjected to intensive literal exegesis but theologians do not attempt to extract from the text an explanation of what 'emptying himself' means, entailed and how it is accomplished rather the central Greek word is used to name a theory which does some assumption about the nature of Jesus' earthly state. Beyond the weakness of textual synthesis and questions about its meaning, the kenosis carries with it certain Christological implications. Grudem (1994) stated that the kenosis theory holds that Christ gave up some of his divine attributes while he was on earth as a man. According to the theory, Christ 'emptied himself' of some of his divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence while he was on earth as a man. This was viewed as a voluntary self-limitation on Christ's part which he carried out to fulfil his work of redemption. Interestingly, it is only the divine nature of Christ that kenoticism calls into question, not His human nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Development of Kenotic Christology

The historical development of kenotic Christology includes its motivations and context that examine the kenotic themes in the early church following the reformation and the post-enlightenment approaches of the nineteenth century. The idea of self-emptying in the theology of the

incarnation is not a new occurrence. Indeed, self-emptying whether metaphorically or ontologically depend on the exegesis. The kenosis is drawn from **ΕΚΕΝΩΘΕΝ** [emptied] and was referred frequently by the early fathers like Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Origen and Hilary of Poitiers (Pannenburg, 1968). However, one must not think that this understanding of kenosis implies the limiting or giving up of the divine nature or attributes as affirmed by contemporary kenoticists. The kenosis, in the mind of the fathers, was defined in terms of the taking on of human nature by the Logos, not the giving up of divine attributes. This is perhaps primarily a result of the need to counter the numerous heretical Christologies that emphasized the human nature of Jesus to the detriment of his divine nature, a typical example being seen in the theology of Arius (Young, 2010). The self-emptying is understood in an ontological and metaphysical way the divine nature of Jesus remains unchanged when the Logos acquires a human nature while this understanding of kenosis is at odds with contemporary kenotic Christology as it does provide an exegetical basis for understanding the self-emptying as literal and ontological.

It was only in the post-reformation and enlightenment period that kenosis concerning Jesus' incarnation began to describe self-emptying as a relinquishing or limiting of divine nature and attributes. The issue of Jesus' divine attributes in nineteenth and early twentieth century kenotic Christology was preceded some centuries before in a debate as to Jesus' use of the divine attributes in the 'formula of concord'. Wells (1984) highlights the instability of the formula and its inability to provide a solution to debates concerning Jesus' use of his divine attributes it was merely an interim settlement. It was only a matter of time to subject Jesus' divine attributes and their limiting had to be discussed again. The result of this emphasis on reason led to the development of metaphysics and

epistemology that proved inhospitable to traditional Christian belief (Evans, 1996). It was in this challenging context that the more complex ontological and functional kenotic Christologies of the nineteenth century were developed. A variety of kenotic Christologies were developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as is evident from the distinction between ontological and functional accounts of kenosis in the introduction (Thompson, 2006). Mackintosh (1978) argues against the idea that the development of kenotic Christology was purely the result of the enlightenment, he believes it to be the most profound motive operating in the Kenotic theories.

Background And Strength of The Kenotic Theories

The theologians who proposed the kenotic theory were primarily from Germany and later on from England. The kenotic theory can be traced to the debates between the universities of Giessen and Tübingen regarding the use of divine attributes during Christ's earthly ministry (Thomas, 2005). The Tübingen School believed that the *krypsis* held that Christ used his divine powers in secret while the Giessen School believed that Christ abstained from the use of divine attributes altogether. Both these schools believed that Christ possessed divine attributes and the only question was whether Christ used them in secret or otherwise. The Kenotic Theories of reform movements such as Lutheranism bring to the fore the servant form of God and shift it away from what he thought had been the propagation of a terrible and wrathful form of God. Calvinism posits a kenosis of power that runs beyond Son's exaltation after death until all the purposes of salvation have been *accomplished*. They held that there was a clear distinction between the human and divine and that in the kenosis the divine glory is hidden. This position of Calvin could be taken to mean that in the exaltation Jesus has not yet attained full divine status (Brown, 2011).

The Kenotic theory was criticized for various reasons by both Protestant and Catholic theologians (Thomas, 2005). Francis Hall point-out various inconsistencies related to the divinity of Christ. He doubted kenoticists who assert their belief in Christ's Divinity but were convinced that they are inconsistent. He further criticizes the kenoticists for being too rationalistic in compromising on the major fundamentals of the Christian faith such as the doctrine of Incarnation, the Trinity and the understanding of the Divine Mission. Thomas Thompson provides a more synthetic explanation of what went wrong with the Kenotic Theory. He indicates that there were objections from theologians who held contrasting positions that the kenoticist's statements were lacking on the deity, humanity or uni-personhood and so on. They perceived in the kenotic theory a modification of the event of salvation, the dubious implication of the kenotically weakened Son for his redemptive work and this caused them grave concern. Some believed that the kenotic theories did not go far enough and fell short of actually re-interpreting Christology and the doctrine of God. Peter Forsyth, Hugh Mackintosh and Vincent Taylor argued that Christ did not actually surrender His divine attributes in the incarnation but simply rendered them potential instead of actual while some thought that Christ never actualized these attributes occasionally.

Wellum (2016) calls Ontological Kenoticism evangelicals because it recognizes that the Son cannot surrender any divine attributes without ceasing to be God. Instead they believe that Christ possesses these attributes, He does not exercise them or He uses them only rarely. He exercises His personhood through His human nature and not at all (or rarely) through His divine nature. Wellum calls this teaching Functional Kenoticism and embraced the degrees with various nuances by men. The Kenoticists take "the Word became flesh" to mean that the Logos literally changed into a man

by reducing (de-potentiating) Him-self 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.

Kenoticism Challenges the Deity of Christ

Kenoticism challenges the deity of Christ by disregarding the implications of divine simplicity. Divine simplicity does not mean that God is simple to understand rather God is a simple being; God is not made up of parts. The argument that any of God's qualities are contingent and not fundamental to Whom was refuted by His divine simplicity. Each of God's attributes is fundamental to Him, and the eternal Son has always possessed the complete, undivided divine nature. The Son would have ceased to exist in the divine essence and ceased to be God at all if He had given up even one of His divine qualities at the time of His incarnation. Without being less than God, God cannot be less than all of the divine qualities. Jesus must continue to fully exist in the divine essence and hence must possess all the divine qualities to be regarded as God. Wells (1984) makes a strong case that holding that Christ solely possessed prospective divine qualities would entail holding that Christ was inherently passive and not active in his deity. In addition, according to Wells, the Trinity was at best reduced to a "binity" during the incarnate era since the divine mainboard was damaged and the second person of the Godhead was on leave.

The personal continuity between the Son of the Pre-existence and the Christ who became incarnate is questioned by kenoticism. Kenoticism questions the necessity of separating the incarnation Christ in His condition of humiliation from the incarnate Christ in His state of exaltation. The permanence of the incarnation cannot be questioned; Paul writes of Christ, who is currently seated at the right side of the Father in heaven, that "in Him, all the fullness of Deity dwells physically" (Col. 2:9). Since Christ is still incarnate even in His exalted form, is He still operating under the constraints of His kenosis? The

kenotic argument, however, contends that omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence and divine consciousness are all incompatible with true humanity. Because Christ is still incarnate while also no longer experiencing the humility that characterized His kenosis, such a view cannot be reconciled with Scripture. Kenoticism is unable to resolve this problem. According to Wellum, if the Son had to forgo some divine characteristics (or refrain from exercising them) to take on the human form because divinity was incompatible with truly human existence, then the exalted Son either still lacks these characteristics (or refrains from exercising them) or he is no longer truly human (Wellum, 2016).

However, Scripture makes it quite plain that He uses them and that, as our Mediator, who always resides to pray on our behalf, He is genuinely human. This suggests that the employment of divine characteristics and authentic humanity are not contradictory. Kenoticism's underlying premise is false.

Views on Ontological and Functional Kenoticism

In the functional model, the priesthood of Christ is described in a Christological language that involves sequentiality of functions (earthly cross and heavenly intercession) but it is soteriologically concrete in spatio-temporal instruments that convey the timeless-spaceless reality of the new creation in human beings. In the ontological model, the priesthood of Christ portrays a Christology that reveals using spatio-temporal instruments the reality of new creation that is already concrete in God. Macquarrie (1990) pointed out the medieval metaphysical discussions of Jesus and has limited its attention to the functional side as the inseparability of the questions of being and doing in application to Jesus Christ. He criticizes the desire to discern from ontological questions as ultimately anti-intellectual because it is unrealistic. Macquarrie introduces the distinction only to criticize Christologies that are unbalanced in one direction or

distinction makes logic for discussions of more balanced Christologies. Schleiermacher (1928) interpreted the person of Jesus Christ in terms of the intensity of his God-consciousness and the necessity for this intensity in terms of the actuality of his redemptive work that functionalist emphasis is never separated from each other. Some would say that functional Christologies should be rejected as inadequate versions of Christianity.

According to the liberal theologian Wiles (1977), there must be some ontological truth corresponding to the central character of the structure of the myth of the incarnation. He suggests that the profound inner union of the divine and the human at the heart of the human personality may be the ontological reality at the centre of this myth rather than an identity between the personhood of Jesus and the Second Person of the Godhead. Functional Christologies all claim that Jesus was functionally equivalent to God. This can be worked out in various ways but they all share the same essential thrust: Jesus is not God; he is God's agent or representative. Every functional statement about Jesus conceals ontological mysteries.

Exegesis of Philipines 2:7

The primary purpose of Phil.2:5-11 is parenthetic as is evident from the preceding verses 1-4 and verse 12. The biblical basis for kenotic Christology with special reference to Philipians 2:7 given that traditionally it has played a major role in biblical arguments for kenotic Christology and has been used by contemporary kenoticists as illustrative (Martin, 1997). The interpretation of Phil. 2:7 is best understood as a parallel with the suffering servant passages in Isaiah and kenosis is not concerned with the incarnation but looks forward to the crucifixion. The kenosis of Phil. 2:7 is literal or metaphorical as well as some arguments from contemporary kenoticists. The aorist tense **ἔκένωσεν**[emptied] presumes a single past event (Hurst, 1998). Arguments from parallelism have also been used to justify the idea that the emptying

of verse 7 does not refer to the incarnation but to Jesus' death on the cross while there might be some similarities between **ἔκένωσεν** [emptied] and aspects of the Isaianic servant. The interpretations that argue against the pericope being concerned with the descent of Christ from pre-existence, to incarnation, to the cross, arguing that the kenosis is to be interpreted apart from reference to the incarnation are therefore unsuccessful.

Given that the first premise of a kenotic interpretation of Philipines 2:7 concerns the incarnation is correct, the question of whether the kenosis is literal or metaphorical can be addressed. Traditional ontological kenoticism argues that in taking the form of a slave Jesus emptied himself of the form of God and thus divine glory and certain divine attributes. However, this ontological interpretation simply doesn't cohere with the text and it has long been dismissed by New Testament scholars. The kenosis is literal and is undermined by the hymnic/poetic form of the text (Silva, 2005). Linguistically and grammatically, the linguistic evidence should be noted that four out of five of the New Testament uses of **ἔκένωσεν** [emptied] are metaphorical and similar metaphors are seen throughout the Pauline literature. Grammatically, Jesus empties himself of the form of God is doubtful since the participle **λαβών** [having taken] is coincident with the main verb in the first line:

‘he emptied himself in that he took the form of a servant’ (O'Brien, 1991). He did not, therefore, empty himself of the form of God. This is further supported by the adversative **ἀλλὰ** [but] which contrasts the kenosis not with the form of God but with **ἄρπαγμα ὄν** [something to be grasped].

Wright (1986) stated that **ἄρπαγμα ὄν** is best understood in the parenthetic context as an abstract noun and therefore does not require an object. It denotes an attitude rather than an act and might best be translated as “Christ did not consider

his equality with God as something to take advantage of. The verb *ekenosen* here refers to no more than the surrender of the glory and 'status' of heaven, for the context is an ethical exhortation not to cling to privilege and self-esteem but if kenotic Christologies cannot claim to be derived from a convincing exegesis of the phrase in Philippians 2:7 from which they derive their name, they cannot on that account be dismissed from consideration. Kenosis in the Pauline sense of Jesus' abandonment of the glory of heaven and acceptance of the human condition in all its humiliation is a precious truth of the New Testament.

CONCLUSION

The kenosis is about the incarnation event of 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 and contribution of the kenosis to Christology. The point of kenosis is that Christ did not become empty without knowing who he was in God. According to the Philippians hymn, Christ chose to leave his divine being for the sake of humanity's salvation. Kenosis affirms knowing one's full identity in God and only then emptying themselves of what is rightfully theirs, then mimicking the life of Christ and participating in the Christian condition that Paul encourages. The historical development of kenotic Christology was observed as a kenotic theory by a variety of factors in an attempt to make logical sense of the incarnation in the light of modern philosophical and historical developments such as omniscience and omnipotence was divested for Christ to acquire essential human properties. It has been seen that kenotic Christology is dependent on the premise that the essential divine attributes are incompatible with the essential human attributes. The assumed contradiction between the two natures that forms the basis of the kenotic account is not a contradiction at all. Giving up the divine nature would be a surrender of deity and even giving up certain of its attributes might well be a voluntary

decision to restrict the independent exercise of some attributes is not necessarily a forfeiture of deity.

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