

Heresy signifies many things in the Christian church. Sometimes the “heresy” is of relatively little consequence. For example, Scripture teaches us that Miriam, the mother of

Kenosis

Yeshua the Christ, should be viewed as especially blessed.¹ It was natural, then, for early Christians to view her role in the incarnation of Christ as particularly “special.” Other times, the heresy is critical. Relatively modern views regarding Mary's perpetual virginity, immaculate conception (1854), and her holy assumption (1950) create heresy difficult to ignore. Although not officially approved by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, current thinking which places Mary at the level of God has already slipped well down that proverbial slippery slope.²

Heresy, then, is a serious issue for religion in general and Christianity in particular. What constitutes heresy varies, of course, from religion to religion. Muslims, for example, have problems with the *shirk*³ of the Trinity; thus, all who believe that God is not a singular entity are infidels. Main figures of different religions are correspondingly thought of differently. For example, while Buddha and Mohammed did not claim deity, Christ did. “I am the truth, and the way, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.” [John 14:6] If one were to argue Mohammed was an imperfect man who sought God's will, it would cause little stir, and possibly an amen from the imam. In contrast, merely hinting Jesus the Christ was “a good man, but just a man,” or perhaps a misunderstood prophet, or anything less than God evokes loud outcries from orthodox Christians. It should. Jesus the Christ was God; and, only as God could He be resurrected. Without such a resurrection, our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins. [I Corinthians 15:17]

We have, then, a shibboleth for serious heresy. To wit, to parallel the words of John in 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 1:7, anyone who asserts that Jesus is not God asserts a heresy of the highest order, and with the gravest of consequence. So, it is with the *kenosis* problem. Used to sup-

¹Luke 1:41-43 says, “When Elizabeth heard Mary's [actually “Miriam”] greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

²Consider this passage:

“MARY [*sic* “Miriam”] is the Mother of God. She is the virginal mother of only one Child. If we are to become Mary's child, we must become the Child Who is her only one. And He is Jesus Christ. ... Mary is full of grace, and has become by grace, what God is by nature. God is Divine by nature. Mary is 'divine' by grace. Just as it is blasphemy to belittle what God is by nature, so it is blasphemy to belittle what God does by grace. Mary is the fullness of grace. She has not only all the grace needed for her own sanctification, she has all the grace needed for the sanctification and salvation of the entire world.

God is infinitely perfect. Mary is perfect in the finite order. Mary has nothing of her own, but all that God has, He has given her. God's Divinity flows into Mary by sanctifying grace, which is a participation in the Divine nature, while she remains human.”

— Father Leonard Feeney, *From the Husetops Magazine*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Series No. 69.

³Arabic for apostasy, especially that which implies polytheism.

port everything from early heresies regarding the divinity of Christ by gnostics, to modern day open theology,⁴ Paul's description of Christ on earth as "emptying Himself" [i.e., "kenosis"] has caused theological tongues to wag.

The threat is not insignificant. Openness of God theology is an extraordinarily useful theological premise. To use the words of one pastor, "it gets God off the hook."⁵ Currently the *kenosis* of Jesus the Christ is being used to support the notion that God has indeed depotentiated Himself; i.e., God does not nor can not know that which has not happened. Using Paul's description of Christ's "emptying Himself," Openness of God theology uses this passage from Philippians to support God's limitation. A noted supporter of this thought, Clark Pinnock said,

There are some who believe that thinking of God as in any way limited diminishes him. This conviction, though, fails to acknowledge that any kenosis (or self-emptying of God), in which God limits the exercise of his properties in order that significant creatures should exist, is balanced by a pleroma (or fullness of glory), in which God experiences real gains. The limitation is well worth it. The very act of self-emptying allows God to experience loving relationships with creatures that would have otherwise been impossible. Thus, alongside what appears to be subtraction and loss, there is actually addition and gain. A certain richness is added to the divine experience by the enjoying of these relationships. The self-limitation of God makes possible for, and renders visible and wonderful, new forms of divine glory. Indeed, open theists do not serve a diminished deity! On the one hand, we acknowledge that God could have created a world that he would totally control, a world whose future would have been completely settled. On the other hand, we believe on scriptural grounds that he chose something very different. He made a world that is not all-determined, the future of which would not be exhaustively foreknown. He did it in order to let finite creativity flourish. In the end, there is no "loss" for God in this view since it is only a question of how God chooses to utilize his power. This choice remains entirely his alone.⁶

Of course, Pinnock's assertions are far from orthodox. More importantly, however, they are heretical at the highest order: "... self-emptying allows God to experience loving relationships with creatures that would have otherwise been impossible." Balderdash. God needed nothing to experience loving relationships with us; we needed Him. The incarnation was for us, not Him.

⁴See John Sanders, "On Heffalumps and Heresies to Accusations Against Open Theism," *Journal of Biblical Studies*, 2, 2002. And in contrast see, John A. Battle, "Some Biblical Arguments Used by Openness Theology," *WRS Journal*, 12, (February 2005), 15-20.

⁵Ligon Duncan, Pastor of First Presbyterian (PCA) Church, Jackson, Mississippi, as quoted by Jeff Robinson in "Openness of God' theology criticized for effort to get God 'off the hook.'" *BP News*, July 26, 2000.

⁶Clark H. Pinnock, *Catalyst Online: Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for United Methodist Seminarians*. <http://CatalystResources.org/Issues/292Pinnock.html> (1999; as perused 2/21/2005).

Assuming I have successfully argued that the *kenosis* issue is not just a topic for church history examinations regarding the Antioch Synod of 341,⁷ this article seeks to:

1. Ascertain the precise nature of the *kenosis* issue.
2. Clarify whether Biblically-focused theologians have resolved the issue.
3. Identify an alternative perspective on the so-called *kenosis* problem.

THE *KENOSIS* ISSUE

Within the theological context of understanding the “humiliation of Christ,” Walvoord, for example, argues that orthodox theologians assert Christ did not diminish His deity, but *added* a human nature to His divine nature.⁸ Similarly, Enns contends there was no loss, but a new nature, a human nature, was added to the person we know as Jesus the Christ.⁹ Grudem argues this passage was designed show Christ's humility as a model for us, rather than a loss of deity.¹⁰

The precise nature of the problem of *kenosis*, however, is that the Christ, according to Paul in Philippians “emptied Himself.” The issue is of *what* did He empty Himself? If He gave up, even voluntarily, part of His deity, then the logic of the hypostatic union is suspect. Furthermore, if He emptied part of His deity, then His sacrifice as God's only Son would be less than full. Finally, if He gave up part of His deity, then how are we to trust Him when He said, “Before Abraham was born, I am ... [John 8:58]. Was He lying when proclaiming Himself Yahweh?

The petard which seems to deafen most theologians to a more reasonable explanation is the notion of “Christ's humiliation.” In other words, the incarnation of Christ is often described within the context of condescension and humiliation. While God did indeed condescend to become human, to suggest humiliation, however grand and old the premise, speaks poorly to understanding Philippians 2:7 (and many, if not all, passages using the notion of *kenoo* (I Corinthians 1:17 & 9:15, II Corinthians 9:3, and Romans 4:14). Walvoord summarizes well the attempts of others to make “emptying Himself” anymore than what is there in context:

The difficulties with all these views which fall short of ascribing to Christ a full deity is that they read into the passage in Philippians 2 more than it actually says and contradict many other scriptures which fully assert the deity of Christ during the period He was on earth.¹¹

⁷Several commentaries, apparently, quote each other on the nature of the Antioch Synod of 341. My review of the canons decreed made no mention of the *kenosis* issue. My apologies for being unable to find a primary source for this synod.

⁸John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*. Chicago: Moody, 1969, 138.

⁹Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody, 1989.

¹⁰Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 549-552.

¹¹Walvoord, *ibid.*, 142.

A “proper doctrine” of *kenosis* has, however, yet to be identified. Grudem, Walvoord, Hodge, and Strong all seem to exegete Philippians from a “humiliation of the Christ” perspective. For example, while arguing for the impeccability of the Christ, Hodge says:

Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of His person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then His temptation was unreal and without effect, **and He cannot sympathize with His people** [emphasis added].¹²

We see illustrated here the fundamental problem with the *kenosis* problem—*human* perspective. To suggest the Christ “cannot sympathize with His people” is ludicrous, yet counter-intuitively, seems “logical.” To illustrate further, consider how frequently Hebrews 4:14-16 is interpreted with a similarly delimited, and wrong, human perspective:

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Walvoord, for example, argues from the above, “... we can come to Him as our High Priest with the assurance that He fully understands the power of temptation and sin, having met it in His life and death (Heb. 4:15).” Balderdash. The Christ fully understood the power of temptation and sin from day one; He did not need incarnation to become High Priest—we needed the incarnation to understand Him as High priest. But, what has all this got to do with the *kenosis* issue?

In the midst of exegetical displays of theological testosterone, it is clear our human lenses are dirty. Human understanding of the Christ's “humiliation, impeccability, and *kenosis*” has polluted message in Philippians. A second look is therefore warranted.

HAS THE *KENOSIS* PROBLEM BEEN RESOLVED?

In a word, no. In an attempt to avoid obfuscation, demonstrate exegetical prowess, or explain an important but simple message from Scripture, commentators have not washed their dingy glasses they used to read Philippians 2. A closer look at context can help. Paul was under house arrest and wrote the church at Philippi to report and thank them for their support in his ministry, especially given their persecution. He took an opportunity in the second chapter to urge them toward humility and unity. When people struggle under persecution, they can turn in on themselves and out toward others. The best and worst of humanity is

¹² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, II*, London: Clarke & Company, 1862, 457.

demonstrated in such circumstances—Paul was worried about them. So, he begins the second chapter with a call to be united, specifically, “like-minded.” And, how should they maintain this unity? Humility: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” [Philippians 2:3]

Saying “be humble” and doing “humble” are two different things. Inspired by Holy Spirit, Paul looked to provide the Christians at Philippi (and us) with the archetype of humility, Jesus the Christ. Paul wrote:

⁶Who, being in very nature [in the form of] God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature [the form] of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

From this passage **and** its context, we can reasonably conclude three things:

1. Jesus the Christ is an excellent example of humility, so much so that He took on the form of a servant.
2. Jesus the Christ chose to humble Himself—it was *His* choice and even chose to demonstrate said humility by dying on a cross.
3. Because of His humility on Earth, God has exalted Him—even to the point that “every tongue” (even the unbeliever’s) will confess Him as LORD.

And, the problem? This Scripture seems to bedevil our finite minds, and so a doctrine of *humiliation* was explicated, displacing the infinite wisdom problem residing in human form. In other words, Christ as God also became human as Jesus—how could He be human and still be God? A review Christ’s teachings will not only help demonstrate the *kenosis* issue is not a problem, but a paradox.¹³

¹³Rather than the street meaning, I am using the philosophical definition of “paradox;” to wit, a paradox is an **apparent** inconsistency, which with more careful analysis and evidence is found to be consistent.

A PROPOSED RESOLUTION AND ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE KENOSIS ISSUE

Human beings were created to worship God. In order to worship, they were created to choose—otherwise worship becomes mere involuntary response; i.e., humans would be mere animals. With the ability to choose, comes also the ability to disobey—to distance ourselves from the Lord God Jehovah. This distance is sin and part of our nature.

Our sin nature manifests itself in a variety of ways—from excessive self-indulgence, to self-absorption, to self-worship—self is the root factor in the equation. God's "first" command in the Decalogue was "You shall have no other gods before Me." His second? Liken unto the first: "Make no idol of anything I have made ... I am a jealous God." Yet, humans continue to worship other gods—even presumably monotheistic believers. We build cathedrals of education, health, and science to ensure our eternity. We construct aircraft carriers to extend our power. In the midst of death, we continue to mortgage, literally and figuratively, our fiscal and spiritual future on the fragile expectation of a "long life." We humans are indeed a curious lot.

One of the more dirty filters caused by our sin nature are the worldly lenses we use to understand God. Christ was especially aware of our dirty lenses. So, He taught us to go beyond our sin nature, to push beyond "natural" inclinations. Consider these teachings:

Problem:	Our "Natural" Reaction:	But, the Christ Taught:
Evil people.	Resist evil people; meet force with force.	"Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."
Enemies.	Avoid and/or destroy them.	"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."
Injustice.	Fight for your rights.	"And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."
Government Oppression.	Rebel and revolt.	"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."
Who's in Charge?	Take charge.	Wash their feet.
Being Falsely Accused.	Get a good lawyer.	Quietly smile with a look that says, "Bring it on."
Indignity.	Puff it up and persist.	Obedience, even on, or to the cross.

Humility—the greatest manifestation of deity in Scripture. But, what do *we* call it? “Humiliation.” We see the Creator of the Universe beaten so hard that His ribs show through His back, and we call it humiliation. We see our LORD being mocked while sacrificing His life for our eternity, and we call it humiliation. We remember His blood, and anguish, and His call to *Eloi, Eloi*, and we call it humiliation. When we call His sacrifice “humiliation,” we blind ourselves. **We see not the greatest manifestation of deity—humility.**

It is easy to be humble when one is indeed “a nobody.” It is easy to be humble when one is wrong. It is even easy to be humble when oppressed by over-powering forces. But, can I be humble when I am God? And, can I be humble when I am sinless? And, when they are putting spikes in my wrists and hanging Me on a tree naked for my mother and others to see My punishment, can I be humble? Yes, if I Am.

But, if you tear the skin off my back? I will confess to just about anything. Make fun unfairly (or even fairly) of my intellect? I will get all puffed up with indignation. Are there dirty feet or hungry stomachs? I'll write a check. Put me on a cross with the ability to come down? I am coming down.

So, is the *kenosis* of Philippians 2:7 an emptying, a depotentiation, or a reduction in His deity? No. If anything, *kenosis* demonstrates Christ was indeed who He said He was—God. Only God would not call a legion of angels to His rescue when He could. I would. He is God; I am not. Christ's “humility” was the greatest testament to His deity. Oh, that I could be so “humiliated.”

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS & POST SCRIPT

There are many ways by which to understand the Word of God. This article illustrated the principal principle: it is best to use the Word to understand the Word. In our attempts to understand the Word, we often understand only the word. Word is inspired; word is not. Humans are naturally constrained by their language (word), but eternally freed by the Word. When we equate word with Word, we will continue to fail to see what the Word wishes for us to understand. The toxicity of our humanity (word) obfuscates our understanding of the Word. To reach God was the goal of the tower builders on the plains of Shinar. They thought their words would bridge the gap between God and their human existence. And, so today we babel on with our words and forget the Word. It is indeed a challenge to filter our finite misunderstandings from an understanding of Word. Praise be to God who incarnated Himself so that we would indeed have a new filter—Jesus the Christ for understanding God. Thank You.

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