

VEILED IN FLESH THE GODHEAD SEE: A STUDY OF THE KENOSIS OF CHRIST¹

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A tragic lack of familiarity with the historical development of classical Christology has resulted in the acceptance of unbiblical views of Christ's self-emptying. The post-Enlightenment doctrine of Kenotic Theology continues to exert its influence on contemporary evangelical models of the kenosis, seen primarily in those who would have Christ's deity circumscribed by His humanity during His earthly ministry. Keeping moored to the text of Scripture and to Chalcedonian orthodoxy combats this error and shows Christ's kenosis to consist not in the shedding of His divine attributes or prerogatives but in the veiling of the rightful expression of His divine glory. The eternal Son emptied Himself not by the subtraction of divinity but by the addition of humanity, and, consistent with the Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union, the incarnate Son acts in and through both divine and human natures at all times. A biblical understanding of these things leads to several significant implications for the Christian life.

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Introduction

“The incarnation of the Son of God.” For many long-time believers, that kind of theological shorthand has become so familiar that we cease to be amazed at the truth it describes. The eternal, preexistent Word—ever with God, ever God Himself—became flesh and tabernacled among sinners (John 1:1–14). It is rightly called the miracle of all miracles. The infinite, eternal, self-existent, self-sufficient, almighty God made Himself nothing by taking on the nature of finite, temporal, dependent, mortal humanity—without shedding His divine nature (Phil. 2:5–8). The immutable God became what He was not while never ceasing to be what He was.

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The Irish Reformer James Ussher rightly said that the incarnation is “the highest pitch of God’s wisdom, goodness, power, and glory.”² Pastor and author Mark Jones has written, “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.”³

There is a peculiar glory to this greatest of God’s miracles. Among all the works Almighty God has accomplished, the incarnation has a special luster of magnificence. The juxtaposition of the majesty of the infinite God with the humility of finite man, united in one magnificent Person, renders the glory of the incarnation more especially brilliant than all other of God’s glorious works. Therefore, God’s people must devote their minds to the study of this wonder. We must peer into this mystery with the hope of enflaming our hearts with the worship that God rightly deserves.

In studying the incarnation, we encounter the doctrine of the kenosis of Christ. That term derives from the verb *κενόω*, which Paul uses in Philippians 2:7 to speak of the humility of Christ in the incarnation. Rather than insisting on His own rights to continue in manifest divine power and authority, the eternal Son of God selflessly surrendered those rights by taking on a human nature in order to accomplish salvation for sinners. The doctrine of the incarnation entails the doctrine of the kenosis, and therefore it is worthy of our attention, study, and adoration.

But that is no easy task. The study of the incarnation and the kenosis of Christ confronts us with some of the loftiest ideas able to be conceived by the human mind: the metaphysics of defining a nature and a person, confessing the union of two distinct natures in one person without contradiction, and more. Many Christians deride such study and counsel others not to waste their time on what they view to be overly speculative and philosophical discussion.

However, 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 never exceed the depths of our theology. Therefore, the genuine worshiper of Christ must always be a student of Christ. John Murray wrote of the incarnation and kenosis: “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.”⁴

In this article, I aim to explore these mysteries which tell of the glories of our Redeemer in four parts. I first consider the church’s formulation of Scripture’s teaching concerning the full and true deity and the full and true humanity of the incarnate Son of God, especially as it was codified in the doctrine of the hypostatic union at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This gives a sense of our biblical and theological boundaries as we theologize concerning the person of Christ. Second, I observe the historical challenges to the church’s formulation of Scripture’s teaching, particularly

² James Ussher, *Immanuel, or, The Mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: Susan Islip for Thomas Downes and George Badger, 1647; repr. Swansea, 1810), 2.

³ Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 25.

⁴ John Murray, “The Mystery of Godliness,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 3:240.

in the form of the “kenotic theory” of Christology, an aberration of the biblical doctrine of the kenosis which, in an effort to preserve Christ’s genuine humanity, fatally undermines both His humanity and His deity. Third, I offer a theological evaluation of the error of kenoticism. Fourth, I present the biblical kenosis by means of a brief exposition of Philippians 2:5–8. Considering all these things, I close with some practical application.

The Church’s Formulation: A Review of Classical Christology

From the very beginning of the church, there was grave confusion regarding how to coherently hold all of the Bible’s teaching together concerning the person of Christ. On the one hand, Scripture unmistakably testifies to the deity of Christ (cf. John 1:1–14; Phil. 2:5–11, as above). He is eternal (John 8:58), omniscient (John 2:25; 16:30), omnipotent (Matt. 8:8–13; 26–27; 14:15–21), the Creator (Col. 1:16), and the Sustainer of creation (Heb. 1:3). On the other, alongside these texts, Scripture clearly testifies to the humanity of Christ. He is the *man* Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5), born of a woman (Luke 2:7; Gal 4:4); He grew in wisdom and in stature (Luke 2:52); He was hungry (Matt. 4:2) and thirsty (John 19:28), He grew weary (John 4:6) and slept (Matt. 8:24), and He bled (John 19:34) and died (John 19:30). In the face of two sets of divinely-authoritative texts that seemed to be utterly contradictory, the task of the church was to do theology—to do justice to all of the biblical data by holding all of those texts together, and to formulate them into a coherent whole.

Christological Challenges

There were many who attempted that task and failed, and their doctrines are enshrined as the historic Christological heresies of the early church. The adoptionists denied that Christ was truly God. They taught that the merely-human Jesus was adopted by God at His baptism, where He was endowed with divine power but nevertheless remained man. The docetic Gnostics denied that Jesus was truly man. Their radical dualism—in which spirit was inherently good and physical matter was inherently evil—made it impossible for God to assume a true, physical human nature. Thus, they taught that Christ only appeared⁵ human, but was not truly human. The Arians denied that Christ was fully God. He was God-like—of a similar substance with the Father but not of the same substance. The Apollinarians denied that Christ was fully man. They taught that the eternal Son assumed only a human body without a human soul. Instead, the divine nature of the Logos replaced what would have been a human soul in the man Christ Jesus.

In addition to denying the true and full deity or the true and full humanity of Christ, there were also heresies that wrongly described the relationship of Christ’s

⁵ The name “Docetism” or “docetic” derives from the Greek word δοκέω, which means “to appear.”

divine and human natures to one another.⁶ The Nestorians conceived of the two natures of Christ as two personal subjects themselves, and so made Christ to be not one person with two natures, but two persons—something of a schizophrenic. The monophysites swung in the opposite direction and confused the two natures such that Christ was to have only one nature.⁷ Some monophysites taught that the human nature was absorbed into the divine nature, so that Christ was a sort of “mostly divine” being. Later monophysites taught that the two natures were so mingled together as to form what is famously called a *tertium quid* (“a third thing”)—neither divine nor human, thus making Christ neither truly God nor truly man.

Heresy	Error
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 (<i>tertium quid</i>)

The Chalcedonian Definition

In October of 451, 520 bishops gathered in the town of Chalcedon to settle these various Christological disputes. And it was there that the church, following the teaching of Scripture, formulated the doctrine of the hypostatic union—that the incarnate Christ is one divine person who subsists in two distinct yet united natures, divine and human. The Chalcedonian Creed is the definition of orthodox Christology, and states:

“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,

⁶ When we speak of the relationship between Christ’s “natures” and His “person,” we need to understand what these fourth- and fifth-century Greek-speakers meant by these terms. Traditionally, Boethius’ definition of a person is regarded as standard: “A person is an individual substance of a rational nature” (as cited in Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology [Wheaton: Crossway, 2017], 262n17). On that definition, the properties of personhood are individuality, substantiality, and rationality. A nature, on the other hand, consists of the attributes, characteristics, and capacities that make a thing what it is a set of properties by which a person acts. The person is the agent while the nature is the “equipment” in and through which the person acts. Succinctly, the person is the *Who*, and the nature is the *What*. See the discussion in Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 262–65, 290–93, 425–29).

⁷ The name “monophysite” comes from the Greek words for one (μόνος) and nature (φύσις).

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.”⁸

The brilliance of this confession cannot be overemphasized. Against the adoptionists who denied that Christ was truly God, and against the Arians who denied He was fully God, Chalcedon affirmed the Nicene Creed and stated explicitly that Christ was “truly God,” “perfect in Godhead,” “of the same nature as the Father,” and that from eternity, since He was “begotten from the Father before the ages.” Against the Docetists who denied that Christ was truly human, Chalcedon confessed that Jesus was “truly man” and “perfect in manhood,” “consubstantial with us”—that is, sharing the very same nature that we do.

Against the Apollinarians who denied His full humanity by suggesting He took on only a human body apart from a human soul, Chalcedon explicitly asserted that Jesus was “truly man, of a rational soul and body,” and “in all things like unto us, without sin.” Now, it is plain from Scripture that Jesus possessed a human mind. If He had only possessed a divine mind, He could never be said to have grown in wisdom (Luke 2:52) or to have been ignorant of certain facts (Mark 13:32). More than that, if Jesus was to redeem humanity He had to possess a fully human nature, exactly as ours is in every way apart from sin. If He is anything but truly and fully man, He cannot represent man as Mediator between God and men. Therefore, just as our human nature consists of both a body and a rational soul or mind, and just as both our bodies and our souls have been corrupted by sin, both body and soul must be borne by our Substitute. The fourth-century Cappadocian church Father, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote,

“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.”⁹

In other words, it was not merely our skin that needed saving! Gregory of Nyssa’s co-laborer, Gregory of Nazianzus, put it famously: “That which He has not assumed

⁸ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: Volume 2: The Greek and Latin Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 62–63.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, II.13 (NPNF, Second Series, vol. 5), emphasis added.

He has not healed.”¹⁰ And because both body and soul—both flesh and mind—needed healing, Christ took on a full human nature: a rational soul and body.

Against the Nestorians, Chalcedon affirmed that Christ’s two natures are without division or separation, and which concur “in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son.” This is plainly supported by Scripture. The Bible never presents Jesus as having a conversation with Himself. We never see a divine person addressing the human person in the same Man. Jesus addresses the Father, because they are two distinct persons (who nevertheless share the identical nature). Jesus speaks of Himself as “I” and the Father as “You” in His prayers (e.g., John 17:4), but we never see that kind of “I”–“Thou” relationship within the God-man. The divine Son does not take unto Himself a human *person*, but a human *nature*; He is but one person. And yet against the monophysites, Chalcedon confessed that though Christ is one person He does not subsist in one nature, but was to be acknowledged “in two natures without confusion or change,” and that the distinction of the natures is not undermined by virtue of their union in the single Person, and that the properties of each nature are preserved and not comingled. In a single paragraph, Chalcedon decimated all contemporary enemies of biblical Christology. It is a brilliant confession of theology, precisely because it is so thoroughly biblical.

Implications of Chalcedon for the Kenosis

There are several implications of the Chalcedonian Definition that bear directly on our discussion. First, when the Creed affirms that Christ in the incarnation is not divided into two persons, but is one and the same Son, it is affirming that the subject of the incarnation was the *person* of the divine Son, and that He remains that single person throughout His incarnation. The incarnation is not the Son’s divine nature transmuting into a human nature; nor is it that the person of the Son assumed a human person along with a human nature. Instead, the *person* of the Son, who had always subsisted in the *divine* nature, now, without ceasing to subsist in that divine nature, began subsisting in a *human* nature as well. The person of that human nature—the subject which acted in and through Christ’s human nature—was the same person who had acted in and through the divine nature from all eternity: God the Son.

Secondly, when, against the Apollinarians, the Creed affirms that Christ possessed a rational soul as well as a body, it attributes that rational soul to human nature, not to personhood in general. The person of the Son does not replace the human soul. This means that the faculty of reason (i.e., the mind, intelligence, consciousness, will) is a property of a nature, not of a person. Therefore, as non-intuitive as it may be for us to say it, Christ had both a divine mind and a human mind, both a divine consciousness and a human consciousness, both a divine will and a human will.¹¹ Donald Fairbairn offers a helpful explanation:

¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzen, *First Letter to Cledonius [Epistle 101]*, as cited in Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 160.

¹¹ The great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, writes, “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

“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.”¹²

In the incarnation, the one person of the divine Son is fully and truly God and fully and truly human. He subsists in two distinct natures: divine and human. And the properties of both the divine and human natures are not amended, lost, or mixed together, but are preserved in their integrity by virtue of their union in one and the same Son. The person of the Son acts in and through both of those distinct natures at the very same time.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that Scripture predicates of the one person, Christ, attributes of deity *and* attributes humanity, because this single person possesses both a complete divine nature and a complete human nature. This is the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, or the communication of properties. That is, the properties of each nature are communicated to the person of Christ; whatever can be said of either nature can be said of the whole person.¹³ So when Scripture affirms seemingly contradictory realities concerning the incarnate Christ—that He is eternal God, yet born in time; Creator, yet possessor of a created body; sustaining the universe while being sustained by Mary; omniscient God, yet ignorant and increasing in wisdom; omnipotent Lord, yet exhausted and sleeping—it is affirming nothing other than the hypostatic union, that Christ is one person subsisting in two distinct yet inseparable natures. He is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, Creator, and Sustainer according to His deity, and yet temporal, ignorant, weak, created, and sustained according to His humanity. We ought to bow in wonder before the wisdom of the divine mind that conceives such a peculiarly glorious miracle as the incarnation.

The Historical Challenges: The Rise of Kenotic Christology

The church's formulation of Scripture's teaching concerning the hypostatic union is codified in the Chalcedonian Creed. In all our theologizing about the person of

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).

¹² Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 140.

¹³ For example, that is how we can make sense of statements like Acts 20:28, which speaks of God purchasing the church with His own blood. By virtue of His deity God has no blood, for He is spirit (John 4:24). But because the person of Jesus possesses a fully human nature, He has blood. And because the person of Jesus possesses a fully divine nature, He is rightly called God. Therefore, it is proper for Paul to speak of the blood of Jesus as the blood of God. It must be noted, however, that the properties of one nature cannot be properly predicated of the other nature. Christ's deity is never humanized, nor is His humanity divinized; each nature retains its own distinct properties. But because the two natures are united in one person, whatever can be predicated of either nature can be predicated of the person as a whole.

Christ, therefore, we must take care above all things to preserve the genuineness of both divine and human natures subsisting in the single person of God the Son incarnate.

However, some have argued that the implications of Chalcedonian orthodoxy do not do justice to the genuineness of Christ's human nature. With the so-called "Enlightenment" of the mid-19th century, the visible church began to be dominated by rationalism. In such a climate, it became increasingly difficult for people to accept that Christ could be able to "live on two levels," as Fairbairn said, having both a divine consciousness and a human consciousness simultaneously while remaining one person. Besides this, it was objected that since we do not have access to a divine consciousness or to divine attributes; Jesus could not have had such access without ceasing to be genuinely human.

As a result, these thinkers emphasized texts which speak of Jesus' ignorance or weakness, and, seizing upon Paul's statement that "He emptied Himself" (Phil. 2:7), they concluded that in the incarnation Jesus emptied Himself of at least some of His divine attributes in order to become truly human. Wayne Grudem summarizes,

"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."¹⁴

There were various strains of this teaching.¹⁵ Kenoticism began in 19th-century Lutheranism in Germany. Gottfried Thomasius introduced a distinction between what he called the "relative" attributes of God (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence) and the "essential" attributes of God (e.g., truth, holiness, love). Thomasius argued that these latter attributes were essential to being God, but that the relative attributes were not. One could still be God without being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Thus, Jesus did not lay aside all of His divine attributes (and so He was still God), but He did relinquish some of them.

J. H. Ebrard maintained that Christ did not divest Himself of any of His attributes, but in His incarnation He basically reduced Himself to a human soul. Therefore, He did possess His divine attributes—even omniscience, omnipotence, etc.—but in a scaled-down form, such that they could be expressed only in a way that was consistent with the limitations of time and humanity. Others said Christ possessed His attributes but was not conscious of them, since He limited Himself to a purely human consciousness. W. F. Gess went further than all the rest and said that in becoming a human person and metamorphosing into a human soul, the Son surrendered all of His

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 551–52.

¹⁵ A thorough survey of the history of kenotic theology is available in A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (T&T Clark, 1900). A helpful summary may also be found in Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 356–64, to whose work I am indebted for this section.

divine attributes. He exercised no divine power except by the Spirit, entirely relinquished His eternal self-consciousness as the Son, and only gradually regained His divine consciousness through the normal course of human development.

A bit later, kenotic Christology began to catch on in Britain, especially as it seemed to some to be a middle way between classical Christology and Higher Criticism. Charles Gore hoped to reconcile Jesus' deity with the fact that He believed Moses wrote all five books of the Pentateuch and that Isaiah wrote all of Isaiah, conclusions that were entirely out of step with the "scholarship" of the Higher Critics. Therefore, by arguing that Christ laid aside His omniscience, Gore could argue that the God-Man was wrong about matters of history, science, and inerrancy, and yet that He was still God. Men like P. T. Forsyth, Hugh Ross 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, others taught that He did so occasionally.

All of these variations were aiming at one key theological principle: in order to be genuinely human, the Son had to live entirely within the limitations of finite human nature, and to exercise the divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence would be incompatible with a truly human experience.¹⁶

Such thinking continues even today. A version of kenoticism has been seeping into contemporary evangelical circles. Contrary to the doctrine outlined above (what Stephen Wellum calls *Ontological Kenoticism*¹⁷), evangelicals recognize that the Son cannot surrender any divine attributes without ceasing to be God. Instead, they believe that, while 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*¹⁸, and it is embraced, to varying degrees and with various nuances, by men such as the biblical scholar Gerald Hawthorne, philosophers William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland, and theologians Millard Erickson and Bruce Ware.¹⁹

¹⁶ Thus they denied the essential tenet of orthodox Christology called the *extra Calvinisticum*. Unfortunately named, since it was not original with Calvin but was shared by the classical tradition, this teaches that God the Son is fully united to, but never fully contained within, the human nature. The infinite cannot be comprehended by the finite (*finitum non capax infiniti*), and so the infinite, divine essence is not circumscribed within the bounds of Jesus' human nature. For more on this doctrine, especially in the theology of John Calvin, see E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966).

¹⁷ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 374–80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 380–93.

¹⁹ See Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 597–614; Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). Once again, I am indebted to the research of Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 380–93.

Because each of the above theologians nuance and distinguish their particular view from the others, a brief summary of kenoticism—whether ontological or functional—is necessarily reductionistic. For the sake of a simple summary, however, we may look to 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.”²⁰

The Theological Evaluation

There are several reasons why the doctrine of kenotic Christology is neither theologically sound nor biblically faithful.

Kenoticism Undermines the Deity of Christ

First, kenoticism undermines the deity of Christ, chiefly by disregarding the implications of divine simplicity. Now, divine simplicity does not mean that God is simple to understand. Rather, to say God is a simple being is to say that God’s being is not compounded; God is not made up of parts. It is not as if when you add together love, holiness, truth, omniscience, and the rest of God’s attributes, at the end of the recipe you get God. No, God’s attributes are identical to His essence. He is what He has. God is not just loving; He *is* love (1 John 4:8). He is not just holy; He *is* holiness (1 John 1:5). If the Triune God were to be deprived of even one of His attributes, He would no longer be God.

For example, the God of the Bible is holy, but if holiness no longer characterized the essence of God, He would not be the God that Scripture reveals. God is omnipotent, but if He were not all-powerful, He would not be Yahweh of hosts, who asks Abraham, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14). God is omniscient, but if He were not all-knowing, He would not be the God who searches all hearts, understands every intent of man’s thoughts (1 Chron. 28:9), and who knows when we sit, when we rise, and even what we will say before we say it (Ps. 139:1–4). God’s attributes are identical to His essence. They are not just what God is like; they are who God is.²¹

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 310.

²¹ For an excellent, accessible defense of the doctrine of divine simplicity, see James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017). For a fuller treatment, see James Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), and Stephen J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

This means that kenoticism is fundamentally fatal to the deity of Christ. Divine simplicity puts the lie to the idea that any of God's attributes are relative and not essential to His being. All of God's attributes are essential to Him, and the eternal Son possesses the full, undivided divine essence from all eternity. If, at His incarnation, the Son surrendered even one of His divine attributes, He would have ceased to subsist in the divine nature, and thus ceased to be God at all. God cannot be less than the totality of divine attributes without being less than God. For Jesus to be God, He must continue to fully subsist in the divine nature, and therefore must possess all the divine attributes.

To the objection that some divine attributes could be possessed in potentiality, we respond that a potential attribute is not an attribute. There can be no such thing as a potentially omniscient being; you are either omniscient or not. David Wells compellingly 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," he says, "a necessary passivity is an operating impotence."²² There is simply no way to maintain that Christ remains God while ceasing to fully possess and actively subsist in each of His divine attributes.

Kenoticism Undermines Trinitarianism

An attack on the deity of Christ necessarily leads, then, to an attack on orthodox Trinitarianism itself. If Jesus does not actively subsist in each of His divine attributes, He can no longer be said to subsist in the full essence of God. Wells goes on to say, "In practice, this meant that during the incarnate period, the divine circuitry was broken, the second person was on a leave of absence from Godhead, and the Trinity was at best reduced to a 'binity.'"²³ Indeed, both the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds confess that the Son is *ὁμοούσιος*—consubstantial, of the same substance—with the Father and the Spirit. 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 simply cannot be said to be of the *same* substance. Kenotic Christology cannot be consistently squared with Nicene Trinitarianism. In fact, it is more at home with the semi-Arianism that the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople fought so vigorously to destroy.

Kenoticism Undermines the Continuity between the Preexistent and Incarnate Christ

Third, by holding that Christ surrendered His divine consciousness at the incarnation, kenoticism undermines the personal continuity between the Preexistent Son and the Incarnate Christ. Macleod observes,

²² David Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 1984), 139.

²³ *Ibid.*

“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.”²⁴

Besides this, a loss of divine consciousness does not square with the biblical data. Scripture never portrays Christ as being ignorant of His deity, or as regaining His divine consciousness little by little. Quite the opposite is the case. He is conscious of His pre-incarnate glory (John 17:5), lays claim to the covenant name of Yahweh (John 8:58), and testifies to His unity with the Father (John 10:30). Such statements are not limited to His maturity when He might have been said to have already “re-gained His divine consciousness.” No, at twelve years old, Jesus, conscious of His divine Sonship, calls God “*My Father*,” demonstrating an awareness that He was the only begotten of the Father, and therefore *the* Son of God in a way that was not true of others (Luke 2:41–50).²⁵

The eternal Son of God who existed for all eternity in the glory and majesty of the Trinity, is, as Chalcedon said, “one and the same Son” as the incarnate Christ who took on flesh and dwelt among us. And He Himself was always conscious of that fact. Though He may have grown in understanding with respect to His human nature, He was always conscious of it with respect to His divine nature.

Kenoticism Undermines the Distinction between Christ’s Humiliation and Exaltation

Fourth, kenoticism undermines the necessary distinction between the incarnate Christ in His state of humiliation and the incarnate Christ in the state of His exaltation. It cannot be disputed that the incarnation is permanent; Paul says of the Christ who is presently at the right hand of the Father in heaven that “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells [present tense] bodily” (Col. 2:9). However, the kenotic argument is that omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and divine consciousness are all incompatible with genuine humanity. Jesus had to surrender these in order to become truly human. But given that Christ remains incarnate even in His state of exaltation, it must be asked: Is He still functioning under the limitations of His kenosis? Is He now, at this present moment, less than omniscient, still ignorant of the hour of His return? Is He less than omnipresent, not “with [us] always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20)? Is He less than omnipotent, not exalted “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named” (Eph. 1:21)? Clearly, such a position cannot be reconciled with Scripture. Christ remains

²⁴ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 210, emphasis original.

²⁵ See William Hendriksen, *Luke*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 185; Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994) 271.

incarnate at the same time that He is no longer in the state of humiliation that marked His kenosis.

It must further be asked, then: Is the exalted Christ somehow not genuinely human? Kenoticism cannot escape this dilemma, as Wellum puts it: "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."²⁶ Yet Scripture is clear that He does exercise them, and that, as our Mediator who ever lives to make intercession for us, He is truly human. This means that true and genuine humanity is not incompatible with the exercise of divine attributes. The fundamental premise of kenoticism fails.

Kenoticism is Irreconcilable with Chalcedonian Christology

Fifth, though it claims to be in line with Chalcedonian orthodoxy, kenotic Christology is irreconcilable with it. Chalcedon declared that the person of the Son, who subsisted eternally in the divine nature, took to Himself a human nature. His kenosis was not a subtraction of aspects of His divine nature, but the addition of a human nature, which human nature consisted of a real human body and a rational human soul, or a human mind. This means that the faculties of "mind" and "will" are properties of nature, and since Christ had both a divine nature 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. He is therefore able, as Fairbairn said, to "live on two levels at the same time"—the divine and the human—without becoming two persons.

Kenoticism rejects this outright. Forsyth wrote, "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."²⁷ But that is nothing more than the rejection of the possibility of there being two natures in one person. It is an *a priori* rejection of Chalcedon's doctrine that the properties of each of Christ's two natures are preserved and concurring in the one Person.

Though Forsyth wrote several hundred years after Calvin, the Genevan Reformer had seen this error in his own day. He diagnosed it as follows: "There is nothing which furious and frantic spirits cannot throw into confusion. 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?"²⁸ Those holding to classical Christology have always thus recognized kenoticism as a species of the monophysitism Chalcedon sought to overthrow. Herman Bavinck gave the following assessment:

²⁶ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 417.

²⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 319.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.4.

“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.”²⁹

Macleod offers a similar evaluation:

“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.”³⁰

Ironically, and sadly, kenoticism ends up denying both the deity and the humanity of Christ. Christ cannot be truly God, because He has relinquished several of the divine attributes and thus no longer fully possesses the undivided divine essence. Neither can Christ be truly man, because He does not possess a human mind, will, or consciousness. Kenotic Christology, then, entails heresy on multiple fronts, and is irreconcilable with historic Christian orthodoxy.

Kenoticism is Incompatible with the Biblical Presentation of Christ

While it is immensely important to defer to the historic creeds, Scripture alone is our sole, infallible authority for these matters. Thus, the most important criticism of kenotic Christology is that it is incompatible with the biblical presentation of the incarnate Christ. The New Testament portrays the truly and fully human Christ as truly and fully divine, conscious of and acting in accordance with His deity, actively exercising the attributes of God, and receiving the worship that belongs to God alone.

Scripture Calls Jesus “God”

In the first place, the New Testament clearly teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ is God. He is called God explicitly in John 1:1 and 18, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, and 2 Peter 1:1. Scripture also speaks of His Godhood in His humiliation. Speaking of the time of Christ’s earthly sojourn, Paul says, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19, ESV). He later clarifies that Christ remains

²⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:303.

³⁰ Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 209–10.

incarnate during His heavenly exaltation, stating that in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells (presently) bodily (Col. 2:9). Matthew 1:23 declares that Mary's Son would be called "Immanuel," which means, "God with us." Without any qualification, God is said to dwell with man in the person of the incarnate Christ, for the incarnate Christ is Himself God. We may add to these passages all those which speak of Christ as the *Son* of God (Mark 1:1; Luke 1:35; 22:70; John 5:25; 20:31), or the only-begotten Son of God (John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:19), indicating that He shares the very same nature as God the Father, even during the time of His humiliation.

Jesus Is Conscious of His Deity

Secondly, Scripture presents Jesus as conscious of His deity. There are several instances in Jesus' life where He asserted His equality and oneness with God the Father, in response to which the Jews attempted to stone Him for blasphemy. When He explains that He works on the Sabbath because His Father does also, the Jews understand the implication: "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because He . . . was calling God His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*" (John 5:17–18). When He asserts His pre-existence of Abraham and identifies Himself as the I AM, the Jews picked up stones to kill Him, because He was identifying Himself as God (John 8:58–59). When He asserts, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) even the Pharisees understood that this was not merely an affirmation of unity of purpose or communion with the Father, but a claim of metaphysical and ontological equality with God.³¹ For this reason they attempt to stone Him once again: "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God" (John 10:33). Jesus knew exactly who He was: God the Son incarnate.

Jesus Exercises Divine Prerogatives

Third, Scripture records Jesus exercising the divine prerogatives that kenoticism claims were incompatible with His humanity. He is the Lord of salvation in the same manner as the Father: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes" (John 5:21; cf. 11:25). He heals the paralytic by announcing, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you," and the Pharisees once again accuse Him of blasphemy, thinking to themselves, "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" Jesus does not correct them, but only affirms that the Son of Man rightly exercises the divine prerogative to forgive sins (Luke 5:18–26). Only God can forgive sins, and the incarnate Christ forgives sins.

Jesus is not only the Lord of salvation but also the Lord of revelation. He delivers revelation to God's people, not as the prophets who spoke from the derived authority of God and declared, "Thus saith the Lord." No, Jesus proclaims revelation from His own authority, declaring, "*I* say to you" (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

Further, Jesus speaks of possessing a unique sovereignty that can only be a mark of divinity. In Matthew 11:27, He declares that all things have been handed over to Him by His Father, and that no one knows the Father except those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. In John 10:17–18, He speaks of a power no other human being

³¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 394–95.

has ever had: the power not only to lay His life down, but also the power to take it up again. These are claims to deity.

Finally, Jesus also exercised the prerogative to receive worship. Not even angels permitted men to worship them, but they exhorted men to worship God alone (Rev 19:10). However, Jesus receives the worship of Thomas, who confesses Him to be “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

Jesus Exercises Divine Attributes

Perhaps most importantly, Scripture unmistakably presents Christ as exercising the very divine attributes that kenoticism claims He had to have laid aside. First, Scripture ascribes the divine attribute of omnipresence to the incarnate Christ. Though He is presently exalted in heaven, it is precisely because He exists in glorified humanity as well as eternal deity that He can promise the disciples that He will always be with them (Matt 28:20).

Scripture also portrays the incarnate Christ as omniscient. When the Pharisees grumble because Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins, they do not voice their concern to Jesus; He reads their minds. The parallel in Mark 2:6 says the scribes were “reasoning in their hearts,” and Luke 5:22 says Jesus was “aware of their reasonings.” Similarly, Jesus not only recognizes Nathanael without ever having met him, but He also knows His character—an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael responds appropriately, by confessing, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (John 1:47–49). The display of omniscience convinced Nathanael that Jesus was the Divine Son of David that the prophets promised. Evidence for Jesus’ omniscience can be multiplied (e.g., John 4:18; 11:14).

On this point, however, kenoticists object that supernatural knowledge does not necessarily imply omniscience. Instead, they reason that Jesus was a man entirely dependent upon the Holy Spirit, and therefore the Spirit could have revealed these things to Jesus just like any other prophet. But Jesus’ knowledge is more extensive even than what the prophets knew by revelation from God. No prophet could claim knowledge of the identity of the elect and non-elect, but Scripture tells us that “Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe” (John 6:64). He knew all men, and what was in man (John 2:25). And when he began to speak plainly of His heavenly origin, the disciples explicitly ascribed omniscience to Him: “Now we know that You know all things” (John 16:30), the same confession Peter makes after the resurrection (John 21:17). These statements indicate something greater than the knowledge of prophets gained by revelation. This is the knowledge of the omniscient God Himself.

But what about Mark 13:32? Is not the comment that Jesus does not know the day or hour of His return an explicit repudiation of omniscience? Put frankly, not if we understand the hypostatic union! If Christ possesses both a fully divine and a fully human nature, able to live on two levels of consciousness at the same time, then, as Calvin said, “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*.”³² Gregory

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1, emphasis added.

of Nazianzus wrote of this text, “We are to understand the ignorance in the most reverent sense, by attributing it to the manhood, and not to the Godhead.”³³ We ought to say that the person of Christ did know the hour of His return according to His divine nature; otherwise He could not be God. But the one and the same Son did not know the hour of His return according to His human nature. He always had access to His divine consciousness, but He never exploited that privilege for Himself. He only accessed that knowledge when it was in accordance with the mission His Father had given Him.

In addition to omnipresence and omniscience, Jesus also exercised omnipotence during His earthly sojourn. In the first place, kenoticism has never been able to adequately answer how the Son, if bereft of His divine power, went on performing the cosmic function of sustaining the universe, which Colossians 1:16–17 and Hebrews 1:3 explicitly describe as His work. Scripture gives no indication that the Son ceased this work when He became incarnate. The kenoticists answer that He had to have temporarily ceased this work, and that He delegated this work to the Father and the Spirit until His kenosis was finished. But such a conception crosses the line into Trinitarian heresy once again, this time running afoul of the pro-Nicene maxim that the external works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*). That is to say, just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are inseparable in their essence, so also are they inseparable in their work. In any divine act all three Persons of the Trinity are involved and act together. To deny this is to introduce into the Trinity the very kind of rift that the Nicene Fathers battled against the Arians. The reality is: as Jesus was being sustained by the nutrients from Mary’s body according to His human nature, He was in the very same moment sustaining not only Mary herself but the galaxies according to His divine nature.

Besides these cosmic functions, Jesus exercised His divine omnipotence as He performed various miracles that testified to His deity. He turned water into wine (John 2:1–11), fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish (Matt. 14:15–21), calmed the stormy waters with a word (Matt. 8:26–27), and raised the dead (John 11:43–44). Kenoticists object that He performed these miracles not by His own divine power as God the Son—for that would not be consistent with His humanity—but only by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as the Spirit worked through Moses and Elijah to perform miracles.

The problem with that interpretation, however, is that Scripture explicitly presents these miracles as manifesting the unique glory of the Son, and as the ground upon which one ought to believe that He is the divine Messiah. The apostle John speaks of beholding in Jesus “glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14), the *unique* glory of the one and only Son to be begotten of the Father from eternity. Shortly after that, when Jesus turned the water into wine, John comments, “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). In other words, the unique glory of the only begotten Son was put on display through Christ’s miracles, and it was that very glory that was the ground of their faith in Him—not as merely another Spirit-filled prophet, but as the divine Messiah, whose name would be called Mighty God

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fourth Theological Oration*, 15.

(Isa. 9:6). Jesus Himself views His miracles as warrant for believing in His divinity: “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:37–38). It must be noted that the Son does not call these the works of the Spirit as might be accomplished in any other human prophet.³⁴ Instead, He calls them “the works of My Father,” and cites them as evidence of the mutual indwelling of the Father and Son—something that can be said only of divine Persons (cf. John 14:10–11). Thus, Calvin says, “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.”³⁵ And Macleod concludes,

“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.”³⁶

Indeed, from seeing His glory as of the only begotten from the Father.

The Biblical Kenosis

Having observed the failure of Kenotic Theology to explain the kenosis of Christ in fidelity to Scripture and in accordance with sound doctrine, we must ask: What then is the kenosis of Christ? Three observations from Paul’s comments in Philippians 2:5–8 provide the answer to that question.

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

First, we must apprehend the glory of the eternal Son. Paul writes, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus who, existing in the form of God . . .” (author’s translation). While most translations translate “existing” in the past tense, Paul uses a present participle to express ongoing, continuous action. Before He took on human flesh, the Eternal Son was eternally existing in the form of God.

³⁴ This is not to deny that Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit in His earthly mission (e.g., Matt. 12:28). He was the Man of the Spirit *par excellence*, full of the Spirit without measure. Rather, it is to say that the God-man who acts according to His human nature by virtue of His being filled with the Holy Spirit without measure is the same God-man who acts according to His divine nature by virtue of His authority and power as eternal Son. Orthodoxy affirms both propositions, whereas functional kenoticism affirms only the former and denies the latter.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.13.

³⁶ Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 210–11.

Now, “form” does not mean that Jesus only seemed to be like God. The Greek term μορφή does not connote merely the outward appearance of something, as we think of in English. The word is notoriously difficult to translate. One scholar writes, “‘Form’ is an inadequate rendering of μορφή, but our language affords no better word.”³⁷ Rather than a single, one-to-one word equivalent, we have to explain what the term means. In the next verse, it describes the genuine humanity that Christ assumed to Himself in the incarnation. Christ took the μορφή δούλου, the form of a slave. He did not merely appear human or merely have the external features of humanity; that is the very docetic heresy the rejection of which the apostle John makes the test of orthodoxy (1 John 4:2–3). Instead, the μορφή δούλου refers to the fact that Christ was fully and truly human—that He possesses a genuine human nature. In the same way, then, the μορφή θεοῦ refers to the fact that Christ was fully and truly God—that He possesses the genuine divine nature.

Yet μορφή is not just a synonym for οὐσία or φύσις, the other words that refer to one’s substance, essence, or nature. μορφή is used nowhere else in the New Testament (except in the long ending of Mark, the authenticity of which is disputed), but in the Septuagint it speaks clearly of one’s appearance.³⁸ Besides this, a cognate form of μορφή is used to describe Jesus’ transfiguration: He was μετεμορφώθη—changed in μορφή (Matt. 17:2). But Christ’s immutable divine essence was not changed at the transfiguration. Rather, the outward expression of the glory of Christ’s divine nature had been veiled, and for a moment He was removing the veil and once again letting His glory shine forth.

Taking that all together, we ought to conclude that μορφή refers to the outward manifestation that corresponds to the inward essence—to the external form that represents what is intrinsic and essential.³⁹ It is “a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it.”⁴⁰ In other words, μορφή is not the essence, but no one can appear or exist in view of others in the form of God, manifesting all the perfections of God, unless that person is in fact God.⁴¹ Christ was existing in the μορφή of God precisely because in His very essence and His being He *is* God from all eternity.

The context of Philippians 2 makes that clear. In verse 6, Paul says that Christ did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped. “Equality” is rendered from the Greek word ἴσος, from which we get the word *isomers*, which describe chemical compounds that have the same number of the same elements but have different structural formulas. They are distinct compounds, but on a chemical level, they are equal to each other. To switch from chemistry to geometry, an *isosceles* triangle is a triangle that has two equal sides. Jesus is ἴσα θεῷ, equal to God. When one considers such statements as Isaiah 46:9, in which God says, “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me,” the conclusion is inescapable. If (a) no one

³⁷ Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 57.

³⁸ Judges 8:18; Job 4:16; Isaiah 44:13; Daniel 3:19, LXX.

³⁹ Homer A. Kent, Jr., “Philippians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11:123, 126.

⁴⁰ J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 417.

⁴¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:386.

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.

If *μορφή* 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. Throughout the Old Testament, when God’s presence is represented as dwelling with His people, there is always a manifestation of that *shekinah* glory—the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire, the bright light that filled the Tabernacle and the Temple. But the Son is the very radiance of the glory of God (Heb. 1:3), the image of God in whose face the glory of God shines in fullness (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). He is the exalted Lord seated on the throne of heaven, the train of whose robe fills the heavenly temple, of whom the angels declare, “The whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:1–8; cf. John 12:37–41). Before the world was, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us was eternally existing in the very nature, essence, and glory of God.

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

Having beheld the glory of the eternal Son, we may also observe from this passage what we might call the humility of the eternal Son. “Christ Jesus, 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 bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6–7).

Even though Christ existed eternally in the very nature of God, equal with the Father, ruling creation in majesty and receiving the worship of the saints and angels in heaven, He did not regard that equality as something to be grasped. He did not regard the dignity of His station something to cling to or to take selfish advantage of and use to further His own ends.⁴² Rather, He humbly accepted the mission of His incarnation, in which He would renounce the glories of Heaven for a time, take on the nature of a human being, and veil the splendor and majesty of His deity behind the form of a slave. Though He had every right to continue in unlimited manifest power and authority, to radiate the very essence and glory of deity, to receive nothing but the most exalted worship of the host of heaven—immune from poverty, pain, and humiliation—He did not selfishly count those blessings to be slavishly held on to, but sacrificed them to become man and accomplish salvation for sinners. He “emptied Himself” (Phil. 2:7).

But of what did Christ empty Himself? The kenoticists have answered, “He emptied Himself of His deity,” or “of His ‘relative’ divine attributes,” or “of His divine consciousness,” or “of His divine prerogatives.” Yet we have observed why those answers fall short of biblical fidelity and theological soundness. Of what, then, did the divine Son empty Himself? Even asking the question demonstrates a misunderstanding of the language. Though *κενόω* literally means “to empty,” everywhere

⁴² Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 209.

it is used in Scripture it is used in a figurative sense.⁴³ According to New Testament usage, κενῶω doesn't mean "to pour out," as if Jesus was pouring His deity, attributes, or prerogatives out of Himself. If that were Paul's intent he would have used ἐκχέω, which he employs elsewhere to speak of pouring something out of something else.⁴⁴ But everywhere κενῶω appears in Scripture, it means "to make void," "to nullify," "to make of no effect." Paul uses it that way in Romans 4:14, where he says, "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void (κεκένωται) and the promise is nullified." Yet no one thinks to ask, "Of what has faith been made empty?" The idea is that faith would be nullified—it would come to naught—if righteousness could come by the Law.⁴⁵

The text teaches, then, not that Christ emptied Himself of something, but that He emptied *Himself*. He nullified Himself; He made Himself of no effect. The Son Himself is the object of this emptying. He did not empty the form of God, nor the divine attributes, nor His divine prerogatives, but Himself. The King James Version captures this well by translating verse 7 thus: "[He] made himself of no reputation." The NIV's rendering is also helpful: "[He] made himself nothing." Then, the very next phrase explains the manner in which the Son made Himself nothing: "[He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men." Christ made Himself of no effect by taking on human nature in His incarnation. He nullified Himself not by subtracting from His deity, but by adding His humanity. This is an emptying by addition! John Murray writes,

"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."⁴⁶

Christ remained what He was, even when He became what He was not. He did not exchange His deity for His humanity. Nor did He become a human *person*. As a

⁴³ Romans 4:14; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 9:15; 2 Corinthians 9:3.

⁴⁴ E.g., Romans 5:5; Titus 3:6.

⁴⁵ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 105.

⁴⁶ John Murray, "The Riches and the Poverty of Jesus Christ," in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 3:230–31.

divine person, He assumed a human *nature*.⁴⁷ The divine, second Person of the Trinity, who was eternally existing in the form of God, nullified Himself by taking the form of a slave and being born in the likeness of man. In the majesty of Heaven, to look on Him would have been to look on the epitome of all beauty. But being found in appearance as a man (Phil. 2:8), He had “no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men . . . and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isa. 53:2–3). The rich became poor (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). The worshiped became the despised. The blessed One became the man of sorrows. The Master became the slave. As John Calvin wrote: “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.”⁴⁸ Bavinck adds, “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.”⁴⁹

We ought then to understand that a significant aspect of the kenosis was a *krypsis*—that is, a concealment or a veiling of the glory that is the external manifestation of His nature.⁵⁰ Christ fully possessed His divine nature, attributes, and prerogatives, but for the sake of becoming truly human, He did not always fully express the glories of His majesty. When He is tempted by Satan in the wilderness to exercise His divine omnipotence to turn the stones into bread or to throw Himself from the top of the temple and manifest His divine glory by being rescued by angels, He refuses (Matt. 4:1–11). When Jesus is betrayed in Gethsemane, He is the divine Son who has twelve legions of angels at His disposal (Matt. 26:53), but He refuses to dispatch them to His service. Whenever any exercise of His divine power or any manifestation of His divine glory would have functioned to benefit only Himself, or to ease the limitations of a truly human existence, and would not be for the benefit of those He came to serve in accordance with His messianic mission, He refused to exercise those prerogatives.

However, there certainly were times when He did exercise His divine power and did manifest His unique divine glory, such as when He turned water into wine, rebuked the waves, read minds, and raised the dead. In these instances, it was essential to the divine Son’s ministry to display the glory of the only begotten Son of God. When the mission He received from His Father required Him to suffer hunger in the midst of His temptation in order that the obedience imputed to His people would be the obedience of a man, Jesus willingly refused to insist upon His right to be free from hunger (Matt. 4:3–4). But when that same divine mission required Him to display His glory in order to prove His divinity and work faith in the hearts of the elect, Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:11).

⁴⁷ The proper definitions of and distinctions between *person* and *nature* are essential to orthodox Christology. See footnote 6.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of the Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Calvin’s Commentaries, 500th anniversary edition, trans. and ed. by John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 56–57, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:432.

⁵⁰ See Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 370.

Such was the humility of the eternal Son. He eternally existed in the perfect blessedness of heavenly communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. From the foundation of creation, He enjoyed the unfettered worship of the hosts of heaven. Even if His divine mission sent Him to be born into the lap of luxury rather than in the humble stable, for the eternal Son of God to experience just a single pang of hunger would have been an infinite condescension. Free from all weakness, infirmity, decay, and sorrow, the eternal Son contemplated the riches of His pre-incarnate glory, and humbly chose to become poor (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9)—to veil His glory by taking on human nature and the weakness of human flesh in order that He might live and die as the slave of all.

The Humility of the Incarnate Christ (v. 8)

And yet the Son's humility did not stop at taking on a human nature. We go on to observe the humility of the incarnate Christ: "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

The divine Son became not just a man, but an obedient man. From all eternity, the Son was equal to the Father in glory, majesty, and authority. In His incarnation, however, He began to relate to the Father in terms of authority and submission (e.g., John 5:30; 6:38). The Master had become the slave. The Lord who rightfully issues commands subjected Himself to obeying commands.

And that is not all. He was not only obedient, but obedient to the point of death. The Author of Life humbly submitted to death. The One without sin humbly submitted to sin's curse. The One who has life within Himself (John 1:4; 5:26)—who gives life to whomever He wishes (John 5:21)—humbly released His grip on His own human life in submission to the Father and in love for those whom His Father has given Him. Here is humility shining like the sun in its full strength. We rightly sing, "Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, My God, shouldst die for me?"

And yet there are greater depths to plumb before the humiliation of the Son of God reaches rock bottom. He was not just man, not just obedient, and not just obedient unto death. The holy Son of God, the Lord of glory, "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The horrors of the cross scarcely need describing. One commentator said, "The cross displayed the lowest depths of human depravity and cruelty. It exhibited the most brutal form of sadistic torture and execution ever invented by malicious human minds."⁵¹ In crucifixion, metal spikes were driven through the victim's wrists and feet, and he was left to hang naked and exposed, sometimes for days. Because the body would be pulled down by gravity, the weight of a victim's own body would press against his lungs, and the hyperextension of the lungs and chest muscles made it difficult to breathe. Victims would gasp for air by pulling themselves up, but when they would do that the wounds in their wrists and feet would tear at the stakes that pierced them, and the flesh of their backs—usually torn open from flogging—would grate against the jagged wood. Eventually, when he could no longer summon the strength to pull himself up to

⁵¹ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 157

breathe, the victim of a crucifixion would die from suffocation under the weight of his own body. This was the most sadistically cruel, excruciatingly painful, and loathsome degrading death that a man could die. And on Golgotha 2,000 years ago, the Son of God died this death. God on a cross.

Even at that point, though, His mission was not complete. The shame and pain of the cross was not the lowest depth to which the Son of God submitted Himself. Deuteronomy 21:23 taught that anyone hanged on a tree is accursed of God, and Paul quotes this verse in Galatians 3:13: “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” Worse than the pain, the torture, and the shame, crucifixion also brought with it a divine curse. This is rock bottom. This is the Highest of the high gone to the lowest of the low. Here is the eternal Son cursed by God the Father. He never deserved to know His Father’s wrath, but only ever His delight and approbation. Yet on Calvary, He was cut off from the apple of His eye, the joy of His heart. What bewilderment must the Son of God have experienced when for the first time in all of eternity He felt His Father’s displeasure. What must it have been to utter that harrowing cry: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

This was the purpose for the kenosis. Man had sinned against God, and so *man* was required to make atonement for sin, but he was absolutely powerless to do so. Only God can atone for sin, and yet only man’s sacrifice would be accepted on behalf of man. So, in the marvelous wisdom of God, God became man to reconcile man to God:

“Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. . . . Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:14–15, 17).

Lessons from the Kenosis

What practical lessons may we take away from our study of the kenosis of Christ? First, we must trust in this divine-human Mediator who became man in order to bear man’s curse. The incarnation and the kenosis of Christ mean nothing to you if you are not a beneficiary of the salvation for which He became incarnate. Your first order of business is to admit your sin before an infinitely holy God, confess your own inability to satisfy the demands of His righteousness, look outside of yourself to this glorious Savior who has accomplished all that is necessary for salvation, and trust in Him to avail with God on your behalf.

Second, have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5). It is interesting to note that Paul’s primary point for writing Philippians 2:5–11 is not to discourse on the fine points of high Christology. Those theological truths are there in the text, and they are glorious. But Paul employs them as an illustration and example of the humility in which the church must walk. You are to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more

important than yourselves; not merely looking out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3–4). If Christ could come from the glories of heaven itself, all the way down to the abject degradation of the cross, surely we, mere creatures of the dust, can surrender our rights for the sake of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (cf. Eph. 4:3). In the midst of a conflict with a brother or sister in Christ—or with a spouse or family member—though we might be right, and though we might be entitled to deference and respect and recognition, we can think on the only One who ever had a right to assert His rights and refused, and regard one another as more important than ourselves, giving preference to one another in honor (cf. Rom. 12:10) for the sake of unity. The kenosis is a call to imitate the humility of Christ.

Third, apprehend the inextricable link between the loftiest of theology and the most practical elements of Christian living. The most mundane, applicable matters of Christianity—such as personal humility and corporate unity (Phil. 2:3–4)—are wedded to the deepest and most difficult doctrines for the mind to conceive (Phil. 2:5–8). So many professing Christians say things like, “I don’t want to hear about doctrinal debates and theological controversies. I want practical teaching. I want a Christianity that shows me how to live right where I am.” In the light of Philippians 2, however, such thinking is pure foolishness. There is no such dichotomy between theology and practice! Theology is the very soil out of which practice grows. Christian living is inescapably rooted in theology. John Murray said it well: “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 [2 Cor. 8:7] are fed from the ocean of the mysteries of God [2 Cor. 8:9]. 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.”⁵²

Finally, the kenosis teaches us to worship our Triune God. Worship the God whose mind is so vast, whose wisdom is so unsearchable, that the truths we struggle and strain so mightily to understand do not make God break an intellectual sweat. They are elementary to Him, and yet wonderful for us. We ought to express our worship to God as Charnock did when he wrote,

“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.”⁵³

May it never cease to astonish us. May it be a cause of perpetual worship of God the Son incarnate, through the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

⁵² Murray, “The Riches and the Poverty of Jesus Christ,” 3:235.

⁵³ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God in The Works of Stephen Charnock*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 2:150.