THEOLOGY: Hypostatic Union & Kenosis

Kenosis

"Kenosis" is derived from the Greek word "kenoo" which means "to empty." It is used in Phil. 2:7. The text of Phil. 2:5-8 is worth recording here.

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross," (Phil. 2:5-8).

The kenosis theory states that Jesus gave up some of His divine attributes while He was a man here on earth. These attributes were omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. Christ did this voluntarily so that He could function as a man in order to fulfill the work of redemption. This view was first introduced in the late 1800s in Germany with Gottfried Thomasius (1802-75), a Lutheran theologian.

Phil. 2:5-8 does not teach that Jesus gave up any of His divine attributes since it says nothing of those attributes. Instead, it is speaking of His humility that moved him, according to the will of the Father, to leave His majestic state in heaven and enter into the humble position of human nature.

There is, however, a problem the orthodox must deal with that the Kenosis theory seems to more adequately address. Take Mark 13:32 for example. In it, Jesus said, "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." If Jesus knew all things, as is implied in His divine nature, then why did He not know the day or hour of His own return. The answer is that Jesus cooperated with the limitations of humanity and voluntarily did not exercise His attribute of omniscience. He still was divine but was moving and living completely as a man.

The Kenosis theory is a dangerous doctrine because if it were true then it would mean that Jesus was not fully divine. If Jesus was not fully divine, then His atoning work would not be sufficient to atone for the sins of the world.

The correct doctrine is the Hypostatic Union, that Jesus is both fully God and fully man (Col. 2:9) and did not give up any divine attributes while as a man on earth. 1

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem

The Solution to the Controversy: The Chalcedonian Definition of A.D. 451. In order to attempt to solve the problems raised by the controversies over the person of Christ, a large church council was convened in the city of Chalcedon near Constantinople (modern Istanbul), from October 8 to November 1, A.D. 451. The resulting statement, called the Chalcedonian Definition, guarded against Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism. It has been taken as the standard, orthodox definition of the biblical teaching on the person of Christ since that day by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox branches of Christianity alike. 36

1 http://carm.org/kenosis (italics mine)

36 However, it should be noted that three localized groups of ancient churches rejected the Chalcedonian definition and still endorse monophysitism to this day: the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Coptic Orthodox church (in Egypt), and the Syrian Jacobite church. See H.D. McDonald, “Monophysitism,” in NDT pp. 442–43.
The statement is not long, and we may quote it in its entirety:\(^{37}\)

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 [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; 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 been handed down to us.

Against the view of Apollinaris that Christ did not have a human mind or soul, we have the statement that he was “truly man of a reasonable soul and body … consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us.” (The word consubstantial means “having the same nature or substance.”)

In opposition to the view of Nestorianism that Christ was two persons united in one body, we have the words “indivisibly, inseparably … concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons.”

Against the view of Monophysitism that Christ had only one nature, and that his human nature was lost in the union with the divine nature, we have the words “to be acknowledged in two natures inconfusedly, unchangeably … the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.” The human and the divine natures were not confused or changed when Christ became man, but the human nature remained a truly human nature, and the divine nature remained a truly divine nature.

Figure 26.4 may be helpful in showing this, in contrast to the earlier diagrams. It indicates that the eternal Son of God took to himself a truly human nature, and that Christ’s divine and human natures remain distinct and retain their own properties, yet they are eternally and inseparably united together in one person.

**Figure 26.4: Chalcedonian Christology**

Some have said that the Chalcedonian Definition really did not define for us in any positive way what the person of Christ actually is but simply told us several things that it is not. In this way some have said that it is not a very helpful definition. But such an accusation is misleading and inaccurate. The definition actually did a great deal to help us understand the biblical teaching correctly. It taught that Christ definitely has two natures, a human nature and a divine nature. It taught that his divine nature is exactly the same as that of the Father (“consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead”). And it maintained that the human nature is exactly like our human nature, yet without sin (“consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin”). Moreover, it

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affirmed that in the person of Christ the human nature retains its distinctive characteristics and the divine nature retains its distinctive characteristics (“the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved”). Finally, it affirmed that, whether we can understand it or not, these two natures are united together in the one person of Christ. When the Chalcedonian Definition says that the two natures of Christ occur together “in one Person and one Subsistence,” the Greek word translated as “Subsistence” is the word ὑπόστασις (G5712) “being.” Hence the union of Christ’s human and divine natures in one person is sometimes called the hypostatic union. This phrase simply means the union of Christ’s human and divine natures in one being.\(^2\)

**Did Jesus Give Up Some of His Divine Attributes While on Earth? (The Kenosis Theory).** Paul writes to the Philippians,

> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil. 2:5–7)

Beginning with this text, several theologians in Germany (from about 1860–1880) and in England (from about 1890–1910) advocated a view of the incarnation that had not been advocated before in the history of the church. This new view was called the “kenosis theory,” and the overall position it represented was called “kenotic theology.” The kenosis theory holds that Christ gave up some of his divine attributes while he was on earth as a man. (The word κενόσις is taken from the Greek verb κενόω, G3033, which generally means “to empty,” and is translated “emptied himself “in Phil. 2:7.) According to the theory Christ “emptied himself “of some of his divine attributes, such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, while he was on earth as a man. This was viewed as a voluntary self-limitation on Christ’s part, which he carried out in order to fulfill his work of redemption.\(^27\)

But does Philippians 2:7 teach that Christ emptied himself of some of his divine attributes, and does the rest of the New Testament confirm this? The evidence of Scripture points to a negative answer to both questions. We must first realize that no recognized teacher in the first 1,800 years of church history, including those who were native speakers of Greek, thought that “emptied himself “in Philippians 2:7 meant that the Son of God gave up some of his divine attributes. Second, we must recognize that the text does not say that Christ “emptied himself of some powers” or “emptied himself of divine attributes” or anything like that. Third, the text does describe what Jesus did in this “emptying”: he did not do it by giving up any of his attributes but rather by “taking the form of a servant,” that is, by coming to live as a man, and “being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Thus, the context itself interprets this “emptying” as equivalent to “humbling himself “and taking on a lowly status and position. Thus, the NIV, instead of translating the phrase, “He emptied himself,” translates it, “but made himself nothing” (Phil. 2:7 NIV). The emptying includes change of role and status, not essential attributes or nature.


\(^27\) A very clear overview of the history of kenotic theology is found in the article “Kenosis, a Kenotic Theology” by S.M. Smith, in EDT pp. 600–602. Surprisingly (for the volume in which his essay appears), Smith ends up endorsing kenotic theology as a valid form of orthodox, biblical faith (p. 602)!
A fourth reason for this interpretation is seen in Paul’s purpose in this context. His purpose has been to persuade the Philippians that they should “do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3), and he continues by telling them, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). To persuade them to be humble and to put the interests of others first, he then holds up the example of Christ: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant …” (Phil. 2:5–7).

Now in holding up Christ as an example, he wants the Philippians to imitate Christ. But certainly he is not asking the Philippian Christians to “give up” or “lay aside” any of their essential attributes or abilities! He is not asking them to “give up” their intelligence or strength or skill and become a diminished version of what they were. Rather, he is asking them to put the interests of others first: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). And because that is his goal, it fits the context to understand that he is using Christ as the supreme example of one who did just that: he put the interests of others first and was willing to give up some of the privilege and status that was his as God.

Therefore, the best understanding of this passage is that it talks about Jesus giving up the status and privilege that was his in heaven: he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (or “clung to for his own advantage”), but “emptied himself “or “humbled himself “for our sake, and came to live as a man. Jesus speaks elsewhere of the “glory” he had with the Father “before the world was made” (John 17:5), a glory that he had given up and was going to receive again when he returned to heaven. And Paul could speak of Christ who, “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9), once again speaking of the privilege and honor that he deserved but temporarily gave up for us.

The fifth and final reason why the “kenosis” view of Philippians 2:7 must be rejected is the larger context of the teaching of the New Testament and the doctrinal teaching of the entire Bible. If it were true that such a momentous event as this happened, that the eternal Son of God ceased for a time to have all the attributes of God—ceased, for a time, to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, for example—then we would expect that such an incredible event would be taught clearly and repeatedly in the New Testament, not found in the very doubtful interpretation of one word in one epistle. But we find the opposite of that: we do not find it stated anywhere else that the Son of God ceased to have some of the attributes of God that he had possessed from eternity. In fact, if the kenosis theory were true (and this is a foundational objection against it), then we could no longer affirm Jesus was fully God while he was here on earth.28 The kenosis theory ultimately denies the full deity of Jesus Christ and makes him something less than fully God. S.M. Smith admits, “All forms of classical orthodoxy either explicitly reject or reject in principle kenotic theology.”29

It is important to realize that the major force persuading people to accept kenotic theory was not that they had discovered a better understanding of Philippians 2:7 or any other passage of the New Testament, but rather the increasing discomfort people were feeling with the formulations of the

28 Sometimes the word κενόσις is used in a weaker sense not to apply to the kenosis theory in its full sense, but simply to refer to a more orthodox understanding of Phil. 2:7, in which it means simply that Jesus gave up his glory and privilege for a time while he was on earth. (This is essentially the view we have advocated in this text.) But it does not seem at all wise to use the term “kenosis” to refer to such a traditional understanding of Phil. 2:7, for it is too easily confused with the full-blown kenosis doctrine that essentially denies the full deity of Christ. To take a term that formally applies to a false doctrinal teaching and then use it to apply to a scripturally sound position is just confusing to most people.

doctrine of Christ in historic, classical orthodoxy. 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.

ARTICLE
The Incarnation: Could God Become Man Without Ceasing to Be God?

by James A. Parker III

The answer to this question is yes. Not only is it possible, but it happened in time and space. Neo-orthodox theologians (twentieth-century thinkers strongly influenced by Karl Barth) have said that the question is logically unanswerable because faith is an illogical paradox and can be seen only through the eyes of faith. In recent years liberal theologians have denied the reality of the incarnation on the grounds that it is a myth and not true in any objective sense. In the nineteenth century advocates of kenotic Christology (emphasizing the “emptying” of Christ in keeping with Php 2:7) argued that in the incarnation the divine Logos (Word) suspended the characteristics of deity because they were in principle incompatible with human attributes, thus making nonsense of the claim that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man (as both the Bible and historic Christian confessions have claimed).

Historical, Bible-based theology has argued that God is omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful), sinless, and incorporeal (without a body) and that these attributes are essential and necessary to deity. Characteristically, human beings do not exhibit these attributes. So how can Jesus simultaneously be fully divine and fully human? Along these lines, people have attacked the doctrine of the incarnation, claiming that it is illogical and contradictory.

This alleged logical contradiction is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how human nature is defined, according to Thomas V. Morris in his book The Logic of God Incarnate. Morris has argued that the way out of this apparent impasse is to have a clearer understanding of three important concepts: (1) essential versus nonessential properties, (2) essential versus common properties, and (3) the difference between being fully and being merely human.

Smith points out that one of the primary influences leading some to adopt kenotic theology was the growth of modern psychology in the nineteenth century: “The age was learning to think in terms of the categories of psychology. Consciousness was a central category. If at our ‘center’ is our consciousness, and if Jesus was both omniscient God and limited man, then he had two centers and was thus fundamentally not one of us. Christology was becoming inconceivable for some” (ibid., pp. 600–601). In other words, pressures of modern psychological study were making belief in the combination of full deity and full humanity in the one person of Christ difficult to explain or even intellectually embarrassing: how could someone be so different from us and still be truly a man?

Yet we might studied anyone who was perfectly free from sin (as Christ was) and who was both fully God and fully man (as Christ was). If we limit our understanding to what modern psychology tells us is “possible” or “conceivable,” then we respond that modern psychology is inherently limited in that its only object of study is simple human beings. No modern psychologist has ever will have neither a sinless Christ nor a divine Christ. In this as in many other points of doctrine, our understanding of what is “possible” must be determined not by modern empirical study of a finite, fallen world, but by the teachings of Scripture itself.

On the first issue Morris argues that an essential property is a property that, if removed, fundamentally changes the thing in question. So, if God’s attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, etc., were removed, then he would no longer be deity. These are essential attributes. While it is a common attribute for a human being to have two hands, this is not an essential property to humanness. The heart of the attack on the incarnation comes from critics on the basis that lack of omniscience, omnipotence, etc., is essential to humanness, since human beings do not have these qualities.

This brings us to Morris’s second distinction: essential versus common properties. It is a common property that everyone living on planet earth was born on planet earth, but this is simply a common property; it is not essential to their humanness. Morris then asks the question, on what basis does one know that the absence of the attributes of omniscience and so forth are essential human properties and not just common properties?

Last, Morris argues, “an individual is fully human [in any case where] that individual has all essential human properties, all the properties composing basic human nature. An individual is merely human if he or she has all those properties plus some additional limiting properties as well, properties such as that of lacking omnipotence, that of lacking omniscience, and so on.” So orthodox Christians, in affirming the incarnation, are claiming that Jesus was fully human without being merely human.

Ronald Nash summarizes the implications of the argument as follows:

This means two things: Jesus possesses all the properties that are essential to being a human being, and Jesus possesses all the properties that are essential to deity. The historic understanding of the Incarnation expresses the beliefs that Jesus Christ is fully God—that is, He possesses all the essential properties of God: Jesus Christ is also fully human—that is, He possesses all the essential properties of a human being, none of which turn out to be limiting properties: and Jesus Christ was not merely human—that is, he did not possess any of the limiting properties that are complements of the divine attributes. In the face of these distinctions, the alleged contradiction in the Incarnation disappears.4

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