

# Kenosis

## Christ "emptied Himself" (Philippians 2:7)

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An apologetic with over 100 links for understanding, defending and advancing the Biblical, orthodox view of our Lord's glorious humility.

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## Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear godly radio and television speakers, pastors and teachers teach that Jesus "emptied Himself of His divinity"<sup>1</sup> or His deity,<sup>2</sup> or that He "abandoned a sovereign position."<sup>3</sup> It has also been said, "When He left heaven and came to this earth, He gave up the voluntary use of His divine attributes."<sup>4</sup> And another has written, "Jesus restricted the use of these divine attributes when he took on the form of man."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps you have heard a speaker raise these questions: "While He was here on earth, was He omnipotent? ... God could not do many mighty works? That's what the Bible says. Was He omnipresent? No. He was restricted by time and space."<sup>6</sup> It has also been asked, "How could Jesus be omniscient and not know the time of His return?"<sup>7</sup> Another radio speaker has taught that God was downsized. "Think about how big the Word is. Think about how downsized to become flesh - one cell..."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps words such as these have warmed your heart at Christmas: "Those hands that formed all the worlds... would now have to be held... And the mouth that spoke, for by the word of the Lord were the heavens made, ...would now have to learn to speak Aramaic and Hebrew."<sup>9</sup>

These are statements and questions about the nature of God as revealed in Holy Scripture and summarized in historic creeds of the Christian faith. They beg for answers to foundational questions of the faith. Would God be God if He did not know the future, or if He did not sovereignly rule the universe? Would Jesus be God if He did not know the future, or if He did not sovereignly rule the universe? When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, did He continue, in His divine nature, to use His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence to sovereignly rule the universe?

Jesus clearly taught, and the rest of Holy Scripture confirms, that He is Son of God and

Son of man (Mtt. 16:13-17). In the [Creed of Chalcedon](#) the early fathers rightly affirmed that Christ "must be acknowledged in two natures, without any commingling, or change, or division or separation."<sup>10</sup>

The [Creed of Athanasius](#) offers an important analogy to help us understand Biblical statements about Christ's two natures: "As a rational soul and flesh are one man, so God and man are one Christ."<sup>11</sup> *Because I am a rational soul* I can say, "I will never die." That statement is not true of my flesh, unless Christ returns before I die. On the other hand, *because I am flesh* I can also say, "I will not live forever." That statement is not true of my soul.

In the same manner, certain statements by or about Christ are true only if ascribed to the appropriate nature. For example, *because Christ is God* He could say "You are of this world, I am not of this world" (NAS Jn. 8:23). This statement is not true of Christ's human nature. If we err in ascribing this statement to His human nature, we would conclude, as did the doceticists, that Christ was only a spirit. On the other hand, *because Christ is man*, He elsewhere says concerning His second coming: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (NAS Mtt. 24:36). This statement is not true of Christ's divine nature. If we ascribe this statement to His divine nature, we would conclude that as God, He did not know when He would return. He would not be omniscient, He would be less than God, and thus, not God at all, as the Arians argued.

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## Kenotic Theology

Most kenoticists believe that Christ gave up His sovereign dominion when becoming incarnate. They follow the same logic as the Arians, but they are deceived into thinking their Christ is still God. These could be classified as neo-Arians. Other kenoticists believe that Christ continued being sovereign while on earth, but that His divine and human natures were not truly united into one Person. These could be classified as neo-Nestorian. Most kenoticists thus either diminish the deity of Christ or they undermine the union of the two natures in one Person.

Much of what we hear and read has been gleaned from theologians who have disseminated their views in commentaries and doctrinal treatises. Rather than study the scriptures regarding the two natures of Christ, many of these pastors, teachers, and radio and television personalities go to their commentaries or other books in their libraries to find answers that they do not test with Scripture.

In his excellent work on [Philippians 2](#), Rodney Decker shows the following sources for many of the distorted views of the kenosis.

1. "Christ had a human soul, to which the Logos imparted his divinity, little by little until he became completely divine" (Dorner).
2. Christ "laid aside his deity which was then restored at the ascension" (Gess and Beecher).
3. He "abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human," e.g., omniscience" (Gore).
4. "He surrendered the external, physical attributes of omniscience, though retaining the attributes of love and truth (A. M. Fairbairn). This was also held by Thomasius, Deilitsch, and H. Crosby."
5. Christ "lived a double life from two, non-communicating life centers. As God, he

continued his Trinitarian and providential existence, and as man he was united with a human nature. He did not know consciously anything of his divine, Trinitarian existence" (Martensen).

6. "He disguised his deity and attributes, not by giving them up, but by limiting them to a time-form appropriate to a human mode of existence ... His attributes could only be expressed in relation to the (human) time and space that his human form could experience" (Ebrard).
7. "He gave up the use of the attributes (cf. Carson, FD&FPJ, 35)."
8. "He gave up the independent exercise of the divine attributes (Strong, ST, 703)."
9. "He limited himself to the voluntary non-use of the attributes (Walvoord)."<sup>12</sup>

Among Catholics the primary influence has come from Karl Rainer, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. According to John O'Connell in the March/April 1997 issue of [The Catholic Faith](#), "Rainer speaks of Christ as gradually developing His self-consciousness: 'This consciousness in Christ realized itself only gradually during his spiritual history, and this history does not consist only, or even first and foremost, in being occupied with this or that fact of external reality but consists rather in the never quite successful attaining of what and who one is oneself ...'<sup>18</sup> So Christ in His human consciousness never became fully aware of His self-identity, nor was He fully cognizant that His Sacred Humanity was intimately united to the *Logos*."<sup>13</sup>

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## Implications of Kenotic Theology

In trying to understand the mystery of the incarnation, kenoticists have fallen prey to the tendency to submit the authority of God's Word to human reason: "Understanding is believing" rather than "God said it, and I believe it." They do not properly acknowledge Christ's two natures during His 33 years on earth, and they ignore or subtly alter important Christological distinctions in God's Word. Dorner's view is at best a perversion of Biblical, orthodox Christology. The remaining views are senseless - what does the nonuse or non-exercise of omnipresence look like? And heretical.

**1. They destroy the integrity of the atonement (Buntin).**<sup>14</sup> The redemption of all creation (Rom. 8:18-22) and of everyone who would ever believe in Christ required not only a perfect human being, but also a sacrifice that was also infinite in every way. It required the "blood of God" (Acts 20:28). "It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (NAS Col. 1:19-20). The fullness of the Father's divinity was in Christ during His ministry and passion, but most kenoticists substitute the word "partialness" for the word "fullness," or they diminish the unity of the Person of Christ. Limiting Christ's sovereign deity or separating His two natures would leave all of humanity, and all of creation hopelessly subject to God's curse and to His eternal wrath.

**2. They distort the Christian view of the incarnation.** The Bible says, "The Word became flesh" (NAS John 1:14); kenoticists teach that God minus the use of His dominion attributes became flesh, or that the Word remained separate from the flesh. The Bible states, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (NAS 2 Cor. 5:19); kenotic thinking holds that only God minus omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, was in Christ, or that God was not truly in Christ. The Bible affirms that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God (Jn. 3:16). To be the Son of God is to have the same substance as God. Kenoticists teach a mutation: God birthed a Son Who either later became God minus boundlessness or Who was never really united to human flesh.

"Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (KJV 1 Tim. 3:16). According to kenotic thought the mystery of godliness lies not in the fact that "God was manifest in the flesh," but that God minus sovereignty was manifest in the flesh, yet was still mysteriously somehow God. Or as Martenson or Rainer would suggest, that God was not really manifest in the flesh, yet was still somehow mysteriously one Person. Such views tend "...to rupture the hypostatic union of Christ's divine and human natures."<sup>15</sup>

Sovereignty is an attribute of God. According to Don Fortner it means ruling "all things, everywhere, at all times absolutely."<sup>16</sup> If, by becoming man, Christ gave up the use of His divine attributes in any way, then He was not sovereign. If Jesus was not sovereign during His earthly ministry, then He was not God. If He was not God, the Word that was God (Jn.1:1) never became flesh - only part of the Word did. And the name "Immanuel," meaning "God with us" (NAS Mtt. 1:23), is a lie, and God's Word is not true.

**3. They deny the immutability of God.** Most kenotic views mutate the Immutable. In order for the God the Son to abandon His sovereignty in any way, He would have to change His character or being. This, God would never do. "I AM WHO I AM" (NAS Ex. 3:14). "But Thou art the same, And Thy years will not come to an end." (NAS Ps. 102:27). "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever." (NAS Heb. 13:8). According to [R.C. Sproul](#), "If God laid aside one of His attributes, the immutable undergoes a mutation, the infinite suddenly stops being infinite; it would be the end of the universe."<sup>17</sup>

**4. They undermine the monotheistic distinctive of the Christian faith.** The only way to limit the use of attributes of one Person without limiting the attributes of all three members of the Godhead is to divide God into three divine Beings for each of the three Persons. Jesus could then suspend His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc., while the Father and Holy Spirit would continue to exercise sovereign dominion over the universe. This view of the Trinity, however, is polytheistic, not Christian. The Christian faith is monotheistic. We believe there is only one God. "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29). The [Creed of Athanasius](#) affirms this truth: "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but there are not three gods, but one God... The Father is omnipotent, the Son is omnipotent and the Holy Spirit is omnipotent, but there are not three omnipotent Beings, but one omnipotent Being . . . We distinguish among the Persons, but we do not divide the Substance."<sup>18</sup>

Kenotic theology has spawned two significant distortions of Scripture, that Christ, as God, emptied Himself of His glory, and that as God, Christ performed His miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit and did not use His own divine power to do the miracles. These two distortions must be examined in the light of infallible Scripture.

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## Emptied of His Glory?

The first verse of the popular song, "He is Lord," begins, "Emptied of His glory God became a Man."<sup>19</sup> Though the Philippians passages does not say that Christ emptied Himself of anything, there are those who appear to need add something to the passage, so they assault His glory. To do this they appeal to Christ's high priestly prayer in John 17. "These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee, even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life. And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus

Christ whom Thou hast sent. I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was." (NAS Vss. 1-5). The last verse is sometimes quoted to argue that Christ had emptied Himself of His divine glory at birth and that He regained it after His resurrection

Referring to Philippians 2:5-7, [John Calvin](#) writes: "In order to exhort us to submission by His example, he shows, that when as God he might have displayed to the world the brightness of His glory, he gave up His right, and voluntarily emptied Himself; that he assumed the form of a servant, and, contented with that humble condition, suffered His divinity to be concealed under a veil of flesh."<sup>20</sup>

The "veil of flesh" is an illusion to Hebrews 10:19-20: "Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh" (NAS).

Neither Christ's divinity, nor His Divine attributes, nor the use of those attributes, nor His glory, was in any way emptied. Rather, these were "concealed under a veil of flesh."<sup>21</sup> There is a distinct difference between emptying and concealing. If I were on a family vacation, and if I carried all my money in my wallet, I'd much prefer that my wallet be concealed than emptied. There is a big difference.

Confusion about Christ's glory can best be minimized by remembering that Scripture addresses His glory in at least five time periods.

1. The first time period is the period before creation. In John 17:5 it is important to note that Christ did not ask the Father for the glory that He had before He was incarnate. Jesus asked for the glory that He had with the Father before the world was created.
2. The second time period is from creation to His incarnation. Jesus did not ask for the glory He had during this time because there are several instances - we call them theophanies<sup>22</sup> - when Christ's glory was veiled, just as it was in the third time period. It was simpler for Christ to refer back to the first time without having to qualify the second time period.
3. The third time period is from Christ's incarnation to His resurrection. It was during this third time period that Christ prayed for the future time when He would have the glory He had with the Father before the world was created.
4. This fourth time period, thus, is that time between His resurrection and ascension.
5. The fifth time period is that after His ascension.

During the third period, from His incarnation to His resurrection, our Lord's divine glory was concealed - not emptied or limited in any way - to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy regarding His name, "Immanuel, God with us" (7:14). Unveiled glory would have blinded the humanity he came to serve and to save.

But even during this third time period Christ did reveal His glory. Luke writes: "And some eight days after these sayings, it came about that He took along Peter and John and James, and went up to the mountain to pray. And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when

they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. And it came about, as these were parting from Him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah' not realizing what he was saying." (NAS Lk. 9:28-33).

John, who was with Peter and James that day, later wrote: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (NAS John 1:14).

Please note the following observations regarding Christ's prayer:

(1) Before creation, whenever Christ looked at Himself, He saw unveiled glory and majesty. Now, as He is praying in John 17, when he looks at Himself He sees hands of human flesh, veiling His glory. He is looking forward to the day His glory would have the same radiance that blazed before creation.

(2) The glory for which Christ yearned, however, was not a regression back to His pre-incarnate, pre-creation glory, but it was a progression to a new glory - His resurrection glory. To His pre-creation glory would be added the glory of His human body which would no longer veil His divine glory. Rather, His glorified human body would now augment the glory of His divine nature - two glorified natures - human and divine, in one glorified Person.

(3) The veiling of Christ's glory is not unique to the 33 years from Christ's birth to His death. It has been veiled in all four of the time periods since creation. In Old Testament times His glory was veiled in some of the theophanies,<sup>23</sup> just as it was during His earthly life. After His resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus concealed not only His glorified body, but also His identity (Lk. 24:9-32). And after His ascension, Stephen saw Him sitting at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55), but there is no indication that His glory conveyed the radiance it did when it blinded Saul on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:32-6).

(4) The reality is that Christ's glory is multi-dimensional, and being God He reveals it when, where and how He chooses. During His life on earth the angels never ceased beholding His glory, the heavens never stopped declaring His glory, nor was the earth ever any less full of His glory. And the utter humility in the way He poured himself out for us was no less glorious than the cloud that filled Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10ff) or the consuming fire that shrouded Mt. Sinai when He gave the 10 commandments (Ex. 24:16-18).

In John's gospel, after the record of our Lord's triumphal entry when many still could not believe in Christ, John quotes Isaiah. "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn-and I would heal them." Then John writes, "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him." (NIV Jn 12:40-41).

The glory that Isaiah saw was Christ's glory, and that glory has never been diminished. "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.'" (NAS Is. 6:1-5).

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## Christ's Miracles Performed *only* by the Holy Spirit?

Christological distortions are often marked with the words "only" and "just." Jesus was and is a man, but not *just* a man. Heresy marked the 1970's Jesus Christ Superstar musical when Mary Magdalene sings of Jesus, "He's a man he's just a man."<sup>24</sup>

The belief that Christ performed His miracles only by the power of the Holy Spirit is growing in popularity, particularly among charismatics in the power evangelism movement. In his book, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, Jack Deere writes "At the beginning of Christ's public ministry, both Luke and Jesus himself made it absolutely clear that the source of power in Jesus' ministry was not His deity, but rather His dependence on the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> This view is consistent with his belief that Jesus restricted the use of His divine attributes<sup>25</sup> when He "left heaven [and His omnipresence] and became incarnate."<sup>26</sup>

This narrow view stands in opposition to four truths found in the Biblical record.

### **1. As a man, Jesus did rely on the Holy Spirit to perform the miracles.**

Quoting from Isaiah, Christ said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor: He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovering of sight to the blind, To set at liberty them that are bruised" (KJV Luke 4:18).

There is nothing in Scripture, however, to suggest that this was His sole source of power. The Old Testament prophets foresaw not only a Spirit-anointed human Messiah (Is. 61:1-2), but also the coming of very Yahweh Himself.<sup>28</sup> For example, we have already shown that the very Christ Who walked on the earth (Jn. 12:41) was the very Yahweh Isaiah saw (Is. 6:1-5). As believers we can do greater works than Christ, not because He was just like us relying on the Holy Spirit, but because He promised we would, and this because He goes to the Father. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father" (NAS Jn. 14:12).

### **2. As a man, Christ also relied on the Father working in Him to do the miracles.** In His gospel John writes:

<sup>33</sup>"The Jews answered Him, 'For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God.' . . . <sup>36</sup>[Jesus answered,] 'do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? <sup>37</sup>If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; <sup>38</sup>but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.' <sup>39</sup>Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp" (NAS Jn. 10:33-39).

We see here Christ giving to the Jews a two-fold apologetic. Jesus identified Himself as God by what He says - "though you do not believe me," (vs. 38) and by his miracles - "believe the works" (vs. 38). Here Christ points to His miracles to prove He is God, not to prove that He was filled with the Spirit.

### **3. As a man, Christ also relied on Himself - His own Deity, to perform**

**miracles without qualifying them as being done by the Holy Spirit or by His Father.** A key passage to examine occurs in Mark's gospel.

"And on that day, when evening had come, He said to them, 'Let us go over to the other side.' And leaving the multitude, they took Him along with them, just as He was, in the boat; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. And He Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they awoke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?' And being aroused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Hush, be still.' And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, 'Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?' And they became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" (NAS Mk. 4:35-41)

It is important to note here is that Christ did not correct His disciples and tell them that it was not He who had saved their lives, but that He had performed this miracle by the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were correct in affirming that the wind and waves had obeyed Him - Jesus!

The clearest proof that Christ drew from His own deity to perform miracles is in the resurrection of His own body, when he was physically dead and totally unable to rely on the Holy Spirit. After casting the moneychangers out of the temple, the Jews asked for a sign, to which Christ responded: "'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews therefore said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken." (NAS Jn. 2:19-22).

Elsewhere in the New Testament the active voice of the Greek verbs for the words "rise" and "arise" affirm the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy. "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone *raises* from the dead'" (NAS Lk. 16:31). "For if we believe that Jesus died and *rose* again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (NAS 1 Thess. 4:14). "God raised Him up on the third day, and granted that He should become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us, who ate and drank with Him after He *arose* from the dead (NAS Acts 10:40-41).

**4. As God incarnate, Jesus worked in unison with the Holy Spirit and with the Father to perform these miracles.** This is especially evident regarding His resurrection.

In the third point above we showed that Christ raised Himself. Christ says, "I will raise it up" (NAS Jn. 2:19) and Luke writes, "He arose from the dead" (NAS Acts 10: 41). But we also see in the same two passages a contrasting thought. Not only did Christ *raise Himself*, but we also see a second truth that Christ *was raised*. John writes, " He was raised," (2:22) as if by another, and Luke writes, "God raised Him up" (Acts 10:40).

Not only did Jesus say He would raise His own body, we find also that the Holy Spirit raised Him (Rom. 8:11) and that the Father raised Him (Gal. 1:1). The majority of references affirm that God - obviously the Triune God - raised Christ (e.g., Acts 2:24, 3:15, 4:10, 5:30, 13:30, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 6:14, 1 Pet. 1:21).

Jesus was and is fully God and fully man, one Person with two natures. Just as we rely on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Rom. 8:11), of the Father (e.g., Jn. 17:23), and of the Son (e.g., 1 Jn. 3:24) to live the Christian life, so Christ, as man, relied on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, of the Father, and of His own Deity - Himself, to perform



the miracles. As God, Christ worked in unison with the Holy Spirit and the Father to perform the miracles.

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## Philippians 2:5-8

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

It would be redundant and beyond my expertise to match Rodney Decker's mastery of the Kenosis passage.<sup>29</sup> His explanation of the Greek text concurs with other Greek scholars and is the clearest explanation that is available on the Web. My intent here is to merely summarize a few observations from my own study.

**1. Jesus did not empty himself of anything (Decker).**<sup>30</sup> Here, unquestionably, he explains not what Christ was, but in what way he acted" (Calvin).<sup>31</sup> One of the strongest historic arguments comes from Chrysostom, a Greek father whose language was only 300 years removed from Paul's Greek, and which had changed less than the King James language has changed in the last 400 or so years. In His exposition of this passage, Chrysostom's Christology triumphed over all the heresies of the previous 300 years.<sup>35</sup>

**2. Context. Context. Context.** The kenoticist violates one of the fundamental rules of exegesis. He reads the text: "Who being in the form of God, emptied Himself," and ascribes the emptying to the divine nature.

The immediate context for "ekenosen," however, is Christ's human nature.

Listing the key phrases in the light of Christ's two natures will help show this context. (Verses are from the NASB.)

Verse 6a: "who, although He existed in the form of God" - This is clearly a statement regarding Christ's divine nature. Christ was and is God.

Verse 6b: "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" - This is clearly a statement regarding Christ's human nature. Would it make any sense for Paul to state that Christ, as God, did not regard equality with God as a thing to be grasped since He was already God? Is the idea of God regarding equality with God a thing to be grasped a sensible issue to raise? It is only as man that Christ did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped. This alone makes sense.

Verse 7a: "but emptied Himself" - ekenesen - As man Christ emptied himself.

Verse 7b: "taking the form of a bond-servant" - A clear statement of Christ's humanity.

Verse 7c: "and being made in the likeness of men" - A clear statement of Christ's humanity.

Verse 8a: "Being found in appearance as a man" - Obvious reference to Christ's humanity.

Verse 8b: "He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." - Christ humanity. Spirit cannot die.

In summary Paul provides one statement regarding Christ's divinity, contrasted by a statement regarding his humanity, followed then by "ekenosen," which is then followed by four statements regarding Christ's humanity. The context clearly indicates that it was only as man that Christ emptied himself.

**3. Paul's appeal is to Christ as man, not as God.** The larger context of Philippians 2:7 is Paul's exhortation to humility: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." (2:5 ESV) Paul does not appeal for us to be like God. He appeals for us to be like a man, the perfect man, the perfect servant, Christ in perfect humility, who chose the role of a servant rather than the sovereign king he was. "Since had He been subjected, had He not chosen it of His own accord, and of His own free will, it would not have been an act of humility" (Chrysostom).<sup>34</sup>

**4. Paul does not contradict himself; nor does God.** The larger context of Paul's writings and the balance of Scripture is consistent. Paul would not tell the Colossians that the fullness of God dwelt in Christ (Col. 1:19-20) and the Philippians that something less than God was in Christ. Nor would God. God is honest; His Word is true; He doesn't lie.

**5. Jesus didn't need to prove that He was God.** Had His divinity been diminished in any way Christ *would* have regarded His equality with God a thing to be grasped.

**6. To empty is to become more.** Just as an athlete becomes more by pouring or emptying himself into his training, so the pre-incarnate Christ became "more" by pouring or emptying Himself in a human nature that could suffer and die for our sins. "But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me" (NAS Phil. 2:17-18). In His identification with Christ Paul parallels his own pouring out with Christ's. Paul's sacrifice was finite and future, thus "poured out." Christ's was infinite and an accomplished fact; Paul chose the strongest words to describe the magnitude of the sacrifice, He "emptied Himself." "How did He 'empty Himself?'" asks Augustine. "By taking that which He was not, not by losing that which He was."<sup>32</sup> "What he was, he remained and what he was not, he assumed," sings the Roman Liturgy" (Catholic Catechism).<sup>33</sup>

Only by failing to properly ascribe Biblical statements to Christ's two natures can anyone conclude from this passage or any other passage of Scripture that the pre-incarnate Christ literally emptied Himself of anything. May God's Spirit give you discernment as you read these words.

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## Two Heads, Two Centers?

According to [S.M. Smith](#), in *Elwell's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, kenotic theology grew out of three historic concerns.

"The primary concern was to find a way of understanding the person of Christ that allowed his full humanity to be adequately expressed. Biblical studies had given the church an intensified awareness that Christianity began in the earliest encounters with the man Jesus. Critical scholarship was "recapturing" him in the light of his environment. It was becoming

more sensitive to the limitations of that "prescientific" era and was seeing more clearly the Synoptic portrait of the human personality of the man Jesus. All this must be said about Christ himself, not merely about some abstract appendage called humanity "assumed" by God the Son.

A second, equally important concern was to affirm that God truly was in Christ. The creeds are correct: very God, very man. The problem is how this can be said without turning Christ into an aberration. If to be human is to learn, grow, etc., and to be God is to be omniscient, then how can we speak of one person? Must he not have had "two heads"?

The third concern stems in part from the first. 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."<sup>36</sup>

It is our intent here to help make orthodox Christology conceivable without redefining the meaning of "orthodox" and arriving at Smith's blasphemous conclusion that "kenotic theology is in reality a variant but new form of orthodox, biblical faith."<sup>37</sup> Lest we remold Christ into our own image, we must be reminded that our authority is Scripture, not our human reason. We use reason to affirm the truth and authority of Scripture, not to replace it as our authority.

Modern psychology accords many scenarios for how the two natures of Christ may have existed in one Person. Any venture into this realm goes beyond Scripture and is pure speculation. The intent of the following explanation, however, is not to show *how* these two natures related, but to show a single possible, reasonable scenario of how the natures *could have* related in a manner that is consistent with Biblical, historic orthodoxy.

**1. The ability to perform multiple tasks at once does not divide a person into two persons.** As humans we have levels of consciousness that allow us to perform multiple tasks at once. I have learned to eat my lunch and to talk on my cell phone while driving. I am no different than a busy manager, a harried mother or an expert chess player concentrating on several strategies at once. Does my ability to focus attention on two things at once divide me into two persons? No.

As man Jesus was not two persons because He performed multiple tasks at once. During His 33 years on this earth Jesus was a human being like us, but without sin. He "grew in wisdom, and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Lk. 2:52). As a boy he learned as we have learned to perform multiple tasks at once. He, too, as one of us, had levels of consciousness that allowed him to walk, talk and think at the same time. But this did not make Him two persons.

**2. The ability to perform tasks without being conscious of doing them does not divide a person into two persons.** Early in our lives we devoted much conscious thought to properly chewing and swallowing food. The same is true of learning to pronounce words, and of learning to drive a car. Parents who teach their teenagers to drive learn quickly not to distract them while they drive. In the beginning driving demands focused attention, as do eating and talking. As we gain expertise, however, we perform these tasks without being completely conscious of doing them. We also learn to perform multiple tasks simultaneously.

For example, I often eat and talk on my cell phone while I am driving. During these

times I am reading signs, judging traffic, listening for horns and sirens, evaluating the food, listening to the person on the phone, coordinating my chewing and swallowing, and not forgetting to breathe in the process. But does my ability to perform these tasks without being aware of all that I am doing divide me into two persons? No.

We all perform tasks without being completely conscious of doing them. Some tasks we can access easily, such as breathing. Other actions or responses are more difficult to access - for example, why we get angry with a certain person's words or actions. Some levels of consciousness, such as those stemming from certain prenatal experiences, can not be accessed even with the help of the best therapists. The fact that a person does things without being conscious of doing them does not divide him into more than one person.

As a human being Jesus performed multiple tasks, such as walking and talking, while not being completely aware of everything He was doing.<sup>38</sup> The ability to perform tasks without being conscious of doing them did not divide Jesus into more than one person.

**3. God's ability to perform multiple tasks at once does not divide Him into two persons.** God has levels and dimensions of consciousness that our human minds will never fathom. John writes, "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (NAS 1 Jn. 5:14-15). God provides this conscious, intensely private attention to millions of His children at the same time. But He is only one God.

As God, Jesus was not more than one Person because He performed multiple tasks simultaneously. As full God in flesh during His 33 years on earth, Jesus continued using His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence to sustain every star. But in His union with the Father and Holy Spirit He was only one God.

**4. As God and as man, Jesus was and is only one Person.** "Christ's humiliation was that *as man* He did not always or fully use His divine powers."<sup>39</sup> He did this to grow and to learn as we do, to qualify as our high priest by obeying God as one of us in order to offer a perfect life as a sacrifice, and to give us His own righteousness.

*As man* Jesus performed multiple tasks while not being aware of everything He was doing, and he had levels of consciousness of which He was not aware. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (KJV Pr. 20:5). In His human experience, Jesus could have related to His divine nature as He would have to those "deep waters" of the preconscious, the unconscious, the subconscious, or the large body of unawareness. Numerous psychological categories abound.

It was neither possible nor necessary for Christ's human intellect to comprehend the vast knowledge of His divine intellect. This would allow Him to grow intellectually as one of us. Nor was it necessary for Christ to know in His human intellect all He was doing as God. He was one Person growing and learning as one of us and simultaneously doing the work of God (Jn. 5:17), without being aware in His human intellect of all He was doing in His divine nature.

As our Brother, as one of us, Jesus grew in relation to God as we do, without being divided into two persons or two centers.

- Jesus had a soul (Mtt. 26:38); He probably talked to His soul as David had (Ps. 42:5).
- He also had a conscience and He listened to it perfectly.

- Jesus had the Holy Spirit to guide and to empower Him just as we do, only He followed the Spirit perfectly. While His human experience listening to and following the Spirit was much like our experience, the Spirit that guided Him, was, in reality, His own Spirit He had as God the Son - the Holy Spirit, "Who proceeds from the father and the Son" (Nicene creed).<sup>40</sup>
- Jesus was a divine Self. The self is the Person, the "me," "myself," and "I" - all interchangeable terms, depending on one's choice of sentence structure or emphasis. Jesus was and is one divine Person - one Self; to have been two selves would have divided Christ into two persons. Though He was only a divine Self, His experience of that Self could have been experienced in much the same way we experience our human selves. As man Jesus probably usually blocked off from His consciousness much of His majesty as God in order to experience our human lot.
- In His human experience Jesus also communicated with God. As believers we communicate with each Person of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As man Christ did likewise, but when He communed with the divine Son, He was communing with His divine Self, and whenever Christ talked to Himself, it was to His divine self, though His experience of communicating with His divine Self was probably no different than our experience of praying to Christ who lives within us. He was one Person. When He communed with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He was communing with two members of the Trinity united with His divine Self. For this reason Jesus could say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30).

As man, Christ was not omniscient, but as God He had infinite levels of consciousness and powers that held all things together (Col. 1:17). As man, He did not normally access these levels of consciousness. When He did, His experience of receiving knowledge from God was probably much the same as ours. Jesus possibly could have accessed information from His divine intellect in much the same way a personal computer accesses information from the Internet, but His finite human intellect could not have "downloaded" all the vast knowledge of omniscient God, only portions of it.

Just as God gives us visions, so God gave Christ's human intellect the vision of Nathanael under the fig tree (Jn. 1:48). As man Christ experienced receiving the vision as we would, but the God from whom He received it was His own divine Person- His divine nature.

The boundless knowledge of His divine intellect was available to His human intellect, but He normally did not access it. For example, He did not know the day of His return (Mtt. 24:36). "He blocked it off."<sup>41</sup>

As God, nothing in Christ's human consciousness escaped the omniscience of His divine consciousness. As God, "begotten not made," (Nicene creed)<sup>42</sup> ". . . the birth of the Son [of Mary] was the work also of the Son Himself."<sup>43</sup> As God, the uncreated Christ sustained His created human nature.

In conclusion, we can see how performing multiple tasks without being conscious of doing them does not require two heads or two centers of consciousness. Jesus had a human consciousness like ours, and a divine consciousness that sustained creation. What we have shown is simply one way that "Jesus can be both the presence of the omniscient God and a limited, growing man."<sup>44</sup> But as we have shown, He was and continues to be only one Person.

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## Three Tests of Orthodoxy

In addition to examining kenotic views in the light of Scripture, and the historic creeds, the following tests can also be used to demonstrate their internal inconsistency and deception.

**1. The other nature test.** If you apply a qualification to one nature, will any Christological problems occur if the same qualification is applied to the other nature. Take, for example, the belief that Jesus gave up the voluntary use of certain divine attributes. In applying the same limitation to His humanity, we would ask, "Are there any problems with saying that Jesus gave up the voluntary use of certain human attributes?" These might include human weakness, ignorance, feelings, dreams, or the ability to be tempted. In the incarnation Jesus did not surrender the use of any of His human attributes; nor did He surrender the use of any of His divine attributes.

**2. The three Persons test.** If you apply a qualification to one Person, will any Trinitarian problems occur if the same qualification is applied to all three Persons of the Trinity? For example, if the Father and the Holy Spirit were to give up the voluntary use of the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, in the same manner as some believe Christ did, would God or anything in the universe change? It is obvious that all of creation would cease to exist. The voluntary use of omnipotence is necessary in order for God to sustain creation.

**3. The listen and watch test.** Listen to what the author or speaker affirms and watch what he or she does with what he or she affirms. If the view affirms that each nature is undiminished and unchanged, check what follows to see if anything is added which ends up denying or undermining what was affirmed? For example, if Christ's full Deity is affirmed, and then qualified to include only the essential nature, then the author of the view is, by his qualification, confessing that part of God's nature did in fact change when becoming incarnate. Scripture and the historic summaries exclude any provision for dividing the divine nature into changeable and unchangeable parts. The two natures were united without change to either.

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## Deity of Christ - Valuable Links

Kenotic theology has cast a murky cloud over the deity of Christ. The following comments and links, though not directly related to Kenotic theology, are included here to simply underscore our Lord's eternal deity.

1. In the Gospel writers Jesus is identified as God ([Zaspel, Catholic Encyclopedia](#)).<sup>45</sup>
2. Jesus' enemies identified Jesus as God when they accused Him of blasphemy. They crucified Jesus because He claimed to be God ([Christian Think Tank, Catholic Encyclopedia](#)).<sup>46</sup>
3. Jesus' friends affirmed His Deity ([Zaspel](#)).<sup>47</sup>
4. Other NT writers recognized the full Deity of Christ ([Zaspel, Catholic Encyclopedia, Buntin](#)).<sup>48</sup>
5. Pagan writers confirmed that early Christians believed in the divinity of Christ ([Catholic Encyclopedia](#)).<sup>49</sup>
6. The "Son of God" motif identified Christ as fully God ([Catholic Encyclopedia](#)).<sup>50</sup>
7. Unlike other Biblical figures, Jesus did not refuse to be worshipped ([Zaspel, Christian Think Tank](#)).<sup>51</sup>
8. The *Nomina Sacra* of the Early Church reveals the reverence ascribed to Christ's

Deity ([Christian Think Tank](#)).<sup>52</sup>

9. At least 25 attributes, titles, actions of the Old Testament Yahweh are ascribed to Jesus in New Testament. The New Testament writers saw Jesus as the incarnation of Jehovah. ([Christian Think Tank, Zaspel](#)).<sup>53</sup>

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## Are Kenoticists Christian?

Saving faith has both intellectual content - "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord" and commitment of the heart - "and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (NAS Rom. 10:9).

The early creeds were formulated to protect the intellectual content of the gospel. Every major heresy distorts John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (NAS). Only the Biblical, orthodox view of the incarnation allows for Christ's atoning blood to cleanse us from all sin (1Jn. 1:7).

For example, to the docetic, Jesus was not truly human. The "only begotten Son" was not truly given at the cross because God could not shed His blood and die. The apostle John condemned this view in the first century. "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (NAS 1 Jn. 4:2-3). The framers of Chalcedon also condemned doceticism in 451.

To the Arian or modern day Jehovah's Witness, Jesus was not truly God. He was not God's only begotten Son, but He was made, the first of creation, exalted, but less than God. Christ's blood was less than divine, thus not able to cleanse from sin. Arianism was condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325.

To the Nestorian, Jesus was truly God and truly man, but Christ was not one Person, but two. He was divided; the two natures remained separate. Mary's son, not God's only begotten Son, was given; the only begotten Son remained separate from the human son who died on the cross. Had this been the case, only human blood would have been shed; it would have had no intrinsic power to cleanse from sin. The framers of Chalcedon condemned Nestorianism in 451.

Most kenotic theology is neo-Arian or neo-Nestorian; it destroys the efficacy of Christ's atoning blood. It either diminishes Christ's deity into something less than God and recreates God into three gods, or it separates the divine nature from the human nature, thus splitting the Person of Christ. Therefore, to the true, consistent kenoticist, Christ's blood has no intrinsic power to save us from sin. The true, consistent kenoticist is thus not a Christian.

However, many kenoticists are inconsistent in their Christology. They do not believe that Christ was sovereign when He died on the cross, but they do believe literally that the blood of Christ is the blood of God (Acts 20:28), and they believe literally that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1Jn. 1:7). These kenoticists are brothers and sisters either who haven't taken the time to study the two natures of Christ, or they have been sidetracked and need to return to sound Biblical truth about our Lord's two natures.

If you haven't taken the time to study Christ's two natures, I invite you to explore the

links at this web site to find the true, Biblical picture of Christ. Wherever Scripture is quoted, open your Bible and read the verses.

If you have been sidetracked by intellectually enticing, but distorted views of the kenosis, I invite you to reconsider your views in the light of Scripture. The everlasting I Am who holds history in His hand entered history as one of us to suffer and die for you for the forgiveness of your sins. Will you not only accept this forgiveness, but also turn from the distortions of Christ to the true and living Christ Whose blood shed for you was truly divine. Perhaps the following irrepressible truths from beloved hymns will help you on your journey back to the Biblical Christ.

"In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, A wondrous beauty I see." <sup>54</sup>  
 "Lord I believe Thy precious blood, Which at the mercy seat of God Forever doth for sinners plead, For me, e'en for my soul, was shed." <sup>55</sup> "Would you be free from the burden of sin: There's pow'r in the blood . . . wonder-working power in the precious blood of the lamb." <sup>56</sup> "Are you washed in the blood, in the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb? Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?" <sup>57</sup> "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." <sup>58</sup> "Alas and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head For sinners such as I!" <sup>59</sup> "For nothing good have I Whereby Thy grace to claim - I'll wash my garments white In the blood of Calv'ry's Lamb." <sup>60</sup>

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## Conclusion

[Fred Zaspel](#) has rightly noted, "Doctrines subjected to neglect soon give way to heresy." <sup>61</sup> Each of us is admonished, as was Timothy, to "study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). The great crisis in conservative, Bible-based teaching comes from a failure to be taught, and a failure to study the core doctrines of the Christian faith. Infidelity to God's Word is also tempting - no less than is infidelity to a marriage partner. New "truths" entice the faithful, as do new illicit relationships. Heresy is no respecter of godliness.

This web page has been established for three purposes: (1) To help those who have not studied the two natures of Christ to understand the proper Biblical view of His humility, (2) To provide resources for those who understand the proper Biblical view to defend it, and (3) To provide resources for advancing the truth in a Christian world of ignorance, misinformation, apathy, and heresy. Corresponding to the purposes you will find in these links information to understand, inspiration to defend, and motivation to advance the truth wherever God has placed you.

As you read the articles and books attached to this site, please remember that truth is not conservative or liberal. There is sound doctrine and there are false teachers. There is the Gospel and there is another gospel. There are those who have given their necks - they have been beaten, fed to lions and exiled for the truths we take for granted; and there are those whom our Lord said would be better off in the bottom of the sea with a millstone around their necks. There are the pure in heart who see Jesus, and there are those who, while seeing, do not see Him.

The broad range of links at this site underscores the reality that the issue of Christ's full Deity is basic to Biblical, orthodox thought throughout history. In studying and discovering our Lord's undiminished Deity, it is our prayer that you, too, will lose



yourself in the glory of Christ's humility.

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