

The Self-Emptying Or “Kenosis” of Christ

The Greek word “kenosis” refers to the act of emptying something. It is used in Philippians 2 to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ in His incarnation. But to what does it refer? Many answers have been given. Some say that Christ emptied Himself of His divine attributes. Others say He only emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives. Still others say that He lost His essential relationship to the Trinity, another way of saying that He gave up His deity entirely. However, none of these views is acceptable to the true believer. An understanding of Philippians 2:5-11 is quite straightforward if one pays close attention to the text and does not read into the text one’s preconceptions.

I. The Problem of the Self-Emptying

1. As we shall see, there have been many ideas concerning the so-called emptying of Christ.
2. As early as 341 the Synod of Antioch made the error of saying that Christ emptied Himself of “the being equal with God,” while at the same time defending His deity.
3. During the reformation many believed that Christ emptied Himself of certain characteristics of deity, mainly omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, without affecting His deity.
4. Today there are still many confusing views concerning this concept.

II. The True Meaning of “Kenosis”

1. The Central Passage – Philippians 2:5-11
 - a. Prior to the incarnation, Christ deemed Himself equal things with God the Father. This refers to His sharing the essence as an equal member of the Trinity.
 - b. At the time that He deemed Himself equal things with God the Father, still *prior* to the incarnation, He was subsisting (existing as an integral part) in the Trinity with the outward appearance of God. For example, He was seen by the spirit beings of heaven as God, and would have appeared to them exactly as the other persons who shared equally in the essence. What this form actually was we have no way of knowing, since it was an uncreated, non-visible, spirit form. Only spirit beings can recognize this form of non-physical existence.
 - c. At the moment of His incarnation, vs. 7, the Lord Jesus Christ emptied Himself of the form of God, taking on Himself the form of a slave. No longer do the occupants of heaven see Him in the form, or outward appearance, of God, but as the form of a man. That previous form became unavailable for viewing by those heavenly spirit beings, so that He is seen by them only in His human form. However, when He emptied Himself of that form of God, He:
 - 1) did not empty Himself of any attributes of deity;
 - 2) did not lose any essential relationship to the trinity;
 - 3) simply changed in appearance with reference to those who are able to recognize His person visually *on the earth*. At one time His person appeared strictly as God, but after the incarnation, He appears strictly as a man. This current appearance is the direct result of His taking a human *nature* with its physicality. If Christ had not taken this new nature, He could not have changed form *permanently*. Christ had appeared as a human in the Old Testament, but only *temporarily* as the Angel of Yahweh.
 - d. As a result of His incarnation, He was able to die. He took upon Himself an act of humility because He had the nature of humanity. This act consisted of an act of

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obedience resulting in death, which would not have been possible had He remained solely in the form of God. This obedience was “until death,” and was strictly with reference to Christ’s assumed humanity.

2. A Definition of “Kenosis”

By “kenosis” we mean that Christ changed form from a likeness shared with the other persons of the trinity to a likeness of sinful man. This act of changing form was done through the birth in Bethlehem.

3. Some False Views of Kenosis

1. The False View That Christ Gave Up Some or All of His Attributes

He would have then been less than God. The attributes of God are inherent in the essence. Something of the essence would have been lost if He had given up any divine attributes.

2. The False View That Christ Limited the Use of Some of His Attributes

Christ, the divine Person, retained His divine nature. Something was added, a human nature, with its ability to be harmed and die, but nothing was removed. Therefore, He was still able to use all the divine attributes because the divine person controlled both natures. The fact that He did not always use all of His attributes in no way indicates that he COULD NOT use all His attributes, or that He somehow lost some of His divine attributes.

3. The False View That Christ Disguised His Deity

Deity is not visible to human eyes, therefore, there is no need to disguise it. Actually, through the incarnation, and only through the incarnation, do we see any person of the Godhead (Jn. 14:9).

4. The False View That Christ Lost His Essential Relationship to the Trinity

This view is patently false on its surface. The use of “essential” means that the thing which makes God what He is, the Spirit essence, was lost in the incarnation. If this were so, Christ would have ceased to be God. Since the Godhood of Jesus is repeatedly expressed in Scripture we reject this view as being an attempt to discredit Christ altogether.