

THE KENŌSIS OF GOD

The self-limitation of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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iUniverse, Inc. New York Bloomington

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ISBN 978-1-4401-3223-0 (pbk) ISBN 978-1-4401-3224-7 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America iUniverse rev. date: 04/06/09

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Preface

It is not for nothing that I call myself a "Christian", rather than "religious" or "follower of God". Although it would seem that the early disciples of Jesus did briefly experiment with other names for their new faith, such as "the Way" (eg Acts 9:2), a reminder that Christianity must result in a distinct lifestyle, they would seem to have quickly settled on the one which has stuck up to this day. And rightly so; even if Christianity does teach a distinctive manner of life, its essence is not merely following a teacher. That may well be what is taught in many other faiths, but the uniqueness of Christianity lies in its insistence that its heart is not following a Master, but in a continuing relationship with him. Action follows from that. Thus for any Christian, the understanding of the nature of Christ must be of vital importance, because if for no other reason, it affects the understanding of how we are saved.

Christianity must involve kenōsis

Who is this Christ? Here there are several key passages of the New Testament to which we may naturally turn; nobody would question that the short passage in Philippians 2, sometimes called a "hymn to Christ" is one of the most important. But right there is a landmine; its main idea is the fact that Jesus "emptied himself", from which is derived the key word kenōsis. And it is this that the apostle is holding up as the pattern for a truly Christian lifestyle. So what does it mean?

In the fourth century, in the height of the Arian controversy, Athanasius suffered exile five times because of his belief about the nature of Christ, that he was indeed fully divine. He realised that if Jesus was not divine, then we cannot be saved. Immediately this tells us that whatever else it means, the word *kenōsis* cannot mean that he became any less than fully God.

It is necessary to say this right at the very beginning of the book, because the idea, and particularly the word *kenōsis*, has a history, an unfortunate one. In the nineteenth century the proposal of kenotic Christology was put forward, that the second Person of the Trinity was limited in aspects of his divinity, and in that way could become incarnate. Objections and criticism of the idea were rapidly forthcoming, and after a few decades, the idea was largely abandoned and forgotten. This means that any suggestion of *kenōsis* is likely to produce a bias against it from the very beginning, and it is in danger of not being taken seriously (Dawe 1963:24). Yet, with qualification, some aspect of *kenōsis* is absolutely essential if the incarnation is to be any more than just an idea. It is impossible for God to appear on the world without in some way limiting himself; as the appearances to Ezekiel (Ez 1-3) or to John on Patmos (Rev 1) make clear. People would simply be overwhelmed, and those appearances must in any case not have been of God in total fullness. God in blinding majesty is deadly, but in condescending self-revelation is saving (Horton 2002:320). The “coming down” of God is basic to his nature, and so to his revelation (Oliphint 2004:44). And to be incarnate, not just appear, limitation is even more necessary. Dawe (1963:142) believes that some form of *kenōsis* is essential for New Testament theology. Richard (1982:162) describes *kenōsis* as “the link relating the finitude and sinfulness of man to the love of God”. Indeed, there are several modern thinkers, well respected, Jürgen Moltmann being the obvious example, who have espoused the idea (cf Pinnock 2001:12). It must be suggested that the rejection of *kenōsis* in its nineteenth century form, although this is justified in the form in which it was then put forward, was motivated more by the influence of a Greek worldview which stressed the immutability and particularly the impassibility of God. The idea of *kenōsis* had been one of the casualties in the battle with Hellenism (Dawe 1963:53).

This had already given problems to theology in the Christological discussions of the early centuries. In contrast, if reliance had been put more on a Hebraic, a more Biblical world-view, suggestions of *kenōsis* would have been treated more fairly. The idea of change is more compatible with the modern world-view (Pinnock 2001:116). Indeed, the *kenōsis* of Christ, and its attribution to the other Persons of the Trinity, is consistent with the Biblical witness, as van den Brink (1993:245) affirms. This is as long as it is a SELF-limitation, and that God is not believed to be inherently limited, or constrained from without. He is emphatically sovereign, even in his *kenōsis*. Unlike other suggestions, such as in process theology, *kenōsis* does not reflect an inherent limitation in God, so includes the affirmation of God’s ultimate control.

Kenōsis through the spirit

The *kenōsis* of Christ is in the context of an appeal; the Philippian passage urges personal *kenōsis* upon Christians. This imitation of Christ must then be an act of will, a voluntary choice, a response to the appeal that the apostle is making. But one of the wonders of Christianity is that it is not simply a human act in response to belief and decision, but is enabled by the Holy Spirit. Without this, it would be impossible; perhaps there are some few individuals who have been able to humble themselves, but at best, they are rare. But for Christians, it is a possibility; Philippians 2 starts with a reference to participation in the Spirit. Thus any imitation of the *kenōsis* of Jesus is empowered by him, just as was the *kenōsis* of Christ himself. God is not overpowering but empowering (Coakley 2001:206). This self-limitation was done from a desire for relationship with the world and in particular with the redeemed. Philippians 2 describes the act of *kenōsis*, done in order to enact salvation. *Kenōsis* is

then both the means, and the goal, of salvation; it is therefore a key role of the Spirit. Even when his activity may seem to be spectacular, such as when he enables healing, or speaking in tongues, glossolalia, the one who experiences them must, or should, be extremely humbled by the fact that God has worked through him or her.

But the Spirit does not only work in a kenotic manner, but his very nature is kenotic. At face value, it is amazing that God in the world could just be ignored, but this is in fact the case! The Spirit has been referred to as the “self-effacing”, or “shy” Person of the Trinity, and certainly this is the case. He does not glorify himself, but Christ (Jn 16:14); this is also an example for Christians to emulate. Such as Congar (1993:5), and Moltmann (1985:102), do not hesitate to speak of the Spirit in terms of kenōsis; likewise Gaffin (1996:25) writes that the Spirit “boxed himself in”.

The nature of God is kenotic

This suggests something that is most significant. If Jesus acted in kenōsis, and if that is the same for the third Person, could it then be that kenōsis is an aspect of the very nature of God? What Jesus, and the Spirit, are doing, is simply acting in accordance with their very nature. This then suggests that it should also be a feature of the first Person, of the Father, and this is indeed the case. If the Spirit is “shy”, how much more the Father, who is never seen, choosing to act by the Son and Spirit, jealously guarding his transcendence? It is not for nothing that many writers have commented on the hidden nature of God. His action likewise is kenotic; for example many have understood the act of creation in terms of kenōsis, God limiting himself in order to give existence, and a measure of freedom, to the creation. Creation and incarnation are understood as two phases of “the one process of God’s self-giving and self-expression” (Rahner, in Richard 1997:94). Such self-limitation can provide a ready explanation for such old problems as the existence of evil.

This introduces the Trinity, and provides the framework for this book. Our experience is first of Christ as kenotic, but this relates back to the fundamental nature of God. “It is precisely in the kenōsis of Christ (and nowhere else) that the inner majesty of God’s love appears, of God who ‘is love’ (1 Jn 4:8) and a ‘trinity’” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, in Richard 1997:22). This kenotic love is for salvation, as God desires “new partners for the eternal dance” (Pinnock 2001:30), which is how the perichōrēsis of the Trinity has been described. Then it relates forward to its application to Christians by the power of the Spirit. The order, interestingly, is that of the traditional “grace” of 2 Corinthians 13:14, known and used on a regular basis by countless Christians. Here grace, love and fellowship are ascribed to the three Persons, each of which is in nature kenotic. This is obvious in the case of the first two attributes, which involve giving, and implied in the third, where any fellowship involves a measure of yielding to the other. Incidentally, although it may be thought that giving does not diminish the infinite God, it is observable that when Jesus healed, he did feel the loss of power (Mk 5:30). This must bring us back to the key question, which provides the theme for this book. What does kenōsis mean, and how does it manifest in the three Persons of the Trinity?

And of course, lurking in the background is another – what does this have to do with us? Theology may well be fascinating, but I can never be content unless it affects my life and that of others round about. If kenōsis is fundamental to what God is like, this would immediately explain why Christians are urged to be kenotic themselves, for being a Christian should mean reflecting the nature of God; we should become like him. The essential idea therefore comes frequently in Christian devotion; to give one example, taken from one of Charles Wesley’s hymns: He left his Father’s throne above So free, so infinite his grace Emptied Himself of all but love And bled for Adam’s helpless race ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free; For, O my God, it found out me! Such a conclusion would have far-reaching consequences, but if it is a valid part of the imitation of Christ, must be taken seriously. Kenōsis is

the pattern for Christian life, simply because a Christian life should be in imitation of God. This book started, as my others, with a study of the implications of Christian doctrine, in this case kenōsis, for the Christian life. What happened was that the tail started to wag the dog, and the section of the book dealing with application got so big that it really had to be separated. It then appeared as *Have this mind* (Williams 2007), leaving me to develop the theoretical basis for the application here.

But this step is essential if the appeal to follow a kenotic life is to be taken seriously, and so it is indeed necessary to continue to consider in all seriousness what the emptying of God is all about. What does it mean for Christ to empty himself? What are the implications of the kenōsis of the Father? In what way has the kenōsis of the Spirit affected his working in the world? And how does kenōsis relate to the fundamental Christian message, the means of salvation? And finally, how does the entire process work out in the future? These are the questions that this book seeks to answer.

It will probably be pointed out that the book as it stands is quite uneven, especially in respect of the referencing, where some chapters are liberally sprinkled, while others have almost none. The reason for this lies in the diverse origins of the material. Those with few are usually notes written to help students, supplementing what was covered in lectures, so that referencing was not so useful; how many students take the trouble to follow them up? The ones with many, on the other hand, were prepared for publication in academic journals, and are therefore likely to contain novel or controversial ideas which need to be supported. I hope that there are enough references to enable anybody interested to follow up material quoted or alluded to. I would hope that this book also stimulates further thought, and especially that further aspects of the idea of kenōsis will be uncovered. The author would love to hear suggestions; maybe one day the book might be developed further in a more even and satisfactory way.

I need to acknowledge therefore especially the comments of editors and referees. These were always appreciated, even if they were not always agreed with. They often stimulated new lines of thought. My thanks therefore to *South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, *Old Testament Essays*, *Koers*, *Theologia Viatorum*, *Acta Theologica*, *Journal for Theology in Southern Africa* for their exposure to, and publication of, various articles reflected in the book. All previously published material has however been extensively revised both to avoid the inevitable duplication between chapters and to attempt some continuity of thought in the book. A few sections are reworkings of parts of my earlier books, and are included here for completeness as they are relevant to the theme of kenōsis. Some of my previous books are referred to in the bibliography, and a list is included at the end of the bibliography. A number of colleagues read the entire book before publication, and I am especially grateful both for their patience and comments. I would particularly acknowledge Deon Thom, professor emeritus in Theology, retired from the University of Fort Hare, who has been a constant encouragement to me in my career there.

He writes, "I must congratulate you on a very extensive and thorough discussion of a very important topic, a discussion which is indeed long overdue. One can only hope that other scholars will take up the challenge and enter the debate. For far too long the facts, as well as the many problems connected with God's kenosis, have largely been ignored by theologians." Professor König, formerly of the University of South Africa comments, "I ... find your approach well informed, broadly based, strongly argued, responsible in terms of conclusions - an overall laudable piece of research. I highly appreciate both the exegetical and the systematic aspects of the presentation. You have a definite ability to draw lines together into an overall view. That is Systematic Theology at its best. And added to that, your Biblical basis is very strong." Then Dr. Lubunga w'Ehusha, of the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa, says "in dealing with the topic of "kenosis" the writer wants to stretch the mind of the reader beyond the controversy about the divine nature of Christ and Pauline Christology that has

fuelled many theological essays and books. The passage of Paul's epistle to the Philippians is not an essay to oppose or compare the divinity of Christ to his humanity but a calling to live out one's Christian faith. The book argues that the kenosis of Jesus is not an isolated act in the history of incarnation but is embedded in the very nature of his divinity. The entire Trinity operates in kenosis, a deliberate choice to self-limitation in order to relate with one another and with the powerless. The book shows that each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, participates and works in a kenotic way in their relation to the humanity. The creator who accepts to give dominion to the people He created, Jesus who limits himself by becoming a human being and the Spirit who dwells in and works through the Church accepting the risk of being grieved by the human fallen nature.

Professor Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, the head of Postgraduate School, South African Theological Seminary, writes that he expected that the book "was going to be an academic book replete with boring, complex and difficult exegetical and theological arguments. On the contrary, I found out after reading that it was very engaging, exciting and very refreshing book on Christian Theology. "What is most refreshing in this book, often lacking in theology is the practical implication of the study. This is surely a plus!" He found that "The major strengths of this book are [that it is] (1) thoroughly biblical, (2) historically and theologically consistent with evangelically Christianity, (3) philosophically logical and coherent, and above all (4) relevant to the Christian life. I enthusiastically commend this book not only to Bible students and academic theologians but to Christians who desire not only to know the truth of Christian Theology but its implications on the Christian life."

I must add, in conclusion to my introducing this theme, that Thielicke (1966:489) observes that any book is a compromise, that between the desire to develop an exact and exhaustive treatment of the subject, and the constraints of time, marketability, and even the demands of prospective readers. He could then have noted that what is necessary for the author is a form of kenōsis, seeing that a book is subject to such limitations! The desire is always to continue to develop, read and add, but I have learnt that there must come a day when the line is drawn, and completion is enacted. Always of course a sadness, and regret, for there must remain gems that have escaped the process of mining!