

KENOSIS THEORY – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.

The *kenosis* theory is a heresy arising from the misrepresentation of Philippians 2:5-11 whereby Christ is said to have *emptied* Himself of the attributes of deity. Were it true, our Lord could sin, make mistakes, etc.

Nothing in this passage says or teaches that our Lord emptied Himself of either His God nature or His attributes. Only the outward and visible manifestation of Deity were removed, being veiled beneath human flesh (Hebrews 10:20).

God may change form, but He cannot cease to be God.

Phil. 2:5 ... Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in **the form of God**, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

7 But **made** himself of no reputation, and took upon him **the form of a servant**, and was made in the likeness of men:

8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

2:6: “form” (Greek = *morfē*, = *morphē*) means the external appearance to the viewers’ eye. But it is an external form that is a true indication of the inner nature from which it sprang.

Here it is of utmost importance to distinguish between personal and positional equality with God. As to His Person, Christ always *was, is, and will be* equal with God. It would be impossible for Him to give that up. But positional equality is different. From all eternity Christ was positionally equal with His Father, enjoying the glories of heaven. But He did not consider this position something that He had to hold on to at all costs. When a world of lost mankind needed to be redeemed, He was willing to relinquish His positional equality with the Father — the comforts and joys of heaven. He did not consider them something that He had to cling to forever and under all circumstances.

Thus, He was willing to come into this world and endure the contradiction of sinners against Himself. God the Father was never spit on or beaten or crucified. In this sense, the Father was greater than the Son — not greater as to His Person, but rather as to His position and the manner in which He lived. Jesus expressed this thought in John 14:28: “If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, I am going to the Father, for My Father is greater than I.” In other words, the disciples should have rejoiced to learn that He was going home to heaven. While on earth, He had been cruelly treated and rejected. He had been in lower circumstances than His Father. In that sense, His Father was greater. But when He went back to heaven, He would be equal with the Father in *His circumstances* as well as in *His Person*.

2:7 But made Himself of no reputation. The **literal** translation is: “But He emptied Himself.” The question immediately arises, “Of what did the Lord Jesus empty Himself?”

In answering this question, one must use the greatest care. Human attempts to define this emptying have often ended by stripping Christ of His attributes of Deity.

For instance, some even say He was subject to the limitations of all men, that He became liable to error and accepted the common opinions and myths of His day! This is a blasphemous lie!

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He voluntarily laid aside His God power and no longer made use of His other attributes of Deity such as all-knowledge. Indeed, He could no longer be in all places the same time. *What He did was to empty Himself of His positional equality with God and to veil the glory of Deity in a body of human flesh.* The glory was all there, though hidden (yet it did shine forth on occasions, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration).

There was no moment in His life on earth when He did not possess all the attributes of God even though He refused to use them. He hid His Godhood in a veil of clay and performed His entire ministry purely as an *unfallen* man, having the Spirit without measure, and operating under the guidance of, & with the gifts of, the Holy Spirit (John 3:36; Heb.2:4). “Himself” is accusative in Greek, meaning He did not empty something from Himself: He emptied Himself from something – **the form of God!** It is similar to pouring water from a pitcher into a glass; the form is different, but the substance remains the same. It was like a king temporarily clothing himself in the garb of a peasant – all the while remaining a king even though such was not outwardly apparent. His *person* did not change, only His *outward appearance*.

Again, one must use great care in explaining the words “He emptied Himself.” The safest method is to let the words that follow provide the explanation. He emptied Himself from having the form of God by taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. In other words, He emptied Himself by taking upon Himself something He never had before – *humanity*. God became Man – that was the emptying of Himself. He did not lay aside His deity, but His place in heaven and even that was only temporarily.

Taking the form of a bondservant: The Incarnation and life of the Savior is seen in that He came “not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). But let us pause to remind ourselves of the train of thought in this passage. There were contentions among the saints at Philippi. Paul exhorts them to have the mind of Christ. The point is that if Christians are willing to take the lowly place, to serve others, and to give their lives in sacrifice, there will be few quarrels. *People who are willing to die for others do not generally quarrel with them.*

Christ always existed, but came into the world **in the likeness of men**, meaning “as a real Man.” – although an “unfallen” one (no sin nature – like Adam before he disobeyed the Lord). The humanity of the Lord is as real as His deity. He is 100% God and at the same time 100% man.

2:8 Each section of this passage describes the increasing depth of the humiliation of God’s beloved Son. He was not only willing to leave the glory of heaven! He emptied

Himself! He took the form of a bondservant! He became Man! And now we read that He humbled Himself. Short of sinning, there was no depth to which He would not stoop to save our guilty souls. This verse shows us how the self-emptying manifested itself.

He humbled Himself by becoming *obedient* to the point of death. He obeyed even though it cost Him His life – He obeyed to the end. Truly, He was the Merchant who went and sold all that He had to purchase us – the pearl of great price (Mat. 13:46).

Even the death of the cross: death by crucifixion was the most shameful form of execution. He was not allowed to die a natural death in bed. His was not to be an accidental death. He must die the shameful death of the cross. Adam was *disobedient* unto death; Christ was *obedient* unto death (Rom.5:19).

2:9 Observe the abrupt change. The previous verses describe what our Lord *did*. But now we turn to consider what *the Father* has done. Because the Savior humbled Himself, in stark contrast, God has highly exalted Him.

As He did not seek a name for Himself, God has given Him the Name which is above every name – Jesus, “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev.19:16).

And what is the lesson in this? The lesson is that the way up is down. We should not exalt ourselves but be the servants of others that God may exalt us in due time.

God exalted Christ by raising Him from the dead and opening the heavens to receive Him back to His own right hand.

2:10 The Father was so completely satisfied with the redemptive work of Christ that He determined every knee should bow to Him — of beings in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. Since He bent His knees in service to others, the Father has decreed that every knee shall bow to Him – Isaiah 45:22-23, every knee will bow to the name of Jehovah (God).

This does not mean that all these beings will be saved. Rather, that those who do not *willingly* bow the knee to Him now will one day be *compelled* to so do. Those who will not be reconciled in the day of His grace will be subjugated in the day of His judgment.

2:11 In matchless grace, the Lord journeyed from glory down to Bethlehem, then to Gethsemane, and finally to Calvary. God, in return, will honor Christ Jesus with universal homage and the universal acknowledgment of His lordship. Those who have denied His claims will one day admit that they have played the fool, that they have greatly erred, and that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the King of glory (Psalms 24:7-10). This will not result in their salvation. Subjugation is not reconciliation.

Remember, this passage was introduced in connection with a minor problem in the church at Philippi. Paul did not set out to write a treatise on the Lord. Rather, he was merely seeking to correct selfishness and party spirit among the saints. The cure of such condition is the mind of Christ.¹

¹ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1989), pp. 1964-1967; *King James Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1989), pp. 1589-1590.