

SELF-EMPTYING AND SACRIFICE:
A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF KENOSIS IN
PHILIPPIANS 2

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INTRODUCTION

To begin with, I believe it would be helpful to state what this paper does not seek to do: this is not an in-depth study of the many perspectives within kenotic theory; neither is it an exegesis on the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2. Instead, this essay is an exploration into how a kenotic understanding of Christ's incarnation might be seen to be compatible with a feminist theological framework. Although Phil 2:6–8 is not the only text believed to give biblical support to the theory of *kenosis*, it is this passage that I will primarily be drawing upon. I will begin the discussion by mapping out one or two common understandings of *kenosis*. From there feminist objections to kenotic theory will be canvassed before exploring whether it is possible for the two to be brought together. The final section of this paper will explore what a working model of feminist *kenosis* might look like.

WHAT IS KENOTIC THEORY?

Michael Gorman boldly declares that Phil 2:6–11 is “Paul’s master story.”¹ It is the Christology within this passage that we are primarily interested in, because the theory of *kenosis* draws its primary exegetical support from here. There have been many views that come under the umbrella of kenotic theory, some of them contradictory, which can make the explorations into this area of Christology complex and complicated.² We would do well, then,

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 12.

² The early Church Fathers fought hard to establish the orthodox belief of Jesus' equal and simultaneous humanity and divinity. However, they did not establish with equal firmness any one way of explaining how this occurred. As this essay explores, there are scholars (such as David McLeod) who reject kenotic Christology outright because of the risk of our viewing Christ as “less” than God. They emphasise instead Jesus' humility and obedience towards his Father. Others like Gordon Fee avoid the problem by interpreting Phil 2 metaphorically.

to start with a definition of the traditional understanding of *kenosis*. *Kenosis* comes from the Greek verb *kenōō*, “to empty.” The foundational text for this theory is Phil 2:6–8; of which verse 7 says that Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (NRSV). The TNIV alternatively translates the verse as “he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.” The basic belief is that in coming to earth as a human, Christ laid aside some of his divine powers or prerogatives. This action is seen as being necessary in order for him to be fully human. The idea of *kenosis*, commonly called kenotic theory, is essentially a doctrine of Christ’s self-limitation. Kenotic theory is a separate discussion from the reality or otherwise of the Incarnation itself. The debate and controversy concerning this theory (of which there has been much) enters when one raises questions of whether Christ could remain fully divine if his power was in some way limited, in order for him to be fully human. Some scholars have rejected kenotic theory outright and even among kenoticists themselves, there has been and continues to be much debate concerning *how* this self-emptying and self-limitation took place.

Gordon Fee explains that “many pertinent texts...seem to express some form of self-limitation of divine prerogatives on the part of the earthly Jesus.”³ As I have mentioned, the primary text used to support the idea of *kenosis* can be found in Philippians 2. Christ was in the form of God, but in coming to earth took the form of a slave.⁴ Michael Gorman notes here the parallelism between “form of God” and “form of a slave.”⁵ He explains that Phil 2:6–8 contains a “downward movement.”⁶ Christ “emptied himself,” “humbled himself,” and “became obedient to the point of death.”⁷ One can

Among feminist theologians, a number reject a theory of *kenosis* outright, because of its apparent incompatibility with feminist concerns; they tend to be less concerned with a faithful interpretation of scripture. As we shall see in this essay, there are those like Stephen Davis and Ruth Groenhout who choose to take the passage at literal face value. It is important to note that Fee, Davis, and Groenhout would all consider themselves kenoticists.

³ Gordon D. Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (ed. C. Stephen Evans; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 29.

⁴ There has been some debate over whether or not the Christ hymn contains the idea of pre-existence. Although an important exegetical issue, either position is compatible with the arguments put forth in this essay.

⁵ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 18.

⁶ See Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 16–17.

⁷ Gorman sees a possible connection in verse 7 with the suffering servant in Isaiah. See Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 21–22. Some have also argued for the presence of Adam Christology in the Christ hymn, in which Christ is the new, more obedient Adam. However, the arguments for this position are not as strong amongst scholars as they once were. Fee explains

also find the suggestion of Christ's self-limitation in John 17:5, Heb 5:7–9, and 2 Cor 8:9. As Stephen Davis writes, *kenosis* fits with the “picture of Jesus” found in the New Testament.⁸

Next we must address the question of whether to interpret the verb “to empty” literally or metaphorically. As Fee phrases it, “[d]id he [Christ] literally ‘empty himself of something’ when he took the form of a slave? Or did he metaphorically ‘make himself nothing’ by assuming the form of a slave, in becoming human?”⁹ Both Fee and Gorman have chosen a metaphorical reading. Gorman explains that Phil 2:7 does not refer to Christ divesting himself of anything. Instead, it is “a robust metaphor for total self-abandonment and self-giving.”¹⁰ Fee makes a comparison with 1 Cor 1:17.¹¹ Similarly, David MacLeod sees the verse as “poetic.” Christ “put himself totally at the disposal of people” and accepted a “lower status.”¹² According to MacLeod, “There was...no emptying of Jesus’ divine attributes.” Rather, “there was...a hiding, veiling, or hiddenness of the divine attributes and nature.”¹³ MacLeod adamantly declares that “[e]vangelicals reject the Kenotic Christology.”¹⁴ I think MacLeod is wrong here, as the raft of scholarly material published on the subject includes writings by evangelical Christians.¹⁵

Stephen Davis puts forward quite a different theory of *kenosis*. He writes:

[I]n the Incarnation, Jesus Christ “emptied himself” by temporarily giving up those divine properties that are inconsistent with being truly human while retaining sufficient divine properties to remain truly divine; and he did not assume those common human properties that are inconsistent

that though an echo of Genesis 2 and 3 might be there, the sense of the text does not allow us to push this too far. See Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” 31–32.

⁸ Stephen T. Davis, “Is Kenosis Orthodox?” In *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 130.

⁹ Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” 33.

¹⁰ See Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 21, 28.

¹¹ Fee, “The New Testament and Kenosis Christology,” 33.

¹² David J. MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2:5–8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 318–319.

¹³ MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation,” 325.

¹⁴ MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation,” 325.

¹⁵ Michael Gorman, Gordon Fee, and Stephen Davis, whose writings I have explored in this essay, would all identify themselves as Evangelicals.

with being truly divine but assumed sufficient human properties to be truly human.¹⁶

We can see the potential problems if this line of reasoning is carried too far, resulting either in Docetism, in which Christ only *appeared* human, or in something like Nestorianism, which results in Christ having a type of split personality.¹⁷ In order to maintain his orthodoxy, Davis suggests that the problem might be solved if we were to rethink our notions of what it means to be divine. What if some of what we think of as God's "essential" properties, such as omniscience, were not essential all the time? This would rely fundamentally on God's free decision to act or not, in particular circumstances.¹⁸

Although Davis' conclusions may be a little radical for some, it is out of a desire to retain orthodoxy (that is, the declaration that Christ was *fully* human and *fully* divine) that Davis moves in this direction. If nothing else, we must admire the fact that he chooses to wrestle so honestly with the paradox that is the Incarnation.

KENOSIS AND FEMINISM

The discussion so far has acted as an extended introduction to the real purpose of the essay: a feminist critique of kenotic theology. As we begin it will be worth our while to listen to Ruth Groenhout:

It has become commonplace in feminist thought to argue that women are socialized to be inordinately self-sacrificing, and that this socialization is a very bad thing. So can a feminist endorse a kenotic theology? Wouldn't a theology that makes an act of self-sacrifice theologically central to an understanding of Christianity be necessarily opposed to a feminism that advocates the empowerment and self-ownership of women? Feminist theory is developed out of a concern for the rights of women to live full, flourishing lives. Kenosis holds up for us the example of a self-sacrificing saviour whom we are to emulate by giving up our claims to power and authority, and by sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others. The

¹⁶ Davis, "Is Kenosis Orthodox?" 117–118.

¹⁷ For a brief discussion on the implications of the Nestorian heresy, see Davis, "Is Kenosis Orthodox?" 119.

¹⁸ The limits of this essay do not permit a full discussion of Davis' argument. See Davis, "Is Kenosis Orthodox?" 115–119.

contradiction seems clear and incontrovertible, and the notion of a kenotic feminist theology seems to be, at least on the face of it, an oxymoron.¹⁹

In response to Groenhout I want to ask: Is the concept of *kenosis* a helpful paradigm for women?

It has been argued by Valerie Saiving, Daphne Hampson, and others that while the primary sin for men is pride, the same does not apply to women. Rather, women lack an adequate sense of self.²⁰ Consequently, being instructed (by those in a position of power) to mortify their pride, and having a model that calls them to “obedience, humility and self-sacrifice”²¹ can only be to their detriment. Hampson writes that “[i]t is as though men have known only too well their problem, and so have postulated a counter-model. ...Instead of a model of the self which is isolated, self-sufficient and independent in its power, we have a model of the self as broken for others, connected, and indeed not a ‘self’ existing in itself at all.”²² Hampson categorically denies that powerlessness and sacrifice can be a helpful paradigm for women.

Fortunately for feminists who may (incomprehensibly, Hampson might say) feel a pull towards kenotic theory as a way of explaining one of the mysteries of the Incarnation, Groenhout offers a challenge to Hampson’s argument. Groenhout suggests that the concerns of feminists and kenotic theorists are not as contradictory as they first appear. One of the main objections put forward by feminist theologians is that Christians (and especially Christian women) are strongly encouraged to adopt Christ’s self-sacrificial attitude. This, it is claimed, clashes with the feminist goal of enabling women to “flourish” and develop a healthy sense of self. However, Groenhout suggests that it is not so difficult for a feminist to embrace a kenotic theology, if only we carefully define what we mean by “self-sacrifice.”²³

¹⁹ Ruth Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 291.

²⁰ I believe that this idea has in part brought a useful corrective to the traditional notion of sin, but it needs further development. Might not either definition of sin apply equally to men or women; both pride or the lack of it (an inadequate sense of self)?

²¹ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation,” *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 41.

²² Daphne Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” *Modern Theology* 4 (1998): 239.

²³ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 291.

Groenhout gives the following definition of self-sacrifice: “It implies that in some significant way the self is actually lost.”²⁴ It can range from “some sort of denial of the self” through to “the sacrifice of the self, or of life... it also must involve giving up the self for some other person, or other good.”²⁵ Importantly, Groenhout notes that it can mean giving up a part of one’s identity.²⁶

At first glance, this definition hardly seems conducive to feminist concerns. However, what shines through clearly in Groenhout’s writing is the importance she places on having a healthy sense of self in order to engage in “proper” self-sacrificial behaviour. Echoing the language of Philippians, she writes that “[s]elf-sacrifice, properly understood, requires that one have a robust sense of the value of the self that is to be emptied.”²⁷ I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with Groenhout’s statement, for it seems to me that Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, had a healthy sense of self. Jesus knew who he was as God’s son, and had a strong sense of the task that he was called to do, even though it led to death on a cross. His was true, unselfish, sacrificial love.

Groenhout argues that there are times when self-sacrifice is appropriate in the Christian life. However, she emphasises that along with having a sense of one’s own worth, it is the responsibility of the individual to judge when a sacrifice is appropriate. She suggests that self-sacrifice is justified “when it aims to stop or limit the destruction of other people or of healthy social relations.”²⁸ Groenhout also points out that there is an important eschatological element to the notion and practice of self-sacrifice: “It is undertaken in the hope of a future in which all things will be made new.”²⁹

So how can we summarise Groenhout’s argument? Simply, the contradiction between feminist concerns and a theory of *kenosis* can be removed if we understand the imitation of *kenosis* as the practice of proper self-sacrifice which flows out of a healthy sense of self-worth and a belief that the particular sacrifice is justified by the situation. To do so is to imitate Christ. In sum, “when oriented toward service to the Kingdom rather than

²⁴ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 298.

²⁵ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 298.

²⁶ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 298.

²⁷ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 303.

²⁸ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 304.

²⁹ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 307.

purposeless self-abnegation, self-sacrifice is an appropriate call for all who call themselves followers of Christ.³⁰

LIVING KENOTICALLY

The final feminist theologian we will look at in this essay is Sarah Coakley. The view she holds of *kenosis* is different again to the views we have already explored, but she gives a helpful perspective on our question of whether *kenosis* is a helpful paradigm for women. Coakley describes *kenosis* as a “special form of power-in-vulnerability.”³¹ However, before we get into this, I want to take a step back and look briefly at an issue raised by Gorman because it will help to lead us into Coakley’s view. Gorman asks the question of whether true divinity might look very different to the way we expect. He suggests that Christ’s condescending to come to earth as a man might be an “*embodiment*” rather than “a *contravention* of his true identity.”³² Gorman explains this idea in the following way:

In this [way of] reading, Christ *exercised* his deity. What is *out of* character for normal divinity in our misguided perception of the reality of the form of God is actually *in* character for *this* form of God. That is, although Christ was in the form of God, which leads us to certain expectations, he subverted and deconstructed those expectations when he emptied and humbled himself, which he did *because* he was the *true* form of God.³³

Let us take a moment to let Gorman’s words sink in. He is saying that Christ’s actions as described in Phil 2:6–8 are not weak or un-godlike. Rather, it is we who have misunderstood what it means to be divine. The virtues of obedience, humility and self-sacrifice are instead part of the character of God!

Coakley holds a similar position to Gorman, and has coined the phrase “power-in-vulnerability.” Her interpretation of Philippians 2 and the “christological blueprint” is that it is “a matter of...choosing never to have certain (false and worldly) forms of power – forms sometimes wrongly

³⁰ Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” 311.

³¹ Sarah Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford/Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 5.

³² Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 26.

³³ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 27.

construed as ‘divine.’³⁴ Hampson’s earlier criticism that *kenosis* is merely a male “counter model” and inappropriate for women cannot be applied here.³⁵ What Jesus showed us then in his earthly life is what true humanity looks like. Coakley suggests that the vulnerability demonstrated by Jesus is not a flaw or a weakness, but instead it is “a (special sort of) ‘human strength.’”³⁶

On closer inspection I find these arguments by Gorman and Coakley to be the most convincing. But if Philippians 2:6–8 holds some sort of ethical imperative, then as Christians, both men and women, feminists or not, we are to imitate Christ’s *kenosis*, or as Coakley describes it, “power-in-vulnerability.” This brings us to the need to develop praxis, an outworking of kenotic theory in daily life. Coakley suggests that we can practice this vulnerability, the kenotic life if you will, by engaging in contemplative prayer.³⁷ She explains: “The ‘spiritual’ extension of Christic *kenosis*, then... involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed practice of ceding and responding to the divine.”³⁸

The spiritual discipline of engaging in regular, primarily silent prayer³⁹ involves a “yielding to divine power” and is both “profoundly transformative” and “empowering.”⁴⁰ Although I would never have thought of it in a kenotic sense, I can agree with Coakley because I have experienced it myself. She writes of the self being “disarmed with God.”⁴¹ There have been times when I have been reluctant to approach God in silent prayer, because I am afraid of what I might hear. There is intense vulnerability in being silent before God. Silence can be frightening. Indeed, I have been in churches where a quiet moment is barely permitted in the service. I believe the primary reason for this is because we are, both individually and corporately, afraid to be disarmed and vulnerable before our God. Feminists are not the only ones to fear a call to self-sacrifice or to pretend that God never requires such things

³⁴ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 11.

³⁵ See Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 11.

³⁶ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 25.

³⁷ It is important to note that Coakley is not referring to “contemplation” in some elitist way. See Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 34.

³⁸ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 34.

³⁹ Coakley explains that “such prayer may use a repeated phrase to ward off distractions, or be wholly silent; it may be simple Quaker attentiveness or take charismatic expression (such as the use of quiet rhythmic ‘tongues’)” See Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35.

⁴⁰ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35.

⁴¹ Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 35.

of us. If we do not take the time to seek God, it is easy to say that we never heard God speak.

Papanikolaou offers some criticism of Coakley's kenotic practice. He questions its ability to have "meaning in the context of human-human relationships and the formation of community." Secondly, he is doubtful of the role it can play in struggling for social justice or against systemic oppression.⁴² I would like to take a moment to defend Coakley here. First, within the paradox that a special strength comes from allowing this form of vulnerability, Coakley writes that it "builds [in] one...the courage to give prophetic voice."⁴³ This is an important role, and I believe there is a need for more of us who are willing to stand in the space where the Church and the feminist movement meet, and to speak out prophetically. In answer to the question of how Coakley's understanding of *kenosis* might apply to interpersonal relationships, I believe that the lessons learned and the strength gained through contemplative prayer should be the starting point for our relationships. When we relate to others from out of a healthy sense of self, aware of both our vulnerability and "power," we can judge for ourselves when self-sacrifice is appropriate, and make such sacrifices; not out of a sense of fear or inferiority, but out of Christ-like love. Perhaps we can follow not only the example of Christ (Phil 2:5-8), but also that of Paul (Phil 3:4-14), and dare to be models of *kenosis* for others.

CONCLUSION

If nothing else, I have demonstrated that kenotic theory is an important and complex area of Christology. I hope I have also alerted readers to the fact that there is plenty of work to be done in this particular area of feminist theology. Perhaps more importantly though, kenotic theorists within all theological camps have the responsibility of continuing in conversation with one another. I believe not only that *kenosis* can be a helpful paradigm for women, but that kenotic theory has much to contribute when it comes to trying to understand the Incarnation. Finally, the motifs we have explored in this paper; of self-emptying, self-sacrifice, and vulnerability, are ones that all Christians have the responsibility of engaging with on a daily basis. Despite the fact that they are unpopular concepts, it is to our disadvantage to ignore them.

⁴² Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse," 46.

⁴³ Coakley, "*Kenōsis* and Subversion," 35.



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