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How Does the Kenosis Fit into the Incarnation?

Harold Willmington

Liberty University, hwillmington@liberty.edu

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How does the kenosis fit into the incarnation?

Most theologians would agree that the two greatest doctrinal references in the entire Bible are Philippians 2:5-8, and John 1:14. Both have to do with the incarnation of Jesus.

- The Philippians passage record occurred when Jesus exited heaven. The John passage describes what transpired when He entered earth. Here are these two passages:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

- Especially are we interested in the Philippian passage:
 - A. Note the phrase in 2:7a *“made himself of no reputation.”* These five English words come from one Greek word, *kenosis*.
 - B. Kenosis literally means, *“to empty.”*
 - C. Plainly speaking, Paul here is stating that Jesus emptied Himself of something prior to departing from glory.
 - D. Just what was the nature of this mysterious *“something”*?
 - E. In essence there are two main views:
 1. He gave up (or surrendered for a while) His divine attributes and walked this earth a perfect man as once did Adam before the Fall. Many prosperity TV preachers (*“name it and claim it”*) teach this heresy, advocating Jesus left behind His divine glory, but not His gold!

In the late eighties a well-known TV evangelist wrote a book, entitled *Jesus Was Not Poor*, the purpose being to *“prove”* from the Scriptures that the Savior was actually a very wealthy man, and that He now desires that all His people also be rich. Some of the incredible *“proofs”* in this bizarre book include:

- † The fact that Jesus owned a large home, based on John 1:39. In reality, this verse does not even hint of this.
- † The fact that Jesus wore *“designer clothes,”* as seen by the seamless garment at the cross referred to in John 19:23-24. No comment necessary here.
- † The fact that He could afford to hire a chief financial officer, Judas by name, as recorded in John 12:6. Again, no comment needed.

When asked, however, to explain 2 Cor. 8:9, where Paul says that Christ *“though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich,”* the evangelist replied, *“The poverty spoken of here did not refer to Christ’s money, but rather His deity! In other words, Jesus gave up His deity at Bethlehem!”* If this statement be true, then both Isaiah (7:14) and Matthew 1:23) were wrong for each had predicted the virgin’s babe would be known as Immanuel, which means, *“God with us.”*

2. There is also a false view of the kenosis that teaches that Jesus emptied Himself of His relative attributes (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence) while retaining His immanent attributes (His holiness, love, and truth). But this is in error. He did, it is true, abstain for a while from using some of these relative attributes, but He never gave them up.
- Both of these views are not only improbable, but absolutely impossible! It simply could not have happened. To explain—
 - A. God possesses many attributes. Let us consider just one—His veracity (truthfulness). Could He ever forfeit this attribute? The following verses provide the answer:

“ . . . that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18).

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (Num. 23:19).

“And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent” (1 Sam. 15:29).
 - B. So what is the intended lesson here? Simply this: It is not only that the God of the universe *wouldn’t* lie, but rather that He *couldn’t* lie!
 - Grand conclusion: Because Jesus is God it would be impossible for Him to give up any of the divine attributes!
 - A. He did, for a while, hide His heavenly fame in an earthly frame. Even though He retained every single attribute while on earth, He did, nevertheless, surrender the independent exercise of those divine characteristics.
 - B. This passage in Philippians also said He *“was made in the likeness of men . . . and took upon him the form of a servant . . .”*
 - C. This simple but absolutely staggering fact cannot be even remotely grasped by human minds. The infinite, holy Creator suddenly becomes in the likeness of His finite and sinful creatures (yet without sin). Who can comprehend such unbelievable condescension? It is as if a mighty and magnificent earthly king would determine to lay aside for a while his fantastic storehouse of wealth and, leaving behind an adoring and amazed court, take upon himself the body of a lowly ant. The *“Son of Man”* was,

by the way, our Lord's favorite name for Himself while on earth. He took upon Himself the form of a servant. He did not come as a mighty human Caesar or some world-renowned human philosopher. Even this would have been a condescension of colossal proportions. He came, rather, as a lowly servant.

- As a postscript, we have said it was impossible for Jesus to give up His divine nature at the incarnation. This fact is also true for human beings. To explain: Let us suppose astronomers have discovered a sub-human civilization existing on the planet Mars. Let us imagine you have been chosen to travel there, serving as a missionary of sorts from planet Earth, to aid them in improving their crude and primitive way of life. You agree to this mission but are shocked to discover there is one all-important condition—before entering the spacecraft you must leave your humanity behind! So much for the mission field!