

WEEK 5 | THE KENOSIS & VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood.

CREED OF CHALCEDON

We believe. . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. . . For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human.

CREED OF NICEA

Two critical issues in Christological—two areas that are commonly challenged or misunderstood—are the kenosis and the virgin conception and birth of Christ. When rightly understood, these two doctrines form a critical part of orthodox Christology. Addressing these issues will prepare us to dive into the subject of the Theanthropic person, the God-man, as we seek to understand how the divine and human natures are united in the one person Jesus Christ.

THE KENOSIS

I. THE ISSUE

Having established that Scripture clearly and unequivocally affirms that Jesus is truly God and truly man, we now come to the question of how the eternal, immutable God took on human flesh. The critical passage is found in Philippians 2:6-7 (we'll include additional verses for context):

⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The crux of the issue has to do with Paul's use of the Greek verb ἐκένωσεν (*ekenosen*), translated as "emptied." What exactly did the Son of God "empty" himself of?

II. HISTORIC & CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION

Since the 19th century, theological reflection on the *kénōsis* of Christ has been negatively affected by the Kenotic Theory. While there is variation among proponents of this theory, it can generally be understood as teaching that the incarnation of Christ involved an emptying of his divinity in some way. The earliest form of this theory can be found in the German theologian Thomasius' *Christi Person und Werk*, in which he argues that Christ abandoned the relative attributes of his divinity, such as his omniscience or omnipresence, in the incarnation, while maintaining the essential attributes of divinity like love or holiness.¹ The Kenotic Theory became especially prominent in British Theology thanks to the writings of Charles Gore.² Gore sought to synthesize Anglo-Catholicism and liberalism in the area of biblical-criticism; the Kenotic Theory afforded him the means of reconciling Christ's assertions regarding the authorship of certain Old Testament books with the findings of modern scholarship.³

The Kenotic Theory found support within the Free Churches, as seen in the writing of P.T. Forsyth. In a lecture recorded in *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, Forsyth draws a distinction between an attribute and the manifestation of that attribute. The former cannot be renounced or changed, but the latter can be. As an example, Forsyth looks at omniscience and writes, "In its eternal form, it is intuitive and simultaneous knowledge of all things; but when the Eternal enters time it becomes discursive and successive knowledge, with the power to know all things only potential, and enlarging to become actual under the moral conditions that govern human growth and the extension of human knowledge."⁴ Thus, Forsyth is able to argue that Christ had the

¹ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Biblical Theology, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 205–6.

² Gore both speaks of Christ as "refraining from the exercise of what he possessed" to abandoning "certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human." Statements like these make clear he is attempting to reconcile two theological views which, ultimately, appear to be mutually exclusive. Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1898), 266. Macleod notes that Gore's statements are often marked by "incoherence and uncertainty." Macleod, 206. It is most concerning that Gore's desire to accommodate liberal scholarship leads him to implicitly undermine the inerrancy of Scripture and, implicitly, the divinity of Christ. This is an important reminder that all theology must rest on sound exegesis of Scripture and nothing else.

³ Macleod, 206.

⁴ P.T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 307–308.

attribute of omniscience without having all knowledge,⁵ enabling him to maintain the facade of orthodoxy while holding to a form of Kenotic Theory.

The logical and theological issues with the Kenotic Theory are legion. A.B. Bruce⁶ notes that the Kenotic Theory is inherently contradictory, “at once an assertion and a deposition of divine power.”⁷ Further, it “reduces the Logos to a state of helpless passivity or impotence.”⁸ Any casual reader of the gospel accounts will recognize these descriptors cannot be applied to Jesus, whose divine authority is evident throughout. Other problems arise. If God should cease to possess any of His perfections perfectly, He would necessarily cease to be God. Thus, should the second member of the Trinity set aside any of His divine attributes, he would necessarily cease to be divine. This violates the God’s immutability and eternity, as well as the consistent witness of Scripture that Jesus was fully God (John 5:23; 8:25; 10:30; Col. 2:9; Titus 2:13). Further, if Christ is the one who providentially upholds the universe (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), what should happen if he ceases to possess those divine attributes which allow him to sustain and uphold all things?

Despite the myriad difficulties with the Kenotic Theory, however, it remains an influence in modern church. One popular church leader writes that “Jesus set aside His divinity, choosing instead to live as a man completely dependent on God,”⁹ and that Jesus “laid His divinity aside (see Phil 2:5–7) as He sought to fulfill the assignment given to Him by the Father.”¹⁰ Thus, it is necessary to address the true nature of Jesus’ *kénōsis*. What does Paul mean when he writes that the Son of God emptied himself?

III. PREFERRED VIEW

A. Context

It is always important to maintain a view to the context surrounding a difficult passage of Scripture. Here, Paul is urging the Philippian believers to adopt a humble attitude and posture towards one another, to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Paul then offers Jesus as the paragon of humility, most brilliantly displayed in the humility and condescension of the incarnation.

⁵ This is, of course, a contradiction in terms.

⁶ Bruce notes no less than seven serious issues with the Kenotic Theory. His response to proponents of it is especially helpful. A.B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ: In Its Physical, Ethical, and Official Aspects*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton), 172–93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹ Bill Johnson, *Face to Face with God: The Ultimate Quest to Experience His Presence* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2007), 108.

¹⁰ Bill Johnson, *When Heaven Meets Earth* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2013), 87–88.

Thus, whatever comes next is meant to demonstrate the humility of the Son of God as a model for believers.

B. Statement of the View

The Son of God, the Logos, emptied himself of the immediate external manifestation (appearance and activity) of His internal divine essence in the human realm in such a way that humans could perceive that appearance during his first advent. Though he always maintained his divine perfections and activity, during the period between his conception and ascension Jesus chose not to externally manifest those perfections in the human realm with the manifestation of his humanity unless the Father willed and the Holy Spirit led him thus.

C. Defense of the View

1. His Pre-existent State

Philippians 2:6 describes Christ's pre-existent state with two statements:

First, he was “being in the form of God.” The tense of the verb “being” indicates that this was a continuous state of existence—he was and had always been in the “form of God.”

The word ‘form’ comes from the Greek *μορφή* (*morphe*), which refers to the external manifestation of an internal essence. In other words, it is the external, visible evidence of who one is, but it does not refer to the essence of person itself. This understanding is drawn from its usage in the LXX, the Greek version of the Old Testament, where *morphe* is used four times and each time it is describing an external, visible form:

- 1) In Job 4:16, Eliphaz is struggling to describe some sort of apparition that has a visible, though unidentifiable, form.
- 2) In Judges 8:18, Zebah and Zalmunna describe the men they have killed as “the form (*μορφή*) of the appearance of the sons of kings” (LXX).
- 3) In Isaiah 44:13, the prophet writes of a carpenter drawing “the figure of a man,” another external form.
- 4) In Daniel 3:19, it is the king's appearance that is changed towards Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, again referring to the outward appearance.

As one scholar summarizes, “it seems clear that *μορφή* belongs to a group of words which describe God not as He is in Himself, but as he is to an

observer.¹¹ So, what is the *morphe* in question in verse 6? It refers to the visible glory of God, the external manifestation of His perfections. Though no one has or can see God, the Old Testament records instances of people seeing the glory of God (e.g. Exodus 24:10). Though they cannot see God as He is, they see a brilliant manifestation of who He is on display. This understanding of *morphe* becomes even more clear when we examine the second statement describing Christ’s pre-existent state.

Second, though the Logos was “in the form of God,” “he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6b). In His pre-existent state the Logos had “equality with God.” That is, he possessed the same glory as Father from eternity past, the external manifestation of His divine essence. This explains Jesus’ request of the Father to “glorify my in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5, c.f. 24). The thing Christ did not cling to was “the glory of God, that shining light in which, according to OT and intertestamental literature, God was pictured.”¹²

Further evidence of this interpretation can be found in a proper rendering of the phrase οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο, which is normally translated “did not count [equality with God] a thing to be grasped.” Scholars have shown this is a Greek idiom that is better understood as “did not count it as something to be used for his own advantage.”¹³ Whereas the idea of ‘grasping’ or ‘holding onto’ his equality might give the idea that Christ’s *kénōsis* involved letting go of his divinity in some way, this nuance makes clear that Christ was not relinquishing his divinity, but the advantages it’s display would afford him.

2. His Self-Emptying

With the above understanding of *morphe* in mind, we can now determine what Paul meant when he wrote that Christ “emptied himself.” He writes that Christ emptied himself “by taking the form (μορφή) of a servant” (Philippians 2:7a). In other words, the *kénōsis* is an exchange of “forms.” Paul is describing the Logos’ volitional choice to exchange the external form proper to His divinity—His external glory (c.f. Hebrews 1:3)—for

¹¹ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 213. See also J. Behm, “μορφή,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 745–746.

¹² Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC, ed. by I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 210.

¹³ N.T. Wright, “ἄρπαγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11,” in *The Best in Theology*, vol. 2, ed. J.I. Packer (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1987), 87–109.

the external form of a servant, i.e. a human being, proper to the essence of a servant.

3. His Incarnation

Three parallel phrases describe this emptying that took place at the incarnation:

- 1) “taking on the form of a servant”
- 2) “being born in the likeness of men”
- 3) “being found in human form”

Each word (form, likeness, form) is a different Greek word all referring to an external appearance. The emphasis is on the fact that the Son of God, in the incarnation, took on the appearance of a man reflective of the nature of humanity he assumed. He had the “form” of a man because He really was a man—he displayed the external manifestation of His internal essence.

D. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that in his Kenosis, the Son of God did not give up or empty himself of any of his divine attributes. Divine simplicity means that God’s attributes cannot be divided or separated from who God is—He is His perfect attributes and cannot be anything less. Had the Son emptied himself of any of his attributes, he would have been rendered less than God while in his state of humiliation, a violation of the Scriptures clear teaching that he was and is fully God.

Rather, Christ emptied himself of the external manifestation of his internal essence. He set aside his glory—the brilliant, visible display of his divinity—and the advantages of that glory by taking on the form of humanity. In becoming a man, the Son accepted that he would be perceived and treated as a man.

There is a moment in the gospel accounts when, briefly, Jesus’ divine *morphe* is put on display. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Matthew tells us that Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matthew 17:2). What the disciples were seeing was “his glory” (Luke 9:32), the external manifestation of Christ’s deity. Indeed, it is the glory of Christ that believers behold in part now (2 Corinthians 3:18) and will one day see in full (John 17:24).

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

I. THE ISSUE

Perhaps one of the most contested doctrines of orthodox Christianity is the virgin birth, a challenge that comes not only from outside the church but also from within the church. With the rise of Enlightenment rationalism came a deep skepticism of anything supernatural. All the miracles recorded in Scripture were called into question, including the virgin birth. In Biblical scholarship, efforts arose to de-mythologize the text—in other words, supernatural events were regarded as fictitious propaganda recorded to serve the interests of the burgeoning early church. Despite the fact that the West has largely moved past modernism, this skepticism of the supernatural remains and has even invaded the church, leading many professing Christians to jettison the doctrine of the virgin birth. As we will see, however, the virgin birth is not an optional doctrine that can be set aside without consequence; rather, it is a critical truth with massive ramifications on who Jesus is. Thus, it is important to see what Scripture teaches on the subject in detail.

II. THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

A. Old Testament Messianic Prophecy

In Matthew 1:22-23 Matthew records that the miraculous conception of Jesus accomplished “from the Holy Spirit” apart from the activity of Joseph or any human male will be “to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet” (Matthew 1:22). He then goes on to quote from Isaiah 7:14, where God promises to give a sign to Ahaz the king. He says, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

The Greek word Matthew uses to translate “virgin” is *παρθένος* (*parthenos*), which in Greek literature normally refers to a young, unmarried woman who presumably has not had sexual relations with a man. The context seems to indicate this is Matthew’s intent as he clarifies that Mary was with child “before [Mary and Joseph] came together” (1:18) and that Joseph “knew her not until she had given birth to a son” (1:25).

Additionally, Matthew uses *parthenos* to translate the Hebrew word *עַלְמָה* (*almah*), which refers to a young, unmarried woman who is a true virgin (there is another Hebrew word that is less clear on the chastity of the subject, but Isaiah chooses to use *almah* in his prophecy). This strengthens the argument that Matthew uses *parthenos* to indicate that Mary was truly a virgin until after the conception and birth of Jesus.

B. Joseph was Jesus’ Legal, Not Biological, Father

The gospel writers are clear that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, and they take great care to avoid statements that would present Joseph as the biological father of Jesus:

1. Joseph is listed as the husband of Jesus' mother.

Matthew 1:16 – and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

2. Conception took place before Joseph and Mary had intercourse

Matthew 1:18 – Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

3. The birth took place before Joseph and Mary had intercourse

Matthew 1:24-25 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

4. Joseph was only “supposedly” the father of Jesus

Luke 3:23 – Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli

5. Joseph was Jesus' legal father from the moment of conception

Matthew 1:1-16 teaches that Joseph was descended from David through Solomon and thus is a legal heir to the throne and kingdom of David. In doing so, Matthew establishes Jesus' legal right to the Davidic throne. Because Joseph was Mary's betrothed at the time of Jesus' conception (1:18), Jesus is legally Joseph's son from conception and a legal heir to David's throne (in Jewish custom, Joseph and Mary would have been legally married from the moment of betrothal, so that Jesus was conceived legally “in wedlock”). This is a crucial point. If Jesus was not the legal son of Joseph from conception, then he would not have been conceived as the legal heir to David's throne and would be disqualified from being the Messiah. If Jesus had been Joseph's legal heir by adoption, he would have no legal claim to the throne of David. Thus, God sovereignly ensured that Jesus was legally qualified to be the promised Messiah and Davidic king.

C. Mary was Jesus' Biological Mother

The gospel writers are clear that Mary was a true virgin when Jesus was conceived and born (See numbers 2 & 3 above).

D. The Holy Spirit was the Agent Cause of the Virgin Conception

1. Scriptural Affirmations

Matthew 1:18 – Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:20 - But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Luke 1:35 – And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

2. The Dynamics of the Virgin Conception

How does the virgin conception work? In Luke 1:35 an angel tells Mary that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The expression parallels Old Testament language of the filling of the Holy Spirit, where the Holy Spirit would come upon and fill a person for a particular task or ministry. Here, the indication is that the Holy Spirit used and controlled the reproductive capacities of Mary (Luke 1:31) and provided what was necessary to transform her egg into a developing baby. There is no hint of any sort of mythological intercourse between gods and humans that was common in Ancient Near Eastern mythology.

III. THE NECESSITY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

A. To Fulfill the Messianic Prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 (see above)

B. To Produce Jesus the God-man (Luke 1:35; 2:11)

C. To Produce Jesus as “the Seed of the Woman” (Genesis 3:15; Galatians 4:4)

D. To Produce Jesus as Holy (Luke 1:35)

It was not Mary's virginity that made Jesus holy. Rather, it was the direct, generative work of the Holy Spirit that ensured Jesus was absolutely holy. See the RSV translation of Luke 1:35 which reads, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

E. To Produce Jesus as "the Son of God" (Luke 1:35)

F. To Guarantee Jesus the Rights of the Firstborn

Because he was conceived immediately by God as a man, Jesus as a human would have all the rights of the firstborn son that God would be expected to have.

G. To Prevent the Curse of Jeconiah from Falling on Jesus

In Jeremiah 22:28-30 God pronounces a curse against "Coniah" (also called Jeconiah or Jehoiachin) in which He pronounces Jeconiah "as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling in Judah." In other words, God would prevent any of Jeconiah's offspring from inheriting the Davidic throne. Jeconiah, an offspring of Solomon, is an ancestor of Joseph (Matthew 1:11). Thus, if Jesus had been Joseph's biological son he would have fallen under this curse and could not have been the Divinely recognized Davidic King. However, Jesus' biological descent from David is traced through one of David's other sons, Nathan, an ancestor of Jesus' mother Mary. Thus, Jesus has both the legal right to the throne through the line of Solomon because he is Joseph's legal son, yet he is able to avoid the curse of Jeconiah by nature of his biological descent from Nathan through Mary.

H. To Symbolize the Ultimate Reconciliation of Humanity with God

The virgin conception and birth symbolized that the enmity between man and God would be resolved through Christ in a new humanity.