

1902

The Kenotic theory--is it tenable?

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Is it tenable?

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## The Kenotic Theory. Is it tenable?

The Kenotic theory though assuming many diverse forms in the hands of its various expounders, still may be stated in general terms thus: "The Divine Logos in order to assume our human nature and to submit to its earthly conditions and limitations, abandoned somewhat the nature that was His before He became incarnate." To this statement we think all its advocates Thomasius, Less., Kierard, Otteley, Gore et al. would agree, despite the differences in their various views. The question then is, "Is such a theory, which in our day has had many brilliant advocates both saints and scholars" which is in itself remarkably attractive to the general thought of our time in its emphasis upon our Lord's union with our human life, satisfactory and acceptable?"

We must challenge it upon the three following grounds.

1. Its want of scriptural basis.
2. Its lack of historic acceptance by the church.
3. Its rational incredibility.

First. Its want of scriptural basis.

Any theory of our Lord's person must rest upon the New Testament representation of Him. All a

prior reasoning is to be rigorously excluded as apt to warp our judgement and to make us blind to any appearing facts. But we must always be true to all the facts and we must not in our endeavor to devise a theory throw aside any of them - nor minimize their importance because they seem unmanageable in our hypothesis. Any theory is at best but a method of explanation - an hypothesis - which in no way makes the fact - and fortunately in this case no particular and complete theory is needed to enable us to obtain the benefits of the Incarnation. We are sure however that if any true theory is ever formulated it can only be done by the due recognition of all the facts - and until such a day arrives we will do well to do without a theory if need should be.

The New Testament represents our Lord's work in the Incarnation as being both for Revelation & Redemption and that to accomplish this our Divine Master assumed human nature and entered upon human conditions of living. They represent this humiliation under three general types - viz.

1. Self Sacrifice -
2. Self Impoverishment -
3. Kenosis -

Since the New Testament used these three figures of speech to express the concept, it is fair to assume that neither fully states the idea but that we must combine the three to obtain it, and always interpret any one of them in a way to allow each of the others its full significance.

Regarding then our Lord's humiliation as Self-Sacrifice we must hold that the Redeemer at the time He made the sacrifice must have had infinite power and wisdom. Brought of these He would have been only a man, and not at all a Divine victim. Any idea of Self-Sacrifice demands a self to be sacrificed, and if power <sup>and</sup> prerogative are gone then sacrifice has no value at all. It is what is given makes sacrifice of worth.

Regarding our Lord's humiliation as Self-impoverishment or self-emptying. such expressions as Paul's: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye, though his poverty might become rich." - (2 Cor 8-9. R4) cannot reasonably be held to mean that our Lord's nature became impoverished. This text and all similar ones lay no necessity upon us for holding to any thing more than that He assumed an additional human-nature and that in the "fashion of a man" and under its limitations endured the conditions of poverty and hardship while communicating also to it something of His own richness.

Regarding our Lord's humiliation as "Kenosis" all turns upon the interpretation of the passage in Phil = II - 6-7. It is from a word in this passage that the word "Kenosis" is derived and it may well be regarded as the "Malakoff fortress" with all Kenoticists.

It reads as follows:

ΤΟΥΤΟ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΤΕ ΕΝ ὑμῖν ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὅς ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ  
ὑπάρχων οὐκ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῷ, ἀλλὰ  
ἑαυτὸν ΕΚΕΝΩΣΕΝ μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων  
γενόμενος - καὶ σκηματί εὐρέθεις ὡς ἀνθρώπος ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν  
γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ:

Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus who being (originally) in the form of God counted it not a prize (or a thing to be grasped,) to be on an equality with God - but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man - he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death yea the death of the cross. (RV with margin)

We hold that "ΕΚΕΝΩΣΕΝ" can not be used in this passage to assert a metaphysical change in the nature of our Lord for the following reasons

1. Paul is enforcing the truth he has just announced by the use of an illustration. In verses 3 and 4 he has said - "Be of the same mind" - doing nothing through faction or through vain glory - but in (your) lowliness

of mind each counting other better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also (kai) to the things of others: Now Paul's reference to the Christ emptying himself must be interpreted in the light of what he intended to illustrate, which was clearly not an abandonment of one's things but instead such a consideration of them as would leave one free to show proper regard for the things of others. The use of the word also (kata kai) is especially significant as it shows that the idea is not of self robbery at all but only of sympathetic interest.

2. In this very passage Paul implies in the terms he uses that the equality of Jesus Christ with God was something inalienable. The word which ~~which~~ he uses to express being or existence is not "eipai" but "ὄντα ἔχειν". As Dr. E. H. Gifford in the Expositor Sept 96 has shown, this word rendered "being" or "existing" (found in the continuous tense of the participle) indicates not only pre-existence but continued existence in the divine mode of being even during his earthly ministry. Textually, this is a very striking fact. No other word could have been used by Paul which in itself would so fully suggest the original, permanent & inalienable we might say constitutional, existence of the Christ. in

Clear distinction from all accidental and temporary conditions. It almost seems as though Paul purposely used a word here which might forever guard his readers from any false interpretation of ΕΚΕΥΩΕΥ.

3. The words - "took upon Him the form of a bondservant" are clearly. Exegetical, elaborating and explaining the idea - "He emptied himself" - Clearly then the first cannot mean an abandonment of essence.

4. The sentence - "who being in the form of God counted it not a thing to be grasped to be on an equality with God but emptied himself" - if carefully considered points to anything but a disruption of the Godhead. -

The word form (μορφή) means the essential attribute while the word fashion (ὁμοιότης) means what is accidental. The μορφή therefore means God's essential mode of existence.

The adjective ἵσα is used adverbially to suggest the various states and conditions under which personal equality might be found. We cannot translate - "to be on an equality" as meaning the same thing as "being in the form of" - for the first denotes merely the accidents of the essence but the latter - the essence itself. (See Buell's notes).

Thus it becomes clear that, that of which "He emptied himself" was that which he counted "not a thing to be



grasped" - that is - "the being on an equality with God. He could forgo the  $\sigma\chi\eta\mu\alpha$ , but not the  $\rho\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  of God without ceasing to be God."

5. We are confirmed in such an opinion of Paul's use of this term in a metaphorical and not in an etymological sense by the use he makes of it elsewhere. In four other passages we find him using it <sup>as</sup> always in a figurative and not in a literal sense. viz.

<sup>(1)</sup> Romans 4-14 = "Faith is made void" - which does not mean "emptied" at all - but simply that the impression is lessened - until it produces no results

<sup>(2)</sup> 1 Cor. - 1-17 - "The Cross is made void" - It does not mean that the Cross is done away - but only that it is disparaged.

<sup>(3)</sup> 1 Cor 9-15 - <sup>as</sup> II Cor 9-3. where Paul speaks of making "glorifying void" - simply means that certain conduct will make it worthless.

In the light of these explanations of this much discussed passage - we hold that Paul is not endeavoring to describe a real metaphysical "kenosis" and self depotentialation - but only a change in the form of manifestation - a hiding of the God consciousness in the historic Christ - He veiled His majesty in a servants form and appeared among the human race disguised - but He was not lost to Himself.

But if this passage does not compel belief - any appeal to such scriptures as we find recording Jesus' lowly human birth - his growth in wisdom and stature - his temptation <sup>and</sup> his ignorance of certain future happenings although they may be beyond satisfactory explanation will not drive us to acceptance of the ~~Renetic~~ <sup>Renetic</sup> theory. There are passages it would undoubtedly explain beautifully but unfortunately it obscures as many sayings as it illuminates - and leaves us befogged with the problem of Scriptural interpretation as far from solution as ever. We conclude <sup>that</sup> the New Testament representation taken as a whole is very decidedly opposed to the theory <sup>and</sup> that even the passage which is held to teach the doctrine most unequivocally - fails to support it.

Second. - Passing now to the second ground on which we challenged this theory namely - "Its lack of historic acceptance by the church" - we find that Canon Gore admits that St. Augustine and the fathers who followed him did not teach the doctrine. But the Patristic literature of the fourth - third and second centuries shows us most evidently that all the positive teaching of the church either by its great men or by its councils excluded absolutely the Renetic theory.

Only a very few passages can possibly be cited as suggesting or implying it - and all such references may be accounted for by fairly considering the undeveloped state of the doctrine and the absence of clear definition, or as the result of infelicitous expression of the thought held. - The doctrine cannot be found in the early Church - any more than among the churches of medieval times unless it be among a few heretics. Its origin is really very modern. The fathers always regarded Jesus as Divine and studied the question of the Incarnation from that point of view -

The contentions of Canon Gore that the fathers failed to recognize our Lord's human nature and that their exegesis was uncritical and sometimes dangerous is impotent to change the above conclusion. For whatever may be said of the Post-Nicene fathers it is perfectly evident that the Anti-Nicene fathers did full justice to both natures in Christ and though their exegesis was incomplete there is not a scintilla of evidence to indicate that they held to any erroneous theory - but abundance of proof that witnesses to their care in avoiding the difficulties of the Rebirth doctrine by discussing the subject of the Incarnation from the historic rather than from the a priori standpoint

Third - Lastly we challenged this theory on the ground of its rational incredibility -

In the development of this doctrine the advocates of the Kenotic theory have formulated their belief under one or the other of the four following statements. To wit

1. That in the Incarnation there was a metamorphosis or conversion of the Godhead.
2. That in the Incarnation there was an abandonment of the relative attributes of the Godhead
3. That there was in the Incarnation a reduction of the Divine attributes to the finite form
4. That there was in the Incarnation an abandonment of certain attributes within the human sphere.

The special and detailed consideration of each one of these in all the various forms in which it has been enunciated, would require a volume. We limit ourselves to more general criticism.

In all of these formularies there is the common element of assumption. That there was a depotentialiation of the Divine. However plausibly stated, this is a stupendous assumption rationally incredible and wholly beyond the power of any one to conceive or explain. The endeavor made by Thomasius and others

to relieve the idea by saying that the attributes laid aside are not essential to Divinity because they describe only such relations as exist between God and His creation. and so are only transient modes of the Divine. fails. because even if they are only manifestations of the Divine called forth by the creature universe, still as long as creation remains we cannot conceive of its existing apart from God's power. If it was possible to imagine the world existing independently apart from God - all our Theistic exceptions must go. God cannot possibly be less than omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent without ceasing to be God.

It might be added that all the Kenotic theories fail also at the very point which they are all devised to secure - namely unity in the Person of our Lord. The explanation fails to explain and after all we find our progress toward a comprehension of the mystery in no way advanced by the speculation. The Catholic faith seems after all to secure all the results attained by the Kenotic doctrine and beside is far more consonant with the Scriptural representation. While we thus reject the Kenotic theory, we must confess that in contemplating the Person of our Lord Jesus

Christ we are in the presence of a mystery to whose understanding our profoundest study but brings - an approximation. Our results are mainly negative enabling us to see what we may not hold - but little more. We discover certain limit-nations between which the truth must lie but we are not yet able to formulate a satisfactory conception of the mysterious incarnate life of our Lord. Fortunately as we said in the beginning we are not compelled to solve the insoluble. We can recognize and acknowledge the mystery. And while in no way disparaging any efforts made by earnest men to throw light upon this subject <sup>as</sup> recognizing that such endeavor should be and must be made in our generation. and that the Reunion theory is founded in a brave and earnest endeavor to give a plausible solution of much that is mysterious in the life of Jesus - the Christ. we must still ~~set~~ set it aside as untenable, at least in any form yet presented. because - it disrupts the Trinity. takes the Messiah of true divinity as well as disparaging His Humanity. takes away the profoundest ethical elements in the Incarnation <sup>as</sup> prejudices the work of Jesus as both Reveal<sup>er</sup> <sup>as</sup> Redeemer.