

Biblical & Christological Grounds for Voluntary Kenosis

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Abstract

Paul's use of the word *kenosis* in Philippians 2:7 ("he *emptied* himself") launched a long and winding quest to understand its meaning in biblical context, its implications for Christology, and its application for personal and public ethics. That journey has been fraught and, at times, badly sidetracked, most notably around the question of diminishment: *what* Christ surrendered and *what* we are asked to surrender. This study will briefly exegete the biblical text, then retrace some key questions and themes in kenotic theology. Ultimately, this overview will lead us to three main convictions: (1) what is "poured out" in kenosis is Christ himself, both and indivisibly as the eternal *Logos* and in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth; (2) kenosis is an attribute of self-giving love and cruciform surrender in *both* divine and human nature, *not* the surrender of divine attributes or diminishment of the divine nature; and (3) central and essential to kenosis is its *voluntary* and *consensual* nature as gift or self-donation, without diminishment, even when undergoing affliction—both for God-in-Christ and in those who follow his footsteps. The essay will conclude with a nuanced demonstration of voluntary consent from the works of Sergius Bulgakov and Simone Weil.

"Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, the Christ upon the cross is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is."¹

— Hans Urs von Balthasar

Introduction

In Philippians 2, the apostle Paul cites or composes a breathtaking 'Christ-hymn' to exhort a troubled church to overcome dissension by internalizing the mindset of Christ and emulating his sacrificial humility. At the heart of this hymn (verse 7), he uses the aorist form of the verb **κενόω** (to *empty, make void, diminish, or perhaps decenter*) to describe Christ's definitive revelation and decisive act of self-giving love, which includes decentering privilege to make space for authentic otherness.

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 139.

Theologians eventually transliterated and employed the apostle’s poetic use of that Greek verb as a noun (kenosis) and adjective (kenotic) to embark on a meandering quest for its meaning in biblical context, implications for Christology and application for personal and public ethics. That journey has been fraught and, at times, badly sidetracked, most notably around *who* surrendered *what*, *when* it was surrendered, and *how* we should follow in Christ’s footsteps.

This study will briefly exegete the biblical text, retrace critical questions and themes, and briefly nod to developments in kenotic theology through the centuries. Ultimately, this overview posits three main assertions: (1) that what is “poured out” in kenosis is Christ himself, both and indivisibly as the eternal *Logos* and in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth; (2) that kenosis is an attribute of self-giving love and cruciform surrender in divine and human nature, *not* the surrender of divine attributes or diminishment of the divine nature; and (3) that central and essential to kenosis is its *voluntary* and *consensual* nature as gift or self-donation, without any diminishment or dehumanization, even when undergoing affliction—either for Christ or those who follow in his footsteps. We will then conclude the essay with a sampling of how Sergius Bulgakov and Simone Weil emphasize the voluntary and consensual aspect in their works.

Philippians 2:5-7 – Key Terms

Have the same mindset that was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not regard his equality with God as something to be grasped for—instead, he poured himself out, assumed the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of humanity (Phil 2:5-7).

Interpretive premises shape every translation. This essay will signal some theological premises that precede this essay but won’t bear the burden of proof or wade into rearguing many of the assumptions on which I stand. Exegetically, I read verses 5-7 of the hymn this way:

mindset – **φρονεῖτε**, usually translated ‘mind,’ but here referring to one’s perspective or inner orientation (especially to the other) rather than mere opinion or calculative reason (διάνοια). Paul is saying far more than “think of it this way.” We are talking about *seeing* others from a new vantage point (the Cross!) through the eyes of Christ.

form of God, form of a servant – following most translations, the word **μορφῆ** evokes the element of ‘shape, fashion, or appearance’² and suggests not so much ‘nature’ as such (NIV) but rather, comes closer to ‘mode of existence.’ While I enthusiastically affirm the eternal and unchanging *fullness of the divine nature*—the glory of infinite love—that dwells in Christ, even

² “μορφῆ,” Liddell and Scott. An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1889. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=μορφῆ&la=greek#lexicon>

bodily, without diminishment (Col 2:9), that isn't what μορφῆ means here. Instead, Paul is alluding to at least two *modes of Christ's divine-human existence*.³ In this Christ hymn, yes, we see the two natures (a. "being God" and b. "likeness of humanity"), but we also see an emptying or pouring out whereby Christ passes from one mode of existence (majesty) to another (the mode of a servant). These are two of a myriad of Christological modes, which range from:

- the eternal Son seated in glory at the right hand of the Father,
- the earthly (and earthy) incarnation of the human rabbi walking the trails of Nazareth,
- the supersubstantial resurrection appearances, where locked doors are but mist to him,
- the ascension of Christ to his royal throne at the right hand of the Father,
- his blinding appearance in visitations (Damascus Road) and through visions (the Apocalypse) after the ascension,
- the universal presence of Christ-*Pantocrator*, who both circumscribes and fills all things,
- the presence of Christ in the Mystery of the Eucharistic meal,
- the Body of Christ (his church) of which Christ is head,
- and in the marginalized other or "least of these" to whom we minister (as in Matt 25).

As is evident, the referent of the preceding list is the One Lord, Jesus Christ, divine and human, crucified and risen, appearing in nine distinct modes of existence. Without a change to his immutable nature (kenotic love), Christ may pass from one mode to another (as we see in his transfiguration—*μετα-μορφώω*) or co-exist in any number of these modes at once. I say 'myriad of modes' following Dr. C.E.W. Green, who posits that *Christ fulfills ALL modes of being* in his union with creation and, echoing the liturgical theology of ancient church, does so *simultaneously*.⁴

To this I would add two corollaries: (1) Every mode of Christ's existence reflects, refracts, or reveals the truth of the one divine essence (infinite self-giving love) and the union of the eternal *Logos* with every one of the *logoi* in creation (visible and invisible). (2) Various modes of being highlight particular aspects of kenosis. In the form of majesty (as Creator), for example, kenosis *sets aside privilege and makes space* for the other. In *becoming* human, kenosis *gives itself/pours itself out* for the other. In *being* human—the form of a servant—kenosis *humbly submits and stoops to serve* the other. Common to every mode of existence—from eternity to womb to tomb to chalice, kenotic love is voluntary self-giving.

³ Richard Trench, "μορφή, σχῆμα, ἰδέα," *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/trench/section.cfm?sectionID=70>. See also Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "'The Being that is in a Manner Equal with God' (Phil. 2:6C): A Self-Transforming, Incarnational, Divine Ontology," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (October 2020): 581-627.

⁴ C.E.W. Green, personal correspondence, through January 2023.

being in the form of God – Translators diverge over whether the *form of God* and the *form of a servant* are statements of contrast (“Although/Though he was...,” as in the RSV, NRSV, ESV) or a statement of reason (“Because he was God” or “Being God,” NKJV, NIV).⁵ Both are true and evident, but in this essay, I will emphasize the latter, seeing both kenosis and the *mode of a servant* as revelations of God’s nature *through* the Incarnation rather than a relinquishment of it. That is, the servant mode is not a concealment of Christ’s deity but our clearest revelation of it! In assuming authentic human nature, including the mode of being Paul describes as “the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3-4), Christ sets aside the glory and privilege of the divine Son’s *mode of majesty, without* ceasing to be fully God and without violating human nature. “Our ‘likeness’ is not a condition for him; it’s our condition that he’s altering from the inside.”⁶ To underscore this point, kenosis is *not* the surrender of divine attributes but, rather, the divine attribute of surrender.

something to be grasped for – We may read this phrase as both ‘clinging to what is ours’ and ‘snatching’ or even ‘robbery’ of what is not ours. I suspect Paul is alluding to the illegitimate ‘snatching’ of the forbidden fruit we see in the story of Adam and Eve. Perhaps Adam and Eve’s first misstep was to forget they *already were* “in the image and likeness of God.” But their groping for deification was a ‘fall’ precisely because they were *grasping for what was already theirs by grace* under the delusion of autonomous *taking*. They were deceived into believing being like God could not look like obedience or surrender. It is both ironic and iconic, then, that Jesus’ voluntary, kenotic submission to the Father (remember Gethsemane) unto death on a cross becomes the fullest and clearest demonstration of his deity and even his glory (John 17:1).

Instead, he poured himself out – “Emptied” became a perilous translation choice for **κενόω** in kenotic theology. Many would read kenosis as connoting an emptying of something (especially divine attributes) out of Christ (a *what* out of a *whom*). And while the word without context surely includes a beautiful self-emptying aspect (voiding or bankrupting egocentrism), I would opt to use ‘*poured out*’ to identify that *what* is being emptied is Christ himself—a deliberate allusion to Isaiah 53:12: “He poured out *himself* to death” (NRSV) or “poured out *his soul* or *his life*” (η ψυχή αυτού, LXX).⁷ That is, rather than speculating what *something* was emptied out of Christ (a temporal diminishment of divine attributes), we say Christ himself is emptied in *to* the world (as Logos) and *in*

⁵ On this, see especially Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 12.

⁶ Chris E.W. Green, personal correspondence, March 31, 2023.

⁷ Cf. Markus Bockmuehl, “‘The Form of God’ (Philippians 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (1997): 1–30.

the world (as suffering servant) as self-giving love incarnate—and that this revelation is an eternal and immutable truth of the Triune God who IS *kenotic love in God's essence and immanence*.

assumed – meaning, *by addition*. The divine Word, without subtraction, in self-giving love, *takes up* the human condition as his mode of being (form of existence), and in his union *with* humanity, *as* humanity, raises up humanity in himself and transfigures human nature “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18). As it turns out, this raising up (deification) of humanity IS *the image of the Image of God restored*.

the form of a servant – We ought not repeat the common mistake of hearing Paul say, “Christ gave up some aspect or attribute of his deity (to be *less* than God) and exchanged it for a servant mode (which is *less* than God). That is not Paul’s logic. Rather, *being* the God of self-giving love, God-in-Christ voluntarily assumes the mode of a cruciform servant to reveal the nature of God as self-giving love in this world. In other words, the man on the Cross is not God in disguise, but God revealed in clearest focus.

and was made in the likeness of humanity – ‘Likeness’ here does not denote similarity (think Docetism) but something closer to ‘identity.’ He took on authentic human nature, like us in every way. As ‘Adam’ was made in the image and likeness of God, so Christ is made in the image and likeness of ‘Adam.’ But in his conception, Jesus was not merely a reboot of pre-fall Adam. Romans 8 tells us that Christ inherits ‘*the likeness of sinful flesh*’ (the human condition, with its attendant temptations and mortality) from the Virgin such that he undergoes and co-suffers our trials, humiliation, and death. To speak of his death as *vicarious* is more appropriate than *substitutionary*, in that Christ lives and dies *with us* and *as us*, not simply *instead of us*. And while the deity of the eternal Son never compromises the humanity of the man Jesus of Nazareth, their indivisible subsistence in the one hypostatic Person transfigures and divinizes humanity (*all* humanity), which is the *telos* of humanity.

Key Questions

My commentary of key terms and phrases above only hints at the messy centuries of questions, debates, and premises that cannot be argued in depth here as we skim our way to the point.⁸ But it does gesture to the constellations of questions that have occupied scholars, preachers, and mystics since the ink on Paul’s letter first dried. Briefly:

⁸ For a thorough history of kenotic theology, I recommend a combined survey that includes Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” in *Swallowing the Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne

1. *Who is the subject of kenosis?* The triune God? The eternal Word? The Incarnate man? Yes. All of the above.
2. *What is emptied in kenosis?* Are the divine *attributes* emptied, suspended, or concealed? No. Rather, *Who is emptied:* the Triune God, the eternal Word, and the Incarnate Son make space and pour themselves out, yet without diminishment.
3. *In their union, how do the two natures relate kenotically?*
 - a. How does the union affect human nature? *Deification.*
 - b. How does the union affect the divine nature? *Hominization.*

1. Who is the subject of kenosis?

We can distill the question of *subject* to two initial nodes: is the subject of kenosis (a) Jesus Christ in his humanity and Passion, or (b) the divine *Logos* who becomes incarnate. We may delineate these in terms of ‘kenosis from below’ and ‘kenosis from above.’ That is, biblical studies scholarship often reads Philippians 2 with a focus on the humility and voluntary suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth in his Incarnation (kenosis from below). Thus, the locus of kenosis is Christ’s sojourn while *in this world* is how he lived and died as the true human and suffering servant.

Meanwhile, Christologists tend to begin with the *Logos* (and, by extension, the Trinity) as subject, whose kenotic move is an eternal act of divine humility that condescends *into this world*. From that perspective, kenosis is already intrinsic to God’s eternal being, fundamental to God’s work of creation, and expressed in the act of Incarnation itself. Kenosis is the content of John’s message: “*God is love.*” What is *agape*? It is kenotic love, by which the divine Word creates all things, becomes the created, and redeems all creation.

Despite the gaping chasm between these two disciplines, the truth is both/and—both *kenoses* (pl.), divine and human, are united in and revealed through the one indivisible, theandric Person—Jesus Christ of Nazareth—eternal Son, incarnate God-man, crucified, risen, and glorified.⁹

Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), 82-111; Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 16-25; Graham Ward, “Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash, and Graham Ward (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 25-36; Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Bruce L. McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 3 (2006): 243–51. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2400.2006.00212.x; Bruce L. McCormack, “Kenoticism in Modern Christology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford University Press, 2015), 444-458.

⁹ This is the heart of Cyrillian Christology, a re-centering cairn along the treacherous path. Cyril of Alexandria, “That Christ is One: by way of dispute with Hermias,” *LFC* 47 (1881): 237-319. See also Ivor Davidson, “‘Not My Will But Yours Be Done’: The Ontological Dynamics of Incarnational Intention,”

The real distinction is in *our* perspective—on the one hand, we recognize the onto-logic of the Incarnation as the divine Word becomes human flesh. And on the other, the Incarnation is itself—and especially the cruciform Lamb—is our epistemological icon of the divine.

This is also why John the Beloved can refer to Christ as “*the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*” (Rev 13:8). The Lamb can only be slain from the foundation of the world IF he is also crucified in time on Golgotha. Conversely, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is his revelation of and participation in the eternal humanity of God, who, transcending time, bears the sins and sorrows of the cosmos. The eternal form of the cruciform God is made particular in the temporal death of Jesus Christ.

In other words, we know kenotic love as we “behold the man” dying on a cross, and, according to John Behr, we know God by *how* Jesus dies.

The fact that Christ shows us *what* it is to be God, in the *way* that he dies as a human being, sums up the theological heart of the creeds and definitions of the early Councils. He shows us *what* it is to be God (not *who*), for he is consubstantial with the Father, and he shows us this in the way in which he dies as a human being—not simply by dying, but the way in which he dies: ‘trampling down death by death.’ What it is to be human and what it is to be God—death and life—are shown together in one concrete being (ὑπόστασις) with one ‘face’ (πρόσωπον).¹⁰

2. What is ‘emptied’ in the act of kenosis?

Earlier, I mentioned kenotic theology’s track record of lurching (not always forward) and getting sidetracked. This is especially true in the assumptions smuggled into the question, “*What* [rather than *who*] is emptied” in kenosis? From the simplicity of “*Whose life is being poured out?*” a good many kenoticists speculated on what divine attributes were being emptied, diminished, or concealed beneath or behind the humanity of Christ.

While I find the question itself problematic, at first glance, it’s not silly. How, indeed, do we maintain the union of two natures in one Person while also taking seriously the limited

International Journal of Systematic Theology 7, no. 2 (April 2005): 178-204; Ivor Davidson, “Theologizing the Human Jesus: An Ancient (and Modern) Approach to Christology Reassessed,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 2 (July 2001): 129-153; John A. McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 216–22; Thomas G. Weinandy, “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” in Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating, eds., *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2003), pp. 23–54.

¹⁰ John Behr, “The Christian Art of Dying,” *Sobernost* 35:1-2 (2013), 137.

consciousness of Christ's authentic humanity? In what sense is Christ truly human if, as an infant, he's also somehow omniscient in his deity? And if he's genuinely *not* omniscient in his infant humanity yet *still* somehow all-knowing in his deity, aren't we back to speaking of two distinct subjects (*prosopons*) and reverting to the Nestorian error? It feels like an age-old double bind: If Christ is *fully* divine, then how can he be *truly* human? And if he is authentically human, what became of his divine attributes? If they are *temporarily* suspended, how can we say Christ remained *fully* divine? If they are not suspended, is the Incarnation just another in a series of theophanies? But if Christ is both human and divine, how can he really be called *one* rather than *two*? And more specifically, it raises the question of divine suffering.

Is God somehow subject to the sufferings of Jesus? Pushing too hard into the Mystery becomes tricky—on the one hand, if one insists that God cannot suffer (hard impassibility), then what does “God is love” even mean? Surely love suffers grief for the other or in a breach of relationship with the other. Compassion IS literally co-suffering love. In what sense would an impassible “unmoved mover” be capable of relationship, compassion, or responsiveness? And what of the indivisible unity of Jesus Christ? Surely, we mustn't say, “Only the human ‘part’ (heresy alert) of the One who was crucified underwent suffering.”

But on the other hand, if the eternal God (who is Spirit) is capable of suffering the limitations and pains of humanity (total passibility), doesn't this undermine the necessity for the Incarnation? The logic of Hebrews 2 and 4 seems to be that God became human *so that* God can authentically undergo the trials of human existence as one who suffers them. In the Incarnation, God's knowledge of our plight moves beyond that of the watchful and concerned heavenly Parent to know suffering directly—as one of us—the Cross-in-time embodies and fulfills the radical empathy of God.

From the Fathers (such as Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor) to living Christologists (e.g., Paul Gavrilyuk, John McGuckin, John Behr, and Chris Green), the tradition is wily enough to hold cheeky incarnational antinomies, such as “*without change, God became*” and “*the Logos suffers impassibly*”¹¹—a modified impassibility limited to

¹¹ Aidan Kimel, “St Cyril of Alexandria: The Impassible Passibility of the Kenotic Word,” *Eclectic Orthodoxy* (Dec. 17, 2015). <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/st-cyril-of-alexandria-the-impassible-passibility-of-the-kenotic-word>

meaning *voluntarily*.¹² They boldly *affirm God's impassible suffering in the flesh*.¹³

Similarly, Dr. Chris Green explains,

Incarnation is much more than God becoming 'a human.' It is about the humanity of God being shared with all of creation. *God can change* because he *is* human, but this *does not alter God*. God takes on *our* humanity and so creates a change for us. The Incarnation recharges *our* changeability and assumes our changeability to transfigure us."¹⁴

These paradoxes only hold IF we *always, always* begin with the one subject, Jesus Christ. Then we can ask simply, "Is the One on the Cross truly human? YES. Is the One on the Cross truly God? YES. Does God suffer? YES, *in the flesh of Jesus*." Remember Paul's strange words, "...the church of God, which he [God] bought with his [God's] own blood" (Acts 20:28). God has blood? Yes, in the flesh of Jesus. And again in 1 Cor 2:8, where the One crucified is identified "the Lord of glory." The Lord of glory can die? Yes, in the body of Jesus Christ.

This is the revelation we've received and believe—this is the kenotic God unveiled in the death of a human slave. We don't reason our way there—rather, we behold: And beholding him, we're beholden... not to calculus, but to worship.

3. In their union, how do the two natures of Christ relate kenotically?

A corollary of the last question arose in Patristic theology as to how the union of natures in Christ affects his and our humanity, without compromising the integrity of either. And how might the Incarnation of God in Christ affect God, if that's possible? Let's take each in turn.

¹² John Behr, "Hebrews," *Open Table Conference* (Spring 2023).

In my own view, the postmodern aversion to divine *impassibility* and *immutability* is predicated on Open Theism's rightful rejection of Aristotelean/scholastic definitions that envisage God as the "unmoved mover"—uncompassionate, nonresponsive, and ungrieving. I join Boyd and Oord in their rejection of that version.

But I also see that as an anachronism, conflating late scholasticism with the patristic vision, which was up to something altogether different. The Fathers declare without compromise that the nature of the triune God is love. They see from Scripture that divine love is responsive: God hears our cries and "comes down" (Exod 2:24-27;7-8). "God *loved* the world in this way: he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). To the infinite and ever-flowing spring of divine love, the fathers attribute *immutability-as-faithfulness* and *impassibility-as-voluntary*. That is, infinite love is immutable in that it is faithful rather than fickle. Likewise, God's capacity to suffer in the flesh of Christ is impassible, but in this way: it is entirely *voluntary* rather than reactive.

¹³ For a defense of the paradox and the perils of abandoning it, see, for example, Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Paul Gavrilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology," in T. J. White and J. Keating, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 127-149.

¹⁴ Chris Green, closed Zoom conference with Julie Canlis, Cherith Fee Nordling, Fr. Kenneth Tanner, Bradley Jersak, Mar. 31, 2023. Cf. Maximus, *Ambiguum* 42 in Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas (Harvard University Press, 2014).

a. How does the union affect human nature? Deification.

The beautiful answer is that through the hypostatic union, God-in-Christ *redeems* and *restores* humanity to its *former* glory, the image and likeness of God in which we were created. Think of how the touch of Christ released healing energies that healed the woman with the issue of blood, opened blind eyes, cleansed lepers, and even raised the dead. Now think of that dynamic in a union far more intimate and universal—a complete sharing of Christ in our one collective human nature—and how in that union, the divine nature raises all of humankind to wholeness.

Further, the union also transfigures humanity from glory to glory into its *future telos* as the image of Christ. The age-old slogan, universally confessed by the first Christians, was that in Christ, “God became human that humanity would become divine.” As Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “What is not assumed is not healed,” and therefore, in the Incarnation, *all* of human nature was assumed in Christ so that *all* of humanity will become by grace what Christ is by nature—we call this transformation *theosis*, *deification*, or *divinization*.

These terms can be startling to those not raised or trained in traditions familiar to the language and theology of the Patristic era, but we see what they’re describing in 2 Cor 3:18, where Paul tells us that we’re being transfigured (lit.) from glory to glory into the image of Christ. So too, Peter says that just as we participate in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet 4:13), so through the promises of Christ, we participate in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). *Theosis*, then, is the process by which we are being transformed through our union with Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. *Theosis* includes the outworking and outcome of our salvation, including redemption, sanctification, and, ultimately, glorification (1 Cor 15:30).

So far, we're still squarely in patristic territory... nothing we don't see in Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, or Chalcedon. Union with Christ deifies human nature... but let's be quick to add that the *plerosis* of *theosis* is *kenosis*—i.e., the fulness of our transformation is the self-giving love of Jesus.¹⁵ The glorification of the Christ and the Christian is ultimately cruciform love—to be “lifted up” (exalted) is to be “lifted up” (crucified)—the *way* in which Christ dies (John 12:32-33). And the way in which he dies is not merely the crucifixion (what we did to Christ) but the Cross (what Christ did for us), which represents God’s self-giving, others-centered, sacrificial love.

b. How does the union affect the divine nature? Hominization.

This second question is more perilous. More recent theology (since Hegel especially) dares

¹⁵ See “Kallistos Ware,” Appendix 2.

to explore the implications of the Incarnation *on God*. Some pursued the question with gusto, including (1) the divine self-limitations of Open Theology, (2) the “weakness of God” theologians (e.g., Bonhoeffer, Weil), (3) real evolution-devolution in the God of Process Theology, all the way to (4) the collapse of transcendence and death of God in Christian atheism.

Even the eminent Catholic theologian, Hans von Balthasar, will dare say,

... that the Father’s self-utterance in the generation of the Son is an initial ‘kenosis’ within the Godhead that underpins all subsequent kenosis. For *the Father strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead* [!] and hands it over to the Son; he ‘imparts’ to the Son all that is his. ‘All that is thine is mine’ (Jn 17:10).... Inherent in the Father’s love is an absolute renunciation: he will not be God for himself alone. He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) God-lessness (of love, of course).¹⁶ [emphases mine]

There’s something exquisite about seeing divine kenosis all the way through the Trinity, poured out *completely*—“*without remainder*”—and culminating in an *emptying out* into the cosmos as radical imminence. Divine self-sacrifice—God bled out, down to the dregs. But we need to ask: isn’t this construct of divine kenosis yet another doctrine of diminishment—the Thomasian stumble revisited in the Trinitarian register?

Instead, I will insist again that the kenosis of Christ is a revelation of God’s nature as the infinite and eternal spring of Trinitarian love, poured out in self-donation that is divine precisely because (1) it never ceases to flow, and (2) because it is never depleted or diminished. How is this for beauty: “In God, everything is eternal, and love is eternal, inseverable, and unseparated, and the short moments of love’s sufferings drown in the ocean, in the ‘ages of ages’ of triumphant love.”¹⁷

Still, it begs the question: how the hypostatic union might not only divinize humanity but also ‘humanize God.’ Do the effects of the union somehow flow between the divine and human natures in *both* directions? The idea follows from Paul’s kenotic theology of *union, identification, and exchange*: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9 NIV). Note here that the union is not unilateral—the infusion of his grace involves Christ’s adoption of our disgrace, with the agenda of cleansing and healing it in himself.

If this occurs via the union of deity and humanity in the indivisible Person of Jesus Christ, it

¹⁶ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. 4: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 323.

¹⁷ Sergius Bulgakov. *Spiritual Biography*, trans. Mark Roosien and Roberto J. De La Noval (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2022), 105.

begs the question: what are the implications of the Incarnation *on God*?

c. The Fiery Sword

To explicate the communication of divine and human attributes, John Behr¹⁸ and Jordan Wood¹⁹ trace the different ways in which Origen,²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa²¹ and Maximus the Confessor²² describe the hypostatic union and our own theosis using the analogy of an iron sword (representing human nature) being immersed in a fiery forge (participation in the divine nature) so that the cold hard steel begins to take on the properties of the fire (searing heat, radiating light, and malleability). Maximus says,

...the quality of sharpness assumes the quality of heat, and the quality of heat that of sharpness (for just as the fire is united to the iron, so too is the heat of the fire diffused throughout the cutting edge of the sword), and the iron becomes burning hot through its union with the fire, and the fire acquires a cutting edge through its union with the iron. Yet neither of the elements undergoes any change in the exchange that results from the union, but each remains secure in its own natural properties, even though it has acquired the property of the other to which it has been joined.²³

Ever the provocateur, Fr. John Behr, has wonderfully noted how, for Maximus, the union is not merely unilateral. We too often stumble over a verb like “making”—the humanity of Christ does not *make* God something else than God always is in God’s nature—none other than kenotic love. But Behr suggests, to extend the metaphor, the humanity of God does *give shape (form!)* to the divine nature just as the sword in the forge gives shape (sharpness) to the heat and light of the fire.²⁴ So also, Jesus Christ gives a particular, cruciform and human shape to the unchanging love of God.

d. Sacrificial Offering

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Jordan Wood, *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015).

²⁰ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.6.6, trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 191-192.

²¹ John Behr, "Introduction," in Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), ix-xxx.

²² Maximus, *Ambigua* 5, vol. 1, 54-59.

²³ Maximus, *Ambigua* 5 vol. 1, 57.

²⁴ John Behr, personal correspondence, March 30, 2023. See also John Behr, "'For this reason the Father loves me': Drawing Divinity into Himself to Minister Divinity to Us," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25.1 (Jan. 2023); Charles M. Stang, "Origen's Theology of Fire and the Early Monks of Egypt," *Modern Theology* 38:2 (April 2022).

Said another way, Simon Oliver speaks of Christ's *sacrificial offering* in the tone of a divine give *voluntarily given*, rather than paganized notions of transaction for appeasement on demand. Sacrificial love is a *gift* given—however costly—and not to be conceived as payment to God. Strictly speaking, it is an offering of oneself and one's life for the beloved other—by God, by Christ, by us—in love.

To paraphrase Simon Oliver below,²⁵ kenosis is the infinite spring of God's eternal love, refracted through human sin, looks like a crucified man, who *willingly* suffered humiliation and *freely* forgave his tormentors, *voluntarily* underwent death. Kenosis is the river of life-giving grace flowing from God's own nature. It is not merely divine reactivity to the rollercoaster of violent human drama.

On the relationship of Trinitarian love, Christ's self-offering, and our participation, he writes of the Eucharist (emphases mine),

... the *sacrificial offering* of Christ on the cross is the manifestation of the *eternal offering* of the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In other words, the *sacrificial offering* of Christ is not something that just happens to take place in first-century Palestine as a reaction to human sin; it belongs to the trinitarian life of God. Refracted through human sin and violence, Christ's *obedient gift* to the Father becomes bloody and violent. It is by means of the eucharistic *sacrificial gift* that we are incorporated into the *perfect sacrifice* of Christ on the cross and the eschatological banquet of heaven, both of which are *participations in the eternal reciprocity* of the Trinity as the Son *eternally offers himself* to the Father in the Holy Spirit.²⁶

"The perfect offering"? Why *perfect*? Because it is specifically the *voluntary self-giving of kenotic love*—the very nature of God and the *telos* of divine humanity.

Kenosis Is Voluntary—Consent and Participation

That final paragraph provides the segue to our punchline. Kenosis, defined above all as self-giving love, must be *voluntary, willingly offered, freely given*. For kenosis to express the *agape* of God—whether in the divine Godhead, creation, Incarnation, or the Passion of Christ—requires both *consent* and *participation*. Participation without consent is coercion (Calvinism). Consent without participation is abstraction (Deism). Love—kenosis—*voluntarily participates* in laying down one's life

²⁵ See "Simon Oliver," Appendix 2: The Nottingham Interviews – 2014.

²⁶ Simon Oliver, "Episcopacy, Priesthood, and the Priesthood of the Church," *The Michael Ramsey Lecture* (Little St. Mary's, Cambridge, November 6, 2017). <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2018/02/15/episcopacy-priesthood-and-the-priesthood-of-the-church>.

or pouring out oneself for the Other.

On the *consent* side, Jesus *participated fully and authentically* in human suffering and death, but note well, he does so by *willing consent*:

“Therefore, the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, so that I may take it again. No one takes my life away from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. I received this commandment from my Father” (John 10:17-18, EOB).

So the kenosis of Philippians 2 is not simply that he suffered (succumbed to) a humiliating torture and death, but that in humility, he gave himself over—he *consented*—to *participate* in the Father’s mission,²⁷ to undergo the burden of the human condition, and to submit to our violence without recourse to rescue or retribution. This voluntary participation must be so thorough that it includes a no-turning-back clause. Riffing off Matt 26:53, Simone Weil once said that Christ so emptied (voided) himself that at some point, he could not have called legions of angels, or the kenosis would not be authentic or complete. But even then, he *willed* his path beyond *unwilling* it. The gift is truly given when it can no longer be taken back, but it remains a gift and thereby becomes a gift.

As per Oliver, we see this same voluntary, self-giving life—this kenosis—as the immutable (i.e., unfailing) love of God-in-Christ from Alpha to Omega. Thus, we have (1) the eternal Word in the kenotic Trinity *beyond time*, (2) who through a *kenotic* act of overflowing love, *creates time*, space, and all that inhabits them, (3) then assumes human nature and the weakness of our flesh *in time*, (4) climaxing in the temporal Passion of the human God crucified, risen, and ascended to *transfigure time*. This Christ-centered series of *kenoses* is both the *arche* (foundation) and *telos* (fulfillment) of love’s ever-radiating ripples.

Voluntary Kenosis – Bulgakov

I’ve chosen to illustrate the essential voluntary nature of kenosis with a sampling from Fr. Sergius Bulgakov’s influential volume, *The Bride of the Lamb*²⁸ and Simone Weil’s kenotic consent from her *Notebooks*. I’ll emphasize his repetitive assumption that kenotic love is by nature voluntary

²⁷ See Maximos, *Disputations with Pyrrhus*, trans. Joseph P. Farrell (Waymart, PA: Saint Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2014), 97: “And the divine apostle, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, saith of Him that “He became obedient unto death, even death of the cross.” So did he obey willingly, or unwillingly? If ‘unwillingly’ then it is reasonable to say that [He was] not [really] obedient [at all, but subject to compulsion], which is tyranny. If ‘willingly’ then He became obedient, not in his deity, but in His humanity... thus He possesseth that faculty of will proper to humanity.”

²⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

[my emphases]. First Bulgakov:

p. 60 – God’s creation of the world is a *kenotic* act of divinity, first in the general sense that God, by placing alongside His absoluteness the relative being of creation, *kenotically* places Himself into a correlation with the latter by the *voluntary sacrifice of love* for it... this is hypostatic *kenosis*.

p. 118 – God is the Creator from all eternity. However, for God the creation of the world is a *kenosis, a sacrificial love*... Love is a living unity of *freedom* and necessity and... both God’s love for Himself in the Holy Trinity and the Creator’s love for creation manifest Love as such: God is love.

p. 226 – [Grace] convinces “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zech 4:6), in the end by divine love. The *freedom* of the person remains inviolable and impenetrable even for God. *Voluntarily*, by His *kenosis* of Creator and Provider, He suspends His omnipotence before the person.

p. 226 – ...as Christ Himself says about Himself: “I stand at the door and knock: if any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20). This door is creaturely *freedom*. the source of the originality and reality of creation in its correlation with the Creator.

p. 234 – “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Here, man does not reject God’s *supreme gift, creaturely freedom*; rather, he desires to realize it by a *free submission* to God’s will, according to the image of the God-man, in whom... human will *freely “follows”* God’s will.

p. 234 – Creaturely *freedom* is naturally afflicted by selfhood, from which it can free itself only by a *voluntary self-renunciation*, in the death on the cross...

p. 241 – Christ’s humanity properly has that *freedom* by virtue of which alone He could have *offered* obedience to the Father even unto death. His whole life can be understood only on the basis of the synergistic relation between His two natures. Synergism in Christ is possible only by virtue of the genuineness of his *kenosis*.

While these examples focus on the BIG events of kenosis (creation, Incarnation, Passion), consider also the many micro-kenoses peeking through so many Gospel pericopes: in Jesus’ baptism and temptation, in his prayers and submission to his Abba, in the restraint and release of his miracles, in his transfiguration and triumphal entry, in his Gethsemane pleas and his cry of

dereliction, in the depths of his descensus and the heights of his ascension. At every point, kenotic love is expressed as *voluntary*—the *willing “decreation”* (Weil) of human self-will and egoism—with no loss of agency even when Christ was pinned to a cross in utter loving surrender.

Remember, after all, that the cruciform inauguration of the New Covenant is a voluntary spousal commitment of the divine Husband to lay down his life for his Bride. Those who have cited wedding vows (hopefully) recognize how voluntary self-giving is also a relinquishment of self-will without the loss of personhood. Where such a relationship is disordered, it is simply not kenotic.

But it doesn't stop with Christ. Think, too, of the great Christlike saints who combined consent and participation in their own kenosis. Remember the Virgin's prayer of consent to participate: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). And of John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). And of the many apostles and martyrs through the centuries who *willingly* lived their lives and laid them down for the gospel—again, not just that they died, but by how they emulated Christ's radical forgiveness and supernatural grace in their deaths.

My Weilian Outro

“Love consents to all and commands only those who consent.”²⁹ –Simone Weil

I intended to wrap up here with a neat bow, reminding readers of the ethical implications of voluntary kenosis and the necessity of resisting every effort to weaponize it as power over the downtrodden, imposing an exhortation to be kenotic on those who suffer injustice. The misuse of kenotic theology to perpetrate injustice and manipulate the vulnerable is pure blasphemy. I had imagined concluding by replaying the best-of articles in Roger Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arram's *Discovering Kenarchy*.³⁰ Instead, I recommend that pivotal work and ask the question: Can we agree at this point that love *MUST* be *consensual*, so kenosis is not only voluntary for oneself but actively advocates for and ensures consent for the other?

Of course, Simone Weil finds a way to speak of kenotic consent more elegantly but with less compromise (again, my emphases):

God wears himself out through the infinite thickness of time and space in order to

²⁹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Routledge, 2002), 119.

³⁰ Roger H. Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arram, *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014). See also Molly Farneth (2017) “The Power to Empty Oneself”: Hegel, Kenosis, and Intellectual Virtue, *Political Theology*, 18:2, 157-171. Farneth explores Hegel's *Entäußerung* (or *kenosis*) as a model that empowers to confront difference and disagreement without domination.

reach the soul and to captivate it. If it *allows a pure and utter consent* (though brief as a lightning flash) to be torn [!] from it, then God conquers that soul... The soul, starting from the opposite end, makes the same journey that God made toward it. And that is the cross.”³¹

Weil trusts that God can indeed “conquer” the soul, but ever only through the persuasion of self-giving love that captivates desire without ever employing force, which for her is a violation. Rather than happily closing this essay with my bullet-point takeaways, the specter of Weil, my sponsor into kenosis, compels me to convey her more provocative questions and assertions... then leave them hanging for your consent (or not).

Simone Weil’s vision of kenosis—divine and human—is radically bound up in her sense of “*decreation*”³² of the will which if misread, can sound dehumanizing to the point of self-harm. Those who know her story may even rightly critique her for attempting to be *willfully will-less*... defiantly self-emptying in disordered ways. But that is only the shadow side of her bright light of illumination... the evidence for which is the cipher that cracks the code to her entire kenotic cosmology: *consent*.

For Weil, divine love is kenotic—complex and layered in the two sides of *consent*—both *active* (voluntary, self-giving, sacrificial willingness) and *inactive* (surrender, obedience, even a sort of abdication). Consent in Weil requires both *authentic agency* (or it’s not willing, and therefore, not love) and *renunciation of autonomy* (of egocentric self-will, the opposite of love). She even defines faith as the “*consented subordination* of all natural faculties of the soul to supernatural love.”³³ Gethsemane comes to mind: “*Not my will, but thine.*”

Here, she holds *desire* and *will* in direct contrast.³⁴ We are created with desire for the Good, and our desire is persuaded by Beauty (“the image of the Good in time”). Desire can never be conquered by force or compulsion.³⁵ For force is the opposite of consent and is, therefore, evil. In contrast to *desire*, our God-given hardwiring for pursuit of the Good, we have also received a God-given *will*. But in the case of the will, she claims, our vocation is to renounce it (i.e., to repent of its Adamic misuse, willfulness, autonomous self-deification). She calls this aspect of kenosis “*decreation*”—the *willing* decomposition of self-will (egoism) overcome by selfless love.

³¹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1999), 88–89.

³² See Simone Weil, “*Decreation*,” in *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mariio von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 32-39. Here, I’m in lockstep with Weil’s cosmology of consent rather than her Christology, which reverts to an emptying of divinity.

³³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 1:131.

³⁴ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:527.

³⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:457.

Again, for Weil, the love of God is *eternally kenotic*. The nature of God is revealed as the self-sacrificial love of the Lamb, both incarnate and slain from the beginning. She says that “God not incarnate is not really God... Rather, God is an eternal act which is ever unmaking and remaking itself all of the time,”³⁶ in simultaneous suffering and joy—in creation, in us and in our affliction, so that our very lives *are* God’s crucifixion.

This same God descends into the world as beauty and deeper still into the experience of our affliction—all affliction. But this descent, as per Philippians 2, acts like a cosmic lever.³⁷ Christ’s descent raises up humanity and all of creation, and ultimately, it is through his descent that he too is exalted. So too, we ascend through descent. “Moral gravity causes us to fall to the heights.”³⁸ This means letting go of hoping in or worshipping omnipotence. “To represent God to oneself as all-powerful is a state of false divinity. We are only able to be one with God by uniting oneself to God stripped (emptied) of his divinity.” Ironically, the God who divests Godself of omnipotence IS the true divinity—meaning the omnipotence is not an innate attribute of deity, except as an adjective for *unfailing* love. But the Cross is where we encounter God the all-powerless. Of course, we wanted more (which is truly less)—a Zeus-like omni-god who fixes what’s wrong by force, overcomes by control. But that’s not God. And so, she says, “Christ was killed out of rage because he was only God.”³⁹

She describes the kenotic God as weak—one reason is that God is impartial. Jesus said, “God causes the sun to shine and rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.” That is, God’s love is consent in *non-active action*...⁴⁰ In fact, God is *voluntarily powerless* to perform the Good in this world without the cooperation (*active consent*) of humanity. God consents to our consent to be the compassion of God in the world. And so this is Weil’s offering, citing ‘Red Banquet’ of the *Theuth*:

I give my flesh to those that are hungry, my blood to those that are thirsty, my skin to act as a covering for those that are naked, my bones as a fuel for such as suffer from cold.

I give my happiness to those in distress and my vital breath to restore to life the dying...

Shame upon me if I recoil from the sacrifice. Shame upon you all if you dare not accept it.⁴¹

³⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:222.

³⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:72; 2:560.

³⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:221.

³⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:221.

⁴⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:257.

⁴¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:315. Her point is that offering up oneself for the other is (must be) a gift.

For Simone Weil, the fullness of divine consent is seen in the Passion of Jesus Christ. She hears the cry of dereliction as the appeal that most praises God because nowhere else do we hear a desire directed so fully at God. She describes it as the “supreme mediation”—the harmony of Christ’s authentic “Why?” (“My God, my God...”) and the Father’s silence of compassion.⁴² There we see both Jesus’ consent to his Father’s will and the Father’s consent to give his Son in sacrificial love for the life of the world.

Finally, and maybe the most volatile aspect of Weil’s kenosis of consent is her unique approach to “redemptive suffering.” Popular understandings of “redemptive suffering” are nearly always ugly theodicies that perpetrate injustice, justify evil, and make God a moral monster. Few have excoriated such theodicies as thoroughly as Weil—except perhaps Voltaire. But contrary to some perspectives on Weil, she explicitly repudiates the desire to suffer as a means to spiritual progress.

Then what, for her, is “redemptive suffering”?⁴³ First, it begins with the reality of evil in this world, where real injustice is perpetrated on innocent victims who cannot simply flee to avoid it. Many have no such privilege. Further, suffering is also inevitable for those whose unwavering desire is for the Good. Love compels them to face into the darkness rather than turn a blind eye to oppression. This combination of the reality of evil and the compulsion of love is unavoidably deadly. Christ himself could not avoid the Cross, compelled as he was to redeem the world... he was not *forced* to suffer and die, but he did *consent* to the way of cross-shaped love.

From there, Weil says: through the *voluntary acceptance* of unavoidable suffering, the actual victim (Jesus) of a real murder was able to “transmute”⁴⁴ ungodly violence into pure suffering. How? Christ drew the violence done to him up onto the Cross, and there separated our sin from his suffering *through forgiveness*. In so doing, Christ “redeemed the suffering” and thereby redeemed his oppressors. Through consent (agency and surrender), he transformed a vile crucifixion into something sacred, a sacrament of love for the world. The violence was still evil, the crucifixion was still a murder, the victim was still victimized—and these realities need to be resisted and overcome, never rationalized or justified. Then how is it that victims become martyrs or tragedies become sacred?

⁴² Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 91.

⁴³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:506.

⁴⁴ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:506.

It is because in *consent*, we retain agency—in our voluntary kenosis, we’re no longer victims. In consent, kenosis is not abdication to injustice but a cruciform response to it. It is not the eradication of the ego, but the dethronement of *egoism*. In consent, we expunge our hearts of malice and decreate selfishness—not the self as such. In kenosis, just as there could be not loss of deity, so too, there can be no loss of humanity, no death of personhood.

Surely this can help us understand what Jesus meant and did *not* mean by “Deny your Self,” where the upper-case S identifies and resists self-centeredness, rather than dehumanizing oneself or anyone else. And it’s not even that we consent simply to suffer—it’s not acquiescence to slavery or domestic abuse or systemic oppression. That is not it. But where slavery or abuse or oppression dominate the landscape, the disenfranchised and disinherited who *must* and *do* suffer can now *consent* to suffer in a particular way, *in the way* the Lamb suffered—*kenotically*—in voluntary self-giving, life-affirming, radically forgiving, relentlessly advocating, co-suffering love. Only then is suffering redemptive—or better, redeemed—in that the exercise of agency in consent to God’s love liberates the heart, mind, and will of the sufferer from and for their oppressor.

Weil’s point may sound risky to the privileged progressive, but bear in mind that Weil’s notion of consent freed and empowered her to actively resist the Nazi occupation of France, just as it redeemed Howard Thurman to overcome fear, hatred, and lies in the racially oppressive America.⁴⁵

Consent so conceived is most definitely *not* the pursuit of suffering for suffering’s sake, but rather, participation in the kenotic compassion (co-suffering) of Christ for the other as participants in God’s work of redemption.⁴⁶ This, then, is how we affirm that kenosis is self-giving love, where ‘giving’ means voluntary and consensual, in God, in Christ, and in us.

Fiat Lux.

Appendix 1 – Divine Kenosis in the Fathers

“For the weakness of God is stronger than men.” –1 Cor 1:25b

Patristic theologians were never afraid to tread into the kenotic ‘weakness of God.’ They saw

⁴⁵ See Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) and Bradley Jersak, “God’s Black Voice,” in *Out of the Embers: Faith after the Great Deconstruction* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2022).

⁴⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:284; 2:507.

that divine weakness is not the surrender of divine attributes but rather, the appearance of divine love in its others-centred, self-giving, servant mode of existence. For example:

Origen

For we must dare say that the goodness of Christ appeared greater and more divine and truly in accordance with the image of the Father when “he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross,” ... than if ... he had not been willing to become a servant for the salvation of the world.⁴⁷

Gregory of Nyssa

God’s transcendent power is not so much displayed in the vastness of the heavens, or the luster of the stars, or the orderly arrangement of the universe or his perpetual oversight of it, as it is in his condescension to our weak nature. We marvel at the way the sublime entered a state of lowliness and, while actually seen in it, did not leave the heights. We marvel at the way the Godhead was entwined in human nature, and, while becoming man, did not cease to be God...

We have shown that God’s goodness, wisdom, justice, power and incorruptible nature are all to be seen in his plan for us. His goodness is evident in his choosing to save one who was lost. His wisdom and justice are to be seen in the way he saved us. His power is clear in this: that he came in the likeness of man and in the lowly form of our nature, inspiring the hope that, like man, he could be overcome by death and yet, having come, he acted entirely accord to his nature. Now it belongs to light to dispel darkness, and to life, to destroy death.

He united himself with our nature, in order that by its union with the divine it might become divine, being rescued from death and freed from the tyranny of the adversary. For with his return from death, our mortal race begins its return to mortal life.⁴⁸

Gregory of Nazianzus

What He was, He continued to be; what He was not, He took to Himself. In the beginning He was uncaused – for what causes God? But afterwards He was born for a cause – and that cause was, that you might be saved, you who insult Him and despise His divinity because He took upon Him your coarseness and, having united himself with flesh by means of the soul, became human, the

⁴⁷ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1-10*, Book 1.231, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *Fathers of the Christian Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 80 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 80.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “Address on Religious Instruction,” *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), 301-2.

earthly God.

Our humanity was joined to and made one with God – the higher nature having prevailed – in order that I too might be made God as truly as He is made human.⁴⁹

In the same category are texts where He is called the servant who serves the good of many and say that it is a great thing for Him to be called the child of God. For in truth He was in servitude to flesh and to birth and to the passions which belong to us with a view to our liberation and that of all those whom He has saved, who were imprisoned by sin. What can be greater for the lowliness of humanity than to be intermingled with God, and by this intermingling to be deified, and that the Dayspring from on high should so break upon us, that the holy one who is to be born should be called the Son of the Most High, and that the name that is above every name should be bestowed upon Him – and what else can this name be but God? – and that every knee should bow to Him who emptied himself for us and mingled the form of God with the form of a slave, and that the entire house of Israel should know that God has made him both Lord and Messiah? For all this was done by the action of the One who has been begotten, and by the good pleasure of the One who begot Him.⁵⁰

But in the form of a slave, He bows down to the level of His fellow slaves – or rather, He bows down to His slaves – and takes upon Him a form not His own, bearing in Himself all that I am and all that is mine in order that He might consume in Himself whatever is bad as fire consumes wax or as the sun disperses the mists of earth, and in order that I may partake of His nature by the blending. This is how He honours obedience by what he does, and He proves it in action by His sufferings. For it is not enough to possess the interior disposition, just as it would not be enough for us, unless we also proved it by our acts; for action is the proof of a disposition.⁵¹

Appendix 2 – The Nottingham Interviews – 2014

The foundations for this article began during my stay as a visiting scholar at the University of Nottingham in 2014. My post-doc. research was focused on kenotic Christology, supervised by Conor Cunningham, who guided my readings and opened the door to personal interviews (face-to-face in most cases), which I've documented below. I published some of these in an appendix to my book, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (CWRpress, 2015). I've reprised some of those interviews here with permission from the publisher because of their direct relevance to this study.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, Oration 3, *On the Son 1*, §19, trans. Stephen Reynolds (Estate of Stephen Reynolds, 2011), 65.

⁵⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, Oration 4, *On the Son 2* §3, 72-3.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, Oration 4, *On the Son 2* §6, 76-7.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

While Philippians 2 speaks of Christ emptying himself, it would be incorrect to say he laid aside his 'Godhead.' As the Vespers hymn for Christmas Eve says, "What he was, remained; what he was not, he took on, for himself, out of love for mankind."

In kenosis, the Word was not deprived of anything. Christ remains in union with the Father. They are not separated but takes on humanity in addition. Therefore, the most we can ascribe to kenosis is a voluntary self-limitation...

Perhaps rather than 'emptied himself,' it would be better to say that he *poured out himself in love*, and that love is his nature. And in this way, *kenosis is plerosis*. The supreme manifestation of this love, this glory, is the Cross. "God is never so powerful as when he is most weak."

As Christ said to Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness," and this applies to kenosis. We could say this at the very least: that kenosis *reflects* something of the eternal Being of God as self-giving love.⁵²

Andrew Louth

In the Trinity, there is a kind of kenosis in the sense of them making way for one another and, therefore, when Christ empties himself, he actually shows what it is to be God, rather than disguising what it is to be God. Kenosis in the modern sense of the Lutheran kenoticists since the 18th century are concerned with what is being taken away, what it is for Christ to be human, with showing why God isn't there. Whereas I think in the fathers, kenosis means God coming down alongside us, his 'condescension' to live among us. For the Cappadocians and Maximus, kenosis is God's self-emptying love. Sometimes you get the impression of the self-emptying so as to make it possible for us to see him, rather than God disguising himself. And sometimes kenosis is bound up with the nature divine being, that love is not concerned with power or force, but love is essentially letting others be and become what they're created to be. And in that sense, kenosis is bound with the nature of love.

In Maximus' treatise on the Lord's prayer, we empty ourselves in response to God's kenosis. We empty ourselves of the passions in order to receive him. In his treatise on the Lord's prayer, he sees the kenosis of God as something inspired by love and the response is love.⁵³

As the Son involved his self-emptying (kenosis), so our deification involves our kenosis, the

⁵² Kallistos Ware, personal interview, Oct. 16, 2014, Oxford.

⁵³ Andrew Louth, personal interview, Oct. 21, 2014, Darlington.

self-emptying of the passions. The way up is the way down: the kenosis of the Son demands the kenosis of the adopted sons; the manifestation of the One ‘more beautiful than the sons of men’ calls for the ‘cultivation of the beauty given to them by grace...’⁵⁴

John Behr

It is a mistake to think of kenosis as laying aside divine attributes. It is much better to think in terms of humility/self-effacing/ self-sacrificial love, so that it is indeed in weakness that the power of God is made manifest, opening up a path for us also to enter into divine life. If Christ had put aside divine attributes to become human, we would not be able to share in his divinity; he would not be a mediator, etc.

In some ways, thinking along such lines results from starting off from an already conceived humanity and divinity—as other than each other. Surely, rather, the fundamental truth of Christianity is that the two are shown together, in and through each other; conceptually distinct (God creates, we are created, etc.), but only ever seen in one *prosopon*, one *hypostasis*.

The difficulty of holding this together results in the many divergences over the centuries, but the creeds always bring us back to this fundamental point of the Gospel.⁵⁵

Christ’s taking upon himself the role of a servant, voluntarily going to the Passion, does not diminish our perception of what we might otherwise have considered to be his divinity, but actually manifests his true divinity. The transcendent power of God is manifest in this world in the flesh, in darkness and in death, as a servant. But this manifestation of divine power, in weakness, is simultaneously a transformation: Christ, in the form of a servant, shows us the image of God; darkness and death become light and life; and the flesh assumed by the Word, becomes flesh of the Word—and becomes Word. Or, as St. Gregory put it, “even the body in which he underwent his Passion, by being mingled with the divine nature, was made by that commixture to be that which the assuming nature is.” Through the Passion, the body in which the Son suffered comes itself to share in the very divinity of God. Not that it is any the less human, but it is no longer subject to the density, opaqueness, and weight, together with the temporal and spatial limitations that characterize our own experience of our bodies: though Christ was once known after the flesh, he is known so no longer (cf. 2 Cor 5.16). The Passion remains the locus for contemplating the transforming power of God, the “God revealed through the Cross.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London, Routledge, 1996), 34.

⁵⁵ John Behr, personal correspondence, Oct. 20, 2014.

⁵⁶ John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 35.

Simon Oliver

Kenosis is not suffering per se, but the eternal reality of God's self-donation. The Cross reveals what is eternally true in the Godhead (the Trinity) and God's creation.

What is important to note is that the Cross is not a response to human evil. Rather, the Cross is the means by which God's eternal love keeps flowing into creation despite human sin. The Cross is God's eternal love, *refracted* through human sin. What God's love looks like now, refracted through human sin, is a crucified Jewish man.

But not as God's plan-B, as if the Cross were God's love were reactive or contingent. Rather, what you see is the eternal flow of God's love. But the violence belongs to humanity, not to God.

For the Eastern Church and patristic fathers, impassibility and ineffability are non-negotiables. This is because the big question is how one defines the difference between God and creation, so that unlike all of creation, God doesn't change. And second, to safeguard the truth that Christ is not just a man (even one filled by the Spirit) or just an angel.

Rather, the Word becomes/was made flesh is rendered 'assumes to himself' a human nature, which changes human nature but doesn't change God.

The radical implication of the Incarnation is that God has been made manifest in the material life of a man. Once materiality has been seen to reveal God, there are no longer any limits to what material reality can reveal, because it's already revealed God in Christ.⁵⁷

Conor Cunningham

We can read Philippians 2:6 to say, "*Because he was God,...*" and so realize that kenosis reveals the divine and what it is to be divine. *Since* he is God, he therefore empties himself. This God diffuses himself (Aquinas) for the creation of the cosmos, and then in the Incarnation, repeats and recapitulates creation. The omnipotence of God is only revealed in his ability to sacrifice. His power is revealed in kenosis.

Yet the Incarnation was not just a self-giving diffusion, but an *effusion*, which is why it's *kenotic*. Effusion speaks of the Word pouring himself into the world through the limits of a womb—in Bethlehem, in time—it speaks of specificity. Yet he takes everything—carries the scars, carries history—back up to the Father and into eternity. The Son lifted earth into heaven because what he

⁵⁷ Simon Oliver, personal interview, Sept. 8, 2014, Nottingham.

did was eternal.

In so doing, Christ not only reveals what it is to be God, but what and how it is to be truly human. Christology is anthropology: “Behold the man,” said Pilate. And this is our *telos*. To become like gods is our anthropology.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Conor Cunningham, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2014, Nottingham. Cf. Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), 165; Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium Et Spes* 22. Vatican II. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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