

KENOTICISM

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Mackintosh's Conditions For Kenotic Theory

Hugh Ross Mackintosh's statement, "That religion has a vast stake in the kenosis as a fact, whatever the difficulties as to its method might be",¹ is a realistic appraisal of the subject. Indeed there are difficulties concerning kenotic theory and perhaps most of them do revolve around the method of kenosis rather than the actual issue of kenosis.

Something had to happen in the incarnation of the Son. Those that agree that there was some form of self-limitation on the part of the Son will often disagree on the extent of the limitation, the definition of limitation, or the way in which the limitation was accomplished. But first what about those who acknowledge no self-limitation at all? Mackintosh says that if a person believes that a reasoned Christology is possible, then kenoticism in some form of a "real surrender of the glory and prerogatives of deity" is necessary if four positions are held simultaneously. These four positions are:

1. Christ is now Divine, as being the object of faith and worship, with whom believing men have immediate, though not unmediated, fellowship.
2. In some personal sense His Divinity is eternal, not the fruit of time, since by definition Godhead cannot have come to be *ex nihilo*; His pre-mundane being therefore is real, not ideal merely.
3. His life on earth was unequivocally human. Jesus was a man, a Jew of the first century, with a life localised in and restricted by a body organic to His self-consciousness; of limited power, which could be, and was, thwarted by persistent unbelief; of limited knowledge, which, being gradually built up by experience, made Him liable to surprise and disappointment; of a moral nature susceptible of growth, and exposed to life-long temptation; of a piety and personal religion characterised at each point by dependence on God. In short,

¹ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912), 470.

He moved always within the lines of an experience humanly normal in constitution, even if abnormal in its sinless quality. The life Divine in Him found expression through human faculty, with a self-consciousness and activity mediated by His human *milieu*.

4. We cannot predicate of Him two consciousnesses or two wills; the New Testament indicates nothing of the kind, nor indeed is it congruous with an intelligible psychology. The unity of His personal life is axiomatic. ²

The first two positions are in reference to Christ's divinity. Since Mackintosh's position regarding some sort of kenoticism is starting from the divinity of Christ, it would be incorrect to say that he has no regard for the divine nature. Not only is Christ now divine but "his divinity is eternal" and "his pre-mundane being" is an unmistakable reality. But this does not complete Mackintosh's case. His divinity during the incarnation is also affirmed elsewhere and in the statement, "The life Divine in Him found expression through human faculty, with a self-consciousness and activity mediated by His human milieu." Nowhere is Mackintosh denying the divinity of Christ. The heart of his kenotic understanding is found in the third statement. Jesus was, during the incarnation, unequivocally human; his life was localised; he had limited power and limited knowledge; his knowledge grew by experience, his moral life was susceptible to growth; he was dependent on God the Father; he moved within the lines of experience which was humanly normal; he was without sin; and his self-consciousness and activity functioned under conditions of human frailty. ³

Alfred E. Garvie gives many scriptural examples which illustrate these conditions: Jesus' surprise at his parents' anxiety at the Temple when he was twelve years old. (Lk 2.49). His marvel at the unbelief of the people in Nazareth (Mk. 6.6). His disappointment at the disciples' lack of understanding about defilement (Mk. 7.18). His

² Mackintosh, 469-70.

³ Mackintosh, 469-70.

disappointment at the disciples' lack of understanding about "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Mk. 8.17). Jesus was perplexed over the Pharisees desire for a sign (Mk.8.12). He was pleasantly surprised at the faith of the centurion (Mt. 8.10) and of the Syro-phoenician woman (Mt. 15.28). He was surprised but not upset by the storm on the sea of Galilee (Mk. 4.38). He sent the disciples into peril on the sea unknowingly (Mk.6.45). He expected to find fruit on the barren fig tree (Mk.11.13). Jesus asked questions for information, such as: "what seek ye?" to Andrew and another disciple as they began to follow him (Jn.1.38), "who touched me?" concerning the woman who touched his garment (Mk 5:30), "what is your name?" to the demoniac named Legion (Mk.5.9), "do you believe on the Son of God?" to the man born blind (Jn.9.35), "where have you laid him?" regarding the location of the grave of Lazarus (Jn.11.34), and "who do people say that I am?" about popular opinion of himself (Mk.8.27-9). Jesus developed mentally (Lk.2.52) and his knowledge of men was gained by experience (Jn.2.24).⁴

Mackintosh adds one last position which closes the gap on anyone who would deny or affirm a kenosis without it. We can not predicate to the incarnate Christ two consciousnesses or two wills. The unity of the personal life of Jesus of Nazareth must be affirmed or he is certainly less of a person than anyone else. In short, according to Mackintosh, "We are faced with a Divine self-reduction which entailed obedience, temptation and death."⁵ This is Mackintosh's position requiring some sort of kenoticism which is wisely circumscribed and well stated.

Baillie's Position Against Kenosis

⁴ Alfred E. Garvie, *Studies in the Inner Life of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1098), 273-4.

⁵ Mackintosh, 470.

On the other hand, D. M. Baillie disagrees. Baillie does not deny that the kenosis of which Paul speaks has a place in Christian thought. But he disagrees with kenotic theory on the following grounds.

1. I am not aware that a good reply has yet been made to the simple question . . . ‘What was happening to the rest of the universe during the period of our Lord’s earthly life?’ (William Temple, *Christus Veritas*, pp. 142f.) . . . It is vain to reply that the question pre-supposes a crude and false separation of the Persons of the Trinity from each other . . . For the Kenotic Christology itself presupposes precisely such a separation, and could not even be stated without it.

2. Instead of giving us a doctrine of Incarnation in which Jesus Christ is both God and man, the Kenotic Theory appears to me to give us a story of a temporary theophany, in which He who formerly was God changed Himself temporarily into man, or exchanged His divinity for humanity. . . . Surely the relation between the divine and the human in the Incarnation is a deeper mystery than this.

3. The difficulties of the Kenotic Theory become still greater when we go on to ask: Was the kenosis merely temporary, confined to the period of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the days of His flesh on earth? . . . Therefore when the days of His flesh come to an end, Christ resumes His divine attributes, and His kenosis, his humanity, comes to an end. . . . He is God and Man, not simultaneously in a hypostatic union, but successively – first divine, then human, then God again.”⁶

Regarding Baillie’s first objection it seems necessary to ask if the *Extra Calvinisticum* can be applied at this juncture: “The Son of God descended miraculously from heaven, yet without abandoning heaven; was pleased to be conceived miraculously in the Virgin’s womb, to live on the earth, and hang upon the cross, and yet always filled the world as from the beginning.”⁷ If the *Extra Calvinisticum* is valid and an interpretation of kenosis is held that does not exclude it, then Baillie’s first objection is pointless. The *Extra* refers to the Son himself and does not require “a crude and false separation of the Persons of the Trinity from each other”. It merely affirms that the Son was both within and external to

⁶ D. M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948), 95-97.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 414, (II,13,4).

the incarnate One. Even without this consideration I question that just because the Scriptures affirm that the Son maintains and controls the universe, they do not exclude the Father or the Holy Spirit from doing so as well.

Baillie's second objection borders on the irresponsible. He says that "Kenotic Theory appears to me to give us a story of a temporary theophany." No responsible orthodox theologian would affirm such a thing. The divinity of Jesus is not put in jeopardy even by the absolute metamorphic kenotic theory of a theologian such as Gess. As a matter of fact, this kenoticism rather affirms the power of deity. It is exactly because he is almighty that the Son has the ability to lay aside his prerogatives. A non-divine being would not be able to do so. God would not be almighty if He did not have power over Himself.⁸ If God's power is limited only by his holiness and his love, then he indeed can come as low as we require. "If the manhood of Christ is unreal, at any remotest point, God has not quite stooped to unity with man. He has not come so low as we require; there has been reservation and refusal; some part of our burden, after all, has been left untouched."⁹

Furthermore, to answer Baillie's third objection, the process does not end here. The resurrected Jesus not only retains all that he had as God before he became flesh but a new kind of man is raised in his resurrection. Although Bruce considers the position that the Logos was subject to the flesh in Jesus to be a weakness of the Gessian position, he nevertheless describes the position clearly.

Depotentiated at His conception in the Virgin's womb, the incarnate Logos become repotentiated at His death, so that He was able to raise His own body

⁸ A.B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ in its Physical, Ethical, and Official Aspects*, Fourth Edition (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1895), 150.

⁹ Mackintosh, 404.

from the grave, and transform it into a fit organ for the manifestation of His recovered life in all its fulness -- transform it at once, per saltum, not gradually; for a body retaining any particle of gross materiality could not be a fit companion for the Logos returned to Himself, but would only bring Him again, partially at least, into a state of most unseasonable bondage.¹⁰

And to make this even clearer:

According to the creative decree of God, the life development of the soul depends on the development of the body; it requires a certain maturity of the physical organisation of the soul to waken up to the self-conscious voluntary life, in order that thereafter, as personal soul, it may gradually subject its bodily organ to the laws inscribed on itself by the hand of divine holiness. Christ's life was subject to the same decree. It was first a natural life, in which the Logos was subject to the power of the flesh; then it became a personal life, in which the Logos became self-conscious, and made the flesh subject to himself, until, at the close of His human development, the body of His flesh became transformed into a glorious body, that is, a body fitted to be the perfect organ of the Logos, once more restored to the fulness of divine life.¹¹

According to this reasoning it took an incarnation which actually subjected the Logos to the power of the flesh in order for the Logos to make the flesh subject to itself and then transform the flesh in a glorious body which could as man, as well as God, participate fully in the life of the Trinity. This entire process was worked out in the sinless and perfectly obedient life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gessian theory and could turn Baillie's objection into a argument for kenosis.

However, there is a possible agreement between Mackintosh and Baillie on the subject of a kenosis in general. Mackintosh says that "it is difficult to see how Kenoticism in some form is to be avoided" if all four of his conditions are accepted.¹² And Baillie allows room for the kenosis of which Paul speaks in Christian thought.¹³ It then appears

¹⁰ Bruce, 179.

¹¹ Bruce, 145.

¹² Mackintosh, 469-70.

¹³ Baillie, 95-97.

that they each either affirm or allow a kenosis in some form. Which brings us to a further consideration of certain forms of the theory.

Four Types Of Kenotic Theory

A.B. Bruce discusses four kinds of kenotic theory: the absolute dualistic type as represented by the Lutheran Thomasius, the absolute metamorphic type as represented by Gess, the absolute semi-metamorphic type as represented by Ebrard, and the real but relative type as represented by Martensen.¹⁴

The absolute dualistic type considers the incarnation in two lights both of which are important. “The incarnation itself is to be regarded in two lights, -- as the assumption by the Son of God of human nature in its integrity, and as the *self-limitation* of the Son of God in the act of assuming human nature. The latter is necessary in order to the former.”¹⁵

But following Mackintosh’s criteria for kenoticism this type will be set aside because it necessarily requires two minds or consciousnesses in the incarnate Christ. “According to the Thomasian theory, the Incarnation involves at once an act of assumption and an act of self-limitation . . . Are such contrary effects of one act of will compatible?”¹⁶ and “The Thomasian form of the kenotic theory is open to objection with reference to the personal unity. It teaches the presence of Christ in two life centres, the depotentiated Logos and the human soul.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Bruce, 138.

¹⁵ Bruce, 139.

¹⁶ Bruce, 172.

¹⁷ Bruce, 177.

However, the Thomasian form has certain aspects which are helpful in understanding kenosis. “Love was the motive of the Incarnation, and love is the sole measure of its depth; otherwise God is not the absolutely free, His power is not servant to his will, but a tyrant over it. . . .For the humiliation of Christ was not all kenosis; it was revelation as well as exinanition.”¹⁸

Indeed, love is the motive not only for the incarnation but for every act of God towards his children. And if God is to be free, his power must be servant to his will. And the incarnation is indeed the revelation of God as well as a kenosis. It is also good to consider at this point that as a part of the Lutheran tradition, the Thomasian theory would be opposed to the *Extra*.

The real but relative form of kenosis as taught by Martensen also has some helpful insights but it also puts forth a double life in Christ as it “seems to satisfy the demands of the *ethical* kenosis taught in Scripture . . . it may be that the Logos has a double life -- one in the man Christ Jesus; one as the world-governing, world illuminating Logos.”¹⁹

The absolute semi-metamorphic type as taught by Ebrard should be set aside because it is not a true kenosis as it holds that “The Son of God in becoming man underwent not a loss, but rather a disguise of His divinity; not, however, in the old Reformed sense of occultation, but in the sense that the divine properties, while retained, were possessed by the Theanthropos only in the time form appropriate to the human mode of existence.”²⁰ Any theory of kenoticism which ultimately results in a disguise of Christ’s divinity is not worthy of the name kenoticism; we can have that under other names.

¹⁸ Bruce, 142-3.

¹⁹ Bruce, 188.

²⁰ Bruce, 153.

The Absolute Metamorphic Type

The absolute metamorphic type as taught by Gess is the most complete type of kenoticism considered by Professor Bruce. It has much to recommend it and there are some criticisms. It is based on the life of the Godhead: “The Son, in becoming man, lost the consciousness, and with the consciousness the activity, and with the activity the capacity to receive into himself the influx of the Father’s life, and to cause that instreaming life to flow forth from Himself again.”²¹ Then Bruce brings up an important hermeneutical concept. What is the most natural interpretation of the scripture regarding kenosis?

By the descent from heaven is signified the humiliation or kenosis whereof the apostle speaks; which, according to the most natural interpretation of the words, imports a transition, on the part of the logos incarnate, from a state of equality with God into a state of dependence and need, a laying aside of his pretemporal glory; that is, not merely of the blessed life in light, but of the life which is independent and self-sufficient, and of which omniscience and omnipotence are attributes.²²

If the most natural interpretation is followed, then there results a simple change to a state of dependence on the part of the Son towards the Father. And this brings the Son to the place of not merely assuming flesh but becoming flesh.

For the Logos, in becoming man, suffered the extinction of His eternal self-consciousness, to regain it again after many months, as a human, gradually developing, variable consciousness, sometimes, as in childhood, in sleep, in death, possessing no self-consciousness at all. All this is inevitably involved in *becoming flesh*, for this third scriptural representation of the Incarnation signifies, that the flesh with which the Logos was united became for Him a determining power, even as, apart from sin, it is a determining power for the ordinary human soul.²³

²¹ Bruce, 145.

²² Bruce, 145.

²³ Bruce, 145.

In actually becoming flesh the Son is put under the limitations of the flesh in a human body to the point that the flesh is a determining power over the incarnate Logos. How then did Jesus gain an awareness of who he was and what his mission entailed? Again

Professor Bruce:

How and when, then, did the Logos, plunged by Incarnation into the oblivion-causing waters of Lethe, at length attain to self-consciousness? Was it by recollection of His pre-existent state? Not principally, for a clear and constant recollection would be incompatible with a life of faith. Or was it by reflection and inference exercised on Old Testament Scriptures? This was undoubtedly one means towards self-knowledge. . . . There must have been latent in the incarnate Logos a certain instinct, as men call that mysterious gift whose true name is an inspiration of God.²⁴

This leaves Bruce with the necessity to acknowledge what he terms “a certain instinct” in Christ in order to explain how he grasped his mission on earth. This could be mistaken for a purely natural ability but it should be understood as more than that. It was a deep inner knowing in the person of Christ.

Bruce calls this theory “a tolerably complete metamorphosis of the Logos, manifestly standing in great need of adjustment to correlated doctrines. What, e.g., on this theory, is to be said of the *integrity* of Christ’s assumed humanity? The Logos, to all intents and purposes, is transformed into a human soul; does He then assume another human soul over and above? Gess replies in the negative. . . . He did not assume, He *became* a human soul, and thereby the presence of another soul was rendered entirely superfluous.”²⁵

Metamorphosis is certainly the correct name for it. The Logos in this theory actually did become man. It is necessary to point out with the use of this word, however, that he did at the same time remain God.

²⁴ Bruce, 146-7.

²⁵ Bruce, 148.

The question may still remain as to how any being is really able to do this. Bruce offers an answer on the basis of this theory.

How is it possible, one may well ask, that a Divine Being can thus all but extinguish Himself? The ready reply is: It is possible just because He is God, and not a creature. . . . The Logos, . . . has life in Himself; . . . Hence He can extinguish His self-consciousness; He would not be almighty if He had not power over Himself. The power of God indeed is not limitless, nor is His freedom arbitrary. But the only limit of divine power is holiness or love. If, therefore, the holy love of God desires to help us, and if for that end Incarnation is necessary, and if Incarnation involves in its very nature transient extinction of the divine self-consciousness, and the resumption of the same as human, and subject to growth, then such an experience must be possible.²⁶

God's will must be supreme over Himself or He is not God at all. Therefore, the only limits on Him are the limits of holiness and love which are fundamental parts of His nature.

Bruce's Criticisms Of The Gessian Position.

“The text, ‘the Word became flesh’, means, that the flesh and blood which he assumed became in this union a determining power for the Logos. The Incarnation signifies the subjection of Deity to the dominion of matter.”²⁷ Although intended as criticisms, this understanding of Gess complete with the depotentiation and repotentiation of the Logos actually speaks well for a tolerably complete metamorphosis of the Logos. What is, after all, the meaning of metamorphosis if it is not to change completely into another form?

And what about the ever sensitive subject of the possibility of sin in Jesus. How real was the risk? For that matter how real was the temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4)? No orthodoxy would ever admit that Jesus succumbed to sin. But if the temptation was not

²⁶ Bruce, 150.

²⁷ Bruce, 178.

real, then it was indeed a charade. And the temptation could not be real unless there was a possibility of succumbing.

This theory is so thoroughly earnest with the conversion of the Logos into a human soul, that it quite consistently treats sin as a real possibility for Jesus. . . . And in general it may be remarked in reference to kenotic theories of the Gessian type, that they seem doomed to oscillate between Apollinarism and Ebionitism. Either they make the Logos, qua human soul, not human enough or too human. Either they retain for the Logos a little of His divinity to carry Him safely through His curriculum of temptation, or, compelling Him to part with all but His metaphysical essence, they reduce Him strictly to Adam's level, and expose Him to Adam's risks.²⁸

At this point each theologian must decide if an exposure to Adam's risks is appropriate. If Christ is to be the "second Adam", then such exposure is surely necessary. Christ must be victorious where Adam failed if He is to be the Saviour.

With these criticisms considered there are fewer inherent weaknesses in Gessian Kenoticism than in the other types considered here.

Does Kenosis Dishonour The Son?

Charles Gore discusses the self-emptying of the Son.

So far the facts of the incarnation are accounted for by the divine motive which underlay it; but they are interpreted further by the divine method or principle of action as St. Paul unfolds it to us. He describes it as a self-emptying (Phil ii.5-11). Christ Jesus pre-existed, he declares, in the *form* of God. The word 'form' transferred from physical shape to spiritual type, describes - as St. Paul uses it, alone or in composition, with uniform accuracy - the permanent characteristics of a thing. Jesus Christ then, in His pre-existent state, was living in the permanent characteristics of the life of God. In such a life it was His right to remain. It belonged to Him. But He regarded not His prerogatives, as a man regards a prize He must clutch at. For love of us He abjured the prerogatives of equality with God. By an act of deliberate self-abnegation, He so emptied Himself as to assume the permanent characteristics of the human or servile life: He took the *form* of a servant. Not only so, but He was made in outward appearance like other men and was found in fashion as a man, that is, in the

²⁸ Bruce, 179-81.

transitory quality of our mortality. The ‘form,’ the ‘likeness,’ the ‘fashion’ of manhood, He took them all. Thus, remaining in unchanged personality, He abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume human.²⁹

In order to take the form, the likeness, and the fashion of a man the Son had to volunteer for some form of self-emptying. It would not have been possible to be incarnate without assuming the permanent characteristics of human life with the transitory quality of our mortality and all of human likeness. Gore goes on the point out that this was not without some sacrifice on the Father’s part as well. ‘The act, which on the part of the Son is thus represented as an abandoning of what He possessed, is on the part of the Father also represented as a real surrender, a real giving-up of the Son, as a father among us might give up his son to be a missionary: ‘So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son.’ ‘He gave him up for us.’”³⁰ The analogy to an earthly father giving up his son to be a missionary is a particularly good one as no son was ever more of a missionary in a strange land than Jesus was.

This then brings us to the question, is believing in such a descent in any way an insult to the Son?

It is easy to see that it involves no dishonouring of the eternal Son, no attribution to Him of failing powers. ‘It was not,’ says St. Leo, ‘the failure of power, but the condescension of pity.’ There was conscious voluntariness in all of our Lord’s self-abnegation; ‘I have power to lay down my life,’ He said, ‘and I have power to take it again.’ . . . It is physical power which makes itself felt only in self-assertion and pressure; it is the higher power of love which is shown in self-effacement.³¹

²⁹ Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: John Murray, 1909), 158.

³⁰ Gore, 158-9.

³¹ Gore, 159-60.

Leo's words are most appropriate; it was not a failure of power in any way, but rather an act of divine love and pity on the part of both the Father and the Son. Therefore, there is no dishonour to either the Father or to the Son.

Is Kenosis A Transitory Theory?

The idea of kenosis is an important one in Christian thought, but the kenotic christologies, whether German or English, turned out to be no more than an episode in modern thinking about the person of Jesus Christ. . . . christology, if it was to escape from the docetic drift of centuries, had to be stood on its head, so to speak, and begin once more from the humanity of Christ, as indeed it had done in the beginning.³²

Macquarrie considers the kenotic christologies to be no more than an episode in modern christology. But even as an episode it was an important one. Docetism had reigned so strongly and for so long that something had to be done to correct this extreme. And to turn it upside-down and begin christology from the humanity of Jesus was an effective method. But beyond this, was it really merely an episode or are elements of it a part of the ongoing discussion? Macquarrie's quote from Wolfhart Pannenberg helps give perspective.

There was needed more than a hundred years of further thinking before there emerged a balanced statement like that of Pannenberg: 'Methodological reasons do not permit us to work with the incarnation as a theological presupposition. To do so would be to make the humanity of Jesus' life problematic from the very beginning. To be sure, all christological considerations tend towards the idea of the incarnation; it can, however, only constitute the end of christology. If it is put instead at the beginning, all christological concepts are given a mythological tone.'³³

This is no more than a call to return to a New Testament method of constructing our Christology before the effects of Nicea and Chalcedon.

³² John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 250.

³³ Macquarrie, 250.

The words of Peter make the primitive position clear. “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know.” (Acts 2.22 AV) Here Peter makes it absolutely clear on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was a man. Furthermore, he says that Jesus was a man approved by God. Then he goes on to say that the miracles and wonders and signs that were worked were done by God. We know that he was talking about God the Father because just a few lines later he tells us that Jesus was raised up by God. The primitive church started with the man and went on to recognize the God that Jesus also was. This was natural to them. They would not have thought of approaching it any other way.

Therefore as an episode kenotic theory was a way of turning things around. Not only that but it remains, perhaps in altered forms, in christology today as a more mature appreciation for the humanity of Christ.

Professor Bruce offers a final warning by saying that we must never allow a theory to cause us to replace our faith with sight and thus rob of the “cardinal truths” of scripture.

³⁴ If kenotic theory has this effect, then it has not served faith but rather harmed faith and it must be set aside. If not then it has been an invaluable aid in the fight against the centuries old docetic tendencies.

³⁴ Bruce, 191.