

THE CHRIST HYMN:

*A Revelation of the Kenotic Nature of God*

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Jesus and a More Christlike God (BIB 5320)

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There is a heaviness within me as I approach this paper that is difficult to fully express. The current cultural landscape is loud. Many groups that have been systemically marginalized are crying out for allies and rallying for long awaited justice.<sup>1</sup> Power struggles between opposing groups are rampant amidst an outburst of pain that is being expressed in truth. I must confess that I often feel lost and like I don't know what to do. It is an interesting moment in history to study self-emptying power and the humility of God. There was a time in my life when, as a "Christian," I would have turned away from much of the pain and chaos in the world when it began to overwhelm me. In part, this was the outcome of a theology I was given that had taught me that *this world was not my home*. I could use this to detach myself from this place and I did.<sup>2</sup> In recent years I have come to understand how misguided this doctrine is.<sup>3</sup> *This World is my home* and I believe that it is God's home too.

God making God's home on earth is one of the central messages of my faith tradition. In the Bible, both the Old and New Testament begin with a message about the closeness of God in *this World*. Genesis tells a story in which the very hands of God mold and form humanity and the mouth of God kisses the mouth of man, breathing life into being.<sup>4</sup> The creation poem reveals an outflow of generosity that reflects the nature of the Divine Spirit as a God who gives. I like to

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. Indigenous rights/sovereignty, refugees, immigrants, violence against women/#metoo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ and all minorities systemically oppressed by power.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. denial of pain/reality, self-numbing, not facing the truth.

<sup>3</sup> Escapist eschatology is often taught in the evangelical church as "The Rapture." N.T. Wright says this, "In fact, don't believe most of what you read about the Rapture. Many Christians, particularly in North America, have been taught for the last century and a half that when Jesus returns he will come down from "heaven" and that his faithful people (i.e., Christians) will then fly upward into the sky to meet him and be taken to heaven with him forever. Books, movies, a million radio and TV shows, and tens of millions of sermons have drilled this picture into the popular imagination. Indeed, for some people today the Rapture is more or less the center of their faith. But it's a complete misunderstanding. It's based on a misreading of what Paul says about the return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17, just four verses, with the idea of a "rapture" in only one, as the basis for a complete theory of everything:" N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why It Matters* (HarperCollins, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 2:7, NASB.

think of creation as *Goodness overflowing*, lovingly creating the substance for all that is; land, sky, sea and every living creature within it. *And it was all called good.*<sup>5</sup>

Lately, I've started to think of this as the first theological picture of *kenosis*. Kenosis is a Greek word which means "emptying" that I will continue to explore throughout this paper. My hope is to magnify the message of the kenotic and cruciform<sup>6</sup> nature of God that was reflected through Christ, revealing the essence of Love Itself. To explore this theme I will focus on the primary text from which kenotic theology is derived, Philippians 2:1-11, interpret and apply this to our understanding of God, and explore how this could influence our own journey of theosis<sup>7</sup> – becoming Christ in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The Gospel of John begins much like Genesis. John is poetic and his writing beautifully echoes the ancient creation narrative as he affirms Christ as the incarnation of God. He writes:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God and He was in the beginning with God...

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 1:31, NASB.

<sup>6</sup> “Cruciform literally means cross-shaped, as in the form of the crucifixion. A cruciform God would be the God whose nature (love) is revealed through ‘Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).” Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (CWR Press, 2015), 325.

<sup>7</sup> Also called Deification/Divinization: “The doctrine of divinization appears in 2 Peter 1:4: “So that through these you might become partakers in the divine nature.” It has become one of the central theses of Byzantine Orthodoxy that through faith in Jesus Christ human existence is sublimated and transmuted so that it becomes a mirror image of the divine. For the Greek Fathers Christ is the paradigm of humanity deified, summarized in the dictum: God became human that we might become divine. Christians participate in Christ's divinity, and thus attain a more authentic humanity. This participation called *methexis* is a gift of grace. Divinization is both Eucharistic as well as personal and operates effectively on both levels.” The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization Online, s.v. “*Deification/Divinization*,” accessed Nov. 28, 2017, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Kurian, G. T. 2011. Divinization Or Deification. The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization. .

<sup>8</sup> Michael Gorman defines theosis in a slightly different way, calling it “Christification” and points out that, “theosis is the center of Paul’s theology.” Cruciform self-giving love Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*, (Eerdmans, 2009), 171.

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.”<sup>9</sup>

This passage is important because John makes the deity of Christ explicit. Christ the Word was with God, present and creating, and God the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>10</sup> John says that Christ is the glory of God *revealed*. What does this glory look like? Philippians 2:1-11 is often referred to as *The Christ Hymn*. Here, Paul articulates a Christology that becomes central to Christianity:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”<sup>11</sup>

The incarnation is a soaring picture of kenotic love. In the incarnation God emptied Godself of all power and privilege to become *just like us*. This is empathic solidarity par excellence. Brad Jersak writes, “Think in terms of Jesus binding himself to us, to humanity, to you.”<sup>12</sup> In so-doing God embraced and embodied human frailty in all its vulnerable beauty that humanity might comprehend God’s nature as *perfect Love*. This act of self-emptying power was not new to God’s nature, as if God were changing or becoming less than God is through Christ.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Christ *is* God revealed to us and a complete picture of the character of Love.

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<sup>9</sup> John 1:1, 14, 18, NASB.

<sup>10</sup> Hypostatic Union, a technical theological term meaning: the revealed truth that in Christ one person subsists in two natures, the Divine and the human. *Hypostasis* means, literally, that which lies beneath as basis or foundation.” This was “definitively established by the Council of Chalcedon (451), which declared that in Christ the two natures, each retaining its own properties, are united in one subsistence and one person.” The Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. “*Hypostatic Union*,” accessed Nov. 28, 2017, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Phil. 2:5-8, NASB.

<sup>12</sup> Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God, A More Beautiful Gospel*, (CRW Press, 2015), 143.

<sup>13</sup> “Kenosis actually reflects God’s triune, unchanging and eternal nature –who God was, and is and is to come.” *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Like most theologies, Kenotic theology has a wide spectrum of thought ranging from orthodox to heretical. The kenotic teaching that God “emptied” Godself of power/deity and therefore ceased to be God, or became an “empty God” is not the definition of Kenosis I am referring to.

At the beginning of Philippians 2 Paul begins by saying, if you love Christ, *be like him*. In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, he writes:

“If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ...if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care* – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside and help others get ahead.”<sup>15</sup>

In today's world, what would this mean? What would kenotic, cruciform Love embodied through us look like? Historically speaking<sup>16</sup> and in my own experience, the church hasn't always done such a great job of revealing God in this way. Over and over again we've seen the church yield and cooperate with damaging power systems and/or create their own. And, too often, we believe that there's nothing we can do to change it so we sit (comfortable or uncomfortable) and become complicit to structures that oppress the other but benefit *us*. In his book, *Making America Great Again*, David Moore writes:

“Many of us see Christianity as the entity that, at best, stood in silence while Africans were purchased, sold, raped, brutalized and humiliated in other ways and, at worst, provided religious justification. We see it as the force behind the theft of continents from indigenous populations who did not imagine the ownership of real property. We see it offering a rationale for inferiority and subjugation of women and the shaming of sexual and gender identity minorities. These historical realities help build the case that there is endemic, something built into Christianity that hampers the conscience so that adherents feel no compunction in denying the dignity of others.”<sup>17</sup>

This is horrible and it is true. But Jesus is the antithesis of this. Jesus persistently pursues the downcast, the excluded, the abused, the marked as *unclean* by religion and society and says, “You! I invite, I welcome, I call, *I come to you!*”<sup>18</sup> Jesus never clings to power but pours himself

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<sup>15</sup> Phil. 2:1b-4a, MSG.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. The rule of Constantine, The Crusades, The Doctrine of Discovery, Apartheid.

<sup>17</sup> David Moore, *Making America Great Again*, (Crowdscribed, LLC, 2017), 69.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Mary Magdalene, the calling of the twelve, the woman at the well, the woman accused of adultery, Zaccheus, the Syrophenician woman, the Sermon on the Mount.

out as he confronts and challenges the systems that oppress, using both his words and his actions. This doesn't get Jesus glorified by any worldly metric. It does get Jesus crucified. But the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth shines through history as God's glory revealed. *Why?* Because, *mysteriously – marvellously*, the cross becomes a profound demonstration of *perfect* Love. The cross holds a mirror up to the brutality and exposes it for what it is – severely lacking in power, and violence is shamed. N.T. Wright pens this, “The crucifixion was the shocking answer to the prayer that God’s kingdom would come on earth as in heaven.”<sup>19</sup>

The cruciform nature of God shows us that kenotic Love has no limit because this is what Love is. It will always pour out in self-giving Love. It can do none other. Paul’s soteriology beautifully beckons those who love Christ to *become* Christ.<sup>20</sup> That is what we can do. Whenever we can, wherever we can, we can lay down our own power and privilege to lift up the ones who have less.<sup>21</sup> This is precisely what Christ did. We are invited to become willing participants in this Love. We can emulate Mary, letting Christ grow in us. We can say yes to a holy union, a powerful partnership with the Divine.<sup>22</sup> And we can pour out our lives like Jesus did, by living in this World, *our home*, fully embracing humanity and honouring the living God who is in *us* and in *everybody* else. We can let our lives sing the Christ Hymn: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> Amen.

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<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why It Matters*, (HarperCollins, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> See also: Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, (Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> I do not mean that we ourselves submit/cower to oppression or abuse of any kind. I do mean that when we can use our resources to empower another, we do.

<sup>22</sup> See also: Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God, A More Beautiful Gospel*, (CRW Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Phil. 2:5, NKJV.

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