

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 05, 2006

## Did Jesus lose his omnipotence?

Someone I know recently asked me about a preacher she heard on the radio talking about Jesus "losing his omnipotence" when he was with us on earth. I hear this phrase enough that it requires analysis.

So, did Jesus lose his omnipotence?

Where does this phrase come from? The idea that something about the Son is suppressed during the Incarnation is referred to as the "[kenosis](#)" doctrine. Kenosis is a Greek term which means "emptying" and is found in [Philippians 2:5-11](#). The point is that Christ, who was in the very form of God, empties himself by taking on the form of a servant.

But here is the tricky thing: the passage does not say *of what* he emptied himself. He just empties. No more clues. So this is one more case where the Scriptures make affirmations that raise questions for further development.

Enter theological thinking: *of what* did Christ empty himself?

**One common answer is that the Son of God simply dumps his divine attributes during the incarnation.** This makes for a straightforward story, but creates all kinds of problems. On the divine side, we might ask how exactly it is that the Son of God can relinquish divine perfections without ceasing to be God. If he simply dumps the very things that make him God, than the proclamation of Christ's divinity is rendered null. On the human side, we might ask how exactly it is that the man Jesus with his human words and actions can speak and act in the place of God (as the Gospels narrate) unless he also has a fully credentialed divine nature. So whatever kenosis means, it means something more subtle than simply dumping divine attributes.

A more complex answer with traditional weight behind it is that **the kenotic humbling of the Son of God consists in the addition of**

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**human nature to his fully intact divine nature.** The Philippians passage points toward this position by stating that Christ, while in the form of God, takes on the form of a servant. The language of taking implies addition, not subtraction. Proponents of this “adding” theory are inclined to point out the alternative way of speaking about the incarnation: *assumptio carnis*. Not only was God put-into-flesh (incarnation), but also God assumed-flesh-to-himself (*assumptio carnis*). God is omnipotent, yet adds to himself an impotent human nature. Is this still a humbling? Yes, because God in his glory does not need to add humanity to himself. But by grace he does.

Now I would align myself roughly with this second view of kenosis. However, I would not put it that way, or at least not only that way. Why? Because the appeal to addition alone might give the impression that we are trying to protect God's nature from the messiness of this world. Now Christians have had good reasons for so protecting God: we want to affirm the power of God, especially if he is to save us. But we need to be careful to not put God in a bind that he has shown himself not to be in. Whatever God's assumption of flesh means, it ought *not* to mean we go on thinking about God as usual and just add a human nature to it. Rather, the incarnation of God must tell us something about God's very nature.

So, what does the kenosis of the Son tells us about God?

At the very least, it should push us to reformulate our understanding of God's omnipotence. Our understanding of God's power is too abstract if he has to lose it to become human. But it is equally abstract if we simply add the doctrine of incarnation on top of an otherwise intact concept of God. It seems to me that the incarnation reveals a new definition of divine omnipotence: **God is so powerful that he can even embrace weakness without ceasing to be powerful.** Weakness is an aspect of divine power. The two are not mutually exclusive. As the [Apostle](#) says, "God's power is made perfect in weakness." Or, put more sharply, "God's power is God's weakness."

#### Any thoughts?

Any insights to offer regarding Philippians 2:5-11?

Is an appeal to the "assumption of flesh" a helpful alternative?

Does this method of inferring things about God's nature from the history of salvation work?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:48 PM

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At [4:46 PM, April 05, 2006](#), [Jake](#) said...

John, I think that this is where Charles Hartshorne (*Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*) is helpful. God is not less powerful because God enters into the world with us, but more. By the incarnation, and with it God's kenosis, God displays the full resolve of God's commitment to be God with us and for us. By adjusting appropriately to the changes of the world, God is thus more powerful than the God of say classical theism, who is impervious to world events. By willing to dance with the created order, which is always changing, God also changes. Jesus' life and death are the ultimate testament to a God who responds to the joys and sorrows of the world in a palpable way. God's knowledge and power, therefore, are greater than, say Aquinas' notion of God as impassible. Because God is in time with us, God is more omnipotent and omniscient. At least this helps me to get my mind around this quandry. Peace.

At [2:01 AM, April 06, 2006](#), [wzph](#) said...

I think Pannenberg answers this question by asserting that we can only understand Jesus' divinity looking "back" through the resurrection, not looking "forward" through the incarnation. From this side of the resurrection, it's clear that none of God's power is lost in the incarnation. That may not be so clear from the other side of the resurrection. Does that help or hinder the conversation?

At [11:10 PM, April 06, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I have two thoughts:

1. Whatever you decide is the correct or best theological view, it need not be linked to a close exegesis of the original text.
2. To me, the failure of so much exegesis on Philippians is the failure to see how "form of a servant" helps clarify what sense God has in the phrase "form of God." I suspect that this is yet another instance of God having heavy royal connotations, albeit a king upgrade to be sure. See Psalm 102 addressed to the king, "Your throne, O God..."

The old functional view rears its ugly head... I am open to this passage being about pre-existence and incarnation, but I remain unsure...

At [11:37 AM, April 07, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ken,  
Although I would concur that theological positions need not be bound up with original meaning, I am personally a practitioner of theological exegesis. Your regular red flags help remind me that my "exegesis" is of another order than original meaning. Thanks for that. I intend to operate under the conditions of a second naivete, so your reminders keep me from slipping back into a first naivete.

[Busters\)](#)

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With these disclaimers, I am still lead to notice details in texts and make use of them in theological reflection. A theology that stops reading the bible stops being theology.

At [11:38 AM, April 07, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

As for "function," of course Christology starts with function. I do not wish to start anywhere else. But "functional" affirmations about Christ in the Bible raise "ontological" questions that we have every right to explore (even when the texts don't help us much).

At [11:41 AM, April 07, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

wzph,

If all Pannenberg is saying s that we can only "look" back from after Easter, I would agree. However, Pannenberg is making the stronger claim (at least in ST vol. II and his earlier Jesus, God & Man) that Jesus is MADE divine by his resurrection. I think this is also a fascinating claim, though I have my doubts. I am more inclined to say that the resurrection reveals the identity of Jesus Christ.

At [11:45 AM, April 07, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Jake,

Thanks for bringing in Hartshorne. I am sympathetic with the move to include God's kenosis within his power, as the post hopefully displays. I also have some reservations that "by definition" God's power is great by his involment in the world. We have no other God than the God we know, but I am nevertheless drawn to the thought that God did not have to do all this, but did it out off grace. God didn't have to be involved in history to be truly divine. It is gift. But that is just my inclination. We only have the God we know, so all such caveats merely function to increase our gratitude that God would do such thing. When it comes to identifying and describing God, you and I are going to make the same affirmations.

At [5:45 PM, April 10, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

Helpful and instructive post once again. I choose door #3.

At [10:12 PM, April 12, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Completely agree that the biblical text is the most appropriate place to work out our theology with fear and trembling. More on task, I like the idea that we can inadvertantly limit God while trying to "protect" him from weakness. I've tended to conceptualize Jesus' divine powers as deliberately put in a "lock box" during the incarnation--something like what Open Theist's do with God's powers during time except more orthodox :0 So Jesus "plays by the human rules" and does all the miracles he does through the power of the Spirit, with the implication that there is nothing Jesus does while on earth than believers cannot do today through the power of the Holy

Spirit...

At [6:10 PM, April 14, 2006](#), [Pastor Rod](#) said...

I tend to agree with Ken's last post. For Jesus to be fully human, his "divine powers" must be limited, set aside or unused in some way.

We seem to get this with regard to his human body. His omnipresence is set aside so that he is limited to the man Jesus of Nazareth.

It seems to me his omniscience and omnipotence also must be set aside for him to have a truly human experience. Anything less would be play acting.

The scene in Gethsemane only makes sense if Jesus is operating within human limitations.

I also agree with Ken that everything Jesus did was done through the power of the Spirit and in the context of his relationship with the Father.

If we try to "protect" Jesus' divinity, we are making the same mistake Calvinists make when they try to protect God's sovereignty and skew their theology to accommodate that.

Rod

At [11:53 AM, April 22, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

This discussion reminds me of the first Beatitude and a quote by Johannes Baptist Metz in *Poverty of Spirit* (a wonderful little book I highly recommend).

*To become human means to become "poor," to have nothing that one might brag before God. To become human means to have no support and no power, save the enthusiasm and committment of one's own heart [through grace]. Becoming human involves proclaiming the poverty of the human spirit in the face of the total claims of a transcendent God.*

Sounds very similar to Philippians 2:5-8 to me.

At [12:51 AM, April 24, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

so the times that Jesus knew what was in the hearts and minds of people wasn't omnipotence, but the Spirit revealing it to Jesus. Mystery... it is a fascinating topic!

Jesus also "disappeared" a time or two. I don't know what that falls under.

love hearing what you all have to say!

At [10:24 AM, April 25, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

John, knowing noone will read this but you so late in the posting day, I thought I would mention this post seems to go so well with your most recent generous one. A theology of weakness as strenth seems to go hand-in-hand with a generous recognition of God's boundless work in the world and our meager recognitions of it in my mind.

Once again, thanks for being you,

dave

At [11:41 PM, April 25, 2006](#), [kerry](#) said...

Hi, John. Jesus in the flesh was clearly not omnipresent nor omniscient. (See Matthew 24:36.) I am surprised this discussion did not bring into focus our belief in a trinitarian God who, though in three persons, is yet mysteriously One. The things that Jesus said and did were because of his unity with the Father and the Spirit. To conclude that Jesus was not omniscient nor omnipotent is correct, but it omits the point that God is not only three, He is also One and no one is suggesting that the Father lost His omnipotence while Jesus walked the earth. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." The Son voluntarily limited himself in the flesh with respect to some of the infinite divine attributes.

Interestingly, don't we believe that the Father also chooses to limit Himself in the area of sovereignty over the human will, giving us the possibility of rebelling against Him? The presence of sin in the same universe with God demonstrates that He has limited Himself in some way, at least for a season. He created persons with wills separate from His own. So there was already a precedent for this "self-limiting" even before the Incarnation. Jesus is the perfect extension of the Father's character in relation to man, but shouldn't He be seen in the context of the Trinity? The kenosis began before the creation of the world (Rev. 13:8b).

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