

I. Incarnation

A. Scriptures Describing the Incarnation: John 1:1-14; 1 Timothy 3:16; Philippians 2:7-8; Colossians 2:9; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:9

B. What is Incarnation?

1. Literal Definition: To be embodied by flesh or to take on flesh.
2. From Greek, σαρκοσις
3. From Latin, *incarnatus*
4. Definition in Christianity: The belief that God the Son became flesh when He was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.
5. Thomas C. Oden – “Incarnation means enfleshing, or becoming flesh, the union of human nature with the divine in one person. In the fullness of time, the eternal Son assumed human nature without ceasing to be God.”
6. J. Rodman Williams – “This is the mystery of the Incarnation, namely, that the Word who was ‘with God, and . . . was God’ took upon Himself flesh: He became man. Without ceasing to be God through whom all things were made, He concurrently became man by assuming our flesh.”
7. Terry Tramel (IPHC Theologian) “At the heart of the Gospel is the good news of God becoming a man in order to rescue and redeem His creation.”

II. Method of Incarnation (How did this happen?)

A. See Diagram of the Incarnation

B. Paul’s use of the verb ἐκενωσεν with the reflexive pronoun (himself) in Philippians 2:7 illuminates our understanding of the incarnation.

1. Word Meaning

- i. From the Greek verb εκενοσεν meaning *to make empty* (see also the Greek adjective κενος meaning *empty*).
- ii. Theological Meaning: Paul writes in Philippians 2:7 that Christ “emptied himself” in order to become incarnate.
- iii. Varying Translations
 - a) NIV – he made himself nothing
 - b) KJV/NKJV – made himself of no reputation
 - c) ESV/NRSV/NASB/MEV – he emptied himself

iv. Other Uses

- a) Paul only uses this verb in regards to Christ in this text.
- b) However, Paul does use this verb in connection to other topics in Romans 4:14; 1 Corinthians 1:17 and 9:15; 2 Corinthians 9:3.

2. Context

- i. This verse of scripture is part of a larger context (verses 6-11) that is believed to be an early hymn or song of the church.
- ii. Verlyn Vebrugge writes that the overall purpose of the passage is to illustrate Paul's point in verses 1-5 "that Christians should be unselfish, humble, and outgoing in their relationships, and thus have the mind of Christ."

3. The problem is that Paul does not tell us what Christ emptied himself of or how much he emptied himself.

4. Interpretation

- i. Verse 6 makes it clear that Jesus is divine, he shares the same nature as that of God the Father.
- ii. Paul makes it clear that Jesus emptied himself willingly. Nothing was taken from him by force but he chose to be emptied. It was a selfless act of love.
- iii. Jesus did not subtract from him anything. Rather, he added humanity (flesh) to Himself and for a time set aside the continual use of his divine attribute in order to live in his humanity.
- iv. Thus, the emptying does not mean that Christ gave up his divinity. Rather, set aside independent, uninterrupted use of his deity for a time in order to be made in human likeness. The Gospels indicated that Christ had all authority but only used the power of that authority in accordance with the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18; John 10:18; Matthew 4:3-4; Luke 22:42; Mark 4:41).
- v. Summary: Frank Thielman – "Paul both states the equality and the substantial unity of Christ with God and then describes one way in which Christ expressed his deity. He did not exploit this status but

manifested it in humble service by becoming a slave and a human being. To use the words of Jesus himself, 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45; cf. Matthew 20:28)."

C. The Theological Nature and Meaning of Incarnation - To what extent did Jesus empty himself?

1. The term Kenosis now refers to the self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation, as well as his conscious acceptance of obedience to the divine will that led him to death by crucifixion.
2. Many theologians see in the term a reference to Jesus' choice not to exercise the prerogatives and powers that were his by virtue of his divine nature.
3. Later theologians speak of the incarnation as the self-emptying of the preexistent, eternal Son to become a human Jesus. This self-emptying involved the setting aside of certain divine attributes, or at least the independent exercise of his divine powers.
4. Roger Olsen – Kenosis is “laying aside his privileges as God in order to take on the form of a servant.”

5. J. Rodman Williams

- i. Kenosis is “the surrender of His heavenly glory and riches and the taking on of the form of a menial servant or slave.
 - ii. The self-emptying of Christ should not be understood to mean that Jesus emptied Himself of His divinity or of such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. In regards to these attributes, it would be better to say that there was a functional limitation in their use by Christ in His humanity.”
6. Ben Witherington – Kenosis meant that “Jesus emptied himself of prerogatives and glory of being divine, or of the right to claim such prerogatives.”
 7. Terry Tramel (IPHC Theologian) – Kenosis is “that Christ surrendered the independent use of his deity at the incarnation. Thus, while still remaining God, He nevertheless lived His entire earthly life in complete submission to the will of the Father who sent Him and to the Holy Spirit who guided Him.”

D. Understanding Kenosis

1. Not to be taken as proof that Jesus gave up his deity, even for a short time. He has always been and will always be divine.
2. The scripture should be understood as a reference to the extreme humiliation of Christ in both his being “made in human likeness” and his “death on a cross.”
3. This demonstrates the great love and power of Jesus who freely lowered himself, made himself of no account, for us. He had all authority but submitted it all in order to live as a servant/slave and die a criminal’s death.

III. Implications for Missions

- A. Another example of how God takes the initiative in reaching/saving/redeeming his creation. The incarnation was completely an act of grace on the part of God towards humanity.
- B. Jesus sets an example that we should adopt for ministry and participating in the mission of God. Some call this an incarnational method of ministry. We conduct ourselves as Jesus did in all aspects of life. We reach others in the pattern set by Christ when he reached out for us.
- C. Self-emptying will look different in various contexts. In order to put on the flesh of our host community (contextualization) we must be willing to empty ourselves of whatever hinders the mission. Ultimately this is not about being deprived for humility’s sake but showing genuine love.