

Christ Jesus Emptying Himself

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In his Epistle to the Philippians Paul exhorts the saints to avoid all self-exaltation and to cultivate a spirit of humility (Phil. 2: 1-4). The apostle does not press humility of disposition as a virtue in an abstract sense, but as a unique excellence perfectly exemplified by Christ Jesus. He writes, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus; Who, being in the form of God . . . emptied Himself, taking a bondman's form" (Phil. 2: 5-7).

From this revelation by the Spirit of God concerning the incarnation of the Son of God we learn that its outstanding feature lay in His making Himself of no reputation, or emptying Himself, the latter being a preferable rendering of the Greek text.* The apostle teaches that Christ Jesus Who was in "the form of God" voluntarily took upon Himself "the form of a servant (or bond-slave)," whereby He "emptied Himself." Being "in the likeness of men," He abstained from using the prerogatives of His deity apart from the will of Him that sent Him. This act of self-abnegation expressed "the mind which was in Christ Jesus," which "mind" the apostle desired should be in His saints also.

*The comment of a great scholar on Phil. 2: 7. is "emptied, stripped Himself of the insignia of majesty"; and again, "He divested Himself, not of His divine nature, for this was impossible, but of the glories, the prerogatives, of Deity. This He did by taking upon Him the form of a servant" (*Commentary on Philippians*, 12th ed., 1908, by Bp. Lightfoot.).

In connection with Christ's self-emptying, a charge of heterodoxy has been brought against the late William Kelly, based, as it seems, upon a half-dozen words occurring in one of his early lectures on this Epistle. This charge of false doctrine is preposterous, but we hope is not as malicious as it is ill-founded. The words of W.K. quoted against him are: "He (Christ) emptied Himself of His deity." And on the evidence of this brief sentence, it is declared that W.K. taught that on becoming man Christ ceased to be God, founding this serious accusation upon what is merely their own hasty interpretation of a brief sentence selected from the speaker's somewhat lengthy expository remarks upon the Philippian passage (2: 5-8).

Indeed, the falsity of this implication is evident even from the speaker's remarks which precede the words quoted. Before using them, W.K. had made clear to his audience what he himself considered was conveyed by the passage he was expounding (2: 5-8), and especially the sense of the phrase, "emptied Himself." He taught his hearers that "emptied Himself" meant not that Christ Jesus in taking the form of a bond-servant thereby dispossessed Himself of His absolute deity, but of its prerogatives by abstaining from using these on His own initiative.

But on this point, we may let W.K. speak for himself. From the long passage (some five pages of print) dealing with chap. 2: 5-8 we have selected from the Notes the following extracts, dealing with the deity of Christ Jesus.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal (on equality) with God, but made Himself of no reputation (emptied Himself), taking a bondman's form, being come in men's likeness" (Phil. 2: 5-7). What an illustrious testimony to the true, proper, intrinsic *deity of Christ!* It is all the stronger because, like many more, it is indirect (p. 46). . . . Nothing can be conceived more conclusively to prove its own supremely divine glory than the simple statement of the text, . . . Of Christ alone it was true that He took a bond-servant's form; and of

Him alone could it be true, because He was in the form of God. In this nature He subsisted originally, as truly as He received a bondman's; both were real, equally real: the one intrinsic, the other that which He condescended to assume in infinite grace (p. 47). . . .

"Yet must we carefully bear in mind that it would be as impossible *for a divine person to cease to be God* as for a man to become a divine person. But it was the joy and triumph of divine grace that He Who was God equally with the Father, when about to become a man, did not *carry down the glory and power of the Godhead to confound man before Him, but rather emptied Himself*. . . He was God: yet in the place of man which He truly entered He had, as was meet, the willingness to be nothing. He made Himself of no reputation (emptied Himself). How admirable! How magnifying to God! *He put in abeyance all His glory* (pp. 47-8). . . .

"There are two great stages in the advent and humiliation of the Son of God. The first is in respect of His *divine nature or proper deity He emptied Himself*. He would not act on a ground which exempted Him from human obedience when He takes the place of servant here below (p. 49). . . . But we find another thing; *if He emptied Himself of His deity when He took the form of a servant*, when He does become a man He humbles Himself and becomes obedient as far as death" (p. 50).

From these extracts it will be seen that W.K. maintained the full deity of Christ Jesus and also that His deity was unimpaired when He took manhood. Being in the form of God, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondman. Of His own will, He divested Himself of His prerogatives as God, choosing not to command as God but to obey as a servant. All the inherent rights of deity are His inalienably; obedience, however, is a function not of deity, but of one who takes the place of submission to the will of another. Being God, and being come in man's likeness, Christ Jesus undertook the place of servitude. "Though He were Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5: 8). Yet He, "according to flesh, is the Christ, Who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen." (Rom. 9: 5).

Such is the doctrine of scripture concerning Christ Jesus, and from this doctrine W.K. does not appear to depart even in the sentence over which some seem to have stumbled through lack of attention to its context. In his address, W.K. was at this point passing from the consideration of vv. 5-7 to ver. 8. In the former the subject is Christ's humiliation; as One in "the form of God," He takes "the form of a servant." In the latter, Christ further humbles Himself and is obedient as man even to crucifixion. Referring to this transition of subject, the lecturer said, "But we find another thing: if He emptied Himself of His deity when He took the form of a servant (vv. 5-7), when He does become a man He humbles Himself and becomes obedient as far as death" (ver. 8). "Deity" and "man" are the two key-words in the two sections of this sentence, and the word "if" should be noted especially.

Obviously, W.K.'s teaching is not fairly represented by quoting only six words from this sentence, and also by omitting the little word "if." Thus, "He emptied Himself of His deity" is made to appear as an independent and absolute sentence, which it was not intended to be. The author did not say Christ did so, but "if" He did so. The speaker's object at this stage was to point out that in verse 7 Christ's humiliation is related to His deity, and in verse 8 to His humanity.

W.K. is not alone in this interpretation. The same distinction is pointed out by J.N.D. in his "Synopsis" of the passage. In similar language he states that as God Christ emptied Himself and as man He humbled Himself. He writes, "Christ . . . when He was in the form of God, emptied Himself, through love, of all His outward glory, of the form of God. and took the form of a man; and even when He was in the form of man, still humbled Himself. It was a second thing which He did in humbling Himself. As God, He emptied Himself; as man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient even unto

death. His humiliation itself is a proof that He is God. God only could leave His first estate in the sovereign rights of His love. It is sin for any creature so to do" (pp. 468-9).

Deity is manifested by the exercise of its attributes and prerogatives. In His incarnation, these were suppressed by Christ, but were not abandoned, which could not be. Hence Christ appeared among men as One Who had (to use W.K.'s phrase) "emptied Himself of His deity." As it were, He had laid aside His garments (His seamless robe) and girded Himself with a towel for menial service at the disciples' feet. His dis-robing did not affect His personal relationship to them as the Lord and the Teacher (John 13: 14). When Christ Jesus emptied Himself for obedience, He was still God, for it could not be otherwise. But, if we may so speak, He was pleased that in His incarnation His deity should remain quiescent, and His bond-service appear.

In the wilderness after His baptism Christ Jesus was twice tempted by Satan to exercise His own deity and do what is impossible to man, though possible to God. But having emptied Himself for service and being there as bond-servant, He remained steadfast in His obedience to and compliance with His Father's will. Hence He neither made stones bread, nor cast Himself down from the temple to prove Himself to be the Son of God, which nevertheless He was, and is.

In the garden of Gethsemane Christ is seen to be the self-emptied One, choosing the Father's will, and not His own. There in agonized anticipation of the cup before Him, He cried, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me: nevertheless, not as I (*emphatic*) will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26: 39). Along with omniscient knowledge of what was before Him on the morrow, there was the display of the spirit, not of self-assertion and of escape, but of self-surrender and submission. He laid aside His own will, accepting His Father's, and on the cross doing that will, offering Himself to God in the sweet savour of His perfect obedience as Jehovah's Servant.

We conclude with three other quotations from J.N.D.'s ministry, all referring to Christ's emptying Himself in His incarnation: (1) "There are two degrees in Christ's humiliation. He first strips Himself of His own glory, and becomes man; then, being man, He goes down even unto the death of the cross;" (2) "He laid aside the form of Godhead, and was found as a man; and, being a man, He took upon Him the form of a servant;" (3) "Leaving God in the glory, leaving the form of God, in abeyance, He became a servant for the blessing of others." All three extracts are taken from his *Collected Writings* (Vol. 27 pp. 255, 274, 323). They all treat of the stoop of grace taken by Christ Jesus when He was found in fashion as a man, and all note the two stages in His humiliation as W.K. also indicates.

NOTE.-The following is a brief history of the phrase under consideration. It first appeared nearly a century ago in W. Kelly's "Notes on the Epistle to the Philippians" (*The Bible Treasury*. Vol. 5). The words in question occur in the article on pp. 283-4 (June, 1865). These notes being compiled from shorthand reports of W.K.'s oral ministry were issued in book form in 1867, and entitled "Lectures on the Epistle to the Philippians." Since that date, fresh impressions from the original have been published, without revision, as required.

In connection with W.K.'s phrase, "emptied Himself of His deity," it is interesting to record a remark of his on the same subject made some ten years previously and occurring in *The Christian Annotator* for the year 1855. In that journal (vol. ii. p. 91), a contributor, writing on the parables of the treasure and the pearl (Matt. 13: 44-46) stated, "The man is He Who parted with all He had, *even His Godhead*, which He laid aside, and . . . bought . . ." On p. 119 of the same volume, in criticizing this remark on our Lord's renunciation. W.K. wrote, "Our Lord does not, and cannot, cease to be 'over all, God blessed for ever.'" As a result, on p. 158 the author of the remark "heartily" withdrew his original expression, substituting for "Godhead" the "glory of the Godhead." He had spoken without due

deliberation.

It will be observed that W.K., before using the phrase. "emptied Himself of His deity" had fully explained what it could *not* mean, viz., that Christ Jesus yielded up the possession of His deity or His Godhead, or His Essential Being, which is an impossibility. In His flesh He was still God, blessed for ever. Taking the form of a bond-slave, He thus emptied Himself, subjecting Himself absolutely to, the will of Another. For our sakes, "He being rich became poor": an unsolved mystery to the understanding, but an amazing comfort and unending joy to the heart of faith.