

The Kenotic Christology of P. T. Forsyth

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Introduction

The person and work of Jesus Christ is the most important doctrine in the entirety of the Christian faith, and as such every aspect of his personhood and ministry must be scrutinized and delineated to appreciate and comprehend the utter magnitude of God becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The soteriological ramifications that stem from the necessity of properly understanding who Jesus was and what his contemporary relevance is are immense considering the assertion that if one does not know who Jesus is, then his salvific benefits are of no consequence. Therefore, it is even more imperative that a holistic approach is taken in explicating the person and work of Jesus Christ in order that God may be glorified as lord and saviour of humanity.

One of the most difficult and controversial aspects of the doctrine of Jesus Christ is that of the *kenosis*. Traditionally, the church and her theologians have understood this divine divesting as a simple “veiling” (*krypsis*), but since the nineteenth century certain theologians have argued that, in assuming human flesh, the pre-existent Christ set aside certain (or all) attributes and thereby “emptied himself” of not only his divine prerogatives but also of his *divine nature*. This interpretive tradition became known as *kenotic Christology* because of its emphasis on the argument that the Son of God literally “emptied himself” of certain (or all) of his divine attributes in the incarnation of Christ. This tradition’s two chief proponents are Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875) and P.T. Forsyth (1848–1921) who, although having different theological emphases, contend that the *kenosis* is not a veiling (*krypsis*) of the deity and divine attributes, but an actual “emptying” (*kenosis*) of it.

In this essay, it shall be argued that the kenotic Christology of P.T. Forsyth is founded upon the premise that the *kenosis* began in the pre-existence of Christ, that in the incarnation the *kenosis* was a moral act of God with the concentration of the divine attributes from a state of actuality to potentiality, and that the *kenosis* was completed by a necessary *plerosis*, which was accomplished in the moral conquest of Christ.

Kenotic Theology

To better understand the importance of Forsyth's contribution to theology in general and Christology in particular, one must first become cognizant of the tradition and hermeneutical trajectory that preceded and influenced him known as *kenotic theology*. "Kenotic theology is a theology that focuses on the person of Christ in terms of some form of self-limitation by the pre-existent Son in his becoming man. Kenotic theology at the theoretical level is a way of conceiving of the incarnation that is relatively new in the history of reflection on the person of Christ."¹

The chief, paradigmatic passage of Scripture that kenotic theologians emphasize is that of the christological hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, especially verse 7. Whereas some translations translate *kenosis* idiomatically as referring to Christ having "made himself nothing" (NIV and ESV) or "made himself of no reputation" (KJV and NKJV), others prefer to translate *kenosis* more literally as "emptied himself" (RSV and NASB). Therefore, it is no surprise that "there has been much discussion about this entire crucial passage (2:6–11), and several interpretations exist today."² Of these several interpretations it is also important to note that "some see this form of thought about Christ as the most recent advance in Christology; others see it as a blind alley."³

Kenotic theology, however, is not as new as some may perceive, for in the patristic era the *kenosis* of Christ was utilized in the many christological and trinitarian controversies. In the famous debates between Athanasius and Arius, Cyril and Nestorius, and Leo and Eutyches the *kenosis* showed "the divine decision that the Word should become man [indicating] a genuine humbling. For God, the Incarnation is not an 'increase' but an emptying, an exhaustion."⁴

However, as the debates raged over the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ and how God could assume flesh and yet remain immutable in his essence, the *kenosis* remained a relatively mute doctrine because of its challenge to the entrenched philosophical

¹ S.M. Smith, "Kenosis, Kenotic Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 651.

² Smith, 651.

³ Smith, 651.

⁴ Emilio Brito, "Kenosis," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2:853.

and metaphysical presuppositions held by many theologians in the patristic era.

Although kenotic theology lay dormant for centuries because of the prevailing Hellenistic metaphysics in theology, a slight resurgence manifested during the Protestant Reformation period. Along with the many lost and distorted doctrines that were retrieved and reformulated by Martin Luther, his reviving of the *Communicatio Idiomatum* aided in the renaissance of the *kenosis*. “According to [Luther], certain attributes of the divine nature of Christ become attributes of human nature.”⁵ This led certain Lutheran theologians, such as Martin Chemnitz, to argue that “Christ possessed divine majesty in his humanity and during his earthly life but customarily refrained from using it. It was only upon his glorification that he would make use of it.”⁶

Nevertheless, Greek metaphysical categories still reigned in Western Christian theology until the Post-Reformation era, when the first formal kenotic Christologies began to be formulated and delineated in response to the numerous aporias regarding Chalcedonian Christology.

The kenoticists shared the new dissatisfaction with the aporias of classical formulations, but they were, for the most part, still committed to the spirit and intentions of the creeds. They attempted to mediate between the legitimate new emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and what they held to be the legitimate intuitions of traditional Christology.⁷

Therefore, kenotic theology is not an entirely new doctrine, but one that is rooted in canonical Scripture, utilized in apologetics, and seminal for a more holistic christological reflection and confession.

Gottfried Thomasius’ Kenotic Christology

“Kenotic theology can be said to have begun as a serious form of reflection on Christology in the works of Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875), a German Lutheran theologian.”⁸ The intellectual milieu in which Thomasius conceived his kenotic Christology was Hegelianism, which affirmed the necessity of the absolute becoming

⁵ Brito, 2:854.

⁶ Brito, 2:854.

⁷ Sammie K. Daugherty, *God as Kenosis: Possibilities for Kenotic Theology in the Texts of Robert P. Scharlemann* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertations Services, 1998), 9.

⁸ Smith, 651.

finite in the historical process of the world so that the absolute could become fully self-actualized. Theologically speaking, for Thomasius, “the primary concern was to find a way of understanding the person of Christ that allowed his *full humanity* to be adequately expressed.”⁹

Because of Thomasius’ discontent with the traditional language and categories of Chalcedonian Christology, he attempted to do justice to the humanity of Christ by focusing on how God “emptied himself” in the incarnation. Consequently, “some form of kenosis or self-emptying on the part of the Son offered the idea that the Son of God could make himself compatible with finite human existence without giving up the essential ingredients of divinity.”¹⁰ This assertion, however, did not place Thomasius outside of the sphere of orthodoxy, for “while Thomasius saw himself as firmly within the ecclesiastical tradition, he [also] recognized that ‘the formulations of Chalcedon were apt to suggest two abstract natures and thus fail to achieve a view of an integrated person.’”¹¹

Thomasius proceeded to explicate his peculiar version of the *kenosis* by holding three realities in tension: the deity of Christ; the *full* humanity of Christ; and the unity of his person.¹² In fact, “the heart of his system was an attempt to hold all three points together through the notion of self-limitation.”¹³ With the *kenosis* being the fulcrum of his Christology, Thomasius began by affirming “the reality of the Christian experience of communion with God mediated through Christ,”¹⁴ which entails a soteriology that emphasizes the need for reconciliation between God and humanity as requiring “nothing short of a ‘God-man.’”¹⁵

Thomasius’ emphasis on the union of deity and humanity in Jesus stems from his presupposition that “God created man for communion with himself”¹⁶ and for this communion to be restored God needed to take on a full human nature “‘in weakness and susceptibility to suffering and trial of its present condition,’

⁹ Smith, 651. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Daugherty, 10.

¹¹ Daugherty, 11.

¹² Daugherty, 11.

¹³ Daugherty, 11–12.

¹⁴ Daugherty, 12.

¹⁵ Daugherty, 12.

¹⁶ Daugherty, 12.

including an openness ‘to the influences of wickedness.’”¹⁷ This seemingly scandalous assertion was necessary, according to Thomasius, because

classical theology had invariably truncated the humanity of Christ in order to protect his divinity. Thomasius believed that if either side was allowed to dominate the other, no true union had occurred. [Therefore], some form of self-limitation on the part of the divine seemed necessary for the union to be genuine.¹⁸

Thomasius’ theory also drew controversy by arguing that, in the *kenosis*, God revealed that he defines himself “in terms of complete self-determination [which] opened up the possibility of attributing a certain type of change to God.”¹⁹ The *kenosis*, then, is God’s self-determination to be the God he chooses to be regardless of any metaphysical language and/or external forces. Therefore, “when defending the notion of self-limitation, the only justification for God’s self-limitation that Thomasius was interested in is the one that protects God’s independence.”²⁰ Thus, Thomasius was both a theologian ahead of and immersed in his time because of his recovery of the *kenosis* and adherence to traditional metaphysical presuppositions.

P.T. Forsyth’s Kenotic View of Jesus’ Pre-Existence and Incarnation

In the wake of the ground-breaking treatment of the *kenosis* by Gottfried Thomasius is the influential thought of Peter Taylor Forsyth, who both succeeded and superseded Thomasius regarding the further development of the *kenosis* in Christology. This was because

Forsyth’s theological background reflected the orthodox Scottish Calvinism of his upbringing. But his studies caused him to challenge much of this, and he came to accept some of what he considered the virtues of liberal theology, particularly biblical criticism.²¹

Because Forsyth drew upon the two streams of orthodox and liberal Protestantism, he could remain within the boundaries of accepted

¹⁷ Daugherty, 14.

¹⁸ Daugherty, 14.

¹⁹ Daugherty, 15.

²⁰ Daugherty, 23.

²¹ A.F. Anderson, “Forsyth, Peter Taylor,” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel Cameron (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 332.

orthodoxy and yet reformulate, to the extent of revolutionizing, the classical christological confessions, specifically the Formula of Chalcedon. Forsyth, therefore, believed that “the task of Christology is to explicate what must be true about Christ for him to have effected the new relationship between humanity and God. Only an incarnational [and subsequently kenotic] Christology adequately explains that event.”²²

The incarnation of Christ, however, was not the initial “advance in force” for Forsyth, because in order “to explain the finality of Christ, we must believe, as the early church did, in the *pre-existence* of Christ.”²³ Unfortunately, the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ has seemed to be more a matter of rote confessionalism in the life of the church, rather than a dynamic doctrine that would (partially) explain the mystery of the incarnation.

Part of the church’s neglect of the pre-existence of Christ was because of the supposed scarcity of *explicit* scriptural passages that testify to its reality, but Forsyth

claims that the work of Christ cannot be explained without the aid of some theory of His pre-existence. Nothing less takes account of the magnitude of His task, nor does it suffice to explain His divinity. Therefore, although there is little respecting pre-existence in the Scriptures, Forsyth feels compelled to postulate the existence of Christ before the foundation of the world.²⁴

The necessity of the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ is not only to be found in the Scriptures, but is also warranted by its *theological* necessity as part and parcel of a coherent understanding of Christ’s person and work. Forsyth points to Paul as one who

worked back from the faith that all things were made *for* Christ to the conviction that, as the end was in the beginning, all things were made *by* Christ; and by a Christ as personal as the Christ who was their goal. And so, from the exalted glory of Christ, Paul’s thought was cast back, by the very working of that Christ in him and in the whole

²² Daugherty, 27.

²³ A.M. Hunter, *P.T. Forsyth* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 76. Author’s emphasis.

²⁴ W.L. Bradley, *P.T. Forsyth: The Man and His Work* (London: Independent Press, 1952), 193.

consciousness of the Church's faith, to the same Christ from all Eternity by the Father's side.²⁵

This retrospective theologizing is indicative of the necessity and importance of Christ's pre-existence for Forsyth's kenotic Christology because of his *a priori* commitment "that theology begins from the experience of salvation in Christ. As a consequence, an adequate understanding of Christ requires a right relationship with him."²⁶

Furthermore, Forsyth provides two theological rationales for the necessity of the pre-existence of Christ: the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, and the immutable nature of God. The former is a matter of affirming orthodoxy in which the deity and eternity of the Father and the Son is upheld. "Such a relation as we believe our Saviour now bears to the Father could not have been arisen at a point in time. It could not have been created by this earthly life."²⁷ The latter is like the former, because God's immutability demands that

if at one moment in history Christ performed the reconciling work, a change in the nature of God would be necessitated unless there were in that act an eternal aspect thus then becoming actualised. God's nature must be unchangeable, for His holiness guarantees this; nothing which happened within time could be allowed to alter the very character of the Eternal.²⁸

Stemming from the argument that the pre-existence of Christ is an absolute necessity in understanding the person and work of Christ, Forsyth proceeds to assert that the *kenosis* began in the pre-existent state of Christ *before* the incarnation. Forsyth believed that "there was an act of renunciation outside the walls of the world and the Son's sacrifice began before he entered it,"²⁹ and although Christ could not fully complete his substitutionary sacrifice until he assumed human flesh, the *posture* of the pre-existent Son was such

²⁵ P.T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 269. Author's emphasis.

²⁶ Daugherty, 26–27.

²⁷ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 269.

²⁸ Bradley, 194.

²⁹ Hunter, 76.

that “his sacrifice began before He came into the world, and his cross was that of a lamb slain before the world’s foundation.”³⁰

By positing a view of pre-existence to substantiate that Christ’s *kenosis* began before the incarnation, Forsyth could demonstrate that the *kenosis* was not a simple *adjustment* by God in assuming human flesh, but an eternal *act* of self-determination by God to be a God who is essentially *kenotic*:

The great eternal act of Christ in heaven and Godhead, before and beyond history, was of a like *nature* to the long act of will by which He went down to death in His human history. It was an act of heart and will, of free resolve, of self-limitation, self-contraction as it were, self-divestment, self-humiliation, [and] self-subordination.³¹

The *kenosis*, then, occurred in eternity past in the pre-existence of Christ because of God’s self-determination to be a God who chooses to be *for others* and not a God who is self-absorbed and consumed by his own ineffable glory. Therefore,

Christ’s earthly humiliation had to have its foundation laid in Heaven, and to be viewed but as the working out of a renunciation before the world was. The awful volume and power of the warfare in which He here redeemed the world, and turned for Eternity the history of the race, was but the exercise in historic conditions of an eternal resolve taken in heavenly places. He could never be king of the eternal future if he was not also king from eternal past.³²

“It is all but impossible to discuss a question like the Kenosis without entering a region which seems forbidding to the lay mind, and is certainly more or less technical.”³³ With this ominous statement, Forsyth begins his treatment on the *kenosis* of Christ as revealed in the incarnation and sets the tone for what has traditionally been a very difficult topic in Christology.

However, for the *kenosis* to be made cognizant in the incarnation of Christ, one must first see the connection between the incarnate and pre-incarnate aspects of the *kenosis*. “Once pre-existence has been accepted as a postulate demanded by religious faith in Christ, it

³⁰ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 271.

³¹ P.T. Forsyth, *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1901), 111. Author’s emphasis.

³² Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 270.

³³ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 293.

becomes necessary to deal with the laying aside of the glory of the heavenly Christ and the humiliation of the earthly Christ.”³⁴ This logical connection strengthens Forsyth’s argument because “if there was a personal pre-existence in the case of Christ it does not seem possible to adjust it to the historic Jesus without some form of Kenosis.”³⁵

Forsyth’s Moral View of Kenosis

Having substantiated the necessity and interdependency of the *kenosis* in Christ’s pre-existence and in the incarnation, one must now realize the *moral* nature of the *kenosis*. This “turn to morality” was ingenious because Forsyth saw “his theory [of the *kenosis*] as a biblical alternative to a static, Greek, outmoded formula found in the Chalcedonian Definition.”³⁶ Forsyth believed that this “moralizing of dogma” was necessary in his contemporary context because the traditional “categories and concepts used to explain the incarnation were drawn from abstract and impersonal sources.”³⁷ Moreover, the positive contribution of the “moralizing of dogma” was “the reshaping of our view of God from what [Forsyth] called static categories to dynamic ones reflecting God’s saving purposes seen in Christ.”³⁸

Although Forsyth was in general agreement with the Formula of Chalcedonian, he believed that a new and better explanation of the incarnation would be through *moral*, rather than *metaphysical*, language and categories. Gwilym Griffith aptly states:

The Chalcedonian formula of the two natures in one Person, designed, as the formula was, for the purpose of dispelling errors rather than for the purpose of adjusting truths, was bound in time to need re-stating. For not only was the formula affected – inevitably – by an early metaphysic and a crude psychology, but also it was framed in a church and in an age in which the moral vitality and urgency of the original Apostolic teaching were lacking, together with that teaching’s close relation to personal experience.³⁹

³⁴ Robert McAfee Brown, *P.T. Forsyth: Prophet for Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 89.

³⁵ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 293–294.

³⁶ Smith, 652.

³⁷ Daugherty, 27.

³⁸ Smith, 653.

³⁹ Gwilym Griffith, *The Theology of P.T. Forsyth* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 38.

Consequently, Forsyth shifted the emphasis from *substance* to *action* by demonstrating that the incarnation, and its subsequent *kenosis*, must not to be understood as “a matter of affirming a logical impossibility, but of affirming a moral choice made by a person to love sacrificially.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, in superseding the traditional language and categories of Chalcedonian Christology, Forsyth refuted the traditional view of the *kenosis* as *krypsis*. “The alternative to a Kenosis used to be a Krypsis, or conscious concealment of the active divine glory for practical or strategic purposes. But that is now an impossible idea.”⁴¹ The impossibility of holding to the *krypsis* view of the *kenosis* is because, per Forsyth, it “hardly satisfies the exigencies of genuine incarnation. Ultimately, it is docetic. Nor does a veiled divinity do justice to the New Testament witness to the humanity of Christ.”⁴²

Ultimately, the moral nature of the *kenosis* is the key to understanding both *how* and *why* God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, because “any modern Christology, if it is to be religiously true, must concern itself with ethical rather than metaphysical categories and must therefore keep close to the moral and experimental method.”⁴³

The moral act of the *kenosis* in the incarnation is not an end unto itself, however, but the impetus of the *kenosis* as a *concentration* of the divine attributes in Jesus of Nazareth. The genius of Forsyth’s contribution to Christology is seen most clearly in his peculiar approach to delineating the *kenosis* in the incarnation. Simply stated, Forsyth’s kenotic Christology posits the notion that “the divine attributes were not parted with but retracted in a different mode of being, becoming *potential* not *actual*.”⁴⁴

Because the debate over the nature/extent of the *kenosis* hinges on the role of the divine attributes, it is important to understand that, for Forsyth, “the attributes of God, like omniscience, are not destroyed when they are reduced to a potentiality. They are only

⁴⁰ Daugherty, 28.

⁴¹ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 294.

⁴² Daugherty, 30–31.

⁴³ Griffith, 39–40.

⁴⁴ Samuel Mikolaski, “P.T. Forsyth,” in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 314. Emphasis mine.

concentrated. The self-reduction, or self-retraction, of God might be a better phrase than the self-emptying.”⁴⁵

The debate intensifies when the traditional view of God’s omniscience in Christ is reformulated by Forsyth’s treatment of the *kenosis*. For Forsyth, the omniscience of God “is an intuitive and simultaneous knowledge of all things; but when the Eternal enters time it becomes a discursive and successive knowledge, with the power to know all things only *potential*, and enlarging to become *actual* under the moral conditions that govern human growth and the extension of human knowledge.”⁴⁶

For Forsyth, the *kenosis* also entails an ontological necessity in God because “to say that God could not limit himself is itself a limitation on God. The growth and change experienced by Christ in the course of his earthly life, as the natural consequence of his conscious choice to become man, was not a threat to his divinity but an expression of it.”⁴⁷ Forsyth argues that

As God, the Son in his freedom would have kenotic power over Himself corresponding to the infinite power of self-determination which belongs to deity. His divine energy and mobility would have a power even to pass into a successive and developing state of being, wherein the consciousness of perfect fulness [*sic*] and changelessness should retire, and become but subliminal or rare... [And] if the Creator could not have become immanent in creation His infinity would have been curtailed by all the powers and dimensions of space. And if immanence could not pass by a new act into incarnation then God would have been lost in his world, and the world lost to God.⁴⁸

The omnipotence of God, then, is revealed most clearly in the *kenosis* of the incarnation meaning that God “is able more than any finite creature to reduce and limit Himself. The possibility of limitation expands the notion of omnipotence, declares Forsyth.”⁴⁹ What Forsyth intends is to re-think God’s *omnipotence* as not sheer, blind power, but as “the power to limit Himself into man [as the] essential part of His infinite power... Limitation or concentration is one of the surest signs of power. Vague power, aimless and wild, is

⁴⁵ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 308.

⁴⁶ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 307–308. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Daugherty, 32.

⁴⁸ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 310; 314.

⁴⁹ Bradley, 201.

not divine.”⁵⁰ Therefore, per Forsyth, “a true view of omnipotence would suggest that it does not and cannot do everything a freakish fancy might desire, but only everything that holy love prescribes.”⁵¹

Kenosis and the Cross

The final aspect of the *kenosis* in Christ’s incarnation is that of the soteriological rationale for the Son “emptying himself.” “In Forsyth’s view the heart of evangelical faith lies in the message of the cross. Soteriology was even more important for him than Christology, the atonement more crucial than the incarnation.”⁵² In fact, as Forsyth states: “It is in redemption that we find the nature of the Incarnation [and *kenosis*],”⁵³ which stems from his presuppositional conviction that “all Christology exists in the interest of the evangelical faith of the layman who has in Jesus Christ the pardon of his sins and everlasting life.”⁵⁴

The kenotic Christology of P.T. Forsyth concludes with Christ’s *plerosis*, in which he regained his ontological status that he possessed before he chose to “empty himself” before the creation of the world. The *plerosis* is, however, not simply an eternal reward of self-glorification for Christ, but is “the history of his ‘moral redintegration,’ of his gradual recovery through moral conquest of what he lost in the moral act of becoming human.”⁵⁵

The *plerosis* is viewed as a necessary culmination of the entire kenotic movement of God in Christ because “to stop with *kenosis* is to go but halfway, to be left with the spectacle of a humbled God, but not of a redeeming God.”⁵⁶ Forsyth argues that a purely kenotic Jesus could not effect humanity’s salvation because for

redemption we need something more positive. It is a defect in kenotic theories, however sound, that they turn only on one side of the experience of Christ, viz., his descent and humiliation. It is a defect because that renunciatory element is negative after all; and to dwell on it, as modern views of Christ do, is to end in a Christian

⁵⁰ Forsyth, *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace*, 98.

⁵¹ Brown, 91.

⁵² Donald Bloesch, “Forsyth, Peter Taylor,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 462.

⁵³ Forsyth, *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace*, 115.

⁵⁴ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 9.

⁵⁵ Daugherty, 33–34.

⁵⁶ Brown, 91.

ethic somewhat weak, and tending to ascetic and self-occupied piety... We must keep in view, and keep uppermost, the more positive process, the effective, ascending, and mastering process which went alongside of the renunciation in Christ, nay, was interwoven with it, as its ruling coefficient.⁵⁷

Ultimately, this motif of *redemption* governs Forsyth's doctrine of the *plerosis* because he is concerned to demonstrate the soteriological significance of why God "emptied himself" in Jesus Christ. "Forsyth ever wrote on this theme that he recognized no other guiding principle than Redemption, no other Christocentrism than that which gave central place to Christ as Redeemer."⁵⁸ Hence, if one is to possess an adequate view of the person and work of Jesus Christ they must be aware that "the idea of Plerosis helps [them] to understand how Christ was able to fulfill the conditions of human ignorance and temptation, yet transcend them in the final victory of the Cross."⁵⁹

Having established the necessity of holding to a *plerosis* in the entire kenotic movement of God in Christ, one must now realize that Christ "emptied himself" not for himself, but *for humanity*, as evidenced in his moral conquest over sin through his life of overcoming temptation and inevitable death on the cross. "It is Christ's identification with man which is [why] the doctrine of Plerosis [is] so important to Forsyth's study of Christology. The self-fulfillment of Christ becomes our own fulfillment, as we are members of the new Humanity."⁶⁰

Because of Forsyth's disdain for the substance metaphysics of the Chalcedonian Formula, he postulated the idea that Jesus as the *God-man* is best thought of "in terms not of a union of these two natures... but of a union of these two personal *movements*. In the historic life of Christ the two *movements* – perfect revelation and perfect religion – were united, involuted."⁶¹ Therefore, when applied to the *kenosis-plerosis* paradigm, one sees that "the Kenosis

⁵⁷ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 329.

⁵⁸ Griffith, 43.

⁵⁹ Bradley, 205.

⁶⁰ Bradley, 204.

⁶¹ Hunter, 78. Emphasis mine.

represents God's movement towards man, while Plerosis manifests man's movement towards God."⁶²

Having already established the *kenosis* as God's movement towards humanity in Christ as revealed in the incarnation, the *plerosis* began to actualize in the cruciform life of Christ. Forsyth argues that Jesus' "growth in grace was the history of the world's moral crisis, [and] it was, in the same act, the growth of our salvation; for the atoning cross was the principle and the achievement of his whole moral life."⁶³ Therefore, as an involution of the divine and human "movements," Jesus' *plerosis* was contingent upon the positive development of his morality, for "the more he laid down his personal life the more he gained his divine soul. The more his divine soul renounced his immunities [from temptation] the more he acquired of glory."⁶⁴

Christ's *plerosis*, then, was a moral conquest for the forgiveness of sins because "redemption was a *spiritual* conflict and victory in a great *moral war*."⁶⁵ Because God always acts morally, his salvation is moral in nature, which means that "the story of Christ's incarnate life of growth becomes the story of his recovery, by moral conquest, of that mode of being from which, by a tremendous moral act, he came. This is *plerosis*."⁶⁶

According to Forsyth, the superlative and final act by which the *plerosis* was completed was in the crucifixion, and although Jesus overcame the temptation to sin during his earthly life and ministry, this strenuous emphasis on the cross "buttresses Forsyth's opinion that the person of Christ is to be interpreted by His work, since it is at the Cross that Jesus finally achieves the highest development of His life."⁶⁷ Furthermore, in emphasizing the cross as the pinnacle of Christ's self-realization of his identity and mission, Forsyth declares that "it was not till he died that he possessed his whole soul, came to his own, entered on all he really was... and could teach about himself things impossible before."⁶⁸

⁶² Bradley, 207.

⁶³ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 348.

⁶⁴ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 349.

⁶⁵ Forsyth, *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace*, 114–115. Author's emphasis.

⁶⁶ Hunter, 78.

⁶⁷ Bradley, 205.

⁶⁸ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 121–122.

The *kenosis* of Christ, which of ontological necessity began in his pre-existence, continued into his incarnation as a concentration of his divine attributes, and provided the necessary conditions for his *plerosis* through cruciform moral conquest, “is a doctrine which does full justice to the moral miracle of the God-man. [For] in Christ we are bidden to see One who, for love of sinful man, renounced the high glories of heaven to become man, taking a servant’s form, and who by his life of perfect obedience to his heavenly Father, even unto death on the cross, gained for himself the highest place that heaven affords.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Hunter, 80.