The Revival of Kenoticism.

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Certain phenomena in the most recent history of British dogmatics appear to justify one in speaking of a resuscitation of interest in what are usually known as the Kenotic theories of our Lord's person. Nor is this renascence at all surprising. For the criticism aimed at the Kenotic hypothesis, on its first announcement—though often described as having been of a shattering description—does not impress the reader of a later day as being either particularly sympathetic or particularly far-sighted. Some of the arguments had that very bad quality in an argument, that they proved too much. They failed also to allow for the distinction between a principle and the forms in which it may be applied.

The differential feature of Kenotic views is, to quote a recent writer, that they seek 'to do justice to the truth that the Incarnation of the Son of God involved a real self-limitation of His divine mode of existence.' Somehow—it is quite felt that we may not be able to describe the method with exactness—He brought His greatness down to the measures of our life, becoming poor for our sake. Advocates of Kenoticism take this seriously, and in consequence try to find a place for the real fact it must denote in their construction of the incarnate life. They refuse to surround or accompany it with qualifications that virtually cancel it. They are aware, of course, of the difficulties attaching to their own view; but since on any showing the difficulties of reason are here immense, they prefer that doctrine which both conserves the vital stake of religion in the real descent of God (*Deus humilis*) and keeps most closely to the concrete particulars of the historic record. These facts plainly constitute the only revelation we possess, and it is no merit in a Christological theory, but the reverse, that it claims to deal successfully with remoter questions of ontology not forced upon us by the representations of the New Testament—such as the relation of a divine Person to the powers or qualities belonging to Him—while it makes the record itself dubious or unintelligible. Our only use for a theory is to synthesize the facts actually before us, not to do something else. That is not truly a knife which fails to cut wood, though as a trowel it is excellent.

Sixty years ago the conceptions of Thomasius and Gess were brought forward under the influence of a variety of motives. Their authors had, like other moderns, been impressed by the fact that the Jesus of the Gospels, whatever more, is in very deed our fellow-man, and this created a desire to give accentuated expression, at all costs, to the reality and integrity of His manhood. But still more, they aimed at bringing out the wonder of His humiliation. What the Gospel proclaims is the redeeming sacrifice of God, with the Cross as the climax of all else; so dear were human souls to Him that He travelled far and stooped low that He might touch and lift up the needy. It is a thought to which the heart thrills again: Christ came from such a height, and to such a depth! He took our human frailty to be His own. *He became poor;* that is an unheard-of truth, casting an amazing light on God; a light, however, whose glory is not enhanced but diminished rather if you straightway add that nevertheless He remained rich all the time. For in so far as He remained rich—in the same sense of riches—and gave up nothing to be near us, our need of a Divine Helper to bear our sicknesses and carry our sorrows would be still unmet. What we require is the love that shows itself in action, 'entering,' as it has been put, 'into conditions that are foreign to it in order to prove its quality.' Now this is what we see when we look at the fact of Christ as a transparent medium through which Divine grace is shining. Therefore we are not to be dissuaded from contemplating that inexhaustible object, or from letting its whole significance tell upon our minds, by the premature introduction, say, of vetoes and interdicts which take their rise in a domain lying outside the historical revelation, as is surely the case when, as Dr. Forrest remarks, it is sought 'to disparage the idea of the Son's self-limitation by asking what became of His cosmical function during the incarnate period.'[1] This objection, I would add, may often on examination be found

[1] *Authority of Christ*, p. 95.

to imply a really tritheistic view of Godhead. The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed a comprehensive expression of the new Christian thought of God; but it is to be reached and controlled by that which we learn from the Incarnation, not assumed as dictating what the Incarnation has to teach us.

A quickened sense of these things has induced several living theologians to reopen the problem on Kenotic lines. It would be absurd to say that anything like a movement is on foot. But the coincidence of result is striking when we take a number of important works issued within the last ten or twelve years. The books of Principal Fairbairn and Dr. Forrest are so well known and so highly valued that I need not pause upon them, though it is worth noticing that Dr. Forrest's attitude to the Kenotic view is even more decisively that of championship in his *Authority of Christ* (1906) than in his *Christ of History and of Experience* (1897). Dr. Sanday, in a passing but suggestive phrase of his latest work, has said that 'the period of Christ's earthly ministry was really a period (so to speak) of *occultation*.'[1] In a valuable article on the Trinity, Bishop D'Arcy, after speaking of the subordinate character of the Son's Divinity as portrayed in the New Testament, proceeds: 'It is this derivative character which helps us to realize that the limitations to which He submitted during His life on earth involved no breach of His Divine identity. . . . His Divinity is dependent from moment to moment upon the Father; and therefore there is no difficulty in accepting what seems to be a necessary inference from the facts of the Gospel history, that, during our Lord's life on earth, there took place a limitation of the Divine effluence.'[2] Principal Garvie and Mr. W. L. Walker appear to be at one in regarding the temporal Kenosis, if we may so describe it, as the illustration and perfect manifestation of an eternal process of self-emptying in the nature of Godhead. Mr. Walker, arguing that the Cross is the symbol of the inmost being of Deity, insists on this timeless background of the earthly drama. 'The life of God,' he writes, 'is for ever the same life of self-denial and self-sacrifice, because it is the life of perfect Love. Out of His overflowing fulness He is constantly giving of Himself in creation in order to find Himself again in those whom He has raised to participation in the Divine life. This is that eternal *kenosis* in which "the Son" is for ever passing out of "the Father" and again returning to the bosom of God.'[3] From this point of view Dr. Garvie finds it possible to harmonize the higher being of Christ with His experience of temptation, as also to reach a more spiritual construction of His miracles. 'The miracles,' he contends, 'did not lessen the self-emptying of the incarnation,' inasmuch as there still prevailed ethical conditions under which alone the derived power could be exerted, namely, intense sympathy with man and absolute confidence in God.[4] Notwithstanding this, Dr. Garvie claims the right to criticize the older Kenotic theories, and does so with a good deal of severity; thereby putting tacitly in force the distinction to which I have already called attention, between a principle and the methods of its application. And, to come to our last example, Dr. Forsyth has just issued a volume, pulsing with warm and live thought, the concluding chapters of which are an exposition not so much of a speculative theory of how the Incarnation must have taken place, as rather of certain vital religious postulates forced upon those who hold firmly to the pre-existence of Christ. Guided by the Kenotic idea (in connexion, it is important to observe, with the thought of a gradual or progressive Incarnation), he there maintains that 'we face in Christ a Godhead self-reduced but real, whose infinite power took effect in self-humiliation,' supporting this by the argument that 'as God, the Son in His freedom would have a Kenotic power over Himself corresponding to the infinite power of self-determination which belongs to deity.' The difficulties of such a view, he holds, are more scientific than religious; but even so analogies are discoverable in man's nobler experience pointing to ways in which the attributes of God, without being wholly renounced, might be retracted into a different form of being, and from actual become potential. 'If the infinite God was so constituted that He could not live as finite man, then He was not infinite.'[5] And yet again, despite all this, Dr. Forsyth nowhere confounds the principle with specific examples of it, but feels quite at liberty to say that there is something presumptuous in certain Kenotic efforts to body forth just what

[1] *Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 136.
[2] *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, vol. ii. p. 762.
[3] *Gospel of Reconciliation*, p. 169.
[4] *Studies in the Inner Life of Jesus*, p. 234.
[5] *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, Lecture xi.

the Son of God must have undergone in such an experience.

I have given these specimen passages—which it would not be difficult to multiply—in order to suggest that the idea they involve is to-day striving once more for expression. There are obvious differences between the older Kenotic theories and the new. A favourite charge against the older sort of construction was the charge of mythology. It was said to be like nothing so much as pagan stories of gods visiting the earth. The reproach was a natural one in the lips of those who repudiate the idea of Incarnation absolutely. If a man does not feel that in Christ we are confronted with the outcome of a vast Divine sacrifice—with what, from the human point of view, is nothing less than an ineffable event in Divine history—for him the problem which Thomasius and the rest were trying to solve (and, as a preliminary, to state) will scarcely exist. He cannot see what the discussion is about. But it is discouraging to find the criticism of more positive thinkers taking pretty much the same line. In their case the Divine immutability is frequently appealed to as an axiom which puts Kenotic ideas out of court from the first. Yet the argument from immutability, it is not too much to say, is a weapon we grasp by the blade. It is an argument with which Celsus and Strauss, to name no more, were quite familiar; they used it, however, as an axe which may be laid with deadly effect at the root of *all* Christian doctrine about God—His personal action, His providence, His saving advent in Christ as such. Therefore the late Dr. A. B. Bruce would have none of this objection. 'It appears to me,' he writes, 'not very safe to indulge in *a priori* reasonings from Divine attributes, and especially from Divine unchangeableness. It is wiser in those who believe in revelation to be ready to believe that God can do anything that is not incompatible with His moral nature.'[1] If Jesus is one in whom God Himself enters our life, plainly He does so either with all His attributes unmodified, or in such wise as to manifest only such attributes as are compatible with a genuinely human experience—putting as much of Himself into humanity as humanity will hold; and which of these alternatives we shall adopt is of course fixed for us by the historic record. To say, as is often said, that we cannot think away a single Divine property without destroying God is not merely a statement so abstract as to be irrelevant to the concrete matter before us; it is a principle which has only to be rigorously enforced to bar out the Incarnation itself.

Personally I find it difficult to understand how those can escape from some form of Kenotic theory who are really bent on having a Christology of some kind, and who, in addition, hold the following four positions, all of them, I think, bound up with the completely Christian view of Jesus. (1) Christ is now Divine; He is the object of faith and adoration, with whom we have immediate, though not unmediated, fellowship. (2) In some personal sense He was Divine eternally, since it is unthinkable that Godhead should have come to be; hence His pre-existent being is to be conceived as real, not ideal only. (3) His life on earth was genuinely human, moving always within the lines of an experience humanly normal in its nature, though abnormal in its quality (*e.g.* sinless). (4) There were not in Him two consciousnesses or two wills, but the unity of His personal life is fundamental. As the late Dr. Moberly has put it, 'Whatever the reverence of their motive may be, men do harm to consistency and truth, by keeping open as it were a sort of non-human sphere or aspect of the Incarnation. This opening we should unreservedly desire to close. There were not two existences either of, or within, the Incarnate, side by side with one another. If it is all Divine, it is all human too.'[2] When we think these four axiomatic positions together, it is extremely difficult, I repeat, to avoid the inference that some limitation of Godhead, real but unspeakably gracious, must have preceded the advent in our midst of Him who is Immanuel, God with us.

Later statements on the subject have this advantage, one feels, that they tend to approach the question by way of postulate *a parte post*, reaching after the Kenotic conception as that by which alone the historic Life can be interpreted consistently with its higher import, but not venturing, as some of the earlier theories ventured, to expatiate in the domain of speculation *a parte ante*, and to describe the steps by which Incarnation was actualized with a minuteness that too much resembled theosophy. We have been

[1] *Humiliation of Christ*, p. 171.

[2] *Atonement and Personality*, p. 97.

taught by Lotze that it is vain to ask 'how being is made.' We may not ascend up to construe things from the standpoint of Deity; for any construction of Christ's person in which the modern mind takes an interest must start from, and proceed through, the known facts of His human life. The known facts of His human life, I say advisedly; for as the discussion matures it becomes plain that the Kenotic view, be it right or wrong, does not in the least depend for its cogency upon one or two passages in St. Paul, even though one of these passages has happened to give a name to the theory as a whole. We have only to place together these two words of Jesus: 'I and the Father are one,' and 'Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, neither the Son, but the Father,' to have the problem full upon us. It is present, therefore, in the unchallenged facts of the New Testament, whether or no we theologize upon it. And even as regards subsequent Christological thinking, while no one in his senses would maintain that the Greek or Latin Fathers had begun to shape a Kenotic *theory*, yet there are substantial grounds for holding that writers like Ignatius, Irenæus, and Hilary did give expression intermittently to great religious *intuitions*, which, if consistently developed, and not immediately stifled, as in Hilary's case they were most noticeably, by counter-statements of a more correct orthodox pattern, would have resulted in something not very unlike the modern view. Whenever they shake off the haunting docetism that spoils much of their reflexion on the historic Christ, it is in this direction that many of their best inspirations tend.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

REVELATION VII. 14.

'These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'—R.V.

It is told of Robert Burns that he could never read the closing verses of this chapter without tears. It is no wonder. The poet is a man of larger heart, of broader and keener sympathy than other men, and with a corresponding power of expression. But we all feel that in words like those of this text something in our hearts is met. They speak of possibilities in ourselves, possibilities of great joy, and they assure us that these possibilities may be realized, because they speak of yet greater possibilities in Christ. When the picture of a blissful world and its blessed inhabitants is unfolded, the imagination leaps forth to meet it; the heart is stirred, melted, satisfied with a conception so pure and beautiful, yet so real and human—the heaven of the redeemed lying as clear before us in the revelation of God, as the way of redemption that leads us to it.[1]

The subject is *The Great Tribulation and the Way Out.*

[1] See J. Laidlaw, *Studies in the Parables*, p. 271.

I. THE GREAT TRIBULATION.

1. What is tribulation?

The original meaning of this word is full of interest. It is derived from the 'tribula' or 'tribulum' (τριβόλος). This corn-drag, or sledge, consisted of a thick heavy board, furnished beneath with pieces of iron and sharp flints. It was drawn over the corn by a yoke of oxen, the driver himself being upon it, or else a great weight, in order to separate the grain from the chaff and to cut the straw. The ultimate object of tribulation, literal or figurative, is the removal of the worthless and the purification and preservation of that which is valuable. The lesson of the threshing-floor, the flying chaff and garnered grain, is written large in the history of nations and individuals. It is not in the tropics, but amid the buffets and bruising of the northern climes that courage, sympathy, self-control—the best qualities of mind and soul—have been produced.

Darwin said to one of his friends, 'If I had not been so great an invalid, I should not have done nearly so much work.'

Carlyle observes, 'We will not complain of Dante's miseries; had all gone well with him as