Kenosis and Narcissism: Notes on the Philippian Hymn for Preaching Today

Bruce L. Roberts
First Presbyterian Church, Tallahassee, Florida

I.

The "kenotic motif," for which the *locus classicus* is Philippians 2:5-11, offers the preacher several methodological problems that deserve careful attention. As is always the case, especially with the subtler christological points, close examination of such problems opens up surprisingly fresh and useful expository possibilities. Both pastors and congregations need to explore new regions of familiar and oft-recited doctrines; for nothing is so enervating as the tiresome elaboration of the obvious.

The first problem lies in the strikingly different uses for which the work *kenos* (or *kenoō*) is employed in the New Testament and in the Septuagint. To be sure it is used in Phil. 2:7 in the sense of Christ's self-emptying (and laying by) of the prerogatives of his divine form and mode of being. But elsewhere (Mk. 12:3, Lk. 20:10,11, Lk. 1:53) the word is used to connote "without profit," and even "futile." In the Septuagint we find the word used in the sense of "pointlessness," "in vain," or "meaningless" (Job 15:3, Jer. 6:29). Somewhat closer to the meaning in Phil. 2:7 is the spiritualized sense of the poverty implicit in discipleship, as in Matt. 5:3 ff. or Jas. 2:5. The point is that we cannot reduce the idea of the kenotic to the level of a truism or a simplism that finds consistent confirmation in the scripture. Paul's use of it in Philippians is original, and somewhat idiosyncratic.[1]

The second problem flows from the first. If a kenotic christology is not specifically, categorically, and universally indicated as an early teaching except by Paul (and by him in this one passage), how are we to make use of it in preaching? The answer seems to be that the self-emptying is both a clear theological statement in the Letter to the Philippians, and an important organizing principle for christology; both substantive and methodological; worthy of attention in and of itself, and highly productive of correlative exegesis with other passages. Clearly the earliest Christian theology employed the concept of kenosis (and the pericope as a whole) in this dual manner.[2]

Donald Dawe associates four basic ideas with Phil. 2:5-11. They are (a) belief in the preexistence of Christ (II Cor. 8:9, Phil. 2:6, John 1:1 ff., Heb. 1:2-3; (b) belief in the reality of his human life as Jesus of Nazareth (II Cor. 8:9, Phil. 2:7-9, I John 4:2); (c) belief in the exaltation of Christ to the status of Lord in his resurrection-ascension (II Cor. 8:9, Phil. 2:9-11, Matt. 28:18), and (c) belief in the redemption that was accomplished by Christ through his ministry of self-emptying love (II Cor. 8:9, John 17:24, Phil. 2:10).[3]

Hans Küng relates Phil. 2:5-11 to the "undoubtedly positive attitude" of Paul to the Gospel tradition of Jesus and his reliance upon it in arguing against those who read in Paul an "abstract kerygma."[4] It is, say Dawe, Küng and others, the demonstration of Paul's gift for taking the gospel tradition seriously and interpreting it coherently and dynamically for the Church. We may set our lenses at infinity as we approach Philippians 2:5-11, for we are dealing both with the passage that lies in the foreground, and with the ultimate pericope: salvation history.

Another preliminary problem lies in the stylistic discontinuity of 2:5-11 with the rest of the Epistle. Taken as a whole, Philippians (for all its weight and worth) is not Paul's finest literary effort. But 2:5-11 is surpassingly beautiful poetry. Some have concluded that it was an insert—a quotation from a more reflective work of Paul's, a pre-existing fragment of his own composition or someone else's. No attempt is made here to resolve that issue. Suffice it to say that it is congruent with the elevated style he employs elsewhere. And despite the fact that it introduces a new idea, it does not contradict his other writings. The passage is in the form of a poem or a hymn. It must, therefore, be considered with the sensitivity rightly accorded to works of aesthetic unity, not hacked apart and analyzed piecemeal. It lends itself to use with the congregation as an element of the liturgy. John Leith classifies it as a "liturgical confession" in his *Creeds of the Church.*[5] A paraphrase of the pericope has been set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams under the title "At the Name of Jesus," and may be found in many contemporary hymnals.[6] Reginald H. Fuller calls Phil. 2:1-11 "the great christological hymn which, following ancient tradition, was read on Passion (Palm) Sunday."[7] So it may be said and sung by all at least as profitably as it may be explained or amplified through the sermon.

A fourth preliminary word must be said with regard to the opening verse of the hymn (2.5). It has traditionally be translated "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (KJV; American Standard Edition). But more recent translations have rendered the verse "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus" (RSV; NEB). Our attention is drawn to the second clause:

i. "which was also in Christ Jesus" (traditional), or
ii. "which you have in Christ Jesus" (modern).

Reginald Fuller points out that the hymn is an ethical exhortation. It is occasioned by the tendency of the Philippian Church to individualism and contentiousness. He discusses two basic exegetical approaches to the linking of the exhortation in vs. 5 to the rest of the poem: (a) following the older translations, an exhortation to heed the *example of Christ* when he humbled himself to become man and to die on the cross, and (b) following the more recent translations, an encouragement to a mystical *identification with Christ* (the characteristic Pauline sense of "in Christ"), an approach popularized in Germany by Karl Barth. "On this interpretation," Fuller writes, "the pattern of Christ's life, namely the humiliation-glorification, is not a model for Christians to imitate, but a pattern into conformity with which Christians are brought by their incorporation into Christ and their life in him."[8]

If we take guardedly Fuller's term "mystical," it would seem that the sec-

ond approach is to be preferred, since Paul is elsewhere more apt to describe Christ as the source of redemptive power than as a paragon to be emulated. A hard and fast line cannot be drawn. Indeed, the *imitatio christi* seems to be occupying the thoughts of major biblical scholars these days, and it is certainly resurgent in homiletical practice in this country. That may be for the good; and the reader may find himself or herself preaching Philippians 2:5 in the sense of our undoubted need to "be more like Jesus." But one who preaches in this vein will, for fifteen or twenty minutes, be moving just outside the Reformed camp, assuming there is a desire to be in the camp in the first place!

II.

To what cultural situation do we bring the Philippian Hymn today? The point of view taken here is that the passage under consideration speaks to a pronounced rise in narcissism in America.

It may just be that Americans are no less generous and altruistic today than they have ever been, but evidence is accumulating that suggests the growth of self-serving patterns of behavior. With the restraint that is appropriate to amateur social analysts, ministers should be alert to point out the indicators of a swing in the national psyche toward a strikingly poignant malady: pathological self-preoccupation.

Each of us will have her or his own list of indicators (and frameworks of interpretation), but I would venture to suggest seven: (1) Proposition 13, recently enacted in California, has triggered instantaneous and affirmative responses in at least half the states in the U.S., where legislators are caucusing at this writing to get on the California band-wagon. And with scant discouragement from the electorate. (2) Several successful current advertising programs openly suggest buying a significantly more expensive product than the ones offered by competitors, because the prospective buyer is "worth it." (3) The year's greatest publishing successes cater to the self-preoccupation market, especially the run-away bestseller *Looking Out for Number One.* (4) Increasing numbers of young Americans are choosing the single status, thus avoiding the emotional stresses of being and having a spouse, and the financial responsibility of children; and they give these as their reasons. (5) The proliferation of various "therapies" to enhance self-actualization continues at full tilt, and finds ready acceptance with the public for the most part. (6) The ethos of liberationism, so profoundly significant in its implications for oppressed persons and for all of society, would seem to have touched off a backlash of self-protection among the secure and the privileged. (7) Popular religion advertises, broadcasts, and publishes a message of gospel-sanctioned self-preoccupation.

Such indicators may not signal anything new in the American experience, but they should prompt us to ask whether a trend is emerging, which could prove difficult to impede or to reverse because of its overpowering momentum.

We have already noted that the Philippian Letter was written to a local chapter of that hardy, perennial group of Christians whose chief distinction is "to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think." The problem in Philippi seems to have been a comparatively minor one. A few commentators

have wondered why Pual used (wasted?) such a transcendently magnificent exhortation for so mundane a purpose. One recalls Reinhold Niebuhr's dig at some preachers who "tend to hit a gnat with a meat cleaver." Whatever may have been the case in Philippi, American self-indulgence (including that of American Christians) is not gnat-like. It is monstrous.

Linda Wolfe, in an article published in the June 1978 "Psychology Today," has called ours "an age of narcissism, recalling the beautiful youth of Greek legend, who fell in love with his reflection in a pool and pined away in rapture over it."

"Some observers," she writes, "see the preoccupation with self and the decline of interest in public life and social goals as an evidence of a growing narcissism in the national character."[9]

Despite the general familiarity of ministers, clinicians, and humanists with the Myth of Narcissus, the medical community has only recently begun to define the disorder of narcissism and to describe the syndrome for diagnostic purposes. In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association will vote on the question of according clinical status to narcissism. A draft of diagnostic criteria being prepared by the APA lists the following identifying symptoms:

"A. Grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness, e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, focuses on how special one's problems are.

"B. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.

"C. Exhibitionistic: requires constant attention and admiration.

"D. Responds to criticism, indifference of others, or defeat with either cool indifference or with marked feelings of rage, inferiority, shame, humiliation, or emptiness.

"E. At least two of the following are characteristic of disturbances in interpersonal relationships:

> 1. Lack of empathy: inability to recognize how others feel; 2. Entitlement: expectation of special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities; 3. Interpersonal exploitativeness; and 4. Relationships characteristically vacillate between the extremes of over-idealization and devaluation."[10]

We could go on and on, describing the predicament with a glowing ardor of moralism, probably because we are uncomfortable with the Narcissus in ourselves. *But what constructive work can a minister do in addressing such peculiar agony from the point of view of Philippians 2.:5-11?*

III.

First, we must work with ourselves. Psychiatrist Otto Kernberg has said (and here you will need to supply "ministers" for "geniuses"), "Frequently narcissists are the 'promising' geniuses who never fulfill their promise, whose development ultimately proves banal."[10] It may be, preachers, that the chief weight of the exhortation will fall upon ourselves; not just because we are Christians, but because we are preachers. One gripped in the pretentiousness so often marring early pastoral careers may find here the key to authentic formation for

ministry. One in mid-career, subject to the peculiar devastations of ministerial ennui, may find here the spring of revitalization. One travelling the vocational homestretch may find here the urge to give headlong expression to a long resisted prophetic impulse. We know in our hearts the dark side of kenosis: futility, vanity, and meaninglessness. But we are addressed in Phil. 2:5-11 by purposive, intentional, redemptive self-emptying. And it is not sick self-abnegation, because there is authentic glory in it, and more. The hymn speaks at the deepest level to our much-vaunted human potential—which we have, already in Christ Jesus.

Second, let the pericope be pondered for the shape and contour it gives to the theology we proclaim. Perhaps it will best be "preached" by the impact it has on our handling of all the beloved texts of Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Eastertide. Speaking personally, I do not intend to preach again on Phil. 2:5-11 until I have allowed it to inform christological and ethical sermons for at least a year. In the meantime, what is to prevent its being used as an aspect of the liturgy, so that the unspoken theological tension and correlation may be worked with by the congregation?

Third, Paul is so conscious here of the majesty of the downward trajectory of God's compassion, that he forgets to scold the Phillipians for their competitiveness and divisiveness. However unintentional this slip-up on his part, let us appropriate it as grace! We will not get very far by carping at the congregation in the pattern of liberal preaching at its worst. Or by quoting another cliche from someone else's worthwhile but ephemeral sermon (as in the by now tiresome "let us live more simply, so that others may simply live.") Our task is to preach the gospel as plainly as we can. Good news: somewhat in the vein of

we sense emptiness in ourselves
our misguided quest for fulfillment
only reveals the vastness
of the inner chasm
but we are in Jesus Christ
who has come down to us
in order to bring us through
our self-preoccupation
into his mind
which is to love and to share

thus our best and most fulfilling course
is to obey him
and to have a part in his joy

for the end of the story is his
glory and our becoming new persons
simple followers
serving him
serving others.

Now it's a risk to construct such a little "history of how I shall preach" such as this. It could be demolished polemically from any number of perspectives. But such an exercise, at very least, will help us to avoid shouting at people for being

narcissists, indulging our professional penchant for sarcasm, or exacerbating our congregations' feelings that their guilt is irremediable. Search, by whatever means, for ways to undergird their fuller incorporation into what God in Jesus Christ is doing for them, as expressed in this cardinal christological passage. (Incidentally, I really made the little sequence above quite crude and elementary, so you can have the satisfaction of improving upon it gleefully. One of us, at least, is not a narcissist!)

Kierkegaard left us a strange little parable as his comment on the Philippian hymn. It concerns a monarch who wished to woo a lovely, but poor, maiden of low estate. His attempt to find a way to win her without compromising her integrity, or overwhelming her with his majesty, or causing her deep shame at what she was (for he loved her and wished to be loved by her) finally results in his laying aside the crown and assuming servant-form alongside her.[12] Erich Segal should have been advised and restrained, for S.K. had already written "Love Story," which he grounded in Paul's poem:

> Unity cannot, as we have seen, be brought about by elevation, so it must be attempted by a descent. The God must become the equal of even the lowliest disciple. But the lowliest is one who must serve others, and the God will therefore appear in the form of a *servant.* But this servant's form is not something merely put on, like the king's beggar cloak, which, because it is only a cloak, flutters loosely, and betrays the king. It is a true form. For this is the unfathomable nature of Love, that it desires equality with the beloved; not in jest, but seriously and in truth.[13]

So we go to work in crafting sermon and living life, knowing narcissism, but also limning the unfathomable nature of love.

[1] See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* Vol. III (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) pp. 659-662.

[2] Donald G. Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif* (Philadelphia, Westminister Press, 1963), pp. 26-29.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 50.

[4] Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, Doubleday and Company, 1976), p. 403 f.

[5] John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: a Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1973), p. 15.

[6] See no. 143, *The Hymnbook.*

[7] Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the New Lectionary: the Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1976), p. 253 f.

[8] R. H. Fuller, *ibid.*

[9] Linda Wolfe and Otto Kernberg, "Why Some People Can't Love," in *Psychology Today,* June, 1978, p. 55.

[10] Draft version, as yet unapproved, of American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Second Edition), Section: category 301.81, Robert L. Spitzer, M.D., editorial chairman.

[11] Linda Wolfe and Otto Kernberg, *op. cit.,* p. 56.

[12] T.H. Croxall, Tr., *Meditations from Kierkegaard* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 32-35.

[13] *Ibid.,* p. 35.