

CHAPTER 7

THE CROSS AND THE *KENOSIS*

CHRIST'S INCARNATION AND THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: . . . (NIV)

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: . . .(KJV)

Recently, I was powerfully “hit” by this command in Philippians 2:5 and by the next verses in which are stated the example that Jesus set for us in the incredible changes He went through to become like us—changes that reflect the same sacrificial love that we see in the paradigm of the Cross. To become like Him, we also must be willing to go through changes and to consider what type of changes we need to experience. As these changes were part of Jesus’ incarnation and birth, we can focus on these changes, especially when we celebrate Christmas.

These translations above of Philippians 2:5 hardly convey the full sense of the imperative mood of the Greek verb *phroneo*. This is not just an exhortation or an ideal that we should “let” or allow to happen; it is a direct command to “Think this way—Jesus’ way!” or “Get your thinking changed to Jesus’ thinking!” One author paraphrases the verse this way: “See to it, every Christian, that the mind of Christ is in you.”¹

Note that the tense of this verb “refers to it as continuing or being repeated.”² Indeed, we will realize the need of the command to be obeyed continuously if we get a real revelation of what we are commanded to be changed into. We will all exclaim that we all have a long way to go and that this command should be obeyed every day for the rest of our lives!

There are two obvious aspects of obeying a command to get something:

- (1) You have to be clear on what you have to get.
- (2) You have to know how to get it.

In this chapter, we are dealing mostly on what we have to get—the mind of Christ; the methods used to get it are based mostly on our complete helplessness to change ourselves into His image and the work of the Spirit in us to the paradigm of the Cross.

This verb *phroneo* means “to think, have a mindset . . . [this] involves the will, affections, and conscience.”³ Just as our basic mindset and attitudes govern all our actions, we can include in the meaning of this command our motivations for all of our actions. Further, our mindset includes our whole concept of our identity—what we think of ourselves, who we are, and what are our goals and ideals for the person we hope to become. Thus, we are commanded to have our whole thinking changed, including our motivations,

¹Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy* (Ventura, CA, Regal Books, 1984) , 72

²J. G. Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), 180.

³Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, Inc. 1994), 1454.

sense of identity, and attitudes, to be like those of Jesus, whose “mind” is detailed briefly but poignantly in this glorious Christological hymn that Paul quotes:⁴

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8)

It is obvious that Paul would not have been inspired to write the command in verse five if our thinking did not need to be changed. With that in mind, these questions follow:

- (1) How passionate are we to become like Jesus in His incarnation/kenosis?
- (2) How willing are we to accept that we need to be changed?
- (3) How willing are we to go through the process of being changed, especially if that change involves suffering of some type?

Theologians debate the meaning of this emptying—His *kenosis*—and necessarily go to great pains to argue that He did not give up His essential deity when He became man.⁵ I heartily agree that such theology is vitally important; however, this “outstanding Christological passage . . . was actually written as an illustration of the attitude that ought to govern a person who professes to be a Christian.”⁶

In other chapters, I have proclaimed the Cross as the ultimate paradigm for our attitudes and humility; we can see, moreover, that the incarnation was also a manifestation of the same selflessness, humility and sacrifice. Here is a quote from one commentary about how the paradigm of the Cross is exemplified by His *kenosis*:

He acted sacrificially by refusing to hold on to His rights, by exchanging His throne for a stable and His crown for a cross. And therein lies not only the basis of our redemption, but the principle of our behaviour. For it was sacrifice that brought atonement to our souls, and it is sacrifice in life-style that brings liberty to our lives.⁷

We should all be asking this question: How can we translate this *kenosis* into relevant language for our daily experience? What does it mean today for us to be willing to love others by emptying ourselves? What does self-sacrifice, self-denial, and humility really mean in the home, in the office, in the classroom? The answers to these questions will come to us day by day from the Holy Spirit as we keep asking him.

When we celebrate Jesus’ incarnation at Christmas time and think of His love and His “mind” that brought Him to earth as a baby in Bethlehem, what better time to contemplate this

⁴ D.A. Carson, D.J. Moo, L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 323-4.

⁵ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

⁶Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy*, 59.

⁷Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy*, 56.

command to have that same “mind”, the same motivation rooted in our thinking and in our emotions as Jesus had? There are many phrases from carols that refer to Jesus incarnation or kenosis and that can help us in our meditation regarding the changes Jesus went through and also the changes we need to go through to obey the command in Philippians 2:5.

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me.

From God’s heaven to a manger, From great riches to the poor . . .
From the azure halls of heaven To a lowly manger stall
From a loving heavenly Father to a world that knew Him not . . .

He came down to earth from heaven, Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable. And His cradle as a stall.
With the poor and mean and lowly

As we consider the incredible changes that Jesus went through to become man and to show us His love, we are moved to seek Him to help us to be willing to be similarly changed so that we can love others. When we consider the sacrifice He made to become like us, we respond by being willing to make any sacrifice necessary to love Him and others. When we consider His humility in becoming as a slave, we pray that we too can be more humble.

A few years ago, a deep sense of the significance of Philippians 2:5-11 prompted me to paraphrase these verses as a prayer that I could sing. I invite you to make the words of this song your prayer also:

Lord Jesus, let Your humble mind
Be more and more in me
Your glorious throne, You left on High;
A servant You chose to be.
Obedient even unto death —
What shame You bore for me!
I worship as I gaze on Your Humility

Because You stooped so low and sought
No earthly praise or fame,
On high has God exalted You;
Let every tongue proclaim
That, Jesus, You are Lord of All,
Be Lord of all in me.
And may my life be filled with Your Humility.

I am sure you have noticed how clearly this passage (Phil. 2:5-11) emphasizes Christ’s obedient and humble service as part of His example to us and thus an essential and significant part of our being like Him. I do need to dedicate another whole chapter to being a servant; however, for now, please consider the following as two prerequisites to becoming a true servant like Jesus.

(1) A radical change in our motivations for service. Our service can be motivated by an attempt to establish our significance or to meet a need of love, acceptance, or value. Remember: “without love [as our motivation], we are nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3). This whole concept of motivation also deserves another whole chapter on how, through the Cross, Christ Himself can become the source and the empowering of our motivations.

(2) A willingness to let go of everything, whether sinful attitudes, or selfish motivations, money, belongings, relationships, ministries, visions, etc. Consider the awesome willingness of Jesus to sacrifice everything in His kenosis or of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Farther down in Chapter 2 of Philippians, we are reminded that we cannot obey the command in verse five by ourselves. In verse 13, we read, “. . . for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”. The working out our own salvation mentioned in the same verse just before this involves, I believe, our passion to keep seeking the Lord to change us to His motivations and attitudes. As I said earlier, I will have to deal later with ways to get His mind in us; one major aspect of this involves the wonderful truth of Christ in us.

Now, the glorious finale in verses 9 to 11:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

It is evident that a major reason that this glorification of Jesus is included here is to show that we too will have a reward for faithfully obeying verse five. “If we endure [suffer], we shall also reign with him.” (2 Tim. 2:12a).

As we are stirred by the majestic music and words of the “Hallelujah Chorus” in Handel’s *Messiah*, we are moved to worship Jesus as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”, but also we can reflect on the promise that we will share His glory and kingship—***IF*** we share His humility and His suffering.

In conclusion, here is a quote from Stuart Briscoe regarding this passage in Philippians:

When this attitude is seen among a group of people, it is so unique, it is unbelievable It means a totally different attitude not only to the Lord but to each other.⁸

How passionate are we to truly have His attitude, His motivation, His humility—to live out the paradigm of the Cross? **Our passion will be first of all expressed in our loving adoration of Jesus’ unbelievable sacrifice and humility in coming to earth to be a bond-slave and of His incredible love in dying for us.** As we thus worship Him, we will long to be like Him, **to have the same humble, self-denying attitude, a similar servant heart, and have the same depth of sacrificial love for others that He showed in His suffering and death.**

[Back to Contents](#)

⁸Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy*, 73.