

Practical Hermeneutics: JAPH324

DEITY VS. HUMANITY

A Closer Look at Philippians 2:6-7

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“Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-7).¹

For centuries, the mystery of the Incarnation has served as a source of wonder for Christians and an insurmountable obstacle for unbelievers. How can a man be God and yet still be fully man? Could God become man without losing His deity? The early church recognized Jesus Christ as possessing two natures in one person, stating at the Council of Chalcedon that He was “at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man.”² However, the human mind cannot fully grasp how Christ could be both God and human: a perfect union in one person of two distinct and unique natures that are seemingly opposite but in no way nullify or suppress one another.

This paradox of the Incarnation has led to countless alternative theories, many of which appeal to Scripture for their proof and support. One of the most common theories proposes that Jesus was not actually God, but only human, and Philippians 2:6-7 is often used as a proof text for this theory. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are particularly vocal proponents of this idea. To address this specific question regarding the person of Jesus, we need to understand both the argument of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the meaning of Philippians 2:6-7.

Understanding the Jesus of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In an effort to make their faith more tenable and reasonable, Jehovah’s Witnesses broke with the traditional understanding of Jesus Christ and instead argue that He was not God at all, but was merely a man. Two of their fundamental beliefs about the origin and identity of Jesus are as follows: (1) Jesus is not God, rather He was God’s first creation. Regarding Jesus’ life on earth, the Watch Tower Society states, “In every period of his [Jesus’] existence, whether in heaven or on earth, his speech and conduct reflect subordination to God. God is always the superior, Jesus the lesser one who was created by God.”³ (2) On earth, Jesus was only human with no claim to deity. He was “not an incarnation, not a god-man, but a perfect man, ‘lower than angels.’”⁴

This is a succinct summary of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ beliefs about Jesus, especially regarding His earthly life and ministry. Their literature is very adamant about Jesus’ inferiority as compared to Jehovah God, with one article clearly stating, “The Father and the Son were not equal before Jesus came to the earth or during his earthly life.”⁵ In defending this view, Jehovah’s Witnesses use Philippians 2:6-7 to simultaneously refute Jesus’ deity and prove His humanity.

Understanding Jesus’ Deity. Paul begins Philippians 2:6 by asserting that Jesus was “in the form of God.” In using this phrase, Paul does not mean that Jesus externally resembled God or that He was a mere representation of God. The Greek word *morph* (form) should not be understood in external, physical terms, but in ontological terms. The NIV captures this meaning with its translation of verse 6: “being in very nature God.” Paul uses the word *morph* to point to a deep theological truth. Jesus did not merely possess divine characteristics; He was God. Before describing any of Jesus’ other attributes or actions, Paul begins with the most important: Jesus’ deity.

Correctly interpreting the first phrase of verse six is critical for understanding the second phrase: “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Jehovah’s Witnesses use this phrase to support their belief that Jesus was inferior to God, which is expressed in their faulty translation of verse six: “who, although he was existing in God’s form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God” (NWT). One article states that this verse demonstrates “that Jesus did not think it was appropriate [to be equal to God].”⁶

These interpretations ignore Paul's emphasis that Jesus is God. Acknowledging Jesus' deity is essential in understanding the rest of verse six, which presupposes Jesus' equality with God. Therefore, in this verse the word "grasped" should not be interpreted as an attempt to *acquire* or *safeguard* equality with God. In fact, Paul's account reveals that Jesus' actions are the opposite of "grasping." Instead of selfishly exploiting His equality with God, Jesus instead uses it to redeem fallen humanity. He adds humanity to His deity, providing a powerful example of humility and self-sacrifice: "He who was God and never ceased to be otherwise humbled himself in the incarnation."⁷ This is the progression of Philippians 2:6–7. After emphasizing Jesus' deity, Paul addresses Jesus' humanity.

Understanding Jesus' Humanity. Philippians 2:7 earned its place in the debates regarding the humanity of Jesus Christ because of its use of the Greek word *ekenosen*. The NRSV and NASB translate *ekenosen* as "to empty," which results in the phrase, "he emptied himself." This translation of *ekenosen* laid the foundation for the idea that Jesus emptied Himself of His deity, so that He was neither God nor divine, but only man. Since the exegesis of this verse hinges on the translation of one verb, it is crucial to understand whether *ekenosen* is functioning literally or figuratively in Philippians 2:7.

Did Paul mean that Christ literally emptied Himself of His deity, or is he metaphorically describing the Incarnation? In order to answer this question, the usage of *kenoo* (the root of *ekenosen*) in the New Testament must be examined. The verb *kenoo* appears in only four other New Testament verses, each time at the hand of Paul: Romans 4:14, 1 Corinthians 1:17, 1 Corinthians 9:15, and 2 Corinthians 9:3. In Romans 4:14, Paul claims that for those who follow the law, "faith is null." Here *kenoo* is used to figuratively describe how faith is of no value, account, or significance for those who are relying on the law for salvation. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, if Paul used the verb *kenoo* literally, the English translation would only read, "lest the cross of Christ be emptied." Both the NIV and the ESV, however, translate the end of this verse as, "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." In adding the phrase "of its power," translators recognize Paul's original intent to use *kenoo* metaphorically. His fear is not that the cross would be literally empty, but that human eloquence would undermine the significance of the cross of Christ. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 9:15 and 2 Corinthians 9:3, Paul uses *kenoo* figuratively. In each of these four occurrences of *kenoo*, Paul eschews the literal meaning of the word for its evocative figurative interpretation. Since *kenoo* is a rare verb in the New Testament—used five times and only by Paul—and is clearly used figuratively in four of these occurrences, there is overwhelming linguistic evidence for a figurative interpretation in Philippians 2:7 as well.⁸

The specific usage of *kenoo* in Philippians 2:7, moreover, supports a figurative interpretation. Paul uses the final two phrases of the verse to expound on the meaning of *ekenosen*: Christ did not literally empty Himself of anything, but He made Himself of no worldly significance when He took "the form of a servant" and was "born in the likeness of men." Literal interpretations of *kenoo* twist the meaning of this passage. Paul's intent was not to show his readers how Christ became man, but to reveal Jesus' refusal to exploit what was inherently His and instead humble Himself by becoming man in order to redeem humanity. Through verse seven, Paul provides the Philippians a beautiful illustration of the Incarnation, not a thorough explanation of how the Incarnation took place. In light of this context and the linguistic evidence of *kenoo*, it is clear that Paul is not using *ekenosen* to claim that Christ emptied Himself of anything, but to instead metaphorically describe the Incarnation.⁹

Understanding the Jesus of Philippians 2:6–7. Paul's fundamental beliefs about the identity of Jesus Christ in these verses blatantly contradict those of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In verse six, Paul demonstrates that Jesus is God, existing in the same form as Him and equal to Him, possessing the same nature and character. This statement directly opposes the Jehovah's Witnesses' first assertion, that Jesus is not God. In verse seven, Paul strongly contrasts the idea of holding on to equality with God with what Jesus actually did: He "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." Jesus does not use His equality with God to further His own interest or to secure His eternal position, but instead, leverages it on behalf of sinful humanity. As has already been proved, He does not cease to be God, but retains the "form of God" and, according to Philippians 2:8, is "found in human form": two natures perfectly united in one person. Paul makes it clear that Christ was both the "form of God" and "found in human form." Using Paul's logic, in order to assert Christ's humanity, one must also acknowledge His deity. This mystery of the Incarnation expressed by Paul refutes the Jehovah's Witnesses second belief: on Earth, Jesus was only human, with no claim to deity.

In Philippians 2:6–7, Paul presents a balanced, complete view of Christ: fully God and fully man. To maintain the truth of Christ's humanity while at the same time denying the truth of His deity is to rob the Incarnation of its awesome power. He who eternally is God became fully man in order to fully redeem mankind. Truly God and truly man, what a glorious mystery!

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notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the English Standard Version.

2 From the Chalcedonian Creed, available at <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Creeds/ChalcedonianCreed.htm>.

3 The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, "Is God Always Superior to Jesus?" http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/article_06.htm.

4 Ibid, "What Does the Bible Say about God and Jesus?" http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/article_05.htm.

5 "Is Jesus God Almighty?" The Watchtower, September 15, 2005, http://www.watchtower.org/e/20050915/diagram_01.htm.

6 The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, "What about Trinity Proof Texts?" http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/article_08.htm.

7 Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 216.

8 Ibid, 217.

9 The NIV and the ESV recognize this original intent in their translation "made himself nothing." Instead of selfishly exploiting His equality with God, Jesus instead uses it to redeem fallen humanity. He adds humanity to His deity, providing a powerful example of humility and self-sacrifice.