"We Have Seen His Glory": Pentecostal Spirit Christology in Conversation with Cyril of Alexandria

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This article proposes a constructive Pentecostal Spirit christology, primarily in conversation with a feature of Cyril of Alexandria’s thought. After considering key features of kenotic Pentecostal Spirit christologies, and showing their limitations, the article takes up the task of constructing an alternative account of kenosis via a re-reading of the Christ hymn in Philippians 2.

Introduction: The Problem with (Some) Spirit Christologies

Pentecostal Spirit christologies, whether academic or popular, often, perhaps even normally, assume a basic incompatibility between the human and the divine. In these contrastive accounts, God must limit his power in order for creation to come into being and exist in its own right. And in the incarnation, the Son’s divine nature must “go quiet,” so to speak, for his humanity to have its own voice.¹ It is almost axiomatic: insofar as God is fully God, we cannot be fully ourselves; insofar as we are fully ourselves, God is not fully God.

Ken Archer puts the point sharply: “Such limitation creates the necessary space which enables God and humanity (as well as creation) to enjoy authentic interpersonal relationships.”² Keith Warrington follows the Assemblies of God theologians, William Menzies and Stanley Horton, in regarding the Son’s incarnation as the giving-up of privileges “enjoyed with the Father in past eternity.”³ And Andrew Gabriel takes the same tack, although he is focused on the doctrine of the Spirit:
With respect to divine omnipotence, the Spirit acts kenotically as the Spirit makes room for creaturely freedom, even to the point of allowing creatures to resist him. In this sense, the Spirit “surrenders” or “empties himself” as he exercises his power within created reality. This is a divine self-limitation (kenosis) of the exercise of divine power . . . . The powerful “fire” of the Spirit can even be quenched and restrained. Even the church sometimes resists the Spirit and, therefore, it is in continuous need of reform. One can resist the Spirit. The kenotic Spirit generally does not force. Rather, believers are invited to “walk by the Spirit” and to be “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5.16, 18).  

Amos Yong, perhaps the best-known theologian in the global Pentecostal movement, draws on a version of this model in his theology of disability: “A world that is contingent, that includes spontaneity, and that features free creatures is possible precisely because God ‘withdraws’ himself in order to create ‘space’ for others (the world and its various creatures).” Here, “withdrawal” seems to be a metaphor for divine self-limitation, which makes the world possible but also immediately and necessarily puts the world at risk. God “distances” himself from creation, and so creation is vulnerable to evil and evils. But if God were not “distant,” creation would not be itself at all. “In such a world [that is, a world in which God has decided to limit his powers], genetic mutations have evolved creatures and whole species that have perished because of inability to adapt to their environment, have resulted mostly in spontaneous abortions, and have produced congenital disabilities (e.g., Down Syndrome); this same world has also allowed accidents to happen (e.g., head injuries), and disabilities caused by the irresponsibility of free creatures (e.g., fetal alcohol syndrome).”  

In an earlier work, Yong argues that Spirit christology, unlike Logos christology, better appreciates Jesus’s humanity, and in this way frees Pentecostals from the unnecessary restrictions of ancient Hellenistic metaphysics, thereby reframing the Oneness-Trinitarian debates. Spirit christology also highlights Jesus’ life as model of the Spirit-anointed life, which, Yong believes, is where the emphasis should be given Pentecostal desire to imitate Christ.  

In a more recent work, Yong makes it clear that he, like the Catholic Charismatic Ralph Del Colle, does not want to reject “high christology” out of hand. He does, however, want to emphasize the Spirit-empowered humanity of Jesus, because, he believes, this is the best way for contemporary believers to grasp the nature and purpose of the Spirit-filled life. What Jesus did, he did humanly and in the power of the Spirit. Therefore, we, who are also filled with the same Spirit, can and should expect to do the same.
Sammy Alfaro’s approach is more radical than Yong’s. His brackets out the categories and concerns of Nicene orthodoxy. Like Yong and Warrington and others, Alfaro holds that Pentecostal spirituality is focused on Jesus’ *humanity*, and just in this way on his *utter dependence* on the Spirit. But Alfaro goes further than most in insisting that this “utter dependence” is possible only if the divine attributes are willingly given up. “In becoming dependent, the Son surrendered the independent use of his divine attributes in incarnation. The Word became flesh and exercised power through the Spirit, not on its own.”

Alfaro finds this kenotic Spirit christology everywhere in early Pentecostal teaching:

Jesus became the Captain of our salvation on account of his complete dependence on the Spirit on his way to Calvary. He lived and died as a man, but a man guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. During his earthly existence, *Jesus relinquished his divine powers and relied on the Spirit* in order to become God’s perfect and spotless sacrificial Lamb.

He believes that the view of the Charismatic Anglican vicar A. A. Boddy is representative of primitive Pentecostalism: “at no time did Jesus exercise his divine powers independently, but was always relying on the Spirit to accomplish his mission.”

In an early editorial on divine healing, A. A. Boddy states that Christ’s life was “the representative human life *lived under our conditions*”—as opposed to God’s conditions—precisely because he “accepted conditionally the Holy Ghost as we may accept Him to be the indwelling Divine Life.” Around the same time, an unnamed contributor to the *Weekly Evangel* claims that “The Lord of glory emptied Himself and took the place of absolute dependence upon His Father. The place of ‘Nothing’ that God might be ‘All.’” And Elizabeth Sisson, a formidable figure in the early movement, contended that what Christ did in giving up his rights, all Christians must do:

As the Father wanted none of the living of Christ’s humanity, when He was here in His human life, wanted only His emptiness, as a human shell in which God could express Himself in word and action, so Christ wants over again our perpetual self-emptied lives, in which to live, in the glory of the Father. As Faith appropriates such ideal Divine Provision, the supply comes forth.
Other examples—and counter-examples, no doubt—could be given, but the point stands: Pentecostals past and present have looked and continue to look to Jesus as the exemplary man of the Spirit.\(^{14}\) And as a rule, they have done so by arguing that Jesus is a man of the Spirit precisely because he gave up the use of his divine resources. They hold that he had to do so, because, as I have said, they assume that the divine and the human exist in radical competition with each other. But Kathryn Tanner is right, I believe, in insisting that there is no competition between God and all that is not-God.\(^ {15}\) Creation is not itself in relative independence from God, but in absolute dependence upon him. God does not distance himself from us in order for us to be free, but frees us by being the inmost source and ultimate end of our existence. Creation is fully itself just because God is “all in all.”\(^ {16}\)

All to say, creation does not need the diminishment or withdrawal of God, but God’s nearness, God’s fulfilling fullness. And it is that very nearness, that same fulfilling fullness that Christ embodies. He does not give up his intimacy with the Father in order to become human or to depend upon the Spirit.\(^ {17}\) It is his intimacy with the Father, his filial communion, that constitutes his humanity and is revealed at his baptism. The Spirit rests upon Christ as the sign that his humanity is fully opened up, absolutely available, to the divine life. And what is true in Christ is true of the relation of God to all creation. In becoming finite, taking finitude up as his own, “the infinite Word shows once and for all equally the non-duality of God and the world and the non-identity of God and the world.”\(^ {18}\)

The divine is not an “other” to the human in Christ, and God is not an “other” to creation.\(^ {19}\) God’s transcendence is more radical than that. “God differs to the point of being the non-other.”\(^ {20}\) God is non aliud—not a thing at all—and therefore is not affected or effected as things must be. It is just for this reason that God can be one with the creature without confusion or violation of any kind, either to God or to the creature. That is to say, the creation is in the creator and the creator is in the creation in such a way that the creator is always creator and the creation is always creation.\(^ {21}\)

### Cyril of Alexandria on Christ and the Spirit

So, how should we speak about Christ’s relation to the Spirit? Is a non-competitive, non-contrastive Spirit christology possible? I believe it is, and I think that Cyril of Alexandria shows how it might be done. Cyril can at times talk about Christ...
surrendering his glory, or of his descending to “human humiliation.”  

But he regularly insists that when Christ was “emptied” this does not at all mean that his divine nature was eliminated or changed in any way. Instead, the Word shared with his flesh his divine glory.  

Cyril does not think Christ had to rid himself of his divine powers in order to be truly human. The opposite is true: he was truly human precisely because his humanity was brought into absolute and abiding communion with his divinity. In him, the emptiness of sinful human existence is filled to overflowing with the fullness of the life of God.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus prays to be restored to his former glory, the glory he had with the Father in the beginning (John 17:5). And yet at the very beginning of the Gospel it is said: “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . . .” (John 1:14). Cyril holds these truths together: if in one sense God’s glory is hidden or veiled in the incarnation, in another sense it is revealed. God, being God, is always inherently glorious. But God, being a living God, and a gracious God, can be differently glorious according to our needs. In Christ, that glory simply is the full humanity fully alive.

This seems to be what Cyril has in mind when he describes Christ’s humanity as a coal glowing with divine fire.  

The flesh of God bears the glory of God, makes the divine glory humanly experienceable: “the Word of God [is] united with the manhood, and not as having cast aside what he is, but rather as having transformed what he assumed into his own glory and power.”  

Taking up human nature as his own, the transcendent Christ is not changed or limited but changes it by his unlimited changelessness.  

He becomes what it is only so that it might become what he is.

At the beginning of the Scholia, Cyril says the Fall stripped humanity of the Spirit, ruining our nature, making it unworthy of intimacy with God. Christ, in giving/receiving the Spirit, restores the Spirit to us, “re-rooting” the Spirit in our nature.  

“He received the Spirit for our sakes in order to sanctify our entire nature. He did not come to help himself but to become for all of us the door, the beginning and the way to heavenly blessings.”

God the Word is “full” in regard to his own nature, and perfect in every respect. From his own fulness he gives out his benefits to all creatures, as he said, “I will pour out my spirit upon on all flesh” (Isa. 44:3). When we say that he was “emptied out” it has no derogatory reference to the Word’s own nature nor, as might be thought, was he changed or made inferior in any respect. For he himself, just like his Begetter, is unalterable and immutable,
and was never capable of any passibility. But when he became flesh, that is became man, he appropriated the poverty of humanity to himself . . . .

Here, Cyril identifies the incarnation with Pentecost. Christ, at one with the Spirit, both receives (humanly) and gives (divinely) the Spirit. As Cyril says in his commentary on the Gospel of John, Jesus “receives the Spirit through himself for us.” Humanity, because of sin, is by nature “empty,” just as God, by nature, is full, fulfilling, overflowing. “He was emptied in this way, by reason of our likeness, being full, as God.” Christ has taken our humanity as his own, and in this way has laid claim to our emptiness. At his baptism, he shares his communion with the Spirit with us, filling our emptiness with his fullness, the divine nature he and the Spirit share with the Father. Importantly, Cyril does not think that Christ has to limit or negate his divinity in order to “make room” for the Spirit. Human being itself, as Christ makes it his own, is itself the room the infinite Spirit fills up beyond all measure.

Cyrillian Christology and the Philippians Christ-Hymn

Cyril’s theology harmonizes perfectly with the Christ hymn in Philippians 2. Of course, I know that this passage can be and often is read to mean that in order to be found in human form Christ had to give up the form of God. But I am convinced it should be read differently. God makes obedience and suffering his own by taking on human nature, and does so by “remaining what he was.” “He was made like us, not losing His own nature, for He is unchangeable as God.” Christ’s kenosis, his pouring out of his fullness into the emptiness of human nature, not only unveiled God, it also exalts humanity—and in particular the humanity of those treated most inhumanely.

Jesus did not have to surrender his divine privileges in order to come and live a human life. In fact, it is a mistake to think of God as privileged in the first place. He is not philanthropic, condescending to help those who are beneath him. He is love, drawing his creatures into full equality with himself. It follows, then, that the incarnation is not a humiliation for God, although it certainly reveals that God is humble. As Anselm says, “In the incarnation of God it is understood that no humiliation of God came about: rather it is believed that human nature was exalted.”

In becoming “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,” Christ did not alter himself, did not become less or other than he was and is and shall be. Said differently, taking on humanity, Christ was not stripped of his dignity; instead, he dignified our nature, and in the process revealed that a slave, even a criminal slave, is no less human, no less worthy than a lord. Better, in a world such as ours, a world
corrupted by the powers of sin and death, a world of injustice and tragedy, it is only in the form of a slave that Christ could perform his humanity fully. That is to say, God’s “form,” when expressed humanly, is necessarily given in the “form of a slave.” It is not the becoming human that is humbling for Christ; it is the becoming “obedient to the point of death” (Phil 2:8). Christ became human and then humbled himself—and even this did not make him less God-like. His kenosis in its entirety simply disclosed what God is like. God exalts himself in humanity. All to say, in spite of what we have come to think, kenosis is not emptying (in the sense of the divine becoming less itself) but filling (in the sense of making humanity more itself by giving it a share in divine life). In Cyril’s words, God the Word does not empty himself of his fullness but in his fullness descends into emptiness and fills it with himself.\(^{34}\)

**Conclusion: Beyond the Imitation of Christ**

Precisely this is the theme of Frank Macchia’s recent *Jesus the Spirit Baptizer*. Pentecost reveals that God, as the ever-abundant source of all things, is also their fulfillment. Jesus “baptizes us in the Spirit from the fullness of his own Spirit-led life as the faithful Son of the Father.” Just so, Macchia argues, we understand kenosis, or self-emptying, not as the elimination of God, but as the gracious realization of God in creation and creation in God. “This divine self-emptying in Christ imparts to us the flourishing of life in the Spirit, the love of the Father in the image of the faithful Son. This divine self-giving frees us to be ourselves as we were created to be and shows us the wisdom by which that life is to be attained and lived.”\(^{35}\) That is, Pentecost frees us to live as Christ in the power of the Spirit. Not in the sense that we merely imitate him, but in the sense that he lives our lives with us and we live his life with him. This is what Paul means when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19–20).

In conclusion, then, following Macchia, who is himself following Cyril, we can say that Christ’s kenosis is not the “scaling down” of his divinity in order to make his humanity viable. Instead, his humanity is viable precisely because it is fully open to his fulfilling divinity. Christ’s humanity is held in full communion with the Father by the Spirit. The divine neither recedes nor dominates and the human is neither diminished nor overwhelmed. Christ is both truly fully human and truly fully divine.

Because we confess that this full and fulfilling communion is true of Christ, we can affirm that it is true of God’s relation to creation as a whole. That is, God is not the one above the many but the all in all. And that means creatures do not have to be less
than themselves in order for God to be God any more than God has to be less than himself in order for creation to be creation. It is exactly the other way around, in fact. Happily, creation is itself just because God is God, the infinite generosity at the beginning, middle, and end of all things.

In this light we can see that Jesus is not to be regarded as the model of the Spirit-filled life but as the indwelling source of that life, more intimate with us than we are with ourselves. Jesus is not an exhibit of a type, but is in and of himself the archetypal reality of life in the Spirit, and as we are in him and he is in us, that reality cannot not come alive in our lives. Therefore, we do not so much seek to do what he did as to let what he is doing happen in us.

**Notes**

1. Ralph Del Colle (*Christ and the Spirit: Spirit-Christology in Trinitarian Perspective* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]) is a notable exception to this rule, as is Frank Macchia, whose work I will take up later in this article.
4. Andrew Gabriel, *The Lord Is the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 190. Notice, for Gabriel, *kenosis* is, by definition, divine self-limitation. This view is not limited to Pentecostals, of course. David Law’s view (see “Kenotic Theology,” in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. I. A. McFarland, D. A. S. Fergusson, and K. Kilby [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 262) seems to be typical: “Despite its problems, however, some version of kenosis is arguably necessary if Christianity is to hold fast to the doctrine of the incarnation, for only if Christ lays aside or scales down some aspect of his divine nature is it possible to conceive of him being divine and yet able to live a genuinely human life. Furthermore, kenosis is central not only to Christology, but to Christian life and discipleship as such. The notions of self-giving, self-sacrifice, service, and love of others which it denotes are essential for Christian existence.”

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Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 110.

7 In his own words, (Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014], 241), “Understandings of Jesus of Nazareth as anointed by the Spirit to accomplish the works of God provide a more conducive framework for seeing Jesus’ solidarity with human beings and project a springboard for envisioning missional discipleship in his footsteps.”


10 Alfaro is no doubt correct in this: many early Pentecostals did suggest that Jesus could be the exemplar only if he refused the uses of his divine powers. They did not want to deny that Jesus was God, of course. They did not hold to a so-called “low christology.” But they did want to say that Jesus, as God, had the power to give up his powers, and that he did so for our sakes, revealing in his self-denying ministry what it means to live in radical dependence on the Holy Spirit.


17 In terms of his creatureliness, Jesus is no less dependent on the Father than he is on the Spirit: “The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).


19 So Tyler Wittman (*God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 17): “God’s relation to creation must be ‘non-contrastive’ and characterized by ‘non-duality.’ This means that God is not a thing alongside other things, and so God’s agency in and among creatures does not crowd out or frustrate created agency in the way that two creatures may displace one another.”


Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 9*.

Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 9*.

Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 12*.


Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 5*.

Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John, Vol. 1*, 82.

Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 12*.

Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 7*.


Cyril, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten 17*. In a similar vein, Sergei Bulgakov, *The Comforter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 250, distinguishes two modes or movements within the one hypostatic “descent” of the Spirit that marks the beginning of the New Creation. At the Annunciation, which is Mary’s Pentecost, the Spirit rests upon and so is revealed in the humanity of the Theotokos. At the Baptism, Christ’s Pentecost, the Spirit rests upon and so is revealed in the humanity of the God-Man. This new descent entails a new relationship for Jesus to the Spirit. And by “virtue of His anointment in His personal Pentecost which is His baptism, the anointment becomes accessible in Him to the entire world.”


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