

SUBVERSION THROUGH SUBJECTION: A FEMINIST RECONSIDERATION
OF KENOSIS IN CHRISTOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To be Christian is to identify with Christ to such a degree that one becomes part of Christ together with other members of his body, the church. Additionally, in order to identify with Christ, one must, in the words of the gospel according to Mark, “deny [oneself] and take up [one’s] cross and follow [Jesus],”¹ or, according to the epistle to the Philippians, “be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God did not consider equality with God as something to be taken advantage of, but emptied himself [*ekenōsen*].”² While these particularly paradoxical ideas of salvation in self-denial and power in kenosis, or self-emptying, may seem self-evident and applicable to Christian life, contemporary Christians would do well to give pause and reconsider how we are to hear and respond to this ambiguous, metaphor-laden language, especially in North American ecclesial contexts.

First of all, certain practical implementations of the Christian prescriptions for self-denial and submission have had deleterious effects on people’s lives both within and outside the church body. For some church congregations, especially within evangelical denominations, the Christological theme of kenosis also functions soteriologically, so that salvation comes through denying oneself and submitting to God.³ However, within these churches, all submissions are not equal; traditionally, women and minorities have been forced to accept submissive roles

¹Mk. 8:33. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

²Phil. 2:5-6.

³Aristotle Papanikolaou affirms this argument, describing kenosis as “the paradigm for human salvation” which then becomes “an ethical imperative within the Christian tradition” (41). See “Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (Jan 2003): 41-65.

toward both God and those holding positions of power in this world, while these same powerful people have maintained their authority over others although they claim a spiritually submissive stance. Consequently, from a theological perspective, this understanding of kenotic soteriology serves to confirm the binary power structures already in place in this world. Even more disconcerting, submission construed in this way can be—and has been—used to justify abuse and oppression;⁴ one need only recall the cooperation between the missionary movement and global colonization, or the domestication and silencing of women based upon literal, fundamentalist interpretations of scripture. Such examples expose the practical difficulties and dangers in applying certain understandings of the theme of kenosis.

Moreover, the scriptures fueling various Christian practices of submission, whether good or harmful, are not altogether lucid in their descriptions, or possible prescriptions, of kenosis. Enough ambiguity surrounds biblical and theological interpretations of kenosis that examinations of the texts and their theological commentaries only compound the confusion. Stephen Fowl notes that, compared to the Christ-hymn in Philippians, “[f]ew other passages in the NT have generated more scholarly literature.”⁵ Additionally, in her work *Powers and Submissions*, Sarah Coakley systematically outlines the theological debate surrounding kenosis, highlighting “how New Testament, patristic, post-Reformation Lutheran, early twentieth-century British, and contemporary analytic philosophy of religion discourses on *kenosis* fail to mesh or concur at crucial points.”⁶ Through her analysis, Coakley points out six major ways of interpreting kenosis and the various assumptions implied in each in order to uncover the term’s “confus[ing]” and

⁴Papanikolaou confirms this practical result, saying, “*Kenosis* as obedience, humility, and self-sacrifice[...]has been used throughout the history of Christianity to maintain women in situations of oppression” (ibid., 41).

⁵Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 89.

⁶Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 4.

even contradictory history.⁷ Her genealogical commentary also exposes the insufficiency of some feminist criticisms leveled against kenotic discourse for their failure to take into account this convoluted development; instead of the hasty dismissal of kenosis that Daphne Hampson advocates,⁸ Coakley calls for a more rigorous, nuanced consideration, whether or not one bears Christian feminist sympathies.

Finally, developing a scripturally faithful and theologically sound understanding of kenosis still requires translation from scriptural contexts into contemporary ones, as well as clear discernment and explication of how power, identity, and submission function in contemporary contexts. Today, rarely do we find a simple dichotomy between those with power and those without; in fact, power does not reside solely in the hands of particular people, but is also invested in social, economic, and political systems. Additionally, as Judith Butler, drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, notes, power is not merely “regulative,” placing limitations on what people can and cannot do, but also is “productive,” generating and constituting people’s very identities in concrete ways according to certain norms.⁹ Power thus tends to be less a possession belonging to a subject and more that which gives rise to—and forms—a subject. Given this intricate, dynamic relationship between power and subjectivity in a contemporary setting, possible meanings of Christian self-denial and submission cannot be immediately deduced from scriptures without creative recognition of the ways in which these words and ideas function today.

⁷Ibid., 31.

⁸Coakley cites Hampson’s viewpoint in response to Rosemary Radford Ruether from Hampson’s work *Theology and Feminism*: “It is far from clear that the theme of *kenosis* is the way in which monotheism would need to be qualified in order to bring the understanding of God more into line with feminist values.[...]That it [*kenosis*] should have featured prominently in Christian thought is perhaps an indication of the fact that men have understood what the male problem, in thinking in terms of hierarchy and domination, has been. It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. *But...for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm*” (ibid., 3, Coakley’s emphasis).

⁹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 4-5.

In light of these practical and hermeneutical difficulties, therefore, this paper aims to salvage a fruitful understanding of Christological kenosis and the character of Christian discipleship it evokes by grappling with theological interpretations of the scriptures that engender these ideas and attending to their philosophical applications in contemporary contexts. Rather than abandoning Christian kenosis to its misunderstandings and perversions, I want to suggest a way of rethinking and embodying kenosis that, at the very least, remains faithful to the heart of Christian tradition and scripture and, ideally, redeems in part the destructive effects of its distorted and confusing explications. The kenosis of Christ as portrayed in the Christ-hymn of Philippians functions not only to describe Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but also to prescribe a life of Christian discipleship, to those who would identify themselves as followers of Christ. The purpose of this paper, then, is to delineate the nature of this twofold function of Christian kenosis.

Kenosis in this context is not to be understood primarily as an evacuation of subjectivity, involving a willful sacrificing or emptying out of one's clearly defined identity. Such a concept is not only logically incoherent, insofar as one's attempt to empty oneself never ceases to be a self-assertion, but also impossible to conceive in a contemporary context in which subjectivity is not so neatly bounded. Additionally, when applied to Christ, theology finds itself in the quandary of attempting to explain what gets emptied (Christ's divine nature or human?) and when (the incarnation, crucifixion, or from eternity?), and, moreover, such a reduction of kenosis falls short of the way in which the epistle to the Philippians employs the term referring to Christ. Instead, kenosis is more adequately conceived in terms of subjection by attending to the various workings of power as they shape identities of subjects. In his kenosis, better described as humiliation or nullification, Christ actually empties the ungodly powers of this world of their

power through his paradoxical identification with God; therefore, the kenotic call of Christian discipleship entails entering into Christ's pattern of thinking and acting in relation to operations of power in this world and thus finding one's identity in God with Christ. Instead of loss and death to self, subjectivity so defined kenotically actually looks like empowerment to live in God, no longer bound to the destructive ways in which the world's power operations may identify oneself.¹⁰

To elucidate this claim, therefore, I will begin by analyzing Sarah Coakley's treatment of the historical development of kenosis and its intersection with power and submission in theology and philosophy of religion. Her desire to uphold an understanding of kenosis in both Christology and Christian spiritual practice provides a helpful initial trajectory for my argument, because her feminist critique actually seeks a potentially fruitful, power-conscious description and prescription of kenosis relevant to women and men in the church. While Coakley significantly clarifies the theological and philosophical moves in the kenotic debate, she does not offer as lucid an explanation of power and vulnerability as she employs the terms. In order to explore the greater intricacies of the operations of power, then, and thus further define the language of kenosis, I will supplement Coakley's work with Judith Butler's discussion of power and its regulative role in shaping subjects through the process of subjection. Butler's attention to the dynamic, ambivalent ways in which power and subjects mutually form, demarcate, and exceed their limits not only moves beyond the tendency to separate power operations from subject formation—by defining power either as a commodity belonging to a prior subject or as an

¹⁰Interestingly enough, such a reformulation of identity through kenosis can still be called a death to self in reference to the typical way one conceives of "the self"—as a neutral, intact subject. As we will see, kenosis opens the way for a very different understanding of self or identity.

external force imposed upon a prior subject¹¹—but also offers a constructive theoretical framework for describing the formative function of kenosis in constituting the identities of Christ and his followers.

With both Coakley and Butler in mind, then, I will turn to two biblical texts, Philippians 2:5-11 and Mark 8:22-10:52, to exegete scriptural possibilities for understanding kenosis. The Christ-hymn in Philippians explicitly uses a verbal form of the word *kenosis* to narrate Christ's self-emptying; thus, an examination of this passage will facilitate reflection on the Christological dimension of kenosis. Although the gospel of Mark does not employ the term *kenosis* to speak of Christ's passion or the call to discipleship, the narrative in these chapters repeatedly uses the language of self-denial, or loss of oneself, in the context of following Jesus, and, incidentally, each call to self-denial occurs immediately following Jesus' predictions of his imminent betrayal, crucifixion, and death in Jerusalem. Thus, Mark's implementation of similar kenotic language in relation to the humiliation of Christ, the focal point of the Philippians hymn, suggests a plausible way for affirming the second, discipleship dimension of kenosis as analogous to the first, as well as for interpreting the kenotic imperative of discipleship in light of Christological kenosis. Bringing kenosis in the Christ-hymn to bear on the repeated call to self-denial in Mark will illuminate the difference between the nature of divine power and action and that of humans—a theological distinction Coakley attempts to affirm—and then will give ground both for rethinking the nullification or emptying wrapped up in kenosis and the interplay between power and identity.

Finally, I will propose a constructive, contemporary application of this theological interpretation of kenosis in scripture to address specifically the complicated intersection of

¹¹Indeed, Butler calls into the question the very notion of a prior subject, and this too will be explored in the second part of Chapter II.

gender difference(s) and Christianity in North America today. Since some Christian feminists have struggled with kenosis, as Coakley notes, I want to return to this audience to demonstrate the validity and even fruitfulness of kenosis for Christian feminism. To accomplish this, I will recapitulate Butler's understanding of subjection to make intelligible the scriptural depiction of kenosis for contemporary feminist theology.

CHAPTER II

KENOSIS IN TERMS OF SUBJECTION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND SUBJECTS

Retrieving Kenosis for Christian Feminism: Sarah Coakley

In *Powers and Submissions*, Sarah Coakley seeks to demonstrate that freedom and submission need not be mutually exclusive, nor power and vulnerability at odds with one another. She claims in the prologue that “the apparently forced choice between dependent ‘vulnerability’ and liberative ‘power’ is a false one,”¹² because she sees within theological discourse the possibility for reframing the ways in which divine and worldly powers are conceived, as well as the ways in which humans relate to the divine (and vice versa). Instead of a quantitative antithesis between divine power and human freedom, which, in its ugliest form, could lend itself to justifying discrimination, abuse, and human suffering, Coakley affirms the paradox of “power-in-vulnerability,”¹³ arguing that human dependence on the power of God is actually liberative in a particular sense.

This paradox is revealed no more truly and mysteriously than in the person of Jesus Christ for Coakley; therefore, she opens her book with an investigation into the kenosis displayed in Christ, in order to retrieve an understanding of Christ’s self-emptying that not only is spiritually suggestive for Christian practice, but also circumvents a zero-sum game between divine power and human freedom and its potential social repercussions. To accentuate the import of kenosis for Christian feminism, Coakley elects as her theological foil Daphne

¹²Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xv.

¹³*Ibid.*, 37.

Hampson, who finally dispenses with kenosis as a “‘far from helpful[...]paradigm’”¹⁴ for women, and proceeds to analyze systematically the many variations in Christian history on the theme of kenosis as they relate (or fail to do so) to Hampson’s critique. After assessing these different interpretations, Coakley offers her own Christological proposal, derived from two of the variations, and what she believes to be its spiritual counterpart in the practice of contemplative prayer. While Coakley arrives at solid theological conclusions regarding kenosis, however, she does not explain sufficiently what she understands “power” and “vulnerability” to mean. Therefore, let us examine her essay on kenosis in *Powers and Submissions*, attending to the moves in her argument in order to consider ways of philosophically nuancing this concept of “power-in-vulnerability.”

Coakley outlines six major definitions of kenosis, which have marked differences over “whether *kenosis* involves pre-existence (or not); whether it implies a temporary loss of all or some divine characteristics (or neither); whether the ‘emptying’ applies to the divine nature or the human (or alternatively rejects ‘two natures’ Christology altogether); and whether the effects of *kenosis* pass to the eternal nature of the Godhead (or not).”¹⁵ Amid the confusion over the terms of the debate, Coakley especially takes issue with the ways of construing kenosis in which divinity and humanity as figured in Christ form a dichotomous relationship, resulting in a privileging of the divine or human over the other. For Cyril of Alexandria, first of all, kenosis is no emptying of divinity but an assumption of humanity into the divine, pre-existent Logos, tending toward a subsumption through Cyril’s unilateral *communicatio idiomatum*.¹⁶ On Coakley’s reading, then, by allowing the divine to fully permeate the human in Christ, Cyril’s interpretation “could insidiously fuel masculinist purposes, masculinist visions of the subduing

¹⁴Qtd. in *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 13-4.

of the weaker by the stronger” if the divine can potentially “obliterate” the human.¹⁷ Coakley’s other major opponent, new kenoticism, reverses the direction of the Alexandrian *communicatio idiomatum*, enabling the human to fully penetrate the divine in Christ. For Coakley, such an inversion results in an emptying out of the divine, thus “mak[ing] ‘God’ both limited and weak” and as such impotent to save humanity.¹⁸ The new kenoticist interpretation, then, is equally problematic for Christian feminism, which does not wish to valorize suffering, weak, or vulnerable humanity *in se*, but seeks its transformation.

In addition to critiquing these theories of kenosis for effectively implying an antithetical relationship between divinity and humanity, Coakley further questions the Alexandrian formulation, together also with the anti-kenoticist philosophical interpretation, because of their implicit aversion to vulnerability from the outset. Cyril’s understanding of kenosis attempts to insulate the divine from the vulnerability inherent in humanity through his one-way communication of attributes from divine to human; thus his paradoxical affirmation that Christ “suffered unsufferingly”¹⁹ begs the question of how seriously his Christology can address human vulnerability and suffering—whether natural to or unjustly inflicted upon humanity. The anti-kenoticism of analytic philosophy of religion, in contrast, endeavors to safeguard humanity from vulnerability altogether by presupposing a certain essentially human autonomy. Such a construction of humanity results in either an omnipotent divinity covertly controlling the otherwise autonomous human, or a separation of Christ’s divine and human natures, “lest the divine nature permeate the human in such a way as to undermine its integrity.”²⁰ The former,

¹⁷Ibid., 15-6.

¹⁸Ibid., 30.

¹⁹Qtd. in *ibid.*, 13.

²⁰Ibid., 29.

“big-brother” option, for Coakley, “summons up every sort of political and sexual nightmare,”²¹ while the latter leaves one with the dilemma of explaining how two separate natures so figured can be united at all in Christ. Neither the Alexandrian nor the anti-kenoticist rendering of kenosis allows for a positive consideration of vulnerability in the divine-human relationship.

In light of these concerns, therefore, Coakley proposes her own theological formulation of kenosis by synthesizing what she labels as the ethical interpretation of kenosis in Philippians 2 with a two-natures Christology aligned more closely with the Antiochene school than the Alexandrian. This ethical reading of kenosis does not presuppose the pre-existence of Christ and thus does not locate Christ’s emptying in the incarnation in a loss or giving up of classically divine characteristics like omnipotence, omniscience, or impassibility. Instead, Christ’s kenosis consists in his “‘servant-like’ example[...]throughout his life,”²² climaxing in his crucifixion, in which Christ eschews certain forms of worldly power and adopts a life of humility in faithfulness to God. In coupling this view with a two-natures Christology, Coakley situates Christ’s emptying within his human nature, following the Giessen school,²³ and not the divine, in order to foreclose the possibility of stripping the divine of the power to redeem and transform human life. However, rather than adopting an Alexandrian Christology like the Giessen school and thus becoming entangled in the problems of a unilateral *communicatio idiomatum* from simply conflating Christ’s *hypostasis* with the divine, pre-existent Logos (disregarding Christ’s human nature as constitutive of his identity), she appeals to the Antiochene understanding of the two

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 8.

²³“A school of seventeenth-century Lutherans from Giessen later proposed a solution which returned to Philippians 2 with a slightly novel twist[...]. These theologians suggested that Christ’s ostensible weaknesses could be explained in terms of a *kenosis* operative on his *human* nature, whilst his divine nature retained its powers” (ibid., 17).

natures, “in which Christ’s personal identity is *confected out* of the ‘concurrence’ of the human and the divine.”²⁴

By upholding this definition, Coakley offers a substantive alternative to Hampson’s dismissal of kenosis in two ways. First of all, Coakley calls into question the traditional gender assumptions at work in Hampson’s argument, in which power corresponds to the masculine and vulnerability to the feminine, by advocating the paradoxical possibility of power in vulnerability, which neither places vulnerability on a pedestal nor frames power as intrinsically abusive.²⁵ Secondly, Coakley’s formulation transcends an antithetical relationship between divine power and human vulnerability implicit in Hampson’s rejection of kenosis by envisioning human vulnerability in relation to God as the possibility for empowering, life-giving transformation in the divine. Instead of understanding vulnerability as necessarily harmful or, conversely, affirming all vulnerability, Coakley is arguing for a relinquishment of those worldly powers that stand in contrast to the power of God, as exemplified in Christ, in order to “‘make space’”²⁶ for the divine. Additionally, she understands divine power to be “non-abusive” but “subtle,” “enabling,” and empowering in relation to humanity.²⁷ Kenosis, therefore, “is not a negation of self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.”²⁸

Coakley’s argument thus provides a lucid analysis of kenosis and rationale for its retrieval in Christian feminism, and her definition of kenosis offers a helpful trajectory for Christian feminist Christology and spirituality.²⁹ However, her vague implementation of the

²⁴Ibid., 38.

²⁵Ibid., 32.

²⁶Ibid., 35.

²⁷Ibid. 34, 35.

²⁸Ibid., 36.

²⁹In reflecting on practical implications of her kenotic theology, Coakley says, “The ‘spiritual’ extension of Christic kenosis, then, involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine. The rhythm of this *askesis* is already inscribed ritually and symbolically in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist; but in prayer (especially in the defenceless prayer of silent waiting on God) it

terms “power” and “vulnerability” enervate the theological conclusions at which she arrives. In discussing power, Coakley does not specify the ways in which divine and worldly power differ and even conflict, and her brief commentary on divine power only frames the concept negatively, as non-abusive and non-annihilating. Whatever transformation divine power produces in human life remains undefined as well. Likewise, the kind of vulnerability Coakley advocates is also only construed in negative terms, as self-effacement or openness, without a positive description of how such vulnerability takes shape.

Moreover, in relegating power to the divine and vulnerability to the human, Coakley does not give enough space for allowing the terms to interpenetrate one another, which is a legitimate concern for anyone interested in adhering to Chalcedonian Christology. In other words, if Christ reveals not only how to be truly human but also the nature of God, then as humanity and divinity concur in Christ, power and vulnerability become intertwined and thus undone according to our typical ways of conceiving both terms. Coakley’s definition supplemented by Antiochene Christology is on the way to such a reinterpretation but does not achieve as rigorous a reworking of the relationship between power and vulnerability as it could accomplish. Here C.F.D. Moule’s adaptation of the ethical interpretation—a view which Coakley ultimately shelves in her assessment of kenosis—may be more persuasive, for he sees Christ’s example as demonstrative of a humility in divinity. Coakley describes Moule’s position,³⁰ saying, “He finds the ‘emptying’ not to refer to an effect on either [Christ’s pre-existence or divinity], nor to his incarnation, but

is ‘internalized’ over time in a peculiarly demanding and transformative fashion.[...]What I have elsewhere called the ‘paradox of power and vulnerability’ is I believe uniquely focused in this act of silent waiting on the divine in prayer” (ibid., 34).

³⁰Coakley also notes the overlap between Moule and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Hampson’s alleged contender (or so Hampson erroneously believes, according to Coakley): “Moule’s interpretation is somewhat closer to what Ruether seems to mean by *kenosis* when she asserts that Jesus’ message and example represent ‘patriarchy’s’ *kenosis*: that is (or so I read her), Jesus promoted values quite different from those of *machismo* or worldly power. In his ethical example patriarchy was emptied out (not, we note, Christ himself emptied out” (ibid., 10).

rather to his humanly ‘humble’ and ‘non-grasping’ nature—which, however, he then casts as the distinctively *divine* characteristic”; therefore, “[Jesus’] example shows us that divinity is ‘humble’ *rather than* ‘powerful.’”³¹ Parenthetically, she inserts the comment “whatever this means,” which ironically exposes the problem that Moule is attempting to address and Coakley unfortunately ignores: how do power and vulnerability concur in Christ, and what shape does Christ give both terms, especially in contrast to the ways in which worldly powers (whatever these mean) seek to demarcate the nature of both power and vulnerability?

In order to wrestle with these issues and buttress Coakley’s argument, we will now turn to the philosophical work of Judith Butler as she takes up the ambiguous relationship between power and vulnerability, framed in terms of power and the subject.

Emptying Subjection of Its Power: Judith Butler

The work of Judith Butler, particularly *The Psychic Life of Power*, revolves around unmasking the illusory understandings of power and subjectivity,³² in order to give an honest account of the complexities involved in power operations and subject formation, as well as to expose the possibilities for making “trouble”³³ within normative discourses of power as they produce and are produced by subjects. Butler’s reflections on the dynamic, ambivalent

³¹Ibid.

³²Throughout this text, Butler rarely, if ever, uses the term “subjectivity,” but predominantly speaks of “the subject” or utilizes one of its verbal derivatives, perhaps to break the typical association between “the subject” and an autonomous individual, to avoid speaking in generalizing concepts divorced from their concrete instantiations (for subjectivity is a senseless category apart from a subject), or to effect a more dynamic understanding of subjects. Regardless, in this section, I will largely follow Butler in adopting this practice as well.

³³This terms finds its context in the preface to the 1990 edition of *Gender Trouble*, in which Butler says, “Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it” (*Gender Trouble*, xxvii).

relationship between power and the subject make her a helpful interlocutor in this exploration of the language and meaning of self-emptying in theology; her thought enables us not only to recognize but also to trouble the normative expressions and uses of kenotic language in Christianity. Therefore, we will consider her narration of power in the process of subject formation in *The Psychic Life of Power* and its potential for reshaping kenosis in Christian theological discourse.

According to Butler, power often looks like either a possession acquired and exercised by a subject or a force externally imposed upon persons.³⁴ In the former case, subjectivity presumably embodies the grammatical sense of the “subject” as an autonomous agent that acts, rather than being acted upon. Additionally, such a subject is assumed to precede the power she possesses; in other words, her identity as an autonomous agent must already be in place before she can have any power, and the acquisition or use of power is only inscribed upon her already formed identity, thus leaving her essential identity intact. As a commodity, therefore, power has no bearing upon subject formation; in fact, the subject becomes a prior, power-neutral substance that can then participate in exchanges of power without threatening the integrity of the subject.

In the latter case, when construed as a force imposed upon persons, power seems to assume a more active role in relation to the subject, placing constraints upon a person’s actions. As Butler says, “We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order.”³⁵ For those so constrained, power defines the subject in a second sense, in terms of subjection; in other words, the exertion of power makes persons subject to another authority. One becomes subject as

³⁴Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13-4.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

subjected³⁶—not as an autonomous agent—and thus power seems to precede the formation of the subject. However, like the first conception of power as possession, presupposed in the imposition of power upon subjects is a prior neutral subject, or autonomous agent, upon which power then acts, making subjects subject. Through this operation of power, subjectivity acquires a double, paradoxical meaning: the subject that is subject to no one is made a subject to another through subjection.

Ultimately, for Butler, both conceptions of power falter under erroneous assumptions. Defining power as a possession, first of all, circumvents the amorphous ways power can operate. While a subject can indeed exercise power, such wielding cannot appropriately be called “possessing,” for power escapes and overflows mere possession or control by a subject upon its reception and execution. Likewise, although power does function to constrain and subject, this second definition still fails to encompass the ways power works. In addition to this negative operation—to limit or demarcate what is prohibited—Butler draws attention to the positive functions of power to shape subjects according to particular social and political norms.³⁷ Moreover, where both conceptions most acutely fall short is in assuming a prior neutral subject that then either acquires and exercises power or is subjected to it, because such an assumption misconstrues the relationship between power and subjects. Not only are the formative dimensions of power ignored in an appeal to a prior neutral subject that is always already safeguarded against the subjecting effects of power, but the very illusion of an accessible prior neutral subject remains unquestioned as well. Neither the subject nor power is explicated

³⁶Here Kenneth Surin’s discussion of the distinction between *subjectum* and *subjectus* may be helpful. He defines *subjectum* as “the thing that serves as the bearer of something, be it consciousness or some other property of the individual” and *subjectus* as “the thing that is subjected to something else.” Kenneth Surin, “Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject,” in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 241.

³⁷Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2.

sufficiently in either case because both concepts are more malleable and interdependent than either definition will allow. Thus, Butler offers redefinitions of power and the subject that broaden both concepts and narrate their complex, dynamic relationship.

To elucidate the nature of power, Butler draws upon the work of Michel Foucault, who describes power in terms of operations, relations, strategies, or regulating conditions.³⁸ Power is never a static commodity for Foucault, nor can one clearly delimit those who have power from those who do not, for such a false dichotomy conceals the fact that subjects are always already caught up in—and shaped by—a network of power relations. In this way, for Butler, “power is[...]a set of conditions that precedes the subject,”³⁹ simultaneously regulating and forming subjects according to the authorized social, cultural, political, and economic norms.⁴⁰

As a network or set of conditions, however, power does not proceed in a deterministic or univocal way; rather, it operates dynamically, having no single origin or end but “malleable, multiple, proliferative, and conflictual.”⁴¹ Butler says, “The formative dimension of power is to be understood in a nonmechanistic and nonbehavioristic fashion. It does not always produce according to a purpose, or rather, its production is such that it often exceeds or alters the purposes for which it produces.”⁴² Because power as such cannot become a possession to be wielded by a subject (or personified system) to regulate one’s subjects with detailed precision, ironically, then, power ultimately eludes control, precisely in what would appear to be its most overtly deterministic operation of generating and forming subjects, for two reasons.

First of all, the operation of power appropriates and maintains its force through discursive or performative repetition. As a set of conditions without a single origin or end, power is only

³⁸Ibid., 2, 13, 98.

³⁹Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰Ibid., 99.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 18.

sustained through continuous reiteration of authorized norms. In addition, this repetition reveals the absence of a fundamental locus of institution or authority from which the present norms derive their force. As a result, the only recourse for maintaining normativity and thus power is a reflexive rhetoric, or a repeated appeal to the repeated reinstantiation of the norms, which projects the illusion of always having been the case. Meanwhile, the repetition attempts to conceal that the appeal is made merely to previous appeals with no real ground to which to appeal. As Butler says, “it is precisely through the infinite deferral of authority to an irrecoverable past that authority itself is constituted. That deferral is the repeated act by which legitimation occurs. The pointing to a ground which is never recovered becomes authority’s groundless ground.”⁴³ Therefore, power fails to form subjects in an exhaustively deterministic way because its authority is always derived from nowhere, constructed from a “fiction” through repetition.⁴⁴ The need for repetition exposes the impotence of the normative to secure its power in the past, present, or future, but it also illuminates the possibility for subverting those norms by repeating differently—through parodic performance of the normative, for instance.⁴⁵

Secondly, repetition is never simply identical reiteration of norms without alteration; indeed, for Butler, in re-citing the normative, repetition offers “an interpretation of the norm[s],”⁴⁶ which also generates a “further formation”⁴⁷ of the present authorized norms.

⁴³Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 108.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁵Butler’s most familiar parodic example is found in her discussion of gender performance and dressing in drag: “The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities.[...]As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*[...]Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a ‘figure’ in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (*Gender Trouble*, 174, 175, her emphases).

⁴⁶Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 108.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 10.

Through repetition, power cannot remain immutable but undergoes some degree of reformation precisely in its regulatory and productive operations.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, this dynamic understanding of repetition is itself repeated and thus assumes (or perhaps discloses) an intriguing dimension only implicit in Butler's other works, for here her central concern becomes the intersection of power and the psyche of the subject through the repetition enacted in the process of subjection.⁴⁸ With this particular focus, Butler overrides the constant temptation to externalize from the subject both power and the prevailing social norms by demonstrating how repetition does not simply—if at all—reshape norms outside of the subject, but repeats and reshapes the subject herself. For Butler, subjection most obviously involves the imposition of norms upon subjects in their formation, thus making them subject to normative power operations, but she also understands subjection to be a process of internalization, in which the subjected subject assumes her identity conditioned by those norms. Such assumption is not merely a process of taking norms external to the subject into her very being; indeed, the “tempt[ation] to claim that social regulation is simply internalized, taken from the outside and brought into the psyche” is precisely what Butler is calling into question.⁴⁹ On the contrary, internalization “fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life”;⁵⁰ as Butler says, “the boundary that divides the outside from the inside is in the process of being installed, precisely through the regulation of the subject.”⁵¹ Only in subjection, then, as the subject is “repeatedly constituted”⁵² through the normative operations of power, does the subject infer an internal/external division, which generates a psyche presumably distinct and insulated from the social norms that, in fact, never cease to pervade and reconstitute the so-called

⁴⁸Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2-3.

⁴⁹Ibid., 66.

⁵⁰Ibid., 19.

⁵¹Ibid., 66-7.

⁵²Ibid., 94.

interiority of the subject. Moreover, subjection, simultaneously involving a certain passivity and activity of the subject, results in both an ongoing “submission and mastery”⁵³ of the normative. In this way, subjection provides a paradoxical occasion for repetition of norms: insofar as internalization becomes the process of installing an internal/external distinction, the subject repeats the normative as she submits to and appropriates the very constitution of her identity, and, in so doing, embodies a reformation of the normative operations of power.

Thus the subject is birthed, formed, and regulated by power, and, as Butler develops this argument, she undoes the presumed, normative construction of the power-subject relationship, troubling its logical progression not only spatially, but also temporally. As already highlighted above, contrary to the belief that power regulates subjects by an imposition from the outside—or even that a subject appropriates power by transferring or receiving it from outside of the bounded subject into the subject’s interiority—Butler carefully rethinks the spatial topography of power and the subject by noting the way in which power operates to install the internal/external division in the very process of subject formation. As the subject comes to be in subjection, the boundaries intended to guarantee the integrity of the subject are established, yielding both an interiority and exteriority to the subject. This construction of space does not define exhaustively the boundaries of the subject, however, nor can it segregate power from the subject successfully. The formation of the subject occurs through an assumption of subjection that results in a reinterpretation or reformation of power, which also produces a further formation of the subject. In this way, power and subjects become intertwined spatially, continually infusing and proliferating one another, through repeated *ad hoc* circumscriptions of the subject, which inevitably fail to produce a static, impermeable subject invulnerable to subjection. Power-subject

⁵³Ibid., 116.

space thus consists of fluid, dynamic negotiations and performances, which both inscribe and dissolve boundaries, through subjection.

Likewise, Butler's account of subjection frustrates the temporal logic of normative understandings of the power-subject relationship. Rather than the subject preceding the operations of power, Butler gives precedence to power insofar as it serves as the condition for the subject's coming to be at all. Her description of this temporal flux further illuminates the contrast between the presumed conception of the power-subject relationship and her own:

There is no subject prior to this effect [of power]. Power not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being.[...]Power loses its appearance of priority, however, when it is wielded by the subject, a situation that gives rise to the reverse perspective that power is the effect of the subject, and that power is what subjects effect. A condition does not enable or enact without becoming present. Because Power [*sic*] is not intact prior to the subject, the appearance of its priority disappears as power acts on the subject, and the subject is inaugurated (and derived) through this temporal reversal in the horizon of power.⁵⁴

Not only does Butler reverse the temporal sequencing of power and the subject by denying the subject priority, but she takes it one step further to suggest that power's operation in subjection does not even appear until the subject comes to be. In that moment of subjection (which must be repeated continually), although power is what produces and forms the subject, its temporal priority to the subject is erased as "the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence"⁵⁵ through her assumption of those very normative conditions. The fiction of the subject's priority is thus fabricated as the subject inscribes into her being the power to which she is subject in order to persist from moment to moment.

To clarify this temporal confusion and provide a cogent description of the subject's formation, Butler employs two motifs: the turning of the subject in Louis Althusser's idea of

⁵⁴Ibid., 13-4.

⁵⁵Ibid., 14.

interpellation and the narration of the subject within the structure of English grammar. Interpellation, for Althusser, is a mode of identification in which the subject comes to be retroactively “through the inaugurative address of state authority.”⁵⁶ The classic image used to depict this idea is a police officer hailing a pedestrian from behind, who, upon hearing the officer’s call, turns around in response. In turning around, the pedestrian has become a subject, identified with the name given by the officer by identifying herself—however inadvertently—with that name. Prior to the hail, the pedestrian had no identity, and thus was not a subject, according to the authority of the state. The officer’s hail imposes an identity upon the pedestrian after the fact, and her turn in response signals a submission to that identity, which, for Butler, is the retroactive formation of the subject in subjection. Butler reflects on this chronological conundrum by posing the following question:

The ‘turning around’ is a strange sort of middle ground, which is determined both by the law and the addressee, but by neither unilaterally or exhaustively. Although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn. But where and when does the calling of the name solicit the turning around, the anticipatory move toward identity?⁵⁷

What seems to interest Butler most in Althusser’s understanding of interpellation is this paradoxical moment of turning that inaugurates the subject’s very being as subject. Less than defining the subject ontologically, Butler’s concern is to lay bare the power of social norms (or state ideological structures, in Althusser’s case) to define and generate identities of subjects in various processes of subjection. Whether or not there is a material essence of the subject prior to interpellation is irrelevant to Butler because the interpellation has always already made access to

⁵⁶Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷Ibid., 107.

such an essence impossible.⁵⁸ She states, “To the extent that the naming is an address, there is an addressee prior to the address; but given that the address is a name which creates what it names, there appears to be no ‘Peter’ without the name ‘Peter.’”⁵⁹ However, the interpellative hail that brings about the subject does not fully determine the identity of the subject, as the turning demonstrates; Butler points out that “this performative effort of naming can only *attempt* to bring its addressee into being: there is always the risk of a certain *misrecognition*.”⁶⁰ The pedestrian could “fail to hear, misread the call, turn the other way, answer to another name, [or] insist on not being addressed in that way.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, what must be emphasized is the temporal ambivalence of the subject’s identity displayed in interpellation. Just as the officer’s hail alone cannot identify and form the subject fully, neither does the subject’s turn—or failure to do so—fully confirm and submit to the interpellative hail.⁶² Identification takes place before and after the normative address—insofar as the officer’s call subjects the previously unidentified pedestrian, bringing the subject into being—as well as before and after the addressee’s response—insofar as the turn, or lack thereof, signals a prior submission to the authorized identification, which remains inscribed in the ongoing formation of the subject, even if misrecognition occurs or the subject resists interpellation. As Butler says, “There is a certain readiness to be compelled by the authoritative interpellation, a readiness which suggests that one is, as it were, already in relation to the voice before the response, already implicated in the terms

⁵⁸Butler’s remarks helpfully clarify the turning with which she is fascinated: “The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself. This figure operates as part of the explanation of how a subject is produced, and so there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn. On the contrary, the turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain. Such a notion, then, appears difficult, if not impossible, to incorporate into the account of subject formation. What or who is said to turn, and what is the object of such a turn?” (ibid., 3-4).

⁵⁹Ibid., 111.

⁶⁰Ibid., 95.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Butler also unveils the repetitive, diachronic possibilities of this turn: “What is brought into being through the performative effect of the interpellating demand is much more than a ‘subject,’ for the ‘subject’ created is not for that reason fixed in place: it becomes the occasion for a further making” (ibid., 99).

of the animating misrecognition by an authority to which one subsequently yields.”⁶³ Thus interpellation reveals the way in which the subject comes to be proleptically and retroactively.

In an analogous way, Butler also draws attention to the grammatical function of the subject in language in order to illustrate the paradoxical timing of subjection and reveal the ambivalent nature of the subject. The grammatical structure of language seems to suggest that the linguistic subject corresponds directly to an extant, autonomous agent with some degree of neutrality prior to the vocalization or inscription of other parts of speech. For Butler, however, such a definition of the subject not only mistakenly presumes one can gain access to a neutral subject prior to language and its performance of social norms, but it also masks the temporal paradox of the subject’s formation.⁶⁴ From her perspective, first of all, the only subject to which one has access at all is the grammatical subject, or the subject inscribed in language, but secondly, even the subject understood grammatically cannot be fully determined via language. As she argues, “the grammar of the subject emerges only as a consequence of the process we are trying to describe.”⁶⁵ From its inception as it is performed or narrated in speech or writing, language strives to arrive at some understanding of the subject, and yet the narration always already “presuppose[s] the very subject for which it seeks to give an account.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, this

⁶³Ibid., 111.

⁶⁴Again, contrary to some critiques, Butler’s implementation of this linguistic analogy is not to make persons as subjects linguistic ontologically—that is, to give such precedence to the performed word that it empties the subject inscribed in language of all matter (see Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 159-60). To this, Butler says, “To literalize or to ascribe an ontological status to the grammatical requirement of ‘the subject’ is to presume a mimetic relation between grammar and ontology which misses the point[...]that the anticipations of grammar are always and only retroactively installed” (*The Psychic Life of Power*, 124). Thus the following statement must not be understood as an ontological claim but as Butler’s recognition of the impossibility of obtaining access to a pure neutral subject upon which the normative is not always already inscribed in language: “‘The subject’ is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with ‘the person’ or ‘the individual.’ The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation” (ibid., 10-11).

⁶⁵Ibid., 117.

⁶⁶Ibid., 11.

grammatical consideration of the subject leaves one in a “circular”⁶⁷ logic that Butler dubs the “grammatical time”⁶⁸ of the subject, in which language concerning the subject’s formation can only speak ahead of itself prior to the formation of the subject or chase after itself following the subject’s emergence, never quite capturing the subject of which it attempts to speak. After all, any narration of the subject never simply narrates from a neutral stance but becomes a further formation of the subject; only at the end of the sentence or story—that is, only retroactively—does the subject come to be. Thus Butler says, “Considered grammatically, it will seem that there must first be a subject who turns back on itself, yet I will argue that there is no subject except as a consequence of this very reflexivity. How can the subject be presumed at both ends of this process, especially when it is the very formation of the subject for which this process seeks to give an account?”⁶⁹

Ironically, in the end, what Butler’s illustrations of interpellation and linguistic narration reveal is the inherent “failure”⁷⁰ of subjection to subject and form the subject totally. On the one hand, subjection necessitates that the subject submit to the normative conditions from which it arises; indeed, the subject’s very coming to be occurs only through a prior submission to those norms, whether consciously or involuntarily. Butler describes this more concretely:

The desire to persist in one’s own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one’s own. Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one’s ‘own’ being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. If such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself.⁷¹

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 117.

⁶⁹Ibid., 68.

⁷⁰Ibid., 131.

⁷¹Ibid., 28.

The retroactive moment of submission in the process of subjection signifies the “ambivalen[t]” nature of the subject,⁷² for submission simultaneously empowers, insofar as subjection fails without the subject’s assumption of her subjected identity, and makes the subject impotent, insofar as what the subject assumes is her being as always already subjected. In this way, subjection belies the source of its “insidious”⁷³ power: in refusing to dictate the identity of the subject, but requiring that the subject submit to the normative conditions for her existence—that is, to “[turn] on [herself]”⁷⁴ in order to come to be at all—subjection’s failure actually looks like ingenious success. Indeed, such failure is always already the triumph of the power of subjection, particularly if the subject comes to stand in direct opposition to the very conditions of her existence, because the subject can never erase the inscription of those norms without ceasing to be. Such a situation of “self-contradiction” can occur whenever hegemonic power norms seek to subject and reinscribe a deviant subject—for example, one who is feminine, homosexual, transgendered, or transsexual.⁷⁵ Butler asserts, “The power imposed upon one is the power that animates one’s emergence, and there appears to be no escaping this ambivalence. Indeed, there appears to be no ‘one’ without ambivalence, which is to say that the fictive redoubling necessary to become a self rules out the possibility of strict identity.”⁷⁶ Thus the “failure” of subjection marks a proleptic loss of the subject, precisely in the subject’s assumption of her identity.

On the other hand, the repetitive process of subjection inaugurates its own failure in another sense. While the instance of subjection’s failure already outlined seems to be a mere

⁷²Ibid., 198.

⁷³Ibid., 6.

⁷⁴Ibid., 3.

⁷⁵Other so-called “deviations” based upon hegemonic racial, ethnic, national, colonial, and religious norms must also be acknowledged in thinking through the concrete significance of Butler’s theoretical framework. The examples contained in the body of the text pertain to gender and sexual norms, which are Butler’s primary focus; however, given that gender is only ever performed by racialized, ethnic, and religious subjects, the various norms at work in subjection cannot be isolated from one another.

⁷⁶Ibid., 198.

rhetorical device, cloaking subjection's normative power over the subject, Butler exposes this façade of subjection's failure to determine the subject by unveiling a more fundamental fracture in the ongoing process of subjection. The subject's submission to the norms conditioning her emergence is not a matter of transporting those norms from outside the subject into her being in such a way that the norms remain immutable; rather, her submission involves an assumption of the normative conditions governing her existence that also becomes a further formation of those norms and thus a further formation of her identity as well. Her submission is a dynamic recapitulation of her subjection, which means that the norms appearing to dictate the subject's identity shift and change—however slightly or drastically—and thus cannot consolidate their power even from the moment of the subject's emergence. In this way, subjection inscribes its own miserable failure into the birth and formation of the subject, for it leaves in the hands of the subject the possibility of transforming and even subverting her own subjection. Such subversion cannot occur without the subject incurring damage to herself—since the normative has become part of her very being—but this vulnerability is what Butler believes to be empowering for the subject in a uniquely paradoxical sense. Rather than empowering the subject to maintain a static identity—to not lose herself amid continuous performance of herself—subjection, for Butler, opens the way for subverting our normative understandings of identity—that is, for identity to be amorphous, transformed, and full of possibilities—and even our normative understandings of power operations. Butler says, “Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to ‘be’ in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷Ibid., 131.

Conclusion: Toward a Kenotic Synthesis

For the purposes of this investigation into kenosis, Butler's account of subjection not only provides a more rigorous exposition of power as it is operative in subject formation than Coakley supplies, but also enables one to rethink the theoretical framework governing the language of kenosis. To those who would define kenosis as self-emptying, presupposing an intact subject that can then relinquish the power she has appropriated by asserting her humiliation or self-renunciation, Butler uncovers the erroneous logic of such a claim:

The renunciation of the self as the origin of its own actions must be performed repeatedly and can never finally be achieved, if only because the *demonstration* of renunciation is itself a self-willed action. This self-willed action thus rhetorically confounds precisely what it is supposed to show. The self becomes an incessant performer of renunciation, whereby the performance, as an action, contradicts the postulation of *inaction* that it is meant to signify. Paradoxically, performance becomes the *occasion* for a grand and endless action that effectively augments and individuates the self it seeks to deny.⁷⁸

Kenosis so defined is exposed as an impossibility, for the emptying of the self is always short-circuited by the self's assertion of her self-denial. Constructing power as a possession to be assumed or relinquished is equally problematic, not only because it results in a similar circular logic, but also because power, according to Butler, operates with a certain priority and dynamism in relation to the subject.

Instead of self-emptying or renunciation, then, Butler allows us to redefine kenosis through a reconsideration of the conditions in which kenosis takes place by calling into question these normative presuppositions. Because the normative operations of power inaugurate the formation of the subject, the subject is always already caught up in power relations and indeed assumes into her being the operations of power to which she is subject. There is, then, no subject outside of power, which means that kenosis can only occur in the midst of the normative

⁷⁸Ibid., 49.

operations of power. Additionally, because the subject is only retroactively produced and cannot determine her own formation, kenosis cannot be portrayed as a purely voluntary, self-determined act; it occurs, instead, on a middle ground in the ambivalence of the subject's activity and passivity, empowerment and impotence.

Therefore, if one is to take Butler's analysis into account, kenosis must be rethought in terms of the process of subjection, as one particular incarnation of subjection (as opposed to a universal category simply conflated with subjection). Never fully of one's choosing, as from a neutral stance, kenosis regulates and forms the subject in particular ways, and the subject assumes this kenotic formation and thus embodies a reformulation of kenosis. Moreover, kenosis does not happen in a neutral space but forms subjects in the context of other, possibly conflicting, modes of subjection, and thus kenosis redefines the identity of the subject in relation to the other ways in which she is subjected. Particularly when various modes of subjection stand in opposition to it, kenosis becomes the occasion for subversion of other normative operations of power in their efforts to demarcate the subject. Such subversion takes place through the inherent vulnerability of the kenotic subject, but is kenotic vulnerability qualitatively different from that of other forms of subjection? What is the nature of kenosis as a Christian mode of subjection, especially in relation to other discourses of subjection? To answer these questions, we must now delve into a scriptural examination of kenosis by turning to the Christ-hymn in Philippians and Mark's gospel account of the call to self-denial for Christian discipleship.

CHAPTER III

ASSUMING CHRIST'S PATTERN OF THINKING AND ACTING: KENOSIS IN PHILIPPIANS AND MARK

In thinking toward the nature of kenosis as a particular Christian mode of subjection, this section will offer a reading of Mark's gospel narrative through the liturgical lens of the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2. Although taking into consideration the historical/social/political milieu, I will not attempt a historical reconstruction of "the" implied audiences of Philippians or Mark; rather, I will present an imaginative reading of how an early Christian audience shaped by the Christ-hymn might have heard and interpreted Mark's gospel narrative. By bringing these texts into dialogue, I want to suggest one way of reading and understanding the gospel narrative in light of this hymn. More specifically I will focus on Mark 8:22–10:52, examining the repeated juxtaposition of scenes in which the disciples seek honor or power and Jesus' subsequent teachings on servanthood. Through these passages, we will then be able to negotiate a contemporary interpretation of Christian kenosis in dialogue with the preceding philosophical exposition of subjection.

Before launching into an application of the Christ-hymn to Mark 8:22–10:52, an initial hermeneutical discussion of Philippians 2:5-11 is necessary. Thus let us begin with a theological consideration of this passage in Philippians, drawing upon the work of Stephen Fowl.

Philippians 2:5-11⁷⁹

The kenotic Christ-hymn in Philippians has become one of the most frequently discussed and debated passages within biblical and theological circles. According to Fowl, the entire letter of Philippians revolves around these central verses, and, to some degree, the whole of Christian theology, especially Christology, stems from this passage.⁸⁰ Philippians 2:6-11 provides a powerful theological commentary on “Jesus [the] Messiah, Son of God”;⁸¹ nevertheless, the Christological and ecclesiological implications of this liturgical narrative are not completely elucidated within the Philippian epistle. Through the following interpretive comments on the Christ-hymn, we will begin to discern the theological contours of the passage which will help contextualize the ensuing dialogue between the Christ-hymn and Mark’s gospel.

The Christ-hymn is introduced by Philippians 2:5, the hinge between vv. 1-4 and 6-11.⁸² Verse 5 implores the Philippian ecclesial audience to “let this be [their] pattern of thinking, acting, and feeling, which was also displayed in Christ Jesus.”⁸³ The verb used in this verse as an imperative, *phroneite*⁸⁴ (from *phronein*, here connoting, according to Fowl, a “pattern of thinking, acting, and feeling”), appears twice in the preceding verses, thus recalling and simultaneously reshaping the command in vv.1-4 to “make [Paul’s] joy complete by manifesting a common pattern of thinking and acting...being bound together by this common way of

⁷⁹The NRSV translation of this passage proceeds as follows: “⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

⁸⁰Fowl, *Philippians*, 89.

⁸¹Mk 1:1, trans. mine. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted. Any translations that I give are based upon the 4th edition of the *Greek New Testament* of the United Bible Society.

⁸²Fowl, *Philippians*, 89.

⁸³Trans. Fowl, *ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁴All Greek words are phonetically transliterated into Arabic lettering throughout this paper. The one exception is the word *kenosis* because of its frequent use.

thinking and acting.”⁸⁵ By repeating the verb *phronein* in the context of “seeing things the same way” or sharing and enacting a “common perspective,”⁸⁶ the text not only situates and interprets the Christ-hymn within the context of encouraging church unity, but it also redefines what it means to “be of the same mind”⁸⁷ through the Christ-hymn’s portrayal of the thinking “that was in Christ Jesus”⁸⁸ in the following verses.⁸⁹

From an audience’s theological perspective, this textual connection binds any theological reflection on the Christ-hymn to a theological consideration of its situation within the church in vv. 1-4. Abstracting vv. 6-11—and theological interpretation of those verses—from the preceding ecclesial imperatives demonstrates a failure to recognize the ecclesial, theological, and rhetorical purposes of the Christ-hymn. Rhetorically, this hymn is heard and understood as part of a letter to an ecclesial audience. Theologically, claims concerning this hymn only become orthodox when they are embodied in the life of the church. Ecclesially, regardless of the hymn’s actual liturgical use prior to the historical reception of the Philippian epistle, Philippians 2:1-11 suggests that from this hymn, the church may discern how to be one body sharing a common perspective; by understanding the mind of Christ Jesus as narrated in the hymn, the church may learn how to adopt and incarnate that same mind in unity.

Given the rhetorical and ecclesial placement of the Christ-hymn in the epistle, understanding both the content of the hymn and the nature of its relationship to the preceding verses becomes crucial in discerning its theological implications. The challenge of interpreting the Christ-hymn lies primarily in its contrast to the typical way in which narratives progress. From beginning to end, the lyrical narrative in vv. 6-11 unfolds by tying together paradoxical

⁸⁵Trans. Fowl, *ibid.*, 77.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁷Phil 2:2.

⁸⁸Phil 2:5.

⁸⁹Cf. Fowl, *Philippians*, 90.

concepts. Although the use of paradox is not unusual in narratives, the striking feature of the paradoxes in the Christ-hymn is their application to God. The contradictory statements in the Christ-hymn are not merely irrational claims according to a human audience's *phronēsis*; rather, the narrative tells an impossible story by holding together impossible contradictions concerning God. Christ was in the form of God, but took on the form of a slave [*doulos*]; he was equal to God, but emptied himself [*ekenōsen*] and was born human. Christ humbled himself and became obedient, even to the point of death, and God exalted him above everything in his humility and obedience.⁹⁰ Moreover, the climax of the narrative is more akin to an anti-climax; rather than triumphing over the Jewish and Roman authorities through a powerful political revolution, “[o]n the cross Christ’s body becomes the site where Rome’s pretensions to dominion are overwhelmed by the power of God, a power which is revealed in weakness.”⁹¹ God exalts Christ as the crucified, obedient one—not as the mighty political revolutionary. Thus the narrative of this surprising Messiah proceeds through striking paradoxical tensions which are never neatly resolved in the hymn.

Although generating a two-natures Christology may not be the primary purpose of this text in Philippians,⁹² some implications of these hermeneutical musings on this passage should be stated. First of all, from a rhetorical perspective, hearing the story told in the Christ-hymn as paradoxical indicates the difference between the *phronēsis* of Christ, which the ecclesial audience is to share, and the audience’s own human *phronēsis*. When an audience recognizes the contradictions in the hymn, it is also forced to recognize theologically that, from the perspective of God, Christ’s being in the form of God and taking on the form of a slave may not be contradictory. In this way, the rhetoric of Philippians 2:5-11 highlights the contrast between

⁹⁰Phil 2:6-9.

⁹¹Fowl, *Philippians*, 99.

⁹²Ibid., 94.

Christ's pattern of thinking and acting—which involves pouring himself out and becoming obedient instead of lording his equality with God over others—and the ecclesial audience's pattern of life—which may look like only considering their own interests and treating others as less than themselves, given the imperatives listed in vv. 1-4.

Secondly, from a theological perspective, the meaning of this hymn remains largely ambiguous. An audience can glean the paradoxical contrasts, but the statements “do not really help [an audience] answer [its] questions about the precise nature of Christ's humanity”⁹³—or divinity, I would add. More specifically, the idea that Christ became human and took on the form of a slave, though he was in the form of God, is superficially clear; however, the ways in which this idea can be (or should be) construed are not definitively outlined in the text. As Fowl says, “[O]n grounds of grammar, syntax, and semantics alone these two clauses [vv. 7-8] support neither a docetic nor an orthodox account of Christ's humanity.”⁹⁴ The hymn does not spell out what Christological conclusions should be drawn from the passage. Thus reading and understanding the Christ-hymn as “compatible”⁹⁵ with a two-natures Christology requires an interpretive decision. This doctrinal possibility may not be excluded from the text, but neither is it strongly affirmed in the text apart from the Christian tradition.

Thirdly, ambiguity also surrounds the way in which the Christ-hymn relates to the ecclesial imperatives of vv. 1-4. From an ecclesial perspective, the imperative of v. 5 (to let the pattern of thinking and acting that was displayed in Christ Jesus also be the ecclesial audience's *phronēsis*) appears lucid, but because Christ's *phronēsis* is not clearly defined throughout vv. 6-11, discerning the way in which the *phronēsis* of God in Christ is to be embodied and demonstrated by the church becomes a difficult task. A conceptual translation is necessary, both

⁹³Ibid., 98.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

theologically and practically for the church, in order to figure out in what ways the Christ-hymn not only describes the life of Jesus but is also prescriptive for the church. An ecclesial audience cannot replace Christ because it is not in the form of God, nor is it equal with God apart from Christ; however, the church is commanded to identify with Christ and enter into his narrative by somehow sharing in his *phronēsis*. Because the Christ-hymn does not spell out the concrete theological implications of its paradoxical statements concerning Jesus, its practical implications for the ecclesial audience endeavoring to be the church also remain somewhat vague.

Finally, although the theological mystery of Philippians 2:5-11 must be acknowledged, this paradoxical passage is not bereft of all meaning. Indeed, vv. 6-11 hint at some theological inferences an ecclesial audience can make. As I have already mentioned above, the rhetorical effect of the paradoxical narrative illuminates the contrast between the *phronēsis* of God and the *phronēsis* of the audience. Thus, to a degree, the epistle implores its ecclesial audience to undergo a *metanoia* in its pattern of thinking and acting. In addition, the contradictory narrative of Jesus in all of its ambiguity says something concerning the mysterious character or identity of God. When the contrasting form of God and the form of a slave coincide in the Christ, for instance, “it may be the case that it is precisely Christ’s taking on the ‘form’ of a slave which definitively makes God’s glory [or form] visible to humans.”⁹⁶ Again, perhaps these paradoxes are not a problem for God to solve, but instead gesture toward the mystery of God.

In conjunction with this example, a final conclusion to draw from the Christ-hymn involves the theme of kenosis. While the hymn does not clearly define self-emptying, the passage provides a contextual clue that hints at an insightful way of understanding this concept. Within the hymn, “[he] emptied himself [*heauton ekenōsen*]”⁹⁷ is immediately preceded by the

⁹⁶Ibid., 93.

⁹⁷Phil 2:7.

claim that Christ “did not consider equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage.”⁹⁸ In discussing the other Pauline epistles in which a form of the word *kenosis* appears, Fowl says that this concept conveys the idea of “nullification or making void” more than “emptying something of its contents.”⁹⁹ More specifically, in I Corinthians 1:17, *kenosis* refers to the “wise words [which] nullify or empty the cross of its power,” and in I Corinthians 9:15 and II Corinthians 9:3, the same word speaks of emptying “boasting...of its force.”¹⁰⁰ Although Fowl does not draw these conclusions, an ecclesial audience can infer that the use of *kenosis* in Philippians would be relatively consistent with its use in the Corinthian epistles, and thus the *kenosis* of Christ would also indicate a nullification of some power or force. Based on its contextualization, what seems to be nullified by Christ is the potential, or power, to use his equality with God for his own advantage. Rather than “attending to [his] own interests,”¹⁰¹ Christ becomes human and takes on the form of a slave, obediently devoted to God.¹⁰² Rather than placing himself in a position of superiority over others,¹⁰³ Christ humbles himself. In short, Christ embodies and reveals the power of God through his kenotic *phronēsis*. Conversely, then, God’s exaltation of Christ reaffirms that the power of God and lordship of Christ are demonstrated through *kenosis*, humility, and obedience. Therefore, the kenotic power of God in Christ nullifies the power-seeking, self-serving, human *phronēsis*.

While this brief exegetical consideration of the Christ-hymn is by no means exhaustive, Fowl’s work illuminates some salient possibilities for our exploration of *kenosis*. First of all, his interpretation logically opens the way for pressing Coakley’s definition of *kenosis* further, so that

⁹⁸Trans. Fowl, *Philippians*, 88.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹See Phil 2:4; trans. Fowl, *ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰²Cf. *ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰³See Phil 2:3.

Christ indeed chooses not to employ certain forms of worldly power, but even more than that, eschews a power-seeking, self-serving way of thinking and acting and instead assumes a life of obedience and devotion to God. Such a life reveals the paradoxical—at least from a human vantage point—*phronēsis* of God to us, which takes the form of humility and care for others rather than using equality with God to Christ’s own self-interest or advantage. By saying no to the opportunity to employ power for his own purposes—in accordance with a human way of thinking based upon the power structures of this world—Christ effects a deeper kenosis, or nullification, of this human *phronēsis*, emptying such a line of thought and action of its power. In this way, Fowl makes space for recapitulating Moule’s formulation, in which Christ reveals divinity to be humble, for Christ’s acceptance of the vulnerable and humble status of a servant to God inverts the way we typically understand divinity and thus reveals how a divine *phronēsis* appears contradictory to humans.

Additionally, as already implied, kenosis occurs in three senses in the Christ-hymn. Christ renounces certain forms of worldly power, and does so, secondly, by nullifying any imposition of self-seeking human structurings of power onto the divine. Finally, the way in which Christ performs these two movements of kenosis is through a life of humility and ultimate humiliation at the hands of the political power of Rome; however, by humbling himself, Christ does not valorize humility or vulnerability for its own sake, but subverts the very structuring of power which prizes the powerful and degrades the humble and thus empties humility and vulnerability of its pejorative status according to a human *phronēsis*.

Through these reflections on the Christ-hymn, we can begin to glimpse the Christological character of kenosis. However, in order to make the kenotic imperative placed upon church more concrete, we will now turn to Mark 8:22-10:52 with Philippians 2:5-11 in mind,

highlighting possible ways in which an ecclesial audience shaped by the Christ-hymn might have heard and interpreted this similarly paradoxical section of the gospel narrative.

Mark 8:22-10:52

The word *kenosis* does not appear at all in Mark 8:22-10:52. Nevertheless, the idea saturates this section of the gospel, and an ecclesial audience familiar with the Philippian epistle would quickly recognize its implicit presence. Moreover, when the theme of kenosis portrayed in the Christ-hymn is juxtaposed with Mark 8:22-10:52, the concept not only materializes in particular ways, but the political dimension of Jesus' kenotic *phronēsis* becomes more explicit in the gospel narrative. To work through the ways in which an ecclesial audience can encounter the idea of kenosis in the process of reading (or hearing) the gospel, I will first address how kenosis defines Jesus' life in Mark 8:22-10:52 and then deliberate on the way in which kenosis shapes the call to discipleship.¹⁰⁴

The Kenosis of Jesus

Mark 8:22-10:52 forms a unit in the narrative, framed by the only two accounts of Jesus healing blind men in Mark and organized by three repetitions of Jesus' passion prediction, the disciples' failure to understand him, and Jesus' subsequent teaching discourse. Each repetition functions rhetorically not only to provide structure, but also to build the paradoxical tension to a

¹⁰⁴While I am aware that reading occurs in time and not in conceptual space, I am also aware that reading only takes place as the reader enters into the text with her preoccupations and assumptions. An audience shaped by the Christ-hymn would have some interpretation of kenosis which it would bring to the Markan text; therefore, a conceptually focused reading of the gospel is not excluded. Furthermore, I find this distinction between the kenosis of Jesus and the kenosis of discipleship helpful here in light of earlier comments on the relationship between the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 and the imperatives given to the church in vv. 1-5.

climactic moment for the audience to experience, in which the discrepancy between the *phronēsis* of God in Jesus and the *phronēsis* of Jesus' so-called disciples is glaringly revealed.

Following the first unusual healing story in 8:22-26,¹⁰⁵ Jesus raises the question of his identity with his disciples. After a series of prior incidents in which the disciples show no sign of understanding who Jesus is, Peter answers Jesus by blurting out, “You are the Christ [Messiah].”¹⁰⁶ From the audience's perspective, this confession would seem to indicate that the blind disciples are finally starting to perceive Jesus' identity.¹⁰⁷ However, immediately on the heels of Peter's proclamation, Jesus begins to predict his imminent suffering and death upon their arrival in Jerusalem, and Peter's attempt to silence Jesus demonstrates the disciples' persistent blindness.

A Pauline ecclesial audience would likely sympathize with Peter's inability to simultaneously affirm that Jesus is the Messiah and that he will die in Jerusalem—and not achieve victory in overthrowing the Romans as a true Messiah should—because Jesus' prediction reiterates the paradoxical story of the Christ-hymn three times.¹⁰⁸ In the context of Mark, Jesus does not consider messiahship as something to be used for his own advantage, but he journeys to Jerusalem on the way [*hodos*] of kenosis; he does not turn away from potential suffering but walks straight toward those seeking to destroy him. For the disciples, Jesus is uttering contradictory nonsense, but for the ecclesial audience familiar with the Christ-hymn, his passion prediction and progression toward Jerusalem are precisely what demonstrate Jesus' messiahship. Joel Marcus vividly describes this paradoxical scene:

¹⁰⁵More will be said on this later. For now, Sharyn Dowd's comment is sufficient: “This is the only healing story in any gospel in which Jesus seems to experience difficulty in achieving the desired result.” Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 84.

¹⁰⁶Mk 8:29.

¹⁰⁷Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 85.

¹⁰⁸Mk 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-4.

Nothing could be more antithetical to conventional notions of victory than Jesus' long prophecy of his own betrayal, condemnation, mockery, physical abuse, and execution. Yet, it must be forcefully added, this prophecy is not a *denial* of the Deutero-Isaian hope for a holy war victory; it is, rather, a radical, cross-centered *adaptation* of it. For those with eyes to see, the fearful trek of the befuddled, bedraggled little band of disciples *is* the return of Israel to Zion, and Jesus' suffering and death there *are* the prophesied apocalyptic victory of the divine warrior.¹⁰⁹

According to the hymn's theology, the Christ reveals God's form through humiliation and obedience even to the point of death. Thus, paradoxically, that which would have nullified the possibility that Jesus is the Christ—humiliation, crucifixion, and death—strangely become impotent to rob him of his God-granted messiahship. The kenotic, disempowering effects of suffering, humiliation, and death are instead emptied of their power by Christ, who truly becomes Messiah in allowing his claim to royal messianic status to be nullified.

If a Pauline ecclesial audience has not inferred these conclusions while reading 8:22-32, it would indeed see the theological connection between the Christ-hymn and this section of Mark's gospel in continuing to v. 33. In response to Peter's rebuke, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, "You are not thinking [*phroneis*] the things of God but the things of humans."¹¹⁰ As in Philippians 2:5-11, the *phronēsis* of God is also contrasted here in Mark with the *phronēsis* of humans. In fact, the contrast becomes antagonistic in 8:33 when Jesus calls Peter "Satan"; the human *phronēsis* in the gospel narrative stands in direct opposition to the *phronēsis* of God. For the audience, Mark's gospel rhetorically and theologically intensifies the Philippian imperative to adopt the pattern of thinking and acting of Christ. Because the discrepancy insinuated in the epistle now denotes hostile conflict in the gospel, the audience discovers that the *metanoia* needed to share Christ's *phronēsis* depends upon God's deliverance from those human patterns

¹⁰⁹Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 36.

¹¹⁰Trans. mine.

of thinking and acting which seek to destroy the *phronēsis* of God in Christ.¹¹¹ In this respect, a Pauline ecclesial audience reading Mark's gospel may begin to perceive yet another dimension to the Christ-hymn: the kenotic *phronēsis* of Christ, coupled with God's vindication of this humbled and crucified one, is precisely what delivers people from their antagonistic, destructive patterns of thinking and acting and thus enables an ecclesial audience to enter into the wholly different *phronēsis* of Christ.

As this Pauline ecclesial audience continues reading, it encounters another scene in Mark's gospel which resonates with the Christ-hymn's depiction of Jesus. In Mark 9:2-8, Jesus is transfigured [*metemorphōthē*] on a mountain before Peter, James, and John. The scene overflows with phenomena indicating the presence of the divine: Jesus' transformation takes place on a mountain, his clothes become unearthly white, Moses and Elijah appear beside him, a cloud engulfs them, and a voice speaks from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"¹¹² These divine manifestations and symbols in the gospel narrative confirm to a Pauline ecclesial audience that Jesus is in the very form of God.¹¹³ His transformation, or metamorphosis, exposes the form of the divine in his humanity. From the audience's perspective, God's transfiguring of Jesus not only reveals him as the son of God and thus the visible embodiment of God Godself, but this event also concretely foreshadows God's exaltation of Christ described in the Christ-hymn.¹¹⁴ Thus, for the audience, the transfiguration both

¹¹¹Don Juel helpfully says, "Perhaps we may understand the conflict so central to the story [of Mark] in terms of bondage. Those who are possessed by Satan are not in control and are thus unable to free themselves. The sick are likewise bound by some malady. Even the allegedly free and healthy turn out to be in bondage, however. Peter's problem, we learn, is that his mind is set on human things rather than on God's things (8:33). Is it any different for the religious leaders? [...] If there is any hope for them, it will have to come from outside themselves." Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 118.

¹¹²Mk 9:7.

¹¹³Cf. Phil 2:6; Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Mark*, 6th ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 145.

¹¹⁴Cf. Hurtado, *Mark*, 139-40.

corroborates Jesus' relationship to God as portrayed in the hymn and serves as God's promise within the gospel narrative to raise this one who will be crucified.

The transfiguration scene does not diminish the paradoxical depiction of Jesus in the Christ-hymn, however; the one revealed to be in the form of God is the one who is on his way to Jerusalem, anticipating humiliation and death at the hands of the Jews and the Romans. Again, the one YHWH calls "my son" demonstrates his divine sonship in the vulnerability of his all-too-human, crucified life lived in devoted obedience to YHWH alone; conversely, as Dowd says, "the transfiguration allow[s] God to confirm Jesus' interpretation of messiahship in terms of suffering"¹¹⁵ to the disciples as well as the audience. The presence of both Moses and Elijah even heighten the paradoxical tension already building between Jesus' first passion prediction and this transfiguration scene. While Moses' appearance functions to identify "Jesus as the prophet-like Moses who proleptically enters into his kingship at the transfiguration and who[...]shares the rule of the universe with his Father by virtue of his translation and divinization,"¹¹⁶ the vision of Elijah recalls to the audience the prophet who prepares the way for the Messiah. As Jesus says to Peter, James, and John immediately following his transfiguration, "Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased,"¹¹⁷ reiterating that the way prepared for Jesus by the Markan Elijah—John the Baptizer—involves arrest, rejection, and death.¹¹⁸ Rhetorically and theologically, then, Mark 9:2-8 can only be truly understood in light of 8:31, just as God's exaltation of Christ in Philippians 2:9-11 only follows (paradoxically) from 2:6-8.

¹¹⁵Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 89.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹⁷Mk 9:13.

¹¹⁸Cf. Mk 1:14, 6:17-29, 9:12.

Throughout the rest of Mark 9 and 10, three final scenes provide a Pauline ecclesial audience with a more concrete narration of the kenosis of Christ. Thus far, through the transfiguration, God has confirmed that Jesus is indeed thinking the things of God¹¹⁹ in predicting his impending humiliation and death. The audience has gained a glimpse of the kenotic, paradoxical way of the true Messiah as the glory of God has been revealed through this one who will be crucified like a slave or criminal. Now in the scenes following the transfiguration, the gospel narrative suggests ways in which the kenotic path of Jesus demonstrates the power of God.

When Jesus and the three disciples descend the mountain, they encounter the rest of Jesus' followers and a man with a demon-possessed son. In this final exorcism of the gospel narrative, the unclean spirit leaves the son looking like a "corpse," and Jesus raises him up from what appeared to be death.¹²⁰ For the Pauline ecclesial audience, as Hurtado states, this story "foreshadow[s] his own victory over death in his resurrection and symbolizes that the power of Jesus is this lifegiving power."¹²¹ The spirit seeking to destroy this boy's life is emptied of its power by the liberating power of God in Jesus, the one who will be destroyed by others who are themselves possessed by an evil pattern of thinking and acting. The forces of evil at work in this boy are overcome, then, by the *phronēsis* of God revealed in Christ's display of kenosis as he moves toward his own destruction in Jerusalem.

A similar theme emerges in the second healing of a blind man at the end of Mark 10. In this scene, Jesus gives sight to this man at his own request, and the man "immediately[...]follow[s] Jesus on the way"¹²² to Jerusalem. While blindness and demon-

¹¹⁹Mk 8:33.

¹²⁰Mk 9:26-27.

¹²¹Hurtado, *Mark*, 148.

¹²²Mk 10:52.

possession may not seem to be analogous predicaments initially, Juel sees in both maladies a kind of bondage requiring redemption, or deliverance. Neither blind people nor those possessed by demons have the power to liberate themselves or restore their own lives; in both cases, healing is necessary.¹²³ Thus, Jesus demonstrates the life-giving power of God by also liberating blind Bartimaeus, and as he continues his journey to Jerusalem, the audience sees once more the paradox of God's power revealed in kenosis, humiliation, and death.

The scene that summarizes the theme of these two healings falls between them, following the third passion prediction.¹²⁴ In a dialogue with his disciples, Jesus' words further intensify the paradoxical ideas expressed in the Christ-hymn narrative from a Pauline ecclesial audience's perspective. Jesus says in response to the disciples' desire to share in his glory, "[W]hoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹²⁵ Unlike the disciples, the audience perceives that this unexpected way of the Messiah pairs glory with a ghastly death and greatness with servanthood. God's deliverance comes in the form of a slave [*doulos*], and his humiliation and death redeem, or ransom [*lutron*], those who are enslaved by destructive powers. Hisako Kinuwaka says, "We see here the climax of Jesus' paradoxical teaching that the way of death is the way of life, that ultimate empowerment of 'serving' is found in struggling for 'life for all.'"¹²⁶ What must not be overlooked in Jesus' statement, however, are the subversive political overtones of his kenotic *phronēsis*. Serving as a slave and giving his life for the liberation of others completely reverse

¹²³Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 118, 186.

¹²⁴Mk 10:32-34.

¹²⁵Mk 10:43b-45.

¹²⁶Hisako Kinukawa, "Women Disciples of Jesus," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 184.

the way in which the Gentile *phronēsis* determines power and authority.¹²⁷ For the Pauline ecclesial audience, Jesus directly contradicts the present political power structures by advocating and embodying the *phronēsis* of God because, as illustrated in the Christ-hymn, his kenotic life and death rob the Gentile authorities of their death-dealing power. This paradoxical political revolution is thus not accomplished by military victory, in accordance with a Gentile *phronēsis*, but through the life-giving, redemptive kenosis of Jesus, in accordance with God's pattern of thinking and acting.

The Kenosis of Discipleship

The path Jesus takes to Jerusalem does not simply signify the kenotic way of the Messiah; he also calls those who would be his disciples to follow him along this way. Just as the Christ-hymn in Philippians shapes the preceding imperatives for the ecclesial audience in vv. 1-4, so too the kenotic *phronēsis* of Jesus portrayed throughout Mark 8:22-10:52 illuminates the way in which this audience is to hear and understand Jesus' interspersed teachings on discipleship. Although according to Mark's gospel, as Juel intimates, Jesus "is a singular deliverer" and not a moral or ethical example to be imitated,¹²⁸ the gospel also suggests that redemption involves following Jesus, or, in the language of Philippians, entering into and enacting his pattern of thinking and acting. Thus, for the Pauline ecclesial audience, the call to discipleship entails adopting Jesus' kenotic *phronēsis* by following him to his imminent humiliation, rejection, and crucifixion in Jerusalem. To discern more concretely what following Jesus means, I will offer reflections on the way in which this Pauline ecclesial audience might hear Jesus' verbal and situational teachings throughout this section of the gospel narrative.

¹²⁷Mk 10:42.

¹²⁸Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 93.

After Jesus' first passion prediction, Peter demonstrates his inability to perceive the *phronēsis* of God as kenotic, which necessitates the first series of Jesus' paradoxical statements on discipleship. In Mark 8:34, Jesus issues an imperative for those who "want to become [his] followers" to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow [him]" and then offers a contradictory explanation: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."¹²⁹ For the audience, this teaching overturns human ways of thinking and acting, in which one saves one's life by protecting oneself against death—not by losing it. Again, this paradoxical reversal uncovers the antagonistic contrast between the things of God and the things of humans, for the way enacted and prescribed by Jesus holds together salvation and loss, life and crucifixion. In fact, the gulf between God's ways and human ways implied in the Christ-hymn gapes even wider in light of the indicative forms of "losing" and "saving." As Dowd points out, "By casting this formula for greatness as a prediction rather than as an imperative, the evangelist remains consistent with the emphasis on the priority of grace that pervades this Gospel and prepares for the announcement in 10:27 that the salvation human beings cannot achieve is 'possible for God.'"¹³⁰ In other words, for a Pauline ecclesial audience, because the human *phronēsis* opposes the things of God, transformative deliverance is needed in order for one to lose one's life and be saved. Lest the disciples or audience be deceived into thinking they can save themselves, the gospel implicitly asserts that this paradox cannot be commanded, but can only become reality for the disciples and audience through the saving power of God.

In conjunction with this first teaching, Jesus offers his second call to discipleship in response to the disciples' argument over which one is the greatest. Similarly, their disagreement

¹²⁹Mk 8:35.

¹³⁰Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 96.

demonstrates their failure to understand Jesus' second passion prediction.¹³¹ From the audience's perspective, the first discipleship discourse has made no impression on Jesus' followers. Rather than denying themselves, they are vying for greatness, and thus Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be [or will be] last of all and servant of all."¹³² To illustrate his point more concretely, Jesus then gestures to a child, saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."¹³³ Through this second teaching, the Pauline ecclesial audience gains clarity concerning the meaning of losing one's life described in the first call to discipleship. Loss of life to the point of death for its own sake is not what Jesus calls for; rather, as Juel argues, "the issue [in Jesus' call] seems more a matter of status."¹³⁴ The paradoxical statements in both of these teachings reverse the status-driven "world order" of the *Pax Romana*,¹³⁵ calling the disciples and audience to let go of whatever societal status or identity they may possess and serve others,¹³⁶ just as Jesus repeatedly does along the way to his humiliation and death. Contrary to the structure of society, Jesus equates receiving God with receiving a child, a person with no claim to power or status whatsoever.¹³⁷ For a Pauline ecclesial audience, this teaching reinforces the call upon the church to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility [to] regard others as better [or above] [themselves]."¹³⁸ The concrete example of welcoming a child—a person who could in no way improve another person's social status—supplies a bodily depiction of having the same pattern of thinking and acting as God in Christ, and the difficulty of doing so

¹³¹Mk 9:32.

¹³²Mk 9:35.

¹³³Mk 9:36.

¹³⁴Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 129.

¹³⁵Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 39.

¹³⁶Cf. Hurtado, *Mark*, 153.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 162.

¹³⁸Phil 2:3.

becomes painfully obvious to the audience through the disciples' status-driven argument.

Consequently, an ecclesial audience familiar with the Christ-hymn may begin to see the stakes of discipleship being raised in this more tangible gospel teaching.

Jesus' final call to discipleship in this section of Mark's gospel serves as the climactic response to the disciples' repeated failure to grasp the significance of his imminent rejection and death.¹³⁹ In this third episode, James and John request places of honor beside Jesus, and thus Jesus rather pointedly prefaces his call to be slave of all by saying, "'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you....'"¹⁴⁰ The antipodal distinction Jesus makes between Gentile use of power and authority and that of his followers explicitly identifies the paradoxical contrast between the kenotic way of God in Jesus and the status-seeking way of the world. For the ecclesial audience shaped by the Christ-hymn, these words reveal the way in which the church's patterns of thinking and acting completely undermine the operations of society when the church enters into the *phronēsis* of Christ. As Joel Green and Mark Baker assert, "[The ransom saying] demonstrates the distance between God's way and the ways typical of human communities. Top-down relations of power, social obligations, struggling for honor and recognition—these patterns of behavior are opposed by the cross at the most basic level."¹⁴¹ Following Jesus does not merely reverse the Gentile self-serving uses of power; rather, the kenosis and exaltation of Jesus exposes their bankruptcy in the presence of the paradoxical power of God. Thus, becoming a disciple implies sharing the *phronēsis* of Christ as a testimony to the power of God and the powerlessness of status-driven societies.

¹³⁹Cf. Kinukawa, "Women Disciples of Jesus," 182.

¹⁴⁰Mk 10:42-3a.

¹⁴¹Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 41.

The shape of this witness is outlined for the disciples and the audience in the rest of this third teaching, as Jesus tells those who wish to be great to be servants and slaves of all, as well as in the prior demonstrative teaching episodes between Jesus' second and third calls to discipleship. Because servanthood and slavery evoke menial tasks performed for others and a loss of status or claim to anything,¹⁴² following Jesus in this way does not appear to accomplish anything. However, the kenosis of discipleship is not a call to lose one's life completely without simultaneously living into and testifying to the liberating power of God. Just as Christ took on the form of a slave, indicating his devoted obedience to the things of God, becoming servant and slave of all like Jesus also means that "authority is something to be exercised on behalf of others. Greatness will be measured by the service one is able to render."¹⁴³ For a Pauline ecclesial audience, the way of kenosis calls for letting go of one's power or status and instead serving and empowering others through the life-giving power of God. Those whom the disciples and audience are called to serve are described in several otherwise disjointed scenes in Mark 9:35-10:22. As Juel says, "Each of these discussions has something to do with the shape of a community that follows the crucified one."¹⁴⁴ In addition to making peace within the community of followers instead of competing for power as the disciples repeatedly do,¹⁴⁵ the ecclesial audience perceives in these scenes a demonstrative call exemplified by Jesus to receive and care for "the most vulnerable members of society,"¹⁴⁶ including children,¹⁴⁷ women (as well as men) who have been abandoned in divorce,¹⁴⁸ and those who find themselves in precarious economic

¹⁴²Kinukawa, "Women Disciples of Jesus," 182-3.

¹⁴³Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 130-1.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴⁵Mk 9:50.

¹⁴⁶Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 131.

¹⁴⁷Mk 10:13-6.

¹⁴⁸Mk 10:1-12.

positions, including women and all the poor.¹⁴⁹ Kinukawa captures the implications of this kenotic call to discipleship by saying, “To deny oneself means to renounce the prerogatives that create boundaries around oneself and keep one’s life separate from the oppressed.”¹⁵⁰ Through this section in Mark’s gospel, then, a Pauline ecclesial audience begins to understand more specifically the shape of kenotic discipleship which shares and enacts the *phronēsis* of Christ.

A final rhetorical point must be emphasized in understanding the call to follow Jesus. The way of kenosis is clearly marked in the gospel narrative by both Jesus’ predictions of his death and his teachings on discipleship; however, at the end of this section in Mark’s gospel, the disciples show no sign of comprehending anything Jesus has said. After telling them to welcome children, the disciples rebuke those bringing children to Jesus in a subsequent scene.¹⁵¹ Following two passion predictions and Jesus’ redefinition of greatness in Mark 9:35, the disciples persist in competing for honor in Mark 10:35-41. In fact, David Rhoades, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie argue that “[o]n the way to Jerusalem, [these actions of] the disciples mirror the oppressive behavior of the authorities.”¹⁵² If the disciples struggle to truly follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, to adopt his pattern of thinking and acting, then “[o]n what basis are present readers to trust that they can succeed as disciples where Jesus’ chosen group failed?”¹⁵³ While a Pauline ecclesial audience may see more concretely through the gospel narrative exactly what is at stake in adopting the *phronēsis* of Christ, what hope does it have to truly understand Jesus’ difficult call and follow?

¹⁴⁹Mk 10:21-2.

¹⁵⁰Kinukawa, “Women Disciples of Jesus,” 180.

¹⁵¹Mk 10:13.

¹⁵²David Rhoades, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 92.

¹⁵³Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 174.

Some insight into this dilemma appears in the stories which frame this section of Mark's gospel. Jesus heals two blind men on his way to Jerusalem. In the first healing account, Jesus attempts twice to restore the man's sight. The odd nature of this healing functions to indicate a figurative dimension to the story, paralleling the inability of the disciples to see and perceive clearly who Jesus is and how to follow him. In the scene immediately following this healing, Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but his protest reveals that he does not truly understand Jesus' messianic identity. The healing of this first blind man thus leads the audience to hope that Jesus will enable the disciples, as well as the audience, to clearly perceive who he is in accordance with his pattern of thinking and acting. The second healing at the end of Mark 10 then offers to the audience the hope of not only understanding Jesus' identity, but also of enacting his *phronēsis* by truly following him on the way. Jesus calls Bartimaeus the blind man to come to him and asks him the same question he asked James and John in the previous scene, but unlike the disciples, the blind man requests only to see.¹⁵⁴ Ironically, his blindness has not kept him from perceiving who Jesus is and what he is able to do, and, indeed, Bartimaeus demonstrates his faith by following Jesus once he has regained his sight. If the blind not only receive sight but are also given the *phronēsis* of Christ, then the Pauline ecclesial audience may find hope in the kenotic power of Christ to also heal the ways in which it has adopted the human, self-serving pattern of thinking and acting, and empower the church to truly follow Jesus.

Conclusion

In this imaginative interpretation of Mark 8:22-10:52 from the perspective of an ecclesial audience influenced by Philippians 2:5-11, I have illustrated the ways in which the theme of kenosis as portrayed in the Christ-hymn pervades the gospel's narration of Jesus heading toward

¹⁵⁴Mk 10:51.

Jerusalem with his disciples. The paradoxical nature of God's pattern of thinking and acting resonates through both the epistle and the gospel, and through Mark's gospel, the kenotic description of the Christ-hymn and the corresponding call it places upon the ecclesial audience become more concrete, though no less difficult. The kenosis of Jesus paradoxically reveals the power of God not only by subverting and nullifying certain worldly operations of power, but also by delivering and empowering those in bondage. Likewise, the kenosis of discipleship bears witness to the power of God, as one releases one's claims to power or status and instead serves others in devotion to God. Thus, the power of God—a power revealed in humiliation, crucifixion, and death—makes the contradictory statements throughout Philippians 2:5-11 and Mark 8:22-10:52 possible, even the salvation of one's life in losing it and becoming great in becoming a slave.

Nevertheless, how is this scriptural portrayal of kenosis to be conceived in a contemporary, North American context? How are we to understand language of power, humility, vulnerability, and nullification today? Finally, how is this investigation into kenosis at all helpful for Christian feminism? Let us conclude by grappling with these questions in light of the preceding philosophical and theological explorations.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: A FEMINIST APPRAISAL OF KENOSIS AS SUBJECTION

This paper has surveyed a conceptual kaleidoscope in reflecting on the theme of kenosis in Christology and Christian discipleship. Coakley's essay supplied an initial trajectory for defining kenosis Christologically, particularly in relation to matters of power and vulnerability, by arguing that Christ's kenosis involved electing not to have certain forms of worldly power. Because Coakley's discussion of kenosis did not provide rigorous descriptions of power and vulnerability and the nature of their relationship in kenosis, then, we turned to Butler's philosophical account of subjection, which indicated a spatially and temporally dynamic relationship between power and subjects. We also briefly hinted at some ways in which the idea of subjection is conducive to reframing self-emptying. Finally, to gain a more concrete image of how power figures into Christian kenosis, we exegeted the Philippians Christ-hymn concurrently with the call to discipleship in Mark's gospel, and this examination gave us snapshots of Jesus' nullification of destructive worldly power through healings and exorcisms while obediently walking toward imminent humiliation and death in Jerusalem, as well as a silhouette of the status-reversing path of discipleship. Through the scripture passages, we concluded that the kenosis of Christ empties the ungodly structurings of power in this world of their power, precisely by entering into what such power structures humiliate and devalue and revealing the power of God there; likewise, the call of Christian discipleship involves entering into Christ's kenotic pattern of thinking and acting, eschewing claims to certain forms of worldly power and social status by instead finding one's identity in God in Christ. As this paper has endeavored to

reconcile these insights into kenosis, two outstanding issues have remained unaddressed: How can Butler's account of subjection offer a contemporary linguistic framework for understanding kenosis today, particularly in the context of multiple discourses of power, and how are these reflections on kenosis actually fruitful for Christian feminist theology?

First of all, in order to explicate a contemporary meaning for the kenotic rhetoric of the scriptures—to describe what we mean in defining kenosis as a nullification of certain worldly powers that operate in opposition to the power of God—I have suggested juxtaposing the scriptural exegesis with Butler's concept of subjection for a couple reasons. On the one hand, subjection provides a realistic way of reflecting on the sharp rhetorical distinctions within the scriptures between the power of God and the powers of this world, enabling us to make sense of the scriptural testimony of kenosis within our contemporary, not-so-black-and-white world. After all, the world and its power operations are not so neatly constructed or bounded as the scriptures may portray;¹⁵⁵ in fact, our experience of worldly powers is often multiple, variegated, and even conflicting, and furthermore, Christian life is lived in the complicated intersection of the power of God and worldly powers. On the other hand, the concept of subjection can subvert kenotic language of self-denial that has had injurious repercussions for women by drawing out its positive connotations—implicated, for instance, in finding one's identity in God—as well as the negative—conveyed through nullification, for example.

If we consider Christ's kenosis in terms of subjection, we can recognize how various power operations would seek to subject and form his identity. The way in which the *Pax Romana* structures power and thus forms its subjects seems to involve instilling a normative

¹⁵⁵Granted, the point of the gospel narratives is not to offer an accurate exposition of the world; gospels function very differently than newspapers, for instance, and must not be taken first and foremost as documents to be read literally. The point of invoking Butler's theory, then, is to bridge the interpretive gap between the role of the gospels within the Christian tradition and contemporary experience of the world as it operates.

desire to attain honor through ascending social status and a normative retraction from those occupying positions of lower status. Moreover, the subjection enacted by the Roman Empire would require imperial loyalty and thus for its subjects to assume these norms as given, lest the repetition of its normative structuring of life falter by a subversive traitor. As one subject to this imperial power, Jesus also embodied a stance of submission to God and the way in which the power of God was at work in forming and shaping his identity.

Where these two modes of subjection¹⁵⁶ conflict in the life of Jesus is through his performance of kenosis. Continuing to employ Butler's terminology, Jesus as a subject of the empire, which sought to fashion him in its own image through its norms, could not and did not move outside the empire's subjection. In other words, assumption and thus repetition of the subjecting norms is inevitable; what matters is how he internalized and repeated those norms. The striking aspect of Jesus' repetition is his active—and not simply passive—entrance into Rome's subjection, because his way of assuming and reinscribing its social norms was a life of humility and an embrace of those of lower social status. What his repetition effected was a subversion of those norms, which exposed their fragility to dictate his identity as a subject, even in the humiliation of crucifixion, the moment of imperial victory *par excellence* over another would-be Messiah. Thus Jesus' kenotic assumption of a humble life of obedient service to God at odds with Rome's prescription for acquiring honor paradoxically (and even parodically) subverted and thus nullified the normative power discourse of the empire; by entering into his Roman subjection as one subject to God, Jesus' subjection to God emptied Roman subjection of its power. The ultimate revelation of Jesus' subversive victory, therefore, was the resurrection, in which God exalted his humble performance.

¹⁵⁶Other forces of subjection were likely at work upon the lives of first century Jews and Gentiles. Here I am drawing attention to the two forces that emerge in the scripture passages already examined for rhetorical purposes.

In this way, recalling the threefold function of his kenosis, Jesus subverted and emptied out the imperial power structures that sought to circumscribe social norms, by embracing a kenotic life of humility which eschewed using his equality with God to his own self-interest, to so empty both positions of power and powerlessness of their normativity and seemingly impenetrable boundaries. By enacting subversion through subjection to God, then, Jesus revealed the positive, life-transforming dimension of kenosis, precisely through nullification, for the *telos* of kenosis is to find one's identity in God, allowing the subjection that God enacts to form one as a subject and in turn embracing that God-given identity amid a plethora of potentially competing subjective forces. Ultimately, Jesus' kenosis marks the possibility for subjected subjects and subjecting powers to be redeemed, or, in Butler's language, to be repeated anew.

As we consider the analogously kenotic character of Christian discipleship in terms of subjection, the subversive kenosis of Jesus opens the possibility for Christians to enter into his subjection, in order that the competing modes of subjection at work in our contemporary context would not form and shape us in ways that run contrary to how God is molding our identities. All worldly forms of subjection need not necessarily be opposed to the subjection of God; indeed, the kenosis of Jesus inaugurates the possibility for worldly modes of subjection to be subjected as well to the subjection of God, and thus for their norms and power operations to be reshaped and redirected by the paradoxical power of God. As subjects to God, then, Christians are liberated to face various modes of subjection in this world with fearless discernment, for the power of God revealed in Christ moves into the middle of the worldly power arena in which Christians live, exposing its injurious modes of subjection from within in uncanny ways, and thus creates a path for Christians to inhabit that arena as Jesus did through God's transformation

of their lives. Moreover, as Christ's followers enter into his kenosis, his subjection is repeated anew in such a way that their bodies become sites of the subversive power of God.¹⁵⁷

Nevertheless, does kenosis construed as subjection offer anything helpful to feminist theology? This question has loomed over this project, and I want to conclude by suggesting briefly a few feminist responses to these reflections on kenosis. Initially, I have tried to show how the power of God revealed in kenosis actually liberates the vulnerable and powerless by emptying sociopolitical structures of their destructive power. God's power depicted in Christ undermines the status-driven power of this world not according to the world's power-hungry patterns of thinking and acting (e.g. by military force or domination), but through serving others and giving life to those in bondage. Jesus' wholly other pattern of thinking and acting results in his humiliation and crucifixion because "the world has no place for Jesus,"¹⁵⁸ and God's exaltation of this crucified one nullifies the world's antagonistic pronouncement upon Jesus. Thus, understanding kenosis as subjection affords feminist theology the opportunity and responsibility to proclaim an alternate form of power as characteristic of God, which can appear—or, from the perspective of the gospel narrative, which only appears—in the middle of powerlessness and vulnerability. In this way, feminist theology becomes empowered to expose as false the patriarchal appeal to divine sanctioning of its hegemonic power and to advocate true liberation for women from patriarchal power through the life-transforming, subversive, and redemptive power of God.

¹⁵⁷See Susan F. Parsons' essay for a theological treatment of Butler's theory of subjection in the context of Christian holiness. She says, "For St. Paul, it is in this place ['temporally based vulnerability' or the Pauline 'body of death'] that Christ appears, and thus here that he begins to speak of the dislocation of the subject which takes place as the soul finds its own form to be that of Christ. For Butler to ask whether there is 'a discontinuity between the power presupposed and the power reinstated' is precisely to attend to that moment, that gap, that opening, in which the subject might be dislodged for the birth of a soul into God. For St. Paul to say that this is the place in which I am continually to interpret myself as one who lives 'in Christ' is to hold open that gap into which holiness comes to be born in me" (418). Susan F. Parsons, "Holiness Ungendered," in *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, Continuum, 2003), 402-20.

¹⁵⁸Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 165.

The character of this liberation presses beyond simply normative constructions of gender to strive for liberation within all injurious forms of subjection, including, among others, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, and socioeconomic status and the complex ways these ideological discourses intersect in subjection. Therefore, for feminist theology, kenosis as subjection not only provides a theological arena for decrying destructive patriarchal norms but also destructive modes of racialization, sexual differentiation, and contextual normalization. Broadly speaking, this paradoxical understanding of kenosis can open up transformative, redemptive possibilities for reconciliation between persons and peoples who have been deeply subjected in multiple ways. Just as, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, the poor of Latin America seek “to overcome material insufficiency and misery” for the purpose of “achiev[ing] a more human society,”¹⁵⁹ so feminist theology can discover in Christian kenosis the power to dismantle all injurious hegemonic powers—patriarchy included—for the purpose of embodying and repeating a new way of being human and living together as subjects to God.

Additionally, in light of these wider implications, understanding kenosis as subjection may actually empower particular subjects to repeat subversively the typically problematic gospel language of self-denial. Here Dowd’s commentary is incredibly helpful, because she says, “[The concept of self-denial] does not mean adopting the posture of a doormat by abandoning all sense of self. It does not mean giving up certain pleasures or desires. It means, rather, abandoning all claims to self-definition and accepting and asserting God’s program for and God’s claim upon one’s life.”¹⁶⁰ The call to follow Jesus requires letting go of one’s self-definition, or the ways in which competing powers may define oneself, and instead embracing the way in which God identifies one. Kenosis does not result in a complete loss of self without a simultaneous

¹⁵⁹Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th anniversary rev. ed., trans. and eds. Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 14.

¹⁶⁰Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 89.

reception of one's true identity in God. As Dowd writes, "For a Christian to deny herself, then, is to have the courage to claim her true identity—to be the person God says she is no matter what the cost."¹⁶¹ Self-denial in this light is thus truly empowering because one is not bound to the way in which society's pattern of thinking defines a person; rather, one nullifies the identity which the world imposes on oneself by entering into the life-giving power of God. For someone victimized by one form of subjection or another (or multiple converging powers), self-denial becomes a subversive act, a rejection of how one has been subjected in favor of entering into the liberation of subjection to God in Christ. The kenosis of Jesus thus empowers the powerless to deny their subjected selves and be formed into new persons by the power of God. Such persons need not be subject to the illusion of powerlessness, nor to the death-grip of victimization, for not only do the hegemonic power operations that victimize always already pose the possibility of their very undoing, but also the nature of Christ's kenosis through subjection to God undoes one's victimization *redemptively* as one enters into his kenosis.¹⁶² Self-denial does not merely trade one form of subjection for another, therefore, but instead subverts the subjected self through the paradoxical subjection of God, an operation of a qualitatively different power demonstrated in the resurrection of the vulnerable, kenotic body of Jesus. As a result, self-denial according to the kenosis of Jesus empowers one to become oneself: a self transformed, redeemed, repeated anew.

These brief comments for feminist theological reflection do not diminish the paradoxical nature of kenosis or the struggle to discern which worldly operations of power indeed run

¹⁶¹Ibid.

¹⁶²Here Butler's discussion of injurious language in *Excitable Speech* is helpful for understanding the liberative possibilities of kenotic language in feminist theology, particularly in the face of domestic violence and sexual abuses, both verbal and bodily. Indeed, the kenosis of Christ accomplishes the feat Butler seeks in calling for "language that counters the injuries of speech" and "repeat[s] those injuries without precisely reenacting them" (40). See *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

contrary to the power of God. Letting go of power-hungry, patriarchal patterns of thinking and acting still requires trusting that the power of God is truly and wholly different than the destructive operations of power of this world, just as it necessitates God's deliverance from the devastating and alluring structurings of worldly power. Rather than being defeated by such difficulties, however, if we are serious about the kenotic power of Christ, we will recapitulate them as sites for hope in the eschatological transformation of the whole world, which is always already inscribed in Christ's resurrection and so always already pervades our world while beckoning us toward a liberative, redemptive, and jubilant kenotic future.

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