The Empty Throne: Kenosis, Mediation, and the Politics of Divine Access

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Abstract

This article argues that the Christological doctrine of kenosis (self-emptying), as articulated in Philippians 2:5–11, has a decisive ecclesiological consequence: it abolishes all claims to necessary spiritual intermediaries between God and the believer. By tracing the logic of kenosis through patristic controversies, Pauline self-understanding, Trinitarian theology, and the motif of Lucifer's pride, the article demonstrates that the Son's self-emptying establishes a direct, unmediated relationship between the divine and human. Consequently, church structures are called to continual reform, existing to serve rather than to mediate, in fidelity to the one Mediator. The distinction between mediatorial power, understood as interposing itself as a condition of access to God, and kenotic ministry, serving as a transparent instrument that points away from itself, is examined in detail. A close reading of Paul reveals his adoption of a kenotic self-understanding even when exercising apostolic authority, while Trinitarian theology grounds immediate communion with the Spirit. The Lucifer narrative, interpreted through the Augustinian lens of evil as privation, serves as a warning against reconstituting mediatorial barriers out of pride. At the same time, the article acknowledges that many Christian traditions explicitly defend the necessity of spiritual mediation, grounding their claims in apostolic succession, sacramental priesthood, or the enduring role of ordained office as instituted by Christ. Such traditions often argue that mediation is itself a gift of Christ to the church, safeguarding both the concrete administration of grace and the visible unity of the community. The discussion engages these perspectives, seeking to critically assess their theological reasoning alongside the logic of kenosis presented here. Ultimately, the article concludes that the "no middleman" principle is not anti-institutional but arises directly from Christ's self-emptying love, obligating ecclesial structures to a posture of ongoing kenotic discernment and reform.

Introduction: The Kenotic Imperative and Its Ecclesiological Silence

The Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5–11 is a foundational text for New Testament Christology. It narrates Christ's progression from equality with God, through radical self-emptying and servanthood, to death on a cross and subsequent exaltation. This passage grounds kenotic theology and shapes the community's self-understanding, presenting the narrative as a paradigm for both doctrine and ethical practice. Paul introduces it with an imperative: "Have this mindset among yourselves" (2:5), signaling that the narrative should inform the community's life. Yet its ecclesiological significance is frequently reduced to personal humility and service, leaving institutional structures largely untouched. This article contends that if the Son's self-emptying reveals the manner in which God relates to humanity, then no office or institution may claim to be a necessary channel of grace. The central thesis is that kenosis abolishes spiritual mediation as a power structure, redirecting ministry toward service that points away from itself and toward the one Mediator.

1. Redefining Mediation: Necessary Channel or Kenotic Instrument

The argument turns on a distinction between two modes of ecclesial action: mediation as a power structure and mediation as kenotic service. The former interposes itself between God and the believer, making access to divine grace dependent on submission to a particular office, rite, or institution. The latter serves as a transparent instrument—a witness that facilitates encounter with Christ while continually renouncing any claim to indispensability. This distinction aligns with the logic of the Christ-hymn: the Son's self-emptying is the basis for universal lordship (2:9–11). Authentic Christoform ministry is inherently kenotic, divesting itself of status so that the one Mediator is revealed. Any office that renders itself necessary in a way that eclipses Christ's immediate presence has ceased to serve the One it purports to represent.

This distinction raises an immediate question: what constitutes a claim to be a 'necessary channel'? Many traditions would protest that they do not claim to control grace, but rather to serve as divinely instituted instruments subject to Christ. To clarify, the issue is not institutional mediation per se—sacraments, ordained ministry, or apostolic succession—but the transformation of those instruments into mediatorial structures that withhold grace, create dependency, or elevate the mediator. Throughout church history, these two models have yielded strikingly different outcomes in practice. For example, in the medieval Latin Church, the doctrine of ex opere operato, combined with mandatory priestly confession, often turned the office of the priest into an indispensable channel for salvation, as seen in the withholding of the Eucharist from the laity or the imposition of an interdict against entire communities. By contrast, movements such as the early Franciscans and the Moravians in the eighteenth century emphasized immediate access to Christ and the Spirit, challenging ecclesial monopolies over sacraments and insisting that ministry should facilitate, rather than control, the believer's encounter with God. A Lutheran distinction is

instructive: the means of grace (word, water, bread, wine) are kenotic precisely because they are finite, humble elements bound to Christ's promise, administered by ministers who must themselves decrease. This stands in contrast to a sacerdotal system in which the priest's person or office becomes a necessary link in the chain of salvation. A kenotic church can still say "this is my body" and "I absolve you," but only insofar as the minister's voice is understood as the transparent instrument of Christ's own address, not a personal mediatorial prerogative.

Still, the historical reality is often more complex than a simple opposition of mediatorial and kenotic models. Many movements blend elements of both, incorporating practices and teachings that can simultaneously point toward institutional mediation and express self-emptying service. For example, reform movements within the medieval church, as well as early Lutheran and Anglican contexts, occasionally oscillated between reinforcing necessary structures and affirming immediate access to Christ. This complexity underscores the ongoing need for careful discernment, recognizing that few traditions or periods are wholly one or the other, but often negotiate a contested boundary between mediatorial power and kenotic witness.

The same logic applies to sacramental practice. The Eucharist and baptism are not mere symbols; they are genuine means of grace. But they are kenotic means—Christ present in, with, and under finite elements, given through a minister whose authority is wholly derivative. The danger arises when the rite or its celebrant is treated as a condition without which grace cannot be received, rather than as a divinely given pledge that draws the believer directly into communion with Christ. A kenotic ecclesiology thus does not abolish visible means of grace; it reorients them as transparent witnesses to the one Mediator.

2. The Kenosis Debate: Three Models and a Shared Commitment

The history of kenotic Christology centers on the effort to affirm both the full divinity of the Son and the genuine humanity assumed in the incarnation, including all the limitations of human existence, without loss of divinity. Three broad models have emerged.

Ontological Kenoticism, classically developed by Gottfried Thomasius, holds that the Logos voluntarily relinquished the exercise of relative divine attributes (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence) while retaining essential attributes of holiness, love, and truth. In this view, kenosis involves a genuine self-limitation of the divine being for the duration of the incarnate life.

Functional Kenoticism, associated with P. T. Forsyth, H. R. Mackintosh, and significantly with Karl Barth, maintains that the Son did not surrender any divine attribute but refrained from exercising them independently of the Father. The kenosis is a veiling of glory, not an ontological subtraction. The Son, remaining fully God, lives a genuinely human life by a continuous act of self-restraint, making room for genuine human development and suffering.

Covenantal Kenoticism, advanced by Bruce McCormack, contends that kenosis belongs to the eternal identity of the Son. God's very being is constituted by the eternal decision to be God-for-us in Christ, so that self-emptying is intrinsic to the divine essence. The incarnation is not a temporary condescension but the fullest manifestation of what God always is: self-giving love oriented toward humanity.

Despite their substantial differences, all three models converge on a decisive point: the incarnation reveals a God whose power is perfected in weakness, whose rule is exercised through service, and whose presence is self-giving identification rather than overwhelming domination. This shared commitment grounds the ecclesiological argument. A divine power that empties itself cannot be represented by a church that fills itself with mediatorial privilege. The form of Christ's presence in the world—cruciform, self-emptying, non-dominative—must be the form of all ministry that claims to act in his name.

3. Paul as Test Case: Kenosis or Usurpation?

If kenosis undermines spiritual middlemen, the Apostle Paul presents an immediate test. Did Paul construct a new mediatorial system, using his apostleship to insert himself as a necessary authority between Christ and the churches? His opponents in Galatia and Corinth accused him of being a self-appointed interloper who lacked proper credentials.

Paul's response constitutes a sustained kenotic self-portrait. In 1 Corinthians 15:8–9, he describes himself as "the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle." The resurrection appearance to him is likened to an untimely birth (ektrōma), a metaphor of profound abasement. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he is "the chief of sinners," not a title of proud superlative but the measure of mercy: "I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience" (1:16).

In 2 Corinthians 12, a “thorn in the flesh” is given “to keep me from becoming conceited,” and Paul’s boast is inverted: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (12:9).

Crucially, Paul’s defense of his apostolic authority is never a defense of personal privilege. It is a defense of the direct, unmediated origin of his gospel. In Galatians 1:11–12, he insists, “I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” He pointedly refuses to “confer with flesh and blood” (1:16) and waits three years before visiting Jerusalem. The argument is not “I am above the other apostles,” but “the gospel I preach is not a human product mediated through a chain of command; it comes directly from Christ.”

Yet Paul also exercises significant authority, as he commands, exhorts, and even threatens (1 Cor 4:21), delivers individuals to Satan (1 Cor 5:5), and pronounces anathemas on those who preach another gospel (Gal 1:8–9). Does this not constitute a form of necessary mediation? The answer lies in the kenotic character of his authority. Paul’s binding and loosing are not exercises of personal power but proclamations of the gospel’s own logic. The authority belongs to the word of the cross; the apostle is its servant, not its master. His “rod” is not a mediatorial privilege but a function of the message that judges and saves. When Paul says, “we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20), the emphasis falls on God’s appeal, not on the ambassador’s status. The ambassador is expendable; the message is not.

Thus, Paul’s apostolic identity is not a counterexample to the kenotic abolition of middlemen; it is its most powerful attestation. His entire ministry is structured so that his own agency recedes and Christ’s agency is magnified. His “authority” is a function of the gospel he serves, not a status he occupies. Any reading that transforms Paul into the founder of a new priestly caste fundamentally misreads the kenotic shape of his self-presentation.

4. The Trinitarian Foundation of Immediate Access

The “no middlemen” principle finds its deepest theological ground in the doctrine of the Trinity. The objection that the Trinity itself is a clerical construct—a formula invented at Nicaea to secure episcopal control—must be engaged seriously.

Historically, this objection overlooks the substantial evidence of early Christian devotion. The worship of Jesus as divine alongside the Father is evident in the earliest strata of Christian practice: pre-Pauline creedal fragments (Phil 2:6–11; Rom 1:3–4), the Aramaic invocation Maranatha (1 Cor 16:22), and the triadic baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19—all of which predate the fourth-century councils. The Council of Nicaea did not invent Christ’s divinity; rather, it clarified the doctrine’s relation to the Father in response to the Arian controversy, employing non-biblical terminology (homoousios) to safeguard the biblical witness.

Theologically, the accusation is inverted. The Trinitarian economy is the architecture of immediate access. The Father sends the Son, who becomes human, unites humanity to divinity in his own person, and opens “a new and living way” through his flesh (Heb 10:20). The Son is the one sufficient Mediator (1 Tim 2:5). The Spirit, poured out at Pentecost, indwells every believer, crying “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6), granting direct filial intimacy that requires no additional human intermediary. The very concept of a priestly caste standing between God and the believer is rendered theologically obsolete by the Trinitarian action itself: the Son mediates definitively, the Spirit indwells immediately.

This is not to suggest that ecclesial structures and ordained ministries are either obsolete or dispensable; rather, their ongoing relevance lies in their ability to serve diaconally—as facilitators and witnesses to the presence of Christ—rather than as necessary mediators who stand between God and the believer. Rather, their proper role is to serve diaconally—to facilitate and witness to the presence of Christ—rather than to function as mediators who stand between God and the believer. They serve the Word and sacrament, not as channels without which grace cannot flow, but as witnesses who point to the one Channel who is Christ. When ecclesial office sets itself up as a necessary condition of access to God, it does not actualize Trinitarian theology; it betrays it, reverting to a pre-Christological order of temple and priesthood that the tearing of the temple curtain (Matt 27:51) decisively ended. The “royal priesthood” of all believers (1 Pet 2:9) is not a democratic slogan but a direct consequence of the Spirit’s universal indwelling.

5. The Lucifer Counter-Narrative: Pride as Privation and the Mediation Temptation

If kenosis is the divine movement of self-emptying love that grants immediate access, the Lucifer myth stands as its permanent, negative mirror: the movement of prideful self-exaltation that seeks to reimpose a chain of command. The narrative’s composite scriptural roots—Isaiah 14’s taunt against Babylon’s king, Ezekiel 28’s lament over Tyre, the apocalyptic fall of Satan in Revelation 12—were synthesized by patristic theology into a coherent prototype of superbia. Origen and Tertullian

already identified the Isaiah figure with Satan, a tradition that Jerome's Vulgate later consolidated by rendering Helel ben Shachar as Lucifer, "light-bearer."

The Luciferian sin is precisely the refusal of a kenotic relation. As traditionally narrated, Lucifer, the highest of angels, refused to serve a God who would take on human flesh and, in the incarnation, place creaturely humanity above angelic dignity. His "Non serviam" (I will not serve) is the antithesis of Christ's "I have come not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). Where Christ empties himself and is exalted, Lucifer exalts himself and is cast down. The dynamics are symmetrical and inverse.

To understand why this pride is so destructive, it helps to view evil not as a positive force but as a privation—a corruption of a good nature that ought to function rightly. Drawing on Augustine, evil is the absence of right order in the will. But the Lucifer narrative sharpens this: the fallen angel's mind is not absent; it is present but distorted, exercising rational capacities in the service of an irrational end. Pride is a self-inflicted wound on reason itself. The rational creature, capable of grasping the good, chooses instead a lesser good—self-exaltation—as though it were ultimate, and in doing so, its rationality becomes systematically distorted. This aligns with Hannah Arendt's insight into the banality of evil: it is not demonic hatred but a thoughtlessness that substitutes ideological clichés for genuine moral deliberation, a mind that "chooses wrong" from within a void of authentic reasoning. Systematic distortion creates a pseudo-rational system that justifies injustice, without the agent's full awareness.

For ecclesiology, the Lucifer myth provides a powerful lens for understanding the dynamics of institutional sin. The temptation to transform diaconal service into mediatorial power is the permanent Luciferian temptation of the church. Whenever an ecclesial system elevates its own structures, rites, or officeholders into a necessary conduit of grace—such that relationship with God is deemed impossible without submission to that system—it replicates the movement of pride that the myth depicts and condemns. The distortion of reason is visible in the way such systems construct internally coherent theologies that rationalize mediatorial control while obscuring the immediate access Christ has won. The "no middlemen" principle is thus not an anti-ecclesial slogan but a call to perpetual conversion, a demand that every structure continually empty itself of mediatorial pretensions and return to its diaconal witness.

6. Paul, Peter, and the Community of the Empty Throne

The earliest Christian communities understood themselves, however imperfectly, as a community of unmediated access. The Jerusalem church had leaders, but those leaders did not claim to be indispensable conduits of salvation. Peter identifies himself as a "fellow elder" (sympresbyteros, 1 Pet 5:1). James presides at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, but the letter that emerges is framed as the decision of "the apostles and elders, with the whole church" (Acts 15:22), and its burden is precisely not to impose unnecessary mediatorial requirements on Gentile believers. The Spirit descends upon Cornelius and his household prior to any action from Peter, rendering Peter's subsequent baptism a public recognition of what God has already done—not a prerequisite for receiving the Spirit. Divine initiative is not contingent upon human authorization; ecclesial rites affirm, rather than confer, God's direct gift.

Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:11–14) is instructive. Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentile believers, under pressure from "certain men from James," was not merely a lapse in social etiquette. It was the re-erection of a barrier that the gospel had dismantled, a performative reinstatement of a mediatorial system—circumcision, dietary law, separation—that implied a two-tier access to God. Paul's opposition is not one apostle against another in a contest of authority but one witness for the kenotic gospel against the re-imposition of spiritual middlemen, however unintentional. His argument that justification is "through faith in Jesus Christ… not by works of the law" (Gal 2:16) removes any human performance or institutional ratification as a condition of divine acceptance.

7. Conclusion: The Empty Throne and Permanent Kenotic Discernment

The ascension of Christ, the climax of the kenotic arc of Philippians 2, leaves the church with an empty throne. The one Lord is not absent; he is present by his Spirit. But the structure of his presence is not an institutional replication of his physical authority, delegated to a single vicar or a sacerdotal class. It is a scattered, Pentecostal presence in the body of believers, each one directly united to the Head. The empty throne signifies that no human being may sit in it. All temporal authority in the church is derivative, provisional, and subject to the criterion of kenosis: does it serve the direct access of believers to Christ, or does it impede it?

This criterion does not resolve all ecclesial controversy; it intensifies it. Whether any given structure serves or obstructs access to Christ becomes the central question. Reformation is not a singular event but a permanent posture of communal discernment,

conducted in the light of the one Mediator's self-emptying pattern. The kenotic imperative, read alongside the Luciferian warning, confronts all ecclesial traditions with an ongoing demand for conversion. The "no middlemen" principle is not the abolition of ministry but its radical reorientation. Ministry that empties itself, that refuses to become a gatekeeper, that points constantly away from itself and toward Christ—this is the only ministry that conforms to the form of Christ. The church is a society of servants, not a hierarchy of mediators. Its power is weakness. Its glory is the cross. Its only boast is in the Lord. Its throne is empty, and that emptiness is the space of divine presence.

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