

Bishop Charles Gore



Philippians 2:5 "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross."

As a young seminarian, one of my early heroes was Bishop Charles Gore. Gore was born in 1853 of Anglo-Irish aristocracy. His grandfather was the Earl of Arran, a group of small islands off the west coast of Ireland. Gore was raised in a low-church Irish Anglican family, but was influenced early on by the so-

called Oxford Movement of his day, which stressed the sacramental tradition and ritualism of Anglo-Catholicism. Gore attended Harrow Prep School, and then Balliol College, Oxford. He took First Class Honors in Classical Moderations and in the Greats (philosophy) and was immediately elected a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, in 1875. He was ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England in 1878. In 1880 he became Vice-Principal of Cuddesdon Theological College, the Oxford Diocesan Seminary in a village just outside of town.

After the death of the famous Tractarian, Edward Pusey, a renowned Professor of Old Testament at my old college, Christ Church, Oxford, a library and a study center was established down the street from the college in 1883, known as Pusey House, to house his theological library, and Gore became its first Principal, an honored position he held for 10 years. This appointment, however, raised some serious objections in the minds of many, for Gore was known to be friendly to what was then called 'the Higher Criticism,' a term applied to a type of biblical studies that emerged in mostly German academic circles in the late eighteenth century, and blossomed in English-speaking academies during the nineteenth, and which held non-traditional views on the authorship of some books of the Old Testament, ideas like perhaps Moses did not himself write the five books of the Torah as was the Medieval legend, or that

there was more than one hand penning the scroll of Isaiah, and over a period of time much longer than that of the life of the prophet. Pusey himself had been firmly opposed to this new movement. Alas, this was the beginning of the spread of modern Biblical criticism at English-speaking universities, which so scandalized the Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1889 a stir was created by the publication under Gore's editorship, of *Lux Mundi*, a series of essays by different writers attempting to bring the Christian faith into line with the modern growth of scientific, historic, and critical knowledge in regards to politics, ethics, and religion. What chiefly outraged Gore's critics was his adoption of what is called the Kenotic Theory of the Incarnation, based upon this morning's reading from St. Paul. The Greek word *Kenosis* means "emptying" and is used in Philippians 2:7, where Jesus 'emptied' himself, taking up the form of a slave. Gore put forward the controversial suggestion that Jesus, when he emptied himself and took upon himself the limitations of our human nature, he also accepted the limitations of our human knowledge, and that therefore, when Jesus spoke (for example) of the Flood in Genesis, he was simply accepting the common assumptions of his day, and not ours, in the light of emerging modern geological studies and the writings of Darwin. Gore suggested that the reader is not bound to accept those assumptions of Jesus as

necessarily correct, which may be why, for instance, Jesus elsewhere misquoted the scriptures in Mark's Gospel (2:23-8). For to err is human.

Not surprisingly, many readers of that time found this view completely unacceptable, as somehow denying Jesus' divinity. Gore's book was widely read and disputed over, as cheap, popular editions were soon available. Two years later, Gore was invited to deliver the annual Bampton Lecture Series at Oxford, and he welcomed the opportunity to clarify his position and reassure his listeners of his fundamental orthodoxy. The Lectures were delivered in Lent, 1891, in the University Church of Oxford, St. Mary the Virgin, to a capacity crowd. Listeners, we are told, filled the pews, stood in the aisles, and sat on the steps of the chancel and the pulpit. A few months later, the lectures were published in book form. The Bampton Lectures led to such a volatile situation among biblical scholars of that day, that Gore resigned as principal of Pusey House in 1893, accepting the position of a simple parish vicar in the village of Radley near Oxford. Nonetheless, in 1911 he became Bishop of Oxford. Yet so troubling were his views still for some, that Pope Pius XII himself personally actually condemned this particular interpretation of Philippians in a papal decree in 1951.

Philippians 2 is sometimes used to explain the human side of Jesus's existence. In the first three centuries of early

Christianity, some groups propounded beliefs of a fully human Jesus who was just especially honored and raised up by God as an anointed one (later called the heresy of adoptionism), while other groups argued for a fully divine Jesus that was more like a celestial being than a man (the heresy of docetism). The Chalcedonian doctrine as accepted at the Council of Nicaea that eventually prevailed was that Jesus had a dual nature, and was both fully human and fully God, and this passage is a crucial part of that argument.

Kenotic Christology essentially states that in order to truly live a human experience, Jesus, despite perhaps being a preexisting divine person, voluntarily humbled himself. He could still perform miracles, heal the sick, and dispense reliable moral doctrine, but was not using divine might to resolve all of his problems as a mortal, as he struggled through all the usual human labors. Thus, Jesus needed to sleep and eat; was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness; could become frustrated at fig trees not being in season; stated that no one knows the day or hour of the end of the world; and so on. Jesus, in Gore's view, still had a pre-incarnate divine nature, but he had 'emptied' himself of that, and was thus fully human, and therefore fallible in his human speaking and thinking.

Modern biblical scholarship is less interested in what the early Church fathers made of this passage and are much more

interested in what St. Paul really meant in writing these words. Paul was seen by scholars as a good Jew, a monotheist, focused on understanding Jesus as the expected Messiah and interpreting his death as a means of atonement for our sins. My own New Testament professor in seminary wanted to go even further than Gore, he wanted to argue that St. Paul had no concept whatsoever of a pre-incarnate Jesus. Jesus, for Paul, was simply the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one sacrificed for our sins. The interpretation of Philippians 2:7, where Jesus is described as having "emptied himself", was not primarily Paul putting forth a theory about God in this passage but was using Jesus' humility exhibited in the incarnation as a call for Christians to be similarly subservient to others. My professor interpreted these words to say for Paul that Jesus was in the 'form' of God in the same that we all are, for according to the Scriptures we are all made in the image or form of God, as my Jewish friends will quickly affirm. But that Jesus, in his humility, 'emptied' himself of even this, not exploiting this aspect of our common humanity, but focusing instead on the 'image or form' of a slave, as one who lives to serve others. And so, Paul wants us to have this mind in us as Christians, that was in Jesus. This is not a grand theological statement about the nature of the incarnation, as the Nicene Fathers later argued, but was simply an ethical statement as to how we are to live our lives as

Christians, we are to 'empty' ourselves of all claims of superiority and live as slaves with one another, as people who serve others, to the point of death, even death upon the cross.

But alas that kind of Christian ethic can be frightening to us. Better to interpret this as a theological statement and leave well enough alone, say many. Yet, modern Biblical criticism, as our Adult Bible Study can bear witness, struggles to understand the words of Scripture within their own context, within their actual tradition, and real-life situation. Modern biblical study wants to understand the culture at the time of writing, to identify the intended audience, and the circumstances of the text. For many, this is perceived even today as a threat to the veracity of our Scriptures. But for others, it is an intent to understand the mind of our biblical authors, and the real meaning of their words. And I suggest that there is no better example of this modern-day struggle with Biblical interpretation than the more than a century of arguments over this simple passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. AMEN.