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‘Is that nice woman a Catholic?’: Ecumenism, kenosis and intercession

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between kenosis as a spiritual disposition, and intercession as making space to welcome others. Autobiographical episodes of ecumenical encounter, positive and negative, seek to earth theological reflection on kenotic intercession in lived experience of inter-church relations over a lifetime of ministry. It argues that self-giving love expressed in intercession, makes welcoming space into which others are invited and heard. This creates a context within which ecumenical relationships can be more hopefully nurtured. The correlation of kenosis and intercession arises from attentiveness to John 17, Philippians 2 and Ephesians 4.

‘Is that nice woman a Catholic?’ The question was asked with just enough incredulity to get my attention as a nine-year-old boy in my gran’s house. In central Lanarkshire’s mining and heavy engineering communities in the late 1950s, sectarian culture was the default position for the majority of folk who went to church. Ignorance, urban myth, experiences at school including schools segregated on the basis of religion, and competition for work and employment, had long combined to create and sustain a social culture split along religious lines latent with acrimony. The hate liturgies chanted at certain football matches were battle cries, a mass affirmation of agreed hostilities, assumed otherness, mutual suspicion and religious intolerance that often had less to do with keeping the faith (of whichever hue) than with finding identity in satisfyingly negative terms by defining

and decrying those who are other.

Fast forward to 1967 when, as one with no church background, I was converted in the conservative evangelical context of a Lanarkshire Baptist church. A confused teenager expelled from school and on probation, I found in Christ an inner renewal of purpose and direction, and new sources of motive and affection. Very soon after, I began to pick up my education and follow the strange but persistent sense of call to Christian ministry. I went back to night school in the full flush of evangelical experience to fast-track Scottish Higher qualifications.

At the first meeting of the English evening class I walked into a room containing a teacher and five nuns. That was the class. Following Vatican II, many of those in enclosed orders were beginning to pursue external educational opportunities. Asked by the senior Sister (Theresa) why I was taking the class, I 'witnessed', 'gave my testimony', and said I wanted to share the Gospel of Jesus and be a Baptist minister. Young, naïve, passionate with evangelical certainties, I was assured by Sister Theresa that she and the Sisters would light a candle for me, and pray each day that we would all pass our exams and be able to serve our Saviour better. For the duration of that class I was treated with kindness, and shared in the laughter and hard work of getting our heads round Shakespeare's *Othello*, Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and the war poems of Wilfred Owen. That was my first exposure to ecumenical co-operation in 1960s Lanarkshire – the kindness of nuns and the fun of learning together.

Within 50 yards of the Baptist church I had joined was the Loyal Orange Lodge hall where the flute band regularly practiced. There were nights when the times of open prayer at the Wednesday prayer meeting were accompanied by the quite audible sounds of drums and flutes playing 'party tunes', those anthems of militant Protestantism. During those first months of pursuing my call to ministry, I found myself trying to hold together two apparent irreconcilables – Evangelicalism with deep antipathy to Roman Catholicism, and personal relationships in a classroom of Catholic nuns.

How to be faithful to the Gospel, yet open to others

The cultural and social rootedness of sectarian attitudes, powerful and pervasive on both sides, gain added intensity when given theological justification. What was at stake for Evangelicals was the basis of salvation,

faithfulness to Scripture, and convictions about the nature of the Gospel and the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross. On theological grounds, many Evangelicals displayed deep aversion to the Mass and the perceived worship of Mary, and expressed outright rejection of the system of Roman Catholicism and the Papacy as in any sense congruent with the New Testament doctrine of the Church. Such theological differences were commonplace assumptions informing what it meant to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Anti-Catholic rhetoric was routinely approved in the popular piety of the church in which I had found faith in Christ.

As I began reflecting on my own experience of Christ, reading and studying the Bible, I gradually formed a theology and spirituality of my own. I could see that wide doctrinal divergences and serious theological differences between, for example, Baptists and Catholics, were real, deep and freighted with strongly held convictions. The dilemma has always been how to be faithful to the Gospel, yet open to others whose love for Christ was expressed in a very different theology. What fellowship could there be with those whose faith was expressed and embodied in forms of worship and practice quite foreign to the 'simple gospel' as many Baptists understood it? How to look sympathetically on ceremonial traditions alien to most Baptists nourished and nurtured by a strict diet of non-liturgical, Word-centred worship, fuelled by intensely personal and identity-conferring evangelical experience?

The search for an answer to such ecumenical dilemmas requires painful honesty about our own prejudices, insecurities, strident certainties and spiritual self-interest.[1] Much has happened in my own ecumenical journey of fifty-plus years since those shared English classes with five nuns, and prayer meetings with flute band accompaniment. Often I have felt, and perhaps contributed to, the frustrations, misunderstandings, theological deal-breakers, and organisational defence mechanisms, that get in the way of healthy and mutual commitment to a Christian unity of heart, mind and purpose.

Often there has been a deficit of will and motivation in the key strategies of bridge-building and good communication. Such strategies

[1] During the Inter-Church Process in the late 1980s, at a conference in St Andrews, one Bishop startled the plenary session with the plea, 'We must impale ourselves on the twin horns of the ecumenical dilemma.' I was sitting beside the late Rev Professor Donald Macleod, whose mirth was all but uncontained!

include: the pursuit of mutual respect through intentional willingness to dialogue towards understanding; self-expending love for others whose experience of and ways of following Jesus differ markedly from our own; openness to missional co-operation where that is possible. Such dispositions and inner commitments to spiritual unity seem hard enough to achieve, without even, or ever, raising the spectre of structural forms of union.

Within my own tradition of Scottish Baptists, when it comes to ecumenical engagement there remains widespread and deep resistance to committed ecumenical relationships at the official denominational level. This is especially strong where forms of structural union are considered both a desirable and definite long-term goal. Any form of organisational unity which aims at more developed forms of structural union between churches of differing doctrinal persuasions, was rejected by the Baptist Union of Scotland at the Assembly of 1989. That decision was in response to the Inter-Church Process which culminated in the establishing of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS). As of 2023, the Baptist Union of Scotland remains unaffiliated to ACTS, and the Baptist voice absent from interdenominational conversations within the Scottish ecumenical instrument.[2] At the same time, and in keeping with Baptist polity and the principle of the autonomy of the local church, many Scottish Baptist churches are significantly involved in local ecumenical initiatives and collaborative projects with varying degrees of engagement, many of them creative, co-operative and fruitful in mission.[3]

‘That all of them may be one, Father …’ (John 17:21)

During the half-century since my conversion my personal journey has been along paths open to co-operative and missional commitments. Like many other Baptists, I have prayed for an openness of mind and heart in ecumenical relations that is able to co-exist with reflective affirmation of,

[2] For a personal but deeply informed account of Scottish Baptist ecumenical relations, see T. Watson Moyes, *Our Place Among the Churches: Scottish Baptist Ecumenical Relations in the Twentieth Century: From Principled Denominationalism to Evangelical Separateness* (s.l.: Scottish Baptist History Project, 2013). The recent death of Watson Moyes was a significant loss to our Scottish Baptist community.

[3] See Moyes, *Our Place* for a detailed example of positive ecumenical shared projects: 118–20.

and continuing examination of, my own Baptist convictions. This raises again the ecumenical dilemma. How can a Christian sustain an ecumenical spirit of openness while remaining true to one's own peculiar faith experience of Christ, one's identity-conferring denominational principles which I hold as convictions, and real doctrinal differences on core matters of belief and practice? How, out of such a matrix of ecclesial and personal tensions, can we create fruitful and even healing conversations over far-reaching theological differences, a shared cultural history of antipathy and misunderstanding, and at worst a difficult to ignore mutual suspicion of each other's motives?

Which brings me to another stage in my education towards ecumenical commitment. After completing an Arts degree in philosophy, my vocational training was in the Baptist Theological College of Scotland, 1974–76. I spent a year going through the Gospel of John in Greek, using the now venerable commentary of C. K. Barrett.[4] That is where I encountered John 17, and the prayer of Jesus, that ubiquitous text underpinning much ecumenical aspiration. Jesus prayed for the unity of all his followers. 'I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you' (John 17:20–21).

These words don't occur on the lips of Jesus in one of John's set-piece arguments with opponents. On the contrary. In one of his most intimate moments of communion with the Father, the Word made flesh articulates the loving union of Father and Son. Jesus' petition stands as an unarguable and inescapable revelation of the will of the Church's Lord. In measured exegesis Barrett gives full weight to the theological and ecclesial implications of Jesus' prayer. The following words are still underlined in my now near antique copy:

> The church's unity is not merely a matter of unanimity, nor does it mean that the members severally lose their identity. The unity of the church is strictly analogous to the unity of the Father and the Son […] The Father and the Son are one and yet remain distinct. The believers are to be, and are to be one, in the Father and the Son, distinct from God, yet abiding in God, and themselves the sphere

[4] C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction, with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: S.P.C.K., 1976).

> of God's activity […]. [Such a community] reveals the pattern of the divine activity which constitutes the Gospel.[5]

Barrett's exposition explains further how the nascent community of believers, and all who will subsequently follow, will fulfil their mission as witnesses to the supernatural realities, through and within which each community of Christ is constituted. The true Church is not one denomination or tradition. It is a community of communities, sent as witnesses to the world of the love, obedience and glory of Jesus. It is essentially a community called into being to embody and demonstrate the union of Father, Son and Spirit. 'The world is to be invited, through the witness of the Holy Spirit and of the disciples, to enter this circle of prayer and love.'[6]

A more recent commentary on John is equally insistent that Jesus' prayer for unity places the deepest obligations on his followers to realise in themselves, and conserve within and between their varied communities, this prayer of the Son to the Father. 'If this is the unqualified, ultimate desire of Jesus at the climactic moment of his mission, then all who trust and follow Jesus should join with him in desiring it, praying for it, and orienting our lives and communities towards it.'[7]

John 17 remains a text that still retains the power to unsettle, inspire and humble all who claim allegiance to Jesus. The priestly prayer of Jesus challenges complacency and relaxed dispositions of contentment with disunity of spirit, rebukes feelings of mutual disregard, and disqualifies the far too confident assumptions of any tradition making exclusive claims intended to disenfranchise other believing followers and disciples of Jesus.

If Barrett and Ford's exegesis is correct, then the follower and believer in Christ cannot assent to a view of other Christians which considers them less than brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout decades of pastoral ministry and ecumenical engagement, my commitment to ecumenism has been a process of continuing education and inner discipline, a broadening of sympathy beyond my own denomination and my personal comfort zones, and a quite intentional willingness to enter into dialogue with those whose convictions and faith experience are different, at times very

[5] Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 512.

[6] Barrett, 510.

[7] David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 348.

different, from my own. This is my faith seeking understanding, one Christian faith tradition attempting to understand another – with charity, integrity and humility.

For such dialogue to be in good faith, there has to be an underlying assumption of common ground and mutual trust, especially where differences are real, acknowledged and respected. Each Christian is called to embody and enact Paul's prayer, pursuing the vision of shared joy in the love of God: 'With deep roots and firm foundations, may you *in company with all God's people* be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, and to know it though it is beyond knowledge.'[8] No single denomination or tradition has the capacity to do that.

What then might be the route of travel to arrive at Paul's vision of all God's people organically rooted in the same love, and established upon the same foundation of far-reaching and all-embracing love? How might the fragmented diversity of Christian traditions come to grasp and know the love of the Lord who first prayed 'that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you'?

'Cultivate this mind-set in your community'

As I have pondered those questions over years of ministry and ecumenical fellowship, and against the background of those early formative experiences woven into my story above, two theological concepts have grown in significance. These are kenosis as self-giving love in consideration of the other, and intercession as that love expressed in prayer.

How might kenosis as a theological predicate of love, divine and human, shape the form, content and costliness of a ministry of prayer for the unity of God's people? Evelyn Underhill – scholar of mysticism, spiritual retreat leader, and an influential if sometimes maverick voice within and beyond the Church of England – frequently spoke of intercession as loving others in the presence of God. I am interested in the nature of that love, its relation to the God in whose presence prayer is offered, and the relevance of kenosis in tackling stubborn ecumenical stalemates.

[8] Ephesians 3:17–19. Emphasis mine.

Specifically, how might a kenotic theological disposition help us create within ourselves, and amongst the wide family of Christian churches, welcoming space for fruitful ecumenical encounter? In what ways could a theology of prayer as kenotic intercession support and sustain, question and keep honest, make fruitful and more generous, our ecumenical hopes and endeavours, dialogues and conversations, projects and prayers?

For each of us, our own denominational distinctives, theological convictions, and ecclesial traditions passionately held, may seem to us like faithfulness. But to others such a standpoint may feel and read more like intransigence. Intercession as kenosis is a form of intentional love reaching out to the other in the presence of God, seeking expressions of union in Christ that transcend intransigence and enable growth in trust and appreciation. Yet the complexity of inter-church relations, the tensions between convictions and concessions, the fear of compromise, and shared histories that may have legacies of lost trust, often frustrate our best intentions.

Is it conceivable that self-giving love expressed in prayer for the other might enable a more constructive realignment of ultimate loyalties before God? Kenotic intercession brings together two theological terms freighted with both promise and demand. This is especially true where relationships are difficult, differences are real, and histories of misunderstanding have become stories of hurt, forcing the question whether well-intended ecumenical engagement can survive a cost-benefit analysis.

It is precisely this sense of impasse that raises one of the more uncomfortable questions in all ecumenical relations and encounters. It is the question of motive, of what matters most, what is desired by each participant in the conversation, and what will be asked of us, and will we be able to give it? P. T. Forsyth, that astringent maverick theologian of the Cross, provides a way towards an answer. When we pray for others, 'trusting the God of Christ, and transacting with him, we come into tune with men [and women]. Our egoism retires before the coming of God, and into the clearance there comes with our Father our brother' (and sister, we might add).[9]

Kenosis as a theological term traditionally belongs within the study of Christology. But it serves also as an ethical and spiritual discipline, deeply and radically transformative of attitudes, behaviour and relationships within

[9] P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London: Independent Press, 1954), 11.

the Church. Indeed the term kenosis is embedded in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2, and is the master key to Paul's argument and plea for unity in the Church. Michael Gorman translates Philippians 2:6 as 'Cultivate this mind-set in your community, which is in fact a community in Christ Jesus […]'[10] The passage goes on to describe the narrative of Christ who did not grasp at equality with God, but emptying himself, taking human form, he became obedient even to death on the cross. The paradigm of the kenotic mind-set is definitively demonstrated in this cruciform journey of Jesus, and it is that mind-set which Paul urges on the Philippian Christians as the preferred ethos within which relationships are to be conducted, healed and sustained. It is intriguing to imagine Paul's words as an ice-breaker at ecumenical discussions: 'In humility count others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.'[11]

The relevance of a kenotic mind-set to ecumenical encounters, conversations, relationships, and projects, each of which can be seriously undermined by defensive denominational self-interest, is well worth exploring. Underhill makes this connection between intercession and kenotic love explicit: 'Self-offering, loving, unconditional and courageous, is therefore the first requirement of true intercessory prayer.'[12] Yes, but how to cultivate ways of responding to other Christian traditions with whom we differ, which are characterised by unconditional and courageous self-offering in love? Does Forsyth's point hold for denominations too; is there such a thing as denominational egoism?

The contrast between self-love, and self-giving love, is memorably described by Frederick Buechner, with characteristic wit and bite: 'Self-love, or pride, is a sin when, instead of leading you to share with others the self you love, it leads you to keep your "self" in perpetual safe-deposit. You not only don't accrue any interest that way, but become less and less interesting every day.'[13] Often in the more fractious ecumenical

[10] Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 20–25.

[11] See Philippians 2:1–4.

[12] Evelyn Underhill, "Life as Prayer", in *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946), 68.

[13] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1973), 73.

exchanges, disagreements emerge over matters of principle and conviction. Precisely then there is the danger that what we consider most important in our denominational and personal identity is held 'in perpetual safe-deposit.' Then the call is to take risks, to become vulnerable in relation to 'the other', and to pray for them and for ourselves as an act of kenotic intercession.

Kenotic intercession and the hospitality of the heart

The scandal of Christian divisiveness, caused by self-love overwhelming the call to self-giving love, risks serious harm to the Body of Christ. It is this concern that gives urgency to deeper consideration of the efficacy of kenotic intercession as enabling and enhancing Christian relationships and inter-church relations. A good starting point might be Bonhoeffer's remarkable Finkenwalde manifesto, *Life Together*. This slim book, hammered out on a typewriter over four weeks, distils Bonhoeffer's teaching and spiritual direction in a community of pastors in training. The context was the German Church crisis. The community was inevitably under pressure from without, while engaged in intense spiritual study and practices within. Conflict and resentments simmered, with consequent dangers of cliques and divisions. Bonhoeffer's response is severely practical and instinctively pastoral. He describes intercession as 'the pulsing heart of all Christian life in unison.' He goes on:

> A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.[14]

Intercession thus becomes an act of kenosis, the creation of a space within ourselves to welcome others, as one forgiven sinner offering the hospitality of the heart to another. Kenotic intercession is both discipline and grace; it requires our obedience and our receptiveness to the self-

[14] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954), 65.

giving love of God, while also demanding our responsiveness to the living Christ within us. To be in Christ, and Christ in us, is a state of being that already joins us with all who are also and already in Christ.

That astonishingly hopeful verse in Romans 5:5 describes the process by which *kenosis* becomes *plerosis*:[15] 'Hope does not disappoint us because God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.' The inner reality of God's gift of love, and its overflow in prayer for others, informs Forsyth's theology of prayer. An admiring student of Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, he echoes Goodwin's theology of prayer in and through Christ: 'as there are thoughts that seem to think themselves in us, so there are prayers that pray themselves in us. […] For it is Christ at prayer within us, and we are conduits of the Eternal Intercession.'[16]

When prayer for others as an act of kenosis becomes a spiritual habit, a formative discipline, an intentional and humble loving of others in the presence of God, it becomes a spiritual prolegomenon to ecumenical engagement. Over time, regular praying for our wider Christian family of brothers and sisters for whom Christ died, may grow into a settled disposition of hospitality and welcome. Kenotic intercession creates a default position of friendship towards those whose faith tradition differs from, and even seems strange, to our own experience. Writing on his personal devotional life, R. H. Gundry, an evangelical biblical scholar shared his regular intercessory list, which included 'other teachers of scripture with whom I sometimes disagree.'[17] This is one individual example of prayer as kenosis, a form of loving others in the presence of God.

By way of conclusion: Truth and love

A key moment in my own experience of ecumenical affairs came as a representative of Scottish Baptists during the Inter-Church Process in Scotland, which culminated in the formation of ACTS in 1989. At the denominational Assembly I was invited by the Baptist Union Council to second the motion for Scottish Baptists to become associate participants

[15] *Plerosis* refers to fullness, in contrast to the self-emptying of *kenosis.*
[16] Forsyth, *Soul of Prayer*, 15.
[17] https://spoiledmilks.com/2019/10/15/a-scholars-devotion-robert-gundry/.

in ACTS. The summary of my contribution recorded in the Assembly minutes touches on key themes of the present essay:

(1) Freedom and toleration: Loving tolerance requires the humility to recognise the limits of our understanding and experience, and the validity of others' experience of Christ.

(2) Truth and love: none of us can claim to understand all the truth of the Gospel. The love of God in Christ is the model of our love in commitment, loyalty, and costly self-giving, and humble awareness of each other.

(3) Grace and fellowship under the cross: wherever else we differ, as Christians we gather together under the cross, worshipping the same Saviour.[18]

Reading these words 34 years later, they still articulate the spirit that I trust informs my own ecclesiology and ecumenical instincts. They encapsulate what Donald MacKinnon called, 'a more inclusive, if much more costly, charity.'[19] MacKinnon frequently encouraged the cultivation of a mind-set geared to kenotic charity in interpreting the theology and practice of other Christians, because failure to do so results in 'our present hesitancies, follies and uncharities in the field of Christian co-operation.'[20]

MacKinnon knew exactly the place where that costly charity, in all its divine and human yearning, is most plainly articulated, and he urged those called to be ambassadors of Christ to regularly find their way there. 'It is for the Christian preacher to stand himself in the shadow of the Cross, to catch there the music of God's promise and joy, of his abiding purpose of love there fulfilled.'[21]

Likewise, the Christian ecumenist must stand in the shadow of the cross, alongside all who like themselves, are forgiven sinners, and to look each other in the face as those for whom Christ died. To think with charity about those from whom we differ in faith and practice, to cultivate 'self-

[18] Moyes, *Our Place*, 98.

[19] Timothy Connor, *The Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald McKinnon's Theology: From Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 99.

[20] Connor, *Kenotic Trajectory*, 54.

[21] Connor, 135.

offering love, unconditional and courageous', to stand before God so that 'egoism retires before the coming of God, and into the space comes our Father and our brothers and sisters', to know the love of God poured into our hearts and overflowing in the loving actions of listening and serving; such spiritual exercises train us towards the desire of Christ that we all may be one as He and the Father are one.

The reflections in this essay are not offered as yet another ecumenical strategy; rather, they are a call to cultivate an ecumenical spirituality, to create ecclesial topsoil into which seeds of trust can be planted, and out of which a spirit of unity can grow. That such generosity of mind and charity of heart is possible, is demonstrated in the courageous words of Thomas Goodwin, one of Forsyth's heroes, a Calvinist puritan of more irenic spirit than many of his contemporaries.

> I never yet took up party religion in the lump. For I have found by a long trial of such matters that there is some truth on all sides. I have found Gospel holiness where you would little think it to be, and so likewise truth. And I have learned this principle, which I hope I shall never lay down till I am swallowed up in immortality, and that is, to acknowledge every truth and every goodness wherever I find it.[22]

[22] Alexander Whyte, *Thirteen Appreciations* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1913), 169.