

A kenotic ecclesiology

By [Douglass Key](#)

June 25, 2012

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Key's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” When Paul appeals to the self-emptying nature of Christ as one of the central Christian impulses for generosity, he is ringing a familiar chord. Generosity for the Corinthians is grounded in self-emptying in much the same way that joy and worship are grounded in self-emptying for the Philippians.

Paul is eager for all of the churches to know the character of Christ, and to reflect that character into the world. This is the life that Christ has called us into and invites us to take up and share. We are, in every way, a people gathered and formed by a self-emptying God.

At a time of considerable anxiety about the church's diminished influence in the culture at large, a word about self-emptying, about kenosis, is perhaps in season. It is tempting to respond to statistical reports and demographic profiles with resignation and despondency. The urge to sit around lamenting what used to be possible for us is strong. We miss the relevance and influence; we miss the security of being the host culture.

But we are gathered and formed by a God who became intentionally and explicitly poor for our sake. There is no reason to believe that the body of Christ should be any less emptied of self than the body of Jesus was in Nazareth. Perhaps a kenotic ecclesiology is a healthy corrective for the triumphant notions of what it has long meant to be the people of God. Perhaps an exile from the corridors of power is an appropriate perspective from which the church can bear an authentic witness to the

gospel.

Disentangled from cultural sponsorship, the church can celebrate new opportunities. A self-emptied body of Christ is free of the divided loyalties and compromised commitments that are demanded by those who would confer worldly glory in exchange for a divine endorsement. Such a kenotic church is free to proclaim the gospel and demonstrate the reign of God more faithfully and honestly.