

# What is Kenotic Communication?

**KENOTIC COMMUNICATION** is a servanthood style of communication that seeks the betterment of the other party. Kenotic comes from the Greek word 'kenosis' which means "to empty"; its primary reference is in Philippians 2 in the poetic hymn that pre-dates the Gospels and sums up Jesus' incarnation and death. **Philippi** is a Roman military outpost, and Paul is keenly aware of how the cultural values of status and self-promotion can influence the fledgling church. In his plea for the new community members to avoid the base habits of rivalry and vainglory, Paul presents the descending Christ as providing the ultimate pattern for relational humility that gives new life to others. Framing this passage are exhortations to be united, to not argue, and to prize the interests of the others over your own. Without emptying ourselves of our default sense of self-importance, even our communication patterns of speaking and listening will be self-serving.



**THE RELATIONAL CHRIST VIRTUES.** By inviting the Philippians to follow the pattern of emptying oneself for the sake of the other, Paul is basically schooling them in the relational virtues that Jesus embodied in his life and teachings, but also in his death. There is a *cruciform shape* to the way we let go of things, die a bit to our ego, and allow new life to arise for the other person. This dying and rising aspect is evident in all of the Christ virtues that promote healthy relationships:

Humility Compassion Kindness Meekness  
Patience Forbearance Forgiveness Love

**APPLICATION TO COMMUNICATION.** When these concepts of living out the Christ virtues are applied to our communication, there are a number of speech practices that emerge out of this approach. But the heart of all these practices is **listening**. When our listening is deep and authentic, then our speech responses to others will have the same depth and authenticity. In short, if we truly listen from the heart we will respond from the heart. But again, we have to empty ourselves of those grasping tendencies to leverage conversations toward our own gain.

“...did not count equality as a thing to be *grasped*...”

### THREE PRIMARY KENOTIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. **THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** Gives the other the assurance of being heard well and invites the other to go deeper
2. **THE QUESTION:** Keeps the conversational center of gravity with the other person and honors their input and perspective
3. **THE RESTRAINT:** Pausing more often or remaining silent shows that you are not needing to control the conversation

Instead of operating out of our usual **mindless**, auto-pilot speech patterns, all three of these skills involve a **mindfulness** that promotes a life-giving dynamic within any conversation. Rather than sucking things toward ourselves, our listening and speaking can be a ‘giving-forth’ that ends up being good for us and others.



(The term ‘kenotic communication’ was first coined by Ted Lewis in 2002 and was first published in his article in the Mennonite in 2008, linkable in this website.)