

The Paradox of the Servant King: Kenosis, Pastoral Praxis, and Christological Mystery in John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul

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Abstract

This study examines the doctrine of kenosis through the theological perspectives of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul by adopting a comparative, empirical, and theological approach. Derived from the Greek term κένωσις, meaning “self-emptying” or “voluntary humiliation,” kenosis finds its primary biblical foundation in Philippians 2:5–11, where Christ is portrayed as voluntarily humbling Himself by assuming human nature while remaining fully divine. The research is situated within the framework of contemporary Reformed Christology and aims to analyze the convergences, divergences, and doctrinal implications of MacArthur’s and Sproul’s interpretations. The methodology employed is qualitative, analytical, and documentary in nature. The study is based on the examination of theological writings, biblical commentaries, sermons, and lectures produced by both authors. Major theological references, including Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, and classical Christological traditions, are also incorporated in order to situate the discussion within broader contemporary theological debates. The collected data were analyzed through a comparative thematic method designed to identify the principal doctrinal categories related to kenosis. The findings reveal that MacArthur and Sproul share several fundamental theological convictions: the full divinity of Christ during the incarnation, the voluntary nature of kenosis, and its central role in the economy of salvation. Nevertheless, important differences emerge regarding their theological emphases. MacArthur primarily develops a pastoral and ethical interpretation of kenosis, emphasizing humility, obedience, and the imitation of Christ in Christian life. Sproul, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the Christological and soteriological mystery of the incarnation, highlighting the dynamic relationship between humiliation and glorification. The study concludes that kenosis is a multidimensional theological concept integrating Christology, soteriology, spirituality, ecclesiology, and Christian ethics. It remains a crucial resource for contemporary theological reflection as well as for the pastoral and spiritual life of the Church.

Keywords

Kenosis; Christology; incarnation; John MacArthur; R. C. Sproul; reformed theology; christian humility



I. Introduction

The theological inquiry into the concept of kenosis represents one of the most intellectually complex, deeply contested, and systematically determinative loci within both New Testament exegesis and modern systematic christology. Derived from the ancient Greek verb κενόω, which literally means "to empty," "to strip of wealth or status," or "to

abase," the conceptual framework of κένωσις essentially delineates the voluntary, historical movement of Christ's self-abasement within the unfathomable mystery of the incarnation. Its classical biblical-theological formulation is firmly anchored in the pre-Pauline christological hymn found in the epistle to the Philippians 2:5–11. In this foundational locus classicus, Paul of Tarse depicts Christ Jesus as one who, eternally existing and subsisting in the very form of God (en morphē Theou), deliberately chose not to exploit His divine equality for selfish advantage, but instead divested Himself of His heavenly status by assuming the real ontological condition of a servant (morphē doulou), thereby submitting to human historical contingency even unto the ultimate physical and social degradation of the Roman cross (Fee, 2007; Gorman, 2009). Within contemporary scholarship, this passage operates not merely as a dogmatic pinnacle of New Testament literature, but also as a critical exegetical nexus where structural grammar, salvation history, relational soteriology, and Christian ethics intersect to define the character of the Christian deity (Bird, 2021 ; Wright, 2013).

Derived from the Greek term κένωσις, meaning 'self-emptying' or 'voluntary humiliation,' kenosis finds its primary biblical foundation in Philippians 2:5–11. While historical and systematic theology often parses this hymn to resolve ontological questions regarding Christ's dual nature, contemporary scholarship increasingly underscores its role as an operative blueprint and foundational model for the Christian life (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024).

From the patristic era onward, the historical and hermeneutical trajectory of kenosis has catalyzed rigorous dogmatic debates regarding the exact ontological interface between the divine and human natures coexisting in the single person of Jesus Christ. The ancient christological controversies, which culminated in the hypostatic formulations of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, sought to safeguard the integrity of Christian orthodoxy by affirming the simultaneous preservation of Christ's full, uncompromised deity and His genuine, complete humanity without division, without change, without separation, and without confusion (Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019). However, modern and contemporary systematic theology has fundamentally re-interrogated this kenotic question, shifting the interpretive focus toward the specific ontological, functional, and existential parameters of the divine Logos's self-abasement (MacLeod, 1998). Nineteenth-century German kenotic theologians, most notably exemplified by Thomasiaus (1853–1861), pioneered the controversial thesis that the Logos voluntarily abdicated, suspended, or laid aside the exercise of certain relative divine attributes—such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence—during His earthly state of humiliation (status exinanitionis). Conversely, prominent twentieth-century systematic thinkers such as Barth (1956), Moltmann (1974), and Pannenberg (1968) radically historicized and relationalized the concept, framing kenosis not as a literal subtraction or surrender of essential divinity, but rather as the supreme, paradoxical revelation of God's intra-trinitarian, passionate love and His profound solidarity with human suffering within the concrete historical reality of the crucifixion.

Within the contemporary Reformed and evangelical landscape, the specific theological contributions of MacArthur (2015) and Sproul (2012) hold significant dogmatic weight in shaping modern orthodox interpretations of the kenotic mystery. While both of these influential thinkers operate out of a shared commitment to classical Protestant

confessionalism, a high view of Biblical inerrancy, and traditional Covenant theology, their respective hermeneutical frameworks and systematic accents present nuanced and vital divergences. MacArthur (2015) articulates a christological defense that is heavily predicated upon the classical doctrine of divine immutability and the historically resonant extra calvinisticum. He strongly insists that the concept of kenosis must never be misconstrued as an ontological loss, reduction, or subtraction of essential deity. Instead, MacArthur (2015) posits that the self-emptying entails a voluntary, functional restriction of the independent exercise of divine attributes, coupled with the temporary concealment of His pre-incarnate cosmic glory under the fragile veil of human flesh. His paradigm explicitly prioritizes the preservation of absolute divine sovereignty and immutability throughout Christ's earthly ministry, intentionally seeking to insulate evangelical dogmatics from the perceived theological hazards and pantheistic tendencies of radical nineteenth-century kenoticism (Wellum, 2016).

By contrast, Sproul (2012) approaches the kenotic reality by leaning heavily into the deeply paradoxical, mysterious, and historical-redemptive character of the incarnation. His systemic reflections foreground the profound soteriological depth of Christ's humiliation, viewing it as the definitive, historical manifestation of God's redeeming love toward broken humanity. For Sproul (2012), the kenosis described in Philippians 2 does not signify an ontological limitation or an abdication of divine attributes, as God cannot cease to be God without violating His own eternal essence ; rather, it represents a voluntary addition of a human nature (*assumptio humanitatis*) by which the infinite God enters human history in deep humility. The structural tension between Christ's radical humiliation (*humiliatio*) and His subsequent cosmic exaltation (*exaltatio*) thus functions as the locomotive engine of his christological and soteriological synthesis, providing a framework where the divine glory is manifested precisely through the concealment of majesty (Sproul, 1993).

The scholarly value and academic significance of this comparative inquiry lie in its rigorous structural analysis of these two influential theological frameworks which, despite arising from an identical confessional baseline, develop distinct doctrinal inflections and systemic priorities. Such an investigation provides critical insights into the contemporary hermeneutical shifts surrounding Philippians 2:5–11, and illuminates the broader ecclesiological, spiritual, and ethical imperatives that emerge from the doctrine of kenosis within the life of the modern church (Gorman, 2009). Furthermore, this study clarifies the precise mechanisms through which modern conservative evangelicalism structurally reconciles classical, transcendent metaphysics—such as divine immutability and impassibility—with the concrete, historical realities of the incarnation and the cross, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Protestant scholasticism (Crisp, 2014).

Consequently, this research is structured around a central, guiding problem, which can be formulated as follows: how do the respective conceptualizations of kenosis articulated by MacArthur and Sproul allow us to comprehend the systematic relationship between the incarnation, the humiliation, and the ultimate glorification of Christ within contemporary Reformed dogmatics? From this overarching problem, three secondary thematic inquiries naturally emerge to guide the investigation. First, it is necessary to determine how each author textually and dogmatically interprets the precise nature of Christ's self-emptying (*ekenōsen*) within the exegetical context of Philippians 2:5–11.

Second, the study aims to identify the foundational points of conceptual convergence and systematic divergence that characterize their respective christological models. Finally, this research seeks to trace the distinct doctrinal, spiritual, and pastoral implications that flow directly from their respective formulations of the kenotic reality in the life of the believer and the faith community.

To address these questions comprehensively, this study employs a rigorous qualitative methodology grounded in documentary, comparative, and systematic theological hermeneutics (Muller, 2016). The primary source material comprises the extensive published corpora of both theologians, including specialized systematic treatises, biblical commentaries, homiletical records, and formal confessional statements (MacArthur, 2015 ; Sproul, 1993, 2012). A critical textual analysis of these primary materials, cross-referenced with contemporary peer-reviewed literature in systematic christology, will expose the dominant theological categories, implicit hermeneutical presuppositions, and overarching systemic trajectories that characterize their respective positions, thereby offering a balanced academic evaluation of their

II. Research Methods

2.1 Conceptual foundations and theological origins of kenosis

The theological inquiry into kenosis represents a structural cornerstone within Christian christology and stands as a primary locus for systematic reflections regarding the ontology of the incarnation. Etymologically derived from the ancient Greek verb κενόω—meaning "to empty," "to divest," "to strip of status," or "to abase"—the concept of κένωσις fundamentally conveys the profound historical movement of a voluntary self-limitation and an intentionally assumed state of humiliation (Barth, 1958). Within Christian dogmatics, the primary exegetical and theological foundation of this doctrine is anchored in the pre-Pauline christological hymn of Philippians 2:6–7. In this canonical text, Paul of Tarse delineates the trajectory of Christ Jesus as an entity who, eternally subsisting in the essential form of God (en morphē Theou), deliberately chose not to exploit His divine equality, but instead "emptied himself" (heauton ekenōsen) by taking the ontological form of a bondservant (morphē doulou) and entering the sphere of human historical contingency (Bible de Jérusalem, 2020 ; Fee, 2007). This specific scriptural passage constitutes the precise exegetical nucleus of kenotic theory, remaining highly determinative within contemporary systematic debates that seek to articulate the complex interface between absolute divine immutability, the reality of the incarnation, and the depth of Christ's historical humiliation (Bird, 2021 ; Gorman, 2009).

The early historical development and dogmatic formulation of kenotic thought emerged initially within patristic theology as early Christian thinkers navigated Greco-Roman philosophical categories. The Church Fathers, most notably exemplified by the Alexandrian tradition with figures such as Origen and Cyril of Alexandria, wrestled extensively with the conceptual challenges of reconciling the profound historical abasement of Christ with the simultaneous affirmation of His uncompromised, full deity (Cyrille d'Alexandrie, 1990 ; Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019). Within this patristic framework, kenosis was predominantly conceptualized not as a reduction of the divine essence, but rather as an act of divine condescension (synkatabasis). It was understood as a voluntary concealment of transcendent majesty, executed without inducing any mutation, loss, or alteration within the immutable nature of the divine Logos. This rigorous patristic engagement occurred within the highly contentious environment of early ecumenical

controversies, eventually culminating in the authoritative dogmatic definitions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, which famously preserved the integrity of Christ's person by declaring the hypostatic union of His divine and human natures to exist "without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation" (McGuckin, 2011).

During the medieval period, scholastic theology significantly refined this christological paradigm by introducing highly technical metaphysical distinctions between the ontological status and the functional exercise of Christ's attributes. In his systematic synthesis, Thomas Aquinas maintained that the incarnate Logos never abdicated or surrendered His essential divine attributes, such as omnipotence or omniscience, as such a divestment would philosophically violate the very nature of the deity (Thomas d'Aquin, 1991). Instead, Aquinas (1991) posited that the kenotic reality consisted in a deliberate, functional restriction of the visible manifestation of His divine glory within the historical parameters of the economy of redemption (*oeconomia salutis*). This vital scholastic distinction between the structural possession (*ktēsis*) and the historical, mediated exercise (*chrēsis*) of divine prerogatives established a sophisticated conceptual framework that remains deeply influential. From a sociological and historical perspective, this intellectual lineage continues to govern modern evangelical and Reformed theological boundary-marking, as contemporary conservative dogmatics heavily rely on these classic distinctions to insulate orthodox christology from the perceived pantheistic and anthropomorphic hazards of nineteenth-century radical European kenoticism (Crisp, 2014 ; Wellum, 2016).

2.2 Modern and contemporary developments in kenotic theology

During the modern era, the dogmatic formulation of kenoticism underwent a substantial structural shift, driven primarily by nineteenth-century German Lutheran theology. Thinkers such as Gottfried Thomasius sought to construct a more psychologically coherent and historically plausible account of Christ's earthly life than what they perceived classical substance-metaphysics could offer (Thomasius, 1853–1861). This theological school pioneered the controversial thesis that the incarnate Logos voluntarily relinquished or suspended the relative divine attributes (*attributa relativa*)—specifically omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence—while retaining the immanent, moral attributes of deity, such as holiness and love. This radical ontological recalculation aimed to secure the psychological and historical authenticity of Christ's human consciousness and developmental growth, ensuring that His exposure to human limitation, temptation, and suffering was genuinely experienced rather than merely simulated (MacLeod, 1998). From a sociological perspective, this modern intellectual evolution reflects the broader cultural pressure of the Enlightenment and the rise of historical-critical consciousness, both of which demanded an entry point for Christology that began from the historical Jesus below rather than the transcendent metaphysics from above (Pannenberg, 1968).

In the twentieth century, kenotic reflection expanded significantly beyond these rigid ontological debates as it was absorbed and re-framed by dialectical, existential, and political theologians. Karl Barth re-interpreted the kenotic narrative by embedding it firmly within his dynamic doctrine of reconciliation, viewing the self-emptying not as a surrender of divine prerogatives, but as the ultimate, paradoxical revelation of divine sovereignty operating within historical vulnerability (Barth, 1958). For Barth (1958), the abasement of the Son does not represent a diminution, loss, or negation of His essential deity; rather, it constitutes the supreme actualization and expression of God's sovereign freedom and transcendent capacity to assume the opposite of His heavenly majesty out of pure salvific grace. In this dialectical view, the true nature of divinity is defined precisely by its capacity for self-giving condescension without violating its eternal essence (Webster, 2000).

Jürgen Moltmann further radicalized this conceptual trajectory by shifting the locus of kenosis into an intra-trinitarian, historical-redemptive event, heavily emphasizing the relational and passible dimensions of the Godhead within human tragedy (Moltmann, 1975). In his foundational theology of the cross, Moltmann (1975) posited that kenosis is the definitive event wherein God enters unreservedly into the depth of human suffering, abandonment, and death. This framework repositions kenosis from a purely abstract, cosmic transaction to an act of absolute divine solidarity with the marginalized, the broken, and the historically oppressed. Consequently, the doctrine acquired a profound ethical, social, and political significance, transforming the cross into a sweeping critique of secular totalitarian power structures and establishing a theological foundation for social critique (Dorrien, 2012).

These modern and contemporary re-elaborations demonstrate that the theological trajectory of kenosis has evolved far beyond the boundaries of classical, speculative metaphysics. It now functions as a highly influential hermeneutical, ecclesiological, and socio-ethical principle. By moving away from purely mechanistic inquiries regarding the compatibility of divine and human attributes, contemporary theology deploys the kenotic motif to actively interrogate and construct the fragile interface between divine transcendence, human historical contingency, and the pressing socio-political realities of the contemporary world (Gorman, 2009; Zizioulas, 2006).

2.3 The kenotic conception in the theology of John MacArthur

John MacArthur articulates a structural reading of kenosis that is deeply embedded within the conservative evangelical and Protestant Reformed scholastic traditions. His interpretive framework is fundamentally apologetic and defensive, primarily aimed at safeguarding the classical dogmas of divine immutability, impassibility, and the absolute deity of Jesus Christ against modern, radical kenotic paradigms that introduce an ontological diminution or structural mutation within the divine nature (MacArthur, 2001 ; MacArthur, 2011). Operating from a presuppositional framework of Biblical inerrancy and a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic, MacArthur (2001) treats the scriptural text as a cohesive dogmatic unity. Consequently, his analysis of the self-emptying motif is intentionally designed to counter any theological trajectory that might compromise the absolute status of the totus Deus (fully God) during the earthly ministry of the incarnate Word, thereby preserving the historic boundaries of orthodox Christology from contemporary revisionism (Wellum, 2016).

In terms of precise dogmatic mechanics, MacArthur (2011) posits that kenosis must be systematically defined as a voluntary, functional restriction of the independent exercise of certain divine attributes, rather than a literal abdication or metaphysical surrender of essential deity. Throughout the entire temporal duration of the status exinanitionis (state of humiliation), Christ inherently retained the fullness of His divine essence ; however, He freely entered into a covenantal agreement to restrict the overt manifestation of His cosmic glory under the veil of genuine human flesh, choosing to operate strictly under the direction of the Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit (MacArthur, 2001 ; MacLeod, 1998). This interpretive stance aligns closely with the classical Reformed defense of the extra calvinisticum—the doctrine that the divine Logos remains fully omnipresent and active in governing the cosmos even while united to a localized human body. By framing the self-emptying as an addition of human limitations rather than a subtraction of divine perfections, MacArthur (2011) maintains consistency with classical substance metaphysics, insisting upon the absolute permanence of Christ's essential divine prerogatives (Crisp, 2014).

From a sociological and pastoral perspective, a defining hallmark of MacArthur's theological method is his rapid transition from speculative Christological mechanics to strict ethical and behavioral imperatives within the believing community. Within his paradigm, the historical self-abasement of Christ is never left as an abstract piece of dogmatic data ; instead, it is immediately converted into a comprehensive, authoritative blueprint for ecclesial obedience, radical humility, and mutual service (MacArthur, 2001). His exposition of Philippians 2 thus maintains a robustly practical and pastoral orientation, wherein high Christology functions as the direct structural foundation for Christian sanctification and communal harmony. By filtering this profound mystery through an existential lens, MacArthur (2011) utilizes the kenotic narrative to construct a sweeping critique of modern individualism and consumer-driven spiritualities, positioning Christ's voluntary surrender of rights as the ultimate, non-negotiable metric for local church ecclesiology and pastoral leadership (Bird, 2021).

2.4 The theological perspective of R. C. Sproul

R. C. Sproul approaches the dogmatic locus of kenosis through a robustly metaphysical and rigorously confessional framework, deeply indebted to classical Reformed scholasticism and the historic ecumenical creeds. His systematic reflections consistently prioritize the transcendent, paradoxical, and deeply mysterious character of the incarnation, wherein divine majesty is uniquely unveiled through the historical reality of Christ's voluntary humiliation (Sproul, 1997 ; Sproul, 2003). Operating within the intellectual lineage of the Westminster tradition, Sproul's method emphasizes that true divine transcendence is not compromised by the incarnation, but is instead structurally demonstrated by God's infinite capacity to manifest His character through historical condescension (Sproul, 2012). From a sociological perspective, Sproul's dense metaphysical focus serves as an intellectual bulwark intended to cultivate deep doctrinal literacy within the contemporary lay ecclesia, challenging the pervasive theological minimalism and anti-intellectualism of modern Western religious culture (Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019).

In strict alignment with historic orthodoxy, Sproul insists that kenosis can never be interpreted as an ontological subtraction, loss, or relinquishment of essential divine attributes. Rather, he posits that the mystery of the hypostatic union is structurally maintained by a voluntary addition of a human nature (*assumptio humanitatis*), by which the eternally unchangeable Second Person of the Trinity takes unto Himself a true human soul and localized physical body (Sproul, 2003). For Sproul (1997), the kenosis of Philippians 2 does not signify that the Logos emptied Himself of His deity, but rather that He emptied Himself of His cosmic prerogatives, choosing to conceal His manifest glory under the fragile, historical conditions of human weakness. This acute dialectical tension between radical earthly humiliation (*humiliatio*) and ultimate cosmic exaltation (*exaltatio*) serves as a foundational axis of his Christological synthesis, ensuring that the integrity of both the divine and human natures remains uncompromised (asymmetrically maintained) within the single person of Christ (Crisp, 2014).

Furthermore, Sproul illuminates the intrinsic soteriological and covenantal dynamics that drive the kenotic movement, framing the self-emptying as an indispensable prerequisite for the legal and historical accomplishment of human redemption. In his systematic architecture, the active and passive obedience of Christ during His state of humiliation directly paves the way for His forensic justification of believers and His subsequent cosmic glorification (Sproul, 1997 ; Sproul, 2012). Kenosis is thus presented not as an isolated historical event, but as a comprehensive, unified redemptive-historical sweep that systematically links the incarnation, the passion, the resurrection, and the

ultimate ascension of the Lord (MacLeod, 1998). While MacArthur's approach fast-tracks the text to draw immediate, visible behavioral modifications and local church ethical duties, Sproul deliberately lingers within the structural depth of the dogmatic mystery, prioritizing a profound apprehension of theological truth as the ultimate, indispensable catalyst for genuine Christian worship, structural orthodoxy, and historical hope (Bird, 2021 ; Wellum, 2016).

2.5 Critical synthesis of the literature

A comparative structural analysis of the existing theological literature reveals several foundational conceptual convergences between John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul, despite their distinct systemic priorities. Both contemporary theologians operate firmly within the boundaries of historic Protestant orthodoxy, unreservedly affirming the undiminished, full deity of Jesus Christ throughout the entire temporal duration of His incarnation. Furthermore, they conceptualize kenosis not as an external imposition, but as an entirely voluntary, sovereign act of divine condescension. Driven by their shared allegiance to classical Reformed confessionalism, both thinkers explicitly reject any modern, radical kenotic interpretations that introduce an ontological mutability, loss of essential attributes, or structural division within the single hypostatic person of the incarnate Logos (MacArthur, 2001 ; Sproul, 1997 ; Wellum, 2016).

Nevertheless, significant divergence emerges when examining the precise hermeneutical accents and systematic trajectories that each author privileges. MacArthur (2011) primarily constructs a pastoral, ethical, and practical Christology. His framework is deeply concerned with the immediate behavioral outworking of the text, positioning the historical self-abasement of Christ as the absolute, non-negotiable archetype for Christian sanctification, personal humility, and local church ecclesiology. Conversely, Sproul (2003) develops a robustly metaphysical and dogmatic analysis, focusing his inquiry on the conceptual depths of the hypostatic union, historic covenantal arrangements, and the intricate preservation of divine transcendence within historical contingency. From a sociological and educational standpoint, this tension reveals two distinct methodologies of conservative evangelical boundary-marking: MacArthur utilizes Christological dogma to enforce immediate behavioral and ecclesiastical reform, whereas Sproul leverages dense theological concepts to cultivate intellectual literacy and combat doctrinal minimalism within the modern lay ecclesia (Bird, 2021 ; Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019).

This dynamic interplay between a robust ethical praxis and a rigorous doctrinal metaphysics constitutes a primary locus of scientific interest for contemporary research on the kenotic motif. It underscores the reality that the doctrine of kenosis cannot be reduced to a purely speculative exercise in abstract substance metaphysics, nor can it be simplified into a mere moralistic sentiment of human humility (Gorman, 2009). Instead, the kenotic paradigm serves as a complex, multi-layered nexus that systematically integrates high Christology, forensic soteriology, relational spirituality, and practical ecclesial praxis. Consequently, rather than relying on generalized assumptions about conservative Reformed thought, this present study adopts a rigorous comparative, documentary, and qualitative hermeneutical approach. It is specifically designed to systematically isolate, decode, and evaluate the precise dogmatic categories, implicit hermeneutical presuppositions, and overarching pastoral implications embedded within the extensive published corpora—including specialized systematic treatises, biblical commentaries, formal homiletical records, and digital media productions—of both John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul (MacArthur, 2015 ; Muller, 2016 ; Sproul, 2012).

While traditional Western scholarship on kenosis often focuses on the Christological and systematic implications (Sproul, 1997 ; MacArthur, 2006), recent

interepistemological research has begun to explore its practical and ethical dimensions within specific ecclesiastical contexts, notably in the Global South (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2025).

2.6 Theoretical framework and methodology

a. Reformed theology and the systematic comprehension of kenosis

The dogmatic locus of kenosis occupies a structurally central position within contemporary Reformed Christology, primarily due to its immediate intersection with the ontological parameters of the incarnation and the hypostatic union. Within classical Protestant scholasticism, the historical self-abasement of the divine Logos is systematically interpreted as a voluntary act of humiliation (*status exinanitionis*) that induces no intrinsic mutation, loss, or alteration within the divine essence (Muller, 2016 ; Sproul, 1997). This historic perspective relies heavily upon the foundational attributes of divine immutability and impassibility, asserting that the transcendent nature of the Godhead remains entirely perfect and unalterable even within the historical contingency of the incarnation (Barth, 1958). Sociologically and textually, this conceptual framework operates as an ideological defense mechanism, enabling Reformed dogmatics to uphold the validity of human historical redemption without succumbing to the mythological or anthropomorphic tendencies found in radical, revisionist accounts of Christ's earthly life (Crisp, 2014).

Operating within this intellectual matrix, Sproul (1997) argues forcefully that the kenotic movement described in Philippians 2:5–11 must never be misconstrued as an ontological diminution or subtraction of Christ's essential deity. Instead, he frames it as the definitive, historical manifestation of the mystery of the incarnation, wherein the eternal, uncreated Son voluntarily takes into Himself (*assumptio humanitatis*) the authentic physical and psychological limitations inherent to the human condition (Sproul, 1997). For Sproul, absolute divine sovereignty and cosmic governance remain completely intact and active through the *extra calvinisticum* during Christ's earthly humiliation. This robust metaphysical framework allows contemporary Reformed theology to simultaneously preserve the absolute transcendence of the divine nature and the genuine, concrete reality of Christ's historical experience (Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019 ; Wellum, 2016).

Conversely, MacArthur (2001) maintains an identical confessional baseline regarding the preservation of Christ's uncompromised deity, yet he redirects his systematic analysis toward a different communicative and structural trajectory. Rather than lingering on dense metaphysical mechanics, MacArthur (2001) posits that the self-emptying (*ekenōsen*) primarily denotes the voluntary suspension of the independent exercise of divine attributes within the historical execution of the economy of redemption. In his framework, the hiddenness of Christ's pre-incarnate majesty under the veil of human flesh serves a direct, immediate hortatory purpose. Kenosis is transformed from an abstract dogmatic puzzle into an authoritative ethical paradigm of absolute obedience, radical self-denial, and practical service, explicitly designed to govern contemporary Christian sanctification and local church ecclesiology (Bird, 2021 ; MacArthur, 2001).

This dual perspective provides the precise systematic coordinates necessary to situate the present study within contemporary Reformed dogmatics. From a sociological and theological viewpoint, this structural tension creates a fertile comparative space. It allows for a rigorous investigation into how identical confessional commitments to biblical authority and classical theism can bifurcate into two distinct models of pastoral and theological communication : one primarily aimed at safeguarding structural orthodoxy and doctrinal literacy (Sproul, 1997, 2012), and the other focused on leveraging Christological truths to enforce ecclesiastical reform and immediate behavioral modification (MacArthur, 2001, 2015).

b. Kenosis, incarnation, and the structural christological tension

The analytical investigation of kenosis invariably exposes one of the most foundational and enduring structural tensions within Christian dogmatics: the precise mechanism by which the voluntary historical abasement of the Son can be systematically reconciled with the simultaneous affirmation of His undiminished, transcendent deity. This profound paradox has preoccupied Christian scholarship across historical epochs, passing from the early patristic and ecumenical dual-nature debates to modern and contemporary systematic recalculations (Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019). From a sociological perspective, this tension is not merely a linguistic or abstract metaphysical puzzle ; rather, it represents a critical conceptual battlefield where different religious institutions construct their understanding of divine authority, vulnerability, and the relationship between the transcendent Creator and human historical suffering (Dorrien, 2012).

In his dialectical reconstruction of the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth (1958) approaches this tension by framing kenosis as the ultimate, paradoxical revelation of divine majesty operating within the parameters of human vulnerability. Within this specific paradigm, the self-emptying of the Logos does not constitute a contradiction or a temporary suspension of divine sovereignty; instead, it is interpreted as the supreme, authentic manifestation of God's sovereign freedom and character within human history (Barth, 1958). For Barth, the absolute capacity of God to humble Himself without ceasing to be God reveals that true divine power is structurally defined by its freedom to love, condescend, and enter into redemptive solidarity with the creature, thereby subverting classical, non-Christian philosophical concepts of detached, static omnipotence (Webster, 2000).

Further expanding this Christological dynamic within the boundaries of historic Reformed scholasticism, Sproul (2003) insists that the kenotic movement cannot be structurally isolated or interpreted independently of its teleological trajectory. He argues that the state of humiliation (*status exinanitionis*) described in Philippians 2:6–8 is textually and dogmatically inseparable from the subsequent state of cosmic exaltation (*status exaltationis*) articulated in Philippians 2:9–11 (Sproul, 2003). In Sproul's systematic architecture, the voluntary abasement of Christ acts as the necessary covenantal and forensic prerequisite that legally prepares for His universal glorification and vindication. The humiliation is thus not an ontological tragedy or a loss of divine control, but a calculated, historical-redemptive movement that demonstrates the absolute structural consistency of God's eternal salvific decrees (Gorman, 2009 ; MacLeod, 1998).

Consequently, this integrated theoretical framework provides the primary analytical categories necessary to execute a rigorous systematic evaluation of the subject material. By mapping out these historical and contemporary trajectories, the study establishes six precise, cross-disciplinary conceptual metrics: incarnation (the ontological entry into history), humiliation (the voluntary restriction or concealment of majesty), deity (the preservation of unalterable essence), obedience (the functional compliance with covenantal roles), exaltation (the historical and cosmic vindication), and ethical exemplariness (the pedagogical application of Christ's mindset to the faith community). These specific categories serve as the objective evaluative grid used to decode, cross-examine, and contrast the modern evangelical source texts under review (Bird, 2021 ; Muller, 2016).

c. Epistemological foundations of the empirical and hermeneutical approach

This scientific investigation deliberately adopts a qualitative, analytical, and hermeneutical research design, which is firmly situated within the advanced interpretive paradigms of contemporary text-linguistics and systematic theology. This specific methodological framework is grounded in the foundational epistemological premise that

theological discourses do not exist in a vacuum ; rather, they constitute highly complex, structurally integrated interpretive constructions that require a systematic contextual and conceptual decoding (Muller, 2016). From a sociological and discursive standpoint, theological literature, homiletical records, and biblical commentaries represent structured linguistic artifacts through which specific religious communities establish, maintain, and defend their ideological boundaries and normative truth-claims (Dorrien, 2012). Consequently, analyzing these texts requires an academic approach that goes far beyond superficial reading, utilizing an evaluative grid capable of exposing the underlying cognitive architectures, semantic networks, and dogmatic assumptions driving each author's rhetoric.

According to the established methodological frameworks of Creswell (2014), qualitative research methodologies are uniquely suited for isolating latent structures of meaning, implicit conceptual categories, and overarching interpretive schemas within complex, dense textual data. Within the parameters of this specific inquiry, a qualitative hermeneutical design is highly appropriate, given the robustly doctrinal, exegetical, and discursive nature of the primary source materials under review (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rather than imposing external, artificial categories upon the data, this approach allows the specific nuances of each theologian's thought to emerge textually, ensuring that the unique internal logic of their respective Christological systems is preserved and accurately represented.

Accordingly, the empirical dimension of this study does not seek a quantitative or statistical verification of word frequencies; instead, it prioritizes a rigorous, systematic taxonomy of the dominant theological themes and structural logic present within the published corpora and audio-visual homiletical records of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul (MacArthur, 2015 ; Sproul, 2012). By bypassing mechanical quantification in favor of deep structural analysis, this methodology provides a reliable framework to examine four core interpretive axes.

First, it investigates the foundational Christological presuppositions regarding divine metaphysics, including immutability, impassibility, and the mechanics of the hypostatic union. Second, it identifies the precise dogmatic and doctrinal categories utilized to define the boundaries of the state of humiliation (*status exinanitionis*). Third, it analyzes the distinct hermeneutical and exegetical accents applied to the semantic structure of Philippians 2:5–11. Finally, it traces the subsequent pastoral, ecclesiological, and ethical implications modeled for the contemporary faith community.

Ultimately, this qualitative and empirical framework serves as a rigorous tool for analytical organization. By establishing a uniform, objective grid for textual analysis, it enables a methodical comparison of the two theological positions, mapping out how shared confessional commitments can produce distinct models of systematic thought and pastoral communication (Muller, 2016).

2.7 Methodology

a. Nature and typology of the research design

This scientific investigation operates under a rigorous qualitative research methodology, uniquely structured around a comparative, analytical, and text-based empirical design. Situated precisely at the intersection of systematic theology, historical-confessional dogmatics, and doctrinal hermeneutics, this study mobilizes the formal analytical tools of qualitative text analysis to process complex religious discourses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rather than evaluating these theological perspectives through an uncritical or purely descriptive lens, this research adopts an objective, non-confessional, and analytical stance characteristic of the sociology of knowledge and

systematic dogmatics. It treats theological formulations as highly institutionalized discursive artifacts that reflect underlying systemic commitments and sociological boundary-marking strategies within the contemporary Western religious marketplace (Dorrien, 2012).

The primary objective of this comparative investigation is to systematically map, decode, and evaluate the precise linguistic and conceptual mechanisms through which John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul interpret and reconstruct the kenosis of Christ within their extensive published corpora (MacArthur, 2015 ; Sproul, 2012). This structured comparative approach is executing a triple analytical function. First, it isolates and catalogs the dominant ontological and metaphysical categories that each author utilizes to define the relationship between Christ's divine and human natures. Second, it systematically scrutinizes their hidden hermeneutical presuppositions, identifying where their interpretive strategies either converge or structurally diverge. Third, it critically evaluates the subsequent spiritual, pastoral, and social-ethical implications that flow directly from their respective dogmatic assertions, charting how abstract Christological coordinates are translated into concrete behavioral expectations for contemporary church communities (Muller, 2016).

To anchor this comparative analysis in a stable textual baseline, the empirical dimension of the study is structurally centered upon each author's detailed treatment of the pre-Pauline Christological hymn found in Philippians 2:5–11. This passage is universally recognized across the spectrum of Christian scholarship as the supreme locus classicus and foundational textual pivot for all subsequent formulations of kenotic doctrine (Fee, 2007 ; Gorman, 2009). By examining how both theologians navigate the intricate grammar, structural transitions, and semantic fields of this pivotal scriptural text, this research exposes the operational core of their respective hermeneutical engines. Furthermore, this textual analysis is cross-referenced with their systematic expositions of related canonical passages that address the historical humiliation, active obedience, and ultimate servanthood of Christ, thereby ensuring a comprehensive and textually valid mapping of their Christological systems (Bird, 2021 ; Wellum, 2016).

b. Textual corpus and research sources

To guarantee the empirical validity, reliability, and academic rigor required for a high-impact international comparative study, the textual corpus assembled for this investigation has been systematically categorized into primary and secondary source materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary data stream is composed of targeted literary works, exegetical treatises, and homiletical transcriptions from the two specific contemporary theologians under review. This primary corpus provides direct access to the operational terminology, rhetorical structures, and dogmatic assertions that characterize their respective Christological frameworks (Muller, 2016).

The primary sources selected for John MacArthur focus explicitly on his extensive published works in biblical exposition and conservative dogmatic application. The structural pivot of his corpus within this study is the specialized volume titled *Philippians: MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (MacArthur, 2001), which contains his exhaustive, clause-by-clause linguistic and pastoral analysis of the kenotic hymn. This text is supplemented by his broader theological publications that explicitly address the parameters of Christ's earthly state of humiliation, the nature of biblical discipleship, and the sovereign character of God (MacArthur, 2011, 2015).

The primary sources compiled for R. C. Sproul are drawn from his extensive multimedia and publishing legacy, emphasizing his robust metaphysical and scholastic approach to classical Christian dogmas. The core literary baseline for his perspective is anchored in

his foundational text, *The Glory of Christ* (Sproul, 1997), which provides a detailed analysis of the metaphysical hiddenness and historical unveiling of the divine Logos. To ensure comprehensive coverage, his corpus is further expanded by incorporating his formal systematic theology manuals, specialized lectures on apologetics, and transcribed academic conferences hosted by Ligonier Ministries, which collectively delineate his defense of the historic creeds and Reformed confessions (Sproul, 2003, 2012).

In addition to these systematic and homiletical writings, the primary corpus integrates the specific biblical and canonical texts that serve as the foundational raw material for both authors' hermeneutical exegesis. This scriptural baseline is anchored by the definitive pre-Pauline Christological trajectory of Philippians 2:5–11, which acts as the supreme conceptual reference point for all subsequent formulations of kenosis. To ensure a comprehensive analytical scope, this text is cross-examined alongside the relational narrative of John 13:1–17, which details the historical foot-washing as Christ's concrete embodiment of servanthood (*morphē doulou*), and the somatic imperatives of Romans 12:1, which establishes the theological foundation for the existential and ethical self-sacrificial lifestyle required of the contemporary faith community (Fee, 2007 ; Gorman, 2009).

The secondary sources consist of a highly selective, peer-reviewed collection of modern and contemporary works in systematic theology, historical Christology, and the sociology of religion. This secondary data stream provides the necessary historical context and comparative benchmarks to measure the distinctiveness of the primary sources. It includes the structural, dialectical frameworks of Karl Barth regarding the sovereign condescension of God (Barth, 1956, 1958), the political and relational Christology of Jürgen Moltmann concerning divine passibility and solidarity with human suffering (Moltmann, 1974, 1975), and the structural socio-political and pastoral paradigms of Latin American liberation theology as articulated by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff (Boff, 1991 ; Gutiérrez, 1988). By interacting with these diverse, major theological movements, this study establishes a robust, highly verified comparative grid capable of accurately identifying where MacArthur and Sproul remain within the classical Protestant consensus, and where they introduce distinct contemporary evangelical nuances (Bird, 2021 ; Wellum, 2016).

c. Data collection strategies and qualitative analytical protocols

To ensure a highly methodical, transparent, and reproducible treatment of the extensive textual data, this study implements a rigorous structural design based on qualitative thematic and comparative analysis. The extraction and processing of the textual data follow a multi-tiered coding protocol, transforming raw narrative and homiletical content into structured, analytically manageable units of meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This systematic analytical workflow is explicitly adapted from the landmark qualitative frameworks established by Miles and Huberman (1994), which prioritize three continuous, interactive flows of data management. These flows consist of data reduction, which condenses thick textual narratives into clear, localized thematic nodes; data display, which organizes and assembles the condensed data to permit conclusion-drawing; and conclusion drawing or verification, which tests the validity of emerging patterns against the broader primary corpus (Flick, 2023).

During the initial data reduction phase, every selected commentary chapter, transcribed lecture, and homiletical source is subjected to systematic open coding. This process helps isolate repetitive rhetorical patterns, recurring semantic structures, and foundational doctrinal assertions. Through an iterative process of text-segmentation, these

primary codes are clustered and integrated into five stable, high-level conceptual axes that serve as the objective analytical grid for this investigation.

The first axis concerns the systemic understanding of kenosis. This dimension decodes how each author defines the semantic parameters of the Greek verb *kenōō* in Philippians 2:7, identifying whether they interpret the self-emptying as an ontological subtraction of divine attributes or as a functional, historical concealment of divine majesty (Fee, 2007). The second axis focuses on the christological relation between divinity and humanity. This dimension scrutinizes the metaphysical models used by both authors to explain the hypostatic union, focusing particularly on how they maintain the integrity of the two natures without falling into Eutychian blending or Nestorian separation (Muller, 2016). The third axis evaluates the socio-ethical and spiritual implications. This node examines how abstract dogmatic coordinates are translated into concrete behavioral, communal, and ethical obligations for individual believers and the broader faith community (Gorman, 2009). The fourth axis examines the pastoral and ecclesiological applications. This category maps the ways in which each theologian deploys Christological truths to shape local church governance, pastoral leadership structures, and corporate ecclesiastical identity (Bird, 2021). The fifth axis traces the structural dynamic between humiliation and glorification. This category evaluates the teleological and covenantal relationship between the historical abasement of Christ (*status exinanitionis*) and His subsequent cosmic exaltation (*status exaltationis*) as outlined in Philippians 2:9–11 (Wellum, 2016).

Once these five thematic streams are fully populated and verified across the individual corpora, a cross-case comparative synthesis is executed. This comparative stage goes beyond simple juxtaposition to explore the underlying structural mechanics of each theological framework (Saldaña, 2021). It is intentionally designed to isolate three distinct discursive dimensions.

Initially, it highlights structural doctrinal convergences, mapping out the shared historical-confessional commitments and classical Protestant consensus that bind both authors together. Following this, it untangles subtle hermeneutical divergences, exposing how different interpretive priorities, stylistic accents, and underlying philosophical assumptions lead to distinct theological emphases. Finally, it charts the specific pastoral orientations unique to each author, illustrating how their respective theological positions influence their distinct methods of contemporary homiletical delivery and spiritual formation (Dorrien, 2012). By strictly adhering to this systematic qualitative protocol, the study minimizes subjective bias and provides a reliable, structurally sound comparison of modern evangelical thought.

d. Methodological rigor, internal validity, and structural limitations

Investigating kenosis through an empirical lens allows researchers to bridge the gap between abstract Christology and ministerial ethics. This empirical movement follows the methodology of recent pastoral studies that utilize synchronic and diachronic tools to evaluate the ethos of contemporary church leaders (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2025).

To establish a high level of academic trustworthiness, structural reliability, and external integrity within international qualitative research standards, this study implements explicit validation protocols. The scientific rigor of the inquiry is primarily anchored in the systematic triangulation of diverse theological data streams, the cross-examination of literary and homiletical text corpora, and a strict adherence to internal hermeneutical consistency during the interpretive phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By constantly verifying emerging thematic codes against both the precise grammatical constraints of the

primary scriptural texts and the established confessional boundaries of the Reformed scholastic tradition, the analysis achieves a high degree of conceptual validity (Muller, 2016). This dual-layered verification process ensures that the resulting taxonomy accurately reflects the authentic dogmatic structures of the authors under review rather than reflecting subjective researcher bias. Nevertheless, in alignment with standard qualitative research criteria, several inherent boundaries and structural limitations within the scope of this investigation must be explicitly acknowledged.

The first limitation stems directly from the boundaries of the assembled textual data, as the study depends entirely upon the published, transcribed, and publicly accessible corporate materials of both theologians. Consequently, localized oral presentations, private correspondence, or unpublished institutional lectures remain outside the reach of this data collection process, meaning that any subtle shifts in their late-career thought that have not yet been formalized in print or digital archives may not be fully captured in this analysis (Flick, 2023). The second limitation is rooted in the very nature of qualitative hermeneutical research, which fundamentally requires an interpretive interaction with highly dense, figurative, and dogmatic language. Although the application of an objective analytical grid derived from the sociology of knowledge and systematic dogmatics works to minimize subjective distortion, the researcher recognizes that any qualitative interpretation can exhibit variation based on the underlying theological and philosophical paradigms brought to the text (Saldaña, 2021).

Finally, the deliberate methodological choice to restrict the comparative analysis to the corporate writings of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul intentionally limits the immediate application of these findings to other contemporary Christological traditions. Major theological developments within modern Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or broader mainline Protestant traditions are not integrated into this comparative matrix, as the study focuses specifically on isolating internal nuances within conservative North American Reformed evangelicalism (Dorrien, 2012).

Despite these recognized boundaries, this specialized methodological focus provides an exceptionally deep, clear understanding of the internal doctrinal logic, homiletical strategies, and hermeneutical priorities that structure contemporary evangelical interpretations of kenosis. Ultimately, the study offers a valuable, verified baseline for future cross-confessional comparative research by establishing how these specific Christological boundaries function within modern religious discourse (Bird, 2021 ; Wellum, 2016).

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Analytical results: The kenotic comprehension in the thought of John MacArthur

The detailed thematic analysis of the comprehensive literary and homiletical corpus of John MacArthur reveals a structural conceptualization of kenosis that is deeply embedded within the historical trajectory of classical Protestant scholasticism and modern conservative evangelical dogmatics. His systematic exposition of the pre-Pauline Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 is driven by a dual defensive and pedagogical priority: the absolute preservation of the undiminished integrity of Christ's divine essence alongside the simultaneous, uncompromised affirmation of the historical reality of His voluntary abasement during the incarnation (MacArthur, 2001). From a sociological and discursive viewpoint, MacArthur's rhetoric operates as an institutional boundary-marking mechanism designed to insulate conservative ecclesiastical communities from the perceived theological dangers of modern liberal Christology, particularly nineteenth-

century European kenotic theories that suggest an alteration or temporary surrender of divine consciousness (Dorrien, 2012).

To accomplish this dogmatic stabilization, MacArthur insists that the self-emptying described by the Greek verb *kenoō* must never be interpreted as an ontological subtraction, reduction, or abandonment of the divine nature or essential attributes of the Logos. The incarnate Word remains *totus Deus*—fully and unalterably God—throughout the entire historical duration of His earthly ministry (MacArthur, 2001). In MacArthur's structural framework, the *kenosis* relates exclusively to the voluntary non-use, functional restriction, and historical concealment of the visible, independent exercise of certain divine prerogatives and privileges within the economy of redemption (MacArthur, 2011, 2015). This conceptual distinction allows MacArthur to safeguard the structural stability of classical Christology while affirming that Christ truly lived within the genuine boundaries of human physical and psychological experience.

By framing the self-emptying as an addition of human nature rather than a subtraction of divine nature, this interpretive approach allows MacArthur to maintain three foundational metaphysical and dogmatic coordinates simultaneously without structural contradiction. First, it preserves absolute divine immutability and impassibility, asserting that the eternal essence of the Son experienced no ontological alteration or loss of cosmic sovereignty during His entry into human history (Muller, 2016). Second, it secures the uncompromised reality of Christ's full human experience, ensuring that His historical suffering, emotional life, and physical dependency were genuine rather than docetic appearances. Third, it guarantees the internal logical coherence of the hypostatic union, demonstrating how the two distinct natures remain united in one single person (*hypostasis*) without confusion, change, division, or separation, in strict continuity with the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (Bird, 2021 ; Wellum, 2016).

3.2 Analytical results : The kenotic perspective of R. C. Sproul

The systematic analysis of the comprehensive theological, philosophical, and multimedia corpus of R. C. Sproul reveals a conceptual framework that prioritizes classical dogmatic precision, structural metaphysical consistency, and the preservation of the deep christological mystery of the incarnation. Rather than approaching the text through a primarily homiletical or immediate practical lens, Sproul frames *kenosis* as one of the ultimate, non-contradictory paradoxes of the Christian faith. He argues that the eternal Son truly experienced historical abasement without experiencing even the slightest ontological reduction of His full, transcendent deity (Sproul, 1997). From a sociology of knowledge perspective, Sproul's discourse operates as a highly institutionalized defense of historic confessional orthodoxy—specifically the Westminster tradition—designed to demonstrate that classical Christian foundational structures can withstand contemporary philosophical critique and rationalistic reductionism (Dorrien, 2012).

In contrast to a strictly functional or behavioral reading, Sproul places his primary emphasis on the deep theological and soteriological—meaning salvation-historical—framework of the self-emptying process. He maintains that the abasement of Christ is an objective, covenantal transaction occurring within human history that reveals the inner life, character, and redemptive blueprint of the triune Godhead (Sproul, 2012). This approach evaluates the *status exinanitionis* (state of humiliation) not merely as a moral lesson to be copied, but as a crucial, legally necessary mechanism within the divine architecture of human redemption. To fully unpack how this christological engine operates, three distinct dimensions emerge as the primary pillars of Sproul's systemic thought.

3.3 Cross-case comparative synthesis of MacArthur and Sproul

A systematic, cross-case comparative evaluation of the data streams extracted from both primary corpora reveals a profound, uncompromised doctrinal agreement on the foundational metaphysics of classical Protestant Christology. Both John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul operate out of a shared commitment to the historic creeds and confessions, fiercely defending divine immutability, the dual-nature architecture of the hypostatic union, and the complete rejection of ontological kenoticism (MacArthur, 2001 ; Sproul, 1997). Neither author allows for any reduction of the divine essence during the incarnation, and both interpret the self-emptying of Philippians 2:7 as an act of addition—assuming a human nature—rather than subtraction.

this foundational confessional unity, the comparative analysis exposes significant variations in their underlying hermeneutical priorities, rhetorical strategies, and pastoral applications (Dorrien, 2012). These differences illustrate how identical dogmatic convictions can produce distinct theological sub-systemic models within contemporary evangelical discourse, which can be clearly visualized across their core interpretive axes. As this comparison demonstrates, the divergence between the two theologians is not a conflict over orthodoxy, but a difference in their structural entry points into the text (Fee, 2007). MacArthur approaches the locus classicus of Philippians 2 from the bottom up, immediately tying the cosmic descent of the Son to the behavioral expectations of the local church. Sproul, conversely, approaches the text from the top down, treating the passage as an opportunity to defend trinitarian metaphysics and anchor the believer's faith in the objective, unchanging structures of the divine decrees (Muller, 2016).

3.4 Analytical discussion of the findings

The empirical and thematic cross-examination of the primary corpora of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul demonstrates that the doctrine of kenosis serves as a highly integrated conceptual intersection where systematic Christology, interior spirituality, and contemporary pastoral theology converge within modern Reformed evangelical thought (MacArthur, 2001 ; Sproul, 1997). From a sociology of knowledge perspective, this investigation illustrates that rather than functioning merely as an abstract metaphysical puzzle, the semantic decoding of Philippians 2:5–11 remains a vital discursive mechanism used by contemporary religious institutions to stabilize confessionally grounded worldviews (Dorrien, 2012). The structural data extracted from both authors clarify that the ongoing maintenance of classical orthodoxy does not result in a rigid, uniform textual production ; instead, it allows for a dynamic variety of emphasis, where shared dogmatic boundaries support distinct structural sub-systems designed to address different cultural and ecclesiastical needs.

Crucially, the analytical results demonstrate that the observed differences between the two theologians do not represent an underlying conflict regarding essential dogmatic foundations; rather, they reflect a structural variation in their respective hermeneutical priorities and homiletical strategies (Bird, 2021). MacArthur develops a thoroughly pragmatic, action-oriented kenotic framework that treats the self-emptying of the Logos as a direct blueprint for Christian praxis, demanding visible changes in local church relationships, leadership structures, and personal morality (MacArthur, 2015). Conversely, Sproul deepens the top-down metaphysical, scholastic, and forensic dimensions of the incarnation, framing the state of humiliation as a necessary legal transaction within the divine decrees that requires intellectual defense and produces corporate doxological awe (Sproul, 2012). This distinction highlights that while MacArthur aims for immediate behavioral sanctification within the faith community, Sproul prioritizes the cognitive stabilization of confessional truths against modern secular challenges (Muller, 2016).

Initially, it operates as a profound Christological mystery, protecting the historic dual-nature Chalcedonian architecture by explaining how infinite majesty can truly inhabit finite human weakness without undergoing ontological mutation (Wellum, 2016). Following this, it establishes an unshakeable soteriological foundation, explaining the active obedience and forensic suffering of the Son under the law as the explicit covenantal mechanism that legally prepares for His universal cosmic coronation (MacLeod, 1998). Furthermore, it provides an absolute ethical model that shatters human pride and individualistic ambition, replacing self-interest with a mandatory pattern of mutual submission (Gorman, 2009). Finally, it serves as a powerful spiritual and structural paradigm for the contemporary church, offering an institutional template that redefines power, authority, and pastoral ministry through the lens of voluntary lowliness and self-sacrificial service.

3.5 Discussion and Practical Implications

a. Critical discussion of the findings

The comparative analysis of the christological frameworks of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul highlights a foundational doctrinal convergence within contemporary Reformed evangelicalism, while simultaneously uncovering significant hermeneutical distinctions regarding the theological and structural function of the kenosis. This creative tension between an action-oriented pastoral methodology and an analytical, confession-oriented methodology shows that the kenotic narrative remains a crucial conceptual intersection for integrating classical Christology, interior spirituality, and ecclesial praxis. Rather than fracturing the confessional system, these distinct approaches reveal that contemporary Reformed theology relies on multiple, reinforcing lines of interpretation to communicate its core dogmas to the modern world (Bird, 2021 ; Muller, 2016).

3.6 Theological implications

a. Christological implications

The empirical analysis confirms that the kenosis remains a central and structuring concept for a precise understanding of the relationship between divinity and humanity within the single person of Christ. The positions of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul show that contemporary Reformed Christology does not seek to innovate, but rather deploys considerable conceptual energy to preserve three pillars of orthodoxy simultaneously. In the first place, both authors manifest an unwavering commitment to divine immutability, protecting the essence of the Logos from any ontological mutation or loss of attributes during His incarnation. In the second place, they assert with equal force the historical reality of the incarnation, guaranteeing that the Son fully assumed an authentic human nature, subject to growth and suffering. In the third place, they maintain the absolute hypostatic unity of Christ, thereby avoiding the trap of Nestorianism by confessing two distinct natures united without confusion or division in one single divine person.

In this regard, the intersection between Christological mystery and ministerial ethics becomes paramount. The functional reality of kenosis demands that the historical self-humiliation of Christ moves from an abstract confessional dogma to an internalized pastoral ethos, serving as an ontological model for Christian character and institutional leadership (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024).

b. Soteriological Implications

The findings also highlight the foundational and non-negotiable soteriological dimension of the kenosis, proving that the humiliation of Christ is not an accident of history but an essential step in the redemptive process. Within the framework of covenant theology, the abaissement of the Son constitutes the indispensable legal and spiritual mechanism required to fulfill the demands of divine justice and offer salvation to fallen

humanity. The active and passive obedience of Christ in His state of humiliation thus becomes the very foundation of the doctrine of justification by faith.

In R. C. Sproul's thought, this dynamic is developed with remarkable systematic consistency through the study of the covenant of redemption. For Sproul, the voluntary humiliation of Christ under the law leads logically and necessarily to His cosmic glorification, making the cross the direct catalyst for His final exaltation. Humiliation does not conceal the glory of God, but paradoxically reveals it in its purest and most merciful manifestation. For his part, John MacArthur articulates this soteriology by immediately linking it to the believer's subjective appropriation of salvation. While professing the same penal substitutionary atonement as Sproul, MacArthur insists that the redemptive work of the kenosis enforces a radical break with sin, transforming the elect's legal standing into a lived reality of a regenerated life. This double reading shows that the kenosis fully participates in the Christian understanding of salvation by uniting its forensic and transformative dimensions.

c. Ecclesiological implications

The doctrine of the kenosis possesses immediate implications for the structure, culture, and organization of the visible Church. Far from remaining confined to academic textbooks, the way a community interprets the self-emptying of Christ directly determines its management of authority, interpersonal relationships, and corporate worship. The kenosis acts as a powerful ecclesiological corrective against the drifts of individualism and secular management models.

In John MacArthur's framework, this reality grounds an ecclesiology of praxis, where the imitation of Christ is the engine of an active communal spirituality, rigorously centered on concrete service, visible humility, and mutual obedience among members. The kenosis here becomes the model for daily ecclesial relationships, tearing down the barriers of spiritual pride in favor of mutual fraternal support. R. C. Sproul, on the other hand, highlights a more contemplative and liturgical ecclesiology, where the believing community is primarily called to gather to adore God and confess the truth of the incarnational mystery. For Sproul, the Church honors the kenosis through the fidelity of its doctrinal preaching and the solemnity of its worship. Together, these two approaches demonstrate that the kenosis can become a dynamic model for fraternal relations, a principle for pastoral leadership, and the very foundation of the liturgical life of a balanced Christian community.

3.7 Practical and pastoral implications

a. Humility and christian spirituality

The study demonstrates empirically that the kenosis constitutes a major paradigm of contemporary Christian spirituality. The humility of Christ, as depicted in the Pauline text, does not impose itself as a simple passive moral virtue, but as a model for inner transformation globally oriented toward sacrificial service and the radical renunciation of self. The research indicates that this spirituality unfolds in a bivalent yet harmonious manner within modern Reformed piety.

In John MacArthur's writings, this dimension translates into an active spirituality, disciplined and centered on concrete obedience to biblical commandments within the framework of local church ministries. For MacArthur, kenotic spirituality is validated by visible acts of piety and practical engagement with the saints. Conversely, in R. C. Sproul's thought, this doctrine leads to a contemplative spirituality, deeply marked by theological wonder and adoration before the paradox of divine majesty clothing itself in the condition of a servant. This complementarity allows for a holistic kenotic spirituality, capable of harmoniously integrating the contemplation of dogmatic truth and the active service of

one's neighbor, humility of heart before the holiness of God, and rigorous obedience within ecclesial communion.

b. Christian leadership and pastoral ministry

The kenosis offers an indispensable alternative model for Christian leadership and the exercise of contemporary pastoral ministry. In a modern ecclesial context sometimes weakened by authoritarianism, clericalism, the quest for visibility, or the importation of secular power dynamics, the voluntary self-emptying of Christ stands as a prophetic and implicit critique against all dominating forms of religious authority. It serves as a reminder that power in the Church is not measured by elevation, but by the willingness to descend to wash the feet of the community.

John MacArthur's approach places immense structural weight on pastoral responsibility, lived out as a service of spiritual protection and strict accountability before the Chief Shepherd. MacArthur redefines leadership as a posture of laborious vulnerability, where the pastor voluntarily exhausts himself for the doctrinal and moral care of the flock entrusted to him. On his side, R. C. Sproul insistently reminds us that Christian ministry must remain rooted in doctrinal depth, confessional integrity, and the faithful transmission of truth. For Sproul, the spiritual leader serves his people by protecting their intellect against contemporary heresies and cultivating sound theology. The union of these two visions requires current leaders to associate tireless pastoral dedication with rigorous doctrinal excellence.

c. Ethical engagement and social responsibility

Finally, theological reflection on the kenosis possesses important social implications that extend far beyond the walls of the ecclesial institution. In dialogue with the developments of contemporary theology, notably in the lineage of Jürgen Moltmann, the voluntary humiliation of Christ can be understood as the supreme model of divine solidarity with the weak, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the suffering of human history. By choosing the condition of a servant and undergoing the infamy of a political execution, the Son of God established compassion as the supreme theological virtue.

For John MacArthur, this social engagement is realized through Christian ethics lived out within creation, where the believer expresses the humility of Christ through rigorous honesty, professional integrity, and localized charity. For MacArthur, the social impact of the Church flows naturally from the moral transformation of its members. For R. C. Sproul, this social responsibility is rooted in a public theology that defends the justice of God, human dignity stemming from the *imago Dei*, and the application of biblical principles to the societal sphere. The kenosis then becomes an overall ethic of service, a theology of lived compassion, and a solid spiritual foundation for Christian social engagement. Thus, the doctrine affirms itself as an essential resource for shaping a Christian presence that is humble, courageous, and relevant within the modern world.

Ultimately, the theological perspectives of MacArthur and Sproul remind the academy that kenosis is not a mitigation of Christ's divinity, but the supreme manifestation of His sovereign character. When properly integrated into practical theology, this paradigm transforms christological mystery into an active model for the Christian life (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024) and offers a crucial diagnostic tool to restore humility within modern pastoral training frameworks (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2025).

3.8 Recommendations

First and foremost, it is highly recommended that future research projects expand this comparative analysis beyond the traditional boundaries of contemporary Reformed evangelicalism. Incorporating the works of prominent contemporary theologians from

Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and post-liberal perspectives would significantly enrich the broader ecumenical dialogue surrounding the kenosis. Such an expansion would uncover unique insights into how different ecclesiastical traditions balance the absolute transcendence and immutability of God with the historical reality of Christ's earthly humiliation, thereby preventing systematic theology from becoming siloed within a single confessional paradigm.

In tandem with expanding the ecumenical scope, academic researchers should conduct more focused and rigorous investigations into the specific ontological mechanics of the kenosis. Particular attention must be paid to navigating the complex relationship between classical divine immutability and the genuine psychological, emotional, and cognitive growth of the incarnate Christ. This line of inquiry is especially crucial in light of contemporary systematic debates regarding divine passibility and historical consciousness, as it challenges scholars to explain how the external exercise of divine attributes relates to the authentic, finite human experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, future scholarly work should actively foster a dedicated interdisciplinary approach that brings systematic theology into direct, sustained conversation with analytic philosophy, historical linguistics, and modern literary hermeneutics. Rather than analyzing the text of Philippians 2:5–11 in isolation, this integrated strategy would provide academic departments with much sharper analytical and conceptual tools. Consequently, researchers would be better equipped to explore the precise linguistic, philosophical, and structural boundaries of the incarnation-humiliation paradox, tracking how structural changes in language affect dogmatic formulations.

IV. Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to examine the doctrine of the kenosis through the distinct theological lenses of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul, utilizing a comparative, empirical, and systematic framework. By conducting a rigorous analysis of the written books, biblical commentaries, and doctrinal monographs produced by these two influential thinkers, this study has demonstrated the profound hermeneutical, christological, and pastoral vitality of the kenotic narrative within contemporary Reformed evangelicalism. Far from being a peripheral or purely historical matter, the theological concept of self-emptying remains an active, essential crossroad where classical Protestant dogmatics encounters modern ecclesiastical practice.

The first major finding of this study confirms that both MacArthur and Sproul are firmly anchored within the historic heritage of Chalcedonian Christology. Both theologians explicitly reject any radical or revisionist kenotic theory that would imply an ontological reduction, subtraction, or mutation of Christ's divine essence during the incarnation. Instead, they interpret the kenosis not as a forfeiture of deity, but as a voluntary act of historical condescension and humiliation by which the eternal Son of God assumed a genuine human nature within the covenant economy of redemption. This deep doctrinal agreement highlights the ongoing authority of classical confessional standards and the permanence of the conciliar categories established at Chalcedoine. Furthermore, this shared baseline functions as a vital soteriological engine for both authors, since they both view the downward trajectory of the Mediator as the legally binding mechanism required to satisfy divine justice and achieve human salvation.

Nevertheless, beneath this unifying confessional foundation, the research exposed significant hermeneutical divergences regarding the precise theological function and structural deployment of the kenosis. John MacArthur constructs an essentially pastoral,

ethical, and practical reading of the text, prioritizing immediate behavioral transformation. In his framework, the self-emptying of Christ serves as a direct, normative blueprint for daily discipleship, motivating mutual submission, operational humility, and concrete service within the local church body. Conversely, R. C. Sproul develops a robustly analytical, metaphysical, and covenantal framework that treats the kenosis primarily as a profound christological paradox. For Sproul, the text serves to highlight both God's infinite transcendence and His legal faithfulness, guiding the believer through a disciplined contemplation of the hypostatic union and mapping out a strict structural sequence from humiliation to universal vindication.

The primary academic and scientific contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of the inherently multidimensional nature of the kenotic doctrine. The empirical data prove that the kenosis cannot be isolated as an abstract metaphysical riddle, nor can it be flattened into a generic moral lesson on humility. Instead, it functions as an overarching, integrative theological space where Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, interior spirituality, and pastoral ethics converge into a coherent whole. Additionally, this project highlights the methodological value of applying a qualitative and systematic analysis to contemporary doctrinal texts, showing that rigorous textual investigation can successfully bridge the gap between academic systematic theology and practical pastoral discourse.

Finally, this research highlights the striking relevance of the kenosis within the contemporary socio-cultural and ecclesiastical landscape. In a modern world frequently dominated by individualism, consumerism, and deep crises of leadership, the voluntary lowliness of the Son of God offers a revolutionary paradigm for church life. By providing a clear critique of all forms of spiritual authoritarianism and institutional self-assertion, the doctrine of the kenosis provides the contemporary church with an invaluable theological resource to reconstruct its understanding of power, pastoral authority, spiritual leadership, and global mission.

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