

DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY

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Introduction

In 1923, Thomas Chisholm penned a poem that would soon become a beloved Christian hymn. The words expressed Chisholm's belief in the faithfulness of God. The poem elegantly says "great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father; there is no shadow of turning with thee, thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not, as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be." With these poetic words, Chisholm beautifully presents the common Christian conviction that God is faithful, and that his faithfulness is due to his inability to change. "For I the LORD do not change," Malachi 3:6 states¹. James 1:17 teaches that in God "there is no variation or shadow due to change." Furthermore, David, in speaking about the fatigability of the heavens and how God will change them as one would change an old robe says of God in Psalm 102:27 "But you remain the same, and your years will never end." Throughout the revelatory witness of the Scriptures, God is presented as one who never changes.

However, what does it mean for God to be unchangeable? According to theologian and philosopher Richard Creel, God can be said to be unchangeable in at least four senses: God can be said to be unchangeable in his nature, his will, his knowledge, and unchangeable in his emotions.² According to the majority consensus in Christian tradition, God is unchangeable in his nature.³ As to the other three senses, trends within modern theology have begun to critique the long held belief that God is unchangeable in will, knowledge, and emotion, and none of these critiques have been harsher than the criticisms levied against the impassibility of God's

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version.

² Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

emotions. Contrary to the historic confessions of the Christian Church, many modern theologians have seen the impassibility of God's emotion as an aberrant doctrine that has tainted the orthodox tradition.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, divine impassibility means that God cannot be affected by outside influences. Furthermore, impassibility means that God does not experience pain or suffering, or any change of emotion.⁴ In Romans 1:26 and 9:5, the Apostle Paul refers to God as the one who is "blessed forever." According to theologian Robert Culver, the term "blessed" is exclusively doxological, and is never used of men.⁵ God is "blessed" forever, or "supremely happy," and does not experience any flux of emotion, nor is he swayed by neither external nor internal motivation. Put in more precise language, impassibility means that God does not experience any deprivation of his eternal blessedness.

The word *impassibility* comes into the English language from the Greek word *apatheia*- *a* being the alpha privative, and *pathe* from the Greek word for "suffering."⁶ Among the ancient orthodox theologians there was no difference of opinion regarding God's impassibility.⁷ It was not until much later theological reflection that the Church made more definite pronouncements over the imperturbable nature of God's emotions. Theologian Rob Lister observes that up till the

⁴*The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church*, pg. 823.

⁵ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2005), 216.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For a wonderful survey of Impassibility in the church Fathers, see Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2013), 67- 100.

modern era the Christian Church has always affirmed some notion of divine impassibility.⁸ Within the last 100 years or so, many theologians have criticized this ancient Christian doctrine. “Theology has no falser idea than that of the impassibility of God,” writes theologian A. M. Fairbairn.⁹ Yet another theologian writes, “The doctrine of the impassibility of God, taken in its widest sense, is the greatest heresy that ever smirched Christianity; it is not only false, it is the antipodes of truth.”¹⁰ Theologian Clark Pinnock calls the doctrine of impassibility “...the most dubious of the divine attributes discussed in classical theism.”¹¹ For close to 1,900 years, the Christian Church has held that God is impassible, yet modern theologians are insistent that impassibility is a doctrine that is foreign to biblical revelation.¹²

One can easily see why many theologians have rejected such a notion as divine impassibility. The Bible seems to give numerous examples of God grieving (Ps. 78:40; Eph. 4:30), repenting (Gen. 6:6; Ex. 32:10-14; 1 Sam. 15:11), and feeling angry (Deut. 4:25; 9:18; Judg. 2:12). Texts too numerous to count demonstrate that God is love, and yet for God to exemplify anger, or repentance would seem to entail a change of emotion within God. Even more problematic for the doctrine of impassibility is the doctrine of the incarnation. Jesus, the

⁸ Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2013), 1.

⁹ A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), p. 483, quoted in Thomas Weinandy’s *Does God Suffer?*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Douglas White, *Forgiveness and Suffering: A Study of Christian Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 84, quoted in Rob Lister’s *God is Impassible and Impassioned*, pg. 123.

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1.

¹² Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 20.

second person of the Trinity, came in the flesh, suffered and died. Christ was God, and he experienced excruciating pain and agony on the cross. If God is impassible, how can Christians make sense of the suffering of Jesus? Even further, if God does not suffer, does this not make God seem less compassionate? An impassible God seems to make God static, inert, and ultimately impersonal, something less than a God.

Why has the Church held to the doctrine of impassibility for 1,900 years? According to many theologians, impassibility is a product of Greek philosophy that had influenced the early formulation of Christian doctrine.¹³ According to one scholar, impassibility is so foreign to the Bible that “it makes nonsense of the revelation of God in the Old Testament [and] makes the incarnation no real incarnation, and it reduces the sufferings and death of Christ to a purely human work.”¹⁴ However, contrary to the trends set by modern theology, this paper will argue that God is indeed impassible. While the Bible may seem to support the notion the God is passible and experiences changing states of emotion, it will be argued that the modern passibilist uses a faulty hermeneutic in interpreting biblical data regarding divine emotions. Furthermore, the charge that Christianity has adopted a foreign metaphysical tradition will be shown to be exaggerated, and a theological and philosophical account will be given to show that God’s impassibility is actually what enables him to love, and ultimately what enables him to save his fallen creation.

Impassibility in Modern Theology
Impassibility and its Historical Demise

¹³ Lister, pg. 42.

¹⁴ T. E. Pollard, “The Impassibility of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955): 356.

According to Joseph Hallman, the modern discussion of divine impassibility began in Germany due to an article published by I. A. Dorner in 1858.¹⁵ While this article garnered academic discussion for some time, it was not till 1920 that the subject of divine impassibility began to demand serious attention. The controversy that ensued led to the publishing of J. K. Mozeley's *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought*.¹⁶ Shortly after that, many theologians such as Bertrand Brasnett, H. W. Robinson, and W. R. Matthews began to advocate the theology of a suffering God.¹⁷ H. W. Robinson writes, "There is no valid philosophical and theological objection against the doctrine that God suffers and the genuinely Christian conception of God requires that, in some sense, He should be a suffering God."¹⁸ According to W. R. Matthews, the atonement of Jesus Christ implies divine suffering.¹⁹

The crucifixion of Jesus provides the impetus for modern theology's insistence on divine passibility. Rob Lister observes that from the perspective of those who advocate divine passibility, the traditional doctrine of impassibility "does serious damage to the union of natures to maintain... that Jesus' experience of suffering and death was a human one."²⁰ According to some Christians, the suffering and death of Jesus were only experienced according to his human

¹⁵ Joseph M. Hallman, *Gorgias Studies in Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 1, *The Coming of the Impassible God: Tracing a Dilemma in Christian Theology* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶Ibid., 3.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ H. W. Robinson, *Suffering Human and Divine*, quoted in Hallman's *The Coming of the Impassible God*, 4.

¹⁹ W. R. Matthews, *God in Christian Thought and Experience*, quoted in Hallman's *The Coming of the Impassible God*, 4.

²⁰ Lister, 125.

nature, not his divine nature, which from the passibilists' viewpoint, seems to divide the natures unwarrantedly. T. E. Pollard eloquently sums up the passibilist argument by writing:

When impassibility is ascribed to God, the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is no real incarnation... Some of the Early Church Fathers tried to overcome this dilemma by saying that the divine in Christ is impassible, but that the human is passible; it was his human nature that suffered, not His divine nature. But can there be a real incarnation of God in man in such circumstances as these? ...To say that the Son of God, as divine, is impassible is to assert that the divine in Christ was unaffected by the human; and therefore that there is no real Incarnation, or if there is an Incarnation, it is meaningless.²¹

Jürgen Moltmann, one of the most ardent defenders of divine passibilism writes:

God has to give himself; and he cannot possess himself apart from this act of serving. God has to give himself completely; and it is only in this way that he is eternal. He has to run his full course on earth as a servant; and it is only in this way that he is completely God. So God's divinity is not cut off from his humanity, and his humanity is not cut off from his divinity: "It was necessary for God to be Man, for only so could he be truly God."²²

According to Moltmann, "The historical passion of Christ reveals "the eternal passion of God... the self-sacrifice of love is God's eternal nature... Golgotha is the inescapable revelation of his nature in a world of evil and suffering."²³

The crucifixion of Jesus is not the only impetus for the modern rejection of impassibility. In the aftermath of horrific evils that the 20th century has endured, many theologians have reconsidered the doctrine of God's impassibility due to the overwhelming problem of evil. Jürgen Moltmann, who himself saw the horrors of World War II, once wrote "A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be

²¹Pollard, 356.

²²Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, u.s. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 33.

²³Ibid., 32.

involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him.”²⁴ According to Moltmann, God must suffer because he is love, and if he does not suffer than he is apathetic. Without love God is no longer God, but is rather a stone.²⁵ In Moltmann’s book *The Crucified God*, he quotes from Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, with a heartfelt plea for Christians to embrace the theology of a suffering God. To speak of a God who does not suffer alongside his creation, writes Moltmann, is blasphemy. If God does not suffer with humanity, then God is a demon.²⁶ Wiesel writes:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. ‘Where is God? Where is he?’ someone asked me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice in myself answer: “Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.”²⁷

In light of the evil experienced in the holocaust, Moltmann insists that a loving God is indeed hanging on the gallows, suffering alongside the travails of his creation. For Moltmann, Christianity does not teach merely that Christ suffers in order to redeem, but that in Christ’s pain and agony we see the revealing of a God who suffers. According to passibilist theologian Kazoh Kitamori, God can only redeem if he suffers. It is God’s immanence within history that, because of God’s love, embraces human suffering and makes it his own.²⁸

The Hellenization Hypothesis

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, u.s. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, as quoted in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, u.s. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 273-74.

²⁸ Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, (Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 1958), 103.

The doctrine of impassibility may cause Christians to wonder, why, in the face of evil, did the Christian Church ever conceive of God as impassible? The Incarnation alone would seem to give strong support for a God who is passible. Yet the Incarnation is not the only grounds for the passibilists arguments. As cited above, numerous examples could be used within the Scriptures that suggest that God feels grief and regret, repents, and is moved to compassion, as well as anger. According to modern passibilists, the reason for the Church's denial that God suffers is due to the vestigial remains of Greek metaphysical thought.²⁹ The Church has been held captive by pagan philosophy, and has unwittingly adopted Greek metaphysical categories that have influenced the way God's nature is understood, and the way that the Scriptures are interpreted. Consequently, many passibilists believe that those who adhere to divine impassibility interpret divine passion within the scriptures as merely *anthropopathic* (attributions of human passion upon deity) expressions, in order to avoid passible emotions within the Godhead.

According to Adolf von Harnack, “[Christian] Dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel.”³⁰ Thus, in accordance with Harnack's theory, Clark Pinnock writes that the idea of God's impassibility “... arises more from Plato than from the Bible.”³¹ According to T. E. Pollard, the idea of an impassible God comes directly from Greek Philosophy.³² He writes, “Among the many Greek philosophical ideas imported into Christian theology, and into Alexandrian Jewish theology before it, is the idea of the *impassible*

²⁹Pinnock, 72-73.

³⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, quoted by Lister, pg. 42-43.

³¹Pinnock, 118.

³² Pollard, 356.

God, and this idea furnishes us with a particularly striking illustration of the damage done by the assumption of alien philosophical presuppositions when they are applied to Christian theology.”

To understand this argument, a brief survey of Greek philosophy is in order.

According to Plato, God was immutable.³³ For the divine to change was a metaphysical impossibility, a logical contradiction. The reason for this was that in order for something to change, something must change from a state of perfection to something less than perfect, or vice versa. But God is perfect, therefore he cannot change.³⁴ Aristotle further developed this idea, adding that to exist is to have actuality.³⁵ Now to exist, a being has both actuality and potential. Take a baby for example. A baby is actual, or *a being in act*, and as such, acts through change, fulfilling its potential to become a man. Thus, beings are a composite of both *act* and *potency*. However, God, who is perfect, has no potency, for as stated above, to have potential is to be imperfect. Therefore, God is *act*, and as such is immutable. Furthermore, Aristotle taught that God is a mind who thinks. Following the implications of God as pure act, Aristotle maintained that for God to think about beings outside himself is to think about beings that have potential, and this would imply progression and change of thoughts. But if thoughts change, then this means that God is changing, which was unacceptable for Aristotle. God as pure act thinks only of his own perfection.³⁶ Millard Erickson remarks “...Aristotle’s God is primarily involved in

³³ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Yale Nota Bene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 28. Properly speaking, “God” is Plato’s idea of the “Good,” which is in no way an analogue to the Christian idea of God. The Platonic Ideas, or *eidōs* or timeless, spaceless, and impersonal abstract objects.

³⁴ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ Hallman, *The Coming of the Impassible God: Tracing a Dilemma in Christian Theology*. 18.

thinking, not feeling-and certainly not in feeling induced by the influence of the creation on him.³⁷

Among the Platonists and the Aristotelians, the Greeks knew of another branch of Philosophy known as *Stoicism*. The Stoics advocated a doctrine known as *Apatheia*. The Stoics believed that the emotions, or *pathe*, were irrational, and endeavored to eliminate such undesirable emotional perturbations.³⁸ The ideal virtue within human life is to extinguish these irrational passions, and to disallow all external influences to disturb one's emotional faculties.³⁹

Of all the influences on early Christian theology, there was no more an influential voice than the Jewish Philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. Philo was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and as an interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures, systematized a hermeneutical framework with which to interpret the Biblical text.⁴⁰ It is here that the debate between passibilists and impassibilists come back into focus. According to advocates of divine passibility, it is Philo who adulterated the Hebrew conception of God with Greek philosophy, and thus tainted the Christian tradition.⁴¹ For Philo, God was immutable, everlasting, and perfect. Therefore for God, it would be unthinkable to believe that God could undergo change in any sense. This is why Philo can write that "God is utterly inaccessible to any passion whatever. For it is the peculiar property of human weakness to be disquieted by any such feelings, but God has

³⁷ Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*, pg. 145.

³⁸ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28.

³⁹ Erickson, 145.

⁴⁰ Weinandy, 74-75.

⁴¹ Ibid.

[not]...the irrational passions of the soul.”⁴² The implications of conceiving God in such terms can be seen in how Philo interprets Biblical passages that speak of divine emotions. Whenever the Scriptures speak of God as regretting decisions, getting angry, or said to have changed prior decisions because he was moved by compassion, Philo consistently interprets these instances as anthropopathisms. Emotions imply change, which is not fitting for the divine.⁴³

Because the early Church Fathers lived within an environment permeated by Greek philosophy, much of their language comes from Hellenistic thought. The Church fathers appropriated Greek concepts to understand and clarify Scripture, and employed language in formulating Church doctrine.⁴⁴ Therefore it is easy to see how contemporary passibilists argue that Church tradition has adopted pagan ideas. Allegedly, the Church has inherited a foreign metaphysic, and has exchanged a passible, loving God, for a static, inert, immutable and impassible God; a God who is a metaphysical iceberg,⁴⁵ rather than a God who is emotionally responsive to his creation.

Impassibility: The Case for Classical Theism

As stated above, the Christian Church has had an overwhelming consensus for nearly two millennia that God cannot suffer, and cannot experience anguish caused by forces external to him. Theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, and Augustine all affirmed divine impassibility.⁴⁶ Even the Reformers of early

⁴² Weinandy, 76.

⁴³ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁵T. Vincent Tymms, *The Christian Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), quoted by Lister, 31.

⁴⁶Lister, 67-94.

modernity held to impassibilism, save Martin Luther.⁴⁷ Were there good reasons for this consensus? Were these theologians oblivious to the influences of unbiblical metaphysics?

Patristic Thought and Biblical Interpretation

That the Church Fathers borrowed terms from Greek philosophy, this can hardly be denied. But borrowing language does not necessitate that the ideas are equal in conceptual value. Christianity predicates to God all of the things that Hellenistic philosophy does, like invisibility, eternity, perfection, and immutability, but does so due to entirely different reasons. Hellenism ascribes to God these attributes for negative reasons, while Christianity does so for positive reasons. Thomas Weinandy states, “While both the New Testament and the Platonic/Aristotelian philosophy would hold that God is perfect, the New Testament upholds this attribute because God must be perfect as the creator of a good world, whereas Greek philosophy tends to hold that God is perfect because he is removed from the imperfect world of materiality.”⁴⁸ God is perfect therefore immutable, not because he stands apart from an imperfect material world, but because he is good. Though the Fathers may have taken the term “immutability” from Greek philosophy, they reformulated the concept of immutability from the Scripture’s affirmation that God is good and full of love.⁴⁹ Such an idea had never entered into the mind of any Greek philosopher,⁵⁰ and it is this fact that contemporary passibilists fail to grasp. The Christian church does not think that God is immutable and impassible for the same reasons that the Greek philosophers did.⁵¹ By and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 107-120.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁰ Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 43.

⁵¹ Weinandy, 110.

large the Church fathers radically transformed the Hellenic view of God,⁵² and upheld many ideas that ran countercultural to the pagan ideas that were prevalent in the Father's cultural milieu- ideas like a personal God, God's immanence, his triune nature, *creatio ex nihilo*, and the goodness of matter.⁵³ The Church's insistence on divine impassibility grew out of their understanding of divine immutability, which was grounded within scripture, not pagan philosophy. The church may have used the same term as the pagans, but the church formulated impassibility on entirely different metaphysical grounds.

So what about the Scriptures that speak about divine passion? To be clear, the position taken in this paper is not that God does not have emotions. Humans are made in the image of God, and are therefore divine analogues (Gen. 1:27).⁵⁴ Therefore, humans bear a resemblance to God in their emotions. However, being analogues, it must be stressed that God is transcendent and is wholly other, which means that they are made in his image, not he in theirs. God is not a man, which necessitates the use of an analogical hermeneutic when interpreting Scripture that speaks of divine passion.⁵⁵ God experiences emotion, just not emotions that deprive him of his eternal blessedness. As has been noted above, traditional arguments have stated that Scripture that speaks of God being angry or grieving over his people are anthropopathisms, and cannot be understood literally. For passibilists who do not find this convincing, one must be reminded that Scripture not only speaks of God changing his mind, but also affirms that God does not change his mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Ps. 132:11; Jer. 4:28). To affirm passibility

⁵² Ibid., 72.

⁵³ Lister, 62

⁵⁴ Ibid., 184

⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.

would be to affirm an irreconcilable contradiction, whereas if these emotions are considered to be anthropopathic, then an analogical hermeneutic would relieve the tension.

What about the suffering of Jesus? According to Moltmann, Kitamori, and many others, Jesus provides the strongest evidence for a God who suffers. Jesus wept (Jn. 11:25), got angry (Matt. 21:12), suffered, and then died (Matt. 27:50). The Incarnation is one of the most vexing problems for those who advocate divine impassibility. Interestingly, it was impassibility and its twin doctrine, immutability that sparked the Christological heresies of the third and fourth centuries. Thomas Weinandy writes that the Christological issues of the early church “centered around the reconciliation of God’s immutability and impassibility with the new reality of Christ.”⁵⁶ How does God not change by becoming flesh, and in becoming flesh, how does he not become passible? In answering these very questions, the Christological heresies of Nestorius, Apollinaris, and Arius came to the fore of early Christian theology. The historical development of these issues, and the ecclesiastical councils that formulated the Church’s understanding of the person of Christ is well beyond the scope of this paper. For the current purpose of the discussion, it is Cyril of Alexandria who best framed Christianity’s perspective on the person of Christ.⁵⁷ Regarding the issue of divine impassibility, and the passibility of Christ, Cyril formulated the *Hypostatic Union*. Christ has two natures, and that the attributes of each nature are predicated to the person (hypostasis) of Christ.⁵⁸ This means that God suffered *as* man, not *in* man. In the Incarnation, the mode by which the Logos exists is as man, therefore Christ suffers as man.⁵⁹ To

⁵⁶ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Studies in Historical Theology*, vol. 4, *Does God Change? the Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, MA: St. Bede, 1985), xxi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

revisit Pollard's objection that there can be no real Incarnation if both natures of Christ did not suffer, is to misunderstand the Hypostatic Union. Neither the divine nor the human natures of Christ suffer because natures by definition cannot suffer.⁶⁰ It is the *person* of Christ existing as man that suffers, and it is only as man that he suffers. Therefore God is impassible, and when the second person of the Trinity assumes flesh, only in the flesh can the Logos suffer.⁶¹

Impassibility: A Theological Model

God is holy, and is holy due to his perfection and his goodness (Ex. 15:11; Lev. 11:44-45; Isa. 6:1-4).⁶² For reasons stated by Aristotle, perfection necessitates immutability, and therefore God is, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, *pure act*.⁶³ However, God is pure actuality not because he is inert and static (as Greek philosophy proposes), but for the exact opposite reason. God, as a Trinity of persons, is utterly dynamic, and infinite.⁶⁴ He has no potentiality because he is fully in act, and cannot be other than he is. Thus, God is impassible, and cannot experience fluctuating states of emotion, because to experience such would be to have potential. Passibilists who believe that impassibility denies God's loving response misunderstand what impassibility actually teaches. Because God is love (1 Jn. 4:16), this necessarily means that God is love fully in act, and therefore it is impossible for his love to diminish. Impassibility does not mean that God does not feel love, but that nothing external to him can cause him to love less.

⁶⁰A nature is a sum of properties that make an individual being what it is.

⁶¹Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, 65-66.

⁶²Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1998), 311-12.

⁶³Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 120.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 146.

Impassibility does not mean that God is not responsive, but as pure act is utterly responsive, and cannot be any more or any less responsive.

This understanding of impassibility provides a hermeneutical model with which to interpret divine passion within Scripture. As seen above traditional orthodoxy has interpreted divine passion as anthropopathic. According to Rob Lister, anthropopathisms are analogical and literal.⁶⁵ By literal it is meant that statements of divine passion are true descriptions. However, by analogical it is meant to deny that divine emotion is univocal.⁶⁶ God does not experience emotion the same way as humans do. Humans are passible, changing in emotional states, while God does not change in such ways. Humans can truly know what it means for God to be loving and to be good, but they cannot exhaustively know such things. Weinandy sates, “[divine] emotions are... expressions of his goodness administered in various ways to meet various situations.”⁶⁷ This does not mean that God changes, but that in Scriptural instances of divine passion, the language is of divine accommodation. Anger and wrath are expressions of God’s goodness and love toward the ungodly. God is angered *because* he is good. God pours out is wrath, *because* he is love. Love and goodness are proper attributes of the divine, not wrath and anger. To use an illustration, the sun that melts wax is the same sun that hardens clay. The sun does not change, only the object in relation to the sun.⁶⁸

What about divine suffering? Does God suffer? To answer this question, a look at the doctrines of transcendence and immanence is of extreme importance, for God is not only

⁶⁵Lister, 187.

⁶⁶“Analogical” meaning similar to the way God is, “univocal” meaning totally the same as God is.

⁶⁷Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 101.

⁶⁸This was adapted from a quote by C. H. Spurgeon

impassible because he is immutable, but also because he is transcendent.⁶⁹ By being immanent, God demonstrates that he is transcendent, and only by being transcendent can he truly be immanent.⁷⁰ In the Exodus, God shows himself to be immanent and intimately involved with his creation (Ex. 2:24-25; 7-12). In God's saving act, God is simultaneously establishing his supremacy over the cosmic order and the Egyptian pantheon. God's transcendence is what predicates to him the ability to be immanent within the world. By creating, God reveals that he is distinct and wholly other than what is created.⁷¹ In contrast to Babylonian cosmogonies, the Biblical God does not wrestle with, nor even collaborate with pre-existent forces, as if there were anything beside Yahweh outside creation.⁷² Yahweh is utterly unique, transcendent above all, and independent, and is thereby able to be immanent in his relationship to his creation. God is completely other than all else in creation, and yet can be present to and act within his creation only because he is other. In saving creation, he shows that he is able to overpower a force that cannot fight his advances as well as demonstrates that his arm is not too short to save, and that he himself is not crippled by what cripples his creation. He is the great physician, and is so precisely because he is not suffering from the very thing that his creation suffers from. Being transcendent does not mean that God is not near to human pain and suffering. God's transcendence is the very thing that enables him to heal pain and suffering. Therefore, God can be truly immanent- can truly be able to save precisely because he is transcendent over all else.⁷³

⁶⁹ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 153.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45-6

⁷² K. A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary*, vol. v. 1A-1B, *Genesis* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996-2005), 117-22.

⁷³ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 45-6.

In the Incarnation, one can truly say that God suffered and died, but only that as man did he suffer and die. Whatever can be predicated to the person of Christ can be said to be predicated to God, but not because God as God suffered, but that God as man suffered.⁷⁴ Jesus is truly God, and truly man- he is truly a man who is God and a God who is man. In contrast to Moltmann, Kitamori, and other passibilists, Christ does not reveal a God who eternally suffers prior to creation, but reveals a God who voluntarily suffers as man for the purpose of redeeming creation from suffering and death. To say that God dies as God would be to say something incoherent and absurd. But to say that God dies as man is to express the mystery of the Incarnation.

Conclusion

God is impassible because as pure act he is immutable, as well as transcendent and wholly other. In conceiving of God as passible, the passibilists blurs the line of distinction between the creator and the created. If God in his triune nature suffers, then he eternally suffers due to his foreknowledge of future events. If God suffers, then evil eternally casts its shadow upon the blessedness of God, and he would not be eternally blessed. Even more problematic, if evil affects God then God is not truly transcendent due to the collapse of an ontological hierarchy.⁷⁵ If evil affects God, then he cannot transcend evil, and therefore could not save his creation due to the inescapable web that evil would spread over reality. God is impassible precisely because he is transcendent, and by being transcendent, he can truly save in his penultimate expression of immanence: Jesus Christ. The Word came to exist as man (John 1:14),

⁷⁴ Ibid., 174. In the Incarnation, one can properly say that it is God who died. This is a practice known as the *Communication of Idioms*. However, if one says that God died, it must be understood that it is God *as man* that died.

⁷⁵David Bentley Hart, *No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility*, Pro Ecclesia 11 no. 2, Spring, 2002 191. God as transcendent is wholly other in his being (this is what ontology is- the study of being). God *is* being, and his creation *has* being. If evil affects God, than this amounts to evil residing within God due to the lack of distinction between God's being, and creation's being.

and it was as man that he suffered and died. In doing so, God took up suffering and death so that he could conquer sin and death in the form of a passible servant, and only by being impassible can God lose the bonds of sin and death.

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