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‘Only the non-suffering God can help’: recovering the glory of divine impassibility

Mark Smith

Introduction

Divine impassibility refers to the belief that God can neither be acted on from without, nor experience ‘emotional’ change within, and that, more specifically, God can thus neither be caused to suffer, nor choose to suffer, in his divine nature. This venerable doctrine enjoyed near-universal acceptance until the end of the nineteenth century—carefully articulated by the Fathers, systematised by the great medieval Schoolmen, and affirmed by the major Reformed theologians (it even makes it into the first of the Thirty-Nine Articles).

Yet over the course of the last century, divine impassibility was in many quarters decisively rejected, the victim of a new mood in theology epitomised by Bonhoeffer’s famous dictum: ‘only the suffering God can help’.¹ Auschwitz, it was felt, had no place for a God who could neither suffer nor grieve, Scripture had no time for a God who seemed neither fully relational nor truly loving, and theology had no need for a God whom it thought characterised by the dubious insights of an alien Greek philosophy. In the place of the impassible God, modern theology sought to rediscover the crucified God—vulnerable in love, co-suffering with his creation, engaged in forging an identity not only for the world but also for himself.

Alas, this article will contend that by jettisoning any serious attempt at metaphysical coherence and by embracing a facile scriptural hermeneutic, this new ‘pathetic’ view of God was less a revelation of the divine than a projection of man’s perennial tendency towards narcissism and idolatry. In contrast, the doctrine of divine impassibility will be shown to be not an obstacle to all that modern theologians wish to emphasise about God’s dynamic life and perfect love, but precisely that which secures those qualities. Indeed, divine impassibility proves to be not only a crucial component in any robust account of God’s nature, but a necessary guarantor of the theologian’s basic conviction that in speaking about God he is doing something other than speaking about himself.

Impassibility and the witness of Scripture

At first glance, nothing appears more foreign to Scripture than the notion of an impassible God. The living God of the Bible is no metaphysical iceberg, placidly observing events in splendid isolation. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is passionately involved with his people, sharing in their joys, reacting to their misdeeds, suffering with them in loving vulnerability—he is a God of ‘pathos’.² Man’s sinfulness grieves Yahweh to his very heart (Gen. 6:6, cf. Ps. 78:40, Eph. 4:30), Israel’s afflictions move him to pity (Judg. 2:18), even foreign nations earn his compassion (Jer. 48:36, cf. Isa. 15:5). In response to Abraham’s haggling, God modifies the conditions of his justice (Gen. 18:20-32); in response to Moses’ intercession, God relents from his intention to bring destruction upon his people (Ex. 32:14, cf. Ps. 106:45); in response to Amos’ pleading, God ‘changes his mind’ (Amos 7:3, 6, cf. 1 Chron. 21:15, Jonah 3:10). Indeed, God’s commitment to his covenant people is so intimate and passionate that it provokes in him a state of emotional turmoil: ‘my heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender, I will not execute my burning anger’ (Hos. 11:8-9, cf. Jer. 31:20, Isa. 42:14). Scripture, then, appears to bear witness to a God of interpersonal relation, passionate engagement and intimate involvement, grieving over his people’s sins, responding to his people’s intercession, and willingly making himself vulnerable out of compassionate love.

However, there is important theme in the scriptural witness that needs to be taken into account. The same Bible that describes God as relational and responsive also emphasises that the divine character is utterly different from our own. God ‘is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind’ (Num. 23:19, cf. 1 Sam. 15:29, Isa. 14:24, Ps. 110:4, Rom. 11:29), and in him ‘there is no variation or shadow due to change’ (Jas. 1:17, cf. Mal. 3:6). God is unlike men, with their passions (Acts 14:15): we are often unhappy, he exists in blessedness (Rom. 1:25, cf. Rom. 9:5, Mk. 14:61); we are limited in perspective, he knows ‘the end from the beginning’ (Isa. 46:9-10, cf. Jer. 4:28); our plans often come to naught, his purposes are never thwarted (Job. 42:2, cf. 2 Cor. 1:18-20); we are beholden to decay and corruption, he is far above the ravages of time (Ps. 102:25-27, Heb. 13:8); our love is intermittent and feeble, his love is steadfast, and endures forever (Lam. 3:21-23, cf. Ps. 100:5). God rebukes those who think he is like us (Ps. 50:21), for his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts higher than our thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9).

Furthermore, we are told again and again that the reason for this great gulf fixed between the character of God and the character of man is that ‘it is he that has made us, and not we ourselves’ (Ps. 100:3)—it is because God ‘created all things, and by [his] will they existed and were created’ that he is worthy ‘to receive glory and honour and power’ (Rev. 4:11); it is because God brought out the stars by number, and called them by name, that he is just in asking ‘to whom then will you compare me?’ (Isa. 40:18, 25-26, cf. Rom. 11:34). To forget God’s sheer otherness is to embrace idolatry (cf. the line of argument in Isaiah 44, esp. 44:18, and cf. Romans 1:21-25).

Indeed, God reveals himself to Moses as ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (Ex. 3:14)—the One whose Name is above naming, whose identity is only truly comprehensible to himself. The great visions of God are always allusive, full of circumlocutions, as if language itself is breaking down in the effort to describe the indescribable: Moses can only glimpse God’s back (Ex. 33:20-23), Isaiah’s attention is drawn to the train of his robe (Isa. 6:1), and Ezekiel falls on his face despite seeing merely ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord’ (Ezek. 1:28). In short, to those who would presume to dictate what God must be like, to those who would shrink him down to human categories of understanding, God answers ‘where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?’ (Job 38:4); and in Job’s response we are given the model for our own: ‘I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes’ (Job 42:3, 6).

We must seek to discover, then, a hermeneutic capable of doing justice to both these scriptural themes, whilst still retaining a coherent doctrine of God. It shall be argued below that the only satisfactory resolution is that adopted by the vast majority of traditional exegetes: that is, to begin with the scriptural emphasis on God’s utter transcendence (stemming from his identity as Creator), and to thereby interpret those more ‘human’ descriptions of God as gracious divine accommodations to creaturely ways of thinking. If this argument holds true, then the overall scriptural witness cannot be seen as implying, let alone requiring, a passibilist conceptualisation of God, but rather as ultimately ‘fitting’ more satisfactorily within an impassibilist framework.

The main reason for pursuing the kind of hermeneutic outlined above is that the contours of the biblical narrative seem to demand it. Since the Old Testament

is an account of God revealing himself to his people, making himself present in their midst and acting in their history, God's immanence inevitably takes epistemological precedence. However, it is through this immanent presence that Israel comes to know the transcendent God who truly speaks to them—God's transcendence, in other words, takes ontological precedence.³ It is because God is the Creator, utterly distinct from all that exists, that he can comfort the believer with his presence 'even in the uttermost parts of the sea' (Ps. 139:7). It is because God is transcendent that he can truly enter into covenants with his people as God and not as some mirage, emanation or world-spirit. It is because God has no rivals, human or divine, to frustrate his plans, that Israel can truly trust him as mighty to save. Those advocating divine passibility thus engage in fallacious reasoning when they assume that it is necessary to make God less than 'Wholly Other' in order to make him more loving or compassionate—for it is precisely because God is 'Wholly Other' than the created order that he is able to relate to it as fully and intimately as he does.

Once, then, we establish God's transcendence as Creator as the necessary hermeneutical starting point demanded by the scriptural witness, we can begin to see why texts which deny human-derived attributes of God are on firmer epistemological ground than those which seek to affirm something about him—when we deny something of God, we know what we are denying; when we affirm something of God, we can be far less sure of the form that the affirmation will take in relation to him who is Wholly Other. In this way, those texts which refer to God in essentially apophatic terms (e.g. God does not change)—and which point us towards a concept of the divine nature in which impassibility (another denial of something in God rather than an affirmation) fits more coherently than passibility—must take some sort of priority over those texts which simply apply a human characteristic to God (including, of course, biblical material which appears to imply that God suffers).

If, then, the scriptural witness nudges us towards regarding the 'transcendence' texts (from which, as will be argued in the next section, necessarily flows the doctrine of an impassible divine nature) as having a certain epistemological priority, we must now seek to consider how it might be possible to satisfactorily account for the 'passible' texts without thereby emptying them of meaning. The most straightforward method here is simply to extend the universally-accepted practice of not reading all scriptural texts univocally! When we read that God

has eyes (2 Chron. 16:9), hands (Ex. 15:17), feet (1 Kings. 5:3), ears (Jas. 5:4) or nostrils (Ex. 15:8), we know that to interpret these texts literally would be not only to bring them into contradiction with other parts of Scripture (e.g. ‘God is spirit’, John 4:24), but would also be to understand them improperly.

That is to say, we recognise that the function of such descriptions is to convey something of God’s character or action through reference to parts of the human body, rather than to literally delineate the divine anatomy, or to encourage speculation regarding whether God’s eyes are blue or how often he blinks. The same principle would thus naturally extend to those passages outlined earlier that describe God as overcome by anger, incapacitated by suffering or changing his mind—just as we recognise anthropomorphisms in Scripture, so we also recognise anthropopathisms. Once we acknowledge that to truly speak of God is utterly beyond creaturely language and thought (as outlined above, cf. Isa. 40:18, 55:8-9), we begin to see that all scriptural language is ultimately a divine condescension or ‘accommodation’ to our limitedness—that God ‘lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children’⁴. Thus, the ‘passible’ texts are improperly understood if taken as literal insights into the mind of God, and properly understood if taken as expressing, in terms that we can comprehend, something of the depth of that divine love which so utterly surpasses all human understanding.⁵

Let us pause here briefly to consider possible objections that might be raised against this line of argument. First, it might be contended that Scripture only requires us to affirm God’s immutability at an ethical rather than ontological level, i.e. that God remains constant in his love and faithfulness precisely by being reactive to human events and changeable in his emotions. This, however, is an untenable position, since if God’s ethical immutability is not grounded in the ontological immutability of the divine nature, then he cannot be trusted to always act out of perfect love and faithfulness, and, furthermore, such actions would cease to be a true revelation of who he is in himself. Let us be mindful that Scripture rejoices not in the changeability of God’s character but in the immutability of his love—it is because God’s love is unchanging that it is thereby perfect, unfailing and eternally trustworthy.

Secondly, it might be contended that the account given above still cannot make adequate sense of those passages where God appears to change his mind. The

issue, however, is simply one of perspective—when God ‘changes his mind’ it is because of a change in others (e.g. Saul’s sinfulness in 1 Sam. 15), and so the ‘change’ in God is actually a reflection of his deeper immutability, whether in terms of his steadfast opposition to sin or his unalterable love for his people.⁶ Similarly, that God ‘negotiates’ with Abraham or Moses is not a sign that he is literally open to having his plans changed (for how then could he ‘know the end from the beginning?’), but rather betokens that gracious condescension of God whereby he enters into dialogue with his creatures in order to teach and to guide them. Indeed, it is because the eternal God wishes people to respond to him that he presents himself to them as one to whom response is possible. If God did not accommodate himself to us, we could not be saved, nor could we truly know his love.

Thirdly, it might be contended that the account given here strips God of all emotion, and so leaves us with little more than an aloof ‘Greek’ deity. The question of God’s ‘emotional life’ is indeed a complex matter, and requires fuller consideration below. For the moment, however, it remains simply to re-emphasise the conclusion of this section: that the variety of the biblical witness is most satisfactorily resolved by a hermeneutic, itself scripturally-derived, that recognises the ontological priority of God’s transcendence as Creator, and so suggests both the epistemological advantage of apophatic over cataphatic statements regarding the divine nature, and the need for anthropopathic texts to be recognised as accommodations to creaturely understanding. In this way, the scriptural witness ultimately provides a framework into which divine impassibility ‘fits’ far more comfortably than divine passibility. We shall now argue that such a conclusion is confirmed by systematic reflection on the doctrine of God.

Impassibility and the doctrine of God

Moltmann typifies the modern ‘turn’ in the doctrine of God when he writes, ‘a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved...the one who cannot suffer cannot love’.⁷ If ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8, 16), it is argued, then he cannot be the aloof, static God of classical theism, but must be rather ‘the fellow-sufferer who understands’.⁸ The Christian God, on this account, lovingly enters into the full vulnerability of real reciprocal relations with his creatures, rejoicing with them in their happiness, weeping with them in their despair, constantly engaged in the attempt to win them back to himself.

However, it shall be argued in this section that the doctrine of God, like the witness of Scripture, clearly points us towards divine impassibility: not only as an important ‘apophatic qualifier’⁹ in elucidating God’s nature, but also precisely as a guarantor of that loving, active, dynamic divine relationality for which modern passibilists yearn.

The orthodox affirmation of divine impassibility derives not from a fatal submission to Greek philosophy, but from a careful consideration of the implications of the biblical witness to God as Creator. If God ‘created all things, and by [his] will they existed and were created’ (Rev. 4:11), if he is the source of the being of everything other than himself, if he is uncaused first cause, then, beyond pointing us to the sheer radical otherness of God, there are certain things that cannot be true of him. God cannot be composite, for if he is dependent on nothing outside himself, then he cannot be dependent on any anterior component parts, and so must be perfectly simple. And if there can be no ‘mixture’ in God, then he cannot be a combination of actuality and potentiality—indeed were he to possess any potential he would be dependent on a prior actuality outside himself—so he must be pure act (*actus purus*). God cannot change, for to change would be to possess a mixture of what one is and what one might become, and, furthermore, he could not then account for the change that marks the created order—so God must be immutable. And if God is immutable, he must also be eternal (i.e. atemporal), since there can be no temporal succession in God, no change from ‘before’ to ‘after’, nor can he participate in the temporality of creation if he is to be its cause.

From these preliminary (and largely apophatic) deductions, it should be clear that for God to truly be God, he must be impassible. God’s aseity (self-sufficiency) means that he cannot be subject to anything, and to suffer is to be passive to the action of something else—God is not our plaything, he is subject and never object. God’s immutability means he cannot undergo any change in ‘emotional’ state. God’s eternal being means he cannot truly enter into time-based ‘experiences’ such as suffering. God as *actus purus* means that he must constantly exercise the full plenitude of the divine nature, and so no cloud of suffering can possibly intrude upon the divine life, which is always as happy, blessed and contented as it can be. The impassible God is not, then, some sort of static ‘rock’, but a God who is constantly exercising the fullness of his eternal being, lively, ever-creating, an unwavering fountain of activity—change

and suffering is foreign to God precisely because they would make him less, not more, dynamically alive. Thus, God's inability to suffer does not constitute a defect in God's being, since a divine capability for suffering would be a form of impotence, not a form of power. To suffer is not a privilege but a lack, and to be impassible is only to lack a lack.

In short, just as only an immutable God can be trusted to be faithful, and only a perfect God can be known to act purely out of selfless generosity, so only an impassible God can express with unimpeded vigour the ineffable perfection of his love. Impassibility, then, is not just an important 'apophatic qualifier' in any doctrine of God, but is also a guarantor of the fullness of the divine life, and so part of the ground of Christian hope. Impassibility does not condemn God to immobility and inertia—rather it ensures that the eternally living God can be perfectly dynamic in his love and goodness. He is powerful to save precisely because, unlike us, he is neither susceptible to the fluctuations of emotional states, nor the victim of passions that overwhelm him.

We are still left, however, with the question of the character of God's love, since it is commonly argued that true love must involve vulnerability and suffering in God. However, the passibilist case is grounded here upon an inappropriately univocal understanding of love, viz. loving human relationships are often characterised by suffering, therefore God's relationship with us must be. Taking God's transcendence seriously, however, counsels us against merely projecting up our experiences of love into God. Rather, love is primarily an attribute of God, not of us—it is known amongst his creatures derivatively and imperfectly. Since suffering is a limitation, a restriction on one's freedom, a mark of finitude and fallenness, it is not proper to perfect love, and therefore is not proper to God's love. And even among humans, love and suffering need not go together—sharing in someone's pain is merely one possible consequence of love, and is neither necessary nor sufficient for compassion.

What is necessary for love is that we will what is good or desirable, and it is this that, however imperfectly, points us back to love's perfection in God. God wills good and desirable things, therefore he loves. As Vanhoozer puts it, 'God's love is not his willingness to enter into a mutual give-and-take relationship with his creatures but his disposition to communicate his goodness'.¹⁰ Suffering can only, then, act as an impediment to God's love, since it would curb His ability

to bring about good. A passible God would also, furthermore, be unable to love altruistically, since he would be acting not just to alleviate his creature's suffering, but his own too. Better than a God who suffers with us is a God who shall in the future bring an end to our suffering, and who can in the present have the most intimate possible involvement with the suffering of his creatures. As McCabe notes, our desire to suffer with those who suffer stems from a frustration that we are 'outside' the other person, and so can be present to another's suffering only by being affected by it.¹¹ God, in comparison, is not outside his creatures, but continually holds them in being, and so is closer to the sufferer than the sufferer is to himself—what we must achieve through pity or co-suffering, God can achieve more perfectly through his ongoing creative act, by which he is united with and within the life of the sufferer. Our love is marked by suffering because our love is not God's.

What then of God's 'emotional life'? Here we need to return to a traditional distinction between 'passions' and 'affections'—whilst God, as source of the existence of everything other than himself, cannot be acted on by anything, and so cannot possess 'passions', he can possess—and does so perfectly—those affections fitting to the divine character. Affections, here, are intentional affective dispositions that express God's character, and which he eternally shows towards his creatures. God is thus perfectly joyful, perfectly loving, perfectly holy, and communicates these eternal affections to his creatures in time. God's affections are held with the greatest possible intensity and power, fully loving, full of life, always active and never passive. Impassibility guarantees the fullness of God's active affections and the perfection of his love.

A suffering God, in short, is a metaphysical nonsense and a pastoral disaster. A suffering God is a God who does not love fully, who is not truly present to his creatures, whose involvement with those creatures is compromised by self-interest, and whose promise to overcome suffering is not secure. Such a God, inextricably caught up in the suffering from which men cry for release, could provide no sure hope, no words of comfort—he would be a God more deserving of pity than worship. The God of the Bible, the God of perfect love, the God utterly transcendent and incomparably immanent, the God whose nature this section has sought to consider, can only be the impassible God, in whom there is no shadow of turning, and no darkness at all.

Impassibility and the Incarnation

The doctrine of impassibility appears to reach a dead end at the Incarnation. Surely in becoming man, in entering into human experience (e.g. Heb. 2:17), God suffered as we suffer? Surely any persuasive *theologia crucis* must have at its centre the Suffering God? Indeed, it might even be said that the event of the Son's God-forsakenness at Calvary is fundamentally constitutive of the very life of the Trinity. Responding to these arguments requires recovering the carefully-articulated Christological formulations of the early church, especially as expressed at Chalcedon. It will be contended that we can indeed affirm (employing the *communicatio idiomatum*, i.e. the communication of properties) that in the Incarnation the Son truly suffers, but that we can also preserve divine impassibility, since this suffering is borne in the Son's human nature, not in his divine nature.

Let us begin, then, by considering how the Church Fathers sought to articulate the complexities of the Incarnation with regard to impassibility. Far from inaugurating the 'Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy'¹², the Fathers were scrupulous in remaining faithful to the biblical witness concerning both the otherness of God in relation to the creation order (indeed championing creation *ex nihilo* precisely against Greek metaphysics), and the true incarnation of the Son of God. The difficulty was in affirming both the impassibility proper to God, and the passibility proper to man. Ignatius, for instance, eager to affirm Christ's real suffering against his docetic opponents, finds his language breaking down in the attempt to express the mystery of the Incarnation—of him 'who was beyond touch and passion, yet who for our sakes became subject to suffering, and endured everything for us'.¹³ Indeed, Gavrilyuk argues that it was this very dialectic between impassibility and passibility that ran like a golden thread through the early church's Christological controversies—and it was the heretics (not the orthodox) who wished to dissolve the richness of this paradox. The orthodox, in comparison, wanted to ensure that it was truly God who became man, and truly as man that he suffered, realising that only in this way could the Incarnation be a real act of divine compassion, and, furthermore, an act powerful to heal and transform the human condition.

The path to Chalcedon, then, was marked by the rejection of those doctrines which failed to do justice to both sides of the equation. Thus, docetism was rejected because it retained divine impassibility at the expense of a true

incarnation, patripassionism was rejected because it attributed suffering to the Godhead at the expense of its genuine transcendence, Arianism was rejected because it could not accept that a Logos involved in suffering could be fully divine, Nestorianism was rejected because its attempt to allot passibility and impassibility to two separate acting subjects denied the Son's singularity as divine agent. What would become Chalcedonian Christological orthodoxy, especially as elaborated in the thought of Cyril of Alexandria, affirmed the paradox—'the Impassible suffers'—but avoided the drift towards Nestorianism by also affirming that there is one acting person—the Son—who takes to himself a human nature (whilst retaining his divine nature) and makes it his own. God did not simply act like a man, but became one. The Son did not suffer in his divine nature, but he did suffer in his human nature—through taking on flesh, the Word was enabled to suffer humanly. Because of the unity of the one Person of the Son, the *ommunicatio idiomatum* allows us to truly say that, on the Cross, God's hands are pierced, God suffers, God dies—but He does so as man. It is truly God who suffers, and He suffers as true man.

Aside from its fidelity to the biblical witness and its metaphysical coherence (which, as we have seen, includes the retention of divine impassibility), there are several other advantages to this classical formulation.

First, a full-blooded two-natures Christology guarantees that Christ can truly pay for our sins and truly sympathise with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15), since his suffering is truly human suffering, borne in his human nature. Indeed, those who seek to locate suffering in the divine nature rather than the human nature of the Son actually distance God from genuine human suffering—whatever it might mean for God to suffer in his divine nature, it would be sufficiently different from our human suffering as to render it ultimately irrelevant to our plight. In this way, impassibility does not make God remote, but is rather a means of ensuring that it is truly God who is incarnate—and since impassibility stems not from God's indifference or lack of compassion, but due to the pure actuality of his goodness and love (which can know no diminution), it guarantees that the God who is incarnate is truly and fully loving. Thus, preachers who (rightly) seek to emphasise the penal forsakenness of the Cross should take care not to lapse into serious doctrinal error by construing this forsakenness as an intra-Trinitarian rupture—to do so is not only to demonstrate a basic ignorance of the doctrine of God, but actually to undermine the very 'good news' that they seek to proclaim.

Secondly, this classical Christology gives us a secure hope, since the God who suffers is also impassible, sovereign over suffering and able to ensure its ultimate defeat (as proclaimed in the Resurrection).

Thirdly, it means that the human life of the Son of God can be both a real model for our own suffering, and, through our union with Christ, a means of transfiguring that suffering—as Christ’s humanity is divinised, so too is ours. Indeed, for Cyril impassibility was significant soteriologically in ensuring God’s life-giving potency—it is because of the Son’s impassible suffering that the divine life can be appropriated to us by Christ, and appropriated by us in Christ.

Fourthly, this classical Christology retains the significance of the Cross—it is not simply a more vivid (and ultimately superfluous) reiteration of that suffering that has always animated the heart of God, but is a unique and salvific act of God (indeed, it is unclear why, on the passibilist view, the Incarnation is really necessary at all). The Incarnation does not reveal the eternal suffering of God, but the gracious condescension of his love. Our comfort is found in the marvellous truth that the impassible was made passible for us, that at the Cross we discover both God’s complete identification with us in our humanity, and also God’s transcendent, impassible love, that is powerful to save, and victorious over suffering and evil.

Impassibility and the pastoral response to suffering

It is the untold suffering of the twentieth century that has done most to discredit the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility—the gulags, killing fields and gas chambers have spoken far more powerfully against the doctrine than any academic debate over metaphysics. Modern theodicies have tended to begin with the fact of horrendous human suffering, and have then asked how—if at all—God can be excused either from indifference in the face of this suffering, or outright complicity in it. Rather than seeking to understand suffering in the context of the ultimate mystery of God (surely the message of Job 40-42!), such theodicies seek to understand God in the light of the ultimate mystery of suffering. The only answer, it is argued, is to see God as identifying himself with and involving himself in human suffering, suffering with his creatures through the vulnerable outpouring of his love: ‘where is God now? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows’.¹⁴ Only the passible God, it is argued, can be the pastoral God—only the passible God can truly offer companionship in suffering and comfort

amidst pain. In contrast, impassibility renders God remote from suffering—an ‘apathetic’ God who can only create apathetic believers, rather than Christians emboldened to decry the evil of suffering and to work towards its alleviation. For clergymen ministering to those for whom suffering is a present reality, then, the only adequate pastoral response would appear to be the suffering God.

It remains doubtful, however, whether a passible God is, in fact, pastorally helpful. The suffering Christian needs hope—but a suffering God cannot guarantee God's own final victory over evil. God promises to wipe away every tear from our eyes, to bring to pass a world where the former things have passed away, where there shall be no ‘mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore’ (Rev. 21:4)—but a passible God can only wring his hands in sentimental commiseration, and hope for the best amid the chaos of evil. In our physical and moral sickness, we need a doctor who is powerful to heal us, not one who is himself incapacitated by illness—it gives us no encouragement that we can escape from our ‘mess’ if God is in the same predicament. Indeed, passibility undermines both God’s trustworthiness and his ability to act, and his love becomes imperfect, inconstant, and dependent on our feelings and actions—it is a self-interested love, motivated by divine constraint rather than by gracious divine fullness. The suffering Christian can take great comfort in the knowledge that his Lord sympathises with him in his weakness, but it is precisely because Jesus suffered as man that this sympathy is genuine—and those who abandon a classical two-natures Christology by positing suffering in Jesus’ divine nature actually imperil the basis of this pastoral comfort. The suffering Christian needs to know that his suffering has some sort of purpose and meaning within God’s sovereign providence (Ps. 119:71, cf. Job 13:15), but passibility renders divine providence reactive and mutable, as God and man together seek to forge an ‘open’ future that neither can accurately foresee. Indeed, the ultimate consequence of such pastoral ministry is to encourage an unhelpful (and unbiblical) self-reliance in the sufferer, since he cannot trust a God to guide him if God himself does not know what the future holds. Furthermore, we cannot be sure, on the passibilist account, whether someone’s suffering is part of a loving Father’s wise providence, or whether it is something which God knows about, wishes were not happening, but is powerless to prevent.

It is, indeed, ironic that impassibility is condemned for surrendering to alien Hellenistic influences, whereas it is divine passibility that is actually in thrall

to worldly patterns of thought. For the passible God, the perpetual Heavenly Masochist, is simply an expression of a narcissistic culture which demands that God share in the development, self-realisation and suffering that mark our lives—God becomes subsumed into a cult of woundedness and victimhood, evil is sentimentally romanticised (even glorified and eternalised) as something intrinsically valuable and redemptive, and God’s selfless love is reshaped into a version of our self-love. However, we should not be surprised at the attractiveness of this image of God, for the temptation to blur the distinction between Creator and creature is a seductive idolatry deeply rooted in man’s nature—the Bible persistently reminds us that we seek to be like God (e.g. Gen. 3:5-6), and to treat God as if he were like us. We should, however, be clear that since the God of the passibilists is ultimately an idol, the proper pastoral response to suffering will involve turning the believer away from lifeless fictions towards the only true and living God, who is mighty to save.

Let us consider briefly, then, the consequent advantages of an impassibilist pastoral response to suffering. We have seen already that God’s impassibility guarantees God’s presence with us in suffering, his comfort amidst suffering (which is founded upon the true human sympathy of his Son), his providence working through suffering (thus giving meaning to suffering), and his trustworthy promise that suffering shall one day be no more. It also ensures that God’s love for those who suffer is gratuitously free in its expression and pure in its purpose, rather than compromised and selfish. Divine impassibility also gives us hope in the perfection of our human nature through union with Christ—in the Incarnation, the Son took on passibility so that he might overcome suffering and bring us to impassibility—he took on all that was painful and purposeless so that he might transfigure it into something full of meaning and hope. Impassibility is thus ‘a characteristic of Christ’s body [i.e. the Church] wherever the present fallen order is endured, confronted and overcome’ (cf. Col. 1:24)¹⁵. Indeed, suffering need not simply be, as it is for the passibilists, an expression of passive victimhood, but can rather be transformed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into a means of cultivating and manifesting Christian virtues such as patience, endurance and trust in God. The Church’s faithful suffering can thus image Christ’s patient endurance (‘the endurance of faith is the impassibility of the Church’¹⁶), as she draws closer to that divine *apatheia* which is the ceaselessly active and absolutely inexhaustible vehemence of divine love. For those enduring suffering, only the non-suffering God can help.

Conclusion

It has been the contention of this article that the widespread abandonment of the doctrine of divine impassibility over the course of the last century has been a disastrous wrong-turn for the Church, both theologically and pastorally. Far from ‘restoring’ a biblical account of God’s interaction with his creatures, this shift has occasioned a retreat into sub-biblical idolatry; far from ‘liberating’ God from Hellenistic chains, it has imprisoned Him in all-too-human concepts; far from ‘recovering’ a richer account of the Son’s Incarnation and Crucifixion, it has emptied both of theological meaning and soteriological power; far from ‘consoling’ those who suffer, it has removed the theological resources for finding meaning amidst pain, and has left the afflicted without any grounds for hope.

The challenge before the current generation, then, is to re-embrace divine impassibility as fervently as their forebears rejected it. For, amidst a culture of preening narcissism and pervasive idolatry, contemporary theologians must seek to return to the wisdom of the apophatic tradition, as a vital protection against the perennial temptation to make God in our own image. Amidst a Church which has forgotten how to speak persuasively of the love of God, clergymen must seek to convey the transcendent beauty and dynamic activity of divine love, a love which is perfect because it is impassible. And, amidst a world that knows suffering and pain as daily realities, all Christians must seek to proclaim afresh the good news of an impassible God whose love is unfailing in its fullness, whose presence is unwavering in its intimacy, who redeemed man’s suffering by suffering as man, and who offers to a broken world the gift of eternal life, and the sure promise that suffering and death and all former things shall soon pass away, as the shadows flee at daybreak.

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ENDNOTES

1. Bonhoeffer, D., *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 197.
2. For this term see especially: Heschel, A., *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 224f.
3. See: Weinandy, T.G., *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 61-63. Of course, God as Creator also takes narrative precedence—the Bible begins, in Genesis 1, with God creating the heavens and the earth.

4. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.13.1. The passibilist case is lamentably ignorant of the degree to which human words are, at the very least, considerably ‘stretched’ if applied to God.
5. Whereas, because of the argument outlined above, the ‘transcendence’ texts, insofar as they are based upon an apophatic approach to the divine nature, can be read more straightforwardly, and are less in need of this hermeneutic of accommodation.
6. Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, 1a.13.7) famously gives the example of walking past a pillar—the pillar may change from being on my left to being on my right, but it is me, not the pillar, that changes position.
7. Moltmann, J., *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 222.
8. Whitehead, A.N., *Process and Reality: An Essay In Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978 edn.), p. 351.
9. Gavriluk, P.J. (2006), *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 62.
10. Vanhoozer, K., *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 457.
11. McCabe, H., *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 39-46.
12. Gavriluk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 5 (Gavriluk is highly critical of this narrative of Hellenisation).
13. Ignatius, *To Polycarp*, 3.2, cf, *To the Ephesians*, 7 (‘first passible and then impassible’).
14. Wiesel, E., *Night* (London: Fontana, 1972), pp. 76-77.
15. Castelo, D., *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2009), p. 145.
16. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, p. 468.