
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

So Passionate He Is Impassible: Impassibility Defined and Defended

Robert D. Brewis

The doctrine of divine impassibility is widely misunderstood and rejected. This article presents the classical, biblical conception of God and the absence of suffering in the Trinity as fundamentally necessary to the love of God in the gospel.

> A fundamental starting point for faithful theology is that God is not a creature.[1]

If the doctrine of God is a storm-centre then in writing on impassibility one has entered the eye of the storm. It is recognised that "centuries of traditional belief about the impassibility of God have been overturned in our age."[2]

Following the work of Adolf von Harnack, Jurgen Moltmann and Clark Pinnock, many see impassibility as a Hellenisation of the Hebrew God.[3] Impassibility is thought to be untenable in light of the suffering of the twentieth century, so that only a God who suffers can survive the holocaust, be believed in, or be loving. The language of Scripture is said to be against impassibility too, with verses such as Gen 6:6 where God's "heart was deeply troubled," or 1 Sam 15:11 where the Lord regretted making Saul king, or Hos 11:8 where the Lord says "my heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." Others suggest that impassibility fails to reckon with the Trinity and sees God as essentially a substance, rather than as a personal being in relationships.[4] For Evangelicals, the issue is made more complex by the fact that many evangelical scholars ignore the doctrine or reject a classical form of it.[5]

---

[1] Peter Sanlon, *Simply God: Recovering the Classical Trinity* (Nottingham: IVP, 2014), 131.

[2] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 16.

[3] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 274.

[4] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 14.

[5] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 165–166. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*

However for those asserting a classical doctrine of God, the idea of a passible God is seen as compromising the trinitarian relations and distorting God into the image of a human. They find verses that suggest impassibility, such as Mal 3:6, "I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed," or those in the Psalms that say God is a rock offering impenetrable security such as Ps 62. Elsewhere, in Isa 40:15, 22, all creation is portrayed as nothing to God and totally unlike him, and in Isa 45:7 the Lord is not afflicted by suffering; rather he creates it. In Ps 2:4 the Lord laughs all the sin and evil of the nations, and in Rom 1:18–32 the evil of societies like that described in Gen 6 is seen to be part of the Lord's sovereign handing over of people to judgement. Consequently, the doctrine of God's impassibility is too important to be ignored. At the heart of the issue is scriptural interpretation and, even more importantly, God, and the extent to which he is loving, compassionate and able to relate to humanity.

This article will seek to defend a definition of the doctrine of impassibility which states that God cannot be acted upon from without, has no changing emotions within himself, and is not liable to pleasure or pain caused by another.[6] In doing so I hope to provide an understanding of God which is able to make sense of the scriptural data so we can expound Scripture rightly. I will assume the orthodoxy of Athanasian trinitarianism and Nicene Christology and seek to build upon these biblical foundations.

First, it will be shown that God is impassible because he is full of passion; not because he lacks passion. Then the doctrine will be fleshed out and explained in light of a biblical ontology that rightly coheres God's transcendence, perfection, the idea of *actus purus* (that God is dynamic and unable to be less or more than he is), simplicity (that God is all his attributes), apophatic theology (asserting something negative about God to protect something positive) and the trinitarian relationships. Secondly, there will be a discussion of how one should understand the Bible's language and the sense in which God can be said to suffer. Thirdly, several challenges to impassibility will be addressed, in particular those of Jürgen Moltmann and Paul Fiddes. Fourthly, how impassibility fits with the incarnation and atonement will be argued. Fifthly, the difference impassibility makes for pastoring and preaching will be explained. In conclusion, it will be argued that those who deny impassibility have failed to reckon with the transcendent otherness of God (that he is of a different

(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 608. Donald Macleod, "The Crucified God," http://beginningwithmoses.org/other-articles/265/the-crucified-god.

[6] Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 32.

order to humanity), his simplicity, and the reality of God's unceasing perfect love.

The Fullness of Passion and the Theological Foundations of Impassibility

That God is impassible because he is perfect in passion grows out of an understanding of God's trinitarian relationships. The trinitarian relations mean that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are interdependent relations who are fully *in act* (*actus purus*)—God *is* eternal persons relating in love (1 Jn 4:8, 16).[7] The mutual subsistent relationships of the Father begetting the Son in the mutual procession of the Spirit constitute and define the persons of the Trinity. Therefore the Triune persons have no relational potential that needs to be actualised, but exist in the fullness of mutual self-giving. Hence the Triune God is impassible because his love and self-giving is totally perfect and cannot change or cease to be, or else God would cease to be God.[8] Therefore God's impassibility does not stem from him being inert. However a full picture of impassibility requires further qualifications. To develop a doctrine of impassibility requires that we understand God's transcendence and immanence, perfect being theology, *actus purus*, simplicity, apophatic theology, and the Trinity.

The transcendence of God, his different order of being (Gen 1:1; Ps 102:25–27), is the context in which all scriptural passages about God must be understood. God is immanent as his transcendent self, and the comments of Walter Brueggemann that in the covenantal context God sheds his transcendence to relate to us like a human lord are erroneous since 'like' does not mean 'the same as' a human lord.[9] Transcendence is otherness not distance—it speaks of the fact that God is of a different order of being to us and is not a souped-up human, as Acts 17:29 makes clear.[10] God is apart from creation as Creator but close as sustainer, and does not lose his ontological otherness by engaging with his creation.[11] Instead his transcendence sets him apart from the creation (and therefore sin and suffering) and enables him to save and act upon all situations

[7] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 113–119.
[8] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 119.
[9] Contra Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 11.
[10] But one could also look at Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 121:4.
[11] Contra Clark H. Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 35.

without any compromise of, or difficulty to himself. Failure to recognise his transcendence leads to panentheism where the creation is infused within the being of God.

The truth that God is the uncreated Creator means that all reality proceeds from him the Creator God, and that there is nothing that exists even conceptually such as love, that God falls short of. God has no potential, but is a fully actualised being, of perfect love, power, wisdom, glory, holiness. God cannot have value neutral gains, because to gain something is to deny his already perfect nature. But God's essence and active properties have no imperfections or limits of any kind; he is infinite and immutable (unable to change).[12] As infinite he is incorporeal, not bound by the limits of a body nor able to suffer as a body can.[13] In addition, God as the uncreated Creator is *a se* (independent and from himself),[14] sustaining all things and determining the relations they have to himself. Consequently all things exist by God's knowledge and power. Therefore God cannot develop through his interaction with creation (see e.g., Rom 11:35–36), without the Creator-creature relationship being reversed, with created reality (even in a concept like love) being greater than God's self.

As a perfect eternal relational Trinity God's essence is eternal *being* and *doing*, thus he is the fullness of love.[15] God is love maximally expressed because God's love is God, and to experience God's love is to experience God. To speak of God's *love* is to speak of God (the God who is all his attributes), but it is to speak of God through the lens of one of his attributes, in this case, love. And since God is perfect and cannot change, then his essence demands that he cannot suffer nor choose to suffer. To suffer would mean that God is experiencing something now that he was not previously, which would mean he was not perfect before, since perfect beings cannot change. It would also mean that God existed in time, thus divinising time, and moving from moment to moment, rather than being eternal as implied from verses like Gen 1:1 and Isa 44:6–8. Therefore God can gain nothing from responsive interaction with creation nor can choosing to suffer make him any more loving. God is *being* itself, and therefore decay is impossible for God, he simply cannot suffer through the created order. Moltmann is mistaken to claim that *actus purus* (God being the fullness of himself) means that to God love and hate are

[12] See Mal 3:6; Ps 33:11; Jas 1:17.
[13] See John 4:24.
[14] See Ex 3:14.
[15] Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, x.

indistinguishable; as sustainer of all God knows all by knowing himself, hence David's reflections in Ps 139. God knows shared love within his trinitarian being, and the Father is conscious of his love for the Son.[16]

As a simple being, God is not composed materially, and God's attributes cannot be separated from God's essence. God is holy love and lovingly holy—to speak truly of any one of God's attributes is to speak of all of them and to speak of God himself. God's essence and mode of existence are one. However, this is not to be understood as saying there is ultimately no distinction between God's attributes such that they dissolve into each other. In God there is a reason and foundation for all the attributes as revealed in Scripture and for the conception we have of them. God neither *has* properties nor *is* he a property, he is purely an act. As simple, God knows all things and causes all things in the one act of his being, and as simple God cannot be composed by relations with the world.[17] However, this should not make us think that God is the author of evil, since evil is not possible from an ontologically good being and therefore God cannot know evil in the way he knows love from himself (Hab 1:13a). As such, evil is a twisting of what is good within the creaturely realm (Gen 3:1–6) and does not just exist like God does.[18] How evil can even exist is a mystery, but in affirming God's goodness, simplicity and the Creator-creature distinction we establish the reality of evil outside of God and the fact God cannot suffer due to evil.

In light of the above, we see that impassibility is a negative attribute (apophatic). It is predicated of God in order to preserve the biblical nature of his positive attributes, such that if we shed impassibility we in fact lose the glory of his passionate, perfect, infinite, unceasing love. Therefore, it is not positively attributing a quality to God such as inertness, as Pinnock suggests,[19] but is instead defending the unchangeable perfection of God. Consequently, nothing can stop God being loving, good or holy (not even sin, as 1 John 4:7–21 shows). Therefore, wrath is not a fluctuating passion, but his unchanging holy love coming into contact with sinners.[20] Emotional states in God do not tell us about change in

[16] Contra Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London, SCM, 1974), 268.
[17] Gilles Emery, O. P., "The Immutability of the God of love," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White O. P.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 59.
[18] Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 36.
[19] Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 65.
[20] Contra Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being* (London: SCM, 2002), 58.

God, but say something of how an unchanging God of holy love relates to changing people.

In light of this, because God's love is perfectly in act, it does not respond through change to new situations; rather new situations e.g., the fall, reveal facets of his perfect love, in this case mercy as seen in Gen 3:16 and 21. Thus God's love means he can perfectly, freely and fully behold those who suffer in compassion, without suffering. So when God "feels" mercy it means he acts to dispel the discomfort of another, not that he changes in himself. God experiences positive emotions, love, joy, peace to an infinite degree. Negative emotions are a falling away from love, and therefore impossible for a perfect being to feel. Thus if God did suffer, the sufferer would no longer have any hope of experiencing perfect love (what Paul calls "all comfort" in 2 Cor 1:3), but instead something less.

Finally, the Trinity of persons is eternally constituted by passionate, dynamic, fully actualised relationships of love and so this demands a dynamic doctrine of impassibility.[21] God's very otherness is his perfect relational love;[22] the Father eternally delighting with the Spirit in the contemplation of the divine nature revealed in the Son.[23] Thus to argue that the Father "suffers" the presence of the Son, as Gary Culpepper does, suggests that each person of the Trinity is firstly inward looking and focused on the self, where each person encroaches upon the "personal space" of the other. This is an extreme version of a social Trinity.[24] Rather, since God is perfect love he is constituted in perfect relationships, since love is a shared reality between persons. But if the trinitarian persons do not experience perfect love, the persons degenerate from the full excellence of relational personhood towards "things," as they are not perfect persons in perfect relationships. Further, perfect love does not trap God for lack of options (e.g., not to love),[25] since as *a se* he delights in the full expression of himself. This means that if God suffered, the divine persons would not be experiencing the perfect happiness demanded

[21] Contra Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 44.

[22] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 21. Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith,* ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 123.

[23] Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 21*, 116.

[24] Contra Gary Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White O. P. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 89.

[25] Contra Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 58. Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 126.

by the eternal contemplation of the other persons.[26] For Colin Gunton to be correct that God can suffer "within" would mean that the Triune persons are imperfect and therefore not divine.[27] Indeed, if suffering were possible then this would make the persons eclipsable, where the joy of contemplating the other would be overcome by the evil in the creation, and as such we would have to conclude that the Father was no longer begetting a perfect Son, as his pure image and idea.[28] Further, if God's love for the Son is eclipsable by a knowledge of suffering then the simplicity of God is undermined since his love is in competition with his knowing—in this case his knowledge of the created order. Thus his attributes cease to be equally ultimate.[29] For the Father to sustain a world that eclipses his own majesty as perceived in the Son, would demand that the Father has a self-destructive tendency; and it would suggest that his creation is greater than his eternal begetting, since the works of God outside of himself would be more real to him, surpassing his nature and the eternal relations he enjoys within himself. Therefore the Trinity does not allow us to have a doctrine of transcendent suffering.[30]

Because he is a Trinity of persons, all God's attributes are relational. If God's attributes could change, his personal relationships would not be ultimate and fully realised. Therefore God would change; yet this is impossible, since as perfect he has no potential. Consequently, impassibility is not philosophy at odds with Scripture.[31] It is more than the idea that God's purposes cannot be thwarted.[32] Neither is it an example of theologians pitting the substance of God against the persons of the godhead;[33] rather it is recognising the fullness of the intra-trinitarian relationships. For God to suffer or need to risk to receive love he would cease to be the fully actualised being of love that he is.[34] But God does not need to be fulfilled.

However, the language of the Bible does seem to say that God suffers. Therefore the language of the Bible will be explained and the way in which God suffers will be articulated.

---

[26] Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 21*, 113.
[27] Contra Gunton, *Act and Being*, 129.
[28] Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 21*, 117–118.
[29] Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 21*, 114.
[30] Contra Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 143.
[31] Contra LaCugna, *God For Us*, 301.
[32] *Pace* Gunton, *Act and Being*, 133.
[33] Contra LaCugna, *God For Us*, 14.
[34] Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 140.

The Language of Scripture and God's Suffering

Due to the transcendence (different order of being) of God, all Scripture's language about God is to be understood analogously and anthropomorphically. Indeed all human language is analogical since it is not materialistic—the word is not the thing.[35] Analogy reflects the fact that God is ontologically unknowable: a created creature cannot know the reality of the uncreated and eternal.[36] Thus revelation from God always includes incomprehensibility which is inseparable from our finitude and his infinitude.

To deny that all revelation is anthropomorphic and an act of accommodation by God is to make a self-referential fallacy, where humanity becomes the epistemological reference point.[37] Thus, for example, we take our understanding and experiences of love and assume that they apply to God. This is a failure to see that humanity is in God's image, making us and our understanding different from his and a reflection of his (as testified to in Ps 139:4, and Job 28). It is a corruption of the Creator-creature distinction. Therefore all human descriptions of God must be analogous. Indeed in many instances this seems self-evident since the descriptions of Scripture are clearly metaphorical and incommensurable: God cannot be both a rock and a lion. To reject analogies for a "literal" reading is to be guilty of anthropomorphism and constraining God with our creatureliness.[38]

Analogy does not deny the reality of revelation but affirms that Scripture is a true revelation of the transcendent God.[39] Neither does analogy make revelation irrational since God is able to speak truly into our frame of reference giving us ectypal knowledge (knowledge not the same as, but analogous to God's). The charge that analogy makes God unknowable only stands if we are to have archetypal knowledge,

---

[35] Gerald L. Bray, *A Christian Theological Language*, Latimer Studies 32 (Oxford: Latimer House, 1989), 5.

[36] Bray, *A Christian Theological Language*, 5.

[37] See A. B. Caneday, "Veiled Glory: God's Self-Revelation in Human Likeness – A Biblical Theology of God's Anthropomorphic Self-Disclosure," in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 152.

[38] A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972), 131.

[39] Contra Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction: The Love of God—Its Place, Meaning, and Function in Systematic Theology," in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 21.

which humans cannot have; the creature simply cannot know things like the uncreated God knows them. Further, to deny analogous language because it cannot be verified, demands autonomous knowledge which is impossible for a creature. Indeed no revelation that comes from outside of us can be verified as "true" in this sense. Since all language about God is analogous, such criticisms become criticisms of language *per se*, and therefore God, since language is his invention by which he has chosen to disclose himself to us. However language can communicate God's truth, since God is a communicator, and the words of Scripture are his words, about himself, the Creator and knower of all things, therefore any analogy he makes in about himself in Scripture must be valid, whilst obviously being constrained by its context and purpose.[40] In addition, he created us in his image to understand him. Like him, we are relational, rational and moral, and recognising that we are created in his image, prevents the functional atheism of a more radical apophatic theology that declares God to be unknowable.

Analogy does take Scripture's statements seriously but interprets phrases in light of the whole Bible.[41] Therefore, references to God's "ears" or "feet,"[42] whilst being anthropomorphic,[43] also say something literally true about God, that he can hear and act. Analogies speak truly but neither fully univocally (where words used of God function for him as they do of humans) or fully equivocally (concealing truth through ambiguity).[44] God portrays himself anthropomorphically to make himself knowable, a know-ability which climaxes in the incarnation; indeed the argument of John 1:1–18 is that the incarnation does not just make God known but knowable in a way that was not possible before. Thus people have real covenant interaction with God, but he is not a covenant partner like us. Therefore statements such as "God grieves" are saying something actually true about God that is analogous to our experience and more profound that we understand. However God's transcendence means we do not know the essence of this grief in God. Therefore it is not to be taken anthropocentrically. Bible texts must be handled with reference to the Creator-creature distinction. Consequently suffering and love

[40] Michael J. Ovey, Christian Doctrine 1.1 Lecture Notes, Oak Hill Theological College, 2007.

[41] Contra Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 24.

[42] See, e.g., Isa 41:3, 10.

[43] Since God is incorporeal; therefore John 4:24 is not pitted against Isa 41:10.

[44] Ovey, Christian Doctrine 1.1 Lecture Notes; Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29.

are not attributed to God to suggest passible emotional change. Rather they show the nature of his love and goodness which finds sin and evil repugnant and "grieves" at their presence, as he knows that it causes human disintegration.[45]

Despite the clear affirmation of relationality in the classical doctrine of God and the reasonableness of the analogical understanding of language, many theologians do want to assert that God does suffer. Consequently a number of particular challenges to impassibility will now be addressed.

Challenges to Impassibility

Moltmann and others assert that God suffers through choice.[46] They say that God does not experience passive affliction from without but enters into the suffering of his creation. Indeed, it is said that to sustain the creation is to suffer it.[47] For Moltmann, God suffers because he loves; because he makes covenants; and because he is involved in history.[48] A similar point is made by process theologian Paul Fiddes.[49]

Several criticisms of Moltmann's view can be made. First, Moltmann's suffering God is still insufficiently loving since even Moltmann's God cannot suffer many of humanity's problems, e.g., starvation, lust or fear, and if God did suffer it would make no difference to the fact of human pain.[50] Secondly, in Scripture suffering does not enable one to love with compassion; suffering *and being comforted* does (2 Corinthians 1:3–4), yet God has no comforter. Thus there is no reason to believe that his suffering will lead to compassion.[51] Thirdly, not all compassionate love demands co-suffering—this is an etymological fallacy. For example, a doctor heals a broken leg not by breaking his own first; rather it is by

[45] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 169.
[46] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 23, D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 68, Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 614.
[47] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 59.
[48] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 23, Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 270–271. See also Moltmann's appropriation of Heschel's work in Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 25–28. See also, Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 16.
[49] Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 17.
[50] Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 6.
[51] Mark Baddeley, "Does God feel our Pain?," *The Briefing* (September 2010): 12.

being 'impassible' as a doctor that he can help.[52] Further, choosing to suffer in a covenant is not essential for a covenant to be compassionate or saving. Instead, the covenant must reveal God's desire to save, his courage to act and his power to achieve his aim.[53] Moltmann's view also fails to see that God makes covenants because he is loving and not that he becomes loving by making covenants in which he suffers. Fourthly, sin—which causes suffering—in Moltmann's scheme helps God to grow in love and is essential for God's development. Thus God owes sinners some credit and love, since without our sin God would be immature. This destroys the holiness of God, and the atonement and final judgement. It creates a panentheistic universe where the creation is within God and transforming him—Moltmann has asserted a Hegelian dialectic, which is one with unbiblical and Greek philosophical concepts of all things being flux. Fifthly, God's aseity (independence) means that creation does not affect him; he does not have to suffer it; it depends entirely on him (Acts 17:25). Neither is God's wrath a disturbance within him, but the reality of holy love. Sixthly, since God is transcendent, simple, perfect, a pure being and trinitarian he cannot choose to suffer, since this is a decision against his very nature.[54] Drawing on Spanish mystic Miguel de Unamuno, Moltmann states that a God who does not suffer is disconnected from creation and unjust, since he refuses to suffer while allowing the "innocent" to suffer.[55] However, God is related to creation by sustaining it, and God has not broken any law in punishing humankind for the fall. To demand that God must suffer for there to be justice is to repeat the egoism of the fall.[56]

Contrary to Fiddes, human relationships do not affect God's intra-trinitarian relationships.[57] Neither is this beneficial since a God who suffers lacks the fullness of relational reality. A suffering God cannot truly heal broken human relationships, or our fragmentation due to sin either within ourselves, the church or the new creation. For in process theology the presence of suffering makes God more loving, such that to remove suffering, to transform the creation and re-new it is unloving, as now God stops being what he could be.[58] Ironically the process theologians have hijacked theology with Greek heresy since the church fathers' study

[52] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 9.
[53] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 10.
[54] Contra Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 23.
[55] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 37–40.
[56] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 12.
[57] Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 143.
[58] Contra Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 105, 109.

of Scripture led them to reject the common idea that the world was ontologically necessary for God.[59] Further if God needs to suffer to love, his love is never given freely as the overflow of his nature, since he needs a fallen humanity in order to experience love in its depths, to develop his character and then love others in fuller ways. Hence God suffers and loves to realise himself.

Both Moltmann and Fiddes have misunderstood the words *essence* and *substance* as static things because they ignore the worldview from which they came.[60] For example, Marius Victorinus saw essence (being) as pure act, the opposite of a static God,[61] as did Eusebius, Gregory of Nazianzus and all the orthodox church fathers.[62]

However, beyond the philosophical challenges, impassibility needs to be reconciled with a biblical understanding of the incarnation and atonement.

Impassibility, the Incarnation, and the Atonement

Moltmann asserts that to understand God's nature one must start with the incarnation and atonement. For Moltmann these events *constitute* the Trinity and its loving nature as it experiences total rupture.[63] Yet, this does not fit with Jesus seeking to return to the glory of the relationships he had *prior* to his incarnation.[64] To say the economic Trinity constitutes the immanent Trinity retroactively is absurd since action flows from ontology, and God is not an event constituted in time;[65] it seems that Moltmann is more Aristotelian than biblical. Furthermore as the means to understanding God's essence, this is flawed because Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Starting with the incarnation makes the human nature the foundation of all reality rather than the trinitarian God. The fact that the *prior existing* Son assumed a human nature has been forgotten (cf., Phil 2:6–7; Heb 1:10–12). In the incarnation the Son's uncreated essence was not changed; rather the eternal Son exists in a new relation. Ultimately Moltmann destroys the Trinity, making the relations dissolvable at the

[59] Zizioulas, *Being in Communion* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 39–40.
[60] See e.g., Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 101.
[61] Bray, *A Christian Theological Language*, 23.
[62] G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 1–7.
[63] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 80.
[64] John 17:5.
[65] See Gen 1:1; Ex 3:14.

cross. This is only furthered by stating that the Son dies. Such an idea suggests that God is in thirds, where one third dies—the essence has been divided; this is tri-theism.[66]

For Moltmann, the doctrine of impassibility implies a docetic doctrine of the incarnation where Jesus only appears to suffer,[67] and where the union between the two natures is dissolved.[68] However, if the real suffering of Christ is shared by the divine nature then the Son has lost his transcendent god-ness. This is a version of eutychianism where the natures are now co-mingled. Further, the church fathers, who affirmed impassibility, rejected docetism (that Jesus only appears to suffer) precisely because they affirmed that the suffering of the man Jesus Christ was real.[69] In addition, if the Son truly did die then we have Arianism, since the Son must be a creature in order to die. If this is rejected for a nebulous "mystery" of death and resurrection in God, then the Son is re-begotten in time and thus he has a beginning—again he is therefore a creature. Far from understanding the Trinity, passibility Arianises it and thus destroys it.

Fiddes asserts that the idea that Christ did not suffer in the divine nature is incompatible with a modern psychological understanding of a person, since a person cannot be a union of two different natures. However, he has not dealt with the unique reality of the incarnation that this is God the Son, not a person like a human person but a divine subsistence, taking flesh, and that the union is without the division or confusion of perfect godhood and perfect manhood. It is a mystery how a human consciousness could be compassed about by the divine consciousness in the same person,[70] but to say that those who teach that the divine nature did not suffer are Nestorian, as Gunton suggests, is a false attribution of suffering to a nature when suffering properly belongs to a person.[71] Impassibility is not saying Christ was two persons, but affirming the mystery that *the Son* experienced death as *a man* without compromising his divinity, since the divine nature cannot die.[72] Christ's humanity shared in God's likeness but not God's essence.

Another challenge is that if Christ's suffering does not reveal the inner life of the Trinity then the economic Trinity no longer reveals the

[66] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 207, 234.
[67] Moltmann, *The Crucified God,* 227.
[68] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 229.
[69] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 18.
[70] Contra Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 28.
[71] Contra Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 613.
[72] Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Book 6:1," http://www.synaxis.org/cf/volume28/ECF00007.htm.

immanent.[73] This is an overstatement, since the incarnation is not to be read *in toto* into the immanent Trinity. Christ ate food, slept and was thirsty—yet such realities do not belong to the Godhead since God is incorporeal, eternal, *a se* and the sustainer of all things. At the cross there is no "death *in* God" or Christ's divinity.[74] Indeed, death in the Trinity obliterates the distinctive work of the persons in salvation: the Son alone becoming incarnate to die, and therefore misses the point of the incarnation—making possible a suffering that was not possible before, and the sufficiency of it for our salvation—the Father does not need to suffer to achieve our redemption. Instead the incarnation is the peak of God's accommodation in revelation, and the supreme revelation of God's power, where the Son accepts as his own what is contrary to his nature without shedding his otherness. Otherwise Jesus would not be the God-man but a man with some divine-like qualities—the incarnation requires that God cannot cease to be God. In the incarnation, the Son of God became passible as Jesus Christ. Jesus experienced authentic human suffering, not quasi divine-human suffering. This preserves the fact the Son of God truly suffered as a man, and stops the incarnation being superfluous. Indeed Hebrews teaches us that the incarnation made possible things that were not previously possible viz., God's Son being a genuine redemptive substitute for humans.[75] However, with Scripture we can speak of God shedding "his blood,"[76] because Jesus is God. Further, as the supreme revelation of God, in Jesus Christ we see that God is compassionate, loving, grieving, suffering, and even embraces his own wrath—yet how this relates to God's essence is a mystery.

Moltmann argues that to undo suffering in God is to undo redemption.[77] That Christ suffered and God did not suffer, for him is a contradiction and the perpetuation of error, where God ends up being divorced from Christ.[78] However, since penal substitution is at the heart of redemption, then the idea that God must suffer in himself to redeem humanity makes no sense. Thus Christ suffering and God not suffering is no contradiction if the cross is the satisfaction of God's justice. The significance of the cross must be human suffering, to enable real substitution and genuine

[73] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 32. See also Macleod, "The Crucified God."
[74] Contra Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 207, 234.
[75] See e.g., Heb 2:10, 14.
[76] Acts 20:28.
[77] See Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 21.
[78] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 22.

human resurrection, otherwise it is no answer to humanity's sentence of death (Gen 2:17). Furthermore, Moltmann simplifies the biblical picture since it is also true that the Father was pleased to bruise Jesus, for our redemption.[79] Impassibility sustains grace as gift, where God acts out of free love for humanity in the atonement, rather than saving us to deliver himself from the pain of witnessing our plight, or because humanity moved him to save, or because he wanted to go through some sort of personal development.[80] Therefore, at the cross, the Father is expressing his holy love as wrath, treating Jesus the Son as a sinner, so that those united to the Son can be forgiven their sin, receive an imputed righteousness, and therefore experience God's same unchanging holy love as saving grace. The classical view does not undermine the cross as love but allows us to glimpse something of the intense other-person-centred love of a God who is pure actualised love. Consequently, impassibility rather than passibility preserves a biblical understanding of God and the atonement.

Moltmann's claim that an impassible Father is loveless or lacks love reveals the problems of his social model of the Trinity,[81] where the three are like a club of brothers and the Father has no monarchy. In such an account the Father's love cannot be seen in his giving or sending of the Son (John 3:16; 4:34), for in such an account the Son's incarnation can only be an act of allowance by the Father, since he has no right or authority to give and therefore he has a reduced generosity, a diminished grace. Whatever Moltmann's motives, inventing a suffering Father is clearly one way of trying to make up for what has been lost, in regards to the Father's love, in his rejection an ordered Trinity.

Finally, the question arises—can Evangelicals preserve an orthodox doctrine of God and the atonement where they say that he chooses to suffer within his divine self rather than being afflicted from without? The answer is "No." For reasons already given, God can no more choose to suffer than choose to not exist, since he cannot be less than his very actualised being and self. Choosing to suffer would not be an act of solidarity with the creation in any meaningful sense, it could not make God more gracious, loving or caring than he already is. We would gain nothing from it. The real question is "why do we want God to suffer?" Is it because we blame him for our world? Surely Job 38–42 is the answer

[79] Isa 53:10; John 10:17—in the atonement Jesus knows the fullness of the Father's love.

[80] When God is pleased with us it is because we are living in accord with his holy love.

[81] Jurgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God* (London: SCM, 1991), xii.

to us, and not in a cold way, but precisely in the way we see that through suffering God works a severe mercy for Job's eternal joy in God.

Furthermore, if we grant that God chooses to suffer in order to become truly loving, then the grace of the gospel is lost, since the answer to evil, and God's just righting of what is wrong, is the cross. But if God is suffering so that he can be truly loving then the cross is not for us (John 3:16) but for himself, to relieve his own suffering. It is an act of self-service to make up for his own deficiency, not other-person-centred love for the creature, and does not fit easily with his triune nature. Such a God would no longer be as purely-loving-others-in-grace as the classical God, and verses like Eph 2:4–8 would make no sense at all. The glory of God as revealed in the cross would no longer be grace but self-love, with grace as a collateral and fringe benefit. This suffering God would primarily be a God of power, able to rescue himself from his pains, but not a God of unlimited, other-person-centred love. The ethic that flows from the cross would be that of firstly serve yourself, and if you can, help others too, not the ethic of 1 John 3:16. And we would again be confronted with the problem of panentheism, since through the cross God would be working outside of himself using events in the created order to constitute his being.

We now turn to explore the difference impassibility makes in practice.

Impassibility and Ministry Practice

First, impassibility gives people a greater understanding of God's majesty and otherness. As people understand his transcendence, immanence, simplicity, perfection, and tri-unity their sense of awe, humility and wonder will increase.[82]

Secondly, impassibility leads to worship as we see more clearly that all love to creatures is given freely, and given God's perfect bliss, his bothering to save is seen as an even greater act of condescension and mercy. Further, the believer can have the assurance that God will not reject them due to uncontrolled anger at sin. Impassibility reminds us that God is truly angry at sin, but that his wrath is not an uncontrollable affliction such that he cannot forgive, rendering repentance impossible.[83] Impassibility growing out of *actus purus* (God always being the perfect irrepressible expression of himself) encourages the suffering person, since God is able to embrace them fully with perfect love in any situation, however horrendous. Thus it

[82] See e.g., Sanlon, *Simply God*.

[83] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 62.

encourages faith rather than discouraging it,[84] and it is this view of perfect love that underpins, for example, Paul's exposition of God's power as an unstoppable and invincible work of grace in Eph 1:19–2:22.

Thirdly, since the Son of God knows what it is to suffer as a man, this increases our confidence that he is truly able to help and sympathise with us (Heb 4:15–16; 5:7–10). He shared in human suffering and not a quasi divine-human experience. Fourthly, impassibility reminds people that suffering exists because of sin alone.

To preach in light of impassibility, the preacher will need to show that the Bible's language reflects an unchanging God in relationship with a changing humanity. Therefore there will be occasions when the preacher explains that "to the repentant, God's perfect love brings forgiveness," that God's wrath is "where we see a God of unchanging *holy* love coming into contact with changing sinful creatures." At other times the preacher might say that "God's grief shows how God's love embraces sinners in their self-destruction, but is not to be understood like our emotional anguish." When the Bible says that God's "heart was changed,"[85] the preacher should explain how Israel deserved wrath but that God persisted in fatherly mercy.[86] The preacher must uphold the mystery of God's being and let the images of Scripture speak, encouraging the congregation to feel their weight. However, the preacher should show that no one image is ultimate, since the images of Scripture only give us insights into God's nature. They do not let us see the whole.

The preacher must also discourage people from seeing God like themselves. However this must not be done in a way that disconnects God's love from our knowledge and experience of love either, since this would rupture the analogous nature of revelation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that all discussions of impassibility must proceed with a right understanding of the transcendence of God. That transcendence is not pitted against immanence but in fact sustains it. God can act in this world in power because he is ontologically other and unaffected by it. It does not master, thwart or entice him. Impassibility does not deny God's immanence at the expense of transcendence, nor

[84] Contra Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 21.
[85] Hos 11:8.
[86] See e.g., John Calvin, *Daniel 7–12, Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 402.

assert a transcendence that makes God distant. We must maintain that God is of a totally different order of being to humanity.

In light of *actus purus*, perfect being theology, and the Trinity, it is clear that God is impassible not due to diminished passion but precisely for the opposite reason. "God is infinitely relational, loving and emotional in a way only a perfect God can be."[87] God is pure actualised love, he is his attributes, love is his unceasing nature, and God simply cannot be otherwise because he is perfect. Impassibility does not undercut relationships, but expresses the fact the Trinity is the fullness of relationships. As fully actualised love, God is supremely loving, caring, merciful and able to embrace others in love. No situation can prevent him from doing so—his love is himself and therefore perfect in power because he is perfect in power. Impassibility denies that God is vulnerable and that his essence can change, but it does not deny his freedom to act; rather impassibility upholds this freedom.

As ontologically other, God reveals himself through analogy, speaking to us in ways that we can understand but always as one who is wholly other. Thus God's grieving, repenting, loathing, is saying something actually true about God. Impassibility affirms a full emotional life in God. These emotions are more profound than we understand, but they cannot be taken literally such that we project our inner passible states into God's immutable perfect being. Instead we should see this as a revelation of his loving embrace of people who change and experience the loss of good. In all this there is a mystery.

God's fully actualised being means that he cannot choose to suffer, and his love must not include suffering or the capacity to suffer. Moltmann's view makes evil essential to God's development in love. As such he destroys an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, the holiness of God, and the grace of the gospel. Fiddes's desire for a God who develops is in fact no answer to a fragmented and suffering world, since only a God who knows perfect relationships can ultimately heal our brokenness. It is ironic that those who charge the classical doctrine of God with being overly Hellenistic, have in their doctrinal reformulations taught panentheism, something which the church fathers rejected as Hellenistic and unbiblical.

God's perfect unchanging being of perfect holy love is the reason why God can relate to people in grace (Matt 5:45), wrath (Rom 1:18), mercy (Gen 6:8), compassion (Hos 11:8–11), patience (Mal 3:7) at the same time, and in the one moment of his being. This is why God can hate and love the sinner simultaneously, and in love save those who are yet the

[87] Sanlon, *Simply God*, 135.

objects of his wrath (Eph 2:3–4), and why saying God "hates the sin and loves the sinner" is falsely reductionistic.

Further it has been seen that only in articulating impassibility can one sustain an orthodox Christology and doctrine of the incarnation. A failure to see the impassibility of God in the incarnation fails to uphold a real redemption, maintain salvation by grace or give true comfort to believers in their present struggles. The true mystery of the incarnation is that the impassible one suffers without shedding any of his transcendent otherness. Impassibility gives believers great confidence that God will not change due to human sin and so future salvation and love based on God's historical acts are assured—we cannot derail God's loving plans, by our sin, between now and the return of Christ.

Beyond the incarnation and redemption, to lose impassibility would affect one's ecclesiology. If sin and evil cause love to grow among the trinitarian persons, then the fabric of the church's fellowship is ruptured as human relationships are no longer related to the Trinity, since sin only ever destroys human relationships. However, the beauty of the church will be the beauty of holiness (Eph 5:25). The joy of the church is love that evidences the undoing of the devil's work (Eph 2:11–22). The future of the church is perfect love without sin, where our lives are taken up into the perfection of fellowship with God (Rev 22:12–17, esp. v. 15).

Finally impassibility focuses our hope in God. In a broken world of fragmenting people, full of pain and suffering, a rescuer is needed. A God who needs evil for his own growth in love is playing a sick cosmic game with his creation, and should be pitied and rejected not adored. However, in a world of sin the message of an impassible God who becomes passible in Jesus Christ to free us, that we might share in his perfect love is stupendous good news, beyond human imagining and worthy of all worship.

ROBERT D. BREWIS is Minister for Youth and Children at Christ Church Chadderton in Oldham, and a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester. He also serves on the editorial board of *Churchman*.