

# **Divine Impassibility, the Atonement, and Elder Care**

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## Introduction

Most people sitting in the pews of Christian churches have not heard of divine “impassibility” or divine “passibility,” and fewer still could clearly state the issues at stake. “Impassibility” may ring a bell with some pastors, but even they have probably not given it much thought since they encountered it briefly in a seminary class. Yet divine impassibility impacts everything else we believe about God. Those in favor of it argue that without impassibility, God becomes unstable and untrustworthy and is not really a God deserving of worship. Those opposed to it argue that divine impassibility makes prayer pointless, undercuts the claim that Jesus Christ reveals God to us, and makes God undeserving of worship.

I will take the position that we should reject the idea of divine impassibility, at least as it has been traditionally stated. While acknowledging the important motives for holding this doctrine, I will argue that the arguments against it have the strongest weight both for our understanding of God and for a healthy Christian life. As we go through this presentation, I think that many listeners will find themselves saying, “I’ve always wondered about that, but I didn’t know how to formulate my question.” Whether or not you agree with my argument in this lecture, I hope that my presentation will help you develop a clearer and firmer grasp of Christian faith.

I have not yet defined “divine impassibility” and “divine passibility.” That is because there are several different meanings in play in the discussions of impassibility. Therefore, my presentation begins (Section One) with three definitions for “impassibility” and then proceeds (Section Two) to a particularly illuminating implication of this doctrine: How God knows about events in this world. Next (Section Three), the listener will find some brief comments on how the debate on impassibility seems to cross the traditional lines between mainline and evangelical theology, with some theologians on both sides of this division urging us to reconsider it. And in this third section, we show what is really at stake for most theologians who argue against divine impassibility: they want a God who can truly be present with his people as they suffer and who

can love them empathetically as they hurt. I will argue, however, that while the implications of the debate on impassibility certainly include the issues of God's suffering and love, they go far beyond that.

This leads (Section Four) to a brief discussion of three traditional arguments in favor of impassibility and my replies. The essay then moves (Section Five) to a surprising development: even staunch Reformed theologians (those most likely to adhere to impassibility in a strict sense) such as B.B. Warfield and Charles Hodge take a position on the atonement that would seem to be nonsense if God is wholly impassible. I think it is extremely significant that such theologians, when talking about our salvation in Christ, cannot avoid language that contradicts the impassibility of God; and that fact in itself becomes a powerful, albeit unintended, argument against divine impassibility. In the last section (Section Six), I discuss the issue of divine power and bring out the pastoral implications of my conclusions on this matter.

## **Section One: What is the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility?**

An ancient, but recently much debated, Christian doctrine states that God is impassible. Exactly what this means is hard to say because, so far as I have correctly understood the discussion of this doctrine, there seem to be three central definitions in play. They are intimately related but not identical.

The first, and in my opinion, the foundational definition is this. The doctrine of divine impassibility states that nothing outside of God, and thus nothing in creation, can have an affect upon God. Nothing can influence God. Nothing can impact God. No event in history can cause anything to happen to God or in God.

This leads us to our second definition: God as beyond or without emotions. "Emotion," it should be noted, is a rather modern concept. Of course, the emotions themselves—joy and ecstasy, fear and agony—are as old as the human race. But the particular way we categorize them is more recent. In our contemporary sense, to say that God is without emotions would be to imply that God has no personal subjectivity or sense of selfhood. That would not

have been acceptable to most Christian theologians in any era. Augustine and Aquinas, for example, tended to distinguish between passions and affections. Passions had to do with the body, tended to be uncontrolled and led to perturbations and disturbances in the person who had such passions, whereas affections had to do with the conscious and rational will. They certainly denied passion in that sense to God, but they also affirmed that God has, at least analogically speaking, affections such as joy and love. <sup>(1)</sup>

In discussing classical authors such as Augustine and Aquinas, it is essential to remember that, in their opinion, individuals generate the “higher” emotions, such as joy and love, from within themselves and not as a reaction to an external source. That is particularly true in the case of an impassible God. God’s emotions/affections do not result from any fact or condition outside him. If God is happy or sad, then his happiness or sadness does not depend on anything beyond himself. Nothing external causes or makes God sad or happy.

The third definition of impassibility extends to suffering. As impassible, God receives no influences and thus feels no pain, suffers no loss, and undergoes no grief. Some modern theologians cash out the denial of impassibility into the currency of suffering: that is, it allows them to affirm that our God not only dwells with us, but he even suffers with us. The titles of two works in theology make this point quite eloquently: *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Jürgen Moltmann) and *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Henri Nouwen). This theme is particularly powerful and widespread among Asian theologians. In the West, the best-known Asian theological text comes from Japan: *The Theology of the Pain of God* (Kazoh Kitamori).

## Section Two: Divine Impassibility and Divine Knowledge

It seems to me that the first definition of impassibility is the most basic.

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(1) Anastasia Scrutton, “Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas: A Way Forward for the Im/passibility Debate?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 no. 2 (April 2005): 169-77.

According to that first definition, nothing whatsoever can influence or have an impact upon God. Given this definition, divine impassibility is not limited to emotions or feelings. In its strictest form, it extends even to knowledge. I will turn to Aquinas to prove this for us.

Most Christian theologians, Aquinas included, will stoutly defend that God knows everything about the world. But—and here is the catch—if God is impassible, then none of that knowledge comes from the world.

Let us look at this a little more carefully. Suppose that John is tired. And suppose that both you and God know that John is tired. Let's first examine your human knowledge, that is, your knowledge of John's being tired. How do you know this? Perhaps you observed him yawn or fall asleep. Or perhaps he told you how exhausted he is. In any of these cases, the fact of John's being tired comes first and then your knowledge comes second. Your knowledge depends on the fact; that is what makes your knowledge to be true knowledge. But notice what follows from this. The fact of John's being tired causes the knowledge in your mind. The world—in this case, John's being tired—has caused the knowledge in your mind. In short, your human mind is, in the technical meaning of the word, “passible.”

This will not do for an impassible God. If John's physical state of tiredness causes God's knowledge of his being tired, then the world has affected God—that is, the world has had an impact upon God. It would seem to follow, therefore, that if God is impassible, his knowledge must somehow come first, and the things in the world come second. God's knowledge of John's being tired must be the basis for the fact that he is tired. This is why Aquinas, who affirmed impassibility, came to the curious position that God's knowledge causes what it knows—that is, God's knowledge of my being tired causes me to be tired.

Aquinas discusses this issue in a passage entitled, “Whether the knowledge of God is the cause of things?” (His answer is a resounding “Yes!”) In his own words:

... hence His (i.e., God's) knowledge must be the cause of things, in so

far as His will is joined to it. Hence the knowledge of God as the cause of things is usually called the “knowledge of approbation.”<sup>(2)</sup>

Aquinas then explicitly adds that in the case of future things, God’s knowledge does not result from those future things. Rather, those future things exist, or will exist, *because* God knows them:

For if things are in the future, it follows that God knows them; but not that the futurity of things is the cause why God knows them.<sup>(3)</sup>

Aquinas’ view of impassibility has some strange implications. Jesus said “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7 NIV). This passage certainly does seem to imply that God rejoices over the sinner’s repentance. But according to Aquinas, God himself, in the act of knowing about that repentance, is the cause of that repentance! Likewise in Hebrews, we read:

I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest’ (Heb. 3:10-11 NIV).

*The Message* paraphrases God’s anger as being “provoked” and “exasperated.” So, according to Aquinas, in the very act of knowing these misdeeds, God causes them; and thus God himself causes the very thing that angers, provokes, and exasperates him!

In my opinion this is an odd thing to say, but it is easy to see why Aquinas said it. He thought that this view of divine knowledge, and only this view, would let him keep his commitment to divine impassibility while simultaneously

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(2) *Summa Theologica*, Part One, Question 14, Article 8, Body. (The translation is the Benziger Brothers Edition, originally published in 1947.)

(3) *Summa Theologica*, Part One, Question 14, Article 8, Reply to Obj. 1.

keeping his commitment to divine omniscience. According to Aquinas' interpretation of divine impassibility, nothing in the world—not our joy or grief, not even our sinning or repenting—can directly affect God. Rather in causing these things, God is reacting, ultimately, only to himself. A similar argument applies to the divine emotions. God may know many things and have various emotions; but according to Aquinas, they are not caused by anything in the world! And so Aquinas can keep God as impassible.

### Section Three: Impassibility and Contemporary Theology

Earlier we mentioned how the debate about impassibility seems to have settled on the issue of divine suffering, although the core meaning of impassibility covers more than just the issue of suffering. I want to make the point that the recent re-examination of impassibility is not limited to one group of theologians but extends to liberals and conservatives alike.

To illustrate this, I will turn to two short articles, one in *The Christian Century*, the flagship magazine for mainline Protestants, and the other in *Christianity Today*, the equivalent for evangelical Protestants.

In 1986 *The Christian Century* carried a brief article by Ronald Goetz entitled, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy." Goetz writes:

A list of modern theopaschite thinkers would include Barth, Berdyaev, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Cobb, Cone and liberation theologians generally, Küng, Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Pannenberg, Ruether and feminist theologians generally, Temple, Teilhard and Unamuno. Just as significant, perhaps, is the fact that even those theologians who have not embraced modern theopaschism have failed to develop a creative restatement of the older dogma.<sup>(4)</sup> ("Theopaschism" is the belief that God can suffer - STF.)

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(4) *Christian Century*, April 16, 1986, p. 385. As of Feb. 25, 2008, this article could be viewed on-line at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1033>.

A number of evangelical theologians have come to the same conclusion as the mainline thinkers. These Evangelicals concur with their mainline colleagues that God is not just passible but that he is a suffering God as well. This is, perhaps, somewhat surprising because many evangelical theologians have a strong preference for pre-modern, classical formulations of theology.

On Feb. 3, 1997, about a decade after Goetz' article, *Christianity Today* printed a short paper by Dennis Ngien under the title of "The God Who Suffers: If God Does not Grieve, then Can He Love at All? An Argument for God's Emotions." The title implies his central thesis: an impassible God cannot genuinely love and, therefore, cannot be the Biblical God. Here is Ngien's statement of his core argument:

If love implies vulnerability, the traditional understanding of God as impassible makes it impossible to say that "God is love." An almighty God who cannot suffer is poverty stricken because he cannot love or be involved. If God remains unmoved by whatever we do, there is really very little point in doing one thing rather than the other. If friendship means allowing oneself to be affected by another, then this unmoved, unfeeling deity can have no friends or be our friend. <sup>(5)</sup>

This passage makes clear that for Ngien, as well as many modern theologians, the trump card in favor of divine passibility is the biblical teaching that God is love and thus should be able to suffer with us. In some ways, Ngien's argument is hardly new. Perhaps it is best summed up in the famous hymn of Charles Wesley:

And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Savior's blood!  
Died he for me? who caused his pain!

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(5) As of February 25, 2008, *Christianity Today* made a copy of this article available at this URL : <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1997/february3/7t2038.html>

For me? who him to death pursued?  
 Amazing love! How can it be  
 that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
 Amazing love! How can it be  
 that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Before moving on, I should add that there are other arguments against impassibility that have nothing to do with God's having or not having emotions and nothing to do with God's suffering or not suffering. I will explore just one: the argument from prayer. This argument deals with impassibility in its most basic definition: that nothing in this world can have an effect upon or cause anything to happen in God.

In petitionary prayer, we trust God to answer. Of course there are many forms of prayer, and some of them do not expect a response from God, although we would be more likely to call such activities meditation or thanksgiving than prayer. For example, I may cultivate a sense of God's presence in every moment of my life, even if that does not necessarily include an interaction with God. But when we Christians do pray a petitionary prayer, when we do ask God for something, we assume that we are interacting with God. Let me put this as simply as possible: First I state my request. Second, God hears my request. And third, God answers my request positively or negatively. But—and this is the point – if God is impassible, then my prayer can have no affect upon God. It literally makes no “difference” to God. And if my prayer makes no difference to God, then God cannot respond to my prayer. If God is impassible, then petitionary prayer makes no sense.

Of course, people who affirm divine impassibility have ways around this argument from prayer. We previously mentioned Aquinas' claim that in knowing something, God causes that thing to exist. In that case, God, in knowing my prayer, actually causes me to pray; and in knowing the request in my prayer, God actually causes me to make that particular request. And so God, who (perhaps from all eternity) knows that prayer and its content, does in fact respond to it, even though he is impassible.

I would respond to such an argument as follows. On this view, God would seem to be responding to himself – to the prayer that he caused to exist in me and to the petition that he caused to exist in that prayer. That would obviously preserve God’s impassibility. But in such an interpretation of prayer, it is hard to see how God is responding to *my* prayer in any normal sense – that is, in any sense that ordinary Christians, or the Bible, would understand such prayer.

In summary, during the last century, Christian theologians, both liberal and conservative, have increasingly questioned the doctrine of impassibility, for the reasons presented in this section. Recently, we have seen occasional attempts to affirm impassibility, but as Goetz notes, the results have been neither particularly convincing nor have they succeeded in advancing the debate. In other cases, theologians have kept the word “impassible” while shifting its meaning to such an extent that it is hard to see exactly what they gain by using the word.

#### **Section Four: Classical Arguments for Divine Impassibility**

In light of the previous discussion, it may seem strange that anyone would want to hold to divine impassibility. And even if they did, it is not at all obvious just how they could do so and be consistent with the rest of Christian doctrine. Therefore, I will present three classical arguments in favor of impassibility.

##### **The First Argument: To Be Trustworthy, God Must Be Impassible**

The first argument is simple. The biblical God reveals himself as trustworthy, stable, dependable, and secure. To be these things, God must be changeless. But a changeless God must be impassible because a passible God, one who can be influenced by things in this world, would by definition be changing. Thus God cannot be passible; he must be impassible. The argument, in short, moves from divine dependability through changelessness to impassibility.

The Bible would seem to support the first two claims: that God is trustworthy and that he is, at least in some sense, unchanging. (A) God is trustworthy. In the Old Testament, “hesed” refers to a “love” that comes out of God’s promises

to Israel and thus is absolutely secure. In the New Testament, “agape” refers to a love that comes from the very nature of God. In both cases, because God is true to himself, he is also true to us. We can rest secure in the unbreakable promises of a dependable God. (B) In several passages, the Bible describes God as changeless. “For I am the LORD, I change not” (Malachi 3:6, KJV). And the book of James describes God as “the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17 NIV). Such passages are rather rare, but they are exceptionally well known, attesting to their importance in popular Christian teaching.

The response to this first argument is equally simple. While every Christian trusts an utterly dependable God, no one wants a God who is unchanging in the sense that a mathematical truth (say,  $2+3=5$ ) is changeless. Numbers are not living, and our God is a living God. What kind of unchanging God does the Bible affirm? It seems to me that the living God of the Bible is unchanging in three areas: being, character, and eschatological victory. The divine being: God cannot go into or out of existence. God’s divine character: God’s character as loving, holy, and just never changes; God’s promises never fail; God’s memory never fades; and God’s reliability is absolute. The divine eschatological victory: God’s final victory is never in doubt; God will most certainly raise us from the dead and give those who trust him everlasting joy and life; and God, absolutely and without any possibility of failure, will redeem all creation, bringing an improved physical world and a society of justice and joy. When one examines the context for the Biblical passages that directly affirm God’s unchanging character, it is always these issues, and specifically the issue of security and dependability, that come to the fore. Usually the connection is by implication, but sometimes it is quite explicit:

God is not a man, that he should lie,  
 nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
 Does he speak and then not act?  
 Does he promise and not fulfill? (Num. 23:19, NIV)

It is not the Bible, but the same connection between God's changelessness and his dependability comes to the surface in the magnificent hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness".

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.

Chorus:

Great is Thy faithfulness, Great is Thy faithfulness,  
Morning by morning new mercies I see:  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

I can see no reason, therefore, why God might not be passible and yet be changeless and completely trustworthy in the way the Bible describes him. To say that God's knowledge of John's being tired depends on or is caused by the actual fact that he is tired – this in no way makes God less trustworthy nor denies that his existence, power, character, and agapic love are in any way less than unchanging nor that the coming of his kingdom is anything less than certain. This essay will come back to this issue in the last section, Section Six, when we discuss different forms of divine power. For now, I think we may conclude that, without any inconsistency or self-contradiction, we may describe God as unchanging and yet passible; at least this is so in terms of the first definition I presented above.

Prayer is a particularly interesting example because it presupposes both sides of this issue, ie., that prayer requires (A) God's constancy and unchanging love while at the same time it presupposes (B) God's passibility in the sense of his capacity to interact with us. When I petition God, I assume that he is eternally and unchangingly a God of love; I assume that his purpose is to do good and not harm to those who approach him through Jesus Christ; and that

his benevolent purpose towards me will never change. And yet, when I pray, I also trust that God will know that I am praying and that he will hear my prayers and perhaps be moved by them. In short, my prayer makes a difference to God, and that is the very definition (in the first sense) of a passible God.

So the first argument in favor of an impassible God, it seems to me, fails.

### **The Second Argument: God Can Be Impassible and yet Possess Emotions if We View These Claims as Analogies**

Aquinas claims that all language about God is analogical or, depending on your definition, metaphorical. Analogies present us with truth, but stated in ways that apparently contrary or contradictory items can be compatible. Thus statements about God's impassibility and his emotional life, although contraries on the surface, might both be true as analogies.

Let me explain. Suppose I say that Sally is a shark and that she is also a pussycat. Literally, of course, that is impossible. She may be neither a shark nor a pussycat (if, say, Sally is my aunt or if she is my pet rock). She may be a shark and not a young cat, or Sally may be cat and not a shark. Whatever else, at a literal level, Sally cannot be both a fish and a pussycat. But taken as metaphors, the situation changes.

Analogies and metaphors are slippery things. They depend upon context and require a sympathetic leap of imagination. Assume that Sally is a human being. Even as metaphors, Sally cannot be both a shark and a pussycat unless we change the context or use these metaphors in reference to different times. On the tennis court, Sally might be a shark because of her smooth, skillful, and aggressive body movement. In a court of law, Sally might be a lawyer who is a shark because of her smooth, skillful, and predatory questioning of witnesses. And yet, Sally might be a pussycat in her Sunday school class if she is kind, non-confrontational, and pleasant even when people say stupid things. Understood as analogies with different contexts, Sally can be both a shark and a pussycat. Indeed Sally can be both a shark and a pussycat in the same context if we refer to different times. Consider this sentence, "As a lawyer, Sally has a rare ability to gracefully and almost instantaneously switch between being a

shark and pussycat – an ability that unnerves her opposing lawyers.”

As analogies, we might say (A) that God is impassible and yet (B) that things in the world affect him and (C) that he has an emotional life. Even as analogies, however, these contradict each other unless we carefully specify the contexts. Aquinas does this with regard to the emotions in God. He talks about love and joy as present in God, the angels, and in human beings in virtue of having “like effects” in all three places and “a certain resemblance” to each other; in short, Aquinas is calling them analogies. In addition, when stressing that human love and joy flow from our “intellectual appetite” and when he says that they are “simple acts of the will,” Aquinas is stressing their independence from external sources.

When love and joy and the like are ascribed to God or the angels, or to man in respect of his intellectual appetite, they signify simple acts of the will having like effects, but without passion. Hence Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei* ix, 5): “The holy angels feel no anger while they punish...no fellow-feeling with misery while they relieve the unhappy: and yet ordinary human speech is wont to ascribe to them also these passions by name, because, although they have none of our weakness, their acts bear a certain resemblance to ours.”<sup>(6)</sup>

How are we to evaluate this argument? I will at this point raise no objection to Aquinas’ claims that we can speak only analogically of emotions in God. And I will not dispute that talk about “influences upon God” is analogical speech. But while true enough, none of this seems to me to settle the issue of impassibility. I say this for the following reasons.

First, we would have to determine the different contexts in which the analogies of divine impassibility and divine emotionality operate. But even if that could be done—and, as we will see when we discuss the incarnation below, I can see no reason why it could not be done—we would have a second and more

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(6) *Summa Theologica*, Part Two, First Section, Question 22, Article 3, Reply to Obj. 3.

basic problem. While the analogies of Sally as a shark and a pussycat operate more-or-less at the same level, claims about impassibility and divine emotion seem to me to operate at different levels. That is, in traditional theologies, one metaphor “controls” the other. This is obviously true for Aquinas, and I think it would be generally true among those who affirm impassibility. In other words, impassibility in Aquinas determines the content of any analogy of divine emotion, whereas the analogy of divine emotion does not seem to have a similar effect on his understanding of impassibility. For example, Aquinas views God’s emotions as derived from himself and that they are not caused by, nor emerge in response to, anything in the world (except in so far as God causes the things in the world so that in the end God is responding to himself). This way of parsing the analogies of divine joy and love presupposes that nothing in the world can have an effect upon God. Clearly impassibility governs Aquinas’ interpretation of the divine emotional life. As a result, impassibility seems somehow “less analogical” than “emotion” when applied to God. In sum, Aquinas adjusts the notions of divine joy and love to accord with impassibility much more than he adjusts impassibility to harmonize with God’s emotions.

It is no accident that Aquinas connects these analogies so that they interact. Christian theology is not a set of isolated facts. Every doctrine sheds light on, and interacts with, every other doctrine. Being a Christian entails having a worldview (and there are a variety of authentic Christian worldviews), and to do theology consists, at least in part, of exploring the conceptual connections between doctrines, even if we claim that those doctrines are true only as analogies. In any worldview and in any theology, therefore, some doctrines are more basic than others.

I conclude that simply interpreting impassibility and divine emotions (and divine responses to prayer, etc.) as analogies, while not wrong, does not warrant our continuing to affirm the doctrine of impassibility.

Let me add a brief afterthought on the interaction of analogies and doctrines. In the last one hundred years, theologians have emphasized the category of person as central to the Christian religion. This is “person” in the modern sense. The great Jewish thinker Martin Buber put this into classical form in

1923 when he published his book, *I and Thou* (German, *Ich und Du*). The Bible clearly pictures God as personal, living, holy, and in constant dynamic interaction with the world. Of course, to call God a “Thou” is also an analogy, although one whose implications Buber was able to specify with considerable precision. Since the publication of *I and Thou*, and to some extent even before, Christian theologians have taken the “Thou-ness” of God as one of the truly central doctrines, and used it as a control on the interpretation of other Christian doctrines such as God’s eternity, changelessness, and lordship. From this perspective, there would seem to be little reason to accept impassibility at all, even as an analogy, since it seems to accord so poorly with God’s Thou-ness.

### **The Third Argument: The Incarnation Allows Us to Call God Impassible While at the Same Time Affirming that God Suffers and even Dies for Us**

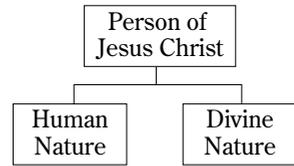
The third argument focuses on the incarnation, and it is by far the most profound of the three mentioned in this paper. Nonetheless, while traditional scholars have used this argument to defend impassibility, it seems to me, in the end, to better support the thesis of divine passibility.

Let me explain how the incarnation seems to justify our calling God - or at least God in Christ - impassible. All orthodox Christian theologians agree that Jesus Christ is one person who is both fully human and fully divine. Jesus Christ suffers and undergoes many things as man, but as God he is transcendent and shares all of God’s qualities. Thus if a man is passible, so is Christ; and if God is impassible, so is Christ. The God-man Jesus Christ is both passible and impassible. How is this possible?

Here I must turn to the rather recondite theological teaching called the “communication of properties” or the “sharing of attributes,” sometimes also called the communication of idioms after its original Latin name.

Consider this chart. Some things are said with respect to Jesus’ human nature, such as Jesus ate fish or that he did not know when the end will come. Other things are said with respect to his divine nature, such as Jesus’ forgiving

Mary's sins. And yet, in the end, we do not say that Jesus' human nature ate fish; we say that Jesus ate fish. Nor do we say that Jesus' divine nature forgave Mary her sins; we say that Jesus forgave her. A "nature" does not *do* anything; but



a person can, and does, do many things. In short, things said in light of his human nature and things said in light of his divine nature work together, that is, they are "shared" or "communicated," in the one person of Christ. The bottom line is this: We can say that Jesus Christ is impassible, in light of the divine nature; while at the same time, we can also say that Jesus Christ is passible, in light of his human nature. Both predicates are applied to the one person, Jesus Christ, who is truly God and truly man.

The next step is key: we move from saying that Jesus Christ is both impassible and passible but to saying that *God* in Christ is both impassible and passible. What we did in the last paragraph was to isolate two important analogies: the impassibility and passibility of Jesus Christ and thus, in an important sense, the impassibility and passibility of God, or more specifically, God in Christ. The impassibility applies in virtue of Christ's divine nature; and the passibility, in virtue of his human nature. And thus we have specified an important context for each term. In a sense, we have developed one of the points in the previous discussion of divine impassibility: namely, we have isolated two analogies, each specified with regard to its own context, and thus potentially compatible.

Charles Hodge gave perhaps the clearest statement of this argument:

Such being the Scriptural doctrine concerning the person of Christ, it follows that although the divine nature is immutable and impassible, and therefore neither the obedience nor the suffering of Christ was the obedience or suffering of the divine nature, yet they were none the less the obedience and suffering of a divine person. The soul of man cannot be wounded or burnt, but when the body is injured it is the man who suffers. In like manner the obedience of Christ was the

righteousness of God, and the blood of Christ was the blood of God. It is to this fact that the infinite merit and efficiency of his work are due.

This is distinctly asserted in the Scriptures. <sup>(7)</sup>

There are two basic reasons, however, why this does not solve the puzzle of divine impassibility. The first is a danger: the only thing we have clearly done is to specify that Jesus in his humanity could have feelings, laugh with children and weep at a funeral, receive nourishment from food, have a knowledge dependent on the facts (and not the other way around), and, in short, that he could be born, grow, and die. And we have specified that in his divinity, it would seem that none of these things apply. What joins them together, as Hodge clearly states (correctly, I think) is the one person of Jesus Christ; they both apply to Jesus Christ. But—and this I want to stress—if we limit passibility to Christ in light of his human nature, then we cannot apply it to Christ in light of his divine nature. Likewise if we limit impassibility to Christ in light of his divinity, then it would not apply to him in light of his humanity. In order to assert that God, or God in Christ, is passible, we have to explain how the analogy would carry over to his divinity, and that is the very issue at stake.

The presence of two natures in one person has always been considered beyond full human understanding, but it is certainly possible for God so long as the divine union is not a self-contradiction. But even as analogies, impassibility and passibility are contraries; they cannot both be true in the same sense. Therefore, if passibility and impassibility are incompatible, then to apply both of them, not just to Jesus Christ, but also to God in Christ would not solve the problem of the impassibility of God, but rather it would undermine the notion of the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ. In short, it would undercut the core Christian teaching that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 KJV). In other words, unless there is some coherent way of uniting passibility and impassibility with regard to God himself,

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(7) Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871; repr., Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1940) 2:395.

we cannot say that God in Christ is both passible and impassible.

I think there is a way, as I have already mentioned, for describing God as both unchangeable, and thus in that limited sense impassible, and yet also passible. That is, God is unchanging love, absolutely trustworthy, totally dependable, forever the sovereign Lord of history, in possession of unchanging existence, and the like. This is the Bible's own context for calling God unchanging. None of this, however, in any way rules out a God who can interact with us in prayer and in all aspects of our lives and decisions. Given these understandings of impassibility (as unchanging in the biblical sense) and passibility (as a living Thou who interacts with his creation), God can be both impassible and passible. Given that these two different meanings of impassible and passible are coherent, then they can be applied (A) to God, (B) to God in Christ, thus (C) to the God-man Jesus Christ. And that was our original starting point: the one person, Jesus Christ, is both passible and impassible. But now there is a difference. We started by examining the traditional suggestion that Christ is passible in virtue of his human nature and impassible in virtue of his divine nature. If my argument is correct, however, passibility applies to Jesus Christ both in his human nature and in his divine nature. That would not be a traditional statement, but I do think it biblically and theologically sound. And with regard to his divine nature, Christ would be unchanging and impassible in all the ways that the Bible claims as well as passible in the sense of being able to interact with creation.

This leads me to my second and more important reason for doubting that the incarnation justifies our calling God impassible in the traditional sense. At John 14:9 Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." The very structure of the Gospel, in the Bible and in the history of the church, has taken this as the axiomatic starting point for Christian life and theology. Jesus reveals God to us by his actions, his character, and his teaching. Above all Jesus reveals God to us through his death and resurrection. During his early life and ministry, Jesus was full of emotion and feelings, passion and compassion, exuberance and exhaustion. He interacted with people and with God. And on the cross he suffered as no one else ever has or ever could suffer.

*That* is what should reveal God to us! If God is completely impassible, then all these attributes of Christ tell us nothing of God—or at best they are empty metaphors whose content has evaporated when interpreted in light of a divine impassibility. The fundamental axiom of the Christian faith that Christ, in his very identity and character, reveals God to us—this axiom should lead us not to an impassible God but to a profoundly passible God. In short, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ should give us our normative analogies for understanding God, and we should interpret issues such as God’s impassibility, eternity, and unchangingness in light of those basic analogies and not the other way around.

Therefore I conclude that the argument from the incarnation does not justify our calling God wholly impassible. Rather it works in the other direction and justifies our calling God passible.

### **Section Five: The Classical Doctrine of the Atonement as a Key Argument for Divine Impassibility**

In the previous sections, I gradually unfolded some arguments for divine passibility. The last argument claimed that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ reveal the character of God. Since Christ lived a suffering life of love for others, we should conclude that our living God loves us even to the point of suffering, which is only possible if he is passible.

In this section I would like to move from Christ to the character of God through a somewhat different route. Here is a brief summary of the argument: In the so-called “classical” view of the atonement, Christ makes a sacrifice on our behalf that propitiates God’s wrath or, in Calvin’s scheme, God’s justice. In either case, God accepts Christ’s sacrifice as “satisfying” him. The key point, however, is that Christ can offer this sacrifice only insofar as he has a human nature. Of course Christ’s divine nature also plays a role, but what I want to stress here is that in the objective theory of the atonement, the human nature is what makes this to be *our* sacrifice to God.

Here is the key point: the death of Christ implies that something in creation,

namely, Christ's sacrifice, has an impact on God. In satisfying God's wrath/justice, Christ's cross makes a difference to God. That means that God must be passible in at least this one case. God has the potential to receive this influence from his son, and when his son dies on the cross, God actually does receive that influence. Conclusion: by definition, only a passible God can receive an influence and thus God must be passible if the objective theory of the atonement is true.

One might be inclined to object that God from all eternity planned for his son to go to the cross. That is, God does not react "ad hoc" to Christ's death, and thus there is no reason to affirm a passible God. I respond: most certainly, God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice was not an "ad hoc" decision. But that only proves that from all eternity God has decreed his own passibility. Or perhaps better stated, from all eternity God has been passible. In still other words, passibility is an inherent aspect of God's nature, and God never changes in the sense of transitioning between passibility and impassibility. That does not mean that God must always be receiving influences from the world. Rather it means that from all eternity, if God should choose to create a universe, he would be capable of interacting with and receiving influences from that world. In that sense, passibility is part of the unchanging and eternal nature of God.

While the objective theory of the atonement is rooted, I believe, in Scripture, it received its first paradigmatic statement in 1098, when Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) published his book *Cur Deus Homo*. Later theologians such as Aquinas, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Arminius, Wesley, Warfield, and Hodge built on Anselm's seminal statement of the atonement, albeit with various modifications. Apparently even the Council of Trent, which defines Roman Catholicism in its modern sense, affirmed Anselm's objective view as well.<sup>(8)</sup> It is the privileged understanding of the atonement in contemporary fundamentalist and evangelical circles. While personally I think the objective view needs to be supplemented with other aspects of the atonement (especially by the so-called Christus Victor view), there can be no doubt of its biblical

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(8) At least that is the opinion of Charles Hodge. See his *Systematic Theology*, 2:482.

profundity and its contemporary significance.

Most of these figures, and in particular those in the reformed tradition, have combined a strong defense of the objective view of the atonement with a belief in a wholly impassible God. My argument, of course, is that this is inconsistent. Or, at least, it has to be shown how both these commitments - the objective atonement of Christ and divine impassibility - are consistent. And for the reasons presented previously, I seriously doubt this can be done.

I want to quote from both Warfield and Hodge, two figures central to the development, not only of the reformed movement in America, but to the larger American evangelical movement as well. Perhaps unintentionally, they use language in their discussion of the atonement that implies God's passibility. In short, even these two staunch advocates of impassibility are forced to a more Biblical use of passible language when discussing how our Lord achieved our salvation. I have used italics to highlight some of the passible language; the words are in the original but not the italics. First to Warfield:

The Biblical doctrine of the sacrifice of Christ finds full recognition in ... the established church-doctrine of satisfaction. According to it, our Lord's redeeming work is at its core a true and perfect sacrifice *offered to God*, ... and, on *being accepted by God*, ... *God is reconciled* to us, ... This doctrine, which has been incorporated in more or less fullness of statement in the creedal declarations of all the great branches of the Church, Greek, Latin, Lutheran, and Reformed, and which has been expounded with more or less insight and power by the leading doctors of the churches for the last eight hundred years, was first given scientific statement by Anselm (q.v.) in his "Cur Deus Homo" (1098); but reached its complete development only at the hands of the so-called Protestant Scholastics of the seventeenth century (cf. e.g. Turretin, "The Atonement of Christ").<sup>(9)</sup>

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(9) *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, s.v. "atonement." B(enjamin) B(reckinridge) Warfield wrote this article.

Charles Hodge writes powerfully of the atonement.

The principle in question, however, is clearly recognized in Scripture, and therefore, the sacred writers do not hesitate to say that *God* purchased the Church with *his* blood; and that the *Lord of glory was crucified*. Hence such expressions as *God's death, God's blood, God's passion* have the sanction of Scriptural as well of Church usage. <sup>(10)</sup>

It is clear therefore, that the Scriptures recognize the truth that God is just, in the sense that He is determined to by his moral excellence to punish all sin, and therefore that the satisfaction of Christ which secures the pardon of sinners is rendered to the justice of God. *Its primary and principal design is neither to make a moral impression upon the offenders themselves, nor to operate didactically on other intelligent creatures, but to satisfy the demands of justice; so that God can be just in justifying the ungodly.* <sup>(11)</sup>

Here again the reconciliation of God with man is effected by the cross or death of Christ, which, removing the necessity for the punishment of sinners, renders it possible for God to manifest towards them his love. *The change is not in man, but, humanly speaking, in God; a change from the purpose to punish to a purpose to pardon and save.* There is, so to speak, a reconciliation of God's justice and of his love effected by Christ's bearing the penalty in our stead. <sup>(12)</sup>

These passages stand within the context of Hodge's complete system. As we saw above, Hodge would gloss all these references to God's suffering, passion, and change by saying that in reality they apply not to God nor to Christ's divine

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(10) Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:483. I have put Hodge's Latin phrases into English.

(11) Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:492-93.

(12) Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:515

(13) Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:395.

nature but to the one divine person, Jesus Christ. <sup>(13)</sup> I previously gave my critique of that position showing that it does not resolve the question of divine impassibility.

But, be that as it may be, these passages move into new territory. Hodge is not talking just about divine suffering or the death of God. He is talking about the sacrifice of Christ on the cross changing (Hodge's own word) God. Christ does not offer his sacrifice to himself! Nor to his divine nature. Nor to his own "divine person." Rather, the one divine person, Jesus Christ, offers his sacrifice to God as such (and thus to the Father, Word, and Holy Spirit). That is key to the biblical view of Christ's sacrifice and certainly to the objective view of the atonement. Thus it is God as such who is moved by, influenced by, and caused by the sacrifice on the Cross to forgive us our sins when we trust him to do so. Such a God is by definition passible, not impassible.

I conclude that to be consistent, even such a staunchly reformed theology as Hodge's must affirm a passible God. If such a theology were to continue to confess an impassible God, the result would be to empty the analogies of sacrifice and reconciliation to such an extent that they could not function to sustain a truly biblical or objective view of the atonement. If this be true for reformed theology, it would be even truer for Arminian, Wesleyan, and other theologies as well - and with less disruption to their larger systematic structures. In sum, since we must accept the foundational axiom that Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection reveals God to us, and since we must accept that the sacrifice of Christ to God procures our salvation, we must also conclude that fidelity to basic Christianity requires us to reject the claim that God is impassible.

## **Section Six: Passibility, Impassibility, and Power: Implications for Pastoral Care**

To introduce this final section, I will tell a story about power. Although there are many ways to classify power, this story highlights two. The story is as old as the human race.

In his eleven-year career as a professional boxer, Adam, as I will call him, never lost a fight. This powerful, unstoppable man knocked out every opponent. His brilliant success as a fighter earned him a small fortune. After retiring from the ring, he used his money, time, and considerable energy to focus on his family. Unfortunately, his only child, a tender and sweet daughter who idolized her father, came down with leukemia; and, after an agonizing eighteen-month battle, the girl died. His wife couldn't accept their daughter's death; and, for whatever reason that lurked deep in her soul, she left Adam, divorced him, and took half his money. Adam couldn't bear it. He sank into a depression that even powerful drugs could only partially control, he turned to women and alcohol, and finally Adam was killed in an accident while driving away from one more drunken encounter with one more woman.

Adam had one kind of power, but not another. He had one-sided power or, as we might call it, coercive power. He could make other men do what he wanted in the boxing ring, and no one had the ability to stop him. But he did not have the power to absorb life's blows and still keep his integrity as a person. Adam lost his centeredness. By centeredness, I do not mean "self-centered" or "selfish." Rather Adam lost his center in the sense that he failed as a person, as a Thou, with the power to respond to each bad thing out of his own integrity and in according with his values and identity. We might call this absorptive power. Adam had one-sided power in abundance, but he had little absorptive power. While a success as a boxer, he failed as a human being.

Suffering is not the only kind of influence that sometimes threatens to overwhelm and to destroy us as well-centered persons. We can also be overwhelmed by other influences—ones that we normally consider desirable. For example, the newspapers will sometimes carry a story about someone who achieved great success and fame as a teenage actor or who had performed to cheering crowds as a very young Olympic gold-medalist in gymnastics or figure skating. And yet as an adult, this same person had "gone to pieces," living in the past and unable to cope with a very different present. The child did not properly integrate the early successes and cheers into the creation of an adult with a centered integrity.

It is not just children. Most of us have read about - or even known - retirees who won a huge lottery or inherited a mountain of money, but who could not handle their own reactions to that money. Their good fortune destroyed them.

In short, to be an excellent person, one must be able to absorb all sorts of influences while creating or retaining a centeredness that allows one to act responsibly and with integrity. And that is a different kind of power from that one-sided power to make or shape (or break!) other people and things.

We see both kinds of power in the life of Christ. He certainly demonstrated one-sided power, that is, coercive power, when he chased the moneychangers out of the temple or when he stilled the storm on Lake Galilee. And God demonstrated that same sort of one-sided power when he raised Jesus from the dead.

At the same time, however, on the cross and in his descent into hell, Jesus also demonstrated a deep reservoir of absorptive power. He suffered physically of course; but he also suffered psychologically, when his best friends abandoned him and denied knowing him. Most of all, however, he suffered God's damnation, as we see when he called out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And yet Jesus retained his core identity, his basic centeredness as a person of love and faith—as we can see when he forgave the soldiers even as they were executing him, or when he ministered to the thief on the cross next to him. But above all, we see the depths of Jesus' absorptive power in his response to being damned. As he descended into hell, he cried out "My God why have you forsaken me?" And yet, despite having felt the full force of God's absolute wrath, he could still trust God, as he "commended his soul to God."

So Christ demonstrated both one-sided power and absorptive power. Both are necessary for him to be the Son of God, our Lord and Savior. Our fundamental theological axiom—that Jesus reveals God to us—warrants, therefore, the conclusion that we will find both types of power in God, unless that would be logically incompatible with some other aspect of God's nature as known either through revelation or reason.

This brings us back to the issue of impassibility. If God is absolutely

impassible, then he can only have one-sided power. Of course, there is no doubt that God does have one-sided power to make things happen. Creation is an act of unilateral power. God's raising Jesus is an act of unilateral power. Even our salvation demonstrates God's unilateral power. St. Paul talks about:

The working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Eph. 1:19-21 NIV).

And in the next verse, Paul comments that God uses this mighty (unilateral) power for the salvation and comfort of those of us in his church:

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church (Eph. 1:22 NIV).

So clearly God has one-sided power, and he exercises that power on our behalf. But if God is impassible, then God has no other kind of power. And God would necessarily lack the absorptive power that we see demonstrated on the Cross. It would seem, that a God without absorptive power would be weak, not strong – lacking power, not all-powerful.

In this article, we have seen many reasons for thinking that God is not impassible. I will deal with one more argument in favor of God's impassibility.

As we can see in Adam, the youthful Olympic gold-medalists, and the retired lottery-winners, powerful forces can overwhelm people, can change them for the worse, and even destroy them. Those defending impassibility, it seems to me, fear that some influence might de-center God, changing him for the worse, thus making him something less than utterly trustworthy. This fear comes into play even with regard to God's knowledge - that is, this fear is sometimes the reason that people deny that God's knowledge depends on what he knows. Maybe God, they reason, would come to know something that destabilizes him

and thus would undercut his rock-solid stability; so in their minds it is better to say that God causes to exist whatever he knows.

Such an argument, it seems to me, misunderstands the nature of omnipotence. The more powerful God is, the more he can absorb any set of influences and yet remain centered and unchanging with regard to his being, character, and purpose. In the case of an omnipotent God, no set of impacts upon him could ever cause him to go out of existence, nor could any group of influences ever undercut his nature as absolute agape-love, nor could any onslaught of chance contingencies endanger his Lordship.

It is not enough to say that an all-powerful God just serendipitously has the capacity to absorb anything that is going to happen. Rather we must say that an omnipotent God has the capacity to absorb any logically possible set of events whatsoever. Thus it does not just happen that God never goes out of existence, but it is impossible that God should encounter a set of events that could cause him to fail to exist. Likewise, it does not just happen that God remains loving, just, and righteous, but it is impossible for any set of influences to change his character. And it is not just a convenient truth that nothing will ever undermine God's gift of eternal life to us individually or prevent the coming of his Kingdom, rather it must be inconceivable that such a set of events could ever occur. Thus God's omnipotence means that he has the capacity to receive any influences that are logically possible—no matter how improbable in fact—and yet remain unchanged in his existence, his character, and his sovereignty over his Kingdom. God is Lord; and no matter what the influences upon him, he will govern the outcome of history. To say that God is omnipotent does not mean that nothing ever influences him; it means that he can absorb any influence whatsoever and yet remain perfectly, unchangeably, and eternally trustworthy.

I believe this truth—and it is a truth in my judgment—carries enormous implications for pastors as well as Christian social workers, nurses, doctors, and other caregivers. This is my retirement lecture. I am getting older. Although I hope, God willing, to live another three decades or more, I am nonetheless weaker now than forty years ago. I cannot lift as much weight or run as fast as once I could. It is embarrassing, but I cannot get off the floor without using

my arms as well as my legs. I am particularly concerned about the loss of leg muscle, because my father died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and loss of muscle mass and failing strength in his legs was a major symptom. But whether or not I ever come down with ALS - and so far I have not - this gradual loss will only continue, just from old age if nothing else. It is the common fate of everyone who lives long enough.

Of course, unilateral power is not just physical. Five years ago when I was president of Tokyo Christian University, I could, with the help of the faculty and staff, cause many things to happen here. Now there is a new man, Dr. Kurasawa, at the helm. He is an excellent man; I support him and am proud of his work. But he is not me! I do not have the power at this university that I once had. This also, with unique details for each person, is the common fate of anyone who lives long enough. It is the reality that social workers and nurses and other caregivers must face when they work with those getting older and especially with the very elderly.

Of course old people would like to have their youthful strength back. They would like to have the unilateral strength that defines a healthy body. That is why we look forward to the resurrection. To walk, dance, run, and jump, to shout and sing with the full vigor and enthusiasm of youth is God's promise. But old people are not yet dead, just old. What should old people do while they are still alive, yet with ever decreasing unilateral power, especially of the body?

Here the pastor, Christian social worker, and other caregivers have a special resource. Unilateral power is not the only power. Absorptive power is also power. As we grow old we do indeed lose unilateral power, but we can gain absorptive power. We can learn to endure hardships, physical loss, the loss of spouse, and the loss of influence and yet remain centered human beings, people with their own unbroken identity and people with a faith and trust in the goodness of God. In doing so, we point to Jesus on the cross and to the God who loves us, suffers with us, and perfectly and omnipotently keeps his center in the midst of every influence that he receives from the world.

As we grow old, we can develop a depth of character, through our still growing absorptive power, in a way that most young people cannot. They just

do not have enough life-experience.

In addition, of course, we can look forward to the resurrection when we, like Jesus, will exhibit the perfect integration and balance of unilateral and absorptive power. In that resurrection, because we are made in God's own image, we will share God's own power, both absorptive and unilateral. And, just maybe, after the resurrection, our challenge will be to absorb, not suffering and pain, but an untold richness of joy, adventure, and beauty while keeping our centered trust in God. I am looking forward to that.