

**THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD:  
CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA TO MOLTSMANN  
by Dr. Robert Duncan Culver**

(This paper was presented at the 1996 meeting of ETS.)

**DEFINITIONS**

Impassibility comes into our language as translation of the Greek word *apatheia* in the writings of Church fathers, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. *Apatheia*, despite the obvious etymological connection with apathy and apathetic in modern English, (Pelikan) started out as meaning “the state of an *apathes*” (alpha privative, plus *pathos*) without pathos or suffering” (Liddell and Scott Lexicon). Among the Greek Fathers *pathos* or passion was the right word for the suffering of Christ, as it still is. So in theology to be impassible means primarily to be incapable of suffering. Early theology affirmed that in heaven our resurrected bodies will be *apathes* in this sense. The word came to be extended to mean incapable of emotion of any kind and beyond that, *apathes* (impassible) in important theological discourse meant without sexual desire (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, chap. xxxv, “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series,” edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 1910, ii, 5, pp. 502-504). As applied to God, incapacity for any emotions sometimes is meant. We will return to this. The twelfth canon of the Second Council of Constantinople (553, Fifth Ecumenical) seems to say Christ on earth was impassible in the sense of “longings (passions, presumably sexual) of the flesh” (Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. R. J. Deferrari, Hersler Book Co., 1954, 224).

In this paper I am interested mainly in the question of whether or not the divine nature is capable of emotion, including, in a secondary way, the experience of suffering.

**IMPASSIBILITY IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH**

There was no difference of opinion on this subject among orthodox theologians of the ancient Church. Even Tertulian, perhaps the most antiphilosophy theologian among important early writers, vehemently opposed the notion that God could suffer pain. Reading of the Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great) in preparation for a paper on the post-Nicea (324) apologetics of orthodoxy sparked my notice of uniform and vehement agreement of Christians on God’s impassibility. In January of this year (1996) I carefully read J. N. D. Kelly’s *Early Christian Doctrines*. He confirms that all the Fathers, including even most heretics, strongly believed the divine Being is impassible. (See pages 84, 120, 122, 142, 143, 169, 291, 299, 372, 314, 317, 322, 325, 476, 488). This issue colored every aspect of efforts to clarify christology at the first four ecumenical councils (Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, Chalcedon 451). Nobody orthodox denied impassibility and even the heterodox acknowledged it. They did not separate impassibility from divine simplicity (mentioned more frequently) but regarded it as a necessary aspect of simplicity. They did not cite Aristotle’s unmoved mover, Plato’s eternal forms or anything of the sort. Their arguments were based mainly on the usual

biblical texts we still today cite to teach God's immutability (Psa 102:27; Is 40:10; Mal 3:6; Js 1:17). Simplicity, that is, God is not composed of parts, was then as now, established logically. Anything composed of parts is the sum of the parts, each of course less than infinite. Any number of finite parts do not add up to infinity. Since God is infinite, as established by scripture and demonstrated by reason, God is simple, not compound or complex. The three members of the Trinity each possesses the Godhead fully. They are not three thirds – they are a trinity of God not three gods.

At this point I want to anticipate charges that the early church fathers corrupted a pure biblical doctrine of a loving, personal God through introduction of Greek speculative philosophy. Let us hear what they said about this charge.

A sophisticated Christian theology which employs formal logic, precise definitions and elegant literary techniques, as some of the ancient theologians did, does not constitute betrayal of the Gospel treasure. The early theologians nevertheless had to defend themselves against those who thought it was a betrayal. Irenaeus, while insisting “the faith” is “one,” yet explained that theological refinements were of value. In *Against Heresies* he says, “Inasmuch as certain men have set the truth aside . . . by means of their craftily constructed plausibilities draw away minds of the inexperienced . . . I have felt constrained to compose the following treatise in order to expose their machinations” (I, 1). These “certain men” are later named. Most of them were highly educated scholastics, wise in their own eyes, whom Irenaeus felt he had to meet, not entirely on their own ground, but in such a way as to provide his readers sufficient skill and knowledge to rescue themselves from these so called “gnostics” – not a term of derision then but more equivalent to our “experts” or “intelligentsia.” His book is strewn with the language of these people. So to answer these errorists some skill (he does not call it philosophy) is helpful. They should not be allowed to get away with doctrinal murder, so to speak, just because they are cunning and eloquent (I, x. 2, 3). More importantly, by such skill “one may [more accurately than another] bring out the meaning of those things which have been spoken in parables, and accommodate them to the general scheme of the faith; and explain [with special clearness] the operation and dispensation of God connected with human salvation . . .” (I, x. 3). [Above citations are all from *Antenicene Fathers*, I, 315-331).

Christian theology was not “as Harnak tried to maintain, the product of encounter between Gospel and Hellenism. It is not the Hellenisation of Christianity. It was not the fruit of speculation but sincere effort to use the techniques of the learning of the day to elaborate Christian truth” (J. Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, p. 303).

Clement of Alexandria had to face opposition from those who opposed any employment of philosophical learning. He said they “prefer to block their ears in order not to hear the sirens” and that Christians as a whole “fear Greek philosophy as children fear ogres – they are frightened of being carried off by them. If our faith (I will not say our gnosis [knowledge]) is such that it is destroyed by force of argument, then let it be destroyed; for it will have been proved that we do not possess the truth” (Danielou, p. 304,305).

Clement asserted that philosophic learning has many positive uses. He really means theology which employs the techniques of learning – which we would now call systematic theology (Danielou, 306-322).

The climax of ancient consolidation of orthodoxy was in 451, at Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council. Jaroslav Pelikan devotes several pages merely to summarize the impassibility doctrine as expressed in the Fathers before the Fourth Ecumenical Council (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, pp. 52-55). I shall not quote this at length as I did in a paper earlier this year. Rather, since the climax of consolidation of orthodoxy came at Chalcedon 451, the Fourth Council, let me cite two learned Fathers whose views on Impassibility coincided quite exactly and whose views were specifically endorsed and incorporated in the Definition and Canons of that Council. The letters of each were read at the Council and essentially adopted as the doctrine of the Council; hence passed into received orthodoxy of the Church from that day to this.

Neither was present and neither expressly addressed the Council. Cyril's "dogmatic letter" addressed the heresy of Nestorius and was written to Nestorius twenty years earlier. Leo's letter (*The Tome of Leo*) was addressed to Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople two years before the Council. Both Epistles were read, weighed and vigorously endorsed at Chalcedon.

Cyril's letter had been first addressed directly to Nestorius just before the third Council (Ephesus 431) because it was he who was deemed to be dividing the church through denial that Mary gave birth to incarnate deity. Cyril's Epistle to Nestorius was then read at the third Council. It had a positive effect in winning that council to the orthodoxy of 325 and 381. But shortly trouble arose from another quarter. Eutyches, an old archimandrite at Constantinople promoted the doctrine "not only that after His incarnation Christ had only one nature but also that the body of Christ is not of like substance with our own" (Kurtz, *Church History*, I. 334). This and other problems made a fourth council (Chalcedon 451) necessary.

So Cyril's letter was read again at the later council. I quote some relevant portions of Cyril's letter:

we say that he 'suffered and rose again.' We do not mean that God the Word suffered in his Deity . . . for the Deity is impassible because it is incorporeal. But the body which had become his own body suffered these things, and therefore he himself is said to have suffered them for us. The impassible [God] was in the body which suffered" (Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd Ed., 1963 p.67).

(The article on Cyril in Smith's six-volume *Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography*, vol 1, p.918, right column says Ephrem of Antioch speaks of a now lost treatise by Cyril on impassibility and another on suffering.)

The Tome of Leo was read by his representative. Hold in mind that the doctrinal problem being addressed was to define the incarnation of the Son of God. As Cyril's letter was intended to correct Nestorius, Leo's Tome was intended correct Eutyches. I cite several portions related to impassibility.

While the distinctiveness of both natures was preserved, and both met in one Person . . . the inviolable [divine and impassible] was united to the passible, so that . . . the same “Mediator” might from the one element be capable of dying and also from the other be incapable [of dying] (*Ibid*, 255).

The Lord of the universe allowed his infinite majesty to be overshadowed, and took upon him the form of a servant; the impassible God did not disdain to be passible Man, and the immortal to be subject to the laws of death (*Ibid*, 256).

To pass by many points – it does not belong to the same nature to weep with feelings of pity over a dead friend [Jesus over Lazarus] and, after the mass of stone had been removed from the grave where he had lain four days, by a voice of command to raise him up to life again (*Ibid*, 256).

In the first excerpt passibility is said to be part of Man’s nature but not of God’s. In the second the same idea is enlarged in elegant language which says that as God was impassible and immortal – hence as incapable of suffering as of dying. In the third, as God the Son our Lord was “incapable of feelings of pity,” such as He expressed when He wept at Lazarus’ tomb. “Incapable of feelings of pity” means impassible in the sense of incapable of emotion.

At this climax in the doctrinal consolidation of Christian antiquity the report of Session II goes on to say:

After the reading of the foregoing epistle the most reverend bishops cried out: This is the faith of the fathers, this is the faith of the Apostles . . . . Piously and truly did Leo teach, so taught Cyril. Everlasting be the memory of Cyril . . . . This is the true faith.

In all of Christian antiquity I was able to find only Origen among the learned, orthodox writers who dissented from this view. In a book on early Christian doctrine, *Gods and the One God* by R. M. Grant (Westminster, 1986) the author shows that Origen’s early views promoted the Christian consensus that God is impassible (pp. 91,92) but late in life of about 69 years (185-254) taught that God is passible (Grant, 92,93). Grant comments, “Apparently the threat of Patripassionism did not bother Origen, at least at this point” (p. 93). (Grant’s documentation seems to be incorrect, so I could not check his references, but I have no doubt he is correct in his report of Origen.)

### **WHY THE PATRISTIC CONSENSUS ON GOD’S IMPASSIBILITY?**

Enlightenment and liberal critics and historians blame the influence of Plato and other Greek philosophers, but I propose a compelling reason in the fact that in scripture God is most forcefully and grandly said to be supremely “blessed.”

This occurs ten times in the New Testament, eight times employing *eulogetos*, used only of God in the New Testament. I cite two of these, Romans 1:25 and 9:5. The first refers to “God . . . the Creator, who is blessed (*eulogetos*) forever. Amen.” The second speaks of “Christ . . . who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.” (See also Mk 14:61; Lk 1:68; II Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; I

Pet 1:3.) The first two refer to Jehovah God; the others to the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In Mk 14:61 the high priest is employing “the Blessed” as a very old circumlocution for Jehovah and in II Corinthians 11:31, “he who is (*eulogetos*) blessed for evermore” is undoubtedly the familiar Septuagint rendering of Exodus 3:14 “I am *ho On*” (I am the one who is). It seems to me relevant to the “impassibility” of God that *eulogetos* means “blessed,” that it renders *baruk* throughout the LXX and seems to refer to the joy of God in heaven and of those whom God has blessed there. In Christian theology and hymnody “blessed” is the standard word for the joys of heaven, unmixed with pain or sorrow (Rev 21:4). I noted this in every appearance of “blessedness” in Calvin’s Institutes, for example.

Twice in the New Testament the word *makarios* is used of God, both times by Paul, (*viz.*: “the glory of the blessed God” (I Tim 1:11) and I Timothy 6:15,16, a peroration of Paul: “the blessed (*ho Makarios*) and only potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality.” Though I shall not carry my argument far in this paper, the evidence from *eulogetos* and *makarios* has impressed me that we need not give up the impassibility of God. God transcendent in heaven and immanent in all creation is supremely happy (a synonym of blessed), always has been so, and for ever will be.

### IMPASSIBILITY TO THE REFORMATION

As an aspect of the simplicity, impassibility continued to be an uncontested assumption of orthodox theology. It shall be sufficient for present purposes to cite the scholastic work of Anselm which evangelicals love most to cite – *Cur Deus Homo* (Why the God-man). “The doctrine of the atonement in Anselm of Canterbury was based on the axiom that the divine nature is impassible, and that it can in no sense be brought down from its loftiness or toil in what it wills to do.” I quote one of Anselm’s responses in his dialogue with Boso in *Cur Deus Homo*:

For without doubt we maintain that the divine nature is impassible – that it cannot at all be brought down from its exaltation . . . . And we affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is true God and true man – one person in two natures, and two natures in one person. Therefore when we state that God undergoes some lowliness or weakness, we understand this to be in accordance with the weakness of the human substance which he assumed, not in accordance with the sublimity of his impassible [divine] nature (*Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol III, edited and translated by J. Hopkins and Both. Richardson, Toronto & New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1976, 5 pp. 58,59).

### IMPASSIBILITY AMONG THE REFORMERS OF 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

It is frequently remarked that Martin Luther was unconcerned about consistency in doctrines. Neo-orthodox writers are pleased with his alleged paradoxes. And we must acknowledge that his kerygmatic theology (doctrinal preaching) was at certain points in tension with his dogmatics – if it is correct to use that word in its proper sense. At the close of Althaus’ treatment of Luther’s “Two-nature christology” he remarks that it was not unified within itself but displays contradictions” (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. R. C. Schultz, 1966, p. 196). In one place Luther could say “Christ on the cross did not feel his deity but suffered purely as a

man' (Althaus, 198). Yet he could also say "the deity of Christ, because of the incarnation and of its personal unity with the humanity, enters into the uttermost depths of its suffering. God suffers in Christ. However Luther did not teach patripassionism . . . . He always regarded God's suffering as an incomprehensible mystery" (Althaus, 197).

Calvin was more explicit about employing two manners of speaking about God. On the one hand we must employ the *ad hominem*, metaphoric language of biblical revelation, and on the other hand we must employ the technical language in dogmatics necessary to define truth and to expose heresy. In this I think Calvin had as great a debt to Hilary of Portiers as to any other theologian. He does not quote Hilary but acknowledges admiration for him, especially Hilary's idea about how to interpret the Bible's way of communicating truth about God. I cite a sentence in comment on Psalm 110:3, "I have begotten thee from the womb before the morning" (LXX). God's "purpose is to educate the faculties of men up to the knowledge of the faith by clothing Divine verities in words descriptive of human circumstances" (On the Trinity, vi, 16 NDNF II, 9, P.103) and similarly through several paragraphs.

Calvin puts it this way: "Let us then leave to God the knowledge of himself . . . . But we shall be 'leaving it to him' if we conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word" (*Institutes*, I, xiii, 21). Many times in his writings Calvin discourages all speculation about God's essence. Rather, says he, we should contemplate God in his works as guided by the Bible (*Institutes*, I,v; vi,1). Yet that did not prevent Calvin from employing the somewhat speculative categories of the "way of negation" ultimately derived from ancient "enlightened" Greek speculations about Zeus or Theos conceived in a monotheistic manner: (immutability, infinity, etc.). Among these Calvin rather incidentally lets out his acceptance of the patristic consensus on divine impassibility. Once in comment on God's "repentance" he says the description of the deity is "accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind . . . . whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion [i.e., passion] in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience" (*Institutes*, I, xvii, 13). A sifting of the *Institutes* turned up several passages wherein Calvin accepts it as axiomatic that the divine nature in itself is impassible.

Impassibility was not in itself an important issue in the sixteenth century. However it is clear that the patristic axiom was not rejected. Theologians continued to affirm the immanent attributes of God such as simplicity, immutability, infinity and the rest. In that context of *apriori* thought about God impassibility really does not need to be mentioned for it is a near necessary inference.

Quite early in the Reformation Era the Anglican Articles of 1553 (Art. #1) affirmed that "God is without bodily parts or passions." This is usually understood to mean that in His incorporeal essence God has no passions, for He is forever "Blessed and only potentate," etc. The first paragraph of the Augsburg Confession says evangelical churches confess "that the decree of the Nicene Synod concerning the unity of the divine essence . . . to wit, that there is one divine essence . . . eternal, incorporeal [*incorporeus*], without parts." The word impassible is

pointedly omitted, though the Nicene Creed as understood by the framers of it (324, 381) unquestionably meant that too. (Lutherans, at least some of the time, think they should stick by strict biblical language more than Calvinists do.) Krauth, the greatest of Lutheran historians of *The Conservative [Lutheran] Reformation*, evidently thinks the Divine nature was impassible before incarnation but by virtue of communication of attributes (*Communicatio Idiomatum*) the divine nature became passible. So before the incarnation God was impassible but now is passible. He argues this at length (pp. 316-320). If Krauth is right, then after the incarnation the divine nature – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – is passible.

The Roman Church, following the ancients, continued to affirm God the Father is “invisible, incapable of suffering, immortal, incomprehensible, immutable” (Denzinger, Syst. Index 18, right column) though the Son incarnate was impassible, untroubled “by the sufferings of the soul and the longings of the flesh” (cites Canon 12 of Second Council of Constantinople [Fifth Ecumenical] 555, Denzinger, Syst. Index VIII f and #224, pp. 88, 89).

### AMONG THE IMMEDIATE HEIRS OF THE REFORMATION (1600S, 1700S)

Through the scholastic period of Protestant theology I detect no variation from the Patristic consensus. The Westminster Confession I, iv, approved by the Long Parliament 1647, says “God . . . is . . . a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.” I think that clearly says God’s “infinite being” is “without parts or passions” as in similar way theology of the day affirmed, though Buswell does not think so (STCR, I, 56, 57) and A. A. Hodge is obscure on the matter (*The Confession of Faith*, Banner of Truth Trust edition, 1964, pp. 48, 49). Buswell seems to say it means God has no body which has parts. I think it says God’s infinite being has no body, no parts and no passions.

For present purposes I shall quote only one further representative of the period, the most learned and voluminous of England’s dissenting (Baptist) theologians, John Gill (1697-1771). His two great volumes (*Body of Divinity*) are the very embodiment of a systematic theology bound to the scriptures. Even present-day publishers of new editions of Gill’s Divinity emphasize that his discussions are in the very language of scripture. [1767 is the publishing date of a *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* quoted here] He wrote:

For as it has been commonly said, “Christ remained what he was, and assumed what he was not;” and what he assumed added nothing to his divine person; he was only manifest in the flesh; he neither received any perfection or imperfection, from the human nature; though that received dignity and honour by its union to him and was adorned with the gifts and graces of the Spirit without measure . . . . Nor was any change made in the divine nature by the sufferings of Christ; the divine nature is impassible, and is one reason why Christ assumed the human nature, that he might be capable of suffering and dying . . . Yet he was crucified in the human nature only, and his blood was shed in that, to which the divine person gave Virtue and efficacy, through its union to it; but received no change at all by this (John Gill, *Body of Divinity* I, 54).

If you have followed the progress of this paper you will recognize this as a near republication of Cyril's *Epistle to Nestorius* and Leo's *Tome*.

Both Lutheran and Reformed theology went through a stage of "scholastic fortification" of the early Evangelical symbols and other Reformation formulas; to be followed by a rationalistic reaction in the "Age of Reason." In the scholastic period, speculative writing about simplicity and immutability of God rendered God not just immutable but almost immobile, hence of course impassible (Traced by J. A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology* vol. II pp. 120 ff.)

### IN THE LATE PROTESTANT ERA

In Britain and America the immutability of God came to be a matter of dispute between orthodox writers of Calvinistic persuasion and Wesleyan theologians. I suppose it was a spin-off from the debated question of free will. I found this quickly by looking up the article on "Immutability" in McClintock and Strong *Cyclopaedia* (IV, 20). This truly great work of the nineteenth century is of Arminian-Wesleyan aegis.

The article first quotes Stephen Charnock (1628-1675), On the *Divine Attributes*, on immutability, a decidedly Calvinistic work. The excerpt was well chosen by the editors. Charnock is still in print and read today as he was when I was in seminary and for about 300 years now. For Charnock God is a "Being, whom nothing from without can affect or alter . . . an eternal Being, who always has and always will go on in the same tenor of existence." The word impassibility is not there but the idea is clearly affirmed in other words.

Then the *Cyclopaedia* assigns equal space to the then most eminent Wesleyan theologian (perhaps still ought to be), Richard Watson (1781-1833). After gentle warning to take the Calvinists cautiously (*Institutes* I, 401) Watson (who always wrote in the style of educated English Calvinists) defends the view that God's immutability consists not in his essential nature or even adherence to his "*purposes*" (which in Arminian theology are subject to change) "but in his never changing the *principles* of his administration" (Watson II, 492). In favor of this Watson (whom I checked out at length in the two tattered volumes of his *Institutes* I am privileged to own) writes at considerable length. I suppose this divergence prevails to the present.

### THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD IN RECENT & CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

With the coming of the Age of Reason (18th century onward), theologians outside the stream of rather strict Augustinian orthodoxy (Calvinist-Roman Catholic) have veered sharply away from views of God which could entertain simplicity (no parts), hence immutability and consequent impassibility. Orthodox Wesleyan Arminianism, early in the epoch, has already been noted. Philosophical-theological development (Schleiermacher and his emphasis on feeling, Kierkegaard and his anti-metaphysical Subjectivism, etc.) began the mood which welcomed departure from classical theistic trinitarian assumptions. Then came Ludwig Feuerbach (1808-1872). In his book *The Essence of Religion* and *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach made two points of interest to the present subject. In the first place, theological dogma is purely subjective in origin and crystallizes the inner aspirations, hopes and fears of people. Their inner yearnings create pictures of what they seek. The mental pictures are projected by creating many gods or



one God which embody what they seek. In the second place, the pervasiveness of evil in the sense of human suffering proves that an omnipotent, holy and loving God does not exist. He is only the creation of religious people, by projection of what they desperately wish to be true. Feuerbach also had a socialist political agenda to promote with his protest atheism. He rightly discerned that the God of the Bible and Christian creeds could hardly be enlisted to support Feuerbach's political-social program.

Then also came Adolph von Harnak (1851-1936). In his view Christian theology got off to a bad start by pollution with classical Greek ideas of God derived mainly from Plato. His seven volumes of *History of Dogma* (1886-1890) traces what he thought was a true history of a false orthodox theology which left the track of ethical religion in the first Apologists of the second century and never got back. Christian theology until the rise of liberalism has been simple faith in a God of love taught and exemplified by Jesus, transformed by the influence of Greek philosophy into cold-blooded dogma.

Several recent and contemporary figures including Karl Barth, John Macquarrie and Juergen Moltmann, all theologically somewhere between historic orthodoxy and modern liberalism, have sought to answer the protest atheism of Feuerbach and the pure ethicism of Harnak and liberalism in general by resort to a redefinition of our Lord's incarnation and the Holy Trinity. By resort to redefinition of trinitarianism these authors have sought to rescue God from charge of impassibility, which they equate to impassivity and immobility.

They have influenced many in the same direction, some of them evangelicals. Among those who now rather thoroughly reject impassibility and regularly participate in programs of ETS are Gordon Lewis and Millard Erickson. One of our founding members, J. O. Buswell rejected it also.

A rather dispassionate survey of the present situation will be found in Alison E. McGrath's *Christian Theology*, now in a fresh edition (213-222 in 1st ed., 248-254 in new ed. of 1996). McGrath, who seems to be writing for secular university classes, presents the matter rather clearly but characteristically without making any commitment of his own. Perhaps it's the British style.

Process Theology as a matter of principle rejects impassibility of God. Tracing their theology to the philosophy of Hartshorne and before him of Whitehead, they say "this concept derives from the Greeks." Since the world is part of God's "constitutive reality," the future of the world is not foreseen to God. Self-determining acts of free, worldly beings like men contribute to His being. Hence "These three terms – unchangeable, passionless, and absolute – finally say the same thing, that the world contributes nothing to God and that God's influence upon the world is in no way conditioned by unforeseen, self-determining activities of us worldly beings. Process Theology denies the existence of this God." (J. B. Cobb, Jr. and D. R. Griffin, *Process Theology* Westminster, 1976, pp. 8,9).

W. Waite Willis, Jr. claims the trinitarian theologies of K. Barth and J. Moltmann as his own and claims Karl Rahner also as a fellow traveller. He asserts that this theology answers the atheistic critics of Christianity of modern times, especially Feuerbach. The God of speculative theology says Willis, is the one against whom "protest atheism" succeeds. The trinitarian God of

the Bible has no problem of unexplained suffering. He's against it and suffers from it along with us and will continue to do so until in the consummation, God, we may suppose, becomes completely God. Is this a union of krisis theology with process theology and with liberation theology? See pages 106-107 and chap VI "The Eschaological Trinity."

As related specifically to impassibility I cite part of pages 105-107. In the Trinity God . . . has become concrete and sensuous . . . . [The trinity comprehends the Christian God's concrete, sensuous, praxis on behalf of human suffering. . . . God . . . joins the protest . against human suffering . . . works in suffering love and . . . will not be fully God while suffering persists . . . surrenders his impassibility" (*Theism, Atheism and the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Scholars Press, 1987. Copyrighted by American Academy of Religion!)

I hope to write another paper showing that we really cannot give up the doctrine of divine impassibility. Recent movement to demolish it takes away too much. I see no mightier than Cyril, Leo, Augustine, the three Cappadocians, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, Edward, Gill and Shedd on the present scene or the future horizon. It may be that chucking the ancient faith in this regard is a liberal-sponsored concession to the subjectivism in popular thought today.

I think analogy is still the route to go, especially what Thomas Aquinas called the analogy of proportionality. More about that next time, God willing.

Yet we cannot leave the matter there even today. Like us, the believers of old said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" and the Father loves me too or He would not have given "his only begotten Son" to save us from our sins. Their pastors also read their Bibles – more than we, for they didn't have all the "how to" courses in seminary to teach and to master! So they also knew of God's love for His people in every age, however explained.

To bring this matter to a conclusion for now, it seems to me we must affirm that we know as much of God as He has seen fit to reveal. The way of negation (incomprehensibility, immutability, etc.) in theology is a way of confessing this in part. The simplicity and immutability of God are, however, not merely speculation – Greek or otherwise. Sound trinitarian teaching affirms not a tripartite God but one God – a God who has no parts at all. The plurality of *personae*, *prosopa*, *hypostases*, persons is a plurality in unity which cannot quite fully be explained but only affirmed and believed. Like Augustine we affirm, "Certainly there are three . . . . Yet when it is asked, what three, human language labors from great poverty of speech. We say 'three persons,' not that it may [rightly] so be said, but that we may not say nothing at all" (*de Trinitate*, V, 9; see NPNF, Vol iii, p.92).

It seems to me to reject impassibility of the Godhead is to dissipate the unity (simplicity and immutability) of God in accommodation to a modern understanding of what constitutes personality, unknown to the people who gave us not only the doctrine but the terminology of a Trinitarian Christology. The creeds do not teach three distinct centers of consciousness in the Godhead as the Trinitarian theologies of Barth, Moltmann and those influenced by them seem to think.

Our own Jonathan Edwards rejected every notion of an indigent, insufficient or mutable God "or any dependence of the Creator on the creature for any part of His perfections or happiness"

(G. P. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 406). In such a case God did not plan, create and control a world with a man in it who would breed a fallen race so God could either be happy or unhappy. God did not need man either then or now in order to be “God blessed forever.”

The anthropopathisms of the biblical revelations are all true on the basis of analogy. Analogy means similarity of some sort, but not equivalence; otherwise not analogy but definition. Ancient theologians figured out right away that God’s repentance is not an emotion of His Being but a change of treatment of mankind or some other part of the creation. Their writings employ the very illustrations (sun’s actions on clay or wax, etc.) we use today. The analogy is a bit crippled but about the best 1900 years of thinking has produced. As to God’s love and all other emotions – fear, hate, jealousy, etc., we then must say that just as there is analogy between man’s repentance and God’s change of treating us so there is analogy between our emotions (or passibility) and something about God’s treatment of us. We just have not found a good name for it – yet. There is no consistency in regarding God’s hate, repentance and wrath as only analogically true while making out love and suffering to be non-analogical. We cannot, in my judgment, have it both ways.

Prayer is only one aspect of worship which depends on the validity of analogy. In prayer we say, “Our Father.” Yet father is a human word indicating a human function of begetting with a whole plethora of accompanying ideas. Some of it is like God. Some is not. It does not fit God perfectly at all, but whether in the prayer of a small child or the dying words of his grandmother, “Father” is a right name for the God of revelation and the vocabulary of prayer.

### **MINDING OUR LANGUAGE AND MENDING IT**

Meanwhile let us not read into God’s being any human ideal having its origin in the present zeitgeist. The spirit of this epoch is not the Spirit of God, but the sullen mood of this present evil age. There may be something analogous to sexuality in God – the image of God doctrine may imply such – but no sexuality. So there is something in God by way of a certain analogy called love and/or hate, but no emotion.

I think we may greatly exaggerate correspondences of analogy in talk about God. There may be analogy of proportionality rather than of strict proportion, to employ the language of medieval, scholastic discourse. But the distinction between analogy of proportion and analogy of proportionality drawn from the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas is a subject for another day. Something about men is analogous to something in God. But that scarcely gives us leave to define God as simply a man on infinite scale as has been done in polytheism and some Christian writing. The other extreme is so to emphasize the immutability of the divine Being as to render Him immobile, not free even to answer our prayers. This was characteristic of some theology of the age of Protestant scholasticism (See Dorner, *History or Protestant Theology*, II, 142ff.)

The language of technical theological discourse has its place, and that is what I am defending today. I must, however, live and die with the language of revelation as expressed best in the perennial hymns. In this too God’s lack of change of any kind has a prominent place. The same theme fills Psalm 90, a Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

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