

**HOLD NOT THY PEACE AT MY TEARS**  
**Methodological Reflections on Divine Impassibility**  
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**1. Introduction**

1.1 Divine Impassibility. Recent work on the divine nature has criticized the traditional conception of divine impassibility, the doctrine that God is not affected by happenings in the world. Although everything in the world is dependent upon God, God is not dependent upon or affected by anything. A corollary, much discussed in recent literature, is that an impassible being cannot suffer. From all sides, the doctrine has been criticized: from theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel to philosophers such as Charles Hartshorne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, the classical doctrine of an impassible divinity has been roundly criticized. Plantinga, for example, writes,

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitter cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine...

As the Christian sees things, Plantinga claims, ours is a suffering God.

The pressures to reject divine impassibility are clear: to modern sensibilities an impassible deity seems woefully out of touch with both Biblical and personal experience; we value a God who suffers with us, who hears and responds to our prayers, who is active in redemptive history and attentive to our personal needs. We want a God who loves us and is responsive to our free choices, who answers prayer and, when we lose our way, coaxes us back to himself. The orthodox conception of divine impassibility, it is alleged, is just so much theological phlogiston, a curious relic of a benighted age. One should, however, beware—this claim is a radical departure from traditional Christian orthodoxy. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD declared Patripassionism a heresy when it exclaimed that the synod "repels from the sacred assembly those who dare to say that the Godhead of the only-begotten is capable of suffering."

**1.2 Methodological issues.** Making one's way in the complex of contemporary and historical theology is no small task. The threat of unorthodoxy looms large, yet the

constraints are not sufficient to compel consensus. Is divine impassibility religiously defensible given this recent criticism? How does one decide for or against such a momentous theological doctrine? Where does one obtain information in theology? Is it possible to theologize sola scriptura? Does one need to supplement Scripture with rational reflection thereupon? If so, how? What role do extra-Biblical tradition, philosophy, and religious experience play? While method in theology is the topic of this essay, I shall advance divine impassibility as an illustrative case study.

Recent philosophical theologians Nicholas Wolterstorff and Richard Creel address these issues in their discussions of divine impassibility. Wolterstorff has offered a series of arguments against the doctrine of divine impassibility. Wolterstorff seems to start with his own religious experience, and then to try to ground it in Scripture and theological tradition. Creel, on the other hand, argues that dismissals of this doctrine are premature. Creel offers a defense of the classical doctrine of divine impassibility as it relates to such other doctrines as immutability, omniscience, freedom, and eternity. Creel seems to proceed primarily philosophically to defend a post-Biblical Platonizing theological tradition from objections that it is not religiously adequate. In the next two sections of this essay, I will discuss central arguments from Wolterstorff and Creel. Although I defend the pathos of God, my primary interest is theological methodology; henceforth, I shall focus upon exposition, commentary, criticism, and, ultimately, questioning.

## **2. Suffering Love**

2.1 Lament for a Son. It is fitting to locate Nicholas Wolterstorff's arguments concerning the divine suffering within an existential context of human suffering. Reflecting upon the death of his son, he writes:

How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity's song—all without lifting a finger that we could see. You have allowed bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself.

We strain to hear. But instead of hearing an answer we catch sight of God himself scraped and torn. Through our tears we see the tears of God.

A new and more disturbing question now arises: Why do you permit yourself to suffer, O God? If the death of the devout costs you dear (Psalm 116:15), why do you permit it? Why do you not grasp joy?

....God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God (LS, 80-81).

Wolterstorff believes that just as God shares his pain over the death of his son, so he too shares God's pain over the death of his Son.

2.2 The Calvinian tradition. Wolterstorff alleges to find support for his position in the Calvinian tradition. Calvin's commentary on Genesis 9:5-6 includes the phrase

that no one can injure his brother without wounding God himself. Wolterstorff comments: "Behind and beneath the social misery of our world is the suffering of God...To pursue justice is to relieve God's suffering." (WG, 16) Furthermore, in his commentary on Habakkuk 2:6 Calvin discusses the lament over the arrogant and the greedy; we are led to cry out "How long?" and Calvin writes of this cry that it is "the same as though God heard himself." Wolterstorff comments on this passage: "The cries of the victim are the very cry of God. The lament of the victims as they cry out 'How long?' is God's giving voice to his own lament." (WG, 17) While belief in God's suffering over injustice would provide a powerful theology of social justice, Wolterstorff has not established Calvin's belief in divine pathos. In the passages cited Calvin does not claim that the cries are the actual cries of God, but they are the same as though God heard himself. This suggests a certain divine accommodation to human understanding.

In his Institutes Calvin warns of anthropomorphism:

The Anthropomorphites also, who dreamed of a corporeal God, because mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet are often ascribed to him in Scripture, are easily refuted. For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lips with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must of course stoop far below his proper height. (I, XIII, 1)

Although this contains a general warning against taking anthropomorphic language literally, Calvin specifically intends this warning to be applied to talk of God's suffering. In his commentary on Isaiah 63: 9 which states that when God's people were distressed God was distressed, Calvin writes: "In this sense the Prophet testifies that God, in order to alleviate the distresses and afflictions of his people, himself bore their burdens; *not that he can in any way endure anguish*, but, by a very customary figure of speech, he assumes and applies to himself human passions [my emphasis]." This comment on the divine accommodation to human language is typical in Calvin's commentaries. Calvin clearly understands the Biblical writers as well as his own claims about God's passions to be construed metaphorically. Indeed, Calvin taught that God the Son suffered only in his humanity and that his divinity remained unaffected. Wolterstorff's attempt to locate his theology of social justice within the Calvinist tradition is unsuccessful.

2.3 The Eudaemonistic ideal. Wolterstorff's most powerful argument against divine impassibility is his rejection of the eudaemonistic ideal of happiness from which grief has been entirely eliminated. His discussion focuses on the writings of Augustine who assumes the Stoical view that "A life entirely free of passions (emotional upset) is to be desired." (SL 205) Because the trinitarian God is complete unto himself he is completely lacking in eros. Since he desires nothing, he can neither lack nor be disappointed; his life then, is a life of uninterrupted bliss. Although human beings are enjoined to suffer sympathetically with other human beings, the Stoic ideal of divine love is one of uninterrupted suffering-free bliss. Hence, the love that God manifests is

not eros or sympathy, but benevolence or agape. Wolterstorff describes the divine experience on the Augustinian model:

God satisfies the eudaemonistic ideal implicit in all that has preceded. God's life is through and through blissful. Thus God too is free of negative pathos. Of Mitleiden [sympathy] with those who are suffering, God feels nothing, as also he feels no pain over the shortfalls of Godliness in his errant creatures. His state is apatheia—an apatheia characterized positively by the steady non-perturbing state of joy. God dwells eternally in blissful non-suffering apatheia. Nothing that happens in the world alters his blissful unperturbed serenity. Certainly God is not oblivious to the world. There is in him a steady disposition of benevolence toward his human creatures. But this disposition to act benevolently proceeds on its uninterrupted successful course whatever transpires in the world. (SL 209-210)

2.4 Divine sympathy. Wolterstorff notes that the impasse between the modern and the medieval thinkers resolves into their conceptions of divine love; the former favor a sympathetic and erotic conception of the divine love while the latter consider only benevolence, without Mitleiden, adequate. Both have an explanation of the relevant Biblical passages, so simple appeal to scripture will not resolve this issue. Wolterstorff attempts to resolve the issue by a discussion of the adequacy of benevolence as the conception of divine love. Is it sufficient for the divine love for God merely to have a steady disposition to do good to his creatures or is such a notion deficient? Is God's love, to put the matter another way, equivalent to benevolence? If so then God's delight is in his well-doing and not in the welfare of his creatures. Indeed, God takes delight only in his disposition to do good, regardless of the condition of his creatures or of their responses to his love. Since his desires are not directed toward his creatures but are focused only upon himself, his happiness is not affected by their sin and suffering. On the benevolence view: "What God joyfully experiences is simply his own exercise of benevolence." (SL 224) Is benevolence a sufficient conception of divine love?

Wolterstorff offers the following illustration for insight into the nature of love:

An analogue which comes to mind is that of a professional health-care specialist. Perhaps when first she entered her profession she was disturbed by the pain and limping and death she saw. But that is now over. Now she is neither perturbed nor delighted by the condition of the people that she sees. What gives her delight is just her inner awareness of her own well-doing. And always she finds scope for well-doing—so long, of course, as she has clients. To those who are healthy she gives reassuring advice on health maintenance. To those who are ill she dispenses medicine and surgery. But it makes no difference to her whether or not her advice maintains the health of the healthy and whether or not her proffered concoctions and cuttings cure the illness of the ill. What makes a difference is just her steadiness in well-doing; in this and in this alone she finds her delight. If it falls within her competence she will, of course, cooperate in pursuing the elimination of smallpox; that is doing good. But should news

arrive of its elimination, she will not join the party; she has all along been celebrating the only thing she finds worth celebrating—namely, her own well-doing. She is a Stoic sage in the modern world. (SL 225)

Wolterstorff begins his criticism by registering his repugnance. But his analysis does not rest on his moral distaste; wanting to proceed by logical analysis he claims that this picture is not coherent: "Though this person neither rejoices nor suffers over anything in the condition of her patients, nonetheless she rejoices in her own doing of good. But what then does she take as good? What does she value? The health of her patients, one would suppose. Why otherwise would she give advice to the one on how to maintain his health, chemicals to the other to recover his..." (SL 225) If this person does value the presence of health in her patients, then she will be glad if it is present and sad if it is absent. But in the illustration she is neither glad nor sad; hence, the incoherence.

Wolterstorff rejects a Kantian disregard for consequences of actions in favor of doing duty for duty's sake because, while it does preserve the coherence of the story, it reduces love to obligation; this undermines any notion of divine love which presumably is an act of grace and not of duty. So Wolterstorff concludes that to act out of love for something other than oneself is to value both that thing and its conditions. Thus the benevolence conception of divine love is incoherent. Hence, God's love for his creatures entails that he has desires for his creatures and their well-being. If God's desires are unsatisfied, that is, if human beings sin or suffer, then God's erotic or agapaic love is expressed sympathetically—his is a suffering love.

Wolterstorff's arguments clearly imply that the human doctor's love could only be a suffering love; the same conclusion about God may not follow. The reason the human doctor must suffer if she desires the health of her patients is because she, not being omnipotent, will inevitably see her ends occasionally frustrated. If she were omnipotent then she could remain in a state of perpetual bliss—knowing both her abilities and that, whatever comes her way, a pleasing outcome will always obtain. God, being omnipotent, need not live in fear that he will not attain his ends regarding human beings. God should suffer only if what he ultimately desires for his creatures is frustrated. But God has determined to attain his ends and will do so given his omnipotence. Since human sufferings can all prove redemptive and since God views all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, God need not depart from a state of perpetual bliss. But won't God grieve over those who do not choose fellowship with him because they do not attain the end that God desires for them? Even the eternal suffering of the wicked need not cause God grief because they have attained the end of appropriate retributive punishment for their sins.

From God's eternal and timeless perspective present suffering may be transformed because of the good now present to God. He may not view suffering as we do—we may suffer if a loved one suffers because the good that such suffering engenders is not now (fully) present to us. For example, when a woman gives birth to a child she suffers terribly, but in retrospect the suffering is forgotten and seems genuinely worthwhile. Yet while she is suffering, the good is not yet fully present to her. Perhaps God's perspective on suffering is like a woman's later perspective on

childbirth where the good is now present and transforms her attitudes toward her suffering. If God sees the end from the beginning, viewing all things in the eternal now, his redemptive viewpoint may see all present suffering through its attendant good. In this manner, God's viewpoint may enable him to view human suffering without suffering himself. Hence, it does not necessarily follow that God's love must be a suffering love.

2.5 Scripture. Wolterstorff also rejects divine impassibility because he finds the Stoic picture of God in a state of perpetual, uninterrupted non-suffering bliss as incompatible with the biblical portrait of God; the biblical writers portray God as rejoicing and suffering over the state of creation. Curiously Wolterstorff offers no Biblical support (ambiguous or otherwise) for this view; rather he merely quotes (in a footnote) Charles Hartshorne, whose commitment to biblical theology is at best questionable, and a brief comment by a biblical scholar on Jeremiah 45. As I will argue in section 4.2, Scripture is ambiguous with respect to God's impassibility and the matter cannot be settled simply by an appeal to Scripture. Let us now turn to Creel's defense of divine impassibility.

### **3. Divine Impassibility**

3.1 Impassible in will. Creel's discussion of the doctrine rightly recognizes that divine impassibility is not merely ambiguous, it is multiguous. God might be impassible in nature, will, action, knowledge and feeling or in any combination thereof. Even most passibilists, Creel notes, believe that God is impassible at least with respect to the divine essence; but is God impassible in will? Can God's will be influenced by forces outside himself, say by our prayers? Process thinkers contend that if God responds to our changing circumstances which are temporally located, then he must continually adapt to these changing circumstances. But Creel's response is that, say, prayer does not imply change because God is necessarily and timelessly adapted to the future. He favorably cites Geach's parable of the chess master whose knowledge of chess is so vast that he never improvises or deliberates. As Thomas Morris says: "Why can't it always and immemorially have been the case that God intends to do A if B arises, or C if D comes about?...No development would take God by surprise and force him to improvise in his governance of the world (DI 18)." God, on this account, need never decide his response to our actions after we have performed them.

3.2 Impassible in action. So far, divine impassibility seems up to the challenge. But detractors of divine impassibility argue that even though God's decisions are eternally determined, he must implement those decisions at the right times and, hence, his actions must be passible. Creel contends, nonetheless, that God's will may both be decided and implemented eternally:

But God should not be thought of as not willing e1, e2, et al. until p1 does a1, or a2, etc.; rather, he should be thought of as eternally willing a set of mutually exclusive possibilities the actualization of which is contingent upon some human action. Hence, God should not be thought of as implementing now this decision

and now that. He should be conceived as eternally willing and doing everything that he ever wills and does (DI 22).

Creel contends that God's actions are better called presponses than responses, and that all divine changes are Cambridge changes (when a proposition changes in truth value which does not imply an actual change in the object) (DI 23, 27-28). Indeed God's actions may be like a giant computer program with all his responses 'built in' from eternity: if so and so occurs then God, timelessly and eternally, responds thusly. Hence, it seems that Creel is correct in arguing that God can be impassible with respect to both willing and acting.

Richard Swinburne, who rejects divine impassibility, believes that it is, indeed, coherent to suppose that God is impassible in will. Swinburne rejects this conception, however, not for its logical failures but because it is religiously unsatisfying. Creel takes exception to Swinburne's methodology which he believes "...assum[es] that, when more than one interpretation of God is possible, we can assume that that interpretation is true which best satisfies our needs (DI 29)." Creel contends that our religious experience is phenomenologically inadequate for deciding between these two options and that we ought to prefer impassibility because it is more natural and simple. Judgments about the more natural and simple are, however, at least in part, in the eye of the beholder. I raise this objection from religious experience now, but we shall discuss its role later.

3.3 Impassible in feelings. The tug toward passibility is nowhere stronger than with respect to God's feelings: his divine love and suffering. Do personality, love, divinity, omniscience and justice require emotional passibility? Is it necessary that a loving being rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn? Is it true, as Hartshorne says, that "Love is joy in the joy of another, and sorrow in the sorrow of another (DI 117-118)." Must God be angry at times of injustice and sin and pleased during times of willful obedience? Is the highest love a suffering love so that any lack of suffering love would imply a consequent lack in divinity? Does God's omniscience require that he know my suffering itself and not merely know that I am suffering?

Creel responds that none of these questions need be answered affirmatively. There is, for example, no logical connection between love, loss and suffering. He asks us to make the following judgments with him: A parent who knows that a diseased child is suffering from the implementation of a newly discovered cure—the joy of the cure will negate any feelings of grief over the child's pain; The loss of a loved one need not cause grief if one knows that they are now in the presence of God. Creel contends that God should suffer with us only if he knows that we have suffered an irredeemable evil or have lost an irreplaceable good. And since, for the Christian theist anyway, all evil is redeemable, there is no reason for God to become prematurely exercised over our temporary setbacks. God views our sufferings *sub specie aeternitatis*; presumably we suffer, on Creel's account, in part because our perspectives are temporal and finite.

His view of the divine psychology, however, only partially squares with human experience. If my child suffers from burning his hand on the stove, I may still suffer with him even though I believe such suffering is redemptive (it may keep him from

walking into the fireplace). I will suffer less, surely, if I know of some attendant greater good; but I reject Creel's implication that I ought not suffer at all. I do not believe that there is a necessary connection between God's redemptive viewpoint and his lack of suffering (although He surely suffers less than he would if our suffering were not redemptive). Did Christ fail to suffer on the cross because he knew from the redemptive viewpoint that his death engendered the greatest good? Or did he suffer merely because he had laid his omniscience aside? Creel's arguments depend upon our making similar judgments about the appropriateness of human love, which judgments one need not make. There seems to me to be a certain lack or absence of character in persons who remain perpetually unperturbed in the face of human anguish; such persons do not seem to be fully human. It may be possible, as I argued in Section 2.4, for God to impassibly and lovingly view human suffering. However, insofar as Creel's argument's for divine impassibility depend upon making similar judgments about human love, his analogies are open to question.

3.4 Impassible in knowledge. With respect to the issue raised by God's omniscience, Creel contends that God's omniscience does not require impassibility because omniscience does not imply that God know the vagaries of my particular emotional life; rather, omniscience implies simply that God knows kinds of feelings or that, counterfactually, God knows, if he were me, how I would feel. Creel believes that these kind and counterfactual analyses of God's knowledge of human feelings are sufficient for the preservation of both divine omniscience and impassibility. But this is surely an unsatisfactory account of God's knowledge of human feelings. Surely one cannot know what a given kind of feeling is like without having it (unless, of course, it is a mixture of other feelings, or is projectable from experiences of others—like Hume's missing shade of blue. ) Hence, if God is not the kind of thing that could have any feelings at all, I don't think that He could know what it is like for anyone (else) to have feelings either. We shall now proceed to a discussion of the methodological issues raised by discussions of divine impassibility.

#### **4. Method in Theology**

4.1 Introduction. I have raised a number of issues regarding divine impassibility that Creel and Wolterstorff have creatively discussed. If we are to find our bearings, as reflective theists, we must search for the proper methodology. If the concept of God is to be reformed how ought one go about such a daunting task? Who will unloose the boat on these stormy theological seas? Is it proper to reply, in the protestant tradition, that the reform must be according to the word of God—let sacred Scripture be our guide? Let us then discuss the Scriptural support for divine impassibility.

4.2 Scripture. Many theological commitments are, to borrow a phrase from Quine, underdetermined by the Biblical data. Underdetermination occurs when there is more than one explanation of a set of data but the data alone are not sufficient to determine the rational preference of one of the explanations over the other. Theological explanations could be underdetermined in at least three ways. First, Scripture rightly interpreted may not settle the issue; indeed, Scripture may simply not address the issue. Second, Scripture rightly interpreted could settle the issue, but we may be unable to

determine precisely the correct rules of interpretation. Third, there may be no such thing as the 'right' interpretation of Scripture; there may simply be a set of competing explanations of the text, all of which are equally compatible with the Biblical data. It is often a matter of genuine contention whether or not a passage ought to be taken in its plain, literal sense or if it ought to be considered metaphorical. It is difficult to deny that the passibilist reading of many Scriptures is more natural, straight-forward, aligned with the 'plain meaning' of Scripture—a judgment, of course, which does not exclude the defensibility of other interpretations. Likewise, theirs is a more natural understanding of what occurs in prayer, although again this concession does not rule out the possibility of an impassibilist account.

In the modern era it would be folly to suppose that we can approach Scripture as Bacon wrongly supposed one could approach nature, standing before it as a child without any philosophical preconceptions, assumptions, or categories. The theory-ladenness of all observations has its corollary in Biblical exegesis. There is no theory free exegesis; the Bible simply does not provide a theory free foundation for theological reflection. Before discussing any particular texts, we should note that there is a decided lack of philosophical speculation about the divine nature in the Scriptures. Any judgments one makes about the divine nature must, therefore, be based on inference and demand an appropriate hermeneutic. On the side of impassibility are the Biblical references to alleged to imply God's immutability: (Malachi 3: 6), Yahweh as the great 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3: 14 taken tenselessly) and the claims that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13: 8); passages smacking of passibility and mutability are considered mere anthropomorphism. The impassibilists are able to provide a consistent and plausible hermeneutic for the understanding of passibilist texts which preserves their religious and philosophical intuitions.

On the side of passibility are Biblical passages which, when interpreted literally, entail a suffering God. Of the many consider:

In all their distress he too was distressed.

Isaiah 63: 9

How often they rebelled against him in the desert  
and grieved him in the wasteland.

Psalm 78: 40

My heart cries out over Moab.

Isaiah 15: 5

So I weep, as Jazer weeps,  
for the vines of Sibmah.

Oh, Heshbon, O Elealeh,  
I drench you with tears.

Isaiah 16: 9

The passages that suggest immutability, on the other hand, are taken to imply merely that God never changes with respect to goodness or his purposes or is unstintingly steadfast in his love. The passibilists, however, interpret metaphorically certain passibilist attributions of God such as repenting, changing his mind, jealousy, anger, etc.

Both the passibilist and the impassibilist can develop a Biblical hermeneutic which will plausibly account for the relevant texts. The difficulty of underdetermination, therefore, seems to be that it is difficult to determine the rules of right interpretation. The voice of Scripture, therefore, is ambiguous with respect to the relevant issues. The doctrine of divine impassibility is underdetermined by the Biblical data. Contrary to the biblical theologians, the concept of God cannot simply be inferred or derived from the content of Scripture. If the discussion is to be furthered, natural theological considerations must be brought to bear.

4.3 Philosophy. A passibilist's attack on the traditional doctrine involves a judgment about the role of philosophy in theology; viz., that it is secondary. Because Scripture and conciliar pronouncements are primary authorities for Christian theology, there is a *prima facie* obligation to uphold doctrinal formulations that involve the reflection on Scripture. But conciliar pronouncements that pass through the filter of certain philosophical positions do not carry the same weight, precisely because we are not bound by any religious duties to uphold any particular philosophy. Wolterstorff, for example, is out of sympathy with certain aspects of Greek philosophy and so feels entitled to read Scripture afresh through the lens of his own philosophical predilections together with his own religious experience. Creel maintains that the Platonizing influence on theology can give an account of the congruence of its notion of perfection both with Scripture and religious experience. Passibilists might concede this, but find it of limited relevance, because they see no reason to accept the Platonizing philosophy in the first place.

It is facile to criticize the impassibilist position for being too Greek, and the influence of Aristotelian, neo-Platonic, and Stoic thought on theological reflection in the medieval period is commonly accepted. Indeed the primary motivation for embracing divine impassibility seems to be philosophical. Metaphysical intuitions about the nature of perfection, the importance of immutability, independence, transcendence, etc., have guided the traditional discussion. Wolterstorff has rightly recognized the commitment to the eudaemonistic ideal as well as the Stoic conception of happiness as crucial to the development of Augustine's doctrine of divine impassibility. Philosophical commitment is the motor that has driven the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility.

Although merely pointing out Greek commitments is typically considered sufficient to undermine a theological view, I would defend the use of metaphysical concepts in the formation of right thinking about God. There is no thought in a conceptual vacuum. But a millennium has passed since this period. Aristotle has been lost and refound again, and our contemporary conceptual machinery finds Greek categories foreign and outworn. Our contemporaries are more inclined toward existential categories (alienation, finitude, lostness, personal, etc.) or process categories (change, temporality, immanence, etc.).

4.4 Logical analysis. Philosophical reflection may also contribute to discussions of divine impassibility by logical analysis of the relevant concepts. Is it logically possible for an impassible and omniscient being to know of the suffering of another? Is it logically possible for an impassible divinity to love other than himself? Is benevolence sufficient for the kind of love that the Judeo-Christian God shows his children? Is the notion of an impassible, omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, simple being logically consistent? Suppose that philosophical analysis can demonstrate the logical consistency of divine impassibility; the issue still remains—Is there a being who exemplifies this property? And is this being adequate to Scripture, tradition, and religious experience? Logical analysis of the concepts may demonstrate the logical possibility of such a being; it is insufficient, of itself, to determine that any being actually exemplifies the property.

Logical analysis may also reveal the inconsistency of passibilist notions with other divine attributes. If, for example, God is affected by miseries in this world then God is dependent on events in the world; but this contradicts the doctrine of God's aseity—that God does not depend on anything. Furthermore, since suffering love implies mutability, this is contrary to the notions of immutability and eternity (since change implies being in time). If one is committed to God's aseity, immutability and eternity then one will surely reject divine passibility. On the other hand one could, using *modus tollens*, affirm God's suffering love and reject aseity, immutability and eternity as essential properties of God.

4.4 Tradition. Because the Christian theologian is part of a story or a history, he must consider seriously all that has passed before. There can be no facile rejection of ideas long accepted as orthodoxy. One must anguish, as did Luther, before one charts one's own course on these theological seas. By locating themselves within this tradition, Creel and Wolterstorff have a *prima facie* duty to preserve the theological status quo. As J. K. Mozley writes in his brilliant study of the history of the doctrine, *The Impassibility of God*: "Whether the idea of a 'suffering God' be true or false, exponents of this conception would have been well advised to discuss it in the light of the Christian tradition." Indeed, although Wolterstorff rejected traditional orthodoxy in affirming God's suffering, he was eager to locate his position within his tradition of believers, the Calvinist tradition. In the protestant tradition, however, the Church is to be reforming, always reforming. Perhaps now is the fitting moment for the reform of the very concept of God.

Tradition plays at least two roles for the Christian theologian. First, it is a rich source of arguments, analogies, controversies, discussions, and alternatives. Christian doctrine has not developed in *vacuo* and it would be folly to ignore the tradition which has spawned the doctrine. The role of tradition in this case is as a source of information, which is not necessarily authoritative for subsequent theology. The second role that tradition plays is authoritative—do the conciliar pronouncements have *prima facie* or *ultima facie* authority for Christian theology? And if a conciliar pronouncement is informed by philosophical presuppositions which are not religiously binding, does one have the right to reject the *prima facie* authority of that council? As I will show in the next few paragraphs, the tradition of divine impassibility was informed primarily by Platonizing tendencies and little by Biblical exegesis.

Although there is unanimity among the church fathers that God suffers with us in Jesus Christ, there is also near unanimity that God suffers only incarnationally and that the Father is incapable of suffering. I will briefly raise these arguments only as illustrations of the philosophical nature of the tradition, I do not intend to criticize them. The reader should be warned that it is easier to caricature and facetiously dismiss these arguments than to understand and to fairly criticize them. In my exposition of the arguments, I rely heavily on Mozley. Consider the following kinds of arguments offered by the Church Fathers in support of divine impassibility: First, if God is essentially spirit then he is beyond experiences which can be known only in connection with a body (feelings). Second, to be affected by another is to be changed by the other; hence, since God is eternal and immutable, it is not possible for him to suffer. Third, God is perfected (complete, not lacking) in every feeling; hence God is in a state of unalterable bliss. Fourth, under the influence of the Stoics there was an aversion to the emotional life as irrational. Last, God is impervious to the negative influences of the passions (with which the pagan gods burned) since any such change would be from the good to the less good.

In many of the traditional arguments there is a tight interconnection between impassibility and immutability. The philosophical arguments for immutability and eternity are decidedly Platonic or neoplatonic. Let us consider several: First, the only possible cause of a changeable, temporal world of becoming is a changeless, eternal world of being. Second, God exists a se, that is, God is dependent only upon himself; hence, it is not possible for anything other than God to affect or change him. Third, If God were to change then it would be either for the better or the worse. But since God is perfect, he could not change for the better or the worse; hence, God cannot change. Fourth, God is simple; therefore, God cannot change because only composite things can change. Fifth, God is actus purus; consequently there is no potential in God for change.

Although Platonic or neoplatonic philosophy has no intrinsically binding force on subsequent thinkers, it should give contemporary thinkers pause that the Church Fathers found such philosophical systems to provide the best metaphysical underpinning of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For the Christian, furthermore, tradition carries more weight than that we can see further by standing on the shoulder of these giants—conciliar pronouncements surely place prima facie constraints on theorizing. Although it is difficult to raise considerations about the status of conciliar pronouncements without completely undermining their authority, but some considerations must be raised. First, some conciliar pronouncements are based on philosophical assumptions that are not binding on the church. Although the church has prima facie obligation to treat seriously the philosophical presuppositions of the councils, it has a right to reconsider such a pronouncement if the philosophical commitment violates their understanding of Scripture, religious experience or intuitions. Second, the councils occasionally make logical errors, treating logically unrelated matters as logical consequences. These mistaken inferences should be recognized and, if the reasoning behind a conciliar pronouncement crucially depends on fallacious reasoning then it may legitimately be questioned. Finally, the church's

highest authority is Scripture and if a conciliar pronouncement is deemed unscriptural then it ought to be rejected.

4.5 Soteriology and Christology. Among contemporary theologians there is a tendency to understand the divine nature both soteriologically and Christologically. These theological commitments, of course, transcend, any simple Biblical exegesis. If Jesus Christ and the Father are one (John 10:30; see also John 14: 24, 16:15, and 14:9), Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) and Jesus is the exact representation of God's being (Hebrews 1:1-3) then Jesus' character is normative for understanding the divine nature. Jurgen Moltmann, who takes Jesus' passion as the center of theological proclamation, writes: "God himself is involved in the history of Christ's passion....If God is incapable of suffering, then...Christ's passion can only be viewed as a human tragedy. For the person who can only see Christ's passion as the suffering of the good man from Nazareth, God is inevitably bound to become the cold, silent and unloved heavenly power. But that would be the end of the Christian faith." Moltmann favorably endorses the passibilist's soteriological emphasis: "One basic concept runs through the whole literature on the subject: the necessity of seeing the eucharistic sacrifice, the cross of Golgotha and the heart of the triune God together, in a single perspective." When one sees the suffering love of Jesus Christ, one sees into the very heart of God. When Jesus commands that we should be merciful, just as the Father is merciful (Luke 6:36) does that imply that we ought to practice benevolence as the impassibilists understand the divine love or that we ought to manifest eros or agape as Wolterstorff argues? If Jesus is the perfect example of the divine love, which is a more fitting conception of his love?

Theologian Eberhard Jüngel, who endorses the Christological approach to understanding God, warns of the dangers of metaphysical speculation when considering the concept of God—what he calls "fall[ing] under the dictatorship of metaphysics, rather than using its language critically [his emphasis]." The focus in Western thought on the conception of perfection as forbidding suffering, has hindered this tradition from seeing God as Crucified. Uncritical metaphysics has blinded rather than enlightened theological speculation. The focus has been on God in his being rather than God on the Cross. Jüngel is not eschewing metaphysics simpliciter, but his is suggesting that its considerations in Christian theological reflection cannot be entirely a priori.; the Christian thinker must consider the nature of God a posteriori as it is revealed in Christ.

4.6 Theology from above and below. Since we are created in the image of God, Calvin argues, we can either do theology from above (know God in order to understand man) or from below (learning of man in order to understand God). As Calvin writes:

For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone....Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him...On the other

hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.

Calvin then proceeds to do theology from above: "But though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie, due arrangement requires that we treat of the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter." However, perhaps now is the fitting time to explore theologizing from below. If so, human experience will not prove mere addenda to theology. If we are divine image bearers then we share some properties with God and the discovery of these ought to be a legitimate part of theological theorizing.

If we are icons of God then we manifest attributes of the divine. Being the divine image bearer implies that we share properties with God and are reflections of divinity. It is this iconicity of God which separates us from the animals and makes us persons. What, then, makes us unique from the rest of creation? There is unanimity of opinion that this implies that we, like God, are knowers, moral agents, have dominion, and are capable of entering into significant relationships with other persons. But we are also different from the animals in our depth and breadth of emotion—we have feelings. With respect to feelings are we image bearers of God? Jesus Christ, furthermore, is not only the visible image of the invisible God, he is also the second Adam, the most perfect example of undistorted humanity. He has compassion for the multitude, weeps with Lazarus' mourners, laments over Jerusalem, grieves and sorrows at Gesthsemane, and the entire range of emotions associated with his abandonment by God in his crucifixion. So, again the Christological emphasis, do the passions of Christ teach us what it truly means to be human, and, hence, divine? Is human experience revelatory of the divine character or is it just another means for creating God in our own image?

4.7 Religious experience. The use of religious experience is manifold. One may have a particular mystical experience and use that as additional data for theorizing as did, for example, Julian of Norwich. Through a series of visions of the divine love Julian sees both God's eros and God's pathos: "God showed me too the pleasure it gives him when a simple soul comes to him, openly, sincerely and genuinely." (RDL 68) and "Our lover desires indeed that our soul should cling to him with all its might, and ever hold on to his goodness. Beyond our power to imagine does this most please God, and speed the soul on its course." (RDL 70) When speaking of our Lord God, Maker she writes:

All the time that he was showing these things to my inward sight, I still seemed to see with my actual eyes the continual bleeding of his head. Great drops of blood rolled down from the garland like beads, seemingly from the veins; and they came down a brownish red colour—for the blood was thick—and as they spread out they became bright red, and when they reached his eyebrows they vanished. Nonetheless the bleeding continued for all the time that there were things for me to see and understand. They were as fresh and living as though they were real: their abundance like the drops of water that fall from the eaves

after a heavy shower, falling so thickly that no one can possibly count them; their roundness as they spread out on his forehead were like the scales of herring. (RDL 72)

The suffering love of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is the eternal love of God who is intimately attached to the miseries of this world. From this revelation of God's great, sweet, tender, compassionate and intimate love, (RDL 67, 70, 82) Julian learns that God who incarnated this love and shed his divine blood for us (RDL 82), who is holy and aweful is also unpretentious and considerate. (RDL 69, 72). The passion of Jesus is a visible manifestation of the passion of God. "The whole Trinity," she writes "was involved in the passion of Christ." (RDL 99) God regards us with sympathy and pity and "...we do not suffer on our own, but with him." (RDL 105)

According to Julian God is as much Mother as he is Father. It is not surprising that one who focuses on the Motherhood of God, would also be more inclined to view God's mercy in a more tender manner. Reflecting on the vision of divine mercy, Julian writes: "Mercy is compassionate with the tender love of motherhood....Mercy works to sustain, to suffer, to vitalize, to heal; and all in the tenderest love....In this way it makes known and displays the supreme, many-sided generosity of God, our Lord and King, and his exquisite courtesy. All this through his abounding love!" (RDL 136-7) God regards us, when we fail, with an eye of love and pity. The model of motherly love is more congenial to the notion of suffering love. It is a healthy feminism which does not downplay obvious sexual distinctions but brings to bear a female insight on a more comprehensive understanding of divine love. Perhaps feeling is an appropriate way of knowing the character of God. I do not intend to endorse Julian's mystical experience; but her experiences may provide keen insight into the divine nature and they ought not be dismissed without a hearing. Indeed as we are part of a believing community we should be eager to enlist insights from other members of the community.

4.8 Religious intuition. The more common contemporary use of religious experience is to let one's religious intuitions settle an issue. Creel, however, criticizes Swinburne who rejects divine impassibility in will because "...he judges that it fails to satisfy religious sentiment." Creel's criticism of Swinburne is not that he uses religious sentiment, but rather because he believes that his theory completely captures the same religious intuitions and since his theory is simpler and more natural it ought to be preferred (DI 28-29). At a crucial point in another argument, however, Creel affirms the appeal to metaphysical intuition: "I have been unable to escape this intuitive conviction in spite of impressive counter-arguments..." (DI 95). The data of religious experience and intuition are surely employed in theological theorizing.

If one allows religious experience and intuition into theorizing about the divine nature, is the divine impassibility model religiously satisfying? There is in the Christian tradition a *prima facie* impetus toward a being who hears and is affected by our prayers, who rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep, who has determined to act in time and for his temporal creatures, etc. A dynamic interaction model of the divine-human relationship seems more religiously satisfying than the static model of orthodox impassibility. This model, however, may need to be revised

under pressure from Biblical data and theoretical concerns. The pressures of adequately understanding God's relationship to the world may affect one's theorizing. Can one imagine, after WWI and WWII, after the holocaust and Hiroshima, upon a family's tragic loss of a young child, etc, that God is in a state of perpetual bliss? Is God's relationship to the world so distant that he remains absolutely unaffected by human suffering?

It is not clear that Creel's account satisfies religious intuition and sentiment. He contends, in support of his position, that when we suffer we do not need a God who is consumed with sorrow, but an impervious rock, an ever present strength in time of trouble, who is capable of responding to our needs with intention and action unclouded by emotion. Hence, the impassibilist might contend that her account is congruent with religious experience; but they might still remain contrary to her opponent's intuitions of what is theologically more or less important in the doctrine of God.

4.9 Socio-historical influences. Although seldom recognized, socio-historical realities have had no little influence on theological theorizing. Norman Gottwald writes: "It is not easy to shift from thinking of cultural and social realities deriving from beliefs about God to thinking of cultural and social realities as the matrices for spawning correlative beliefs about God." These understandings taken from general culture may find specific expression within the context of Judeo-Christian beliefs about God. While retaining their own cultural significance they may initiate, shape and change one's conception of God. Terence Fretheim describes how this process works within the context of Scripture itself:

One can see that, in interaction with the theological heritage, certain sociopolitical realities bring into prominence certain images of God from time to time: the liberation images during the time of the Exodus, Hosea's marriage imagery in the contest with the fertility cults, the feminine images in the despair of the exile. Whatever the details, the process itself is theologically important: for it shows how the theological heritage, in continual interaction with sociopolitical realities, calls into question honored images and practices, moving the people on to new understandings of God and new vistas of that shape of life which faith in such a God implies.

Contemporary theological socio-political analyses see the struggle of God in history to redeem the oppressed, to identify with the downtrodden and to release those captive to unjust social structures. Some eras, including the modern era, are more focussed on concrete values such as pain and suffering and others on symbolic values such as honor and shame. What we value is surely of relevance to our understanding of God.

While in the medieval period the highest form of authority (and, hence, the most god-like) would have been the king; it is not surprising that in this context a monarchical view of God would have flourished. Indeed the entire socio-political context that spawned such a belief was a feudal system with the monarchy distantly related to the peasants by an arduous series of secondary causes, related at best by a system of peasant duties and occasional kingly benevolences. It is not difficult to see

how this would provide fertile grounds for development of the doctrine of divine impassibility. But the limitations of the monarchy metaphor are manifest in our culture and new socio-political realities may urge the acceptance of a new metaphor for the divine-human relationship. Within the context of what may be viewed as an immanent divine struggle against oppression and injustice, the metaphors of a monarchical, transcendent and impassible deity may prove wanting.

The influence of socio-historical realities on theology makes it necessary for us to study ancient culture to determine what ideas they were expressing. This is an argument for the importance of translating these ideas into contemporary terms. Just as we are not religiously bound by past philosophies, so we are not religiously bound by past socio-political analogies—in both cases, we may have access to better analogies and they may prove useful in informing our theology.

## **5 Conclusion**

5.1 Inference to best explanation. The relevance of extra-Biblical intuitions to theology assumes that the Scriptures are ambiguous with respect to a static or dynamic view of the divine nature and omits consideration of the weight of tradition; neither can be denied by the Christian thinker. In fact there is now a conflict of considerations; there is a case for orthodoxy from the weight of tradition, a Platonizing metaphysics and some Biblical passages. A case may be made as well for a dynamic model from the data of mystical experience, religious intuition, feminine understanding of the divine, socio-political reflection and Scripture. How should one resolve this matter giving the competing hypotheses and the underdetermination of the doctrine by Scripture? What is the proper theological methodology for proceeding through this impasse? Although I can only be suggestive at this point, I would like to raise some procedural issues for thinking about the divine nature.

When one is presented with a body of data and with the task of providing an explanatory account of that data one must adjudge which of competing hypotheses provides the best explanation of that body of data. We ought to accept that hypothesis which provides the best overall explanation of all of the available evidence. Due to the logical compatibility of a host of competing hypotheses with the data, there is no way to definitively settle the matter based on the evidence alone; one must simply make the best judgment that one can make given the lack of direct access to the divine nature. In making an inference to best explanation from a given set of data, one makes a variety of judgments: judgments of the intrinsic likelihood of the ability of the hypothesis to unite otherwise apparently unrelated phenomena, the simplicity of the hypothesis, and the fertility of the hypothesis for subsequent theoretical understanding. While some of these considerations are more easily ascertainable in scientific judgments, they are not foreign to judgments made both in everyday life and in theology. For the sake of brevity I shall consider only the fit of the data with the respective hypotheses concerning the nature of God.

One caveat needs to be recognized before proceeding. What one counts as evidence on this issue is in part a function of what one already believes about the nature of God. The most obvious example is the countenancing or discounting of religious

experience. The impassibilist will surely discount the putative religious experience. The impassibilist will surely discount the putative religious experience of those who claim to have felt God's sympathetic suffering love. This discounting may render nugatory the evidential weight of a body of evidence that carries a great deal of weight for another person reflecting on this matter. Another example of the "theory ladenness" of the evidence is the passibilist's rejection of the weight of tradition. The arguments from tradition will be discounted due to their ontological judgements.

Which of the competing hypotheses with respect to the nature of God is the best explanation of the available evidence? A hypothesis  $h_1$  explains the evidence better than a competing hypothesis  $h_2$  if and only if the evidence  $e$  is more likely given  $h_1$  than  $h_2$ . One might ask, in order to make judgments of fit the following question: if the hypothesis were true, what would one expect? If God were impassive, what would one expect? In the Christian tradition, one would have to ask if one would expect records of divine revelation that overwhelmingly indicate passibility and only incidentally indicate immutability (indeed, Scripture never indicates that God is impassive). If God's love were sympathetic would one expect the Scriptural record to make claims about God's passions? While the Scriptural record can be made to fit the hypothesis of divine impassibility, the fit is at best forced and unnatural. There is a certain naturalness of the passibilist interpretation given Scripture. For the Christian philosophical theologian, one must always think with Scripture in the background.

Indeed, it is not merely the passibilist language of Scripture which is better explained by the postulation of pathos of God, the very idea of God's providential activity in history is better explained by his desiring of certain ends for his creatures, his frustrations at the ends not being attained and his determination to actively remedy the situation to attain those ends. The very idea of divine immutability is *prima facie* incompatible with the Christian notion of divine providence. While I don't mean to suggest that it is logically impossible for an impassive, immutable being to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (for Creel has demonstrated this possibility), I do believe that such a being would not lead one to expect the actions of God as revealed in Scripture and hence, is not as well confirmed by the biblical evidence as its denial.

Also, if one conceives of God as a personal being, as one is enjoined to do in the Christian tradition, then behaviour that is deemed ideally appropriate in personal relations ought to be deemed appropriate to the personal relationship that God has with his creatures. If having feelings of sorrow and sadness are appropriate expressions of emotion, even when one believes that they are redemptive, then one may adjudge such behavior appropriate for God. There is a note following "An Order for Burial" in the *Book of Common Prayer* which says: "The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy". The note proceeds: "This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian"" On the Christian understanding of things, grief is appropriate even if one believes that a loved one is in a better place. While we do not mourn as those who have no hope, we do indeed mourn (but tempered, as those who do have hope). Thus, while it is not a logical consequence of any of our beliefs that God have suffering love, and this is where I disagree with

Wolterstorff, it does seem more appropriate to the personal manner in which Christians conceive of their relation to God.

The same sorts of questions need to be asked about the evidence raised in the preceding sections. I shan't continue along these lines; I have only suggested inference to best explanation as a means for proceeding through this impasse. Of course there is still much that needs to be explained on the view that God is not impassive. Exactly which emotions does God have? If one believes that he lacks certain emotions, say jealousy or anger, why that emotion and not another? Further, while rejecting the Platonizing influence on classical theology, most thinkers in the Christian tradition find process theology and equally unfitting ontology. Thus, those who embrace God's emotional mutability have failed to provide an alternative and satisfying divine ontology to fill the void.

5.2 Conclusion. Creel has offered a powerful and creative defense of the classical doctrine of divine impassibility. His model may preserve God's decisive and personal interaction with his creatures; perhaps it is logically possible for God to be dynamically involved in the world without willing and acting in time. However, Wolterstorff has raised concerns that might militate against divine impassibility. Tradition and Greek philosophy are on the side of divine impassibility; soteriology and Christology favor divine empathy. Religious experience and social factors are informative but ambiguous and the issue cannot be settled by simple appeal to Scripture because the Biblical data both underdetermine the doctrines and are not theory-free.

Although I have taken a side on this issue, I have raised the problem of divine impassibility not to resolve it but as instructive of theological methodology. I have intended to raise the following issues from this discussion. First, Biblical theology is impossible apart from considerations of natural theology. I have not made the grandiose claim that all knowledge of God is underdetermined by the Biblical data, but I think it is clearly so in the matter of divine impassibility. Indeed, I suspect that most claims concerning the divine nature are underdetermined by the Biblical data. The alleged Biblical theologian, at least on this issue, must consider matters philosophical, traditional, sociological and experiential. Second, natural theology, at least for the Christian thinker, is impossible apart from considerations of Scripture and tradition. The Christian theorizer is part of a tradition that circumscribes the proper domain of theorizing. While the

I have suggested that by inference to best explanation, one may be led to embrace the pathos of God. Are we now in a theological crisis stage, awaiting another Augustine or Aquinas to lead us to the new conceptual promised land? It may be prudent to affirm the words of Augustine: "We speak of God, what wonder if you do not understand? For if you understand, it is not God. Let there be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To touch God to some extent with the mind is a great blessing, but to comprehend him is entirely impossible."

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