God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Christology

Paul L. Gavrilyuk

I. Paradoxical Christology as a Part of Lex Orandi

I cannot think of a more suitable occasion for discussing the topic that is before us than the season of Lent. During this time we are invited to purify our spiritual senses in order to enter into the mystery of Christ’s passion so that we could share more fully in the reality of his resurrection. The hymnography of the Byzantine Lenten Triodion gives us much to ponder in this regard. On Good Friday the Orthodox Church sings:

Today he who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the cross.
He who is king of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns.
He who wraps the heaven in clouds is wrapped in the purple mockery.
He who in Jordan set Adam free receives blows upon his face.
The bridegroom of the Church is transfixed with nails.1

The author of the hymn draws a sharp and deliberate contrast between the divine subject, identified as the Creator of the world, and the characteristically human experiences of humiliation, mockery, crucifixion, and death that this subject is made to endure. The same point is reempha-

1. “The Service of the Twelve Gospels,” antiphon 15, in Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, trans., The Lenten Triodion (South Canaan, Pa.: Saint Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2001), p. 587. This antiphon is also repeated during the Royal Hours (p. 609) and on Holy Saturday, Matins, Second Stasis (p. 637).
Paul L. Gavrilyuk

sized in different ways throughout the *Lenten Triodion*. Drawing upon the eschatological imagery of Matthew 27:45, 51-52, the hymnographer presents crucifixion as a great cosmic drama: “When the thief beheld the author of life hanging upon the cross, he said: ‘If it were not God made flesh that is crucified with us, the sun would not have hid its rays nor would the earth have quaked and trembled.’” Elsewhere the Byzantine hymnographers address Christ as “the crucified God” and speak of his “divine passion” and even of “God’s death”:

> And putting all our trust in it [the cross], we sing to Thee, our crucified God (στὸν σταυρωθέντα, Θεόν): Have mercy upon us.³

> We exalt thy divine Passion (τὰ θεῖα πάθη), O Christ, above all for ever.⁴

> By dying, O my God, thou puttest death to death through thine divine power (Θάνατον θανάτῳ, οὗ θανατοῖς Θεί μοι, θεί σου δυναστεία).⁵

These texts are not easily datable. The liturgists agree that the earliest strata of the *Lenten Triodion* belong to the sixth century, with the activity of the editors peaking during the ninth century and continuing for the next five hundred years. The bold theopaschitism of these texts is reminiscent of the paschal liturgical sermon attributed to Melito, the second-century bishop of Sardis. Compare, for example, Melito’s description of crucifixion with the first quotation from the *Lenten Triodion*: “He who hung the earth is hanging; he who fixed the heavens has been fixed; he who fastened the universe has been fastened to a tree; the Sovereign has been insulted; God has been murdered.”⁶

Elsewhere Melito (or another patristic author) marvels at the mystery of the divine kenosis and expresses his wonder in a set of the following antitheses: “The invisible is seen and is not ashamed, the incomprehensible is seized and is not vexed; the immeasurable is measured, and does not resist;

the impassible suffers and does not retaliate; the immortal dies and takes it patiently; the heavenly one is buried, and submits.”

We find a similar pattern in the anaphora recorded in the late fourth-century liturgical manual known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*: “the judge was judged and the Savior was condemned; the impassible was nailed to the cross (σταυρωθη ἐδειοντος ὁ ἀναπαθής); the immortal by nature died; the life-giver was buried.” This appears to be the only surviving Eucharistic prayer to contain explicitly theopaschite language. I have shown elsewhere that the literary dependence of this part of the anaphora upon Melito’s liturgical sermon is very plausible. The anaphora of the *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII offers a particularly telling example of how the words of early paschal sermons found their way into the later Eucharistic prayers, thereby transforming the liturgy into a “Sunday pascha.”

The hymns of the *Lenten Triodion*, composed almost a millennium after Melito’s *On Pascha*, also echo the words of the bishop of Sardis: “without changing Thou hast emptied Thyself, and impassibly Thou hast submitted to Thy Passion.” The continuity between the paradoxical language of Melito and that of the *Lenten Triodion* is remarkable. Melito’s liturgical sermon is the fountainhead of a homiletic tradition that was later crystallized in the hymnography of the Byzantine *Lenten Triodion*. This homiletic tradition has tenaciously preserved in the worship of the Orthodox Church to this day the paradox of the impassible God’s suffering in the flesh. The historical studies of divine (im)passibility have thus far largely ignored this rich hymnographic material. Recited every year during Lent, the theopaschite hymns continue to have a considerable impact upon the collective imagination of the Orthodox Christians.

Beyond Byzantium, the language of paradox also found its home in


8. *Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII.12.33. The text is a part of the Post-Sanctus.


10. Canon ascribed to St. Kosmas (d. ca. 750), canticle five, in *Lenten Triodion*, p. 593.

11. This tradition is traceable through the works of Apollinaris of Hierapolis, in *Chronicon Paschale, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* 16 (Bonn: E. Weber, 1832), vol. 1, pp. 13-14; Hippolytus of Rome, *Contra Noetum* 18; Ephrem the Syrian, *De crucifixione* II, III, IV; and Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* XIII, and other later authors, such as Proclus of Constantinople.
Paul L. Gavrilyuk

Syrian Christianity (for example, in the work of St. Ephrem the Syrian) and in the Latin West. One is reminded of the famous *Vexilla Regis*, commonly sung in the Roman Catholic Church on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and during Lent:

Abroad the regal banners fly,
Now shines the cross’s mystery:
Upon it Life did death endure,
And yet by death did life procure.

[...]
That which the prophet-king of old
Hath in mysterious verse foretold,
Is now accomplished, whilst we see
God ruling the nations from a tree.  

Both *Vexilla Regis* and Byzantine hymns heighten the drama of Christ’s death by reminding the worshipers that the Crucified One is God incarnate, and that by enduring death he has paradoxically abolished death. Other notable parallels may be found in the libretto of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* and in Charles Wesley’s hymn “O Love Divine What Hast Thou Done!” It is remarkable that despite their considerable cultural and theological differences, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists pray with a united voice, especially when they lift up their eyes to the Crucified God. Even if today the theologians may disagree on how to understand God’s

12. *Vexilla Regis*, stanzas 1 and 4: “*Vexilla Regis* prodeunt;/fulget Crucis mysterium,/quo carne carnis conditor/suspensus est patibulo [variant reading followed in my translation: qua vita mortem pertulit/et morte vitam protulit] ... I mpleta sunt quae concinit/David fideli carmine,/dicendo nationibus:/regnavit a ligno Deus .... ” *The hymn is attributed to Venantius Fortunatus (530–609). Some changes, including the variant reading cited in square brackets, were introduced by Pope Urban VIII in 1632. The English translation is by Walter Kirkham Blount (d. 1717).*

13. “Ah Golgotha, unhappy Golgotha!/The Lord of majesty must scornfully perish,/The saving blessing of the world/Is placed as scorn upon the cross./Creator of both earth and heaven/From earth and air must now be taken./The guiltless must here die guilty./Thee pierceth deep into my soul/Ah Golgotha, unhappy Golgotha!” J. S. Bach in cooperation with C. F. Henrici, *Matthew’s Passion.* First performed on Good Friday 1727 (1729?).

14. “O Love divine, what hast thou done!/The immortal God hath died for me!/The Father’s co-eternal Son/Bore all my sins upon the tree./Th’ immortal God for me hath died:/My Lord, my Love, is crucified!” Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742).
involvement in suffering, the prospect of unity is open in the Church’s *lex orandi*.

God’s appropriation of human suffering in the incarnation is one of the central themes of patristic Christology. The Fathers also assert with equal force that God is impassible. In contrast, there is a widespread tendency today to question the notion of divine impassibility. Many contemporary theologians hold that the assumption of divine impassibility renders early Christian discussions of God’s participation in suffering problematic, if not altogether contradictory. Is this criticism justified? What precisely was at stake for the Fathers in affirming both that God is impassible and that in the incarnation God participates in human suffering? How did such paradoxical statements function in patristic discourse?

In this paper I will defend the coherence of paradoxical Christology. I will contend that the notion of what I call “qualified divine impassibility” is not only defensible, but *necessary* for a sound account of the divine incarnation. I will also point out the problems to which the abandonment of divine impassibility has led some modern theologians. I will argue that God is neither eternally indifferent to suffering, nor eternally overcome by it. Rather, there is eternal victory over suffering in God, manifest most fully through the cross and resurrection.

It should be noted that while rejecting divine impassibility, most contemporary passibilists acknowledge that considerable qualifications apply to the claim that God suffers. It would be worthwhile to explore the points of convergence between these more measured proposals and what I have called the paradoxical Christology of the Fathers (although I will not undertake such an exploration here).

II. The Scope of Modern Passibilism

In the last two hundred years the issue of God’s participation in suffering has attracted an increasing amount of theological attention. In the nineteenth century the problem of the divine self-limitation in the incarnation became a focal concern first for the German theologians Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875) and Wolfgang Gess (1819-1891) and later for the British kenoticists, such as Charles Gore (1853-1932) and Frank Weston (1871-1924). In the early

15. Thomasius, *Christ’s Person and Work* in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth*
Paul L. Gavrilyuk
twentieth century Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944), whose works are now becoming increasingly accessible in the West, developed a deeply original and comprehensive kenotic account of divine agency, testing the boundaries of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the United States, the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) provided the foundation for the dipolar theism of Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) and his followers. In the Reformed tradition Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) treatment of kenoticism has recently been constructively reassessed by Bruce McCormack. In the field of biblical theology, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), Terence Fretheim, Richard Bauckham, and others developed a theology of divine pathos which aims at recovering the rich vocabulary of divine emotions present in the Bible. Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of the cross introduced the theme of God’s identification with suffering humanity into political theology. No contemporary discussion of theodicy, especially the so-called theologies after the Holocaust and Auschwitz, can avoid the issue of God’s compassionate responsiveness to suffering.
cles Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and other proponents of Open Theism have called for a reconsideration of the notions of divine timelessness, foreknowledge, and sovereignty in light of what these theologians take to be the biblically based ideas of divine passibility and changeability. To do justice to these proposals I would have to engage them one by one. For fear that we will not be finished before Easter, I will spare you such a discussion for the time being. I should emphasize that I do not see patristic understanding of God’s involvement in suffering as in all respects antagonistic to the insights expressed in these proposals. It would be fruitful to produce a companion volume that would put these diverse approaches in conversation with patristic theology.

My sketchy map gives some idea of the vastness of the theological terrain that the participants of our symposium are invited to explore. The most comprehensive proposals include the following three dimensions:

1. The suffering of God on the cross and, more generally, in the work of redemption;
2. The suffering of God entailed by the act of and subsequent interaction with creation;
3. Suffering as a feature of God’s inner life, particularly as pertaining to the immanent Trinity.

The first dimension, God’s suffering within the economy of salvation, usually constitutes the shared focus of discussion. Not all contemporary passibilists develop the second and third dimensions. The question whether eternal suffering can be ascribed to the inner life of the Trinity remains arguably the most controversial and speculative of all three.

God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh


23. There is much internal debate in the passibilist camp on this score. For a recent sur-
Paul L. Gavrilyuk

The common denominator of most passibilist proposals is the conviction that the heritage of patristic theology cannot be accepted in its entirety. Here again there is a spectrum of positions on just how far the revision of patristic theism must be carried out. Some theologians, following Jürgen Moltmann and Clark Pinnock, call for a revolution in the Christian concept of God. The most far-reaching projects abandon theistic frameworks altogether and consequently reject most classical divine attributes, including omnipotence and omniscience, as well as the corollary doctrines of creation out of nothing and miracles. When engaging such projects it would be myopic to focus on the issue of divine suffering without first considering the underlying ontology.

More moderate proposals focus primarily on the criticism of divine impassibility and immutability as presumably the “weakest links” in the intellectual structure of the traditional theism. Even those Christian thinkers who find most features of the patristic theism defensible concede that the notion of divine impassibility is one of the most vulnerable aspects of patristic theology. Analyzing these developments, particularly the widespread tendency to reject the concept of divine impassibility, Ronald Goetz spoke twenty years ago of “the rise of a new orthodoxy.”

I realize, therefore, that by defending the concept of divine impassibility in this essay I am swimming against a potent current of contemporary thought. I am not prepared to call this dominant trend a “new orthodoxy,” since no Christian communion has yet endorsed passibilism officially. A consensus of contemporary theologians that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century is hardly a reliable barometer of doctrinal truth.

To be sure, I do not labor in heroic solitude (it would be a rather un-Orthodox and un-catholic thing to do). The concept of divine impassibility of this debate see Sturla J. Stålsett, The crucified and the Crucified: A Study in the Liberation Christology of John Sobrino (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 442-73.

24. The concept of what I here call “patristic theism” is introduced and defended in William J. Abraham et al., eds., The Logic of Canonical Theism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).


God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh

...ability has had several eloquent champions in our time, including this symposium's participants Fr. Thomas Weinandy and David Bentley Hart. In addition, the philosophical work of Richard Creel deserves more attention than it has received. Consensus patrum is another weighty reason to reassess the matter more closely.

III. Some Prevalent Misconceptions of Divine Impassibility

It has become common to dismiss divine impassibility on superficial etymological grounds. Patristic theology is falsely credited with a bleak view that God is apathetic, uncaring, unconcerned about the world, emotionally withdrawn, and in this sense impassible. Lucien Richard expressed a common climate of opinion when he wrote: "the acceptance of the apathetic God into classical Christology led to insoluble theological difficulties. Qualities such as pity, compassion and love appear incompatible with absolute 'immutability.'" In addition, the critics of divine impassibility unfailingly note that the Fathers drank from the poisoned wells of Hellenistic philosophy. Almost a century ago William Temple declared: "Aristotle's 'apathetic God' was enthroned in men's minds, and no idol has been found so hard to destroy." Along similar lines, William Wolf noted that the Church Fathers "were deriving their definition of the changeless perfection and utter serenity of deity from Greek philosophical theology rather than from the revelation of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Modern theology of divine suffering is then presented as a long-overdue message of liberation from the shackles of heathen philosophy and idolatry.

32. One finds a similar rhetoric in Karl Barth's critique of both patristic Christology and Lutheran orthodoxy. See Church Dogmatics IV/1 (London: T. & T. Clark and Continuum, 2004), pp. 84-85, quoted by Bruce McCormack in his contribution to this volume.
Paul L. Gavrilyuk

This line of argument is a classical case of genetic fallacy. Surely the fact that a given idea, in this case the notion of divine impassibility, has been used by the Greek philosophers (or Sufi mystics, or the German idealists) does not discredit this idea automatically. Obviously the critic needs to establish that the ancient philosophers were wrong in claiming that God was impassible. Actually, the critic cannot even show that the philosophers agreed on this matter. The Epicureans taught that the gods had anthropomorphic emotions, but were unconcerned about the world. In contrast, the Stoics held the moral ideal of apatheia in high esteem. However, it would be logically odd to predicate apatheia to their material and impersonal deity. For the Peripatetics and later Platonists, divine apatheia was as a corollary of incorporeality. As a minimum, the Fathers’ adoption of impassibility involved a choice between these and several other options including the overly passionate gods of the Homeric pantheon and mystery cults. More importantly, the passibilist critic needs to establish that the Christian theologians borrowed impassibility from the pagan philosophers without quite baptizing it. I have argued elsewhere that it is in this regard that the passibilist objector is most obviously mistaken.³³

One would search in vain for a patristic text in which divine impassibility means apathy or absence of concern for creation. Augustine, for example, was emphatic about distinguishing the Christian ascetic virtue of apatheia from insensitivity. In The City of God he asks rhetorically: “If apatheia is the name of the state in which the mind cannot be touched by any emotion whatsoever, who would not judge this insensitivity to be the worst of all moral defects?”³⁴ For Augustine, therefore, apatheia was anything but stone-heartedness. Following Justin Martyr and other early Christian writers, Augustine proposes that the resurrection state will be characterized by apatheia, understood as freedom from suffering and irrational impulses, as well as by joy and love. Most contemporary passibilists simply ignore this textual evidence and continue to identify divine impassibility with emotional atrophy.

³³ Following his contemporaries, Barth characterizes the claim that God is not affected by the experiences of the incarnation as a pagan idea, alien to the biblical understanding of God.

In ascetical theology, *apatheia* refers to the state of the soul freed from the attachment to sinful thoughts and desires. According to Evagrius of Pontus, “the progeny of *apatheia* is *agape*.”35 Far from being an emotional zero, *apatheia* is the precondition of Christian love, purified of all self-centered desires. By analogy, divine impassibility in the sense of perfect control over emotional states, is a condition of divine love, mercy, compassion, and providential care. Unfortunately most contemporary passibilists continue to ignore this historical evidence and to interpret divine impassibility as emotional impotence and indifference.

In general I find the widespread contemporary tendency to draw ill-founded psychological and political implications from the metaphysical notions to be quite lamentable. Sartre famously felt nausea when pondering the idea of infinity.36 Some contemporary theologians fail to imagine divine omnipotence in terms other than tyranny, absolute monarchy, or some equally detestable form of political government.37 Such distortions become possible when divine omnipotence is erroneously and arbitrarily divorced from God’s perfect goodness, love, and compassion. A God of infinite power who is at the same time wicked may justifiably be imagined as a tyrant and a veritable terminator. But the omnipotence of God cannot be separated from his perfect goodness, for in God all attributes are united in a union beyond description. There can be no better panacea from all forms of human idolatry, power grabbing, and tyranny than the overflowing goodness and the self-emptying love of the omnipotent God. A deity of limited power would be too weak to counter human usurpations of power and idolatry.

At times political theologians practice a similar hermeneutic of suspicion against other attributes of God. When a metaphysical term has no ob-

---

35. Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, 81. This Evagrian theme is developed by Maximus the Confessor, *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, I.2, I.81, IV.91.
37. I should underscore that I concede that divine omnipotence could be imagined in these questionable ways. It would be historically naive to deny that the term “almighty” has had complex political connotations in the collective imagination of Christendom. It is possible, for example, to look at the Byzantine icon of Christ Pantokrator and construe it as somehow issuing a blank check endorsement to the autocratic abuses of the imperial power. I am also not advocating a sterile claim that the notion of divine omnipotence is intrinsically apolitical. Instead I propose to read the icon of Christ Pantokrator as a reminder that the only absolute Lordship that the believers are to recognize is that of Christ, not of any earthly ruler.
vicious political or psychological connotations, such a term is dismissed as too impersonal, static, and abstract (as opposed to being personal, dynamic, concrete, or relational). Apparently this approach is immensely effective rhetorically, since so many theologians deploy it as a “preemptive strike” to preclude any serious discussion of the concepts so attacked.

The impassible God has been called “the celestial Narcissus,”38 “the self-protecting monarch,”39 “the patriarchal ruler,”40 “the eternal bystander” (Camus), and numerous other non-flattering appellations. I suppose that traditional theists could return the compliment by calling the God of modern passibilism the Perpetual Heavenly Masochist, the Feuerbachian Copy of the Suffering Humanity, the Idol of Self-Flagellating Theological Liberalism, or the Grand Phantasm of Victimhood Ideology (take your pick). In a recent article Christopher Insole psychoanalyzes the God of classical theism as a projection of the Cartesian self, and the God of modern passibilism as a projection of the Romantic self.41 No matter how intellectually seductive such caricatures may be, they only distract from an in-depth analysis of metaphysical alternatives. I suggest a thorough purification of contemporary theological imagination through a heavy dose of mental askesis. To put it bluntly, not every passionate thought that invades one’s theological mind when pondering divine perfections needs to be recorded in print. In the spirit of the third commandment, I think it is time to call for a moratorium on divine name-calling.

More seriously, it has been argued that the assumption of divine impassibility renders any account of divine emotions and involvement in the drama of human suffering highly problematic, if not altogether incoherent. I will meet this objection in two interrelated ways: (1) by distinguishing adequate and inadequate ways in which impassibility and other negative divine attributes have actually functioned in Christian theological discourse, and (2) by arguing that in order to be redemptive God’s involvement in suffering must be marked by impassibility.

IV. The Function of Divine Impassibility in Patristic Christology

How does divine impassibility actually function in patristic texts? As the hymnographic material cited in the beginning of this essay illustrates, the notion of divine impassibility commonly appears in the context of other apophatic markers of the divine transcendence, such as immortality, immutability, invisibility, incorporeality, incomprehensibility, uncreatedness, and the like. This implies that *divine impassibility is primarily a metaphysical term, marking God’s unlikeness to everything in the created order, not a psychological term denoting* (as modern passibilists allege) *God’s emotional apathy.* When Melito says that “the invisible [God] is seen” his point is that the God who is by nature unavailable to the ordinary senses (cf. John 1:18), under certain circumstances and for certain reasons makes himself visible (cf. Matt. 5:8; John 14:9; 1 John 1:1-3). Similarly, the uncreated God creates and reveals himself through creation. The incorporeal God manifests himself through material objects. As the Orthodox Church sings on Good Friday: “Today he who is in essence unapproachable, becomes approachable for me and suffers his Passion, delivering me from passions.”

If one rejects the attribute of divine impassibility on the grounds that there are instances of special revelation in which God is said to suffer, one will face similar difficulties in the case of all negative markers of the divine transcendence. It is a methodological mistake to isolate the concept of divine impassibility, as some contemporary passibilists often do, and jettison this concept without attending to a more general problem: How can the attributes of the transcendent Creator be reconciled with God’s revelation under the finite conditions of the created order? I will touch briefly upon three complementary strategies for addressing this difficulty. (I cannot offer a detailed discussion of a general theory of religious paradoxes here.) The first strategy is to construe the paradoxical statements as poetic devices conveying “insights through the clash of images, insights which could not be communicated in any other way.” Such a reading of paradoxes seems to be especially relevant for interpreting the antithetical lan-

---

42. *Lenten Triodion,* p. 576.
language of Melito and that of the later Byzantine hymnographers. The powerful juxtaposition of Christ’s divine attributes (“he who held the earth upon the waters . . .”) and his human experiences of suffering and death (“. . . is hung upon the cross”) in the Good Friday service is designed to bring in the hearts of the believers a sense of contrition, sorrow, gratitude, and wonder before the depth of God’s self-abasement. On this reading, paradoxical language is a contemplative technique designed to direct believers’ minds in prayerful meditation upon the mystery of God’s death and crucifixion, the mystery which is ultimately beyond all human words and powers of expression. I am sympathetic to this understanding of the function of paradoxical language, as long as no rigid distinction is made between the allegedly purely affective language of poetry and prayer on the one hand and the language of philosophical theology on the other hand. When the Byzantine hymnographers sang praises to God they theologized; conversely, when the Fathers theologized, they continued to pray.

The second strategy is to take the proposition “the impassible suffered” as a particular case of what Ian Ramsey called the “paradox of the religious ultimate.” This paradox consists mainly in recognizing the limitations of religious language: while on the one hand some predicates (not all) may be fittingly ascribed to God, on the other hand, from the standpoint of apophatic theology, no predicate can be applied to God because God does not belong to the same order of being.44 Whatever appropriate qualifications one applies to the claim that God suffers, one is bound to acknowledge at the same time that God is impassible, because he transcends all suffering, just as he transcends everything else.

The third and last strategy is to construe God’s impassible suffering as a special case of coincidentia oppositorum. Impassibility enables God to be involved in suffering to the fullest possible extent, in the manner that only God can. The critics of patristic theism object that the idea that God transcends suffering makes God apathetic and incapable of compassion. In fact, the exact opposite is the case. It is precisely because God infinitely transcends all human suffering that he is able to overcome our suffering and manifest true compassion. It is precisely because God has nothing at stake for himself in the experience of suffering, that he is able to love us so

perfectly. If God chooses to participate in suffering, he is not overwhelmed by suffering. God retains his freedom and remains active in suffering. God’s involvement in suffering is never meaningless, but is always purposeful, aimed at healing the misery of his creatures.45

Already in the third century Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213–ca. 270) established most of these points in his treatise To Theopompus, On the Impassibility and Passibility of God. Gregory explained the voluntary character of Christ’s suffering as follows: “For he in his sufferings continues as he is, voluntarily taking human sufferings upon himself, and does not suffer the pains which arise from human passions. For God is the one who is unharmed by every suffering, and it is his property always to remain the same.”46 God retains his freedom and immutability even in suffering. According to Gregory, God manifests his impassibility not by keeping aloof, but by the manner of his participation in suffering:

We would not have known the impassible to be impassible if he had not participated in the passions and undergone the force of the passions. For impassibility eagerly rushed upon the passions like a passion, so that by his own Passion he might show himself to be the cause of suffering of the passions (ostenderet se esse passionem passionibus). For the passions were not entirely able to stand against the weight of the power of impassibility.47

Many philosophically minded pagans of Gregory’s time found such a way of using impassibility to be quite objectionable, perhaps even verging on nonsense. They argued that it would be more fitting for the impassible God to dissociate himself from all involvement in human misery altogether. Gregory ascribes to his philosophical opponents a view that “God is turned towards himself and wallows in himself, with the result that he does nothing and allows others to do nothing.”48 Gregory proceeds to argue that a God who is unconcerned about his creation is weak (infirminus

45. This observation applies to God’s direction of only certain kinds of evil. I am not arguing that God uses all suffering to bring about healing. I leave open the possibility of apparently and inexplicably gratuitous evil that God permits without directing.
47. Gregory Thaumaturgus, Ad Theopompum, 6, p. 158.
Paul L. Gavrilyuk

est) and inactive. He goes so far as to say that “in God it would be a great passion (passionem maximam) not to care for human beings.” Similar to Augustine, Gregory sees divine impassibility and providential care not only as compatible, but as reinforcing each other. Here Gregory uses the term passio in the sense of a defect or fault, a connotation that is largely lost in the English term “passion.” He also appears to make a point that a passionate person may be uncaring and selfishly absorbed in the realm of her own emotions. For example, the Greek Zeus was a very passionate god, but he was hardly compassionate. This point often escapes those contemporary theologians, who think that to make God super-emotional and omni-relational is to secure divine compassion. God may indeed be relational, but so is the Devil. (I imagine that the Devil also has his emotional highs.) More to the point, divine affectivity and relationality must be carefully qualified before they can play a part in a sound account of divine compassion.

Gregory also argues that it would be unworthy of God to abandon his creatures to die in sin and ignorance without offering them any assistance. He compares the benevolent God of Christians to a physician, who “when he wants to cure those who are afflicted with grave illnesses, gladly takes upon himself hardships in his ministry to the sick, for he already looks forward to the joy which will be his from the recovery.” It is fitting for God (theoprepes) to participate in human suffering for the sake of healing. This therapeutic analogy and the teleological justification of the incarnate God’s participation in suffering became commonplace in patristic literature.

Gregory is aware of the fact that divine impassibility may be used in what I call an unqualified sense, which rules out any form of divine involvement in pathos. The later Platonists ascribed this kind of impassibility to the noetic realm. The Gnostics, particularly those with Docetic sensibilities, claimed that since God was impassible it was both metaphysically impossible and morally unfitting for him to be involved in the evil realm of matter by assuming a despicable human body. More than a century later the Arians argued that since the unbegotten God was impassible, he could not possibly be ontologically equal to the suffering Logos. In the

50. Gregory Thaumaturgus, Ad Theopompum, 6, p. 156.
51. Origen, Contra Celsum, IV.14, 15; De principiis, II.10.6; Gregory of Nyssa, Contra Eunomium, 3.4.724; Oratio Catechetica Magna, 14. 16.
52. Plotinus, Enneads, III.6.1.
fifth century, to safeguard the notion of unqualified divine impassibility, the Nestorians insisted upon a sharp division between Christ’s divine actions on the one hand and his human experiences on the other hand. Their profound theological differences notwithstanding, the Docetists, Arians, and Nestorians shared a common approach to divine impassibility. All three groups deployed divine impassibility in an unqualified sense, as a property that categorically excluded God’s participation in any form of suffering. It is significant that the Church has rejected such a use of divine impassibility as flawed.

In response, the Church Fathers defended the reality of Christ’s suffering against the Docetists, the fullness of the incarnate Son’s divinity against the Arians, and the unity of his person against the Nestorians. For the Fathers, divine impassibility was quite compatible with God’s providential care even to the point of participating in suffering. Contemporary theologians fail to understand the main thrust of patristic Christology when they reduce the contribution of the Church Fathers to a version of Docetism or Nestorianism. When the Fathers of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, following the insights of Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, affirmed that “one of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh,” they intended to emphasize that God did not cease to be God when he had entered the conditions of human suffering. In a statement such as “the impassible suffered,” divine impassibility functions as an indicator of the divine transcendence and as a marker of God’s undiminished divinity.

Used adverbially, as in the expression of the Lenten Triodion “and impassibly thou hast submitted to thy passion,” divine impassibility qualifies the manner in which God endures suffering. To read such statements in a Nestorian manner as saying that the divine subject is not affected by suffering in any way at all is to misinterpret them. When the Fathers spoke of God suffering impassibly, they wanted to stress that God was not conquered by suffering and that God’s participation in suffering transformed the experience of suffering.\(^3\) In the incarnation God made human suffering his own (ἰδιοποιήσας, οἰκείωσας) in order to transform suffering and redeem human nature. In the words of the Lenten Triodion: “Thou hast put to death the passions (πάθη) of my flesh by thy divine cross, and by thy Passion (πάθος) Thou hast given all men freedom from the passions (πάθη).”\(^4\) Note an in-

---

\(^3\) Cyril, *Ad Nestorium*, III.6.

\(^4\) Lenten Triodion, p. 267.
tricate jeu de mots in this quotation: πάθος (singular) refers to the drama of the cross, whereas πάθη (plural) refer to sinful human desires. This word-play can only partially be conveyed in English.

Given the exegetical complexities of the term πάθος and its cognates, some contemporary scholars have argued that while the notion of divine apatheia may have played a valuable function in patristic theology, the notion should be best abandoned by the present-day theologians, because of its allegedly permanent association with apathy. I am in general against any historical insulation and domestication of patristic ideas, and in this particular case I could not disagree more. Apatheia, even in its least attractive Stoic form, has as much to do with apathy as amnesia does with amnesty. The claim that any talk about divine impassibility must be abandoned because the notion has been so often misunderstood is a classic case of an argument from abuse. No matter how powerful its rhetorical appeal, this argument is profoundly flawed. As even a sketchy discussion of divine omnipotence indicates, a similar set of interpretative difficulties besets a theologian in the case of just about any other divine attribute, including even such seemingly non-problematic concepts as love and compassion. It is misleading to isolate the concept of divine impassibility and to require that all of its possible uses be immune from criticism as a condition of the concept’s viability. As I argued earlier, divine impassibility is not only compatible, but is actually a corollary of a proper understanding of God’s love and providential care. In the final section I will address the difficulties to which the abandonment of divine impassibility has led those contemporary passibilists who make suffering a permanent feature of the inner life of God.

V. Problems with the Concept of Eternal Divine Suffering

Many contemporary theologians who claim that God suffers eternally tend to conceive of suffering as a permanent quality of divine love. I concur with the legitimate concern of these theologians that the account of God’s love manifested on the cross must be continuous with the qualities of God’s love vis-à-vis creation and that love which is shared by the persons of the Trinity. In the words of the nineteenth-century Russian theologian, metropolitan Filaret of Moscow: “The love of the Father is crucifying, the love of the Son is crucified, and the love of the Holy Spirit triumphs by the
power of the cross.”

However, against those who would eternalize divine suffering by making it a feature of the immanent Trinity (as, for example, Jürgen Moltmann and his followers do), I would contend that the love that is manifest on the cross embraces not only the suffering of all those abandoned by God, but also holds the power of the resurrection to transform and conquer all suffering, penetrating to the very depth of hell.

Tomorrow, on Lazarus Saturday, Christ will be weeping (liturgically speaking) at the tomb of his friend. In line with the theological insights of Cyril of Alexandria, the Fathers taught that the Weeping One was God incarnate himself. However, the Weeping One did not just stand at the tomb of Lazarus and continue weeping for all eternity, as some passibilists imagine. He has also raised Lazarus from the dead. The Weeping One triumphed over grief and mortality when Lazarus was resuscitated.

It follows that in order to be able to redeem, God must be more than a Whiteheadian “fellow-sufferer who understands.” A God who is merely a fellow-patient cannot help those who suffer. Divine compassion is far more than sentimental commiseration. The time will come when God will wipe away every tear from the sufferers’ eyes (Rev. 7:16), as he had wiped away the tears of Mary and Martha by raising Lazarus from the dead. This means that tears, grief, and pain do not have the final word in the life of God, contrary to what the books under such titles as The Tears of God and Theology and the Pain of God would have us believe.

Perpetual divine suffering has no purpose, except the perpetuation of misery. To postulate the unredeemed suffering in God, as some contemporary theologians tend to do, is to eternalize evil. Far from offering a compelling theodicy, the projection of humanity’s suffering onto the inner life of God only compounds the problem of evil.

In this picture, which has an almost hypnotic hold on contemporary passibilists, the destructive nature of suffering is trivialized and falsely romanticized as something intrinsically valuable and redemptive. The victims of the Gulags and the

Nazi concentration camps would cry out, if they could, against such a conception of God, for they have learned experientially that prolonged suffering destroys personhood, if it is not physically resisted and overcome spiritually. The Christian martyrs certainly did not suffer atrocious pain in this life so that they could go on enduring the same pain with God for all eternity. This would be a nightmare. Mortality and attendant misfortunes are by definition the features of this life, not of the life eternal.\textsuperscript{59}

The theology of eternal divine suffering is a misguided and sentimental glorification of evil, despite the best intentions of those who proclaim it. The savior who suffers eternally himself stands in need of the other impassible Savior, who alone is capable of rescuing the impotent savior from his miserable fate. One may imagine that such an impotent savior would be so absorbed in the drama of his own suffering as to be incapable even of sentimental commiseration with his creatures.

In the spirit of patristic theology it would be appropriate to speak of God’s eternal and decisive victory over suffering and death, a victory marked by impassibility, not of God’s suffering for all eternity, associated with the rejection of impassibility. When modern passibilists (in many cases for good reasons) protest against the false triumphalism of \textit{theologia gloriae}, they nevertheless do not sufficiently acknowledge that \textit{theologia crucis} remains largely a theology of despair without the \textit{theologia resurrectionis}, i.e., the message of God’s decisive victory over death. In the words of the Orthodox Easter troparion: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.” Christ’s suffering on the cross has universal redemptive value only if sin and mortality have been once and for all conquered by the power of the resurrection.

The Fathers, from Melito of Sardis to the anonymous hymnographers of the \textit{Lenten Triodion}, have faithfully retained the paradox of the impassible God’s suffering in the flesh. This paradox captures the vital tension between God’s transcendence and undiminished divinity on the one hand and God’s intimate involvement in human suffering on the other hand. God is impassible inasmuch as he is able to conquer sin, suffering, and death; and God is also passible (in a carefully qualified sense) inasmuch as in the incarnation God has chosen to enter the human condition in order

\textsuperscript{59}. I am reminded of the words of the Eastern Orthodox funeral service: “With the Saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of your servant, where there is no pain, nor sorrow, nor suffering, but life everlasting.”
God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh

to transform it. God suffers in and through human nature, by taking human grief and sorrow into his life and making these experiences his own.

Some contemporary passibilists reject Chalcedonian Christology, which they wrongly interpret along the Nestorian lines of sharply distinguishing the sufferings of human nature from the actions of divinity. These theologians propose instead to predicate all suffering directly to Christ’s divine nature. Consider the attendant problems of this position.

First, if God suffers for all eternity, then there is nothing uniquely redemptive about Christ’s suffering on the cross. Incarnation becomes a pale copy of what God has been enduring for all eternity. Second, if all experiences of Christ can be predicated directly to God in his divine nature, in other words, if God as God undergoes human suffering exactly in the way that humans suffer, then the assumption of human nature will be completely superfluous. In this scheme human nature only duplicates the experiences that God has already undergone apart from humanity in his divine nature. Third, God’s eternal suffering in the divine nature entails some form of permanent divine embodiment — an inescapable conclusion, which only a few modern passibilists would be prepared to defend. If God already has a cosmic body, his assumption of an additional human body in the incarnation becomes unnecessary. Finally, if within the framework of the incarnation suffering is predicated to God directly in his divine nature, then God no longer shares in the suffering of the assumed humanity, but rather suffers in complete separation from humanity. As Thomas Weinandy aptly pointed out, “ironically, those who advocate a suffering God, having locked suffering within God’s divine nature, have actually locked God out of human suffering.”

Taken together, these objections are too damaging to make the concept of eternal divine suffering viable.

60. See Marcel Sarot, God: Passibility and Corporeality (Kampen: Pharos, 1992).
61. It is possible to deflect these objections by arguing that the central significance of the cross consists in God’s revelation of what he endures for all eternity. The problem with this move is that it shifts the function of Christ’s atoning death from that which brings about reconciliation between God and humanity to that which solely manifests the already present reality of reconciliation and suffering, which supposedly exists in God for all eternity. Such an internalization of atonement has the overall effect of the supreme divine drama being accomplished outside of history. In my judgment, the theological problems created by this move far outweigh the valuable claim that there must be a continuity between God’s inner life and God’s actions ad extra.
VI. Conclusion

The central aim of Chalcedonian Christology was to keep Christ’s divinity and humanity distinct, yet united. By blending the distinction between divinity and humanity as well as by attributing all human experiences of Christ directly to God, the contemporary passibilists have made the assumption of humanity in the incarnation superfluous at best and metaphysically impossible at worst. I repeat: God, as God, does not replicate what we, as humans suffer. Yet in the incarnation God, remaining God, participates in our condition to the point of the painful death on the cross. Remaining impassible, God chooses to make the experiences of his human nature fully his own. For these reasons, the notion of divine impassibility needs to be recovered and more adequately integrated into the contemporary theological reflection on the mystery of God’s involvement in the world’s suffering.

Paradoxical Christology holds the potential of moving the discussion beyond the modern caricatures of the traditional understanding of impassibility, and vice versa, beyond at times too dismissive readings of the passibilist proposals by the champions of impassibility. Paradoxical Christology expresses in the language of prayer and symbol that which is so difficult to formulate adequately in the language of dogma.

To propose paradoxical Christology is not to revel in irrationality and incoherence. These old intellectual vices are still intellectual vices, despite all lauds sung to them by the high priests of postmodernity. My point is that the dissolution of the christological paradox, by those who reject either that God is in any sense impassible, or that God is in any sense passible, creates far greater theological conundrums than those presented by the admittedly problematic paradoxical language.

The intent of the paradoxical statements is to hold God’s transcendence and undiminished divinity in tension with the divine care for creation and involvement in suffering. While paradoxical Christology provides for a considerable array of plausible kenotic models, such a Christology does rule out those approaches that exclude any notion of divine impassibility altogether.63 Some critics may see the reticence of the

63. For an illuminating and nuanced critique of the main kenotic models, see Sarah Coakley, “Kenesis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender (Oxford: Black-
hymnographers to specify just how precisely the impassible God participates in human suffering as theologically immature and question-begging. I think the issue could be looked at in a different light. The strength of this position lies in its apophatic reserve and breadth: to repeat, no one model of God's involvement in suffering is endorsed as normative or binding, while both divine apathy and unredeemed eternal suffering are decidedly rejected. However God participates in suffering, he is neither eternally indifferent to suffering, nor eternally overwhelmed by it. Thus, the recognition of the irreducible paradox of the divine transcendence and immanence lying at the heart of the mystery of God's involvement in suffering will provide a basis for achieving the future theological consensus on this issue.

well, 2002), pp. 3-39. Coakley's concluding suggestions for how the imitation of Christ's vulnerability may be suitably appropriated in contemplative prayer are especially valuable. See also her "Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis," in Exploring Kenotic Christology, pp. 246-64.