Foundations

An international journal of evangelical theology

EDITION 88 | June 2025

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Foundations Theological Journal

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical ecumenism. It has been published by Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council) from its inception as a print journal. It became a digital journal in April 2011. The views expressed in the articles published in Foundations do not necessarily represent the views of Affinity or its partners although all content must be within the bounds of the Affinity Doctrinal Basis.

Editor

Dr Donald John MacLean
foundations@affinity.org.uk

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Alistair Wilson
Edinburgh Theological Seminary

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Editorial

It is a privilege to introduce this edition of *Foundations*. It is my final as editor, and I can only say that the past five years have been a pleasure. This is entirely due to the quality of the contributions and reviews over that time. So, I thank the writers during my time as editor for continuing the excellent tradition of *Foundations* – combining academic rigour and commitment to the Affinity basis of faith.

The contributions to this edition continue that same standard. They comprise the "lightly edited" papers that were presented at the 2025 Affinity Theological Study Conference. The theme was "the doctrine of God", an area of significant contemporary theological reflection. The papers did not disappoint, and much discussion from various perspectives ensued! As ever in *Foundations*, further articles on this important theme will, no doubt, be very welcome.

To turn to the articles themselves, Mostyn Roberts considers "The Power and Personhood of God." Mostyn provides a helpful theological analysis of God's power and practically relates this to the weakness of the cross and the church.

Next, Robert Letham considers the area of apologetics in "Faith and Reason: Reflections on Belief in God." Letham focuses on Aquinas and Anselm, surveying and interacting with their reflections. As ever with Bob, we are treated to historically informed and theologically enriching reflections

Thomas Brand leads us through the deep waters of the doctrine of impassibility and classical theism. He interacts with theology, ancient and modern, and offers a trenchant critique of possibility and a corresponding defence of impassibility. Perhaps the "heaviest" of the articles, it repays careful reading.

Steven Duby turns to the area of Christology and its relation to the doctrine of God. Often, critiques of historic teaching on theology proper highlight a lack of interaction with Christology. Steven's paper prevented that charge being one that could

be addressed against the Affinity Theological Study Conference. He makes the case that in Christ, "God did not choose simply to stay above the fray" and focuses on the meaning of the human weakness and sufferings of Christ.

Michael McClenahan reviews recent trinitarian theological reflections in the light of historical and creedal teaching on these subjects. Michael makes a strong case for robust adherence to credal teaching and the danger of straying from it.

There are, as usual, a number of book reviews to close out this edition. And, with this, I hand over to Rev. Dr. Malcolm MacLean (no relation!), who I have no doubt will carry the work of *Foundations* forward with great skill.

Donald John MacLean
Editor of Foundations
Elder, Cambridge Presbyterian Church and President and Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary (UK)

June 2025

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GREAT GOD *of* WONDERS

THE GOD WHO IS AND THE GOD WHO ACTS

2025 Papers

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THE POWER AND PERSONHOOD OF GOD

Mostyn Roberts

> *For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*[1]
>
> *Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority.*[2]
>
> *We should admit rather that power produces knowledge…; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.*[3]

I. Abstract

This paper explores the biblical and theological understanding of God's power, asserting that divine power is inseparable from God's personhood and character. It traces the expression of God's power through creation, providence, and redemption – culminating in the cross of Christ where power is paradoxically displayed in weakness. The paper contrasts God's righteous and purposeful exercise of power with human abuses of power, engaging critically with Michel Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge dynamics. It argues that true power in the church must reflect God's character, aim at restoring believers into the image of Christ, and be exercised through godly leadership, spiritual means, and humble dependence on divine strength.

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1 1 Corinthians 1:22–24 (ESV).

2 Lord Acton, Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 5th April. Transcript of, published in *Historical Essays and Studies*, edited by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907).

3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Penguin edition, translated by Alan Sheridan, 1991; first published as *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*; Éditions Gallimard, 1975), 27.

II. Introduction

Objective truth, absolute morality, religious or other metanarratives, social structures and institutions, knowledge, human rights – all are viewed today as masks of power. The jewels of the liberal establishment get a bad name as the dupes of power; power has become the éminence grise behind the structures and values we hold dear. Everything is suspect, a probable 'power grab'. Where this all-embracing suspicion comes from and whether there is anything we can learn from it, we shall see later. But surely not all power, even if some suspicion is always justified, is bad? Let us begin with what the Bible says about power, which means beginning with God. Following that and some systematic reflections, I examine four main issues relating to power: sovereignty, knowledge, the cross, and power in the church. My thesis is simply that if it is God's power we want to see at work in the church, we must be restored in his image through Jesus Christ.

III. God and Power

1. God's Names

The early names of God in the Bible denote power. *El* (derivatives *Eloah, Elohim;* compound forms*, El Shaddai* (Almighty God, Gen 17:1), *El-Elohe-Israel* (God, the God of Israel, Gen 33:20), *El Elyon* (God Most High, Gen 14:19)*, El Gibbor* (Mighty God, Isa 9:6)) is the first common general description of deity in the Ancient Near East and it is widely accepted that it is derived or at least related to the Hebrew word *el* whose root meaning is strength or power (Gen 31:29; Ezek 32:21). God is first introduced to us therefore in his own word as powerful, indeed power itself. Power and God's being as a person (his personhood) are inseparable. The most frequently occurring name of God in the Old Testament (x 2250) is *Elohim* (Gen 1:1), a plural of majesty and also an adumbration of more than one person in God. *El Shaddai*, 'God

Almighty' (Gen 17:1; Exod 6:3; cf Rev 1:8; 4:8)[4] particularly denotes God as the all-powerful one. Also implying power is *Yahweh Sabaoth*, 'the LORD of Hosts' (Ps 24:10; 46:7,11).

In the Greek world before Christ, 'Plato calls *dynamis* [power] the absolute mark of being' but 'the cosmic principle is the same thing as God. There is thus little reference to the power of God, for God himself is power'[5]. The difference in the Bible is that the power of a personal God replaces the force of nature that was equated with deity. Individual gods in the pagan world were sometimes called *dynameis* but in the Hebrew Scriptures there was a 'LORD' of hosts (Ps 24:10), and in the LXX *dynameis* is sometimes used for 'hosts'.

2. God's Actions

This all-powerful God (for expressly or by implication God is omnipotent, e.g. Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Jer 32:17; Luke 1:37) has acted in power in creation, providence and redemption.

i. In Creation

As Creator he made all things (Gen 1:1; 1 Chron 29:11; Neh 9:6; Job 38:4f). His eternal power is, with his deity, revealed in creation (Rom 1:20; Ps 8:3; 19:1). His creative power distinguishes him from idols (Ps 135:5-7; Isa 45:12,16,18; Jer 10:11,12). He created by a simple act of will, a word (Ps 33:6). He created, as the use of the verb *bara* (Gen 1:1,21,27; Heb cf. 11:3) suggests, from no pre-existing material, *ex nihilo*. His power exceeds that of all created agents. Only his power can produce from nothing. He created man, male and female, in his image, to be his representatives,

4 *El Shaddai,* x 48 in the OT, x 31 in Job; in the New Testament *pantokrator*, 2 Cor 6:18, x 8 in Revelation.

5 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged by Geoffrey K. Bromiley (Wm B Eerdmans, 1959) 187, s.v. *dynamai.*

dominion bearers, prophets, priests and kings in and over creation. Yet these are 'but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him!' (Job 26:14).

ii. In Providence

As Ruler, God exercises his power in providence, his government of creation in fulfilment of his decree. He preserves what he has made (Ps 104:5-30; Acts 14:17); indeed, because this all-powerful God is all-knowing, nothing he made will ever be annihilated – he has no second thoughts, or better ideas, or ways in which things could be improved (though had he purposed creation otherwise, he could have done things differently with different perfections). His power is active in propagation (Gen 1:22,23) and in governing history and nations (Jer 27:5; Acts 17:25-27). He exercises moral government: he judges, and punishes, evil (Gen 6-9); he rules the devil though uses him for his purposes (Job 1,2).

iii. In Redemption

As Redeemer, God exercises his power to redeem his people. Although creation is called as a witness to the greatness of God's power (e.g. Jer 32:17), it is more likely to be his acts of deliverance that are typically referred to as the supreme example of God's power. Having recounted God's great deeds in getting Israel to the border of the Promised Land, Moses prays, "O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?" (Deut 3:24; c.f. Isa 63:11; 43:16-17; 51:9-10). The Psalms repeatedly extol the power of God in saving his people and destroying the wicked (Ps 7:6,7; 20:6-8; 89:17,18). God's power is to be beheld (63:2) and a cause of praise (145:4-7).

God may work without means (as in immediate creation); with means (as in mediate creation, Gen 1:22,24,28); or against means (Isa 38:7,8 when the sun is returned ten steps on Hezekiah's dial).

But there is a yet greater work of deliverance according to the prophets, typified but not fulfilled in the deliverance from Babylon under Cyrus. There is a greater Messiah than was ever seen in the sixth century BC (Isa 9:6,7; 61:1,2), a greater future for Jerusalem (51:3) and a greater freedom, joy and prosperity than was known in Israel in succeeding centuries or ever (Isa 60 *passim*; 65:17-25) and one day a new creation (Isa 64:17-25). Thus, the redeeming power of God is seen above all in the coming of Jesus Christ where the 'power of the Most High' and the coming upon Mary of the Holy Spirit are parallel and identical phrases for the act of God that caused Jesus to be conceived (Luke 1:35). Jesus knew the power of the Holy Spirit in his ministry (Luke 4:14; Acts 10:38). He gave his apostles authority to cast out demons (Mark 6:7). There were times because of lack of faith in the crowd (Mark 6:4,5) or in the disciples (Matt 17:19,20) that miracles could not be performed, indicating that faith is the usual precondition to his performing a miracle, rather than that unbelief is an external limitation on his power. His death on a cross seems to be the nadir and negation of power but it is in fact the place where God's power is most effective for his glory (1 Cor 1:18-25). Jesus was assisted by the power of the Spirit of God in his death (Heb 9:14) and above all in his resurrection by which he was seen now to be the Son of God in power (Eph 1:19,20; Rom 1:4) in contrast to the apparent weakness of his incarnation. His power is seen in its 'immeasurable greatness' (Eph 1:19), which is as close to saying 'infinite' as one could get, particularly in the resurrection of Christ.

The publication and application of redemption are also acts of the power of God – the disciples would receive power when the Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16) and is to be preached and received exclusively in the power of God so that faith is

both created by and rests in his power (1 Cor 2:3-5). In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul draws a distinction between the power and wisdom, weakness and folly of the world and of God. Believers experience a measure of the transcendent fulness of his power, that we might grow in the inner man and have strength to know his incomprehensible love (2 Cor 4:7; Eph 1:19,20; 3:20-21) and achieve God's purpose for us which is to be conformed to Christ. It is in his servant's weakness especially that God's power is apparent (2 Cor 4:7; 12:9,10).

The climax of history will be the return of the Lord Jesus Christ 'in power and great glory' (Matt 24:30).

IV. Some Systematic Reflections

1. Personal Infinite God

The God of the Bible is personal and infinite. He is personal as one God as well as being three subsistences or persons as Triune. He is personal in essence. His attributes, or perfections, including his power, are one with his essence. The 'power of God' is 'God powerful'. His essence is his attributes, and his attributes are his essence and his essence is personal. The simplicity of God demands this – all that is in God *is* God.

2. Power of One and of All

The persons of the Trinity are consubstantial, so they consist of the essence, therefore the attributes of God, in common. They are one, for example, in will and power. Will and power are not attributes God 'has', as if they were somehow distinct from his essence. God has no 'parts' (neither spiritual nor, of course, physical); this is what is called his 'simplicity'.[6] He is one; the three persons, meanwhile, are subsistences

6 For example, Thomas Torrance writes, 'His power is not different from his nature, for it is the power of his nature, the power of his Being in action, the power of what he is in his Being and ever will be. He is God the Father

of the one essence; they are one in essence, therefore in will and power. Indivisible in essence, the persons are therefore indivisible in operations, working inseparably in creation, providence and salvation. Each person will have a particular 'appropriation' in the work, so the Father, Son and Spirit will each distinctively exercise power. Thus, we may say that the Father's acts of power are seen in that all things proceed from him, the power of the Son in that all things are accomplished by him and the power of the Spirit in that all things are applied or completed by him. Thus, the same essential power of the one God is exercised in three presentations, or appropriations, so that truly *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt*[7].

In the Bible, Christ is the power of God (1 Cor 1:24); the Father is 'the Power' (Jesus using a Jewish circumlocution for God to describe the Father – Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62) and the Spirit is the power of God (Mic 3:8; Luke 1:35; 5:17). Power is particularly associated with the Spirit for it is his work to bring the work the Father has initiated and the Son has accomplished to fruition (Acts 1:8). But as the Athanasian Creed says, "the Father is almighty, the Son almighty and the Holy Spirit almighty, and yet there are not three Almighties but one Almighty".

But what does power mean within God? Classical Theism holds that the distinctions between the persons are derived from eternal relations of origin only (the unbegotten Father, the begotten Son and the Spirit who proceeds). Thus, eternal generation alone explains the Son's eternal origin, without any subordination or difference of authority, or any hierarchy, within the ontological or immanent Trinity. The fundamental act of God in power is therefore his own self-existence, his aseity, and that is for eternity as all his attributes require his eternality. The eternal generation of the Son is also an exercise of power by the Father – an eternal exercise of divine power in the 'appropriation' of the Father. Father and Son together breathe the Spirit.

Almighty…We cannot even think of God's power from any point above him or apart from what he actually is'. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, (T&T Clark, 2001) p 204-05.

7 "The external works of the Trinity are undivided."

"Generation and spiration – the two 'emanations' or processions in which we may discern the personal modes of the one God – are the manner in which God is limitlessly abundant life, reciprocity and 'ineffable mutual delight'".[8] We might easily also say, 'limitlessly abundant power'.

3. *Power in Context: Character, Counsel, Covenant and Creation*

God's power is directed by both his will and his *character.* First, his power is wholly directed by his character, that is his love, holiness, righteousness and wisdom. Nothing he does is ever inconsistent with any of these or other attributes. God will never use power unrighteously, unwisely or unlovingly. Second, the exercise of God's power is further directed by what he has determined (understood non-temporally) as to the end of all things, that is, by his eternal *counsel* or decree. There is an eternal plan in all things – to unite all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). Third, central to God's counsel is *covenant*. Unlike the arbitrary and capricious gods of paganism, God acts righteously, rationally and consistently. He need not have entered a covenantal relationship with humanity but he condescended to do so, first with Adam in a covenant of works, then in a covenant of grace to save a people in Christ, pursuant to an intra-trinitarian covenant of redemption. God will save the people he elected in eternity and will be faithful to them through life and in death and in the consummation. His power is engaged in this context. Fourth, God's power operates within the context of other powers in his *creation*. He has created human beings with free will, the ability to make significant decisions and God, while retaining absolute sovereignty, nonetheless works with the freedom he has created and honours the significance of will and power, for good or ill, in unbelief and faith, of his creatures. We are not puppets; he is not a puppet-master.

8 John Webster, 'Trinity and Creation,' in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, Vol. 1: God and the Works of God (T&T Clark, 2016), 89. The internal quotation is John Owen, 'Christologia,' in *The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth edition) vol. 1, 18. The eternal, ceaseless nature of generation and procession must be remembered; they are not acts in time, nor acts which originate in the will of God so much as in his nature: 'in accordance with nature but not thereby lacking in freedom' (Webster, 'Eternal Generation', God without Measure, vol 1, p 35). Nor of course do they imply subordination of the Son or the Spirit to the Father.

The freest person to walk the earth was his Son, Jesus Christ. He demonstrated the proper use of freedom, which is to obey the Father. Power in the creature is to be exercised to this purpose, but the reality in a fallen world is horribly different.

4. Absolute and actual (ordinate) power

God's power is not limited by any external thing, for anything apart from God is his creation and nothing created can thwart his purposes (Job 42:2). Nothing poses a threat to him; nothing limits him. He does whatever he pleases (Ps 115:3). But he could do a lot more than he does. His power is absolute in terms of what he could do, but of course he does not do all he could do. He does what in righteousness and wisdom he determines to do, what he decrees. This is called his 'ordinate' power, power applied to a given end. For example, Jesus could have called on his Father to send legions of angels to help him (absolute power) but he did not, so that Scripture would be fulfilled (Matt 26:53-4). His ordinate power is directed by his righteous will. Is anything too hard for the Lord? No. Will he therefore do everything he could do? No.

5. What God, Thankfully, Cannot Do

God cannot contradict his being, as in dying, which would be a contradiction of his necessary existence, of his eternity, of his spirituality and his aseity (self-sufficiency). God cannot contradict his character, for example by lying as he is the God of Truth (Tit 1:2). He cannot do anything that contradicts any of his attributes, for example his omniscience. He cannot change his mind (Scriptures that suggest he does are to be seen as his changing not his mind but his revelation of his mind to us, e.g. Gen 6:6, 1 Sam 15:11 but c.f. v 29). He cannot contradict his stated purposes, such as being unfaithful to his promises (2 Tim 2:13). God cannot do what contradicts the nature of reality – for example make a square circle or a rock too heavy for him to lift. Such logical contradictions are unknown to him so to do them would be to contradict

his omniscience as well. From our perspective we might see these as ‘limitations’ on God’s exercise of his power but they are better seen as perfections of it, arising from his being, his character, his purposes or the nature of his creation. There are no weaknesses in God but only aspects of glory, for not to be able to die, or lie or be unfaithful or contradict his designs or purposes, is to be truly God.

6. God and Potential

While discussing God’s power (omnipotence) it is worth noting that God has no *potential*. A being with potential can grow and change. Neither is true of God. God is perfect and complete in every way. There is potential in what God determines to do in creation, but not within himself and, as we have seen, what he may do in creation would be acts of ordinate power, governed by the factors discussed above.

7. Power Defined

A typical definition of God’s power would be that of Stephen Charnock: “that ability and strength whereby he can bring to pass whatsoever he please”.[9] His first exercise of power is his self-subsistence, his aseity. It is of his essence to be able to do all that he wills, and he will do what he wills in accordance with his character. Power is what God is, and it is how he accomplishes things. “Power belongs to God” (Ps 62:11 – alongside steadfast love). After celebrating some of the works of God in creation Job concludes, “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (Job 26:11). The chapter begins however with “How you have helped him who has no power!” (26:1). Job is not addressing God but, sarcastically, his “worthless physicians” (13:4). It raises the question, from where does our power come?

9 Stephen Charnock, *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2 (Baker Book House (reprint): 1993) 13.

8. God's Power and Ours

"In him we live and move and have our being" Paul tells the Athenians, citing one of their own poets (Acts 17:28). We live by the power of God. All things were created and exist by his will (Rev 4:11) and of the Son it is said, "he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3). If this is true in creation and providence, then all the more so in redemption: "O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord…You have a mighty arm" (Ps 89:8,13), therefore "Blessed are the people who know the festal shout...For you are the glory of their strength; by your favour our horn is exalted" (89:15,17) – that is, God is the one who endows the king and his people with power. He delivers the weak (Ps 71:17-21) and helps his kings (20:6) and his prophets (Mic 3:8) and gives strength to his people (Zech 10:12). The strength of animals is his gift (Job 39:19,20); how much more the strength he gives his apostles to preach the gospel (Col 1:29; 1 Cor 15:10) and to enable sinners to receive it in regenerate hearts (Luke 18:26,27; John 3:5.6; 1 Cor 2:4,5,12; 2 Cor 5:17) and to love him (Eph 3:16-19). God's power is the source and origin of our power. When his servants are weak, it is his power that is demonstrated to his glory (2 Cor 12:9,10). God's people are not simply passive in relation to God's power. He urges us to call upon him (Isa 62:6,7; Eph 6:18; Col 4:2,3; 1 Thess 5:17) and the prayers of the saints have real influence in the courts of heaven, even bringing God's judgments on the earth (Rev 8:3-5).

V. Issues Concerning Power

Every sin is an abuse of power, a misdirection of the energy God gives us. It is true at the level of the individual, in family life, in society, in the state and in the church. At the cosmic level Satan is the arch abuser of power. We are accustomed to hearing of abuse of power in different spheres by totalitarian regimes, sexual predators and bullies. Whilst not ignoring the wider picture, I want to focus on what the church

may learn about the abuse of power from the biblical presentation of God's use of power and from analyses of power at work in the world.

1. Power and Sovereignty

If *power* is the ability and strength used to achieve one's purpose (following Charnock's definition of the power of God), *authority* is the institutional or structural context that legitimates the exercise of power. *Sovereignty* is the supreme rule in a society which normally enjoys authority to exercise power. Order is the end to which duly authorised sovereignty is justified in exercising power. God possesses sovereignty, authority and power to perfection and exercises them perfectly. We do not. Were God to rule us directly there would be no problem. However, he has ordained that in family, society and church there should be human government with varying forms of authority and sovereignty for the purpose of appropriate order. It would appear from the headship God gave Adam over Eve and creation (Gen 2:19-25; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 2:13,14) and the fact that there is authority in heaven (Matt 25:21,23; Luke 19:17,19) that some form of government was and would have been necessary even had there been no Fall, but certainly the Fall made government absolutely necessary and far more painful both to exercise and to be subject to.

What happens in human government? Too often power is exercised without or beyond the remit of legitimate authority, sovereignty becomes tyranny, and order becomes harsh control or even bondage. On the other hand, power may not be exercised adequately or at all, authority and sovereignty are ineffective, chaos and anarchy ensue.

What happened in Eden? Eve was deceived, Adam rebelled, power was exercised against the God who gives it. Behind power is an act of will informed by a mind with a certain picture of reality, in Adam's case and forever after a distorted view of reality informed by Satan's double lie – you shall be as God, you shall not die. This was rebellion against sovereignty and authority; disorder ensued. God did not

exercise power to stop this rebellion because it was within his decree that it happen. Here is an example of what looks like a strange inertia, a non-exercise of power when action seems called for. God is exercising power only within the parameters of his decree. He of course swings into action after the Fall – the encounter in the Garden, the imposition of the curse, the promise of grace (the *protevangelium*, Gen 3:15), the expulsion from Eden. God acts in accordance with his decree and his character, exhibiting righteousness and grace in perfect harmony. His sovereignty and authority remain intact, and power is exercised to restore order (redemption) in creation.

i. Power Absolute and Ordinate in Practice

God does not do all that he could. Absolute power refers to all that God could do, limited only by not contradicting his being or character. Ordained or ordinate power is what God actually does. The distinction is not without practical relevance. One of the effects of medieval nominalism was to drive something of a wedge between the will of God and his character.[10] In *Sovereignty: God, State and Self,*[11] American philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain discusses the relationship between God's power and his other attributes, notably his will. The God of Augustine and Aquinas never acted in capricious ways, she argues, but 'voluntarism' developed in the late middle ages in which God is particularly characterised by omnipotence and freedom, his will being primary among his attributes. The result is a God who is more likely to exercise power in arbitrary ways: "Medieval scholars argue that this idea exacted a severe cost, namely, that it

10 From Platonism, medieval theology held to the notion that Forms had real existence, for example, humanness, canineness, felineness, in which the common nature of humans, dogs and cats was anchored. These forms could by Christians be seen as rooted in the eternal Logos. This belief in 'real' universals was called 'Realism'. William of Ockham (c 1287-1347) believed that an extra-terrestrial realm of such universals was not real, nor necessary. For him, universals were only names (hence 'nominalism') and we are to look only at particular things as having objective reality. We do not need any factor other than the mind and individual things to explain the universals. Two dogs may be alike, as may two men, but they do not share a common nature. So, one asks, if this similarity between two men is not the result of a shared universal, why are they so similar? The reason is: the will of God. This emphasis on God's free and sovereign will, or 'voluntarism', traceable to Duns Scotus (1265-1308) thus developed alongside nominalism. See Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The weaving of a sacramental tapestry* (Eerdmans, 2011), chapter 4, pp 79-82, for a helpful discussion.

11 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self* (Basic Books: 2008).

diminished the intelligibility of the world and threw medieval thought and practice into a whirlwind of controversy from which it never recovered. For example, if God can act contrary to what we have come to understand as natural law, where does that leave earthly power and the understanding of selves?"[12] Whereas Thomism appealed to reason rather than authority, and Augustine appealed to love, the new emphasis on God's sovereignty, whilst revering God, meant his actions (for example, creation) became primarily acts of will rather than of reason or love.

The voluntaristic God, argues Elshtain, led to the voluntaristic prince. The seeds of absolute monarchy (epitomised in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*) reflected a view of God that saw his exercise of power unbound by his righteous character. William of Ockham, the leading nominalist, taught that "no act [is] evil except as prohibited by God and which cannot be made good if it be commanded by God", a doctrine "promoted and advanced by such as thinking nothing so essential to the Deity as uncontrollable power and arbitrary will".[13]

Of course, it is right to say that an act is right if God commands it, but it is only so because the will of God acts in perfect harmony with his righteous character (and so could never be 'evil'). Unlike Ockham, Aquinas, says Elshtain,

> *Retained the inner connection between God's reason, justice and love, and the manner in which God wills. God's omnipotence remains but he is bound in ways accessible to human reason and through the workings of grace. God's will is just, insisted Aquinas. It follows that God can do nothing contrary to his nature and to what he has ordained. God's ordained power offers a world that is stable and knowable: God will not pull the rug out from under us.*[14]

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12 Ibid., 35

13 As summarised by Ralph Cudworth, a Cambridge Platonist of the 17th century, cited in Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self,* 40.

14 Ibid., 22.

Elshtain concludes,

> *Suffice to say that with post-Ockham theology, God is less frequently represented as the fullness of reason and goodness than as the site of sovereign will. This latter vision came to dominate sovereignty talk and helped to lay the basis for the juristic conception of the state when man decided that he, too, could be sovereign in this way.*[15]

Ockham effectively said that absolute and ordained powers are one. He opposed the increasingly totalitarian direction of papal power but by concentrating attention on the sovereignty and authority of God, he ironically created the tools for absolutism to increase.

In all this one sees the danger of isolating or prioritizing the will, the 'sovereignty principle'. The simplicity of God means that this can never happen with him. The will which moves power will always act in concert with the other attributes. With fallen human beings, too, the will moves in concert with our *sinful* character – we are free, but the will is not, bound to our fallen nature. Where the will is exalted, ironically it becomes more in bondage to the flesh. Think of the temptation of Christ (Matt 4:1-11) – Satan was trying to tempt Jesus to an independent exercise of power, wrenched free from his mission and call to obedience to the Father.

It would be simplistic to say that this is behind all cases of abuse of power, but it may explain much. Perhaps authority, sovereignty, power, the 'man of action', are venerated too much; the will is exalted over other aspects of personhood and character. The will has traditionally been portrayed as autonomous – hence 'free will', as if it could be separated from the mind and from the nature of the person. This can however degenerate into a love of power, and indeed the 'will to power'. Men (or women) in positions of leadership, in society or church, can be particularly prone to separating the ability and energy to do something (power), from the moral character that should

15 Ibid,. p 27.

govern their behaviour. At the personal level it is seen in sexual abuse or bullying, at the political level in the lurch towards totalitarianism. Power corrupts, as Lord Acton said – or rather, it manifests the corruption of the flesh.

What can be done? At the structural level, forms of government that share power should be created. A biblical blend of democracy, aristocracy and monarchy (the many, the few and the one) is familiar enough in Protestant churches and in western politics and can work well. But at the personal level, perhaps we should indeed remind ourselves of the inseparability in God of power and will, reason, love and other attributes. So also, by us, should power be exercised in righteousness for the glory of God and the good of his people. True godliness reflects divine simplicity – one should perhaps call it 'integrity'.[16]

The triune nature of God also helps us here. Elshtain reports that in the fourteenth century "it was common for theologians to maintain that the Father has a form of absolute power that is beyond the power of the Son and the Spirit".[17] The equality of the three fades in favour of the absolutism of the one. The communal context of power is lost within God and then in the church. A firm grasp of the truth that God is both simple (his attributes are one essence and indivisible) and triune, keeps power in the proper context.

2. *Power and Knowledge*

The relation between power and truth is manifold. For example, does power decide what is true or not? Is might, right? In his lectures *Truth and Juridical Forms,* Michel Foucault recounts from the Greek play *Oedipus Rex* a chariot race between Menelaus and Antilochus. There is an infringement at the turn where there is a man placed to make sure the rules are followed. Menelaus lodges a protest against Antilochus

16 I am not suggesting we can perfectly reflect God's simplicity; apart from anything else, we have 'parts' – at the very least we are 'body and soul'; God does not and is not.

17 Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self,* 26.

who has won the race. How is the truth to be established? We might think – call the witness, the umpire on the spot. But no, Antilochus is challenged to swear by Zeus that he did not commit a foul. He refuses to do so thus giving himself away.[18] So how is truth established? Not by evidence but by a test that has no inherent relation to the issue to be resolved at all. It is a trial, a kind of power play, relying on a religious worldview and regard for conscience. It is an appeal to the gods / God as judge. In premodern times, guilt and innocence were established not by evidence but by ordeal – such as clutching a red-hot coal or being ducked in water. However irrational they seem (and became), these were originally not superstition but appeals to the God who knows all things and is our ultimate judge. One thinks of the test for adultery in Numbers 5:11-31 where the priest writes a curse and washes it off into water in which there is dust from the floor of the tabernacle. Here is God revealing the truth through ritual.

The Bible has many instances however where truth is not so much revealed as validated and established by power. Who is the true prophet? For example, in Egypt? The Exodus is, after creation, the greatest display of power in the Old Testament and power displays (miracles) accredit the servant of God, Moses, by whose hand God does miracles. Miracles attest to the authority of prophets, including Jesus the greatest of all (Acts 2:22, where "mighty works" translates *dunameis* c.f. Matt 11:10ff; Mark 6:2; Luke 19:37) and his apostles (2 Cor 12:12 – the "signs of a true apostle").[19]

The Bible therefore shows God using acts of power to accredit his servants and these are different from 'magic': they are done by the word, they are signs that point to the greater work of salvation or new creation, and they are performed in response to faith. Power supports the word and the work of the word and points to the God who performs it.

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18 Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works 1954-84* (Penguin Books:2002), 17,18.

19 Not all miracles attest the truth however, for false prophets can perform counterfeit signs (Deut. 13:1-5). The primary test is 'is this man speaking the word of God?' A straightforward test was given by God: does what this man says come to pass (Deut 18:20-22). More fundamentally, has he stood in the council of the LORD (Jer 23:18)?

Displays of divine power therefore presuppose that relativism has no place in God's world. There is a difference between the truth and falsehood and God will demonstrate that. The final demonstration of that distinction will be the final judgment at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Power does not reveal the truth but it does bear witness to it. The reality of absolute truth means too that truth can challenge power – the role of the prophet.

The relationship of power and knowledge has been brought to the fore by Michel Foucault, perhaps the most important philosopher on power in recent times. His radical relativism meant that there was no truth that stood above power. "Truth", Foucault says, "is 'a thing of this world' – meaning truth exists or is given and recognised only in worldly forms" and no means of verification used to determine truth are available to us in forms which we know to be definitive.[20] According to one scholar, he wanted "to generate doubt and discomfort" in the process of "extending our capacity for suspicion"[21] but he was not saying that all power was evil, just that it was dangerous . We have to avoid the Scylla of paranoia and universal suspicion and the Charybdis of a compulsive quest for foundationalist certainties and guarantees, both of which (in his view) impede the rational and responsible work of careful investigation.[22] The problem for the relativist of course is that it is not possible to stand outside this network to challenge power with an objective Truth.

Very simply, for Foucault, what a group in power determined was true, and becomes 'knowledge'. Foucault was not saying this is how it should be, but simply analysing how things were. He wanted to expose the power networks that lurked behind the supposed objectivity of science, politics and religion. We are familiar with the trope that 'knowledge is power'; for Foucault 'power is knowledge', though in neither

20 Colin Gordon, Introduction in James D. Faubion ed. *Michel Foucault: Power: Essential Works 1954-84* (p xviii.

21 Gordon, Ibid., p xvii.

22 Gordon, Ibid., p xix.

case do we mean the two things are identical. Foucault did not assert that 'power equates to knowledge' – he insistently denied that this is what he was saying – but he did argue that they were inseparable: "the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process".[23] His claim is that power relations stand behind both institutions and stated ideals.[24] In society, knowledge develops within, and masks, power networks. Truth claims are power grabs. Spheres of knowledge (and Foucault particularly examined the social management of madness, sexuality and penal systems) emerge within the practice of power, and power relations in which we live form us as individuals. "Government", for Foucault, is "the conduct of others' conduct".[25] He once said, "nothing is more untenable than a political regime which is indifferent to truth; but nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to prescribe the truth".[26]

He most fully worked out his thinking on 'power-knowledge'[27] in *Discipline and Punish*, a history of penal systems and prison. Foucault sees three stages of penal system, the pre-modern (characterised by torture), the early modern (18th century – the era of punishment) and the modern (19th and 20th centuries – the era of discipline). The shocking thing, says Foucault, is that this last phase is no better than the earlier, to us perhaps more primitive and crueller, forms of punishment. All are forms of control and oppression. All that changes is the mechanisms and technologies of power. Power relations are integral to society; history is the "endlessly repeated play of dominations",

23 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 224.

24 James K.A. Smith, *Who's afraid of Postmodernism?* (Baker Academic, 2006), 877.

25 See Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power: Essential Works,* 341.

26 Cited by Gordon, *Michel Foucault: Power: Essential Works,* xxxix-xl, from a late interview by Foucault.

27 Which may, tentatively, be defined thus: 'power-knowledge is the cognitive content behind acts of power, characterising regimes or individuals in power, which informs, motivates and directs power acts, by which the regime/individual seeks to control, and which it seeks to impose upon, those under its jurisdiction, and which then escalate into further impositions of knowledge and power'.

the only drama being staged.[28] The prison is a microcosm, Foucault is saying, of society itself.

For Foucault his view of power is epitomized by the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham[29] (whom he regarded as more important for our society than Kant or Hegel).[30] In Bentham's model for a prison, every prisoner is isolated in a small room where they all may be observed at all times by a single person in the central tower. Each person can be seen but cannot see the observer or each other. The system combines visibility (total, of the individual) and unverifiability (he never knows whether he is being watched or not by the observer – who is in effect invisible[31]). Bentham envisioned the same arrangement for prisons, factories, schools, barracks, hospitals and madhouses. He also acknowledged that it did not matter who governed the Panopticon or according to what moral code – it was effective as a system of control, not just a "dream building" but "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form...a figure of political technology...'.[32] This is how Foucault applies Bentham's idea, more widely than as a prison:

> *The Panopticon is a ring-shaped building in the middle of which there is a yard with a tower at the center. The ring is divided into little cells that face the interior and exterior alike. In each of these little cells there is, depending on the purpose of each institution, a child learning to write, a worker at work, a prisoner correcting himself, a madman living his madness. In the central tower there is an observer. Since each cell faces both the inside and the outside, the observer's*

28 Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* Ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142*;* cited in Smith, op cit., 87.

29 *Discipline and Punish,* chapter 3. He calls the Panopticon the "architectural figure" of the disciplinary society, op cit, 200. Foucault writes: "Discipline…is a type of power…comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures…a technology"; and claims that it may be taken over by many kinds of institutions, so a "disciplinary society" is formed (p215-16). It reduces people as political forces and maximises them as useful forces, (p221). Historically Foucault traced the development of 'mechanisms of discipline' (as opposed to 'punishment') throughout the 17th and 18th centuries (p209). He asserts that in England it was 'private religious groups' that carried out for a long time the functions of social discipline (p213).

30 Michael Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," in *Power: Essential Works 1954-84*, 58.

31 For Foucault, it is the apparent neutrality and political invisibility of systems of control that make them dangerous, and transferable between political systems: who invented concentration camps, for example? (Britain!).

32 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205.

> *gaze can traverse the whole cell; there is no dimly lit space, so everything the individual does is exposed to the gaze of an observer…The Panopticon is the utopia of a society and a type of power that is basically the society we are familiar with at present, a utopia that was actually realized …We are a society where panopticism reigns.*[33]

Moreover, asserts Foucault, in such a society power rests not on inquiry (the judicial form whereby truth was traditionally ascertained) but on 'surveillance' (supervision) and 'examination'. Inquiry was interested in *what happened*. Supervision and examination are interested not in reconstituting an event in the past to ascertain whether it deserved punishment or not (that is, has a crime been committed?), but in *whether someone is behaving as he should in accordance with norms or rules*. Norms are a major tool of control – ditch norms to obtain freedom.

The difference between 'inquiry' and 'surveillance' may seem slight but think of the difference between a crime and 'anti-social behaviour', or police recording non-crime hate incidents. Does Foucault have a point? Such surveillance, he says, grows to make "the punishment and repression of illegalities a regular function, co-extensive with society".[34] Do we think perhaps of all-seeing CCTV cameras?

The plague-ridden city, for Foucault, is the ideal demonstration of the disciplinary society,[35] where complete control, regulated organisation and constant surveillance, are seen in full bloom, the disciplinarian's dream. We might, in an uncharitable mood, call it totalitarianism. We might, in an even more uncharitable moment, think of the Covid era, where supposed knowledge kicked power into action, and then power created an environment where knowledge developed and on the basis of that knowledge, shared by an elite, decisions were made, laws were promulgated, people were ruled. *Raison*

33 Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms", 58.

34 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 82.

35 Ibid., 195-200.

d'état is perhaps a valid principle in emergencies and at moments of urgent national security, but it can easily become accepted as normal.

James K.A. Smith uses the 1975 film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* to illustrate power as Foucault sees it.[36] Set in a mental hospital, strategies aimed toward cure are in fact systems of control. The hospital is a machine that 'works over' its patients by its power. From a glass-enclosed nurse's station, Nurse Ratched keeps watch over the ward like a warden from a prison watchtower. Institutional power is portrayed as attempting to whitewash its mechanisms with paternalistic claims about 'cure' and 'the good of the patient'.[37] This is precisely Foucault's point about the principles driving penal systems. They may not be as harsh today in terms of punishment but they are about control. And those same principles are applied in other institutions, indeed in society at large: "all of us…are subject to mechanisms of control and repression'.[38] Different eras result in different configurations of society, but they result only in different constellations of power. Whether torture, punishment or discipline, all aim at control. Power is unavoidable and constitutive of society; one cannot have society that is not fundamentally characterised by power relations. Power, for Foucault, means force relations, relations of domination, control of one group by another.

We may think Foucault's thesis gloomy in the extreme, driven by a neo-Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion, perhaps indeed the ultimate conspiracy theory: the whole of society is one big power grab, Big Brother out to control you.[39] 'In power-knowledge we live and move and have our being' might be his text. One may think all he is doing is describing the impact of culture and our environment on us. What he does do however is to alert us to culture as the presence of power, and our role as subjects within that context.

36 Smith, *Who's afraid of Postmodernism?*, 81-8.

37 Ibid., 84.

38 Ibid., 89

39 Foucault's analysis of history in *Discipline and Punish* came under attack from some historians; see David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (Verso, 2019; first published by Hutchinson, 1993), 401-06.

Foucault did have something to say about the church, as he saw the late Middle Ages (15th and 16th centuries) as the time when the idea of 'pastoral government', the "idea that each individual should be governed in a relationship to truth, composed of dogma",[40] extending over secular society. In *The Subject and Power,*[41] Foucault asserts that the modern western state integrated into a new shape Christian 'pastoral power', pointing out that Christianity is the only religion that has organised itself into a Church (he has the Roman Catholic Church in the forefront of his mind). It is a form of power whose ultimate aim is individual salvation in the next world; is prepared to sacrifice itself for the flock, as well as to command – so is different from royal power; that looks after each individual, not only the whole community, throughout life; that cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, exploring their souls and knowing their consciences, with an ability to direct it; and is 'oblative' (directed at worship). Though no longer widely effective in its ecclesiastical form, this type of power has spread, argues Foucault, and multiplied outside the Church and informs the post-medieval state, healthcare, the workplace, penal systems, education, sanatoriums and the military. It became co-extensive with and central to what Foucault calls the 'disciplinary' society.[42] The goal of 'pastoral power' became this-worldly; the officials of power increased, taking in police, private benefactors, philanthropists, healthcare officials and many others.

So, while Foucault has no particular love for Christianity,[43] he does see that it is in a *secularised* form that 'pastoral power' has developed and become a network of 'force-relations'. What he is suspicious of more fundamentally, however, is what this 'pastoral power' has grown into. Foucault is describing a ubiquitous presence of

40 Gordon, op cit, xxxix. For a discussion by Foucault of the God – shepherd – king theme in Christian and other literature, and how this influenced western ideas of government, see "Omnes et Singulatim,"in *Power: Essential Works 1954-84*, 298-325.

41 *Power: Essential Works 1954-84*, 326-48.

42 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Power: Essential Works 1954-84*, 332-36.

43 Although he retained what David Macey calls a "lingering admiration" for the church, especially when, as in South America, it stood up for the poor and persecuted; *The Lives of Michel Foucault,* 351.

knowledge and power whereby one group dominates others. In the apocalyptic words of his younger contemporary, Bernard-Henry Lévy, "total power is synonymous with total knowledge, and the shadow of Bentham's panopticon looms large over all modern societies".[44]

But, *contra* Foucault, all-power and all-knowledge exist only in God. When power is abused by man you have the horrors of which he speaks, though we could point to societies where cruel domination is not inherent/endemic. In God alone however are omniscience and omnipotence pure and simple; by God alone are knowledge and power perfectly harmonised and put to perfect use.

What do we see in our churches? The pastoral gaze will caringly look after the flock but must not become the surveillance of panopticism. We know in part and will be satisfied with that. Power must be exercised in accordance with character. Unlike an atheist we need not be relativists. Our power is sourced by and subject to a higher power, and our knowledge is subject to a higher truth.

It is salutary to acknowledge however that our knowledge (the truth by which we live) will be formed to some extent within human power networks and is not as pure as we may like to think. The way a leadership or a church culture over the years, or even generations, produces a kind of Christian subculture by which it operates (not always harmfully of course) should be addressed by Scripture. The Reformed church must always be reforming. It should be of concern to us because whatever 'discipline' characterises our churches, will become co-extensive with the church and such cultures create us as individuals and if there is abuse of power that will detrimentally affect those living within that network. Power is productive, for good or ill. Aware that our culture will greatly influence the people we are, we must create healthy church cultures and put in place counter measures – counter-knowledge, counter-disciplines and so a counter-culture.

44 See Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 386.

3. Power in Weakness: The Cross

When Jeroboam asked Rehoboam to treat Israel kindly, Rehoboam's older advisers advised him to "be a servant" to them; his younger men encouraged him to oppress them further. Rehoboam followed the latter course, and in the providence of God the kingdom split (1 Kings 12:1-16). Two different ways of using power: to serve, or to oppress. Foucault would have immediately recognised Rehoboam's response, a stereotypical 'force-relation'. The way of service however is not so common or popular; indeed, by such as Nietzsche (a considerable influence on Foucault) it would be derided as Christian weakness and folly.

Yet as Christians we cannot consider power without considering Christ, and we cannot consider Christ without turning to the cross. We want to look more now at power at the cross, before closing with power in the church.

To recap a little: Power in the Bible is reflected in God's names, and demonstrated in creation, providence and redemption. At every stage God acts through Christ, through whom all things were made (John 1:3, Col 1:16) and in whom they hold together (Col 1:17). All things are reconciled to God by him through the cross (Col 1:20). In all his dealings with creation God's exercise of power is qualified: by his character so that he does nothing discordant with his holiness and love; by his counsel, for his decree directs all he does; by covenant, for he relates to creation and notably to his redeemed people by covenant; and by the nature of creation, for though he can work without and against means, he will never act in such a way as to contradict the nature of what he has made. God exercises and directs his power within his chosen channels.

There is however a being in creation who opposes God, yet never outside God's sovereignty or counsel. He is called variously "the adversary" ("Satan", e.g. Job 1:6-9), "the slanderer" ("the devil", e.g. Matt 4:1), "the enemy" (Matt 13:25) or "the destroyer" ("Apollyon", Rev 9:11) amongst other names. He and his cohorts are called

"the rulers…the authorities… cosmic powers over this present darkness…the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12; c.f. 2:2; John 12:31). His story spans the Bible, from his presence in Eden in the guise of a serpent, to being cast into the lake of fire prepared for him (Gen 3:1; Rev 20:10; Matt 25:41). The work of Christ in redemption is described as to destroy him and his works (1 John 3:8, Heb 2:11). But how would this be done?

In the Incarnation God performs arguably the greatest act of power to that point in the conception by the Spirit of his Son within the womb of Mary ("the power of the Most High will overshadow you", Luke 1:35) uniting the eternal Word with a sinless human nature so that the God-man is born. It was of the essence of Jesus' life and ministry that he obey the Father (John 4:34, 17:4; Heb 10:7). He obeyed even to death, death on a cross (Phil 2:8). In doing so, though never relinquishing anything of being God except the unclouded enjoyment of glory, he took on also the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil 2:6-8). Thus, to display power was never in itself primary or central in the work of Christ; all was in the service of, a means to, obediently carrying out the redemptive purposes of God. Indeed, the devil's temptation of Christ (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) was to get him to exercise power rather than accept the role of humble and human dependence and obedience that alone would accomplish the work of redemption. "If you are the Son of God..." (Matt 4:3,6) is an invitation to exercise independent power, the sovereignty principle. Christ does not succumb.

This obedience would lead him to the cross, as Paul says (Phil 2:8). Redemption needed the exercise of power but only in the service of righteousness. What divine power was exercised at the cross? The power of Jesus' will, moved by love, is immense. Further, it was by the Spirit that Christ was enabled to offer himself without blemish to God (Heb 9:14). But redemption required the satisfaction of God's law, both in terms of precept (Christ as God-man perfectly obeyed the law of God thus

providing a perfect righteousness to the Father and for imputation to his people) and of penalty (bearing the just punishment for the sins of his people thus removing from them the wrath of God). The real battle with the evil one was not a power display but a provision of righteousness that met all the demands of God, not "by the sheer power of a king, but by the sacrifice of a priest to make propitiation for our sins" (Heb 2:17).[45] Satan's greatest threat over sinners is eternal damnation for unforgiven sin, hence his determination to accuse the saints (Rev 12:10-12). Thus, Satan is cast down for now he has no more claim over God's people (John 12:31; Rev 12:7-12). Thus, the crucified Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and God's weakness (at the cross) is shown to be stronger than man's strength (1 Cor 1:24,25). The saints' victory over Satan is "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev 12:11).

There was on the third day a mighty act of power in Jesus' resurrection, for by it he was declared Son of God in power (Rom 1:4). And when he returns, there will an immense display of power in his appearing, the resurrection of all people, the final judgment and in bringing in the new heaven and new earth.

4. Power in the Church

Meanwhile what of the proper exercise of power in the church? We have seen that the key to the right exercise of God's power is that he only exercises power in accordance with his character and his purposes. Moreover, the power we need to see exercised in church must be his power graciously and righteously exercised. Therefore, we see the purpose of power.

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45 Joel R.Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology vol 1: Revelation and God* (Crossway, 2019), 1147.

i. The Purpose of Power

In the era of redemption, the purpose of power from a Christian perspective in the world and the church is to unite all things in Christ (Eph 1:10), in particular the restoration of fallen human beings into union and communion with God in him. This entails restoring in us the image of God. Foucault's analysis of power as a ubiquitous network of force relations is insightful about the world as it is but gives no guidance as to how power should be used. The direction of others' conduct (Foucault's understanding of government) is not in itself a bad thing, but everything depends on what it is aimed at and how it is done.

In the church God is aiming, penultimate to his own glory, at the restoration of sinners into his image and the image of his Son (Rom 8:29; Eph 4:23,24; Col 3:10) or as Paul says elsewhere, until "Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19) or believers are "mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). This means the perfection of holiness and love (Eph 1:4; 3:17-19; 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Jn 3:2,3,23; 4:7).

Foucault's understanding of pastoral power in its early ecclesiastical context is not inaccurate in its assessment of what this means: to do with salvation, involving the inner person, requiring sacrifice, aiming at worship. Using the Bible, however, rather than Foucault as our guide, the aim of pastoral care/government/use of power is the restoration of sinners to fellowship with and the worship of God under the government of God: "The Lord reigns...Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!" (Ps 99:1,5). We belong to God, we are to be restored to him: "It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" (Ps 100:3,4); "Worthy are you our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev 4:11). It is for his flock that Christ died and that elders are called to live and die (John 1:11; Acts 20:28). Therefore, pastoral care is

a means to the end of bringing a sanctified people into the presence of God, ultimately to see God.

This means perfect freedom for a person, as we will see below. Our moral quality must be holiness with love, our nature the renewed image of God in Christ, our disposition and activity worship, our relation to all other creatures, one of freedom (not meaning isolation). The environment to be created in churches is freedom, not oppression. Pastoral ministry, while always being personal, is to be as unobtrusive as possible so that the Spirit's power is free to work in our worship, preaching and government. This means that the spiritual nature of the work must be ever kept in the foreground. The aim is spiritual, the means must be spiritual. Things go wrong in churches when a human, measurable, quantifiable goal usurps the place of the goals God has set and when ungodly means of achieving those goals usurp those that God has ordained. How then is power to be rightly exercised?

ii. The Exercise of Power

If the purpose of power is to bring us to God, the exercise of power must be to allow God's power to work in his people. We can trace this in terms of character, counsel, covenant, creation and cross.

First, the *character* of the one exercising power must be godly, reflecting both the nature and the character of the God he serves. As the sinner's life grows out of his sinful nature, so the regenerate character grows out of the renewed nature – or should do. Godliness therefore reflects simplicity – complete harmony of being. Power must be exercised in accordance with that godly character. The will must not be elevated above the character. Sovereignty is of the Lord, not a church leader.

Second, there is an overall plan we are following – God's *counsel* or determination to unite all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). Led by Scripture and the Spirit we know what we are aiming at. We seek therefore to present everyone mature in Christ (Col 1:28).

Third, power must be exercised in accordance with the *covenantal* purposes of God – seeking to bring sinners into the new covenant and all its benefits (see e.g. Heb 8:10-12), then applying the principles of new covenant ministry to foster their growth in Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, these means are fundamentally Spirit (2 Cor 3:3,17; c.f. Zech 4:6 – "Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts")[46] and Word (4:2-6; 10:3,4)[47]. What the Spirit brings is freedom (2 Cor 3:17) in the sense of freedom from bondage to sin and death but here probably particularly from the law as a means of justification (the covenant of works refracted through the old covenant); and the Spirit transforms the believer into Christ's image (v18). Nor should we forget here that the Lord's Supper is the meal of the new covenant (Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25).

Fourth, power must be used in accordance with the *created nature* of human beings – to be inviolate by human engineering. The pastoral task is the exercise of power to shepherd the soul (Heb 13:17 – your leaders are "keeping watch over your souls"; and 1 Pet 2:25 – Christ is the "Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"). But that does not mean that only the soul is precious or that the body is of no importance. Far from it, the spiritual life is to be lived out in the body, the sins of the body are to be mortified, the body is to be used for righteousness (Rom 6:12-20 – where Paul again speaks of freedom – this time freedom from bondage to sin's dominion). The body itself will one day be transformed, to be like Christ's glorious body (Phil 3:21). To say it is a spiritual ministry, is not at all to deny or devalue the physical but to remember that it is first of all the human being as before God – *coram Deo* – that is the focus of pastoral care, and that the soul/mind/heart is the engine room of the new life and

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46 C.f. also Rom 15:13 – "so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope"; 1 Cor 2:4,5: "my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"; 1 Thess 1:4,5: "the gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction".

47 Elders must be "apt to teach" (1 Tim 3:2) and be devoted to reading the Scripture, teaching and exhorting (4:13) and be ready to "Preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2).

the matrix of divine power. The life that is nurtured there will be active in the home, at work, in church, in politics, in society – and to none of these will the pastor be indifferent though his influence in each case will be more or less indirect.

When does the exercise of power go wrong? When official power (that is, of one in legitimate office, an elder or deacon) is abused and decisions or actions are forced on an individual or a congregation; or when unofficial power, such as the power of relationship, exploiting people's deference to authority or unwillingness to oppose their leaders or dislike of confrontation, is relied on to achieve a goal. There are many aspects to this – lovelessness, ambition, pride, the 'Diotrephes' syndrome, wanting to be first (3 John 9), managerial models of ministry – but much would be avoided if (i) church leaders were to remember that the flock belongs to the Lord, not to them – "It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps 100:3); the flock does not belong to the undershepherd; (ii) the aim of their charge is fundamentally spiritual, love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5). Thus, results cannot easily be measured though fruit can be seen.

In addition, pastoral care must be aware of the networks of power in which people live and which influence their thinking – indeed to some extent, create them. We think, for example, of the materialism of the west or the sexualisation of young people and children. Most mass media aims to create an audience for marketing; the provision of communication, information and services, ostensibly the primary service on offer, is only ancillary to that main goal. We are familiar with the extensive grasp of Meta, Alexa or Siri, X or Instagram. Here is power-knowledge at work, a culture forming minds and perhaps especially young minds.[48] Are we able to produce counter-

48 "At least 70% of the UK population - more than 47 million people – use a platform owned by Meta every day. Most are unwittingly being tracked as they go about their day to day lives. It's not just the data that we upload into the media sites themselves, but a whole empire of data about other activities that is fed back to Meta, allowing them to customise and optimise their ad business, which brought them $134bn in revenue last year". Matilda Davies, *The Week*, 6 April 2024.

cultures? Do we have a counter-knowledge/truth to convey and counter-power to apply? James K.A. Smith describes the way in which marketing capitalises on human desires and uses tools of what Foucault would call 'disciplinary practice' to create its audience: making us internalise its values, using techniques of repetition, images and other strategies, communicating truth in ways that are rarely propositional or cognitive, so that we become the kind of person who wants that car, that beer, those clothes or that holiday. The covertness of the operation (the invisibility of power) and its apparent neutrality are what make it so powerful.[49]

Within churches also, as mentioned before, power-knowledge develops. Notice the way Paul uses in his letters vocabulary such as freedom, slavery or captivity. The situation in Colosse was challenged by Paul thus: "See to it that no-one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:8). Or in the Galatian churches where Judaistic legalism was eating out the freedom of the gospel, where false brothers "had slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery" (Gal 2:4). "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). Or in Ephesus, where Paul assures his readers that Christ is seated in heaven and rules "above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above very name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:21) and that we are to see where the real "powers" against us are ranged, in the heavenlies, and we are to stand against them in Christ and in the armour of God (6:10-20). Pastoral work is to liberate sinners and Christians from various power-knowledge networks to realise their true freedom, to come under the government of God, to worship him through Christ and in the Spirit. Perfect freedom may perhaps be seen as the finite, dependent 'imprint' of divine aseity in that, if aseity is God's independence, so true freedom in

49 Smith, op cit 104-05.

Christ is creaturely independence from bondage to sin, Satan, death, and all false gods and ideologies. We are liberated from false lords and powers to depend solely on the true God. The more dependent on him we are, the more free we are. It is an imprint of his aseity, not an imitation of it, because of course we are dependent and God is not, but it is a creaturely independence.

Counter-formation is an important part of our task. Let us lead worship reverently (Heb 12:28) in Spirit and truth, according to the word, observing the sacraments. We have a crisis of worship in western evangelicalism, as if how we worship were more or less up to us and our preferences – which is to create another human power-knowledge network. We need to recover the regulative principle as a principle of liberation, seeking God's kingdom and righteousness before all else, substituting the true God for our idols. Thus will the image of God be renewed in us, in the context of the church; we become the people of God in company with one another, not alone.

But the method of helping people to achieve this is by producing freedom for them, realising that the work is God's. When church leaders impose their own goals and visions, then people become fodder for merely human power and tragedy results. Doing God's work with God's people must be done in God's way; then the power will be God's and the glory will be his (2 Cor 12:9-10). This entails duly-appointed men called and commissioned to the ministry of word and sacrament, engaged in the task of shepherding established by God (Ezek 34:1-16; John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-5) who will work with the flock for their joy (2 Cor 1:24).

The Christian is not merely passive in relation to God's power. In prayer, impotence takes hold of omnipotence. The child leans on the Father, in reverence and dependence, calling for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, recognising his need for even simple daily provision, as well as mercy for our sins and protection from evil (Matt 6:9-13). We pray for the preaching of the gospel (Eph 6:18,19) and for the

Holy Spirit's constant influence in our midst (Rom 12:12). If we want to experience God's power, we will be people of prayer.

Fifth, and finally, at every point we find that *the cross* is integral to pastoral living, as Paul outlines in 2 Corinthians. "My power is made perfect in weakness" was the truth of the cross of Christ. It is the truth for Christian living. And as Paul particularly means in context, it is the truth behind pastoral work. As even Foucault saw, and church leaders sometimes forget, sacrifice is integral to pastoral care. Pain does not have to be sought; merely obey – this was the heartbeat of Jesus' life and death. Obedience is the way of love and righteousness, of serving rather than being served, of dying daily, of being "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities". For God's power is made perfect in weakness: "when I am weak then I am strong". Then the power *of God* is made perfect; then the power *of Christ* rests on me (2 Cor 12:9,10). Thus, his work is done in his way.

About the author

Mostyn Roberts is a former solicitor; retired pastor with 30 years of ministry, including 25 years at Welwyn Evangelical Church; former lecturer in systematic theology at London Seminary; and author of numerous books and articles.

FAITH AND REASON

REFLECTIONS ON THEISTIC PROOFS

Robert Letham

I. Abstract

When considering the nature and purpose of arguments for the existence of God, much depends on those for whom the particular argument is intended and what it is designed to achieve. Moreover, we must address the question of the legitimacy and validity of such an argument. This paper explores the classic theistic proofs – particularly those of Aquinas and Anselm – and evaluates their strengths and limitations in establishing the existence and identity of God. It argues that while *a posteriori* arguments (like Aquinas's Five Ways and modern design arguments) may suggest the existence of a supreme being, they cannot reveal the triune God of Christian revelation. Likewise, *a priori* arguments (such as Anselm's ontological proof) offer rich theological reflection for believers but are not designed to persuade sceptics. Ultimately, the paper contends that God is not the conclusion of human reasoning but its starting point, and that the knowledge of God is rooted not in abstract proofs but in divine self-revelation through Scripture and the person of Christ.

II. A Sceptical Introduction

1. Modern Arguments with an Apologetic Purpose to Persuade Unbelievers

In the wake of criticisms raised in the Enlightenment, there have arisen a range of arguments intended to convince atheists or agnostics of the existence of God. Often these have proceeded from the works of God in creation. Discussion of how to approach such persons has driven considerable interest in apologetics in the

USA. One well-known Christian philosopher and theologians has recalled how, the first time he travelled to America, one of the first questions put to him was "Say, what is your apologetic methodology?" Sometimes I wonder about the extent to which those obsessed by apologetics have hands-on experience. In this paper, I do not intend to discuss these arguments in any detail. However, at the end of the paper, we will consider a better way.

As is well known, the Bible never attempts to prove that God exists. Those who say 'there is no God' are classed as fools (Ps 14:1, 53:1). Behind this lie some excellent reasons.

First, the premises of an argument have greater certainty than the conclusion to which the argument attempts to reach.[1] The aim would be to establish the existence of God but in order to do so a rational and reasonable discussion must proceed, at least tacitly, from commonly agreed principles, among which the intended conclusion does not feature. To enter such a discussion is to give the game away from the start.

Moreover, most arguments intend to establish that there is a supreme entity and cannot describe the nature of that entity. Alternatively, the focus is on a certain property, a supreme designer, a first cause, or the like rather than the full characteristics of that entity. As we shall see, even if such an argument were successful, the most it could establish would be the existence of a supreme entity. Such a being would be an idol, ruled out by the first commandment. It could not prove the existence of the one true and living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In short, such a process is a blind alley.

Furthermore, since God the Trinity is personal, one can ask whether a logical argument is appropriate. Do you try to prove by logic the existence of person A, B, or C, of a friend or family member? Is it not by introduction, recognition and communion? This is *personal* knowledge, in which intuitive and relational modes of interaction

1 Apart from simple deductive arguments.

are the distinguishing markers. We will return to this later. For now, as the composer Verdi remarked in a letter to Francesco Florimo on 5 January 1871, "Let us return to antiquity; it will be a step forward."[2]

2. Thomas Aquinas Enters the Stage

At the start of his *Summa theologica*, Aquinas (1225-1274) refers to various types of arguments to establish the existence of God. On the question of whether it can be demonstrated that God exists, in *ST* 1.2.2., in the *sed contra* section, he argues against the proposal that God's existence cannot be demonstrated and in favour of its being possible. He refers to Romans 1:19-20 as establishing his point. He suggests that demonstration can be done in two ways: *a priori*, from what is prior absolutely, and *a posteriori*, from what is prior relatively, only to us, from those of his effects that are known to us back to their cause. These alternatives are *preambles* to the articles of faith and are known by reason; therefore, they are not themselves articles of faith. Since the effects are not proportionate to the cause, we cannot, by this means, know God perfectly as he is in his essence. Yet his existence can be clearly demonstrated, so Aquinas maintains.

III. ***A posteriori*** *Arguments*

1. The Five Ways

In *ST* 1.2.3., 'Whether God exists?' Aquinas argues that the existence of God can be proved in five ways.

First, Aquinas presents the argument from motion, or change. It is certain, and is evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Whatever is in

2 In *Autobiografia dalle lettere,* ed. Carlo Graziani (Verona, 1941), cited in 'Notes on the Quartets' by Michael Steinburg in Robert Winter, *The Beethoven Quartet Companion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 269.

motion is put in motion by another. Motion is nothing other than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. Nothing can be put in a state of actuality other than by something that is itself in a state of actuality. Fire is actually hot and brings wood, which is potentially hot, into a state of being actually hot. Therefore whatever is in motion is put in motion by another. Craig comments that what is meant is that: "Anything in change is being actualized by a being already actual," not a potential being. Thus, "anything changing cannot at the point at which it is changing cause itself to change. It must be shaped by something else ... this something else, if it is in a process of change, is also being changed by something else, and so on."[3] But this cannot go on to infinity, Aquinas continues, since unless there were a first cause of motion there could be no subsequent motion. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other. And this first mover is God. Brian Davies summarises pithily, "There must be something which causes change or motion in things without itself being changed or moved by anything."[4] Aquinas has the same argument in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1:13. It is based on Aristotle, *Physics*, 8:5, who states that no infinite regression is possible, "we must reach one first cause – God."[5] This is what is known as God – as the unmoved mover.[6]

The second way is closely related and is based on causality; in particular the nature of the efficient causes. In the world of sense we find that there is an order of efficient causes. Davies, in discussing causality, refers to grandparents, who cause the birth of grandchildren via the production of their children even though they have no immediate connection with the birth of the grandchildren and may even be dead at the time, whereas the statue of Nelson is supported by the column underneath at all times

3 William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibnitz* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 172–73.

4 Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 29.

5 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book One: God* (Anthony C. Pegis; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 95.

6 In response to the ideas advanced in the last century of a suffering God, I believe it was Colin Gunton who suggested that these theorists were advocating 'a most moved unmover.'

and so is the cause of Nelson remaining in place. Thus, "in the five ways, God is not a cause who at some time past set a process going which then in time had certain effects. He is the cause of effects which depend on him *as they occur*."[7] Aquinas continues; that it is not possible for a thing to be the efficient cause of itself, for then it would be prior to itself. It is not possible in efficient causes to go back to infinity. If there is no first cause there will be no intermediate or ultimate causes. Moreover, if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity there would be no intermediate or ultimate causes. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first cause, "something which is not itself caused to be by anything,"[8] which is God.

The third way is taken from what Aquinas describes as possibility and necessity, which we might better understand as the difference between necessary and contingent being. In nature, Thomas writes, we find things that are possible to be and not to be [contingent, in other words]. It is impossible for these entities always to exist since at some time or other they may not be or may not have been. On the other hand, if everything were contingent, it would be possible for there to be nothing. Therefore not all beings are possible [contingent]; there must exist something that is necessary, that *must* exist. A necessary being either exists by itself or another. It is impossible for necessary beings that exist by another to go on to infinity, as above. Therefore, there must be a being that exists necessarily and does so of itself, not from another. This is what people refer to as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Things are generally regarded as good, true, noble, and the like. In this they are measured by something that is the best. The maximum in any genus is the cause of that genus. Therefore, there must be for all beings something that is the cause of their goodness, truth, and nobility. This we call God.

7 Davies, *Aquinas*, 27.

8 Davies, *Aquinas*, 29.

The fifth way is taken from the government of the world. Things that lack intelligence are driven to fulfil their end or purpose. Evidently, they are driven to that end by a being with superior power and intelligence. Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all things are directed to their end or purpose. This is God. This is a form of argument for design.

In each of these cases advanced by Aquinas, it is clear that the movement of thought is from effects in the world to the ultimate cause of those effects. Here we see the influence of Aristotle, for whom knowledge is based on sense experience. For Aquinas, "all our knowledge originates from sensory intuitions," with the result that he favoured *a posteriori* arguments.[9] We can know of God only what is evident to us through our senses, proceeding from the world to God, from effect to cause. We begin with the world in which we live.

None of these arguments can establish that the being in question is the God who has revealed himself in Scripture. To this Aquinas agreed, holding to the fact that the Trinity is revealed and is not reached by reason. As with other arguments that have developed later in response to post-Enlightenment scepticism, the best that can be established is that there is a supreme entity which has certain powers – design, government of the universe, the efficient cause of all things in creation, and is the prime mover. Each of these categories highlights certain properties of that entity, but no more. These arguments do not say anything about the nature of God, as Aquinas acknowledges; still less can they establish that the supreme entity in question is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 Craig, *Cosmological Argument*, 160, citing Gilson.

We need to add to these five ways, Aquinas's existence argument, which appears throughout his work and Davies argues is fundamental to his thought.[10] It is presented explicitly in *ST* 1a.65.1:

If things that differ agree in some point, there must be some cause for that agreement, since things diverse in nature cannot be united of themselves. Hence whenever in different things some one thing common to all is found, it must be that these different things receive that one thing from some one cause, as different bodies that are hot receive their heat from fire. But being is found to be common to all things, however otherwise different. There must, therefore, be the principle of being from which all things in whatever way existing have their being, whether they are invisible and spiritual or visible and corporeal.

In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas refers to an argument by John of Damascus about the government of the world that is obviously similar and was also suggested by Averroes:

Contrary and discordant things cannot be parts of one order except by someone's government which enables all and each to tend to a definite end. In the world we find things of diverse natures come together under one order, not rarely or by chance, but always or for the most part. There must therefore be some being by whose providence the world is governed. This we call God.[11]

As Craig says, there is:

... an element of agnosticism in Aquinas's philosophy of God. We are driven by his proofs to assert that God is, but we do not know what God is. He has no essence except his act of existing. This is why Thomas employs the via negativa in eliminating certain qualities that can not be applied to God.[12]

He comments that there is little that is distinctive in Aquinas, since what he said had already been said by Aristotle, Maimonides, and Ibn Sira; "the principal

10 Davies, *Aquinas*, 31.

11 Aquinas, *SCG*, 96; J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* (Paris, 1857–66), 94:796; John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1:3.

12 Craig, Cosmological Argument, 193.

contribution of Aquinas comes in his conception of existence as the act of being of a particular essence." Before Aquinas existence was seen as an accident, something added to the essence of a thing, something adventitious that was not a necessary part of the thing. Aquinas denied that existence was an accident.[13] His contribution was "a mental exposition summarizing the culmination of hundreds of years of thought."[14]

i. Reason and the Supreme Authority of Scripture

Moreover, still in *Summa theologica* 1:1, Aquinas acknowledged that even if such arguments were successful they would be accessible only to a few people. Additionally, over time they would be degraded by many errors. Meanwhile, he insists, our salvation depends on knowledge of the truth.[15] Therefore, divine revelation is necessary. It is well to read this entire section:

> *As other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences; so this doctrine does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith, but from them it goes on to prove something else; as the Apostle from the resurrection of Christ argues in proof of the general resurrection (1 Cor 15).*

Inferior sciences leave the proof of their principles to a higher science, but the highest science, metaphysics, disputes with those who deny its principles only if its opponents make some concession. Otherwise, it answers objections.

> *Hence Sacred Scripture ... can dispute with one who denies its principles only if the opponent admits some at least of the truths obtained through divine revelation... If our opponent believes nothing of divine revelation, there is no longer any means of proving the articles of faith by reasoning, but only of answering his objections – if he has any – against faith. Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is*

13 Craig, *Cosmological Argument*, 195 Here he was in line with Augustine, who held that there can be no accidents in God; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5:3–5:6.

14 Craig, Cosmological Argument, 196.

15 Aquinas, *ST* 1a:1:1.

clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations but are difficulties that can be answered.

Since grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity [citing 2 Cor 10:5].

Writing about the authority to be accorded to doctors of the church, Aquinas says:

Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says (Epist. ad Hieron. 19:1): 'Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe that their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem anything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.'[16]

Most of Aquinas's work was in biblical exposition. Together with that background, this passage should give a lie to those who have labelled him as a rationalist who brought about a split between faith and reason. It is evident that he knew the limitations of reason as well as its usefulness and necessity. Here his principial reflection on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, faith and reason, would place him in the same camp as the reformers and the members of the Westminster Assembly.

ii. What was Aquinas Attempting to do?

It is obvious that Aquinas was living in a very different world than ours. Two basic facts need to be recognised. The first was that in thirteenth-century Europe Christianity

16 Aquinas, *ST* 1a:1:8.

was the unquestionably assumed foundation and bedrock for the whole of life. This can be seen in a different setting, in Aquinas's contemporary Bracton's *De legibus et consuetinibus Angliae,* the first codification of the laws and constitution of England. There Bracton based the responsibilities of the king on biblical foundations, including reference to the letters of Paul.[17] On the other hand, these hitherto unquestioned axioms had undergone challenge from Islamic philosophers, such as Averroes and Avicenna, who were in the vanguard of interpretation of the recently rediscovered corpus of Aristotle. Some scholars, following Averroes, adopted positions at variance from the Christian faith. It has been surmised that ideas of 'double truth' had a certain vogue – that something could be false scientifically but true in religious terms. To Thomas, it seemed some were saying that contradictories could be simultaneously true. It had raised the question of the relationship between faith and reason. Aquinas asserted that while reason was limited and could not of itself arrive at such things as the doctrine of the Trinity, nevertheless, the Christian faith, and with it the existence of God, could be rationally explained and defended.

Aquinas was not attempting to persuade an atheist or agnostic, such as we encounter. It was a completely different world than ours. Indeed, as Davies remarks:

> *Aquinas is not at all worried about making out a case for God's existence. He knows of those with no Christian faith ... but he does not really doubt the reality of God. It is most unlikely that he ever encountered an atheist in the modern sense. Nor does he maintain that anyone has an obligation to weigh up the evidence for theism.*[18]

Moreover, "he thinks it perfectly proper for someone to start by taking God's existence for granted."[19] He denies that God's existence is evident to us in the way

17 For instance, *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England* (1268; Samuel E. Thorne; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 2:21.

18 Davies, *Aquinas*, 21.

19 Davies, *Aquinas*, 22.

logically self-evident propositions are[20] and, in contrast to Calvin 300 years later,[21] he is unhappy with the idea that all people have an innate awareness of God's existence by nature.[22] We are therefore dependent on revelation. It is obvious that Calvin was not to deny the need for revelation but in his case, he held that there was a universal *sensus divinitatis* that, given the fall, expressed itself in a variety of forms of idolatry.[23]

iii. Later a posteriori *Arguments*

Robert Tad Lehe considers Stuart Hackett's defence of the cosmological, teleological and moral arguments, inferring God's existence from the actuality of the cosmos, its orderliness, the existence of persons and moral order.[24] He agrees with Bernard Lonergan that all arguments for the existence of God "are included in the following general form. If the real is completely intelligible, God exists. But the real is completely intelligible. Therefore, God exists."[25] This is based on the coherence theory of truth. Knowledge depends on the complete intelligibility of reality, on the adequacy to reality of a coherent system of thought. This suggests that the existence of God, who is the source of reality and the capacity to know reality, is the best explanation for the unity of thought and reality which makes knowledge possible. While this is of course true, and these assumptions have underpinned scientific investigation, it still leaves the identity of God unaddressed.

20 Davies, *Aquinas*, 23.

21 Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 218–45; John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1–6.

22 Davies, *Aquinas*, 22.

23 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1:1–:5:14, esp. 1:3:1–3.

24 Robert Tad Lehe, "An Epistemological Argument for the Existence of God," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (William Lane Craig; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 77–97.

25 Tad Lehe, "Epistemological Argument," 96.

iv. Argument From Design

Ronald Reagan, in his inimitable fashion, told this joke about atheists and design: "Sometimes when I am faced with atheists, I am tempted to invite them to the most fabulous gourmet dinner that there has ever been, and when we have finished eating that magnificent dinner, to ask them if they believe there was a cook."[26]

Reagan's point is clear and carries more traction than many highly sophisticated philosophical treatises. However, the question still remains about the identity of the cook. Clearly, there is a superb chef behind the meal who can hardly remain hidden for very long, given his – or her – amazing culinary expertise. But the joke does not disclose anything of the nature of the cook; it might even have been a robot, and, with Elon Musk suggesting robots may well carry out all – or almost all – the functions humans currently do, that possibility does exist.

v. Kalam Cosmological Argument

The kalam cosmological argument was formulated by medieval Muslim philosophers, following the rediscovery of the Aristotelian corpus. It has attracted the attention of Christian apologetes in recent decades, including William Lane Craig.[27] The argument asserts that the universe necessarily had a beginning and therefore must have had a cause. As Lawhead points out, the first step, that the universe had a beginning needs justification. Aquinas, for instance, thought it possible that the universe is co-eternal with God but dependent on him. It is revelation that states that there was a beginning.[28] The logic of the kalam argument runs like this: 1. An actual infinite number of entities cannot exist. 2. If a series of past events does not have a

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26 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast," 4 Feb. 1988, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-national-prayer-breakfast, accessed 15 May 2025. A far cry from the embittered politics of today.

27 William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

28 William F. Lawhead, "The Symmetry of the Past and the Future in the Kalam Cosmological Argument," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (William Lane Craig; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), here 99–100.

beginning, there exists an infinite number of entities, therefore, 3. The universe had a beginning. This forces a finite future in addition to a finite past. Lawhead argues that if the past necessarily had a beginning then the future will necessarily have an end, whereas if the future consists of an unending series of events, it is possible for the past to consist of a beginningless series of events.[29] In short, it claims too much. Whatever developments are suggested by Lawhead or Craig it is clear the argument cannot prove the existence of the God who has revealed himself in Scripture.

Prevost agrees with Lawhead on the failure of the kalam argument to sustain proof for the existence of the God acknowledged in classical theism.[30] The kalam argument goes, 1. The universe is of a finite age. 2. If the infinite requires the postulation of the existence of an actual infinity of moments, such an actual infinity is impossible logically. 3. If finite, it must have been created. 4. This cause is God.[31] The alternatives are that God is eternal and outside time (which is the classic Christian understanding) or that God is everlasting, and time is part of his being. Everything depends on the possibility or impossibility of the actual infinite. Kalam depends on the impossibility.[32] Prevost argues that "simple conceivability or having the capacity to describe a state of affairs without any obvious logical contradiction are not sufficient techniques for proving the logical possibility of a particular state of affairs." This applies to kalam and whether an actual infinite is possible.[33] This seems to me to lead to a labyrinth, with Craig's famous analogy of a library with an infinite number of books; what number should be assigned to a new acquisition to the library?

29 Lawhead, "Symmetry," 100–103.

30 Robert Prevost, "Classical Theism and the Kalam Principle," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (William Lane Craig; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), here 114.

31 Prevost, "Kalam Principle," 116.

32 Ibid., 118.

33 Ibid., 119.

vi. Teleological Argument

William Lane Craig advocates a teleological argument based on a plethora of material in physics and other allied disciplines. Craig asks, "How complex and sensitive a nexus of conditions must be given in order for the universe to permit the origin and evolution of intelligent life on earth." In reality the universe was fine-tuned from the start. In passing, he deals with the hypothesis of divine design.[34] He refers to God's handiwork in nature, his revelation of himself to creation, "a self-disclosure which is aesthetically beautiful," citing Psalm 19:1. The decision to believe is a matter of *fiducia*, referring to Romans 1:21, and concludes that, "The teleological argument ... brings us more quickly to the true crisis of faith."[35] Again, for all its merits – and its biblical connections are appealing – the argument leaves open the identity of the God whose fine-tuned handiwork is featured.

These arguments are based on evident realities but, at best, have only partial application. They are arguments for a prime mover, a first cause, an intelligent designer, or a supreme moral agent. They refer to a supreme being or to particular properties of a supreme being, but not to the nature of that being or its identity. If successful, they stop well short of identifying the being with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In effect, they aim to prove the existence of an idol, contrary to the first commandment.

Moreover, as we stated earlier, any argument proceeds on the basis that the agreed starting point is of greater certainty than the conclusion since the conclusion of the argument is in suspense and must be demonstrated rationally. In terms of the tacitly agreed process of the argument, this makes human axioms of greater certainty than God.

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34 William Lane Craig, "The Teleological Argument and the Anthropic Principle," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (William Lane Craig; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), here 127.

35 Craig, "Teleological Argument," 153.

But God is not a conclusion at the end of a human argument; God is the starting point for any and all arguments. That, *inter alia,*[36] is why the Bible never seeks to prove the existence of God; it assumes it. Moreover, logical argument is of lesser weight when persons are in view. More intuitive factors are involved. Recognition and communion are the means such relationships are initiated and cultivated, and they stand in no need of a lengthy or complex process of logical construction.

IV. A priori *Arguments*

We turn now to consider those arguments that do not depend on reference to external and observable realities. These are sometimes termed 'armchair arguments,' meaning that they are constructed and developed logically from assumed axioms. There is nothing necessarily deceptive or inadequate about such arguments as such, since all knowledge in whatever discipline can only exist on the basis of unprovable assumptions, which provide the basis and ground for all subsequent investigations and without which such investigation could not occur.[37]

1. Anselm's Ontological Proof

Most prominent among *a priori* arguments for the existence of God is the famous proof of Anselm, abbot of Bec in Normandy, in his *Proslogion*, written in 1078, sometime before his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury.

i. Perfect Being Theology

Katherin Rogers remarks that the Middle Ages was "the golden Age of perfect being theology, with Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) the most successful exponents of this

36 "among other things".

37 See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

method."[38] It was based on the premise that God is perfect and always does what is best. If this sounds speculative, one only has to think of what the denial of this assumption entails. Moreover, as Rogers indicates, this premise is taken for granted and "almost any philosopher who is talking about God is doing perfect being theology."[39] This is the background to Anselm's own theology and to his discovery of "the single most discussed argument in the history of philosophy of the last thousand years,"[40] one which over nine hundred years on is still a hot topic among philosophers and has never been successfully refuted.

Marilyn McCord Adams observes that contemporary philosophers, as well as Augustine, "see themselves as responding to pressure *from outside to defend* the rationality of Christian faith... St. Anselm's eleventh-century situation was different." Most of his life was spent in the Benedictine monastery at Bec. He wrote for, and at the request of, his fellow monks, in pursuit of their common aim, to see and enjoy God.[41]

Anselm's work was rooted in service to God and the church. In *De Incarnatione Verbi* written to Pope Urban II after he had become Archbishop of Canterbury, he stated:

> *No Christian ought to argue how things that the Catholic Church sincerely believes and verbally professes are not so, but by always adhering to the same faith without hesitation, by loving it, and by humbly living according to it, a Christian ought to argue how they are, inasmuch as one can look for reasons. If one can understand, one should thank God; if one cannot, one should bow one's head in veneration.*[42]

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38 Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), viii.

39 Rogers, *Edinburgh*, 4.

40 Ibid., 1.

41 Marilyn McCord Adams, "Anselm on Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Brian Davies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), here 32. Italics original.

42 Anselm, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 1; Brian Davies and G.R. Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 235.

ii. Anselm's Argument in the Proslogion

Anselm, in his *Monologion*, rehearsed a range of arguments relating to the nature of God but ended up dissatisfied. He acknowledged the impact of Augustine on his thought, especially from the treatise *De Trinitate.*[43] One of the questions that arose for Anselm was from his commitment to perfect being theology. It necessitated an answer that would say what the perfect being is like.[44] Anselm held that this required asking about things applying to God independently of his works, things that would apply to God if only he existed.[45] He proposed "that there is some one thing through which all good things whatsoever are good…" and that therefore "that through which all things are good is a great good…" and "this thing alone is good through itself."[46] However, he detected a lack of cohesion and coherence and felt a pressing need for a single argument to establish God's existence, "one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself."[47]

There followed a period of intense struggle for Anselm. His biographer, Eadmer, writing in 1124, described the difficulties he underwent: his lack of sleep, his loss of appetite, and his intense struggles against temptation.

> *He also wrote one book, which he called Monologion: in it he speaks in no other way than to prove the existence of God by reason alone, apart from the authority of holy Scripture, After this, it entered his mind to examine and prove what is believed and proclaimed about God by one single argument: that is, that he is eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omnipresent, incomprehensible, just, holy, merciful, truthful, reliable, good, just, and not a few other things, and in what way all these attributes are in himself one. In which matter he himself related how he had great difficulty in bringing it to birth. For, in pursuing these thoughts, he deprived himself of food and drink, and went without sleep; he was*

43 Anselm, *Monologion,* Prologue, in Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 5–6.

44 Brian Leftow, "Anselm's Perfect Being Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Brian Davies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 132–56, here 132.

45 Leftow, "Anselm's Perfect Being Theology," 132–34.

46 Anselm, *Monologion*, 1; Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 11–12.

47 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 82.

> *weighed down, and this affected him in the early morning and other services he was responsible to direct, due to his troubled and agitated mind ... tempted by the devil, nothing would deter him from his intention.*[48]

Eventually, the torture ended. At long last, he found the argument. It was revealed to him. Great was the rejoicing among his fellow monks.

> *And look! By night, during the nocturnal vigils, by the grace of God shining in his heart, the matter became clear to his mind. Immense rejoicing and jubilation filled all his closest friends.*[49]

The result was the *Proslogion.*

In the Preface he wrote that he intended "to prove whatever we believe about the divine being"[50] and to do so "from the point of view of one trying to raise his mind to contemplate God and seeking to understand what he believes."[51] In short, this was written for believers, specifically his fellow monks, as an exercise in understanding the faith they already had. He began with prayer to the God whose existence he is attempting to prove by reasoned argument. The final section rehearses the attributes of God, unfolding the nature of God in an atmosphere of praise and worship, and of application. It is not a work of apologetics in the modern sense; it is not aimed at convincing an atheist (were there any?). Indeed, while working through his proof he

48 "Fecit quoque libellum unum, quam monologium appellavit: Solus enim in eo secum loquitur, acta cita omni auctoritate divinae Scripturae, quod Deus sit sola ratione, sic nec aliter esse posse probat & astruit. Post haec incidit sibi in mentem investigare, utrum uno solo & brevi argumento probari posset, id quod de Deo creditur & praedicatur: videlicet quod sit aeternus, incommutabilis, omnipotens, ubique totus, incomprehensibilis, iustus, pius, misericors, verax, veritas, bonitas, iustitia, & nonnula alia, & quomodo haec omnia in ipso unum sunt. Quae res sicut ipse referebat, magnam sibi peperit difficultatem. Nam haec cogitatio partim illi cibum, potum, &somnum tollebat: partim & quod magis cum gravabat, intentionem eius qua matutinis & alii servitio Dei intendere debebat, perturbat. ... diaboli esse tentationem, niliusque est eam procul repelere a sua intentione." Eadmer, *Fratris Edineri Angli de Vita d. Anselmi Archiepiscopi Cantuariensis: Lib. II Nunquam Antehac Aediti* (1124; repr., Antwerp: excudebat Ioannes Gravius, 1551), C3a-b. My translation.

49 "Et ecce quadam nocte inter nocturnas vigilias Dei gratia illuxit in corde eius, & res patuit intellectui, immensoque gaudio & iubilatione replevit omnia intima eius." Eadmer, *De Vita Anselmi*, C3b-C4a. My translation.

50 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 82.

51 Ibid., 83.

talks to God. Rather, he was seeking to establish the rationality of faith, which was already present and came from elsewhere, founded on other grounds.

Here we need to understand what exactly is meant by 'proof.' In this context, it derives from the verb *probo* which means, *inter alia*, 'to examine, to put to the test.'[52] It is not intended as a mathematical or logical proof. It is more a closely reasoned examination of the rational grounds for belief in the God in whom Anselm, his monks, and Christians in general trust. As Barth comments it is more accurately described as *intelligere*, to understand, with the result that "the validity of certain propositions advocated by Anselm is established over against those who doubt or deny them."[53]

Here is the main thread of Anselm's argument.

In *Proslogion*, 1, he addresses God in prayer. "Come then, Lord my God, and teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you."[54] With intense prayer he bemoans the Fall and the limitations it imposed.[55] He says:

> *But I do desire to understand your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand (Isa 7:9).*[56]

As Adams states, God is his primary teacher. God makes the first move, giving uprightness of will, inclination for good.[57] This is "a prayer exercise for believers." The soul speaks to God. God illumines the soul. Understanding is gained, "a mean between faith and sight."[58]

52 Oxford Latin Dictionary.

53 Karl Barth, Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme (1931; repr., London: SCM, 1960), 14.

54 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 84–85.

55 Ibid., 85.

56 Ibid., 87.

57 Adams, "Faith and Reason," 35–36.

58 Ibid., 38.

Proslogion, 2 starts again with prayer, "Well then, Lord, you who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as you see fit, that you exist as we believe you to exist, and that you are as we believe you to be." And then, immediately, Anselm addresses God in terms of the name he had revealed to him. "Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought [STWNGCBT or TTWNGCBT]."[59]

This is the key to grasping the significance of what Anselm goes on to write. God is STWNGCBT. Some might object to Anselm seemingly conjuring out of thin air a description of God such as this and using it as the basis for his subsequent argument. However, whatever its inadequacy might be perceived to be, its denial has to be ruled out of court. Is there some entity that can be thought to exist that is greater than God? Even the fool mentioned in the Psalms, Anselm continues, knows what is meant by STWNGCBT, even if in his mind he does not understand that it exists. So, Anselm reasons, there is universal recognition of what this means. Moreover, one suggests, it could be said to sum up the biblical revelation of the uniqueness of God, his incomparability, mentioned many times in Isaiah and reiterated in the New Testament. It goes beyond God being the greatest entity ever conceived by humans or the greatest that it is ever possible to conceive. It means he is entirely independent of whether humans do or do not so conceive of him.[60]

Anselm advances the argument; that perfection entails existence. "It is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists."[61] He realises the obvious point that because we can form a mental image of a thing, it does not follow that the thing thus conceived actually exists. He provides an example of a painter who visualises the painting he is planning on producing but knows that as yet it does not exist until he has executed it. Even the Fool can agree

59 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 87 Alternatively, 'that than which nothing greater can be thought."

60 Barth, *Anselm*, 74.

61 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 87.

that the idea of STWNGCBT exists in the mind; it is, after all, something concerning which he denies actuality.

Still in *Proslogion*, 2 Anselm proceeds to assert that STWNGCBT cannot exist in the mind alone. This is since if it existed in the mind but not in reality it would not be STWNGCBT, since if it existed in reality also it would be greater. And this is greater than existing solely in the mind:

> *If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.*[62]

This is a huge step in Anselm's case. He argues that if STWNGCBT is purely a mental concept it is not STWNGCBT since existence in reality is greater than existence merely in the mind.

That leads us further, into *Proslogion,* 3. Not only existence is entailed; *necessary* existence follows. Anselm immediately states, "And certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot even be thought not to exist."[63] STWNGCBT must exist necessarily, in such a manner that it is impossible that it does not exist. If it was possible for it not to exist, or to move out of existence, then it could not be STWNGCBT:

> *For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd.*[64]

62 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 87–88.

63 Ibid., 88.

64 Ibid., 88.

Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought must not only exist but cannot be thought not to exist. So, Anselm concludes:

> *Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist ... And you, O Lord God, are this being. You exist so truly, Lord my God, that you cannot even be thought not to exist... Everything else there is, except you alone, can be thought of as not existing.*[65]

Davies summarises the argument:

1. *We can think of something existing that cannot be thought not to exist.*
2. *Such a thing would be greater than something that can be thought not to exist.*
3. *So, something than which nothing greater can be thought of cannot be something that can be thought not to exist.*
4. *So, something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to exist.*[66]

Anselm is above all seeking to demonstrate that something existing only in the mind and /or which might fail to exist is not something TWNGCBT. In fact, "God is first of all in reality, then following from that ... exists, then as a consequence of that ... can be thought."[67] There is no greater entity possible, nor can one possibly be conceived to be.

Anselm moves on to argue in *Proslogion*, 5 that God is whatever is better to be than not to be and that, existing through himself alone, he makes all other beings from nothing.[68]

Leftow comments that in the *Monologion*, Anselm sought arguments that "the best actual being is in its best possible state". The *Proslogion* goes "even a bit further,

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65 Ibid., 88.

66 Brian Davies, "Anselm and the Ontological Argument," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Brian Davies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), here163.

67 Barth, *Anselm*, 92.

68 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 89.

arguing that the best *possible* being is in its best possible state" (*Pros*. 5). To do this Anselm "compares thinkable (roughly, possible) states of God." For instance, he writes "What then are you, Lord God, that than which nothing greater can be described? ... the greatest of all things ... who made all other things from nothing. For whatever is not this is less than can be described. But this cannot be thought of you."[69]

Further, in *Proslogion*, 15 he concludes:

> *Therefore, Lord, you are not only that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought but you are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if you are not this same being something greater than you could be thought - which cannot be.*[70]

iii. The Sequel

Objections by Gaunilo (a Christian playing the part of the fool) and, later, Kant do not touch the argument. Gaunilo, playing devil's advocate, pointed to the idea of a perfect island, Kant to six hundred thalers in one's pocket. In neither case could a mere idea of a thing prove the existence of the thing. Therefore Anselm's argument was invalid since the idea of STWNGCBT could not establish the actual existence of STWNGCBT. However, both missed Anselm's point that, while the existence of this or that thing in the creation is contingent, dependent entirely on God for its existence and continuation, God is necessary. By Anselm's definition, he cannot be classed with other entities and is therefore not subject to the conditionality that is entailed in their own existence.

Aquinas's objections seem more pertinent. He wrote:

> *Perhaps not everyone who hears this word 'God' understands it to signify 'something than which nothing greater can be thought,' seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that what everyone understands by this*

69 Leftow, "Anselm's Perfect Being Theology," 140.

70 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 96.

> *word 'God' is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not follow that he understands that what that word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it is admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.*[71]

That may be so but Anselm did not intend the argument for an apologetic purpose, given that those who came into this category are described in the Psalms as fools. Aquinas added that while the existence of truth in general is self-evident, the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us.[72] However, while Anselm clearly understood that no one can come to the faith by a process of reasoning alone, he allowed for the fact that some may be convinced by such methods.[73] It would seem that it could have an effect among theists, who accept the basic premise of the supremacy of God. Moreover, if we consider the entire treatise, Anselm urges his readers to live lives that reflect what they believe, bursting into praise and gratitude to God as he does. In this way it can fulfil his intention to advance faith through understanding.[74]

Here is a clash between Anselm, influenced indirectly by Platonic thought through his reading of, and allegiance to, Augustine,[75] and Aquinas's reliance on Aristotle, for whom sense experience was foundational. It seems to me that some

71 Aquinas, *ST* 1:2:1. Reply Obj. 2.

72 Aquinas, *ST* 1:2:1. Reply Obj. 3. See also J. Anthony Gaughan, *The Ontological Argument: A Critique from a Thomist Perspective* (Blackrock, County Dublin: Kingdom Books, 2020).

73 Adams, "Faith and Reason," 50–51. It is well known that people come to Christ by a bewildering variety of means. Since God is the creator of all things, he can use anything he pleases to that end.

74 See Lydia Schumacher, "The Lost Legacy of Anselm's Argument: Re-Thinking the Purpose of Proofs for the Existence of God," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 1 (January 2011): 87–101, who stresses this point, indicating that Anselm considered that a focus on God would encourage his readers to appreciate his goodness, and be transformed progressively into the image of Christ, which in turn would make their faith intelligible to others.

75 Anselm, *Monologion,* Prologue; Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 6. Anselm there asks anyone who thinks he has diverged from the truth to compare what he has written with Augustine, *De Trinitate*. He himself "was unable to find anything inconsistent with the writings of the Catholic Fathers, and in particular with those of the Blessed Augustine." See also Gareth Matthews, "Anselm, Augustine, and Platonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Brian Davies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 61–83. Matthews comments that both were broadly Platonist philosophers, not from a study of Plato but through intermediaries. Yet "the Platonic stamp on each of them is difficult to miss." 81-82.

form of philosophical realism is needed to appreciate Anselm's argument. Given those assumptions, it can function effectively.

Certainly, it is still a hot topic among philosophers well over nine hundred years later. Neither disproved nor definitively established, it endures. Furthermore, it has the power to generate further thought; a great work of art can engender a seemingly endless trail of derivative work. The last few years have seen the construction of numerous ontological arguments.

2. *Ontological Proofs*

Miroslav Szatkowski mentions that over nine hundred years after Anselm, ontological arguments are at the forefront of recent philosophical debate.[76] Tyron Goldschmidt points out that in ontological arguments the premises are supposed to be known *a priori*. They are either analytically true – true in virtue of definitions and concepts – or necessarily true, true no matter how the world might have differed. In this, they contrast with cosmological arguments and design arguments. Both of these appeal to empirical evidence about the beginning of the universe and natural laws; these are more hostage to scientific discovery.[77] While ontological arguments seek to prove that there is a greatest conceivable being, answering the question as to why there is anything at all, *a posteriori* arguments focus on one divine property or attribute. Ujin Nagasawa and Alvin Plantinga are notable exponents of ontological arguments. Plantinga has written, "I do not believe that any philosopher has ever given a cogent refutation of the ontological argument in its various forms."[78].

Even with that in mind, it is well to heed the comment of Daniel Dennett, "Even if a *Being greater than which nothing can be conceived* has to exist ... it is a long haul

76 Miroslaw Szatkowski, *Ontological Proofs Today: Philosophische Analyse* (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2012).

77 Tyron Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1–2.

78 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 85–86.

from that specification to a Being that is merciful or just or loving – unless you make sure to define it that way from the outset."[79]

Given the effective stalemate over Anselm's argument, together with conundrums such as the relationship between the sovereignty and love of God over against evil, some philosophers have advanced the idea of a being that is maximally excellent rather than perfect. Plantinga suggests the following three premises:

1. *There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated.*
2. *Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world.*
3. *Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world.*[80]

As Goldschmidt observes, the crucial point here is the possibility premise. For Plantinga the only question of interest is if it is true. He says he thinks it is true but there is nothing much more to say than that. If something appears to be the case, it is possible (whether it actually is the case). But what of situations where something that appears to be the case turns out not to be the case or could not possibly be the case?[81]

In fact, Plantinga was not out to prove the truth of theism but rather its rational acceptability.[82] He insists his premise is rational. What it establishes is that theism is about as rational and respectable as any controversial philosophical view. The *possibility* of maximal greatness entails the possibility of necessary existence, which quite quickly entails existence. So, the argument does not say explicitly that God exists but "it so *nearly* does." The acceptance of the premise depends on the prior acceptance

79 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 42. Italics original.

80 Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 111, cited by Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments*, 36.

81 Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments*, 38–39.

82 Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 112, cited by Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments*, 38.

of the conclusion.[83] It is obvious to me that it presents a god who is necessarily less than the biblical God, clearly not STWNGCBT.

i. Yujin Nagasawa[84]

Yujin Nagasawa defends perfect being theology but at the expense of abandoning the perfect. In practice he supports the maximal God thesis. He warns that perfect being theists should avoid Anselm's definition of TTWNGCBT and instead argue the maximal God thesis. That is that God has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence. This will undercut all arguments against perfect being theology.[85] This is impacted by arguments to the effect that an omnipotent, omniscient and totally benevolent God cannot be such together since these properties collide in the face of evil. The maximal God thesis avoids this problem by asserting a maximal *consistent* set of these properties. The conclusion it reaches with the maximal concept is that there is good reason to think perfect being theism is true, and no good reason to think it is false.

Nagasawa thinks it "allows us to undermine nearly all existing arguments against perfect being theism simultaneously." In other words, it is a user-friendly edition that eliminates the more difficult elements.[86] He is concerned that "even if there is no successful argument against perfect being theism, critics can still question if there is a successful argument for perfect being theism."[87] He concludes that "we have good reason to think that perfect being theism is true, because the maximal concept of God

83 Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments*, 49.

84 Yujin Nagosawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

85 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 207.

86 Nagosawa, *Maximal God*, 2.

87 Ibid., 3.

allows us to refute arguments against perfect being theism while establishing a robust argument for it."[88]

The upshot of the maximal being theory, as Nagasawa expounds it is, as he says, "my response to the arguments against perfect being theism is to replace the omni-God thesis with the following thesis: ... the Maximal God thesis: God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence." He is therefore "very knowledgeable, very powerful, very benevolent."[89] This, I suggest, places God on a level with creatures – just that he is better, maximally better. As Nagasawa acknowledges, "it does not imply that God is unquestionably an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being."[90] If perfect being theists make these claims they do not face the criticisms of perfect being theology. [At what cost, one asks?] Nagasawa continues, "I am not rejecting the omni thesis here. What I am saying is that perfect being theists do not need to worry about the cogency of the omni thesis."[91] No they don't, do they?

Nagasawa does not claim that God is definitely [omni x3] but equally does not claim that he is definitely not [omni x3]. "I claim that this is an open question, on which the cogency of perfect being theism does not hinge" for it is far from obvious that perfect being theology entails the omni-God thesis.[92] WWAD? (What Would Anselm Do?) I suspect he would reply that one who may be less than omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent is lesser than one who is so and consequently is not the one about whom he was writing and to whom he was praying.

88 Ibid., 4.

89 Ibid., 92.

90 Ibid., 93.

91 Davies and Evans, *Anselm*, 93.

92 Nagosawa, *Maximal God*, 93–94.

V. Everything is a Proof for God

Scripture declares that the entire creation displays the greatness of God (e.g. Ps 19:1-6, Rom 1:19-20). This revelation of God's power and beauty is universal – the heavens and the earth, day and night (Ps 19:1-6).

In Romans 1:19-20, Paul graphically portrays the invisible things of God being clearly visible in creation. The universe is akin to the clothes God wears to display his glory. People are without excuse for suppressing or rejecting this knowledge, clearly seen all around us. It is also a rejection of what is evident within – man as made in the image of God (Rom 1:20f). Calvin wrote of the *sensus divinitatis*, the well-nigh universal recognition of a supreme being.

In this sense, the creation is an icon, an image through which we are given to perceive transcendent realities. Many are blinded by sin; while recognising the beauty of the world they fail to perceive the one reflected in that beauty. Some are desensitised. I recall being present at the old Academy of Music in Philadelphia for a performance of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In the sublime and heartbreaking final movement, *Der abschied*, some of the most searingly beautiful music Mahler or anyone has written, a man in front of me was looking around the auditorium, yawning and picking his ear. Ultimately, we need what Calvin described as the spectacles of Scripture to bring creation into proper focus.[93] This is due, not to any deficiency in the revelation itself but rather to the obtuseness of fallen human beings.

Preeminently, God reveals himself in his Son, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity. "He who has seen me has seen the Father," he said to Philip (John 14:9). We cannot now see him, but we can hear him, for whenever the gospel is preached, Christ is speaking (Rom 10:14, Eph 2:17 et al.). Supremely at the cross, the

93 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:6.

eternal Son through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to the Father (Heb 9:14).

This revelation, in creation and grace, is infallible. All God's revelation is infallible and achieves the purpose for which he gave it. The move in Western culture from Socinianism onwards, through the Enlightenment, and into today's postmodernism and nihilism is an instance of apostasy, in which the generations of rebellion are bearing fruit. Is the West akin to the first-century world of Paul's day? In some ways, it is, but we should remember that it was a pagan world that suppressed the knowledge of God in creation but had not yet received the gospel. The West today is doubly apostate. But Romans 1 is not the final judgement; there is still hope.

The main *a posteriori* arguments, at best, have only partial application. They are arguments for a prime mover, or a first cause, an intelligent designer, and a supreme moral agent. They refer to particular properties of a supreme being but not to that being as such nor to the nature of that being. If successful, they stop well short of identifying that being with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As such, they aim to prove the existence of an idol, contrary to the first commandment. Moreover, since any argument proceeds on the basis that the agreed starting point is of greater certainty than the conclusion, the conclusion of the argument is in suspense and has to be demonstrated rationally. This makes the premises and the tacitly agreed-upon processes of the argument have greater certainty than the God one is attempting to prove. But God is not a *conclusion* at the end of a human argument; he is the *starting point* for any and all arguments and thought.

However, Anselm's argument has great use for those who already believe. The God who makes himself known in creation, who has spoken definitively in his Son, not only exists but there is no possibility of his ever not existing. As such, he is the source of the entire creation, not as a necessary outflow or emanation from him, which is a form of pantheism or panentheism, but as a free and sovereign act of his will, bringing

into existence all other entities, which in their cases are contingent. To align ourselves aright with the reality he has brought into existence, he is to be the source and basis for all we do, whether in action, thought, or argument. This, I suggest, supports the case made by Martyn Lloyd-Jones that the gospel is to be proclaimed, not debated. Thus, in facing a pagan culture, Paul builds on what the people already know and corrects what they don't know (Acts 14:8-18), while at Athens he assumes the existence of God without attempting to prove it. From the works of God in creation and providence, which are accessible to everyone, he heads straight to Christ. In short, revelation has priority – a move from God to man.

About the author

Robert Letham is a Senior Research Fellow and former Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Union School of Theology, Bridgend; Associate Professor at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam; Fellow in History and Theology at Greystone Theological Institute, Pittsburgh; Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia; and Minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, USA.

The God of Unchanging Glory[1]

From Nicaea to Hegel and Back

Dr Thomas Brand

I. Abstract

This paper explores the enduring theological significance of divine impassibility – the doctrine that God does not suffer or undergo emotional change – in light of both its historic affirmation within classical theism and the modern movement toward divine passibility. Beginning with the rise of this modern trend, shaped by existential crises and philosophical developments from Hegel to Moltmann, the paper traces the consistent witness of the early church, scholastic theology, and Reformed orthodoxy in upholding God's simplicity, immutability, and impassibility. Through theological, philosophical, and scriptural analysis, it contends that only the impassible God of classical theism can offer the steadfast hope and saving grace proclaimed in the gospel. In doing so, it also highlights what is lost – both doctrinally and pastorally – when divine impassibility is denied or diminished.

II. On Gulags and Cockroaches

A few months before the end of the Second World War Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested under Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code and sentenced to eight years in the Gulags. There he met the religious poet Anatoly Vasilyevich Silin, whose longing for a God that could understand the horrors of their suffering was expressed in the line "By grief alone is love perfected."[2]

1 Much of this paper is reworked and simplified from the third chapter of my book *Intimately Forsaken: A Trinitarian Christology of the Cross* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). I am grateful for permission from my publisher to rewrite some of the same material here.

2 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, Volume 3*, trans. Harry Willetts (London: Harper Perrenial, 2007), 107.

It is precisely this desire that has driven the movement, since the end of the nineteenth century, towards the theological affirmation that God is not impassible, but that he suffers like us and with us.

The desire is illustrated in Franz Kafka's 1915 novella, *Metamorphosis*. The story begins when Gregor Samsa awakens one morning, "from troubled dreams"[3] and discovers that he is a cockroach. Later in the story, as the family is forced to adapt to this new reality, Grete, Gregor's sister, sits with her mother, "pressed together almost cheek to cheek." Their closeness leads to a "mingling their tears."[4] Mother and daughter look for help and stability from the father, and through tear stained faces they receive his reply. "'My child,' said her father compassionately and with surprising understanding, 'but what shall we do?'"[5]

Kafka's fiction captures the helplessness of humanity in the face of suffering. The father's response also captures the very human assumption that compassion requires mutual suffering, that is, as the etymology suggests, compassion is *suffering with* the sufferer. The same sentiment is expressed again and again in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Dostoevsky's Grant Inquisitor[6] and Voltaire's *Candide,* to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's scratching on the wall of his prison cell: "Only a suffering God can help."[7]

The assumption is driven by a desire for faithful biblical exegesis of the many passages that have been argued to present God as changing, becoming, emotional, angry, jealous, and perhaps – like the gods of Greek mythology – more like us. Several fundamental questions about the nature of God and his compassion for his creatures are raised by the driving assumption behind a passiblist hermeneutic. These questions

3 Franz kafka, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Michael Hofmann (UK: Penguin Classics, 2007), 1.

4 Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, 55-56.

5 Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, 68.

6 Fyodore Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (UK: Rabdin Giysem 1992), Books Five and Six.

7 Cited in Letham, *Trinity*, 303.

are illustrated by way of a parable in Paul Gavrilyuk's recent work, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*. It is worth quoting in full:

> *Consider the case of a house on fire. Several people are unable to exit the building and cry aloud desperately for help. Firemen have been called, but for some reason they do not come. A crowd is gathering around the house. Some stare at the house with a mixture of anxiety, fear, and curiosity. Some attempt to visualise as vividly as possible what the people who are in the house must be going through. These members of the crowd burst into tears, yell, tear their hair; in short, they are greatly emotionally affected. One of them has already had a fit and lies unconscious. Another has become mad and predicts the end of the world. Yet another person decides literally to suffer with those who are in the house and commits suicide by burning himself. Panic grows. A certain man from the crowd, without going through all the emotional pangs that those standing near him are experiencing, being motivated only by his conviction that the people will surely die if there is no one to help them, gets into the house and, at great risk to his own safety, rescues them.*[8]

Gavrilyuk concludes by asking "who out of all the people that were present at the scene manifested genuine compassion, the answer is obvious."[9]

The parable encapsulates the error of the belief that one must truly suffer with someone in order to have genuine compassion on that person, but it does not directly answer the passibilist claim that the God of the Bible suffers with us and for our salvation. We will return to this when we explore the Scriptural passages relating to impassibility and we will try to discern which set of verses – those affirming impassibility and those affirming passibility – should be determinate for our doctrine of God.

My plan in this paper is to start with the historic orthodox position on divine impassibility viewed as a consequence of divine immutability and simplicity, and then track the movement towards divine passibility in the late nineteenth century, then turn

8 Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

9 Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 10.

to the Scriptural issues, and finally consider why it matters and what is lost when divine impassibility is denied or minimised.

III. The Historic Orthodoxy of Divine Impassibility

I want first to set out the historic teaching on divine impassibility in relation to Classical Theism as a whole and demonstrate that the church has understood from the first centuries after the apostles that God is simple – that is without parts – and that he cannot suffer.

In the early centuries after Christ there are only two main works focusing completely on and affirming impassibility in the third and early fourth centuries respectively. Gregory Thaumaturgues, *Ad Theopompum de Passibili et Impassibili in Deo*,[10] which tackles the issues more systematically although there are some questions over authorship, and *Lactantius, De Ira Dei*.[11] In the third century Origen is often taken in the secondary literature to be a Patristic voice for divine passibility. He writes, in his *Homiliae in Ezecheilem*, that "The Father himself and the God of the whole universe is long suffering, full of mercy and pity. Must he not then, in some sense, be exposed to suffering? . . The Father himself is not impassible."[12] But those who would hold Origen as a passibilist champion tend to ignore a broad range of his theological texts such as his *On First Principles*, in which he sets up the established doctrine of divine simplicity in opposition to divine passibility.[13]

Right from the Ecumenical Councils of the early church, through the Scholastic era and into Reformed orthodoxy and beyond there is almost universal assent to what we

10 Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Ad Theopompum*. In *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works*, trans. Michael Slusser (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1998).

11 Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, in *Lactantius: The Minor Works*, trans Mary Fancis McDOnald (Washington: Catholic University of America), 1965.

12 Origen, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 6.6, 185-254.

13 Origen, *On First Principles* (U.S.A.: Ave Maria Press, 2013), Book I, Chapter I, 6. Contemporary passibilist theologians, intending to claim historical precedents for passibilism, occasionally note apparently passibilist texts in Origen, without taking the context of his other writings into account.

now know as Classical Theism right up to the end of the nineteenth century. Classical Theism is the constellation of historic orthodox doctrines concerning the Godhead that God is simple, immutable, impassible and timeless. We find this uniform teaching at the Council of Ephesus in 431, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, particularly in Leo's *Tome* which speaks of God as "Impassibilis Deus inviolobilis naturae,"[14] at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and even in the First Vatican Council in 1869. All affirm Classical Theism because it was the near-universal assertion of the early church that Classical Theism best describes the God of Scripture.

As early as 180, two generations after the Apostle John, Irenaeus affirms that God is simple in his *Adversus Haereses*:

> *He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to Himself, since He is wholly understanding, and wholly spirit, and wholly thought, and wholly intelligence, and wholly reason, and wholly hearing, and wholly seeing, and wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good.*[15]

This is clear very early Patristic teaching not just that God is simple but that he is metaphysically simple. Irenaeus teaches that God is without parts and that therefore his attributes as we understand them are not properties of the substance God, instead, and to use the phrase made famous recently by James Dolezal, "all that is in God is God."[16]

Later in the fourth century, another towering father, Hilary of Poitiers teaches that God is "not a being built up of various and lifeless portions . . . .and not compact of feeble elements." For Hilary, "All that is within him is one." Again, in commenting on Malachi 3:6 Hilary notes, "He who says I am, and I change not, can suffer neither

14 Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, Leo's Tome, 105. Translated: "God, incapable of suffering, of inviolable nature."

15 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, quoted in Christopher Tomaszewski, "How the Absolutely Simple Creator Escapes a Modal Collapse," in *Classical*, 235.

16 James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 41.

change in details nor transformation in kind. For these attributes . . . are not attached to different portions of him, but meet and unite, entirely and perfectly in the whole being of the living God."[17]

One might respond by pointing to odd claims made by these writers, but the overall consensus is clear – the near unanimous Patristic and Conciliar voice is that the Scriptures describe God in the terms of Classical Theism. But as is often the case, the Ecumenical Councils, and to a slightly lesser extent, the Patristic theologians themselves, did not always define the doctrines of Classical Theism precisely. This task was taken up powerfully in the Scholastic and Reformed eras following directly from the near unanimous Patristic assent.

During the Reformation Calvin was involved in the French Reformed Confession of Faith (*de la Rochelle*). The first article speaks of divine immutability, that God cannot suffer. Later in England, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that God is "without body, parts of passions."[18] The exact phrase appears in the Forty-Two Aticles of 1552, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England in 1563, the Irish Articles of 1615, the Savoy Declaration of 1658, and the Second London Confession of 1677/1689.

As I stated at the beginning of this section, my intention is to make it abundantly clear that the historic orthodox church, from the Patristics through the Reformation, gave near universal assent to the doctrines of Classical Theism, that God is simple, immutable, impassible and timeless.

The question to ask at this point is, if Classical Theism obtains and accurately describes the God of Scripture, what can be said of the divine nature itself and how should we speak of God's nature?

17 Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, Book VII, 27. Cited in Christopher Tomaszewski, CT 234.

18 *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1969), Chapter II. I.

In Romans 1:20 the apostle Paul speaks of God's nature referring to his "Godness," that is, the divine nature is what makes God, God. It is this divine nature that, as Aquinas argues following the Patristic voice, is simple, absolute and eternal. This understanding of the divine nature is adopted wholesale by the magisterial Reformers.[19]

In the Prima Pars of Aquinas' *ST*, the sections *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*, in the Treatise on the Most Holy Trinity, are, in my estimation, the best in depth writings on the doctrine of the Trinity in the history of the Church. For Aquinas' *via negativa*, theological knowledge of God's essence is limited to what God is not, he is not composite, he does not change, he does not suffer and he is not bound by time. In all these ways he is different from us his creatures and all of creation. In the Prima Pars Aquinas sets out the doctrine of divine simplicity and its implication for divine non-corporeality, goodness, infinity, immutability, eternity, and unity. "Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how he is not."[20] Accordingly he defines divine simplicity as the denial of composition in God, God is not composed of parts – corporeal or metaphysical.[21] Divine simplicity so stated logically grounds divine immutability – that God cannot change – and this in turn logically grounds divine impassibility – that God cannot suffer. Following Aquinas, most of the Schoolmen, particularly in the Dominican tradition, begin discussion of the divine attributes with simplicity. John

19 Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, ed., *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), provides an overview of the Protestant reception of Aquinas. An Evangelical and distinctly Van Tillian critique of Aquinas' thought and writings can be found in K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (New Jersey: P&R, 2017). Oliphint focuses on epistemology and the existence of God. The work is strongly critiqued within the Reformed tradition by Richard A. Muller, "Aquinas Reconsidered," review of *Thomas Aquinas*, by K. Scott Oliphint, *Reformation21*, February 19, 2018. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1969), Chapter 2.

20 *Aquinas, ST,* I, q. 3.

21 Aquinas unpacks non-composition in God in Question 3 in terms of non-corporeality, matter and form, composition of quiddity, essence and nature, subject and accident, genus and difference, composition with other things. *ST* I, q. 3.

Duns Scotus, a Fransciscan, departs from the Thomist pattern and begins with divine infinity and argues that infinity entails simplicity.[22]

For Aquinas, the simple divine nature is not composed of parts, neither physically, metaphysically or even logically. For theists more broadly, God is not composed of physical parts because God is non-corporeal, and more than this, for all theists, God cannot have parts because otherwise there would need to be some cause of the unity of the parts and therefore some causal power behind God's existence. It just depends on how fine grained our definitions become – do we include metaphysical and logical parts or not?

For the Classical Theist and Aquinas in particular, God is free from the composition of potency-act and matter-form. God has no potential, his existence is his essence, and he is not composed of substance and accidents or properties. Therefore, God is being itself (*ipsum esse*) and he is pure actuality (*actus purus*).[23]

The Classical Theist position is therefore that God is in himself essentially and personally, absolutely and eternally perfect. This formulation of the doctrine is strongly upheld by the Reformed tradition, both doctrinally and exegetically. Francis Cheynell for example, one of the Westminster divines, in following the Great Tradition connects the doctrine that God is *actus purus* and divine simplicity with his exegesis of the burning bush passage in Exodus 3:14.[24]

So far, I have assumed that there is a direct entailment from simplicity to immutability to impassibility. But it is more nuanced than this, and the complexity is in part produced by the lack of consistent definitions in the secondary literature.

22 Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hacket, 1987), 88. See also, Cross, *Scotus*, 96-99.

23 Aquinas, *Compendium*, 1.9; 1.11; *ST* I. Q. 9, a. 1, 2.

24 Francis Cheynell, *The Divine Triunity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (London: T. R. and E. M., 1650), 8-9. In *God Without Passions: A Reader*, ed. Samuel Renihan (Palmdale: RBAP, 2015), 159, Duby contends that although modern exegetes tend to restrict the meaning of the divine name in Exodus 3:14 to the Lord's relationship with Israel, pre-modern writers such as Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine and the Damascene, see in it God's "eternal plenitude," and his necessary existence. Duby, *Jesus*, 16.

Additionally, some theologians would seek to modify the definitions in order to uphold Classical Theism but in a qualified sense. John S. Fienberg[25] for example discusses the distinctions between divine aseity, sovereignty, immutability and simplicity. He affirms the first two but abandons the historic doctrine of simplicity that we have outlined, on the basis of his reading of Scripture and his own metaphysical commitments. In the next section we will see more and more examples of contemporary evangelicals moving away from the historic Reformed doctrine of God.

Impassibility serves well to highlight the confusions and various definitions. The entailment from divine simplicity is generally accepted in the literature on the subject but impassibility is variously applied to God's will, his knowledge and his emotion. When considered like this, immutability neither implies, nor is implied by impassibility but for strange reasons. One can conceive of a being that cannot suffer but can change if such a being could change itself but was immune to external causal influence. On the other side, one can conceive of a being that is changelessly grieved by sin in his emotions and is thereby immutable and passible. The second scenario is a little weaker because it would still require the first external influence of sin on the being and this would prevent immutability from obtaining in the first instance.

Richard Creel has done much valuable work to draw attention to the complexities of the doctrinal relations between simplicity, immutability and impassibility. He derives eight different definitions of impasibility from the literature and finds that the most common definition is that "impassibility is imperviousness to causal influence from external factors."[26] He also suggests that some theologians may claim that God could choose to become impassible, having not previously been so impervious.

Creel applies his general definition of impassibility to God's nature, will, knowledge and feeling. He designates the four as either passible or impassible and

25 John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Illinois: Crossway, 2006), 277-337.

26 Creel, *Impassibility*, 11.

produces a table describing all possible permutations of divine impassibility. The summary is that "It should be clear now that the question with which we are concerned does not come down to a choice between two simple alternatives: Is God passible or impassible? It comes down to a choice among sixteen permutations."[27] As we have seen, the historic orthodox position has been that God is impassible in all four of these areas. The historic orthodox and Thomistic definitions of divine simplicity require that God be impassible in nature, will, knowledge, and feeling. Once this is established, the examples of non-entailment are removed, and it is logically clear that God is simple and therefore immutable and therefore impassible.

Before we move to discuss the trend towards divine passibility, I want to spend a little time examining the way that the church has historically applied and used the doctrine of divine impassibility in various polemical contexts in the second, third and fourth centuries. Gavrilyuk, who wrote the parable we noted at the beginning, charts three heresies across three centuries that were opposed by the orthodox doctrine of divine impassibility.

In the second century the Docetists, because of their assumption that suffering is improper to the divine nature, claimed that the divine Christ only appeared to suffer. The heresy was condemned by the church, particularly in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyon, who argued that although the divine nature cannot suffer, by the hypostatic union, the God man Jesus Christ truly suffered for us and as one of us. The opponents of Docetism strongly upheld divine impassibility and indeed used it to uphold orthodoxy against Docetism.

Into the third century we begin to see the heresy of Modalistic Patripassionism. It is really a conjunction of two Trinitarian heresies. Modalism claims that the one God sometimes exists and acts in the mode of the Father, sometimes as the Son and sometimes as the Spirit, depending on the situation and our perception of God.

27 Creel, *Impassibility*, 12.

Patripassionism claims that at the cross, God the Father also suffers in the suffering of the Son. When the cross is understood according to the heresy of Modalism, Patripassionism automatically follows because the single divine person suffers at the cross and therefore God suffers. If there is no Triune distinction of persons, one must conclude that God suffers, hence Modalistic Patripassionism. The heresy falls into the opposite error from Docetism because it fails to uphold divine impassibility and thereby diminishes divine transcendence.

Then in the fourth century, following the Council of Nicaea 325, the heresy of Arianism was again condemned, in part by upholding the orthodoxy of divine impassibility because the divine Son, in the incarnation, assumes individuated human nature[28] to himself.[29]

IV. The Trend Towards Divine Passibility

In the introduction I noted several writers from Kafka to Solzhenitsyn who asserted that only a God who suffers can bring us any comfort in the face of the terrors of human suffering. Now that we have outlined the historic orthodox doctrine, we can explore the departure from orthodoxy from the end of the nineteenth century to the present in wider Protestantism and particularly in contemporary evangelicalism.

Between the two great wars of the twentieth century, B. R. Brasnett, author of *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, claimed, “Men feel, and perhaps will feel increasingly, that a God who is not passible, who is exempt from pain or suffering, is a God of little value to a suffering humanity.[30] This summarises the root of the passibilist turn from the end of the nineteenth century, a turn which, until recently, has led theologians to mock Classical Theism.

28 I use the phrase “individuated human nature” deliberately. For more detailed discussion of this aspect of the incarnation, see Brand, *Intimately*, 34-40.

29 Gavrilyuk, *Suffering*, summary on 17.

30 B. R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: SPCK, 1928), ix.

In most works of contemporary theology, the primary cause of the turn is greater human suffering accompanied by greater public awareness from the time of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 to the two great wars in the last century. But this does not do justice to the deep philosophical currents emanating from Hegel's absolute idealism and his conception of God as becoming. We will return to this after briefly exploring Moltmann and his legacy.

The late theologian Jürgen Moltmann, comments on E. Weisel's famous account of a prolonged hanging at Auschwitz.[31] Weisel, who observed the horror, recalls the question, "where is God?" To which the answer was given, "He is here, He is hanging there on the gallows." In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann remarks:

> *Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.*[32]

Throughout his many writings Moltmann emphasises this same point,[33] but beneath his rhetoric lies the false assumption that the impassible God of Classical Theism must be inert and indifferent and without compassion for human suffering. Moltmann repeatedly articulates the human desire for a suffering God while others like Solzhenitsyn or Dostoevsky only implicitly affirm.

Moltmann is probably the most well known of the passibilist theologians, but his influences, less traced in contemporary theology, are found primarily in Luther and Hegel. The former supposedly provided the Protestant framework and the latter the philosophical underpinnings and recentralised a form of Trinitarian theology within Protestantism. For Luther, and I admit that this is a vast oversimplification, God suffers

31 E. Weisel, *Night* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972), 76-77.

32 Moltmann, *Crucified*, 283.

33 Cf. Moltmann, *History*, 29; Moltmann, *Trinity*, 47.

as God at the cross because Luther affirms the *communicatio naturarum*, whereby predicates apt of one of Christ's natures in the hypostatic union, are transferable to the other nature.

But to make sense of Hegel we must first go back to Immanuel Kant and his critique of metaphysics in the eighteenth century. During the eighteenth century, the doctrine of the Trinity was relatively marginalised in rationalist theology and pietism and this is primarily traceable to Kant. In the "Transcendental Deduction" of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he sets out his notion that an individual is aware of representations in sense perception as a unified field of consciousness (in other words, *I* am aware of all these perceptions in a unified way, they are all *my* perceptions). Kant calls this the "transcendental unity of apperception," and from it he argues that every possible human judgement is restricted to a framework of twelve categories which he describes as pure, *a priori* concepts of the faculty of understanding.[34] From Kant's Inaugural Dissertation[35] of 1770 onwards, the deduction of these twelve categories[36] is central to his critical project. It is important to see that the categories are not Cartesian innate ideas with content, nor are they the concepts of Berkley's empiricism. The purpose of the categories is to provide an exhaustive inventory of the highest genera under which all entities of human cognition and knowledge can be subsumed. The vital upshot is that because the categories frame all possible knowledge and are based on sense perception, human knowledge is thereby limited to what we can know through our senses. Kant goes on to argue in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that when we try, in metaphysics or

34 In the Metaphysical and Transcendental Deductions of the first *Critique*, Kant defines the categories as pure, *a priori* concepts of the faculty of the understanding. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), A79/B106.

35 Immanuel Kant, *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World* [Inaugural Dissertation], Cambridge Edition I, Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770, trans. and ed. David Walford in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

36 For those interested in the detail, Kant gives twelve categories listed under four headings which are derived from the forms of judgement. Categories of Quantity: Totality, Plurality, Unity; Categories of Quality: Reality, Negation, Limitation; Categories of Relation: Substance, Causality, Community; Categories of Modality: Possibility, Existence, Necessity. Kant's categories of Modality concern the attitude of the epistemic agent towards the content of judgements. Kant, *Critique*, A74/B100.

theology, to acquire knowledge beyond sense perception, we automatically fall prey to fallacies which he describes as paralogisms, amphibolies and antinomies. From Kant's destructive critique and severe restriction of metaphysics and theology, the obvious implications for our knowledge of God are set out in Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*,[37] where he argues that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible and unpractical. He also denies the relevance of the historicity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the atonement. In *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant writes that the doctrine of the Trinity "has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realise that it transcends all our concepts."[38] From these brief quotes and the background in the *Critique* it is difficult to overestimate the impact of Kantian epistemology and ontology on modern theology, most apparently in the move away from Trinitarian theology and towards historicism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries exemplified in the writings of Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch.[39]

Kant's transcendental or subjective idealism is developed by Hegel into an absolute or objective idealism in which a modalist form of Trinitarian theology is recentralised because Hegel sought to provide a critical foundation for metaphysics. Hegel claims that all of nature is moving toward a goal. He speaks of the absolute – often synonymous with God – as that which does not depend on anything but moves from unity to otherness to integration. This is Hegel's architechtonic across his philosophy, from history to politics to Trinitarian theology and therefore the absolute, or the personal God, is the goal of Hegel's philosophy. The ideas are most clearly (although in Hegel's philosophy everything is obscure!) expressed in Hegel's *Lectures*

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37 Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (San Francisco, Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

38 Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 66.

39 For analysis of this aspect of Kant's influence on theology, and the idealist underpinnings, see Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 315-366.

in the Philosophy of Religion, and *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is in these texts that Hegel rejects Kant's epistemology and from there also to reject divine simplicity and impassibility in Classical Theism. Particularly, Hegel claims that God is not pure actuality but that he, as the absolute, moves towards his creation. There are some clues that as early as 1799 or possibly 1803, Hegel was considering bringing together the triadic syllogism with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.[40]

Hegel called Christianity "The Consummate Religion"[41] because in it the concept of religion has become objective to itself, although he seems to view the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation as metaphorical. As we have said, he coordinates the syllogism with the Trinity in his Lectures, the Phenomenology of Spirit and The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate. Here is the Hegelian syllogism:

> *Premise one: Universality (*Allgemeinheit*). God in and for itself before creation.*
> *Premise two: Particularity (*Besonderheit*). God creating the world as other and outside God.*
> *Conclusion: Singularity (*Einzelheit*). God reconciled the world to himself.*[42]

In discussing the incarnation, Hegel quotes a Lutheran hymn (he was himself a nominal Lutheran) as he asserts that "God himself is dead." Hegel expounds the line, not in the Nietzschean sense, but with the claim that at the cross, death, finitude and the negativity became moments in God himself. "Death itself is this negative, the furthest extreme to which humanity as natural existence is exposed; God himself is [involved in] this."[43] Again in the *Phenomenology* he writes "The death of the divine man, as death, is abstract negativity, the immediate result of the movement which ends only in natural universality."[44] It is only because of Hegel's modalistic Trinitarian theology

40 O'Regan, *Handbook*, 257. Beiser, *Hegel*, 12-13, 145.

41 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), vii.

42 Hegel, *Lectures*, 415-416. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 325, 465, 525. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, section 4.

43 Hegel, *Lectures*, 468. Cf. Hegel, *Spirit*, 475-476.

44 Hegel, *Phenomenology,*475.

that he is able to argue for the reintegration of the other into the Absolute, into God, and therefore for death and negativity itself to become a moment in the divine life. But Hegel's notion of divine possibility and becoming is the only way that God can be a saving God in the face of human suffering.

The influence of Hegel on theologians like Moltmann, and Moltmann's influence on contemporary Protestant and evangelical theology should, by now be very clear and yet very few contemporary evangelicals note Hegel's philosophy in discussing divine impassibility. Richard Muller,[45] Richard Creel,[46] Rob Lister[47] and the editors of the recent work, *Confessing the Impassible God*,[48] all fail to mention Hegel's influence in any detail, and often even in passing. On the other hand, Hegel is cited much more frequently by Protestant theologians influenced by Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jüngel and Rahner.

For Moltmann, his dependence on Hegel is clearest in his Trinitarian theology of the cross, which cuts against the Patristic, Scholastic and Reformed traditions.[49] In *The Crucified God*, he asserts:

> *If one describes the life of God within the Trinity as the history of God (Hegel), this history of God contains within itself the whole abyss of godforsakenness, absolute death and the non-God. . . Because this death took place in the history between Father and Son on the cross on Golgotha . . . The concrete "history of God" in the death of Jesus on the cross on Golgotha therefore contains within itself all the depths and abysses of human history and therefore can be understood as the history of history. All human history, however much it may be determined*

45 Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 3* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003). Muller does not refer to Hegel in this volume. Although Hegel's lifetime does not fall within the post Reformation period, which is the focus of Muller's work, Muller frequently cites significant philosophers and theologians outside the post Reformation era.

46 Richard Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Origen: Wipf &Stick, 2005). Creel gives one footnote reference to Hegel.

47 Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (England: IVP, 2012). Lister does not cite Hegel's works in the bibliography, although there are two references in the text, at 126, footnote 16, and 145.

48 *Confessing,* eds. Baines, *et al*.. Hegel is not cited in the text or the bibliography.

49 My recent work covers this question in detail. Brand, *Intimately Forsaken.*

by guilt and death, is taken up into this history of God, i.e. into the Trinity, and integrated into the future of the history of God. There is no suffering which in this history of God is not God's suffering; no death which has not been God's death in the history on Golgotha.[50]

The influence of Hegel is explicit and Moltmann's articulation more fully embraces the paradox, adding a stronger twentieth century flavour. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*,[51] and *History and the Triune God*, Moltmann further develops these themes. The adoptions of Hegelian Idealism into liberal German theology began long before Moltmann, but it was Moltmann who most powerfully and prodigiously brought it to public attention in the starkest and most galvanising language. Before him though, in 1883, Isaac August Dorner wrote *Divine Impassibility: A Critical Reconsideration*.[52] Writing between the Industrial Revolution and the First World War, he sought to synthesise Schleiermacher and Hegel as a response to and partial rejection of Classical Theism. His writings also respond to the Kenotic Christological debates of his time and ours.

Since the work of Dorner, Mozley and Moltmann, among many others, and until very recently, the denial of Classical Theism and divine impassibility has increased exponentially in popularity. In 2015, Brandon F Smith and James M. Reniham wrote:

For the better part of the last two centuries the orthodox consensus has been slowly eroding, to the point that, as it stands today, this particular doctrine is a byword for archaic and mistaken theology in both academic and ecclesiastical circles.[53]

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50 Moltmann, *Crucified*, 255.

51 Moltmann, *Trinity*, 17, 36.

52 Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Dorner's Trinitarian theology, following Hegel, tends towards modalism with his language of "absolute personality" applied to the Godhead.

53 *Confessing the Impassible God: The Biblical, Classical, & Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility,* eds. Ronald S. Baines, Richard C. Barcellos, James P. Butler, Stefan T. Lindblad and James M. Renihan (Palmdale, RBAP, 2015), 253. Cf. Jung young Lee, *A Systematic Inquiry in a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 1.

But in the last decade, Classical Theism has seen something of a renaissance[54] and resurgence in popularity in Protestantism and this conference is a wonderful example!

We have seen the power of Hegel's influence on the trend towards divine possibility and before moving on to the next section, a certain historical irony should be appreciated. Since Hegel's death in 1831, our optimistic faith in human progress which so characterised Hegel's outlook, has been obliterated – Tolstoy[55] and T.S. Eliot[56] are fine examples. The process, driven by our inhumanity in the last century and the compartmentalisation that accelerated in the post war years, has ruined the prospect of the Hegelian ideals and his progressive historicism has become untenable. It was the Protestant adoption of Hegel that flowed into the affirmation of divine impassibility, and yet it is precisely the human suffering – which led to the theological shift – that can no longer be supported by Hegel. Put more starkly, the philosophical foundations of passibilism are no longer defensible. This irony now drives us to the foundations of any systematic account of suffering, divine or human: the word of God, the Scriptures.

54 Bruce L. McCormack lists several more recent proponents of divine impassibility and claims that the doctrine has made a comeback "with a vengeance." Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3. I would add the following more recent publications to McCormack's list: Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2022); Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022); Glenn Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Michigan: Baker, 2022); *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, eds. Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023); and Brand, *Intimately Forsaken*.

55 Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library), Part Eleven, Chapter I.

56 T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), See particularly *Burnt Norton*.

V. Scriptural Considerations

My intention in this shorter section is not to set out a comprehensive analysis of the Scriptural teaching on divine impassibility, that has been done many times and very well elsewhere. Instead, I want, at the outset, to acknowledge that there are many passages in God's word that are easily interpreted as depicting a suffering, changing, sometimes even finite and anthropomorphised God. But there are also many passages – like Exodus 3:14 or Titus 1:2 – that deny such a description of God. Some of the strongest contrasts are seen in the minor prophets – compare, for example Malachi 3:1 with Hosea 11:8-9. We see the contrast of attributes most pressingly in the famous passage in 1 Samuel 15 where we read in verses 11 and 29 that the Lord does change his mind and that he cannot change his mind.[57]

The disparity within Scripture, even within a single chapter is, in my view, entirely deliberate and intended by the divine author. Maximus the Confessor calls them stumbling blocks – apparent contradictions that force the church to wrestle with the word to understand the deep things of God. Essentially, when reading the diverse descriptions of God in the Bible, we must assess the relative weight of each set of verses and then conclude which set qualifies the other. In other words, are the impassibilist texts subservient to and qualified by the passibilist texts or is it the other way round? Or is there some middle ground, the route taken by some neo-Classical Theists like William Lane Craig, Ryan Mullens, Vern S. Poythress, John Frame and Fienberg, whereby there is a mutual qualification between the sets of texts? The latter options tends not to work out consistently in my view, mainly because we cannot say that the divine nature both does and does not suffer in the same way and at the same time – such language is only possible when applied to the Son in the incarnation by

57 The opposing statements about God in Scripture in relation to divine immutability and impassibility are numerous. God is also said to repent in Genesis 6:5-7; Exodus 32:12-14; Deuteronomy 32:36; Judges 2:18. But he is said to be incapable of repentance and changing his mind in Numbers 23:19; Psalm 102:26-27; Hosea 13:14 James 1:7; Hebrews 6:17.

virtue of the hypostatic union and the Catholic and Reformed interpretation of the communication of idioms.

Again, we do not have space here to discuss all these texts and reach an exegetical conclusion on the weight of each passage, and as we've said, this has been done extensively elsewhere. Instead, I submit, as we established in the previous sections of this paper, that the consensus of the Church across the ages, from the earliest Patristic texts through the Scholastic era, into Reformed Orthodoxy, has been emphatically that the Scriptures teach that God is impassible and immutable. If we take seriously the Lord's promise to lead his church into all truth (John 14:16-26), we must then also take seriously the near universal affirmation across the ages of the New Testament Church that God is simple, immutable, impassible and timeless. Classical Theism is, I argue, taught in Scripture, and from there it has been taught by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is at the heart of historic orthodoxy.

Augustine of Hippo writes, in accordance with the Patristic voice, that the doctrine of divine impassibility does not preclude divine affections, but that such affections are qualified by divine impassibility.[58] Gavrilyuk summarises with the statement that divine impassibility serves as an apophatic qualifier of divine emotions referenced in Scripture.[59] Apophatic theology, endorsed throughout orthodoxy, holds that one must reach the doctrine of God through a series of denials, the *via negativa*. Thus, the divine affections are unlike our own, they are compatible with divine impassibility, the doctrine which qualifies them. In other words, the set of verses that uphold Classical theism must be the lens through which one interprets the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic set of verses.

58 Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei*, 14.7.

59 Gavrilyuk, *Impassible*, Chapter 2, This section of my paper implies many questions and makes many assumptions about the error of Adolf Von Harnack's Hellenisation Thesis. The thesis is shown to be historically inaccurate by Gavrilyuk in Chapter 1. See also Lewis Ayres, *Christological Hellenism: A Melancholy Proposal* (Marquette University Press, 2024). I consider Harnack's thesis to be sufficiently disproven elsewhere to address it in more detail in this paper.

VI. Why Does It Matter?

I want to close this paper with a set of questions. Why does it matter whether or not God is impassible, whether or not Classical Theism obtains? And what is lost when divine impassibility is denied or minimised? The questions all go together, as should be clear by this stage in the argument. To answer them briefly, I will first set out some strong pastoral benefits of Classical Theism and then sketch the rudiments of an impassibilist theodicy.

The Lord tells us in his word (Exod 3:14) that he exists in such a way that his very name, YHWH, which signifies his essence, is to exist. He cannot therefore not exist, otherwise during his existence he would not be truly God as he says he is. Further, his nature is such that what he says cannot be false (Titus 1:2) and he is incapable of lying. Neither can he be unfaithful (2 Tim 2:13), to be such would again contradict his ever blessed nature which is love itself is faithfulness itself, is wisdom itself and goodness itself. On such an overwhelmingly sure foundation our salvation rests. To borrow the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, I can think of no greater comfort in life or death than to know that I, body and soul, belong to such a Lord and Saviour.

To adopt some form of Barthian Neo-Classical Theism, or even to embrace divine passibility, in which God elects to be faithful but presumably could be otherwise, presents the sinner with no solid hope. Or perhaps if God could – even only hypothetically – fail to keep his promises, for example, in the face of overwhelming evil such that a suffering God were to be as helpless as we are, then again, we are given no real, lasting hope. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously etched on the wall of his cell words that mirror the Gulag poet Silin, "Only a suffering God can help."[60] But again we have seen that a suffering God cannot help, he is, like us, helpless in the face of suffering, and no judgement, no justification and condemnation can even finally prevail over such suffering.

60 Cited in Letham, *Trinity*, 303.

What is at stake in considering Classical Theism? Even our eternal salvation. Only the impassible God can help, only the God who is incapable of suffering as God, who is immune to external causal influence, who cannot change and who is simple – without body, parts or passions. Only this God can help, because as Hebrews 2:14-18 teaches, this God, in the person of the Son, took on human nature in the incarnation. God the Son incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, suffered and died for us and for our salvation. This is historic pro-Nicene orthodoxy.[61] When the contrite sinner repents and trusts in the Lord God, the Almighty, he can know with certainty that he will be forgiven.

About the author

Dr Thomas Brand is the Ministry Director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches and chairman of Affinity and the Greater Love Declaration.

61 Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 236.

The Weaknesses of Christ[1]

Their Theological and Pastoral Significance

Dr Steven Duby

I. Abstract

In studying God's providence and difficult questions about God's permission of evil and the Christian's experience of trial and suffering, many things are worth considering. These include the wisdom and will of God, the goodness and justice of God, the nature of evil as privation (not some substance created by God), and our blessed hope – the face-to-face sight of God that will secure our everlasting joy. Yet at the centre of our life with God is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose own suffering indicates, among other things, that God did not choose simply to stay above the fray. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the faith and the human weaknesses and sufferings of Christ, with a view to how his way of navigating these things can be an example for us. For it seems to me that study of Christ's faith, weaknesses, and sufferings provides us with a model that can help us both to clarify certain aspects of suffering and emotion and to move forward through suffering in a humane and spiritually healthy manner.

II. Introduction

The next three sections of the paper will flesh out some of the factors involved in Christ's faith, weaknesses, and sufferings. The first section deals with the sense in which Christ had to exercise faith on earth prior to his glorification; for, while Christ never lacked knowledge of himself or his divine mission, his exemplary trust in the

1 This article is adapted from *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism* by Steven J. Duby. Used with permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group (http://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com).

Father's promises in the face of suffering can be a comfort and strength to us in our discipleship. The second section deals more directly with the weaknesses of Christ and the suffering he underwent in his human soul. The manner in which Christ suffered can help us see how one may truly experience human emotion without sugarcoating the difficulties and yet live in holiness and obedience to God. The third section deals with the sense in which Christ, our high priest, has grown and been perfected in his mercy toward sinners, which, as any reader of Hebrews can attest, ought to be an encouragement to us in our weakness and our battles against indwelling sin. These three sections deal mostly with the theological underpinnings requisite to pastoral application, and I leave a more detailed discussion of pastoral application to the questions appended and to the group discussion time.

III. The Faith of Christ

The sense in which Christ exercised faith (or whether he did in fact exercise faith) while also possessing a unique human knowledge of God is a matter of debate in the Christian tradition. One of the key questions here is whether Christ, in his human soul, had the beatific vision on earth prior to his glorification. If so, then, since his human soul directly beheld the very essence of God at all times, he did not have to exercise faith (for one walks either by sight or by faith). However, if Christ in his human soul did not have the beatific vision until his glorification, there is an opportunity to consider him exercising faith on earth and to consider how that might be helpful to us today. This section will consider some historical sources and then take the approach according to which Christ did exercise faith on earth in vicarious and exemplary fashion.

1. Historical perspectives on Christ's faith and knowledge

Discussion among medieval and early Reformed figures often ramifies the knowledge of Christ's human soul under a threefold consideration: beatific knowledge (i.e., direct vision of God's essence), infused knowledge (i.e., knowledge implanted in the mind of Christ by the Holy Spirit), and acquired knowledge (i.e., knowledge by sense perception or experience). In the *Summa theologicae*, Aquinas introduces Christ's human knowledge in IIIa.9.1, where one of the driving principles of Aquinas's reasoning is that Christ assumed a complete human nature and that the powers or faculties of the human nature have attained to their ends and are perfect.[2] Aquinas then treats Christ's beatific, infused, and acquired or "experiential" knowledge in successive questions. According to Aquinas, since Christ even in his humanity knows God fully (see John 8:55) and since Christ even in his humanity is the one leading many sons and daughters to glory (see Hebrews 2:10), he must preeminently have the vision of God that God's people have in glory, for "it is proper for the cause to be greater than the thing caused."[3] Aquinas still clarifies that this beatific knowledge is not a strict "comprehension" of the divine essence, for though Christ's human knowledge surpasses that of any other creature, it remains finite.[4]

In Aquinas's exposition, Christ also knows all things by the infused knowledge that he has from the Spirit (see the various cognitive terms used for the Spirit's work in Isaiah 11:2).[5] Moreover, because of Aquinas's commitment to the perfection of Christ's intellect, he reasons that Christ possesses acquired or experiential knowledge too. For, Aquinas says, it pertains to the perfection of the "active intellect" of the human person to access or act upon images acquired by sense perception and render them intelligible

2 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.9.1 (138-9). Cf. also IIIa.15.3 corp. (188).

3 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.9.2 corp. (141); cf. *Compendium theologicae*, in vol. 42 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine ed. (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1979), I.213 [166]; 216 (170).

4 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.10.1 (148-9); cf. *Compendium*, I.216 (170).

5 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.11.1 (157-8).

to the intellect.[6] It was this acquired knowledge in which Christ grew in Luke 2:52. Aquinas then clarifies that growth in knowledge is twofold. The growth may take place either with respect to the essence of the knowledge itself, "insofar as the habit of knowledge itself is increased," or with respect to the effect of the knowledge as when someone by the same knowledge shows "lesser things" to some and afterward "greater and more subtle things" to others. In his infused knowledge, which was complete in itself from its inception, Christ advanced in "knowledge and grace" in only the second way, for, "according to the increase of age, he did greater works, which showed greater wisdom and grace." In his acquired knowledge, however, Christ advanced in gaining new mental habits. Consciously abandoning his previous view of the matter in his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas writes that Christ's knowledge did not merely increase "by experience" (by connecting previously infused knowledge of universals to newly acquired sense perception) but even by gaining new habits from the intellect's engagement of the objects of sense perception.[7]

In light of the simultaneity of Christ's beatific knowledge, on the one hand, and his corporeal and mental suffering, on the other, Aquinas concludes that Christ was at the same time a "comprehender" (*comprehensor*) who has obtained beatitude and a "pilgrim" (*viator*) who is en route to beatitude. On the one hand, Christ directly saw and enjoyed God's (his own) very deity even before his exaltation. On the other hand, both his body and soul were passible and underwent suffering. Thus, Christ already possessed a beatitude proper to the soul in the vision and enjoyment of God, but he also was still tending toward beatitude with regard to the passibility of body and soul.[8] Though Christ's beatific knowledge and passibility cohere during his earthly sojourn, his beatific knowledge, in Aquinas's judgment, does not fit with the notion of Christ having faith. For the object of faith is a "divine thing not seen." But, since Christ from

6 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.12.1 (166).

7 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.12.2 (167-8).

8 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.15.10 (196).

the time of his conception fully sees God by the divine essence, there can be no faith in Christ. Though Aquinas affirms that true faith has a "certainty or firmness" with which one clings to God, he holds that there is a certain "defect" in it since it is not yet sight.[9] Likewise, the essence of hope is the expectation of the good that one does not yet see (cf. Rom 8:24). But Christ had the full enjoyment of God from conception, so he did not have hope in that respect. Yet one can say that Christ did have hope at least with respect to anticipating the resurrection and glorification of his body.[10]

In early Reformed theology, the human knowledge of Christ often appears in discussions of the various kinds of "ectypal" theological knowledge that God communicates to human beings.[11] When the Reformed treat Christ's own human knowledge, they often take up the threefold division of beatific, infused, and acquired knowledge, but there is some diversity in their accounts, with frequent appeals to patristic figures like Athanasius and Ambrose. Within this Reformed diversity, there are some authors who maintain the doctrine of Christ's beatific knowledge on earth, while others reject that doctrine and explore the implications of Christ exercising faith on earth.

Girolamo Zanchi, for example, affirms that Christ always has beatific knowledge, for Christ's human intellect always immediately sees the Word and, in the Word as in a mirror, all other things. Christ's direct vision of God is ingredient in his salvific efficacy. For it is from his own fullness that he communicates the beatific vision to the elect. Like his medieval predecessors, Zanchi also affirms the presence of a habitual knowledge infused by the Spirit, which Christ could consider actively when he willed, and a knowledge acquired by sense experience (in which Jesus grows according to Luke 2:52).[12] With regard to the infused knowledge, Zanchi comments that as Christ

9 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.7.3 (109).

10 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.7.4 (110).

11 See, e.g., Franciscus Junius, *De vera theologica* (Leiden, 1594), VI (45-52); Polanus, *Syntagma*, I.7 (11); Turretin, *Inst.*, I.2.6 (1:5).

12 Zanchi, *De incarn.*, II.3 (362-4, 366-7, 369-71, 377-8).

advanced in age, he also advanced in this knowledge in a certain way: not with respect to the habits themselves (which are "replete from the beginning") but with respect to the acts of knowing or the exercise of the Spirit's gifts. For just as Christ grew bodily and in sense experience, so he also grew in the powers of his soul for discerning and reasoning.[13] Still, in accordance with his affirmation of Christ's beatific vision on earth, Zanchi holds that Christ does not have faith "properly speaking," for faith's object is something unseen (so Heb 11:1). But insofar as faith is a gift of the Spirit, Christ must be said to have it in some sense. Zanchi thus reasons that Christ has faith "improperly" insofar as faith denotes a human knowledge of God.[14]

In a number of cases, the Reformed theologians address the Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine (1524-1621), who, more like Lombard and less like Bonaventure and Aquinas, was resistant to the affirmation of any growth in the knowledge of Christ.[15] In his treatment of Christ taking up human infirmities and being like us in everything (but without sin), Polanus engages Bellarmine, but Polanus states that there is no controversy over Christ's beatific or infused knowledge. By virtue of the hypostatic union and the Spirit's endowment, Christ has the fullness of beatific and infused knowledge "from the beginning of his own conception." For Polanus, there is no incremental growth in the infused or "donative" knowledge, except, as the "orthodox fathers" put it, according to the revelation of it to others. Yet, for Polanus, there is still a "negative" ignorance (though not a "privative" and culpable ignorance) in Christ. Indeed, when Christ says that he does not know the day or hour of his return, the interpretation that Christ simply wishes not to reveal the day and hour is false. Citing Cyril of Alexandria, Polanus judges that Christ himself in his human intellect did not know the day or the hour. Polanus also underscores that while Christ did not grow in

13 Zanchi, *De incarn.*, II.3 (357-8, 373-7).

14 Zanchi, *De incarn.*, II.3 (360-1).

15 See Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationum Roberti Bellarmini de controversiis Christianae fidei, adversus huius temporis haereticos*, vol. 1 (Ingolstadt: Sartorii, 1601), I.2.4.1-5 (513-24).

the infused graces of the Spirit, he did grow in natural things, including his acquired knowledge.[16] In accordance with his affirmation of Christ's beatific knowledge on earth, Polanus denies that Christ has faith in the sense of a "gift by which these things are believed which are not seen."[17]

William Ames also addresses Bellarmine's position, appealing to Aquinas to make the point that Christ did grow in the habits of acquired knowledge. Like Zanchi, Ames also suggests that Christ's exercise of the habits of infused knowledge, rather than being immediately perfect, grew over time in accordance with the growth of his human stature and "faculty of perceiving." For Ames, the wisdom of Christ can be regarded as perfect from the beginning "intensively and in the first act" but still increased "in the second act" and "by extension to new objects." In fact, Ames goes on to utilise a distinction between the "right" and the "possession" of the Spirit's gifts. As Son of God and heir of all things, Christ has the right to all the Spirit's gifts, but under a "voluntary dispensation", Christ lives in a humble state and will come into full possession of certain gifts (or "degrees" of gifts) of both the soul and body only when he is raised and exalted. Within this framework, Ames then suggests that Christ, in his human intellect, truly did not know the hour of his return to judge the world. In fact, Ames reasons it does not make sense to interpret ignorance as only a denial of revelation. For if it were only a denial of revelation, and if, like Jesus, the Father too chose not to reveal the hour, then Jesus could not have said that the Father does know the hour of his return. But Jesus does say that the Father knows the hour in Mark 13:32, which entails that the ignorance cannot be just a matter of choosing not to reveal.[18]

Several Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century, like Gisbertus Voetius and Francis Turretin, affirm Christ's reception of infused knowledge from the Spirit but

16 Polanus, *Syntagma*, VI.15 (370-2).

17 Polanus, *Syntagma*, IX.6 (587).

18 William Ames, *Bellarminus enervatus*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Iohannes Ianssonius, 1628), II.1 (82-6).

also argue that Christ exercised faith during his earthly life. Voetius[19] distances himself from those who attribute the beatific vision to Christ on earth and provides a number of reasons for attributing faith to Christ, several of which are included here.[20] First, the Scriptures expressly attribute faith or an "essential adjunct" of faith to Christ in various places (Ps 22:9-11; Heb 2:13). Second, the "formal object" of faith is proposed to Christ, namely, divine promises revealed by God, some of which concern blessings proposed to Christ himself as a man under the law of God and some of which concern the benefits that Christ will procure for others (see, e.g., Isa 53:10-12; John 17:2, 20-21). Third, Christ's life exhibits the effects or consequents of faith, not least prayer, consolation, and hope (see Ps 22:9-11; Matt 26:39, 42, 44; John 17; Heb 5:7).[21]

Fourth, the "proper external causes of faith" (at least those "conserving" faith) are offered to Christ, and Christ himself "uses these as appointed means and supports of faith." Some of the means that Voetius has in view are "ordinary," namely, the word of God, prayer, and sacraments like circumcision, Passover, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Voetius recognises that many commentators (*Postillistae*) and scholastic theologians have argued that Christ uses these sacraments only for the sake of others. Voetius maintains, though, that while Christ did not have to use the sacraments in the manner of sinners, that does not mean that he could not use them for himself at all. He used them both "legally" to fulfil the requirements of true religion and "evangelically" as signs sealing the divine promises and confirming and sustaining faith in the promises, including the promise of salvation from death (Heb 5:7). Other means that Voetius has in view are "extraordinary," like the Father's speech at Christ's baptism and transfiguration (Matt 3:17; 17:5), the ministry of angels after Christ's temptation (Matt 4:11), and the Father's speech after the triumphal entry in response to

19 Or those who were authorized to give an account of the relevant disputations that occurred under Voetius's guidance at Utrecht.

20 For the comments on the beatific vision, see Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum theologicarum, pars secunda* (Utrecht, 1655), II.8 (156); 9 (186); 73 (1216).

21 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.8 (156, 159).

Jesus' prayer that the Father glorify his name (John 12:27-29).[22] Fifth, as a man subject to God's law, Christ ought to have faith as a "part" of divine worship and a "necessary act of religion." Sixth, Christ faces things that oppose (and therefore presuppose) faith, particularly external temptations in the wilderness and "spiritual desertions" in Gethsemane.[23] Voetius is aware of potential objections. He clarifies, for example, that Christ did not have faith in the way that sinful pilgrims needing reconciliation have faith. Christ exercised faith in a mode that did not require the presence of sin, the work of regeneration, or the hearing of the word of God for the beginning of faith. Christ was not weakened by doubt, but for the conservation of faith and for eliciting acts of faith, he did use ordinary and extraordinary means and supports.[24]

Turretin adamantly contends that Christ receives the beatific vision only when he is glorified. Like Ames, Turretin employs a distinction between "right" and "possession" to make his case. There is, Turretin maintains, a distinction between the "right to all paternal goods" that Christ as Son of God had from the very beginning of the incarnation and the "possession" of these, some of which Christ could "lack for a time by a voluntary dispensation." The anointing of the Spirit abides from the conception of Christ and supplies all that Christ needs for his mediatorial office, but the "acts of anointing" progress through "their own order and degree according to the economy of the divine will." The "Spirit of wisdom…holds back his own acts and does not immediately pour out his own rays most fully into the intellect of Christ." The union of the human soul with the person of the Logos "implies indeed possession of beatitude, but not immediately approaching or constantly being enjoyed, because, from the dispensation of God, passion ought to precede glory and felicity."[25] Indeed, for Turretin, the state of glory and beatitude and the suffering Christ experienced on earth

22 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.8 (157-62, 164).

23 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.8 (157).

24 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.8 (156-8).

25 Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.13.2, 9, 14-16 (2:379, 381-3).

are incompatible, so Christ is not simultaneously a "comprehender" and a "pilgrim" but rather first a "pilgrim" and then a "comprehender" from his exaltation onward.[26] Thus, Christ could truly grow in human knowledge, and, in his human intellect, he did not know the exact time of his return. This follows from his being like us in everything except sin. And it does not create a logical problem, for contradictory propositions (i.e., that Christ knows something and Christ does not know something) can both be true in different respects where the different respects in which they are affirmed have ontological bases (i.e., a divine and human nature) that are really distinct (not just formally distinct, like genus and species).[27]

Like Voetius, Turretin argues that several scriptural texts explicitly ascribe faith (or faithfulness) and hope to Christ (Acts 2:26; Heb 2:17; 3:2) and imply faith in Christ where Christ calls the Father his God (e.g., Matt 27:46). Yet faith is not applied to Christ as though he were a sinner in need of mercy. Nor is faith predicated of Christ "by reason of the mode of knowledge," as though there were an obscurity in Christ's human knowledge of God. For there is no imperfection in Christ's faith. Instead, a perfect faith with certitude is predicated of Christ "with respect to the substance of knowledge and with respect to assent to the thing known, that is, doctrine revealed by God, and with respect to the trust which rests in the goodness of God providing all things necessary for us." With this faith, Christ trusts and anticipates from the Father the full beatitude that awaits him after his resurrection (so Heb 12:2).[28]

2. The theological implications of Christ's human faith

With these historical considerations in view, what should be said about Christ's knowledge and faith during his earthly obedience? Given that some of the

26 Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.13.12-13 (2:382).

27 Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.4-8 (2:380-1). Turretin's account also supplies interpretations of texts like Matthew 11:27, John 21:17, and Colossians 2:3.

28 Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.12.5-8 (2:378).

early Reformed affirm a beatific vision of Christ on earth while some recent Roman Catholics have questioned it (e.g., Gerald O'Collins and Thomas Weinandy), this is not an issue that can be settled simply by a vague appeal to distinctive principles of Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. One must ultimately ask which view best expresses the concrete teaching of Holy Scripture. It seems to me that there are good reasons to affirm that Christ exercised faith before his exaltation and that the book of Hebrews in particular impresses upon us that this faith is ingredient in the Son's association with us human beings. However, the contrary statements and the cautions of eminent patristic, mediaeval, and early Reformed authors must be taken seriously, especially in a contemporary context where theologians are often tempted to emphasise Jesus' solidarity with fallen human beings at the expense of his distinction from us – a distinction by virtue of which he can save us from our sin and misery.

On the one hand, then, before explicating the claim that Christ exercised faith on earth, it will be wise to take into account the importance of his unique human knowledge of God. In particular, the gifts of the Spirit attested in a text like Isaiah 11:1-5 should occupy a significant place in our Christology. Though the New Testament gives little information about Jesus' childhood, Luke's Gospel does bear witness to Jesus' wisdom from an early age. The boy miraculously conceived by the Spirit of God "grew and became strong, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). At the age of twelve Jesus stayed in Jerusalem after his parents had left the Passover feast. He amazed the teachers there with his understanding (2:47). When asked why he remained behind, Jesus simply responded, "Why were you seeking me? Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in the things of my Father [or "in my Father's house"]?" (2:49). Evidently, Jesus was aware of his filial identity and his divine appointment to a particular task ("it is necessary…") even prior to his baptism in

the Jordan. Jesus' "sense of mission expresses itself early on."[29] From a negative angle, the Gospels do not present us with a Jesus who is unsure about his identity and mission or merely conjecturing about what he must do. Considering what Scripture teaches about the intellectual gifts of the Spirit and about Jesus' wisdom at an early age, I take it that the infused knowledge of Christ secures his understanding of his filial identity and mission. Communicated immediately by the Spirit, this infused knowledge equips Christ with a certitude required to fulfil his office and reveal the Father, even if Christ in his human intellect does not directly see the divine essence throughout his earthly life.

Of course, Luke adds that Jesus still "advanced" in wisdom (2:52). It is true, as Aquinas and Polanus all point out, that Jesus advanced in the outward display of his gifts. As he progressed in age, he manifested his divine identity and spiritual gifts more fully. Yet it also seems, in accordance with Ambrose, that Christ's advancement in wisdom in Luke 2:52 corresponds to his own subjective advancement in age. In light of this, Aquinas, for example, rightly affirms that Christ advanced in "acquired" or "experiential" knowledge, not least with respect to human suffering. Yet authors like Zanchi, Ames, and Turretin gesture toward some ways in which one might say that Christ advanced with regard to the infused knowledge as well: not with respect to its habits but with respect to its acts (Zanchi); not "intensively" or with respect to the "first act" (habit) but "extensively" and with respect to the "second act" (exercise) and "degree" (Ames); not with respect to the anointing of the Spirit per se but with respect to the subsequent outworking of the anointing and added degrees of knowledge (Turretin). I take these distinctions to be potentially fruitful, though it has to be admitted at some point that there are serious limits to our reasoning about the human intellect of the incarnate Son. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that the Son received at conception

29 Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 75.

the intellectual habits from the Spirit and then, under the Spirit's constant presence and movement in his soul, exercised the habits over time in a greater degree or depth in correspondence with the growth of his human faculties and ratiocination.

On the other hand, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus, in his human intellect, truly did not know the hour of his return. In particular, given that the Father knows but does not reveal the hour, it is difficult to take Jesus not knowing in Mark 13:32 to be a matter of not revealing. Furthermore, if the infused knowledge of Christ secures his fitness for his mediatorial work, it seems unnecessary to posit a beatific vision during his earthly life.

With Aquinas and many others, it is important to affirm that human nature's union with the person of the Word does lead to human nature receiving the gifts of the Spirit, including intellectual gifts. But Ames and Turretin, in my judgment, helpfully make the point that the "right" to the gifts does not mean there can be no development with regard to the "possession" of the gifts. To be sure, as authors like Aquinas and Zanchi observe, Christ can give only what he has, and he is appointed to give us the glory of the beatific vision. But that does not require that Christ have the beatific vision from conception onwards. It requires only that he obtain the beatific vision, along with knowledge of the time of his return, when he is raised and exalted. After all, he is appointed to procure the resurrection of the body too (e.g., 1 Cor 15:20; Phil 3:20-21; Col 1:19), but he himself obtains the resurrection body only after his passion.

Furthermore, as Voetius noted, Christ's vicarious obedience includes his exercise of faith. After Adam and Eve failed to trust in the goodness and provision of God (Gen 3:1-7), and after Israel failed to trust the promises of God in the wilderness (Num 14:11; Deut 1:32; 9:23; Ps 78:22, 32; 106:24), the second Adam and true Israel came to deliver us by fulfilling all righteousness, passing through the testing of the wilderness (so Matt 3:13-4:11) and living by faith until he was vindicated and exalted to the Father's right hand. In addition to this broader biblical theme, there are a few texts

that apply the language of faith to Christ more directly. For example, the Evangelists apply Psalm 22:8 to Christ on the cross. In the Psalm, those who despise David mock him: "He trusts [LXX 21:8 "hopes"] in YHWH. Let him deliver him." Matthew then records the Jewish leaders mocking Jesus: "He trusts in God. Let him save him now, if he wills" (27:43). Jesus himself and the Evangelists confirm the applicability of Psalm 22, particularly where he utters the cry of dereliction and his clothes are divided by the soldiers (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; John 19:24). The same verb is applied to Jesus in Hebrews 2:13. Jesus' speech in Hebrews 2:13 echoes Isaiah 8:17-18, where the prophet awaits YHWH while YHWH hides his face from Jacob: "I will trust in him."

To be fair, it is not as though a text like Hebrews 2:13 is overlooked by advocates of Christ's beatific vision on earth. As a prolific biblical commentator, Aquinas treats this passage in connection with the beatific vision. In his rendering of the text ("I will be trusting in him"), Aquinas exegetes the text by discussing Christ's "hope" (*spes*). Christ does not have just any "hope" but a "firm" hope that is "without fear," which is called *fiducia*. Christ has this *fiducia* in the help of the Father for "the glory of the body which he will raise again, both the members and the soul." However, Aquinas notes, some will question the applicability of *spes* and *fiducia* in the case of Christ. In response, Aquinas remarks that *spes* and *fiducia* must be distinguished. The former is "the expectation of future beatitude," which was not in Christ because he has been "blessed from the instant of his own conception." The latter is "the expectation of some help," which was in Christ since he "expected from the Father help in the passion." Hence, when the text says that Christ has hope, "it is not to be understood by reason of the principal object, which is beatitude, but by reason of the glory of the resurrection, and the glories collated to the body."[30]

30 Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura*, in vol. 2 of *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, 8th ed., ed. P. Raphaelis Cai (Turin-Rome: Mariett, 1953), II.3.133-5 (366).

Aquinas is certainly right to emphasise the firmness of Christ's confidence in the Father. However, if the infused knowledge of Christ sufficiently equipped him with a certitude about his identity and office, and if Christ's reception of the beatific vision upon his exaltation has enabled him to give the beatific vision to us, then there is no need to bring a prior commitment to a beatific vision of Christ *in via* to our exegesis of a text like Hebrews 2:13. In that case, it will be more fitting to take Christ's faith to be a confidence and rest in the Father's provision of future gifts that only anticipates the forthcoming sight of glory. For this aligns with the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1 and with the fact that Jesus is the "pioneer" of this faith in Hebrews 12:2.[31]

To be clear, the presence of this faith does not entail that Christ merely held an opinion about his divine identity and mission or that he merely hoped someday to be sure about those matters. The infused knowledge communicated by the Spirit provided Christ with a sure grasp of his identity and mission, even if it did involve some ordinary impressions and concepts in the human soul and not yet a direct vision of God's (indeed, his own) deity itself. Thus, the affirmation that Christ exercised faith need not jeopardise his certainty about his identity, mission, and teaching. Yet, after stressing that Christ's faith does not have to mean that he was uncertain of things, it is important to recall that he did have fear and anxiety in the face of trials and suffering. Perhaps this is a point where Voetius's discussion of Christ's use of signs and means of divine grace might play some role in our Christology. For example, when Christ completes his time of temptation in the wilderness and angels come and minister to him (Matt 4:11), there are no crowds around him to benefit from this confirmation of Christ's identity. Presumably, he is the one who is helped and encouraged by the angels' ministry. Likewise, Christ is strengthened through prayer in Gethsemane. Though Christ is undeterred in his faith in the Father's promises, his soul is in some

31 For further discussion on the meaning of ἀρχηγός ("founder" or "pioneer") see: Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

sense strengthened by such divinely ordained means. Considering the sense in which Christ might be both unshaken in his determination to do the Father's will and also subject to real mental infirmity leads us to the next point.

IV. Christ's Human Weaknesses and Suffering

In what way did Christ stand firm in faith while also experiencing sorrow and dread and even asking the Father to remove the cup of suffering? Several insights in catholic Christology can help us to understand the Bible's portrayal of Christ's steadfastness and his genuine experience of the sorrow and dread on account of which he needed the comfort of the Father and Spirit. Various authors call attention to the fact that in the incarnation the Son of God assumed the defects or infirmities of our human nature (cf. Ps 88:3; Isa 53:4, 11; Matt 26:37-38; John 12:27). Ambrose writes, "[Christ] assumes my will, he assumes my sadness. Confidently I call it 'sadness,' for I preach the cross….For me he suffers, for me he is sad, for me he is grieved. Therefore, for me and in me he has grieved, who for himself has had nothing that he should grieve."[32] As the sovereign God, the Son did not have to take up a human nature, much less these defects, so his bearing our infirmities was emphatically free.[33] But, under the decision to take up a human nature in which he would suffer for our sin and lead us to glory, the Son had to take up a nature with these defects. While the Son did not have in himself any cause of incurring such defects, since he came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3) he still took up weaknesses consequent to the human race's fall into sin. In short, while he did not assume *defectus culpae* (defects rooted in one's own guilt), he still assumed *defectus poenae* (defects resulting from punishment common to the human race).[34] Thus, the Son did not assume a mere image or likeness of human

32 Ambrose, *De fide*, II.7.53 (2:284).

33 Lombard writes that Christ has "assumed these defects not by necessity of his own condition, but by a will of pity" (*Sent.*, III.15.1 [95]).

34 Lombard, *Sent.*, III.15.1 (93, 95). Compare Aquinas, *Compendium*, I.226 (176-8); *ST*, IIIa.15.6 ad 3 (192).

passion and grief. He bore these infirmities in order to prove the truth of his humanity, to satisfy the justice of God by suffering in our place, and to set an example of patient endurance for us.[35]

1. Christ's assumption of human infirmities

These were defects or infirmities of both body and soul. Christ experienced not only bodily fatigue, hunger, and cold, for example, but also sorrow, fear, anxiety, anguish, and grief.[36] He sensed and was affected in his soul by the pains of the body.[37] He also was affected in his soul by pains or griefs proper to the soul itself. He apprehended by his rational judgment the evils and afflictions set before him (and before others too) and abhorred those evils and afflictions by his human will so that he was affected by sorrow, fear, and anxiety over present and future things that he had to face, including bodily harm and the eventual separation of the soul from the body at death.[38] He apprehended and abhorred things that were harmful or detestable not just concerning the body but also with respect to the soul itself, like the sin and spiritual misery of the human race, the abandonment of his friends, or the loss of a good reputation through slander and mockery.[39] There is some debate in the Christian tradition about whether Christ's mental and spiritual affliction affected not only the "lower reason" (*ratio inferior*) of his soul but also the "higher reason" (*ratio superior*) of his soul.[40] Did Christ endure things repugnant or disruptive not only to the well-

35 See, e.g., John of Damascus, *Expos. fidei*, III.20 (162-3); Lombard, *Sent.*, III.15.1 (95-6); Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.14.1 (179-80); 15.1 (185-6); Polanus, *Syntagma*, VI.15 (370, 372); Voetius, *Select. disp.* II.9 (165-6, 187).

36 For different delineations of the mental, spiritual infirmities, see, e.g., John of Damascus, *Expos. fidei*, III.20, 23 (162, 165-6); Lombard, *Sent.*, III.15.1 (93); Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.15.5-7, 9 (190-3, 195); Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.14.4 (384).

37 On the soul (not merely the body) performing the act of sensing by means of the organs of the body, see, e.g., Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.78.3-4 (253-7); IIIa.15.4 corp. (189); 15.5 corp. (190).

38 Cf. Aquinas, *Super Matt.*, XXVI.5.2225 (343); *ST*, IIIa.15.4, 6-7 (189, 191-3).

39 See Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.46.5 corp. (441); 46.6 corp. and ad 4 (443-4).

40 The distinction between *ratio inferior* and *ratio superior* is not a distinction between two intellects or two sets of faculties but rather a distinction between two "offices" of human reason. *Ratio inferior* signifies human reason in its consideration of temporal, lower matters, and *ratio superior* signifies human reason in its contemplation of eternal, higher things (see Augustine, *De trin.*, XII.4.4 [1:358]; Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.79.9 [275-6]).

being or fulfilment of the *ratio inferior* but also to the well-being or fulfilment of the *ratio superior*? If one is convinced that Christ possessed the beatific vision during his earthly sojourn, then one would logically deny that this was the case.[41] If, however, one holds that Christ did not have the beatific vision until his exaltation, then one may affirm that he did endure things repugnant to the fulfilment of the *ratio superior*.

Some of the early Reformed authors (rightly, I think) affirm that when Christ endured the wrath of God on the cross it did affect the higher operation of his soul.[42] He bore our sin and guilt as our covenant sponsor, becoming a curse for us and facing the just judgment of God (Isa 53:5-6; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24). In order to atone fully for our sin, Christ was affected in his "higher" mental and spiritual operation by "hellish punishments" (*poenae infernales* or *poenae gehennales*): a "penalty of loss" and a positive "penalty of sense" (actively sensing painful things). With respect to the penalty of loss, Christ emphatically did *not* endure a deprivation of the Father's love or favour itself (an *amissio* or *privatio realis*) (see John 10:17), but he did endure at least at certain moments a deprivation of his active sense of the Father's love and favour and of the joy and consolation following on that sense. With respect to the penalty of sense, Christ apprehended the wrath of God directed toward him in his representation of sinners whose guilt was imputed to him. That apprehension of God in his severe wrath disturbed or suspended the joy of Christ's soul and induced in him the sort of grief to which we ourselves had become liable.[43]

Nevertheless, Christ remained steadfast in his faith and hope in the Father's provision while being affected by such sorrow and distress.[44] He knew in his human

41 See Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.46.7-8 (444-7).

42 See, e.g., Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.9 (166-7); Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.14.3-4 (2:384), where both authors take issue with the views of certain *Pontificii* who restrict the suffering of Christ to his body or to the sensitive part of his soul.

43 Ames, *Bellarminus enervatus*, II.2 (87-8, 91); Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.9 (166-7); Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.14.5-7, 12, 14-15 (2:384-7); 16.9-10 (396); Owen, *Hebrews*, 4:504, 506-8, 510-11, 518, 528-9.

44 On Christ never despairing, see Ames, *Bellarminus enervatus*, II.2 (89-90), where he argues that "despair is not of the essence of infernal punishment. The author of the punishment is God; the devil and the sinner is the

intellect that he remained the beloved Son of the Father. He knew that he was making satisfaction for our sin and not being eternally damned (Ps 16:10-11), but he did lack at certain points the active sense and enjoyment of the Father's delight in him as the obedient Son. According to Voetius's disputation on the "agony and desertion of Christ," the Saviour always had a habitual apprehension of the Father as his deliverer, which sustained his trust in the Father, but by another mental act he also apprehended the Father as the judge of the sin and guilt he bore for us, which yielded sorrow and anguish.[45] Thus, the cry of dereliction occurs "according to the flesh" and expresses Christ bearing the sins of others. Ambrose paraphrases Christ's words: "Because I have taken up alien sins, I have also taken up the words of alien sins."[46] As Christ himself faces the hellish punishments and endures a suspension of his active enjoyment of the Father's delight and an apprehension of God's heavy wrath, he speaks "in his own person and about himself as our sponsor."[47]

2. *The interplay of Christ's natural and rational wills*

Now, to grasp the sense in which Christ stood firm in his determination to do the Father's will while also having mental infirmities like sorrow, fear, and anxiety, it is important to consider the different ways in which he willed (or did not will) various things. Human volition includes at least (a) willing certain things as ends in themselves, (b) choosing certain things relative to certain ends under the deliberation and judgment of reason, and (c) having desires for things that concern the well-being of the body. The human will with respect to its act of desiring certain things as ends in

author of despair." Again, "despair does not properly respect the punishment itself, but the continuation of it to eternity."

45 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.9 (168-70, 185-6); cf. Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.14.14 (2:386-7).

46 Ambrose, *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento*, 5, 38 (242).

47 Voetius, *Select. disp.*, II.9 (185-6); cf. Ames, *Bellarminus enervatus*, II.2 (93); Turretin, *Inst.*, XIII.14.6, 14 (2:385-7). Voetius's joining of "in himself" and "as our sponsor" is helpful here. It expresses that Christ himself was affected by the *poenae infernales* and yet not as though he himself were guilty of sin but only as the innocent covenant head voluntarily bearing our guilt.

themselves is sometimes called "natural will," "will as nature," or "simple will." The human will with respect to its act of choosing certain things relative to certain ends under rational deliberation and judgment is sometimes called "rational will," "will as reason," "conciliative will," or "deliberate will."[48] In addition, the will as the power of choosing or rational will is called the *liberum arbitrium* in Latin. It is a power or faculty involving both the rational intellect and the will since it involves both the judgment of reason about what is good and the will's consequent rational desire and determination to seek union with what is deemed good. The act of rational desire and determination about the way to obtain an end is called "choice" (*electio*).[49] Finally, the power of desiring things that concern the well-being of the body is sometimes called the "sensual" or "sensitive appetite" (*sensualitas*). It is, strictly speaking, located in the "sensitive power" of the soul and called "will" in only a participatory or extended sense, insofar as it is governed by the rational will's determination about seeking things that fulfil the desires of the body.

As to the Christological issues, Christ never faltered in his rational will (his rational judgment and determination) about either the end of his task (i.e., human salvation) or the means by which it would be accomplished (i.e., suffering and crucifixion). He did exercise "free choice" (*liberum arbitrium*) insofar as he desired and determined to do what his rational judgment had always deemed good, but his choosing was distinct from other human choosing insofar as he had no prior ignorance, uncertainty, or doubt about the good of his redemptive task and thus did not require counsel or deliberation. Accordingly, Christ's rational will with respect to the end of his incarnation and even with respect to the painful means of suffering and crucifixion was always conformed to the divine will. At the same time, Christ did not will pain and

48 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.18.3 (233).

49 See Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia libri Ethicorum* in vol. 47 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine ed. (Rome: ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969), III.5 (133-4); *ST*, Ia.83.3-4 (310-12); IaIIae 13.1, 3 (98-101); IIIa.18.4 (234); cf. Mastricht, *TPT*, II.15.5 (158).

death in his natural will (his will with respect to the power of desiring certain things as ends or goods in themselves) or in his sensitive appetite (his power of desiring things that concern the well-being of the body). Indeed, he naturally opposed and repudiated pain and death in his natural will and sensitive appetite.[50] While the end of his redemptive task (i.e., human salvation and the glory of God) was not at all repugnant to Christ's natural will or sensitive appetite, suffering and death were indeed repugnant to his natural will and sensitive appetite. Thus, Christ as man in his natural will and sensitive appetite willed something other than the passion and death decreed by God.[51]

On the one hand, the desires of Christ's natural will and sensitive appetite did not, strictly speaking, contradict the divine will or his own human rational will. For Christ opposed and chose his passion and death for different reasons and in different capacities. Christ's natural and sensitive volition opposed pain and death as ends in themselves, and Christ's divine and human rational volition chose the pain and death not as ends in themselves but as means to a greater end. Likewise, since Christ was infallibly disposed to the fear of YHWH and to faithfulness by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2, 5), his natural and sensitive repudiation of pain and death did not overwhelm or impede the determination of his divine and rational will. Moreover, the divine will and Christ's human rational will, while always governing the natural and sensitive will, permitted Christ's natural and sensitive displeasure in pain and death in accordance with the authenticity of his human nature.[52] On the other hand, then, it was granted to Christ as man genuinely to despise the suffering that had been decreed by God. The reality of the spiritual anguish of Christ discussed above is explained and corroborated by this natural and sensitive despising. For Christ was troubled that he

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50 Lombard, *Sent.*, III.17.2 (106-7); Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.14.2 (180-1); Ames, *Bellarminus enervatus*, II.2 (92); Owen, *Hebrews*, 4:509.

51 So Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.18.5 (235-6).

52 So Athanasius, *Oratio III*, 55,10-16 (366-7); John of Damascus, *Expos. fidei*, III.18 (157-60); Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.18.6 (236-7).

had to face things that he naturally regarded as evil and despicable in themselves and that he naturally abhorred.[53]

3. How Christ's suffering informs our understanding of obedience

The fact that Christ was troubled and yet persevered in obedience to the Father is aptly set forth by employing a distinction between "passion" (*passio*) and "pre-passion" (*propassio*). The language appears in Jerome's commentary on Matthew, for example, where Jesus "began to be sorrowful and distressed" (Matt 26:37). Jerome observes that the Lord proves the truth of the humanity that he assumed by beginning to be sorrowful (*coepit contristari*). However, lest it be suggested that "*passio* should rule in his soul," the Lord only "begins" to be sorrowful by *propassio*.[54] Jerome may overread the significance of Matthew including the verb "began," but the distinction between *passio* and *propassio* is a valuable one that is explained further by later writers.[55] In his commentary on Matthew's description of the scene in Gethsemane, Aquinas remarks that:

> *Sadness sometimes occurs according to passion, sometimes according to propassion. According to passion, when something suffers and is changed; but when it suffers and is not changed, then it has propassion. But when things of this sort are in us, so that reason is changed, then there are complete passions. But in Christ reason has never been changed. Then there has been propassion, and not passion.*[56]

While we often talk broadly about "passion" as a matter of one thing being affected by another and undergoing some sort of change, this *passio*/*propassio* distinction helps us to express that "passion" in the strictest and complete sense occurs when pain, grief, or anxiety deflects or hinders the will from following the sound

53 So John of Damascus, *Expos. fidei*, III.18, 23 (157-60, 165-6).

54 Jerome, *Sur Matt. II*, IV.26, 37 (252).

55 It is picked up in Lombard's *Sentences* in III.15.2 (98-9).

56 Aquinas, *Super Matt.*, XXVI.5.2226 (343).

judgment of reason about the best course of action. By contrast, "propassion" occurs when pain, grief, or anxiety are very much present in the soul and yet still subjected to sound rational judgment about the best course of action, which was true in Christ's life.[57] For, as Christ says, his soul was troubled, and yet he knew that he had come precisely for the hour of suffering that lay before him (John 12:27-28).

Significantly, the fact that Christ's sorrow, fear, and anxiety remained subject to his rational determination to do the Father's will takes nothing away from the genuineness of these mental infirmities. Indeed, one might say that he tasted them in an unmitigated form since he never attempted to insulate himself from them by taking the easier path of selfishness. What he did do to address these infirmities was to pray. Some authors in the Christian tradition assert that Christ did not have to pray for himself,[58] but even if a number of qualifications need to be made and even as he prayed to set an example for us, there is an important sense in which Christ truly prayed for himself. Just as the Son as God did not have to take up our infirmities, so he did not have to take up a posture of prayer. Nor did he have to pray as though he was unsure about the outcome of his passion. Nevertheless, having freely assumed a human nature with its infirmities, Christ genuinely expresses his natural and sensitive will to the Father when he asks that the cup should pass from him. He also expresses his rational determination when he adds, "Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will" (Matt 26:39).[59] For the fulfilment of that rational determination Christ as man continually depends upon the empowerment of the Spirit. He therefore applies himself to the divinely appointed means of receiving help.[60] In this way, Christ follows in the tradition of the psalmists

57 Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.15.4 corp. (189) on *propassio* being "inchoate" and not extending itself beyond sensitive desire.

58 E.g., Hilary of Poitiers, *La Trinité*, X.37-8 (228, 230, 232); Ambrose, *Traité sur l'Evangile de S. Luc, vol. 1*, trans. Gabriel Tissot, SC 45 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1956), V, 41-2 (198-9); John of Damascus, *Expos. fidei*, III.24 (167-8); IV.18 (215). praying for himself, see further Owen, *Hebrews*, 4:501-2.

59 Compare Athanasius, *Oratio III*, 57 (368-70); Aquinas, *Super Matt.*, XXVI.5.2231-2 (343-4).

60 Aquinas, *ST*, IIIa.21.1 corp. (251); cf. Owen, *Hebrews*, 4:509.

and provides both an example of unfolding our natural will and griefs before God and also an example of submitting our wills to the will of God.

V. Growth in Mercy toward Sinners

Finally, though this paper has already touched on Christ's growth with respect to his knowledge, one should also comment on whether he grew with respect to his mercy and sympathy as high priest. Of course, the divine Son had previously understood the nature of human infirmity and emotion and operated with the Father and Spirit in God's work of comforting his people. In addition, the Son, according to his humanity, received wisdom and understanding from the Spirit by which he always knew what sort of help sinners need. Yet the author of Hebrews anchors Jesus' ability to sympathise in his having been tempted like us: "For we do not have a high priest unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one having been tempted according to all things like us, without sin" (4:15). Is it fitting, then, to say that the Son in some sense *grew* in mercy?

1. Christ's suffering and his sympathy

In his commentary on Hebrews 4:15, Calvin denies that Christ grew in mercy. He says that "the Son of God will not have had necessarily to be formed by experience toward the affection of mercy." Yet the Son had to be "exercised in our miseries" in order to persuade us that he is merciful and inclined to help us. That Jesus experienced our misery is a gift to us.[61] For Calvin, the Son has clothed himself with our flesh and its affections and thereby proved himself to be true man and ready to help us, but the Son himself did not need such "lessons". His experience of our condition is for our benefit so that we can see how much he cares about our salvation. Whether the Son is still liable at present to experiencing our miseries is a "frivolous" question. The point

61 John Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Hebraeos*, in vol. 55 of *CO*, 34.

is that, in view of the Son's human affections, we know not to be frightened by the majesty of Christ, because he is our brother.[62] When Christ is said to "learn" obedience in Hebrews 5:8, Calvin comments that the "proximate end" of Christ's suffering is to make him "accustomed" or "habituated" to obedience. But Christ did not need such habituation, for he was already willing to obey the Father from the beginning of his incarnate life. Christ does this for us, to give us a model of obedience. Calvin does acknowledge that Christ "by his own death has learned fully what it is to obey God," particularly since he is "led to the denial of himself." Yet, in Calvin's exegesis, the emphasis still falls not on Christ being equipped for his high priesthood but on the pedagogical aspect of Christ's experience of suffering. His suffering teaches us the extent to which we must obey God.[63]

Perhaps a charitable interpretation of Calvin's comments would suggest that he aims only (and rightly) to deny that Christ had to grow in mercy with respect to his divine love and with respect to his infused habits, while still leaving room for some genuine subjective growth on Christ's part. More than Calvin, exegetes like Aquinas and Owen allow such acquisition of knowledge by experience to influence their exposition of texts like Hebrews 4:15 and 5:8. Aquinas recognises that God has eternally known our misery by a "simple knowledge." Yet, according to Aquinas, the author of Hebrews intends to communicate that mercy and pity "agree" or "fit" with our high priest in a special way. The special ability to sympathize that is rooted in Christ's temptation does not concern a bare potential for showing pity (*nuda potentia*) but rather a certain "readiness" or "eagerness" (*promptitudo*) and "aptitude" (*aptitudo*) for coming to the aid of others – "and this because he knows, by experience, our misery."[64]

Owen also recognises that the divine Son, even prior to the assumption of a human nature, was merciful. But mercy in that case was a "naked simple apprehension

62 Calvin, *In Heb.*, 54.

63 Calvin, *In Heb.*, 63.

64 Aquinas, *Super Heb.*, IV.3.

of misery, made effective by an act of his holy will to relieve." The human mercy of Christ, however, includes more:

> *Mercy in Christ is a compassion, a condolency, and hath a moving of pity and sorrow joined with it. And this was in the human nature of Christ a grace of the Spirit in all perfection. Now, it being such a virtue as in the operation of it deeply affects the whole soul and body also, and being incomparably more excellent in Christ than in all the sons of men, it must needs produce the same effects in him wherewith in others in lesser degrees it is attended.*[65]

For Owen, a text like Hebrews 2:17 is not describing mercy "in general" but "as excited, provoked, and drawn forth by [Christ's] own temptations and sufferings. He suffered and was tempted, that he might be merciful, not absolutely, but a merciful high priest." This particular mercy is:

> *…the gracious condolency and compassion of his whole soul with his people, in all their temptations, sufferings, dangers, fears, and sorrows, with a continual propensity of will and affection unto their relief, implanted in him by the Holy Ghost, as one of those graces which were to dwell in his nature in all fullness, excited and provoked, as to the continual exercise in his office of high priest, by the sense and experience which he himself had of those miseries which they undergo.*[66]

Along with the habit of mercy originally implanted by the Spirit, Christ had a:

> *…ready enlargedness of heart…[through]…particular experience…of the weakness, sorrows, and miseries of human nature under the assaults of temptation; he tried it, felt it, and will never forget it… In his throne of eternal peace and glory, he sees poor brethren labouring in that storm which with so much travail of soul himself passed through, and is intimately affected with their condition.*[67]

65 Owen, *Hebrews*, 3:469-70.

66 Owen, *Hebrews*, 3:470.

67 Owen, *Hebrews*, 3:480.

Aquinas and Owen duly bring out the fact that while Christ, as God, already understood human misery and was merciful, his experiential knowledge of temptation uniquely equipped him to care for sinners. Christ's divine omniscience and habitual graces from the Spirit were in no way defective, and yet the experience of suffering and acquired knowledge of human misery established in him a peculiar readiness and eagerness to help us in our weakness. What is new here is not the knowledge of misery in itself or the virtue of mercy in itself but the fact that Christ's human virtue of mercy is now informed by his own direct experience of suffering and incited to act in part by that experience.

That is, upon seeing the saints' misery, Christ as man is moved to relieve us not just by what he sees outwardly but by his own inward experience and memory of what he himself went through on earth. In this respect, then, Christ did grow in mercy and had to "become" a merciful and faithful high priest (Heb 2:17).

VI. Conclusion

Having reached the word limit for these conference papers, I must now provide a brief conclusion. It seems to me that Holy Scripture, read with the help of insightful authors throughout church history, presents us with a vision of a Saviour who exercised faith on earth prior to his glorification, experienced real human weaknesses, sufferings, and emotions, and grew in mercy toward sinners as our high priest. May the Lord guide us further in discerning the most fitting pastoral applications of this Christological balm in the life of the church today.

About the author

Dr Steven Duby is an Associate professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary and author of several books including Jesus and the God of Classical Theism *and a forthcoming commentary on Habakkuk in the International Theological Commentary series.*

The Trinitarian resurgence?

Michael McClenahan

I. Introduction

The story of recent Protestant engagement with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not an entirely happy one. The heart of the contemporary confusion is a widespread failure to grasp the nature of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The nature of this relationship was at the core of the fourth century Trinitarian controversy and it was this particular doctrine which was given confessional shape and substance at Nicaea (325) and Nicaea-Constantinople (381). The failure of the evangelical church to rightly receive the catholic tradition on this fundamental teaching has caused significant confusion. For example:

> *[T]hough the Father is supreme, he often provides and works through his Son and Spirit to accomplish his work and fulfill his will. I am amazed when I consider here the humility of the Father. For though the Father is supreme, though he has in the Trinitarian order the place of highest authority, the place of highest honor, yet he chooses to do his work in many cases through the Son and through the Spirit rather than act unilaterally. ... It is not as though the Father is unable to work unilaterally.*[1]

The idea that the Father works unilaterally is not one that should pass without a serious measure of alarm. Or again:

> *The Father is the grand architect, the wise designer of all that has occurred in the created order, and he, not the Son or the Spirit, is specifically said to have supreme authority over all. In his position and authority, the Father is supreme*

1 Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, Crossway, 20-12), 55, 57. See the various interactions with Ware in *Trinity without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology*, Michael F. Bird & Scott Harrower (eds) (Grand Rapids, Kregal, 2019) where the argument is made that he is articulating a form of semi-Arianism.

among the Persons of the Godhead as he is supreme over the whole created order.[2]

It is sometimes suggested that the chief defect in Protestant theology has been the neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity:

…it is remarkable to note that the doctrine of the Trinity has made an important comeback among Christian theologians, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century. World-wide an ever-increasing number of theologians from a wide range of denominations have discovered the doctrine's ecumenical significance, seeing that it involves a faith tradition shared by the universal church and thus serves as a distinguishing characteristic of the largest religion in the world.[3]

At a *prima facie* level, this does fit the history of the intellectual pursuits of many academic theologians in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet if the doctrine of the Trinity is at the heart of the "faith shared by the universal church" it should not be a surprise that forms of the doctrine were retained and proclaimed at church level. Fred Sanders helps here:

There is an oft-told tale of how the doctrine of the Trinity was marginalized in the modern period, until an heroic rescue was performed by one of the Karls (Barth or Rahner). But for theologians like Pope, Hodge, Bavinck, and Hall, as for most Christians, there was no need for an absolute retrieval of a completely lost doctrine. Retrieval is a normal part of responsible theological method, and theologians were actively engaged in a kind of low-level, ordinary retrieval throughout the modern period, a retrieval so incremental as to be indistinguishable from conservation.[4]

2 Bruce A. Ware, 'Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority And Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead' in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* edited by Dennis W. Jowers & H. Wayne House (Eugene, Pickwick Publications, 2012), 17. It should probably be noted that Ware is attempting to articulate the orthodox doctrine, the problem lies in the move from eternal relations within the one God to the idea of 'relationships,' which in Ware's retelling are decidedly anthropomorphic and rely on social accounts of the Trinity.

3 Cornelius van der Kooi & Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2017), 80.

4 Fred Sanders, 'The Trinity', in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* edited by Kelly M. Kapic & Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2012), 21-45, 44. For another modern example of

Modern evangelical Protestantism has not forgotten the doctrine of the Trinity. It has rather, in quite a number of varied and often bizarre ways, decided to develop novel ahistorical versions of the doctrine, or else quite commonly central elements of the doctrine have been jettisoned in catechesis and apologetics.[5] This failure has resulted in some cases in a flirtation with social trinitarianism and in other cases a rejection of the tradition with a wholesale turn to social conceptions of the divine persons. In his important work on the subject Stephen Holmes concludes that:

> *In brief, I argue that the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable. … Many brilliant works have been published in the name of that recovery, but I argue here that, methodologically and materially, they are generally thoroughgoing departures from the older tradition, rather than revivals of it.*[6]

Thankfully this is not the end of the story. In the decade just past controversies over aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity have provoked serious reassessments of Protestant teaching and recent years have seen significant conferences, publications, and academic courses dedicated to the necessary work of theological retrieval.[7] The

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this lamentation see Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London, T&T Clark, 2003), 3-18, the chapter title is 'The Forgotten Trinity.'

5 For an example of the former see Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Eastbourne, Kingsway Publications, 1987) in which there is almost no reference to the Nicene tradition and the place of the Nicene grammar in confessing the doctrine of the Trinity. This is not to suggest that McGrath is unorthodox, just that the presentation of the doctrine is not explicitly Nicene. For an example of the doctrine expressed in strong social Trinitarian terms as part of an apologetic attempt see Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), 214-215: 'The inner life of the triune God, however, is utterly different. The life of the Trinity is characterised not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love. When we delight and serve someone else, we enter into a dynamic orbit around him or her, we centre on the interests and desires of the other. That creates a dance, particularly if there are three persons, each of whom moves around the other two. So it is, the Bible tells us. Each of the divine persons centers upon the others … That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love. The early leaders of the Greek church had a word for this – perichoresis.' Keller's work is clearly indebted to the work of Colin Gunton as indicated in his references.

6 Stephen R Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Paternoster, 2012), xv–xvi.

7 The story of the controversy and the early stages of the retrieval is very well told in *Trinity without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology*, Michael F. Bird & Scott Harrower (eds) (Grand Rapids, Kregal, 2019). Most recently see the retrieval work in Matthew Barrett (ed) *On Classical Theism: Retrieving the Nicene doctrine of the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2024).

kind of low-level retrieval and conservation highlighted by Sanders has developed into the wholesale recovery of the catholic doctrine of the God that the Holy Trinity is. This work is far from complete – but at the level of confessing the faith once delivered to the saints contemporary Protestantism is in a much healthier position now than it was a decade ago. But it should be remembered that this is a return from a fairly low ebb. If Protestants have learned anything from this theological debacle it is that a posture of deeper humility to the work of the Spirit in previous generations is part of our moral and spiritual vocation.

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on what went wrong before turning to some key theological principles that will help Protestantism navigate the lee shore it has been troubled by for quite some time. The argument at the heart of this paper is that Reformed Protestantism's claim to be genuinely catholic depends on a return to a clear and unambiguous confession of the Nicene doctrine of the Holy Trinity and, in particular, the Nicene account of the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, Protestantism is summoned by the gospel to mortify certain theological desires that have led it into idolatry and confusion while learning to confess again the good news of God, who is the Holy Trinity.

II. Jürgen Moltmann (1926-2024)

The German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann lived an extraordinary life and it is hard to think of a theologian with a higher global profile in the twentieth century – with the exception, perhaps, of Pope John Paul II.[8] He was extraordinarily fruitful in his writing and he was both intensely engaging and charismatic in his teaching. He attracted loyal students in vast numbers and influenced conservative Protestants (as well

8 Although Pope Pius XII thought the honour should go to another Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, whom he described as 'the most prominent theologian since Thomas Aquinas.' See Steven D. Cone, *Theology from the Great Tradition* (London, T&T Clarke, 2018), 145. Barth may have had a major academic impact but Moltmann's impact has been much wider and deeper. If prominent means 'better' maybe Pope Pius XII had a point.

as other Christian traditions) in every continent. It has been noted that "no single other theologian of [the late twentieth century] has shaped theology so profoundly as has Moltmann … the power of his vision and the originality of his method helped inspire a host of new directions."[9] Many of the maladies that have afflicted modern Protestantism are evident in his work. By his own testimony, Moltmann's life of faith began in a dramatic context. Caught up in the bombing of Hamburg in July 1943, Moltmann said "[d]uring that night I became a seeker after God."[10] It is hard to overstate the horror of the bombing of Hamburg, as many people died during Operation Gomorrah as were killed in Great Britain throughout the course of the war:

> *Altogether 56 percent of Hamburg's dwellings, around 256,000 of them, had been destroyed and 900,000 people were made homeless. Some 40,000 people lost their lives and a further 125,000 required medical treatment, many of them for burns.*[11]

Moltmann's dear friend Gerhard Schopper died at his side. For Moltmann, life became an enduring quest to interrogate the question of human suffering and the relationship of God to the endless woes of his creatures. And so, in one of the most famous openings to any theological work, Moltmann wrote:

> *Jesus died crying out to God, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" All Christian theology and all Christian life is basically an answer to the question which Jesus asked as he died.'*[12]

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9 Miroslav Volf 'Introduction' in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, & Thomas Kucharz (eds) *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honour of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), ix.

10 Jürgen Moltman, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (London, SCM, 2007), 17. See also Thomas R. Thompson, 'Jürgen Moltmann' in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought ed Chad Meister & James Beilby* (Routledge, 2013), 227-238.

11 Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (Penguin Books, 2008), 446. For a brief account of Operation Gomorrah and the impact on Hamburg and Nazi Germany see 443-450.

12 Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God* (London, SCM, 1974), 4. For personal reflections on his life see Jürgen Moltman, 'A Lived Theology' in Darren C. Marks (ed) *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2002), 87-96. See also his fascinating work autobiographical work *A Broad Place*. The reference is to Psalm 31:8 and not to the Sermon on the Mount.

A central part of Moltmann's work was the development of what he called a social account of the trinitarian persons: "[t]o take up the theology of the cross today is to go beyond the limits of the doctrine of salvation and to inquire into the revolution needed in the concept of God."[13] In this revolutionary move Moltmann set to one side the classical doctrine of the one divine essence and three personal subsistences, and instead offered social and personal concepts for understanding the Trinity. Moltmann rejected both classical theism (especially Aquinas) and Hegel who spoke of the divine as "absolute personality." Moltmann's theological vision is a reorientation of Christian theology *proper*. It is a vision rooted in a particular set of revolutionary theological ideas. Stephen Williams says,

> *It is the cross itself that is the critique of alien ideas of God within our (own) Christian tradition. Moltmann's special target here is the doctrine that God does not and cannot suffer, the doctrine of divine impassibility. To all appearances that was axiomatic in the early church, profoundly affecting its Christologies. Hence the revolutionary nature of Moltmann's proposal.*[14]

This is not just a specific *theodicy* for a particular time and place but a reimagining of the Christian doctrine of God. A "trinitarian history of God" (an oft-repeated phrase) rooted in the story of the gospel. The story of Jesus is the story of the Son, which shapes the story of the Triune God; the biography of Jesus is the historical, developing account of the growth and development of the Triune God. He argued:

> *In distinction to the trinity of substance and to the trinity of subject we shall be attempting to develop a social doctrine of the Trinity.*[15]

This social doctrine finds unity in God because there is unity of love and purpose be-

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13 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 1.

14 Stephen N. Williams 'Jürgen Moltman: A Critical Introduction' in *Getting your Bearings: Engaging with Contemporary Theologians* Philip Duce & Daniel Strange (eds) (Leicester, Apollos, 2003), 75-124, 85. This helpful overview article by Williams includes a valuable section on divine suffering (83-89; 107-115). For a theological assessment of Moltmann's construction of divine passibility the most important work is Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

15 Jürgen Moltman, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 19.

tween the persons. It is a long way from the Nicene doctrine of the church catholic.

The point is not particularly hard to grasp – the unity of the Godhead is a unity of "purpose, revelation and glory." This is why social Trinitarians have introduced the church to a whole new set of images to help explain the Trinity. In comes, among other things, dancing. And, of course, dancing seems to work well as a picture of divine unity because in dancing (well some dancing at least) there is a unity of purpose. Paul Fiddes' book *Participating in God* uses Henri Matisse's odd and distasteful painting *La Danse* on the cover. So Fiddes: "…the image of the divine dance is not so much about dancers as about the patterns of the dance itself, an interweaving of ecstatic movements."[16] Perhaps someone should point out there are five naked people in Matisse's painting, which seems numerically challenging for the trinitarian application unless the point is that creatures fully participate in the divine dance, which would seem to open up a whole world of theological trouble.

The further development of Moltmann's vision may be seen, for example, in the work of Cornelius Plantinga Jr.'s article "Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism":

> *The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit, as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that, on this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, persons in some full sense of that term.*[17]

16 Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Theology of the Trinity* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

17 Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., eds. *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 67-89 , 68. This is the first of three criteria that Plantinga advances for a 'social theory of the Trinity'. This article remains foundational for social theories and is honest enough to ask '[b]ut, now, what about the claim that there is only one God? How, exactly, may social Trinitarians cling to respectability as monotheists?' (75). It may be argued that this is setting the bar a little low. See also Miroslav Volf, '"The Trinity is our social program": The doctrine of the Trinity and the shape of social engagement' in Modern Theology 14:3 July 1998, 403-423, and the response by Mark Husbands, 'The Trinity is not our Social Programme: Volf, Gregory of Nyssa, and Barth' in Daniel J. Treier (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2009), 120–41. The development of Patristic doctrine and, in particular the language of person and substance, is set out in John McGuckin, Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy (New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 138-145. See also the excellent work by D Glenn Butner Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2022).

Or again:

Father, Son, and Spirit, must be regarded as tightly enough related to each other so as to render plausible the judgement that they constitute a particular social unit. In such social monotheism, it will be appropriate to use the designator God to refer to the whole Trinity, where the Trinity is understood to be one thing, even if it is complex thing consisting of persons, essences, and relations.[18]

Moltmann's influence is legion. It is seen in every modern instance where the Father and Son as divine persons are set against each other or separated from each other in the work of Christ making satisfaction for sin. Consider this example of an evangelical receiving Moltmann's revolution in the doctrine of God – this is J.R.W. Stott citing Moltmann:

When, then, do we understand of God when we see the crucified Jesus and hear his derelict cry? ... in that awful experience which "divides God from God to the utmost degree of enmity and distinction" ... we have to recognize that both Father and Son suffer the cost of their surrender, though differently. "The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father."[19]

The notion that the Father can become sonless is Moltmann's revolution in the doctrine of God in a nutshell.

Moltmann believed that the church in Europe faced a "double crisis" – a crisis of relevance and a crisis of identity.[20] This twofold crisis is the crisis of two interwoven elements. It is the "traditional dogmas" of the church that make the church

18 Plantinga, 'Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism', 68.

19 John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester, IVP, 1986), 216-217. It is troubling to see Moltmann's teaching on the personal enmity between the divine person of the Father and the divine person of the Son in this volume on the work of Christ. The issues are outlined helpfully in Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why it Matters* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2012), 13-47. It is simply untrue to say that the Father and the Son were divided 'God from God to the utmost degree of enmity and distinction.' Much of the evangelical infatuation with Moltmann was based on the assumption that this teaching somehow would help in upholding the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. It does nothing of the sort.

20 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 7.

increasingly irrelevant because they (the dogmas) rupture the "critical solidarity with our contemporaries." Yet as the church attempts to speak with contemporary relevance "the more they are drawn into the crisis of their own Christian identity."[21] The opening chapter of *The Crucified God* is an extensive rhetorically expansive discussion of this twofold theme.[22] The argument Moltmann advances is that Christianity – which once conquered the Roman world – must now "conquer its own forms when they have become worldly."[23] Moltmann discusses at great length the ways in which the "cult of the cross" and the mystical common piety that surrounds the religion of the masses is a consequence (in his view) of the abandoned masses finding their hope and comfort in the abandoned God:[24]

> *The church of the crucified was at first, and basically remains, the church of the oppressed and insulted, the poor and wretched, the church of the people.*[25]

In other words, the church of the crucified, not the church of the metaphysically speculative Nicene tradition with all the associated traditional dogmas. The "cult of the cross" and the transformation of the gospel story into the story and personal autobiography of God himself are central to the recovery, or maybe even discovery, of real Christian identity. The rhetorical force of Moltmann's work is seen in the accent he placed on the history of Jesus. His stress on the economy – the works of God in history – and his downplaying of metaphysical, speculative theology made him not only popular with evangelicals but effectively sidelined much of the historical emphasis on theology proper, the divine attributes, and the creedal understanding of the Holy Trinity. Without Moltmann's reorientation of modern theology to the economy and his complementary development of Trinitarian thought in social terms, many of the

21 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 7.

22 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 7-28.

23 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 36.

24 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 32-75.

25 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 52

most significant changes in Protestantism would not have occurred or would not have happened in the way that they did. Moltmann's argument that the history of Jesus is in some sense the biography of God himself set the context for his teaching about divine abandonment at the cross. None of this was authentically catholic, nor was it faithful to the confessional Reformed tradition. At best, Moltmann's work was eccentric; at worst, it represents a total retreat from the pro-Nicene Reformed position.

So much for the pathology of contemporary Protestantism's malady.

III. Central Concepts in the Confessional Tradition

What then is the task of theology? Holmes writes:

> *The task of theology is to find a grammar that will speak of this adequately, a task completed by the Cappadocian fathers in Greek and St Augustine in Latin, at least in the judgement of the majority witness of the Christian tradition. The question both had to answer, of course, was how to speak of the threeness of God without compromising the prior confession of simplicity.*[26]

The church must speak and the church must maintain the prior confession of divine simplicity. When speaking the church must recall the great distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge – believers have no knowledge of God as he knows himself. This is the essence of the archetype: only the Lord God knows the Lord God in his infinite wisdom and glory, and only the Lord God knows all things in relation to himself. The maxim still stands *finitum non capax infiniti* – the finite is incapable of the infinite.[27] It is probably worth comparing this confessional view with Moltmann – "[i]n the incarnation of the Son the triune God communicates himself wholly and utterly."[28]

Secondly, the church must respect the prior confession of divine simplicity. The Belgic Confession begins with the words "[w]e all believe in our hearts and confess

26 Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*: *Understanding God's Life* (Paternoster, 2012), 108.

27 *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* Richard A. Muller (ed) (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1985), s.v. *Finitum non capax infiniti*.

28 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 97.

with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual Being, whom we call God."[29] The Lord God is not, as social Trinitarians would say, "complex". Many who hold to social views of the Trinity agree with Plantinga that "simplicity theory ends up complicating trinity doctrine quite needlessly. Its lease ought not to be extended."[30] Yet the confessional Protestant tradition is quite uniform here – "[t]he orthodox have constantly taught that the essence of God is perfectly simple and free from all composition."[31] This is because the divine nature cannot be dependent on anything, the Lord God is not a composite being formed from pre-existing materials – his essence alone is eternal, self-sufficient, and unchanging. Herman Bavinck argues that:

> *On the whole, its teaching has been that God is "simple," that is, sublimely free from all composition, and that therefore one cannot make any real [i.e., ontological] distinction between his being and his attributes. Each attribute is identical with his being: he is what he possesses.'*[32]

Giles Emery writes that:

> *The recognition of the simplicity and incomprehensibility of God ranks among the fundamental elements of a Christian culture that respects the mystery of the Trinity.*[33]

The recognition of these "fundamental elements" disciplines the thinking and speech of the church and enables the confession of the church to be shaped by the grammar of the gospel developed in the fourth century.

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29 *Creeds, Confessions, & Catechisms: A Reader's Introduction* Chad Van Dixhoorn (ed) (Wheaton, Crossway, 2022), 79.

30 Plantinga, 'Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism', 85. Plantinga's article is largely a rejection of divine simplicity.

31 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (trans) George Musgrave Giger, (ed) James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 3.7 (191–94). Turretin's entire discussion is helpful. For a robust modern account of the classical doctrine see Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London, T&T Clark, 2016).

32 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation Volume 2* (trans) John Vriend (ed) John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Baler Academic, 2004), 118.

33 Gilles Emery OP, *The Holy Trinity: An Introduction to the Catholic Doctrine of the Triune God* (Washington DC, Catholic University Press of America, 2011), 92.

IV. A Contemporary Restatement of Traditional Doctrine

In an excellent statement of confessional Trinitarianism Scott Swain states:

> *The doctrine of the Trinity is the church's interpretation of God's revealed name, "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). God makes his triune name known to us through an unfolding economy of revelation that disciplines us at once to distinguish the one true God from all who bear the name "god" but lack the characteristic marks of God's unique and indivisible nature and to identify the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the one true God without eliding the distinctions signified by their personal names. Interpretation of God's triune name in turn gives rise to trinitarian language and metaphysics34, along with the illuminating concept of divine "person," which serve to elucidate further the significance of God's triune name and to expose errors that would mask that name's significance. Because it concerns the supreme mystery of revelation, the doctrine of the Trinity sheds light on our understanding of divine perfection and divine action and deepens our communion with God.*[35]

Swain is surely correct to refocus attention on the significance of the one divine name revealed in Matthew 28:19. God's revealed names matter, and this climactic revelation, on the cusp of the global mission of the church to baptise the nations, reminds us that the one God of the covenant is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

V. Divine Aseity and the Doctrine of the Trinity

> *Praise, blessing and sanctifying add nothing to God; they do not and cannot expand or enrich God's holiness, which is inexhaustibly and unassailably full and perfect. They are simply an acknowledgement and indication. And theology as holy reason finds its completion in such acknowledgement and indication.*[36]

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34 Duby notes that the word metaphysics may be shorthand 'for any doctrine of God according to which God is complete in himself without reference to the economy.' See Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, 2019), 188-189.

35 Scott R. Swain, 'Divine Trinity' in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* edited by Michael Allen & Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2016), 78-106, 81. This is a superb summary chapter. Emphasis added.

36 John Webster, *Holiness* (London, SCM, 2003), 29-30.

What does it mean to talk about God's "inexhaustibly and unassailably full and perfect" life?[37] It does not mean that we try to find a way to define God's life as a "much bigger" version of creaturely reality. Of course, this is a discussion of something incomprehensible. The necessary concepts will themselves be creaturely ("anthropomorphic") and therefore analogical. Yet Webster says, "the content of the term cannot be determined simply by analysis of the difference between God and contingent creatures."[38]

Traditionally divine life/aseity/independence is referred to in discussions of the divine attributes. In the western theological tradition there is first a discussion of *de Deo uno* before there is a discussion of *de Deo trino*. This is seen, for example, in the second chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. For some people even the very chapter title seems odd – "*Of God, and of the Holy Trinity*." In traditional Reformed theology, Divine aseity is "a term derived from the language of self-existence used with reference to God by the scholastics: God is said to exist from himself (*esse a se*)."[39] A charge that is often raised against the classical doctrine of aseity is that it is just a thinly veiled Christian version of Greek philosophy. The argument runs that Christian theology was taken captive by Greek philosophy in the early church. This is at the heart of Moltmann's project.[40] This is known as the "Hellenization thesis." But, as Michael Allen notes (quoting Robert Louis Wilkins) it would be better to speak of the "Christianization of Hellenism."[41] While this approach has been often criticised

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37 Webster offers a briefer version of his argument in his essay 'God's Perfect Life.' It is from *God's Life in Trinity* Miroslav Volf & Michael Welker (eds) (Fortress Press, 2006), 143-152.

38 John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume 1 God and the Works of God* (London, Bloomsbury T&T, 2016), 14.

39 *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* Richard A. Muller (ed) (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1985), s.v. *Aseitas*.

40 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Fortress Press, 1993), 16-20.

41 Michael Allen 'Divine Attributes' in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* edited by Michael Allen & Scott R. Swain (Baker, 2016), 71-73. Weinandy outlines the hellenization thesis in this way: 'The influence of Greek philosophy, especially Platonism, is the main reason why it has taken almost two thousand years to develop the notion of God's passibility. All theologians, who advance the idea that God is passible, agree on this judgement. The static, self-sufficient, immutable, and impassible God of platonic thought hijacked, via

complaints are almost always based on a misunderstanding of how these topics relate. Under the discussion of the one God, it is appropriate to speak of God as the first mover (Aquinas) and therefore to think of aseity largely in terms of causation. It is also appropriate to speak of the one God in terms of self-existence and independence. It is also appropriate to offer an account of the attributes of the one God. Of course, if this is all we have to say about aseity the doctrinal formulation will be distorted, but simply saying these things, in the context of a broader Trinitarian discussion, does not distort the teaching. T.F Torrance calls the traditional approach "radically schizoid." Torrance believes that the traditional approach "makes of him an immutable and impassible Deity, with devastating consequences for life and work."[42] Blame for this terrible turn of events has been firmly (and totally unjustly) laid at the feet of St Augustine. In a famous and formative essay, Colin Gunton argued that Augustine gave priority to the unity rather than the threeness of God and thus laid down principles that would endlessly distort Western theology.[43] The traditional approach critiqued by Torrance, Gunton, and many others, is commonplace and dominant in the tradition since the time of Aquinas (at least). Richard Muller helps us here:

> *One of the great errors of modern writers has been their claim that ... the Protestant scholastics devalued the doctrine of the Trinity because of an emphasis on the essence and attributes of God. The error arises out of two misapprehensions concerning the form and method of scholastic system. On the one hand, it assumes that the comparatively greater space allocated to the doctrine of the essence and attributes is a sign of its greater importance to the system. ... In the second place, it is the discussion of the work of the three persons, first in their relationships ad intra and then in their common works ad*

Philo and the early church Fathers, the living, personal, active, and passible God of the Bible.' Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 19.

42 T.F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (T&T Clark, 1994), 4. You can read his general lamentations about the western tradition here.

43 Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991). The most recent and specific response to Gunton is Bradley E. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in the Light of Augustine* (Wipf & Stock, 2011).

> *extra, that provides the point of transition from the doctrine of God to the rest of the system.*[44]

Additionally, Sanders maintains that "the mere external sequencing of the doctrines is hardly a matter of great importance, consensus at the level of the table of contents is no goal worth seeking."[45] At this point an observation from Webster provides clear navigation. Webster highlights that the unity of God and the triunity of God are not rival or competing concepts. The theological tradition is ordering material in a certain way and for a certain purpose (Muller's comment about "point of transition"). Webster writes that "[i]n arranging the material in this way, there is, of course, no suggestion of the material priority of *de Deo uno* over *de Deo trino*: that the simple divine essence and the divine triunity are equiprimordial is beyond question."[46]

At this point it is important to return to Webster's previous observation that in discussions about divine life "the content of the term cannot be determined simply by analysis of the difference between God and contingent creatures."[47] Life for God is not simply an increase on created life, rather, and this may be one of Webster's most significant contributions to this discussion, God's own life should be considered as the fullness of the life of the divine persons.

Webster believes that a careful exposition – a conceptual expansion – of the fundamental claim of Nicaea, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, yields a doctrine of the divine life, aseity, and fullness, that will fund significant theological

44 Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725 Volume Four: The Triunity of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003), 144-147. Some of the difficulties in discussing the divine attributes are discussed in Stephen Holmes helpful article 'Divine Attributes' in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, & Iain Torrance (eds) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 54-71.

45 Fred Sanders 'The Trinity,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-53, 38. This is an excellent short article.

46 John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume 1 God and the Works of God* (London, Bloomsbury T&T, 2016), 5. For a really interesting account of divine life see Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Lexham Press, 2018), 30-87. See particularly 58-60 where King builds on the foundations laid by Webster.

47 Webster, *God without Measure*, 14.

development. The confessional aspect here is not incidental – it is fundamental, pervasive, and determinative.[48] Webster argues that God possesses "unqualified and wholly realized identity."[49] Such designation of God as *perfect*, indeed as superlatively perfect, must not stop at *comparative description*. If we rely on comparison we will miss out on the "unfathomable strangeness of God." Theology must direct its attention to those places where the One who is incomprehensible has declared his perfect being: "to the free, spontaneous presence of the Holy Trinity in majestic condescension."[50] Webster's theology is marked by his development of a positive doctrine of divine aseity rooted in the fullness of life possessed by the divine persons. Historically aseity has been understood as a negative concept; or at least a concept to be discussed under the topic of the one God, rather than the triune persons.

VI. The Eternal Generation of the Son

Swain highlighted the need "to identify the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the one true God without eliding the distinctions signified by their personal names."[51] This is precisely what the gospel proclaims (Matt 28:19); the revelation of the triune name of God, and the distinction of names, reveals the importance of the eternal generation of the Son. It is in this sense that the language of Father and Son is appropriate language of the Godhead – not that the distinctions in the name of God reveal a relationship of authority and submission (the Son has no lesser glory), but

48 'A number of things came together to extract me from the inhibitions of my theological formation. One very prominent factor was a half conscious but remarkably emancipating decision to teach confessionally, in two senses. First, I resolved to work on the assumption of the truthfulness and helpfulness of the Christian confession, and not to devote too much time and energy developing arguments in its favour or responses to its critical denials. I discovered, in other words, that description is a great deal more persuasive than apology. Second, I resolved to structure the content of my teaching in accordance with the intellectual and spiritual logic of the Christian confession as it finds expression in the classical creeds, to allow that structure to stand and to explicate itself, and not to press the material into some other format.' John Webster, 'Discovering Dogmatics', in *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* Darren C. Marks (ed) (Ashgate, 2002), 130-131.

49 John Webster 'God's Perfect Life' in *God's Life in Trinity*, Miroslav Volf & Michael Welker (eds) (Fortress Press, 2006), 143-152, 143.

50 Webster, *God without Measure*, 144.

51 Swain, *Divine Trinity*, 81.

rather that the Father is the eternal and unending source of the Son's life. The central truth encapsulated in the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is that the Father communicates the fullness of the divine life to the Son. This involves no diminution of the Son because within the eternal life of God there never was a time when the Son was not. It is sometimes said that the Son receives his personhood from the Father but the divine essence by his own right. This is not the teaching of the church catholic. Sonship is the one thing the Father cannot communicate to his Son because it is the one thing the Father does not possess. What he can give to the Son is the fullness of the divine life. One the central texts for this teaching is John 5:26. Thus Webster argues:

> *Christian teaching about the eternal generation of the Son is a conceptual expansion of the confession of the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made.*[52]

This gloss on the Nicene formula stresses the distinctions within God ("God of God") because there is eternal movement within the life of the one God. This eternal movement the church has called "processions". These processions – reflecting the intellect and will of God – are the only distinctions within the perfect life of God. One of these processions is the Son, the other the Spirit. These processions are what the

52 Webster, *God without Measure*, 29. John Webster offers this helpful reminder of the place of creeds and confessions: 'We should be under no illusion that renewed emphasis upon the creed will in and of itself renew the life of the church: it will not. The church is created and renewed through Word and Spirit. Everything else—love of the brethren, holiness, proclamation, confession—is dependent upon them. Yet it is scarcely possible to envisage substantial renewal of the life of the church without renewal of its confessional life. There are many conditions for such renewal. One is real governance of the church's practice and decision-making not by ill-digested cultural analysis but by reference to the credal rendering of the biblical gospel. Another is recovery of the kind of theology which sees itself as an apostolic task, and does not believe itself entitled or competent to reinvent or subvert the Christian tradition. A third, rarely noticed, condition is the need for a recovery of symbolics (the study of creeds and confessions) as part of the theological curriculum—so much more edifying than most of what fills the seminary day. But alongside these are required habits of mind and heart: love of the gospel, docility in face of our forebears, readiness for responsibility and venture, a freedom from concern for reputation, a proper self-distrust. None of these things can be cultivated; they are the Spirit's gifts, and the Spirit alone must do his work. What we may do—and must do—is cry to God, who alone works great marvels.' in 'Confession and Confessions' in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 83.

church has traditionally called “divine persons”. These processions have been revealed in the temporal or redemptive missions of the Son and Spirit. Fred Sanders argues:

> *The most holistic interpretive move in the history of biblical theology took place when the early church discerned that these missions reveal divine processions, and that in this way the identity of the triune God of the Gospel is made known.*[53]

This “interpretive move” has come to the fore in recent years, and this is a matter of great significance. It is the retrieval of some of the best insights of Aquinas.

Yet even relatively recently, it was argued that,

> *Those who deny any eternal submission of the Son to the Father simply have no grounding for answering the question why it was the “Son” and not the “Father” or “Spirit” who was sent to become incarnate. And even more basic is the question why the eternal names for “Father” and “Son” would be exactly these names.*

This objection is simply a way of denying the truth or importance of the eternal generation of the Son. If the Father has sent forth his Son eternally – so that the Son is eternally “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of this nature” (Heb 1:3), it should not be difficult to hold that the reason why the Son became incarnate is that in the fullness of time the Son spoken forth eternally should be spoken into time (Heb 1:2).[54]

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53 Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016), 113.

54 For an outstanding recent account of eternal generation see Graham J. Shearer, ‘The Communication of the Divine Essence in Eternal Generation: A Dogmatic Defence’ (PhD Dissertation, The Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland, 2023).

VII. Conclusion

The argument advanced in this essay is that the rejection of pro-Nicene trinitarian theology in the twentieth century, particularly by social trinitarians, has impoverished Protestant theology and rendered it incapable of explaining the place of Nicene terminology, grammar, and concepts in the contemporary confession of faith in the one Triune God. This is hardly a trivial matter. The abandonment of Nicaea – it might be said "with the utmost degree of enmity" – has transformed Protestant teaching, even Reformed evangelical Protestant teaching, on the doctrine of God, the Holy Trinity, and the person and work of Christ. The relatively broad treatment of Moltmann in this essay seeks to illuminate George Hunsinger's claim that Moltmann's work "is about the closest thing to tritheism that any of us are likely to see."[55] Thus on this point certainly Karl Barth was unerring in a letter to Moltmann – "If you will pardon me, your God seem to me to be rather a pauper."[56] The only way for Protestantism to recover from this vicious theological poverty is to return to the reading of Scripture with the great Nicene tradition of the church catholic. On this there was no dispute at the Protestant Reformation. No "back to the Bible campaign" will bring enrichment, for the only faithful way back to the apostolic witness is through the great gift of the Spirit to the church, the pro-Nicene faith – "the confession of the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made."[57]

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55 Cited in Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In dialogue with Karl Barth and contemporary theology* (London, T&T Clark, 2002), 201-201, quoting a review of Moltman in The Thomist 47 (1983), 129-139, 131.

56 Letter dated 17 November 1964, in Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961-1968*, (trans and ed) Jürgen Fangemeier and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1981), 176.

57 Webster, *God without Measure*, 144.

Book Reviews

Worshiping on the Way

***Worshiping on the Way: The Psalms of Ascents* by Jonathan Landry Cruse. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2025 (176 pages) £23.99**

Worshiping on the Way is an insightful study of the Psalms of Ascents (Psalm 120-134). Jonathan Landry Cruse is the author of this book and several others, including *Church Membership* (2024) and *The Christian's True Identity* (2022). Cruse is a graduate of Westminster Seminary California's Master of Divinity program and has been the pastor of Community Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA since 2017. Published on 7 January 2025, *Worshiping on the Way* is Cruse's fifth project with Reformation Heritage Books.

This volume was developed from a sermon series that began under unusual circumstances. In the peak of the COVID-19 lockdowns during May 2020, the church was set to continue in-person services after weeks of online-only meetings. Cruse chose to expound Psalm 122, which has a rather appropriate first verse, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." This re-opening sermon blossomed into a series on the Psalms of Ascents, which is the foundation of *Worshiping on the Way*.

It is commonly believed that the Psalms of Ascents were songs sung by Jewish pilgrims as they trekked to Jerusalem. In this book, Cruse seeks to apply these psalms to the life of the modern believer in two main ways: Keeping one's eyes on "the heavenly Jerusalem" and continuing to progress in one's walk with Christ.[1] He asserts that "these psalms impress on us the need for a desire and determination for the things

1 Jonathan Landry Cruse, *Worshiping on the Way: The Psalms of Ascents*. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 5.

of God."[2] This two-fold application sees the physical act of marching parallel to the believer's spiritual journey, and it captures the feel of these psalms aptly.

Worshiping on the Way covers one psalm per chapter in a conversational and devotional style, each chapter being an appropriate length for a single sitting. Yet, enough depth is provided to satisfy mature believers. Three reflection questions can be found at the end of each chapter, making this book a good option for group discussions. An expanded section for discussion, application, and prayer for each chapter would be welcome in a future edition.

Cruse's greatest strength is how he is able to convey the context and theme of each psalm in a way that is not intimidating. For example, the chapter on Psalm 131 is about the believer being content with God's plan for their life. The author begins this section by discussing a trip that his family took to an amusement park. Readers are then gently transitioned from this story to the text of Psalm 131 through a comfortable segue.

Pastor Cruse has penned a helpful guide to this section of the Psalms. It comes highly recommended for those who are unfamiliar with this psalter within the Psalter and for church leaders who are leading classes that feature time for discussion. More generally, *Worshiping on the Way* is a great resource for any student of the Bible.

R. A. Miller is a secondary teacher at Central Baptist Christian School in Brandon, FL, USA.

2 Cruse, *Worshiping on the Way*, 6.

Intimately Forsaken

***Intimately Forsaken: A Trinitarian Christology of the Cross* by Thomas Brand. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2024 (216 pages) £119.99 hardcover.**

There have been numbers of debates in recent years about how God's unchanging nature coheres with God's loving relationship with people. This academic book (which grew out of a doctorate) focuses in on Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross as an avenue into exploring these debates. This is done so in an academically rigorous and heartfelt manner.

Thomas Brand's *Intimately Forsaken* delves into the theological significance of Christ's cry of dereliction – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Using the analogy of cathedral architecture, the book examines this cry as a weighty theological pillar supported by interconnected doctrines of Trinitarian theology and Christology. Brand argues that the cry reveals the profound mystery of Christ's suffering and humanity while affirming the unity and impassibility of the Trinity.

Brand organises his work around four "pillars" that uphold the theological framework of his argument:

1. **The Meaning of "Forsaken" in Mark 15:34:** This foundational pillar focuses on the exegesis of the term "forsaken" and its theological implications. Brand contends that Christ's forsakenness was confined to his human nature and did not entail a rupture within the Trinity.
2. **The Communication of Idioms:** Drawing from early Church Fathers like Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine, Brand explores how Christ's two natures – divine and human – relate. The communication of idioms allows attributes of Christ's divine nature (e.g., immutability) and human nature (e.g., suffering) to be predicated of the single person of the Son.

3. **Divine Impassibility and Christ's Suffering:** The book defends the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, which holds that God cannot suffer. Brand reconciles this with Christ's suffering by asserting that it is experienced through his human nature while preserving the unity of the Trinity.

- **Trinitarian Distinctions:** The fourth pillar addresses the distinctions within the Trinity, clarifying that the Son's cry to the Father does not indicate separation but reflects relational and functional distinctions within the Godhead.

Brand stresses that Christ's cry must be interpreted within the framework of Trinitarian orthodoxy. He critiques modern theological trends that suggest a rupture in the Trinity or a passible God, arguing instead for the continuity of divine impassibility. The forsakenness of Christ, Brand asserts, was a covenantal experience borne in his human nature as the representative head of humanity. It was not a break in the intra-Trinitarian relationship but a manifestation of divine justice and mercy.

Drawing on historical theology, Brand situates his argument in the context of patristic and scholastic thought, especially the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, and Cyril of Alexandria. He critiques views that downplay the theological unity between Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, advocating for a cohesive understanding that upholds the centrality of the cross in Trinitarian theology.

Conclusion

Intimately Forsaken underscores that the cry of dereliction is not merely a moment of despair but a profound revelation of God's love, justice, and self-giving in Christ. Brand concludes that a proper understanding of this cry must reflect the Trinitarian foundations of Scripture, preserving the mystery and majesty of the Triune God while addressing the depths of Christ's suffering. The book offers a robust defence of classical theism, challenging contemporary reinterpretations of the cross and calling

for a renewed focus on historic orthodoxy. While these sorts of academic works are challenging to read, this one is worshipful and honouring of the mystery of God's perfect, eternal, cross-shaped love.

Rev. Dr. Peter Sanlon is an Adjunct Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Westminster Presbyterian Seminary, UK and the Minister of Tunbridge Wells Presbyterian Church.

Numbers 1-19

***Numbers 1-19* by L Michael Morales, London (Apollos ; AOTC 4a), 2024 (502 pages) £39.99, ivpbooks.com.**

L. Michael Morales's *Numbers 1–19* is a comprehensive rather than concise commentary, with this first volume spanning 502 pages. When paired with the forthcoming Volume 2 (chapters 20–36), the combined work may approach 900–950 pages, making it a substantial presence alongside other AOTC volumes (e.g., Leviticus, 538 pages; Deuteronomy, 544 pages; 1 & 2 Samuel, 614 pages; 1 & 2 Kings, 615 pages). Yet, as a commentary, it is not designed to be read cover to cover. Instead, readers will likely turn first to its 75-page introduction, which J. Gary Millar, a noted biblical scholar and author, praises as "worth having for the introduction alone." There's something in that.

The value of the introduction is twofold. First, it establishes very quickly and concisely a helpful framework for understanding Numbers, highlighting the book's emphasis on covenant community and leadership. To achieve this, Morales draws out helpful comparisons and contrasts with Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He establishes the importance of Israel's camp around the tabernacle in the wilderness as the visible representation of the covenant community and how this parallels the heavenly host which surrounds the throne of God. The organisational logic of Numbers is established as theological. Morales then links the wilderness encampment to the vision of Ezekiel in chapter 1, the ideal temple in the latter chapters of Ezekiel and from there to the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22. We might say the logic of Morales's commentary is biblical-theological. There are obvious benefits for the preacher (the Apollos series is "intended primarily to serve the needs of those who preach from the Old Testament," it says on the back): themes of the covenant community in relation to God, the role of human leaders within that (both positive

and negative), and the connections between the wilderness encampment and broader themes in biblical theology are all things we would want to preach. From this point of view, Morales has done exegetes and expositors a great service.

The second way in which the introduction is valuable is in showing Morales's workings. A plethora of Jewish rabbinical and medieval sources informs his analysis of verbal and numerological parallels, everything from the colour blue to the signs of the zodiac. In Morales's view, "Jewish tradition offers interpretative insight" (p. 24), although this tradition should be viewed critically: "my aim is not to validate every aspect of ancient tradition" (p. 29). All the same, he sees nothing inventive in Jewish exegetical tradition: "the 'sages' did not manufacture correspondences but merely made them explicit" (p. 29, my emphasis). This gives the impression that any perceived parallel is either intentional in the biblical text itself or, at least, is legitimate. But more is less: tenuous and unconvincing parallels may undermine confidence in his interpretation as a whole, which would be a shame. Morales does not draw from premodern Christian (Early Church, Medieval Christian or Reformation) exegesis of Numbers in the same way. Perhaps this is because insights from within Judaism have often been overlooked by Christian interpreters, or because Christian exegesis of the Old Testament has showed a lack of interest in the Old Testament on its own terms and from the perspective of its own distinctive theology, but I wonder whether this commentary gives the message that the Christian exegete (and preacher) of Numbers (if not the OT as a whole) must not only be acquainted with Jewish interpretation from the Mishnah onwards, but is also free to embrace its hermeneutical principles.

David Green is the Vice-Principal and a lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew at London Seminary.

Herman Bavinck: Centenary Essays

***Herman Bavinck: Centenary Essays*. Edited by Bruce Pass, Brill, 2025, 205pp, p/k, £45.14 (Blackwells.co.uk)**

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) has in recent years emerged as a towering figure not only in theology but also in ethics, psychology, pedagogy, and Christian philosophy. The volume, *Herman Bavinck: Centenary Essays,* commemorates the hundredth anniversary of Bavinck's death, and presents a compelling case for his continued relevance in today's theological conversations. As editor Bruce Pass notes in his introduction, Bavinck's work remains relevant because "*Reformed Dogmatics* and the rest of Bavinck's voluminous writings transcend their social and religious setting" (1).

This collection is more than a retrospective celebration of Bavinck's centenary; it is a constructive engagement. "Accordingly, this collection of essays contributes to the kind of preliminary work in which projects of Bavinckian retrieval need to invest. A further aim of this volume, however, is to present a snapshot of the current state-of-play in Bavinck studies" (3). The result is a volume that balances historical scholarship with theological imagination, highlighting Bavinck's ongoing relevance to contemporary issues.

One of the special features of the book is its attention to Bavinck's *interdisciplinary engagement* (4). The essays do not treat Bavinck merely as an ivory-tower theologian, but as a thinker whose vision extended into the realms of science, ethics, politics, psychology, and education.

Bavinck's theological use of Scripture reflects a nuanced and layered approach. Koert van Bekkum examines Bavinck's use of Scripture and notes how his references "can be divided into three categories: (i) prooftexts, (ii) 'stepping-stones,' and (iii) more extended exegetical remarks" (14). While his style may not always satisfy

modern “exegetical standards” (27), the theological intent is undeniable: he is less concerned with verse-by-verse exegesis and more interested in sketching a grand biblical-theological narrative. It reflects a redemptive-historical orientation. While Bavinck affirms the inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture, he avoids terms such as “inerrancy” and instead emphasises its soteriological aim: “Scripture is trustworthy and every word of Scripture is inspired. Yet representation of truth in these inspired words is mediated and thoroughly human” (25). His analogy between incarnation and inscripturation exemplifies this careful theological reflection.

Theologically, Bavinck walked a fine line between fidelity to the Reformed tradition and openness to development. “Bavinck appropriated Reformed sources by adjusting their content to the needs of his time. He was a careful student of historical theology but he also had his own agenda and applied what he found in the sources in a very particular way” (37), notes Henk Van Belt. Van Belt identifies four key characteristics that shape Bavinck’s engagement with Reformed sources: his belief that Reformed theology is catholic yet supreme, his desire to actualise the tradition, his mediated knowledge of the tradition, and his ambiguous relationship to Reformed Orthodoxy (35). This confirms the view that Bavinck was both “orthodox and modern”. In this sense, Bavinck’s theological method was both “organic” and constructive.

Perhaps most significant, at least for me, is Bavinck’s engagement with philosophy. The volume highlights his conviction that Christian theology requires a *specifically Christian philosophy*. As Pass notes, “For Bavinck, Christian philosophy is philosophy that is governed by what he describes as the biblical, organic viewpoint—a mode of reasoning that itself is conditioned by the knowledge of God” (64). Pass also shows how Bavinck ably critiques the failures of the nineteenth century’s dominant paths – critical (Kant), mystical (Schleiermacher), and speculative (Hegel) – as inadequate for theology’s task.

The book's attention to ethics and public theology, psychology and pedagogy, shows Bavinck as a thinker for today. His ethical work is both deeply Christological and rooted in divine command (97), while his political thought resists both liberal activism and quietistic withdrawal. Andrew Errington shows how in Bavinck's 1908 essay "Christian Principles and Social Relationships", Bavinck outlines a theological vision grounded in a thick doctrine of creation (116), advocating for a society shaped by the moral structures embedded in the created order.

It is gratifying to see essays devoted to Bavinck's psychology and his pedagogy; both have been neglected facets of Bavinck's work in the recent revival. As Michael Bräutigan points out, Bavinck advocated for an integrated theory of psychology that drew from philosophy, physiology, and theology. Central to Bavinck's view is the *psychosomatic unity* of the human person. He emphasised that humans are fully embodied beings, not fragmented into dualistic parts. Bräutigan shows that Bavinck's work presents a comprehensive, theologically grounded vision of human psychology that has interdisciplinary depth and enduring relevance.

In the final chapter, George Harinck explores Bavinck's approach to pedagogy and explores his often-overlooked role as an educational leader and advocate. Bavinck was active in Christian education as a board member, policy influencer, and as president of both the *Gereformeerd Schoolverband* and the national *Onderwijsraad* for over three decades. As Harinck shows, Bavinck had a commitment to shaping the educational landscape of the Netherlands, and he recognised that Christian schools needed legal freedom as well as a clear pedagogical vision grounded in a Reformed worldview. His work in educational theory, especially in *Paedagogische beginselen*, reflected this conviction, though its academic tone proved challenging for many schoolteachers. This chapter persuasively argues that Bavinck's educational vision deserves renewed attention.

Overall, these essays show that Bavinck is a rich and multi-faceted thinker. This volume presents a theologian deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, yet unafraid to engage the future. It models the kind of fruitful, critical, and hopeful engagement that Bavinck himself pursued: a theology that is biblical, catholic, and profoundly relevant.

Steve Bishop maintains the neo-Calvinist website www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk and a Research Associate at Union Theological College, Belfast.

CORRIGENDUM

In my review of N. G. Sutanto's *God and Humanity* (*Foundations 87*: 136–137), I should have clarified that the new translation of Bavinck's *Biblical and Religious Psychology* was not available to the author at the time of writing. However, he did cite from the original Dutch edition. My apologies for overlooking this. Additionally, I would like to correct my assertion that "Sutanto states that Bavinck's *Foundations of Psychology* is consistent with his later work, and yet Bavinck suggests otherwise" as it was based on misinformation.

Steve Bishop

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www.affinity.org.uk
@affinitytalks
office@affinity.org.uk
PO Box 905
Haywards Heath
RH16 9TJ
07936 048259

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