

After months in which Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of The Christ* has been breaking box office records and hitting the headlines in both secular and Christian papers, it seems almost impertinent to pose the question: 'Does God suffer?' The Christian wants to shout out 'Of course! What gospel would there be if he did not?' Such a response is more readily given today and with fewer qualifications than in previous generations. The doctrine of divine impassibility, which is often taken to be the antithesis of the idea that God suffers, has taken a dreadful battering in the last century or so. Yet many Christians who have no desire whatsoever to create an unfeeling, impersonal God in what J.I.Packer calls an 'eternally frozen pose'<sup>1</sup> will nonetheless feel the need to protect God from the instability attendant on being able to suffer. We want a God who loves and relates – this is the drive behind much of the attack on impassibility – yet we are not convinced that the suffering God is entirely – well, *God*.

Does God suffer? And if so, does it make sense to describe him as 'impassible'?

## Getting our theological bearings

Tracing back from divine impassibility we begin with God's *aseity*. God is *a se* – of himself, self-existent, self-sufficient and self-contained. No person or thing can threaten his existence or change his essential nature. The divine name I AM WHO I AM<sup>2</sup> (Ex.3:14) is a biblical foundation for this as for God's eternity and immutability. *Immutability* indeed is an implication of aseity. How, people may ask, can God be said to be immutable when Scripture portrays God as being in contact with this world and the people of God experience now his wrath, now his love? Nevertheless, in all these

relations, God does not change (Mal.3 :6; James 1:17). Though everything perish, he remains the same (Ps. 102:26), unchangeable in his essence, thoughts, will, purposes and decrees. Another way of asserting this is to say that God is *pure act* or *pure actuality* – the opposite of potentiality. He has no passive potentiality; he cannot therefore change or develop. He is entirely involved in everything he is and does. His immutability, at least in terms of his will, is, positively, 'the moral consistency that holds him to his own principles of action and leads him to deal differently with those who change their own behaviour towards him'.<sup>3</sup>

This is the conceptual range in which we need to think about God's impassibility. When we come however to the Reformed Confessions we do not find mention of impassibility as an attribute.<sup>4</sup> Stephen Charnock is typical in touching on it in the context of God's immutability.

The Westminster Confession, chapter two, states that God is 'without body, parts or passions' because, according to Hodge, such are inconsistent with God's absolute perfections such as simplicity, unchangeableness, unity, and omnipresence.<sup>5</sup> Yet impassibility is part of Christian orthodoxy. Thomas Torrance, for example, affirms: 'God is certainly impassible in the sense that he is not subject to the passions that characterise our humanly and creaturely existence.... He is moreover intrinsically impassible for in his own divine Nature he is not moved or swayed by anything other than himself or outside himself.'<sup>6</sup> Similarly J.I.Packer, reflecting some of the modern defensiveness about the doctrine, says: '[that] God is impassible... means not that God is impassive and unfeeling (a frequent misunderstanding), but that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him at their own will. In so

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far as God enters into suffering and grief (which Scripture's many anthropopathisms, plus the fact of the cross, show that he does), it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim'.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile if we turn to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* we find a definition of impassibility that Thomas Weinandy is keen to defend: 'There are three respects in which orthodox theology has traditionally denied God's subjection to "passibility" namely (1) external passibility or the capacity to be acted upon from without, (2) internal passibility or the capacity for changing emotions from within, and (3) sensational passibility or the liability to feelings of pleasure and pain caused by the action of another being'.<sup>8</sup> As it stands, this definition would seem to be narrower than Packer's in that it leaves no room for God even voluntarily to enter into suffering and grief.

Enough of the 'bloodless definitions of theological philosophy'. What do the Scriptures say?

### **Biblical Landmarks**

'Men tell us that God is, by the very necessity of his nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducements from without; that he dwells in holy calm and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human sufferings or human sorrows forever...let us bless our God that this is not true. God can feel; God does love. But is this not gross anthropomorphism? We are careless of names; it is the truth of God, and we decline to give up the God of the Bible and the God of our hearts to any philosophical abstraction'.<sup>9</sup> So says B.B. Warfield. The God of the Bible is certainly a God to whom emotion is attributed. There are 'for example' sorrow and pity (Ex.3:7-12); wrath and compassion

(Ex.34:6); delight (Zp.3 :17); jealousy (Ex.34:14); grief (Gn.6:6) and love (Je.31:3). When we come to God incarnate the full range of emotions is attributed to Christ: weeping (Jn.11:35); rejoicing (Lk.10:21); anger (Mk.3:5; Jn.2:15); annoyance (Mk.10:14); sorrow and indignation (Jn. 11:38); anguish (Lk.22:44); forsakenness (Mk.15:34).

Two particular verses in the Old Testament call for attention, on which I shall make some general comments and return to them later in the article. In Genesis 6:6 we read: 'And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart'. The first part of this verse is one of those statements that seems to call into question God's *immutability* in that it suggests regret or repentance in God. Similar passages are Exodus 32:12, 14; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35; 2 Samuel 24:16; Jeremiah 18:10. God changes his mind, it appears, about some good he had intended for his people or some judgment he was to inflict. In Genesis 6 he regrets having created man. How do these verses harmonize with Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29 which state that the LORD is not a man that he should repent? The second part of Genesis 6:6 moreover calls into question God's *impassibility* in that it attributes grief – bitter indignation – to God. Gordon Wenham calls it the most intense form of human emotion – a mixture of rage and anguish.<sup>10</sup> The word is used of men in e.g. Genesis 34:7 (Dinah's brothers' feelings after she was raped); 1 Samuel 20:34 (Jonathan when hearing of his father's plan to kill David), 2 Samuel 19:3 (David on hearing of Absalom's death) and of God in Psalm 78:40 (the people 'grieved' God in the wilderness), and Isaiah 63:10 (grieving his Holy Spirit). How are we to understand this attribution of change of mind and deep inner perturbation to God?

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Four approaches are discernible, the first three being hermeneutical methods that safeguard God from mutability and passibility, the fourth theological, seeing in such verses an adumbration of the incarnation.

(1) Relating to immutability rather than to impassibility, that what is represented is God's consistency in the face of changing human attitudes and behaviour. Weinandy for example says: 'In a sense God is said to "change his mind" precisely because, as the Wholly Other, "he does not change his mind".<sup>11</sup> It is precisely because God is unchanging in his righteousness that he reacts so strongly against evil, and shows favour to human repentance. This is God's moral consistency.

(2) That this is an illustration of God's accommodation to our capacity, using anthropopathy. The attribution to God of human feelings is a didactic method adopted by God to teach us about how God views (in this case) sin. This is Calvin's approach; he is worth quoting at length:

The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God, easily appears from this single consideration, that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen. The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad, but remains for ever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God's hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit *accommodates* himself to our capacity. Wherefore, there is no need for us to involve ourselves in thorny and difficult questions, when it is obvious to what end these words of repentance and grief are applied; namely, to

teach us, that from the time when man was so greatly corrupted, God would not reckon him among his creatures, as if he would say, 'This is not my workmanship.' ...Similar to this is what he says, in the second place, concerning grief; that God was so offended by the atrocious wickedness of men, as if they had wounded his heart with mortal grief. ...This figure, which represents God as transferring to himself what is peculiar to human nature, is called *anthrōpopatheia*.<sup>12</sup>

(3) That we are to understand the 'repentance' and 'grief' as referring only to the actions God performs in history, 'not with respect to his counsel but to the event; not in reference to his will, but to the thing willed; not to affection and internal grief, but to the effect and external work because he does what a penitent man usually does'.<sup>13</sup> Thus these verses explain what God does on the 'horizontal' plain, not what goes on in his mind.

(4) That by the anthropomorphisms of Scripture we are prepared for the coming of the Son of God. Jesus, for example, wept and lamented the ravages of sin and death (Jn.11:35,38; Mt. 23:37). Another striking locus is Hosea 11:8-9. God has threatened judgment on his people but then his covenant love takes over:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zebouim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my burning anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and not a man;  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.

Here God asserts his covenant faithfulness (v.8) but *based on* his ontological immutability (v.9), as the reason why he will not destroy his people. The same faithfulness is the cause of his 'pain'.

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Notice firstly, that in both Genesis 6 and Hosea 11 we see the juxtaposition of wrath and grace in the presence of sin. In Genesis 6, God is 'in anguish' over the sin of the world and will exercise judgment on the world, but in Genesis 6:8 we are introduced to Noah, the righteous man, who was saved with his family from the wrath to come. Here God's 'bitter indignation' blends into his wrath. In Hosea the LORD expresses a more complex inner turmoil between justice and mercy. The pain of God here arises from the apparent conflict of love and justice in the presence of sin. Secondly, we need to realise that if we call this 'suffering', we are interpreting emotional pain as 'suffering'. Physical pain in relation to God was not on the horizon in the Old Testament and in weighing up the early church's discussions of impassibility it is worth remembering Gerald Bray's point that their concept of suffering was physical pain that was an inevitable accompaniment of life; God has no body; to speak of 'God suffering' apart from the incarnation would therefore not be meaningful to them'.<sup>14</sup> Thirdly, 'the Holy One in your midst' (Ho.11:9) is a remarkable combination of transcendence and immanence. Thomas Weinandy concludes that it is precisely because God is the Wholly Other that he can be 'passionate' in a sense that is beneficial to his people. He argues that in using language that is anthropomorphic the Bible is saying something that is true about God but it is crucial to remember that 'the one who is so filled with passion is the Wholly Other...who transcends what is beyond the merely customary and human ...and he is able to express such depths of passion only because he is the Wholly Other'. While asserting that such language about God says something true about him we must not fall into the trap of so conceiving of God's compassion and grief that it undermines his otherness, for then precisely what gives it value – that he is the Holy One – will

be undermined and the significance of his suffering lost.<sup>15</sup>

### The Origins of 'Impassibility'

The concept of impassibility has negative connotations today, yet according to Pelikan 'the early Christian picture of God was controlled by the self-evident axiom, accepted by all, of the absoluteness and impassibility of the divine nature'.<sup>16</sup> Could this possibly, have been derived from Scripture whose God is so full of life, dynamism and emotional expression? The answer of course is that while we do not want to take the fire out of God's anger or the warmth out of his love, we do want to protect certain truths about God. It seems a very natural development of the more easily substantiated notion of immutability to hold that if God cannot change neither can he 'be moved' or 'suffer pain' in the emotions. Suffering is experiencing change, and change is within time; God being atemporal and incorporeal, absolute and perfect, cannot change, therefore cannot suffer. It is argued,<sup>17</sup> however, that the baneful influence of Greek philosophy is seen, in which emotion is viewed as dangerous, even evil, and God is the 'Unmoved Mover'. The perfect being was *apatbēs* – without suffering, enjoying perfect tranquillity – and human happiness consisted in achieving this state. The notion of *pathos* in Greek thought means both suffering, and passion in the sense of emotion. The connecting idea is passivity – both come upon you against your will and are therefore a mark of weakness, therefore God cannot suffer or be emotionally moved.

Weinandy argues however that the Fathers were far more influenced by Scripture than by Greek philosophy in coming to their insistence on the

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absoluteness and impassibility of the divine nature. He asserts that the Fathers were concerned to protect the complete otherness of the one God in relationship to the created order. They denied existence to the anthropomorphic and mythological gods of the pagans, but more significantly stressed that the one God was the Creator *ex nihilo* of all else that exists. He did not just relatively transcend all else as the pinnacle of a chain of being but he ‘transcended creation in that he constituted a distinct ontological order all his own’.<sup>18</sup> We find that the doctrine of Creation is pivotal in deriving a biblical understanding of impassibility; we shall find that the cross is pivotal in understanding how God suffers.

Such positive assertions about God are further clarified and his transcendence protected by a cluster of negative attributions – equivalent to the ‘without body, parts or passions’ of the Westminster Confession. What was never denied of God was that he was passionate in his love, compassion, mercy or wrath; and what was never asserted was that his impassibility entailed his being static, inert and emotionally cold, as many of the modern critics of impassibility have assumed. To assert impassibility is never, in orthodox thought about God, to assert that he is devoid of love or compassion. Rather it is to establish in his unchangeably perfect being a love that is perfectly passionate. ‘It is clear that impassibility means not that God is inactive or uninterested, not that he surveys existence with Epicurean impassibility from the shelter of a metaphysical isolation, but that his will is determined from within instead of being swayed from without. It safeguards the truth that the impulse alike in providential order and in redemption and sanctification comes from the will of God’.<sup>19</sup>

What is also hinted here is that divine passibility would make God in his purposes and plans vulnerable to the dictates of the created order, even to meeting his own needs through the work of redemption. Critics of the Fathers therefore overemphasize the influence of unbiblical philosophy on the early church and underestimate the influence of contemporary culture on themselves. In similar vein Richard Muller states of critics of post-Reformation orthodoxy, that their assertion of impassibility was not to deny affections in God; nor to imply an absence of relatedness, love, long-suffering or compassion in God. The Protestant Orthodox, says Muller, wrote out of a tradition of God’s aseity and pure actuality, but not out of the Stoic notion of a God as uninvolved or unrelated. ‘The modern writers who argue against the doctrine of divine impassibility as if it were little more than the uncritical importation of a Stoic concept are beating, not a dead, but a nonexistent horse’.<sup>20</sup> It is arguable that it is the modern critics, not the Fathers, who are importing contemporary philosophy into the doctrine of God. To some of these critics we now turn.

### Contemporary Criticisms of Divine Impassibility

Richard Bauckham lists five factors in the development of what he calls the modern doctrine of divine passibility: (1) The modern context – especially Auschwitz; (2) Biblical understanding – especially of the prophets; (3) The God of personal love – if he loves he must suffer; (4) the ‘crucified God’ – sometimes expressed (as in Horace Bushnell) as being the expression of the suffering in the eternal heart of God; or (as in Kitamori and Moltmann) the decisive event of divine suffering; (5) the problem of theodicy. We can examine these briefly under the heading of

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### *Theology after Auschwitz*

Although criticism of impassibility was not new (Weinandy quotes A.M.Fairbairn in 1893 saying that ‘Theology has no falser idea than that of the impassibility of God’),<sup>21</sup> after Auschwitz the question was posed with greater point, ‘What kind of God can we believe in now?’ A ground-breaking work was the Japanese Lutheran Kazoh Kitamori’s *Theology of the Pain of God*,<sup>22</sup> arguing that only a God who suffered could make sense of the immense pain in the world. Jeremiah 31:20 is seminal for him:

Is Ephraim my dear son?  
Is he my darling child?  
For as often as I speak against him,  
I do remember him still.  
Therefore my heart yearns for him;  
I will surely have mercy on him,  
declares the LORD.

More influential has been Jürgen Moltmann who is moved by the accounts of Jews in Auschwitz, especially that of Elie Wiesel.<sup>23</sup> Moltmann argues that only a God who suffers in solidarity with the innocent is worthy of the name God; that the cross is not just an act of divine sympathy but an act of ‘divine solidarity with the godless and the Godforsaken’; that the Father suffers, but differently from the Son; and that the cross is an intratrinitarian event and therefore determines the doctrine of God. The basic problem Moltmann addresses is that of theodicy – the justification of God to a sceptical world. As Bauckham puts it, ‘Only the suffering God can help’. It is seen as axiomatic that if God loves he must suffer, entering into the lives and griefs of people. This is the *pathos* of God. Indeed the one who cannot suffer, cannot love and is poorer than any man. Biblically Moltmann draws on the Old Testament, especially the prophets, as portraying a God who draws near his people (Ex.2:23-27; Je.31:20).

Moltmann of course focuses on the cross where the suffering of God is seen at three levels: (1) with the incarnation it is the clearest disclosure of the empathy of God with a suffering world; (2) it reveals the Son to be passible not only in his human nature but in his divine Person; (3) the Father suffered too in abandoning the Son as the Son suffered abandonment.

It is important to note that Moltmann tends towards a panentheistic<sup>24</sup> concept of God: God is identified with the universe but is much *more* than the universe (unlike pantheism); the universe is ‘in God’. In other words, God is not ontologically distinct from all he has made.

Another contemporary challenge to impassibility is found in

### *Open Theism*

The motivation is again the justification of God, but the focus is more on presenting God as loving and relational, rather than on defending him against the charge of allowing untold suffering. God is primarily love, therefore open and responsive. We must do away with the ‘aloof monarch’ concept of God; there is no blueprint of the future; the future is open, even to God. We have been created as free beings; our decisions change God’s plans and decisions; he is immutable in his essence, but changes in his plans and purposes as he learns new things and his thinking develops as the future unfolds. God is personal and loving, therefore feels and suffers; he is not only not responsible for the holocaust which is the action of free human beings, but could not prevent it because of our freedom. The God of Open Theism is markedly different from the God of historic Christianity and a basic problem is the one-dimensional nature of the thinking on

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passibility: if he is to love, he must allow us free will and he must suffer; if he suffers, it must be at the expense of his transcendence. There is a rationalistic failure to maintain both immanence and transcendence. The desire for a God of love who sympathizes with us and the perception that the impassible God cannot be such a God, is giving us a God who is part of the same ontological system as that in which suffering takes place. He is in our midst, but he is not the Holy One. He may be Moved, but is he a Mover?

If the doctrine of creation gives us God transcendent, then the cross is where we must meet the immanent God.

### God's Suffering at the Cross

First, some basic issues. What is suffering? All suffering is a form of death and is a precursor of death. Death in Scripture is the divinely inflicted penalty for sin. God's response to sin is wrath; the imposition of the curse (Gn.3:14f.). Expressions of God's wrath against sin are many and powerful (Ex.34:7; Na. 1:2,3; 2 Thes.1:6-9; Rev.14:19). Death is not extinction; it is existence under the wrath of God. There is no suffering like eternal death – eternal existence under the wrath of God, that is, hell. Suffering therefore is not the basic human problem. Sin is. It is because of sin that God imposed death and all forms of the curse. Death (and all forms of suffering with it) is an enemy to be abolished but only as a consequence of first dealing with sin.

Wrath is not the only response of God to sin. There is of course the promise of salvation. It is also, however, in relation to sin, not to suffering, that the striking expression is made in Genesis 6:6 concerning pain in God. It is not the suffering of mankind

that evokes the pain of God. God most assuredly has compassion on all he has made (Ps.145:9; Lk.6:35; Acts 14:17; Rom.2:4) and the fact that people are described as enemies of God in their hearts and subject to God's wrath does not mean that God does not feel or act compassionately towards them. Yet Genesis 6:6 is not with reference to human suffering but to human sin. God in his hatred of sin purposes to destroy man. But there is grace – Noah will be saved. God's condemnation is seen in relation to the world, and his salvation in relation to Noah and his offspring.

In Hosea 11 the objects of anger are God's covenant people; but here his grace is in apparent conflict with his justice. Both are directed at the same people. In the end this will only be resolved not by Ephraim's being handed over, but by God's only beloved Son being given up to judgment for the much more profound spiritual salvation of which the redemption of Israel is a picture.

Suffering within God in the Old Testament is therefore specific. It is firstly an expression of God's reaction to sin, and secondly of the tension in him between mercy and justice. In Genesis this is relieved by disparate acts of judgment and mercy – the Flood, the Ark; in Hosea it is left unresolved but points forward to a deeper, spiritual salvation as God sends Christ to endure ultimate suffering on the cross. The suffering of God is because of sin; it is in Christ; it is mediatorial; it is redemptive. Argument along these lines is found in Kitamori, but it is taken to a point where the transcendence of God is lost and God appears to be under a necessity of sending Christ and saving sinners to resolve his own inner tension. Redemption becomes self-serving. For example: 'Our reality is such that God ought not to forgive it or enfold it.... The

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living and true God must sentence us sinners to death. This is the manifestation of his wrath...The "pain" of God reflects his will to love the object of his wrath'. This 'pain' is the 'tertiary' produced by love and wrath. 'God who must sentence sinners to death fought with the God who wishes to love them'.<sup>25</sup> The cross, says Kitamori, is the bitterest pain imaginable. In it God entered the world of sin to bear the the bitterest pain imaginable. In it God entered the world of sin to bear the responsibility for sin. In doing so he not only answered our pain, which is the reality of living under God's wrath and our estrangement from God, but also answered the prior problem, the solution of the conflict between wrath and love in himself, the cause of his pain.

The significance of this is that the cross is always logically prior to the incarnation in the purposes of God. A problem, as already mentioned, is that the cross becomes the answer to a need in God. Moltmann's solution is slightly different. His concern is theodicy. He discusses the concept of Christ being 'handed over' (Rom.8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal.3:13) and concludes that God the Father abandoned the Son for, and in solidarity with, godless and God-forsaken men. A major problem with Moltmann is the blurring of what 'forsakenness' and 'abandonment' mean. For Moltmann it is always suffering, not sin, that is the essence of man's problem. There is at the cross the loving identification of Father and Son with 'sinners' but in the end there is little need for propitiation; the cross merely becomes another, if the most extreme, element of the incarnation. There is identification but no substitution. Man is a victim, not an offender.

If man as sinner, rather than man as victim, is to be the beneficiary of the atonement, then the doctrine

of penal substitution is essential and central to our understanding of the cross. Identification is not enough. The incarnation is not enough. Christ suffering and dying with and 'for' suffering humanity is not enough. The only satisfactory explanation of the cross is the biblical one: that there is a demonstration of both the love and the justice of God. He is the propitiation for our sins.<sup>26</sup> His suffering was the enduring of divine wrath (Rom.3:25; Gal.3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Jn. 2:2). In Torrance's words:

It is then, the mediatorial passion of Christ in life and death in bearing the wrath of God upon the sin of the whole human race, the fearful anguish of his soul in making that sin his own and bearing the infliction of divine judgment upon it, the indescribable agony and sorrow that overwhelmed him in the Garden of Gethsemane and in the darkness of dereliction which he endured on the Cross, in which spiritual and physical pain interpenetrated each other, all that unveils for us something of the infinite depth of the active suffering of God.<sup>27</sup>

In this light such Scriptures as Hosea 11:8 and Jeremiah 31:20 are anticipatory of the cross. The pain of God described in them points to the cross. These passages are not prophetic as is Isaiah 53, or typical as are the sacrifices, but are anthropopathic revelations of something of what the cross meant for God.

A crucial question however is: if Christ suffered – *who* suffered? God? Or man? Christ in his human nature? Or in his divine nature? Or both? Or the divine person of the Son of God? Cyril of Alexandria wrestled with the doctrine of the incarnation in the struggle against Nestorius and worked towards some important clarifications. For example, in the context of the 'communication of idioms' (attributes) he 'grasped and explicitly stated for the first time that the attributes are predicated not of the natures,

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but of the person, for the incarnation is not the compositional union of natures but the person of the Son taking on a new manner or mode of existence'.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore the Son who grieves, suffers and dies as *man*, for that is now the manner of his existence. This is doubly important: (1) he who truly experiences the ultimate in human suffering is none other than *the Son of God* who is one in essence with the Father; (2) the manner in which he experiences suffering, as he has experienced every facet of human existence, is *as man*.

Every facet of human existence includes, now, death. For death is not extinction, or it would be nonsense to say that the Son of God died; but death is existence under the wrath of God; and this was certainly true of the Son. It was true in that 'he who is impassible as God is passible as man. The Impassible suffered...To say that "the Impassible suffers" is not, then, to be incoherent, but to state the very heart of the incarnational mystery'.<sup>29</sup> It simply means that he who is in the midst of us is indeed the Holy One. What is ruled out by this formula is also important: for if Christ suffered in his divine *nature* he would no longer be experiencing human suffering in an authentic human manner, but in a divine manner. All of the human experiences of Christ – being born, weeping, rejoicing, fearing, groaning, suffering, dying – must be predicated of him – the *Son of God* – as *a man*. If 'the Impassible suffers' is replaced by 'the Passible suffers', the death of Christ loses its significance entirely. Within the incarnation the Son of God never does anything as God *merely*, nor as God *in a man*, but as God *as man*. And how does the predication of suffering of the divine person not affect his divinity? Here we are at the heart of mystery. In Torrance's words:

On the one hand, therefore, we cannot but hold that God is impassible in the sense that he remains eternally and changelessly the same, but on the other hand, we cannot but hold that God is passible in that what he is not by nature he in fact became in taking upon himself 'the form of a servant'. He became one of us and one with us in Jesus Christ within the conditions and limits of our creaturely human existence and experience in space and time. That is surely how we must think of the passibility and impassibility of God: their conjunction is as incomprehensible as the mode of the union of God and man in Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup>

It remains true therefore that the Christian can rejoice in 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.'

Another important question is: did the Father suffer and if so how? It is axiomatic for Moltman, for example, that the Father suffered in abandoning, as the Son suffered in being abandoned. By theological inference our doctrine of the Triune God leads us to affirm that if the Son suffered, the Father and the Holy Spirit also suffered. Moreover, by analogy, the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac speaks of a God who knew the cost of giving a son. Other verses in Scripture (Jn.3:16; Rom.8:31,32) speak of the giving of the Son in terms implying cost. The Father suffered the anguish caused by sin (Gn. 6:6) and the conflict between wrath and mercy (Ho.11:8). What did he feel as his Son cried out in forsakenness on the cross? We cannot imagine. The Father's suffering is divine and a mystery to us. John Frame's counsel is wise: 'In the Incarnation, the Son suffers loss: physical pain, deprivation and death. The Father knows this agony, including the agony of his own separation from his Son...What precise feelings does he experience? We do not know and we would be wise not to speculate'.<sup>31</sup>

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What then of God identifying with humanity in their suffering? We know that God is a God of compassion and if we hard-hearted creatures can 'feel' another's pain it is difficult to imagine him not suffering in some way when his creatures suffer. But we have to be very careful; we must not attribute our sinful and fallible feelings to God; anthropomorphism is to describe God to us, not to attribute our feelings to God. That God 'feels' is a biblical given; exactly what that means is unknowable by us. It is, I suggest, biblically unwarranted to describe God as suffering with humanity generally in its suffering. Indeed it risks undermining the uniqueness and glory of the cross, for it is there that God shows his love for us; there that we see what God's suffering and, indeed, love is; in Christ dying for, not merely sympathizing with, sinners.

Yet it would be warranted to speak of God's identifying with one group of people: his covenant people, elect from eternity and blood-bought. This is what Exodus 2:23,24 points to and Acts 9:4 clarifies.<sup>32</sup> Christ suffers in or in communion with his people, his body. Their suffering meanwhile is transformed, for their own blessing (Rom.8:28) and the building of the church (Col.1:24). Moreover their sin still grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph.4:30).

The New Testament's insistence on the finished work of Christ on the cross; on irreversible victory revealed and sealed by the resurrection and on the accomplishment of propitiation, reconciliation and redemption by the cross; and the correlative absence of emphasis on God 'suffering with' or even sympathizing with humanity apart from the cross, make it imperative to see the passibility and impassibility of God in the light of a crucified saviour.

## Conclusion

'He suffered impassibly.' 'The Impassible suffers.' Perhaps this is as close as we can get to the mystery of the suffering of God. I conclude with some summary statements:

1. The doctrine of the impassibility of God must be maintained if our God is to be the God of the Bible – the God who suffers.
2. To maintain it truly requires a correct balance of God's transcendence and immanence. He is 'the Holy One in our midst'.
3. To the extent that the Old Testament speaks of 'pain' in God it is: in relation to sin in creation, where it merges into his wrath; or the conflict of wrath and mercy in relation to his covenant people.
4. Such 'pain' is anticipatory of the cross; it is fully revealed at the cross; and explained by the cross.
5. The suffering of the Son of God on the cross was in his being inflicted with the wrath of God against sin.
6. The one who died on the cross was the Son of God as man. It was not God suffering as God, nor in man, but *as* man. Only the mystery of the incarnation gives the suffering of God its essential ontological framework.
7. The Father, it may be affirmed, suffered; but exactly how is not revealed.
8. God in Christ suffers with his covenant people; in all their affliction he is afflicted.

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1. Article on *God* in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester:IVP, 1988).
2. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
3. Packer, *loc.cit.*
4. Richard Muller notes that 'the Reformers do not typically argue "impassibility" as an attribute'; though they deny the existence of *passiones* in God, they speak of this as an aspect of his immutability. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Vol.3: The Divine Essence and Attributes*; p.309. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). There are 42 index references in Muller's volume to immutability; only two to impassibility.
5. *The Confession of Faith*, p.49 (London: Banner of Truth, 1958).
6. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p.248 (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1996).
7. *Loc. cit.*
8. 3rd Edition; OUP, 1997. Quoted in Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) p.38.
9. B.B.Warfield, 'Imitating the Incarnation' in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950) p.570-71.
10. G.Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), ad loc.
11. Weinandy *op.cit.* p.61.
12. Calvin, Comm. on Genesis ad loc. (Baker Book House, 1993 reprint). My emphasis.
13. Turretin, *Institutes of Elencic Theology* (Phillipsburg:Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992) I.3.11.11.
14. Gerald Bray, 'Can God Suffer?' [www.geocities.com/the\\_theologian/content/doctrine/impassible](http://www.geocities.com/the_theologian/content/doctrine/impassible).
15. Weinandy, p.59.
16. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* I (Chicago University Press, 1971), p.229; cited in Weinandy, p.85.
17. e.g. Richard Bauckham in 'Only the Suffering God can help' in *Themelios*, April 1984, vol.9 no.3.; D.A.Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981) p.215 quoted in John Frame, *No Other God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey:Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), p.181.
18. Weinandy, p.109.
19. G.L.Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London:SPCK, 1952) p.7; cited in Weinandy, p.111.
20. Muller.*op.cit.*, p.310.
21. Weinandy, p.1, citing Fairbairn in *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p.483.
22. 1946; E.T.(London: SCM Press)1966.
23. In *Night* (Fontana/Collins, 1972). See Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p.273.
24. *The Crucified God*, p.277.
25. Kitamori, *op. cit.*, p.21.
26. This of course has implications for the extent of the atonement – for whom did Christ die? As penal substitute – not for the whole world.
27. Torrance, *op.cit.* p.249.
28. Weinandy, p.200.
29. Weinandy, pp.202f.
30. Torrance, p.250.
31. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p.614.
32. See also 2 Cor.1:5; Col.1:24; 1Pet.4:13.

We greatly regret a serious error in our last edition in the article by A.T.B. McGowan, **Justification and the Ordo Salutis**, p.15, column 1, line 2.

'a meritorious condition of salvation' should have read 'an unmeritorious condition of salvation'.

We offer our profound apologies to the author and to our readers. - Ed.