

The Impassibility of God and God's Covenant Love

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions;... (Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1)¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the impassibility of God (i.e. that God has “no passions”) has fallen on hard times. While it was the majority position of the early, medieval and Reformation era church, it has since in the modern era come under attack.² This assault upon impassibility increased greatly with Jürgen Moltmann’s book *The Crucified God*, which utilized insights from Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori to put forward a “post-Auschwitz” idea of a God who suffers with us.³ From Kitamori and Moltmann, the “neo-Lutheran” application of the *communicatio idiomatum* (“communication of idioms”) to propose a passionate God who suffers entered Evangelicalism through the writings of authors like Dennis Ngien.⁴ More

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 2.1, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3:606

² See Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway: 2013), 64-125, for a historical survey on the doctrine of impassibility.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 47, 274. Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori (北森嘉蔵) supposedly gained some insight into his newly discovered theology, after utilizing Martin’s Luther’s doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* contextualized into the Japanese context, to form a theology of suffering (*theologia doloris*) [Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (translator unknown; originally 神の痛み of 神学, Tokyo, Japan: Shinkyo Shuppansha, 1958; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 105-6]

⁴ See Dennis Ngien, “The God Who Suffers,” *Christianity Today* 41 no. 2 (Feb 3 1997): 38-42. Also Dennis Ngien, *A Faith Worth Believing, Living and Commending* (Eugene, OR, USA: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 12-18. I termed it “Neo-Lutheran” because Luther himself does not utilize the *communicatio idiomatum* in the way Kitamori, Moltmann and Ngien utilized it (c.f. Peter D. Anders, “Divine Impassibility and Our Suffering God: How an Evangelical ‘Theology of the Cross’ Can and Should Affirm Both,” *Modern Reformation* 6:4 (July/Aug1997): 29). This is so despite the fact that Ngien appealed to the Lutheran Book of Concord (Ngien, “The God Who Suffers,” *CT* 41 no. 2: 41) as if Luther’s version of the *communicatio idiomatum* supports his theology of a God who suffers.

The Lutheran version of the *communicatio idiomatum* states that the attributes of Christ’s divine nature can be predicated of his human nature, whereas the Reformed and catholic view of the *communicatio idiomatum* is that what is predicated of any of Christ’s natures can be predicated of his person [Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 72]. As Calvin states:

Such modes of expression intimate both that there is in man one person formed of compounds, and these two different natures constitute one person. Thus the Scriptures speak of Christ. They sometimes attribute to him qualities which should be referred specially to his humanity, and sometimes qualities applicable peculiarly to his divinity, and sometimes qualities which embrace both

recently, the attack against impassibility has been incorporated into the general attack against classical theism by the Open Theists, who took up supposed insights from these theologians to speak of the *pathos* of God as part of their larger campaign against God's immutability and foreknowledge.⁵

In light of the many attacks against impassibility, I would like to focus on one particular attack against impassibility: that of the supposed incompatibility the doctrine of impassibility has with the notion that God has love especially for His people. I would first present some of the arguments for divine passibility based upon God's love, deal with and propose a more refined definition of divine impassibility, and then address the arguments for divine passibility. It is my contention that the arguments for divine passibility in regards to love misunderstand the doctrine of divine impassibility and the nature of God and His love, thus divine impassibility is actually and fully consonant with the covenantal love of God to His people.

2. SOME PASSIBILIST OBJECTIONS

Objections to divine impassibility come from various quarters. From a biblical theological focus on the prophetic books, Abraham Heschel argued that the biblical portrayal of God in the prophets comes from their Hebrew *understanding* of who He is as He relates to them, not some abstract Greek Aristotelian *idea*.⁶ God "is concerned about

natures, and do not apply specially to either. This combination of a twofold nature in Christ they express so carefully, that they sometimes communicate them with each other, a figure of speech which the ancients termed *ιδιοσωμάτων κοινωνία* (a communication of properties) [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. by Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.14.1]

⁵ Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in Clark Pinnock et al, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 22-6; William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *Idem*, 130-4.

⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Part 2; New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1975), 2, 29-39

the world and shares in its fate.”⁷ God is said to be not a mere supreme principle, He cares for His people, and His love for His people is expressed in His covenant with them, a covenant which establishes a reciprocal relationship between God and His people.⁸ The *pathos* of God establishes God as being never neutral and always partial to justice, in a dynamic relation contrary to fatalism.⁹ Heschel attacks divine impassibility as being “Greek” and unbiblical, being based upon the “Greek” idea of ontological perfection of being (the idea of God as the “perfect being”).¹⁰ He does this by attacking the notion of *being* as being a Greek concept, replacing it with the *mystery of being*. God thus transcends *being* as the ultimate *mystery of being*, removing the “problem” of perfection which supposedly stems from a Platonic conception of *being*.

From a post-World War Two theological perspective, theologians Kazoh Kitamori, Jürgen Moltmann and Dennis Ngien have each argued for a theology of God’s suffering.¹¹ In Kitamori’s system, God’s suffering has propitiatory value, and therefore God as passible is necessary for salvation.¹² Much closer to orthodoxy, Moltmann argued that only a passible God gives us the ground for real hope in the world, and the ground for “living with the terror of history and the end of history.”¹³ Ngien on the other hand states that love

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 16-20

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-5

¹¹ Kitamori “contextualized” his theology in part as a response to the suffering of Japanese after World War 2. [Randall E. Otto, “Japanese Religion in Kazoh Kitamori’s Theology of the Pain of God,” *Encounter* 52:1 (Winter 1991): 37-8]. Moltmann came up with his theology of suffering in response to the atrocities of the Holocaust (Moltmann, 274-8). Ngien came up with his theology of God’s suffering as a response to his childhood experience of hospitalization. While none of us do theology in a vacuum, and whatever theology we have must be able to account for the suffering in this world, it is imperative that theology must be first and foremost be done from God’s Word, instead of using our experiences as axioms in determining our theology. As an aside, as one whose ancestors have suffered under the cruel inhumane barbarity of Japanese occupation, I find Kitamori’s contextual reason shockingly insensitive and naïve.

¹² Kitamori, 20-1. As it should be evident, Kitamori’s syncretistic “theology” is way beyond the pale of orthodoxy. I have separately addressed Kitamori’s syncretistic heretical theology elsewhere, in my paper *Evaluating Kazoh Kitamori’s doctrine of the Atonement*.

¹³ Moltmann, 278

implies vulnerability, and thus God must be passible (thus vulnerable) in order to be love.¹⁴ Furthermore, God is only able to console us if he suffers together with us.¹⁵ Lastly, Ngien contends that only a passible God can be present at the Cross, for otherwise “Christ’s divinity [would be] untouched by the suffering of his humanity.”¹⁶

Thus, the main arguments here against divine impassibility line up as follows: (1) Impassibility contradicts the biblical account of God especially in the prophetic books, because relationship in a covenant implies reciprocity and therefore God must be passible; (2) Impassibility depends upon perfect being theology; (3) Divine passibility is a better ground for consolation and hope; (4) Vulnerability is necessary for true love, and thus a God that is love must be vulnerable and thus passible;¹⁷ (5) Divine passibility is necessary for God to be actually present at the cross. In this paper, I will focus primarily on arguments 1, 3 and 4, and secondarily on argument 2 as it interacts with my focus on God’s love.

3. WHAT THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF IMPASSIBILITY ACTUALLY TEACHES

Before interacting with the arguments for divine passibility, an important question to ask is what the Christian doctrine of divine impassability actually teaches. Conversely, we

¹⁴ Ngien, *Faith*, 13; Ngien, “God who Suffers,” *CT 41* no 2: 40. In a slightly more elaborate argument, love, as opposed to mere benevolence, must give of oneself, and thus love implies vulnerability [Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen, The Netherlands; Kok Pharos, 1992), 82-6]

¹⁵ *Idem*, “God Who Suffers,” *CT 41* no. 2: 40

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40; Ngien, *Faith*, 14. As it is mentioned in footnote 4, this particular objection by Ngien is caused by his flawed understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Christ suffered as a *person*, and it is this personal suffering that God participates in in Christ, not in a “divine nature” that suffers.

¹⁷ Another example is seen in this statement: “An almighty God *who cannot suffer is poverty stricken because he cannot love or be involved*” (Lister, 133. Emphasis original). Also, “this divine offer of [involved love] renders God vulnerable: vulnerable not only to rejection by the beloved, but also to whatever negative factors may be afflicting the beloved” (Sarot, 85)

should also question whether at least some of its proponents or opponents have misrepresented or misunderstood the Christian doctrine of divine impassibility.¹⁸

A major modern philosophical theological work on this topic was done by Richard Creel.¹⁹ In this work, Creel surveyed a couple of earlier works on the topic, and puts forward as a generic definition of impassibility “that which cannot be affected by an outside force.”²⁰ Creel then proceeds to apply this generic definition to the various aspects of “nature,” “will,” “knowledge” and “feeling.”²¹ However, it is better to assign the term “impassibility” to the emotions, as that is how the term is used historically, as we have other terms to use when applied to the other categories.²² So it seems that a good generic definition of divine impassibility is the notion that God’s emotions, if any, cannot be affected by an outside force.

In Reformed theology, the doctrine of divine impassibility is held to as a corollary to the doctrine of immutability.²³ It is because God is “pure act” or “pure actuality” (*purus actus*)

¹⁸ This is for example a charge made by Marcel Sarot against many presentations of divine impassibility, in that they confuse the Greek Stoic notions of impassibility with the traditional Christian view (Sarot, 45-7).

¹⁹ Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1986). According to Rob Lister, Creel’s work is “one of the most important monographs defending divine impassibility in the twentieth century.” (Lister, 149)

²⁰ Creel, 11

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12

²² This is pointed out by Sarot (Sarot, 26-30), who gave more specific definitions of “impassibility” as “incapable of experiencing emotions,” and “incapable of suffering” (*Idem*, 26).

The other terms are: immutability (nature, will, knowledge) and exhaustive foreknowledge (knowledge).

²³ C.f. Under the section “The Immutability of God,” Louis Berkhof states, “And if Scripture speaks of his repenting, changing His intention and altering His relation to sinners when they repent, we should remember that this is only an anthropopathic way of speaking. In reality the change is not in God, but in man and in man’s relations to God.” [Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 59. In *Systematic Theology*, New Combined Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996)]. Charles Hodge briefly states under the heading “immutability” that “Those passages of Scripture in which God is said to repent, are to be interpreted on the same principle as those in which He is said to ride upon the wings of the wind, or to walk through the earth” [Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2001), 391]. Francis Turretin states under “The Immutability of God”: “Repentance is attributed to God after the manner of men (*anthrōpopathōs*) but must be understood after the manner of God (theoprepōs): ... not to affection and internal grief, but to the effect and external work because he does what a penitent man usually does.” [Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, vol. 1 (ed. by James T. Dennison Jr.; trans. by George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992), 206]

that God cannot change (immutable), including in His “emotions.”²⁴ It is noted that Reformed theology does not deny that God has “emotions” per se, but that it is concerned that God does not have any change in Himself, so therefore any supposed change in emotions in God, if any, to be seen as a change outside God.²⁵

Apart from that consensus, there are differences in the way divine impassibility is understood. Louis Berkhof holds that changes in God’s “emotions” are due to changes in the people, thus for example when God loves a person He formerly is wrathful against, Man is actually the one that moved from the sphere or relation of “anger” to the sphere or relation of “love,” while God is “fixed.” Herman Bavinck merely states the negative proposition that God does not change at all regardless of “emotions,” while Charles Hodge is even vaguer and says that such language is anthropopathic without stating in what manner they are anthropopathic. Michael Horton on the other hand appropriates the language of *energies* (Greek: *energeia*) in Eastern Orthodoxy to say that immutability and impassibility refer to the essence of God and not the persons.²⁶

It might perhaps be clearer and better to speak of God using the *ad intra* and *ad extra* categories, distinguishing (without separating) the imminent Trinity and the economic

Although Bavinck does not speak about impassibility per se, he alluded to the doctrine when saying “while immutable in himself, he [God] nevertheless, as it were, lives the life of his creatures and participates in all their changing states... Yet, however anthropomorphic its language, it at the same time prohibits us from positing any change in God himself.” [Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. by John Bolt; trans. by John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 158]

²⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic*, 59; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A New Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 235

²⁵ “God is impassible, which means that no one can inflict suffering, pain, or any sort of distress upon him. Insofar as God enters into experience of that kind, it is by empathy for his creatures and according to his own deliberate decision, not as his creatures’ victim.” [James I. Packer, “Theism for Our Time,” in Peter T. O’Brien and David G. Peterson, eds., *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays presented to Dr. D. B. Knox* (Homebush West, NSW, Australia: Lancer Books, 1986),7]

²⁶ Horton, 129-31, 241, 249

Trinity.²⁷ God is impassible *ad intra* (within himself) while God in His relations with His creatures *ad extra* is not impassible but rather interactive. This distinguishes between God's being (*ad intra*) and God's works (*ad extra*), and seems to be the most representative of and yet clear Reformed view of divine impassibility.²⁸

Interacting with the generic notion of divine impassibility as advocated by Richard Creel, Creel's generic definition as applied to emotions is too vague. The Christian and Reformed view of divine impassibility does say that God cannot be affected emotionally by an outside force, but it states much more — that God's emotions are unchangeable *ad intra* while being faithful and determinate *ad extra*.²⁹

4. ANALYSIS OF PASSIBILIST ARGUMENTS

4.1. GOD AS SUI GENERIS AND THE DOCTRINE OF ANALOGY

As we begin to deal with the passibilist arguments, we must establish from the onset the doctrine of analogy. Whatever is predicated especially of God can and must only be predicated of Him analogically not univocally; we reason ectypically not archetypically.³⁰

²⁷ Turretin points in that direction of clarity by stating that the emotion of repentance is to be understood as "to the effect and **external work**" (Turretin, 206. Bold added). Such a distinction lies in the essential distinction between the imminent Trinity and the economic Trinity (c.f. Anders, "Divine Impassibility," *MR* 6:4: 26-7).

²⁸ Utilizing those categories would eliminate the necessity of appropriating the Eastern Orthodox category of *energies*, though the category of "*energies*" is similar to the "*ad extra*" category. It also has the advantage of not having the possible problem of seeing God as being somehow "fixed," which it seemed to be the logically consequent of Berkhof's manner of stating the doctrine. God can be and actually is "dynamic" in His works, as the progress of redemptive history clearly shows.

It is to be noted that this is an assertion of how best the doctrine of divine impassibility is to be understood, a view narrower than J.I. Packer's, Bavinck's, or Hodges' views. I furthermore assert that this is a better way of understanding the traditional general historic Christian (patristic and medieval) teaching on the topic, as opposed to Rob Lister's dialectical and logically contradictory view of God as being both "impassible" and "impassioned" (Lister, 36, 251-2), a view which would be discussed later.

²⁹ Thus, Creel's distinction between mere impassive benevolence and involved love such that God being impassible has the former but not the latter (Creel, 117), is in error. Rather, God has both but both are *ad extra* expressions.

By "faithful," it is meant that any emotion of God *ad extra* is a consistent application of *ad intra* principles in time. "Determinate" implies that God is sovereign over those emotions.

³⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd Ed. (ed. by William Edgar; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1974), 31, 270; Horton, 128; Bavinck states, "It [The knowledge of God] is therefore an

God is God. He is in a class of His own (*sui generis*).³¹ As such, when we deal with attributes of God, we cannot understand them in the same manner as when they are predicated of Man. God's knowing and Man's knowing for example are analogous. Thus, when we speak of God's "emotions" in general, or God's love in particular, we cannot understand them univocally but analogically. We therefore cannot use creaturely analogies and think that just because human knowledge or human emotions are such, then such must apply equally to God when those same attributes are predicated of God.

Thus, in dealing with passibilist arguments, many of the objections are immediately suspect, since they argue from our human experience. In this light, Ngien's supporting argument, whatever the merits of his main overall argument, is immediately suspect when he links the necessity for divine *pathos* with the human example that consolation for him was only possible when his mother could sympathize with him.³²

4.2. ON EMOTIONAL STATES AND PERFECT BEING THEOLOGY

As mentioned, one of Heschel's arguments for passibility attacked the perceived Greek captivity of theology in the doctrine of divine impassibility.³³ This showed that he misunderstood the biblical doctrine of divine impassibility, which is not the same as the Greek Stoic idea of impassibility. Furthermore, even if that was not the case, it is surprising how contemporary theologians attack "Greek philosophy" as the culprit for much that is wrong with traditional theology.³⁴ The problem is that no matter which position is taken on

analogical knowledge: a knowledge of a being who is unknowable in himself, yet able to make something of himself known in the being he created" (Bavinck, 48. Emphasis original). See also Bavinck, 107-10.

³¹ C.f. Num. 23:19, Ps. 50:21; Bavinck, 36-7; Berkhof, *Systematic*, 43; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 131

³² Ngien, "God Who Suffers," *CT* 41 no 2: 40.

³³ Heschel, 2, 29-39

³⁴ The Open Theists blame Greek philosophy also for the "problems" they "found" in classical theism, as it can be seen in John Sander's chapter on Open Theism in the book *The Openness of God* [John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al, 59-75].

many issues including this one, one can be accused of being captive to Greek thought. In our specific case, the alternative to divine impassibility is divine passibility, which is actually the position of many pagan religions including Greek mythology, and yet loud screams of protest would be voiced if one were to accuse divine passibilists of being captive to Greek paganism! It is not sufficient therefore to postulate the identity any biblical doctrine has with any particular theory in pagan philosophy as being evidence for syncretism with pagan Greek thought.³⁵ Such might well be true, but it has to be proven not merely asserted.

This idea of the “Greek captivity” is claimed to be expressed in the usage of perfect being theology which stems from Platonism, a theology most explicitly seen in the Ontological argument for the existence of God.³⁶ Heschel’s argument links divine impassibility (and immutability) with perfect being theology through stating that only a perfect being theology would denigrate change, since a perfect being by definition cannot change. Thus, the “Greek captivity” resulted in the embrace of divine impassibility, while the “biblical view” should entail the denial of perfect being theology and a subsequent embrace of the “mystery of being.”³⁷ Creel on the other hand, while an impassibilist of sorts, undermines the concept of a perfect being by putting forward an idea of an extensive change in God which, as opposed to an intensive change, neither changes God for the better or for the worse.³⁸

³⁵ This is not to mention that such reasoning commits the genetic fallacy and the fallacy of poisoning the well.

³⁶ The ontological argument for the existence of God states that God is the greatest possible being of which nothing greater can be conceived.

³⁷ Heschel, 40-5. If a perfect being undergoes a change for the better, then it must have been previously imperfect. If it undergoes a change for the worst, then it must now be not perfect, as well as being imperfect earlier since the capability to be able to undergo a change for the worst is contrary to perfection

³⁸ Creel, 144-5.

In response, it must be said that this charge of the “Greek captivity” is overstated. Against Heschel, it is a cop-out to suggest that “being” is unimportant and just speak about the “mystery of being,” because it is unlikely that Heschel would countenance saying that God is just like Man having the “mystery of being.” Heschel has to maintain that God is in some sense greater in being than Man, unless he wishes to assert that God and Man might be equal, and therefore the question and concept of “being” re-appears.

The idea of extensive change introduced by Creel is interesting but does not solve the problem. If we are to speak of attributes like God’s knowledge, or of God’s love, the question to be asked is whether any proposed extensive changes have any actual effect on these attributes. If they have, they are “intensive” changes. If however they do not have any actual effect, they are accidental to the attributes and thus unimportant for the purpose at hand. Furthermore, one does not have to hold to perfect being theology to state that God cannot change, because one does not have to hold to Platonic graduations of being but rather just to a basic dichotomy of being between Creator and creature. The denial of change within God is not because change would result in a drop in levels of being as per perfect being theology, but rather that any change would result in God becoming less than God.

As applied to the doctrine of divine impassibility, the question is one of constancy and change. God is impassible merely implies that God’s “emotions” are constant, unchanging and faithful to His nature.

4.3. ON CONSOLATION AND HOPE

Moltmann and Ngien have asserted that only divine passibility could give hope and consolation.³⁹ However, if God's "emotions" can change, then upon what basis can the passibilist think that God would not suddenly change his love to anger, his sympathy to apathy? Can a God who "suffers mood-swings" be a sure source of comfort and hope?⁴⁰

The Christian and Reformed doctrine of divine impassibility states that God's emotions are constant. Therefore, it is a sure ground for comfort and hope since it does not have a God who is loving towards His people one day, and hating them the next. An appeal to God's constancy and faithfulness can be seen in the narrative of Scripture in places like Numbers 14:19, where despite God's visible anger, Moses appealed to the steadfast love (חֶסֶד — *hesed*) of God to spare the people.

It could be objected that if God's emotions are constant, then God cannot *become* angry with those He love, or *become* loving to those He is angry at. That would be comforting for those who are under God's love, but devastating for those under God's anger. Such an objection however fails when divine impassibility is interpreted with the *ad intra* and *ad extra* categories. God's "emotions" are constant as to their being, but God's works (*ad extra*) change in time thus his "emotions" *expressed* towards His creatures change based upon God's revealed will, which reveals how He interacts with His creatures. In this regard, Heschel errs because he refuses to distinguish God's interaction with His creatures *ad extra* with God's own nature *ad intra*; refusing to see the imminent Trinity as being distinct (not separate) from the economic Trinity.⁴¹

³⁹ Moltmann, 278; Ngien, "God Who Suffers," *CT* 41 no. 2: 40

⁴⁰ Philip R. Johnson, "God without Mood-Swings," in Douglas Wilson, ed., *Bound Only Once* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 109-121

⁴¹ This is the problem with much of modern theological passibilism (Lister, 244)

One further objection to impassibility is the idea that sympathy in “co-suffering” is necessary for consolation, as if somehow the idea that God suffers together with us should be a source of consolation for those who suffer. In response, utilizing an analogy of a doctor with his patient, what is needed for consolation is not some form of “co-suffering,” like having the doctor to “climb into the bed next to him or her [the patient] and start making groaning noises,” but rather that the doctor is able to cure the patient.⁴² After all, suffering has no inherent value even in love, for it is not suffering that “make love admirable,” but rather it is “love that makes suffering admirable.”⁴³ Consolation and hope rests thus on God’s love and sovereignty, on the One who is “strong to save,” not on the powerless co-sufferer.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding the presence already of objective consolation in God’s promises, God did in fact give us someone who can sympathize with us, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 2: 14-18). This subjective consolation is to found in the person of Christ the God-Man in his high priestly office, and not on some passibilist god out there.⁴⁵

4.4. ON LOVE AS RELATIONAL RECIPROCITY

The modern notion of love as requiring relational reciprocity, that both partners interact with each other emotionally, is said to require some version of divine passibility, as any form of love that is not relationally reciprocal is said to not be true love. Against this argument, it must be maintained that God’s love is qualitatively different from human love.

⁴² Gerald Bray, “Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord: Can God Suffer?” *Modern Reformation* 8:2 (March/April 1999): 18

⁴³ Creel, 123

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18. Also, “While [God] certainly promises to bear our burdens for us (1 Peter 5: 6-7), the point is that he is strong to bear them when we are not, and not that he will unendingly wallow in impotent victimization with us.” (Lister, 251)

⁴⁵ As Kevin DeYoung points out, the sufferings of Christ was meant to perfect him for his high priestly office, not that we can look “at God through our sufferings.” [Kevin DeYoung, “Divine Impassibility and the Passion of Christ in the Book of Hebrews,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 41-50]

Furthermore, reciprocity is not the real issue under contention. Rather, the contention is whether God in the exercise of His love must *necessarily* be engaged in any form of relational reciprocity. In other words, is God free and sovereign over how and when He interacts with His creatures?

From creation, God chooses freely to interact with His creatures through covenants.⁴⁶ In these covenants, God has set the parameters for the interactions between the covenant partners, regardless of whether the other party has obligations to fulfill within the covenant. That God is free to enter into relationships with His creatures and is sovereign over these interactions show us that God in the exercise of His love is free as to how He engages in any particular relationship.

As a counter-example to the idea that God's love necessarily requires relational reciprocity, God's relationship with the reprobates through the Noahic Covenant would be a good example of God being free not to have relational reciprocity.⁴⁷ God's common love or benevolence to the reprobates functions similarly as how Creel's idea of the impassible God functions—in a way that “(1) car[es] about the welfare of that person, (2) act[s] for the welfare of that person, and (3) tak[es] pleasure in the welfare of that person.”⁴⁸ This sort of disinterested (not uninterested) benevolence is unilateral and does not involve reciprocity

⁴⁶ WCF 7:1, in Schaff, 3:616; Michael G. Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2012), 18-21

⁴⁷ The Noahic Covenant is made with all both elect and reprobate (Brown and Keele, 74-75). For the purpose of this argument, I am focusing on the fact that it is indeed made with reprobates and shows God's common love towards them.

⁴⁸ Creel, 117. This common grace love is “God's providential love over all that he has made” [D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 16-7]

of any kind.⁴⁹ Although most certainly the reprobates ought to be grateful, that forms no part of the relationship as it stands.

So while God in His love does engage in reciprocal relations with His creatures, the passibilist objection fails because God could choose how and when to and when not to engage in reciprocal relations with them. God is sovereign over the relationships He Himself chooses to enter in, and thus the Christian notion of impassibility stands.

4.5. ON LOVE AS VULNERABILITY

The last passibilist argument to be addressed is that indicating that love requires both parties to be vulnerable. Key to this passibilist objection is the notion that getting involved in a relationship implies the potentiality of one party to, for example, hurt the other party, and that through empathy, the feelings of one party would influence the other.⁵⁰

Here, the notion of analogy helps as well, as human analogies of love are not perfect. The experience of empathy applies to humans because we as finite beings cannot know and understand the other party's feelings except through relational experiences. Yet, for God who is omniscient and thus fully knows everything and everyone, how can it be said that God can gain knowledge of the feelings of the other party which He previously did not have? So if God already knows all the feelings of the other party, all the time, in what manner can it be said that empathy is necessary for God to love His creatures?

The other objection of vulnerability states that love implies the potentially to affect the other party, thus it suggests that the love of an impassible God is defective somehow since His heart would not be considered open to input from His creatures. But if God is God and

⁴⁹ Disinterested love is for the "well-being of the receiver of benevolence," while normal love is for mutual fellowship between the parties (c.f. Sarot, 83)

⁵⁰ Sarot, 85

sovereignly in control, then what kind of “inputs” can creatures make, except “inputs” that God is sovereign over. Marcel Sarot, citing Heschel approvingly, attempts to differentiate between “personal” states and relations, and “causal” relations.⁵¹ God according to them is passible in the “personal” sense, since God cannot be under any “causal constraint.”⁵² In other words, they recognize that God cannot be dependent on the world. Yet, such a distinction is invalid for the simple reason that personal actions are still actions and thus still causes. A cause that is “personal” differs from an impersonal cause as to the identity of the mover standing behind the action, not as to the action itself. Therefore, in order for God to be independent of the world, He must be sovereign over any input creatures can make in any relationship with Him, if any.

In Evangelical circles, Rob Lister makes a different distinction along the same theme of vulnerability, with his claims that God is impassible as He “cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised,” but He is also passionate and could be “affected by [H]is creatures.”⁵³ This distinction however cannot work. If God can be affected by His creatures, either He has determined that He will react in such a way in time in response to such a stimulus, or He has not determined such. If He has determined to react in such a way from eternity, then He is not really affected by His creatures but that creaturely action is merely the occasion for God to act. If however He has not determined such, then God’s emotional response must be either manipulated, overwhelmed, surprised, or any permutations of the three. Since Lister agrees that no creature could ever “wring an emotion from him [God] *involuntarily*,” thus the only logical position He could hold to is that God is not affected by

⁵¹ Sarot, 28; Heschel, 5

⁵² Sarot, 29

⁵³ Lister, 36

any creature and no creature has ever contributed any input to God.⁵⁴ As such, Lister's thesis of God being both "impassible" and "impassioned" is dialectical and a logical contradiction. God does respond to His creatures, but responding (active tense) is different from being affected (passive tense).⁵⁵

It must be remembered that God is totally unlike any other creature, thus any relationship with Him must of necessity be strange to His creatures. God in His grace does relate to us in terms that seem very human, and such we call anthropomorphism and anthropopathism, because it is in God's condescension that He works and reveals Himself in ways we can understand. If God does not work and reveal Himself in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic ways, how can we understand Him at all? Thus, God's love does not partake of vulnerability, although God does express Himself as if He were vulnerable, utilizing language of anger and hurt in dealings with His people as seen in passages like Hosea 11: 8-9.

5. CONCLUSION

God is indeed impassible in His emotions. He is constant and unchanging in His emotions *ad intra*, while faithful and determinate as to His expressed emotions *ad extra*. Passibilist objections especially in the area of God's love fail because either they misrepresent the Christian doctrine of divine impassibility, they fail to see the difference between God's being and God's works, or they fail to realize the qualitative difference God's love has over creaturely love. God is always determinate over His expressed emotions, and therefore His love is active and more akin to volition than to human

⁵⁴ Lister, 254.

⁵⁵ Likewise, I disagree with Horton that we should say that "God is affected by us but is not determined in his being, will, or actions by us" (Horton, 249). Rather, it is better to say that God responds to us, including to our emotions.

emotions, although certainly not reducible to mere volition.⁵⁶ Generalizing Turretin's understanding of divine "repentance" to emotions in general, language of God's emotions is to "be understood not *pathetically* (*pathētikōs*), but *energetically* (*energētikōs*)."⁵⁷

Practically, this doctrine of divine impassibility should give us hope and comfort. Since God is unchangeable as to His emotions *ad intra*, while faithful and determinate as to His emotions *ad extra*, we do not have to worry about God arbitrarily undergoing mood-swings for any reason whatsoever. The God who loves us His people in Christ will always love us in Christ, and will not suddenly undergo any "mid-life crisis" of wondering whether He actually does or does not love us His people. The God who is sovereign in reciprocity will love us despite our failure to love Him enough in return, and in Christ will sympathize with us in our struggles despite our failure to ask Him to do so. God is love, and because He is love, He does not depend on our part of the reciprocal relationship in order for Him to love us first and always.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Rom. 8:38-39)

Neither will our lack or weakness of love separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Amen.

⁵⁶ Thus Gordon Clark states,

"But someone says, God is love, and love is an emotion, is it not? .. He [God] issues an order: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God. Is this a command to become emotional? To have ups and downs, sudden surges and ebbings? Oh, No! someone replies. Our love should never ebb. ... We agree, do we not, that our love for God should be steady. And we agree that God's love for us is unchangeable. Then is not such a mental activity or attitude better designated a volition than an emotion? [Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 1965), 29]

⁵⁷ Turretin, 206

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