

*Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies:
Why the Gospel of Christ's Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer*

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It was several months ago when I got the call from Mark Dever: “Hey Kevin, are you planning on going to T4G next year?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, you know that afternoon session right in the middle of the conference, right after lunch when everyone is groggy and needs a break? How would you like to speak during that time? We are trying to line up eight breakout sessions. You might anywhere from 50 to 500 people. What do you say?”

Mark knows how to drive a hard bargain.

Obviously, I'm thrilled to be doing this breakout session. It is an honor to speak to you and a privilege to play some small part in this incredible conference with these gifted leaders.

Introduction

As I've reflected over the past six months on my topic and the title I gave Mark back in 2009, one thought has been uppermost in my mind: what in the world was I thinking?! First of all, almost no one believes in impassibility anymore. Second, most people haven't heard the word “impassibility” before. And third, I can't even remember my own title without looking at it. I should have stuck with my bread and butter and given a talk on: Why I'm Not Emergent And No One Else Is Either Anymore.

But alas, the die was cast many months ago and so here we are. I've entitled this talk “Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies: Why the Gospel of Christ's Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer.” The first line in the title comes from Charles Wesley's hymn “And Can It Be.” I chose that line because it captures the wonder and paradox of the incarnation. *On the cross, the Immortal dies.* That's the glory of the gospel.

Or to put it another way, in the person of Jesus Christ, the impassible suffers. The mystery and majesty of the incarnation is weakened if God as God can experience pain. It is not a miracle to say the passible suffers. But if the *impassible* suffers, then God in the incarnation has accomplished something absolutely unique and remarkable. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Defining Our Terms

Let me start with a definition, a relatively simple definition. By **impassibility** I mean this: God cannot suffer and is incapable of being acted upon by an external force. Related to this definition is the question about passion and emotions. How should we understand God's inner life? Does he have emotions? If so, how are his emotions like ours or unlike ours? We'll come back to these

questions later, but for now I just want to offer the simple definition. Impassibility means God cannot suffer and is incapable of being acted upon by an external force.

Over the past century or so, impassibility has become passé. To suggest that God can suffer, and indeed that he *must* suffer if he is to be truly loving, has become the new orthodoxy. But for most of Christian history theologians believed God could not suffer. In fact, divine passibility is at the heart of two ancient heresies: theopaschitism and patripassianism.

A document from the council of Rome (382) concluded: “If anyone says that in the passion of the cross it is God himself who felt the pain and not the flesh and the soul which Christ, the Son of God, had taken to himself...he is mistaken.”¹

Theopaschitism comes from two Greek words: *theos* meaning God and *pascho* meaning to suffer. Hence, theopaschitism was the belief that God suffered as God on the cross. So that when Jesus died, God suffered.

Patripassianism is a related heresy. It asserted that the Father (*patri*) suffered (*passian*) along with the Son on the cross. So that not only did the Son suffer in his God-forsakenness on the cross, but the Father also suffered in his dying Son.

“How Deep the Father’s Love” is one of my favorite songs. But I have always wondered about this line:

How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory

It seems to me you can interpret this in two different ways. “How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns His face away” could refer to the Son’s experience of loss as his Father turns His face away from the Son. Or, the line could refer to the Father’s pain and experience of loss as He (the Father) turns His face away from the Son. I think the first meaning is correct. I hope that’s the intent of the verse, because the second meaning is close to patripassianism.

Both theopaschitism and patripassianism were rejected by the Church in the sixth century, by the patriarch of Constantinople in the East and in the West by Hormisdas, bishop of Rome.

¹ Quoted in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 395.

A Tricky Heresy

Before I go on and make a case for impassibility, I need to make clear that I don't think it is automatically a heresy to believe that God suffers. I think it is a mistake, but not necessarily a heretical mistake. "But what about theopaschitism and patripassianism?" you ask. It's true, those two heresies affirmed the passibility of God, but they were heresies for other related reasons.

Theopaschitism was a *Christological heresy*. It was defended by Peter the Fuller of Antioch, a Monophysite. He believed Christ only had one nature. Therefore, when Christ died on the cross, the divine nature must have suffered because there was no distinction to be made between a human and divine nature. His belief that God suffered was an outworking of his belief that Christ possessed only one nature.

Patripassianism, on the other hand, was a *Trinitarian heresy*. It was essentially modalistic, believing that the Father and the Son were the same person appearing in different modes of being. Therefore, whatever the Son experienced the Father also experienced because the persons of the Trinity are not distinct persons, but different expressions of the same person. So the Son cannot suffer without the Father also suffering, for there is one God and this one God is the Father.

Are you with me? This is tricky, I know. Everyone who espouses theopaschitism or patripassianism believes that God suffers. But not everyone who believes God suffers holds to the Christological implications of theopaschitism or the Trinitarian implications of patripassianism.

For example, John Stott in his magnificent book *The Cross of Christ* argues, wrongly in my opinion, for divine passibility. He says on pages 326: "There is good biblical evidence that God not only suffered in Christ, but that God in Christ suffers with his people still." But earlier in the book Stott is careful to say that God did not die on the cross, nor did the Father die on the cross. Stott wants to reject the ancient heresies while still retaining the right to say God suffers:

An overemphasis on the sufferings of God on the cross may mislead us either into confusing the persons of the Trinity and denying the eternal distinctness of the Son, like the Modalists or Patripassians, or into confusing the natures of Christ and denying that he was one person in two natures, like the Monophysites or Theopaschites.²

So Stott is smart enough and careful enough to know the dangers of an *overemphasis* on the sufferings of God. But he still wants to emphasize that God suffers. Two sentences later he argues: "it seems permissible to refer to God suffering on the cross."³

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 155.

³ Ibid.

The New Orthodoxy

Stott is certainly not the only one who wants to highlight the suffering of God. Karl Barth spoke of God's own heart suffering on the cross. Bonhoeffer said, "Our God is a Suffering God." More recently, Jurgen Moltmann has argued in his book *Crucified God* that the Father suffered the loss of his Son on Good Friday. Another well respected philosopher-theologian admitted, after a tragedy in his life, that he found the doctrine of impassibility "impossible to accept" and "grotesque."

Many, if not most, Christian books you pick up on suffering or the problem of evil, especially books written at a popular level, will offer "God weeps with those who weep" as one of the answers to the problem of pain. God, it is said, is as much grieved by our grief as we are. He hurts as much or more than we hurt. To say anything less is to make God into an unfeeling monster.

Before the nineteenth or twentieth century you could find almost no Christian arguing that God suffered. But in the last hundred years it has become the new orthodoxy. Now you will find almost no one arguing that God *doesn't* suffer.

We can understand why impassibility has fallen on hard times.

1. We live in an age that prizes authenticity and nothing is thought more authentic than brokenness and pain. Suffering is our culture's currency for "the real."
2. We live in an age where Christians are suspect of anything that sounds Greek. And many people argue that divine impassibility is simply a holdover from the Greco-Roman world, the old unmoved mover of the philosophers. The Hebrews, it is said, saw God as full of pathos, but the early Christians dumped that for a Greek view of a stoic, passionless God.
3. Most people assume that a suffering God is a more caring God. "What meaning can there be in a love that is not costly to the lover?" it is argued. God must stand in solidarity with our pain. He heals our suffering by sharing in it. A God who cannot suffer cannot love. Only the suffering God can help.
4. Divine suffering is thought to be one of the best answers to the problem of evil. After two world wars, a Jewish holocaust, and several ethnic genocides, how can we worship a God who is immune to our pain? You may remember that famous scene from *Night* where Elie Wiesel suggests that God was hanging right there on the gallows. Did Wiesel mean God was dead or that God was suffering with that man? Most everyone assumes the latter. Moltmann, reflecting on this story, says "Any other answer would be blasphemy. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon." A number of evangelical writers continue to echo Moltmann's assessment.

5. The fifth argument against impassibility is the most compelling. If Christ shows us what God is like, then shouldn't we conclude that our God is a suffering God? The cross, it is said, revealed the eternal suffering in the heart of God.⁴

In Defense of Impassibility

So with all this arguing against impassibility, why do I think the doctrine is still defensible and even good for us as Christians? That's the question I want to answer. I want to give five arguments in favor of divine impassibility and then conclude with five brief reasons why impassibility is good news.⁵

Remember our definition: impassibility means God cannot suffer and cannot be acted upon by an external source. Here are five arguments why I believe this is true, in no particular order.

1. The weight of church history overwhelmingly supports the notion that God does not suffer.

The early church held it as self-evident that the eternal God was unchangeable and impassible.

Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Fathers, said what separates God from creation is that He is "unchangeable and eternal." He is superior to things that can be changed. Our God, he wrote, is "unbegotten and impassible."⁶

Irenaeus writing in the second century says, "The [Gnostics] endow God with human affections and emotions. However, if they had known the Scriptures, and had been taught by the truth, they would have known beyond doubt that God is not like men. His thoughts are not like the thoughts of men. For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those dispositions and passions that operate among men" (1.374).

In the third century we read from Origen: "We will not serve God as though He stood in need of our service, or as though He would be made unhappy if we ceased to serve him. Rather, we do it because we are ourselves benefitted by the service of God. And we do it because we are freed from griefs and troubles by serving the Most High God through His only-begotten Son, the Word and Wisdom" (4.642).

Likewise, Arnobius writing at the beginning of the fourth century writes, "Our salvation is not necessary to Him, such that He would gain something or suffer some loss if He either made us divine, or allowed us to be annihilated and destroyed by corruption" (6.459).

⁴ For more information about the reasons for possibility, including exact citations for these various assessments of impassibility, see Kevin DeYoung, "Divine Impassibility and the Passion of Christ in the Book of Hebrews" *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006), p. 44.

⁵ The best, most exhaustive defense of impassibility in recent years is Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

⁶ See Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2000), 85.

There is no doubt that the Church Father believed in an impassible God. And yet, we should not think, as many simply assume, that the Fathers conceived of God as static, lifeless, or uncaring, as if the Fathers swallowed Stoic philosophy hook, line, and sinker. Clement of Alexandria was one of the Fathers most influenced by platonic and Stoic thought and yet his thoroughly transcendent God was also “by nature rich in pity, in consequence of his own goodness.”⁷

Even more striking is the example of Origen. “God,” Origen argued, “must be believed to be entirely without passion and destitute of all these emotions.” And yet elsewhere Origen says, “The Father himself and the God of the whole universe is ‘long-suffering, full of mercy and pity’ (Ps. 86:15). Must he not then, in some sense, be exposed to suffering?...The Father himself is not impassible.”⁸ So what’s going on here, besides the fact that Origen could sometimes be inconsistent?

What’s going on here is massively important. Origen was among the first theologians, but certainly not the last, who wanted to maintain that God was both impassible and impassioned. He wanted to defend that God is absolutely other and completely unlike the created world with its changing states. But at the same time, he wanted to do justice to the rich emotional language the Bible employs with reference to God. The God of the Church Fathers was impassible but not dispassionate.

We see this same emphasis in Calvin. God is full of vitality and passionate activity, but he is also completely transcendent. “Surely,” says Calvin, “God does not have blood, does not suffer, cannot be touched with hands.”⁹

Likewise, the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

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; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will be by no means clear the guilty. (II.1)

⁷ Ibid. 96.

⁸ Ibid. 97-98.

⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xiv.2.

The Confession has no problem saying God is, on the one hand, immutable and impassible while, on the other hand, still calling him long-suffering and describing his just passionate hatred for sin. This is not an indifferent God.

Perhaps this is a good place, before moving on to my second point, to say something about the line “without body, parts, or passions.” Some Christians really blush at this language. It seems almost embarrassing, like some relic of a bygone era when people believed God was a Stoic philosopher. But that understanding doesn’t do justice to the Confession.

First, the context is defining what it means for God to be a “most pure Spirit.” Without body, parts, or passions is meant to guard against the idea that God consisted of any material elements or experiences bodily sensations.

Second, Ligon Duncan has an excellent article where he looks at Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, William G.T. Shedd, and Robert Dabney and their approach to this line in the Confession. Dr. Duncan concludes that all four believed in impassibility but also affirmed some kinds of feelings or human-like emotions in God.¹⁰

Third, there is a rich history in Christian thinking of distinguishing between passions and affections. We’ll come back to this in a moment because it is hugely significant in how we think of emotions, but let me just sketch the difference briefly. Both Augustine and Aquinas distinguished between passions, which were passive and involuntary, and affections, which were active and voluntary. Affections were the consequence of right reason. Passions were disordered and misguided, and therefore were often associated with sinful inclinations. I’m not sure the Westminster Confession was self-consciously standing in this tradition, but this certainly was the tradition many theologians stood in. Passions did not refer to passionate feeling. They referred to the sorts of emotions that sweep over you and threaten to control you. Clearly, God can have no part in these passions.

So to summarize this first point: From Augustine to Anselm to Aquinas to nearly everyone else until the 19th century, Christian theologians believed that God did not suffer. And yet no one prior to deism in the 17th and 18th centuries believed God was static, emotionless, and distant. Our forefathers understood that God did not have to suffer in order to be fully loving and full of life.

2. The Bible teaches that God does not change.

The Scriptures make this point repeatedly: God, unlike every created thing, is independent and unfailingly consistent. God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should

¹⁰ Ligon Duncan, “Divine Passibility and Impassibility in Nineteenth-Century American Confessional Presbyterian Theologians” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 8 (1990), pp. 1-15.

repent (Num. 23:19). I the Lord do not change (Mal. 3:6). With God there is no variation of shadow due to change (James 1:17). Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). God cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). Moreover, in Acts 17 Paul says God is not served by human hands, as though he needed anything (v. 25). Our God does not change, and he does not need lack for anything. As John Piper says, “God is and always has been an exuberantly happy God.”¹¹

God’s unchangeableness—and you cannot have an unchangeable *suffering* God—lies at the very heart of what it means for God to be God.

Herman Bavinck:

The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming.¹²

J.I. Packer:

[God] exists forever; and He is always the same. He does not grow older. His life does not wax or wane. He does not gain new powers, nor lose those that He once had. He does not mature or develop. He does not get stronger, or weaker, or wiser, as time goes by. ‘He cannot change for the better’ wrote A.W. Pink, ‘for he is already perfect; and being perfect, He cannot change for the worse.’ The first and fundamental difference between the Creator and His creatures is that they are mutable and their nature admits of change, whereas God is immutable and can never cease to be what He is.¹³

If you pull at the string of immutability—and I would argue impassibility is of the same thread—you unravel a ball of theological problems. Suddenly you have a miserable God, the unhappiest being in the universe as he shares in the suffering of all his creatures. And once you have a God mired in the misery of his creation you are marching closer to process theology. In process theology God so identifies with his creation that he is all becoming, no being. And because he experiences all the brokenness we experience, God can’t help but be in process with the rest of us. In fact, he then needs us to be freed from our suffering so that he can be free from his. And once you get to this place in your theology you are miles away from Romans 11:34-36: “Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to God

¹¹ *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 26. See page 72ff. for Piper’s explanation of how God can be grieved and happy at the same time.

¹² *The Doctrine of God*, translated by William Hendriksen (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 149.

¹³ *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 69.

that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

When you lose the biblical teaching “I the Lord do not change” you start to lose everything. And let me say a word about that verse. It is sometimes argued that Malachi 3:6 is only about God’s unchangeable character and nothing about an immutable nature. But the two cannot be separated. How can we be confident of God’s consistent character if who he is in himself is subject to change? The only way we can trust that God will always be the same in his character and purposes is trusting he will always be the same in his being.

But let me hasten to add that unchangeableness in character and nature does not mean unchangeableness in actions. Because we are so changeable, we will experience God’s unchangeable nature in different ways. “Immutability,” says Bavinck, “should not be confused with monotonous inactivity or immobility. Scripture itself describes God to us in his manifold relations to his creatures. Though unchangeable in himself, God lives the life of his creatures, and is not indifferent to their changing activities.”¹⁴

I can’t stress this enough. To be impassible is not to be passionless. To be immutable is not to be motionless. God is always active, always dynamic, always relational. In fact, it is because God is so completely full of action that he cannot change. He is love to the maximum at every moment. He cannot change because he cannot possibly be any more loving, or any more just, or any more good. God cares for us, but it is not a care subject to spasms or fluctuations of intensity. His kindness is not capable of being diminished or augmented.¹⁵

So although God does not undergo changes in his emotional state as human do, he is nevertheless utterly passionate in his compassion, mercy, joy, and displeasure. God is so dynamic, so active that he cannot change to be any *more* active or dynamic. God’s immutability is not opposed to his vitality. It is the *guarantee* of his vitality.

3. God’s emotional life is not identical to ours.

Here’s the most difficult part of this whole discussion. I have a women in my congregation who has asked me repeatedly, “Does God have emotions or not?” And I’ve never given her a satisfactory answer. I’m not sure this will be satisfactory either, but I’ll give it a shot.

Clearly, in one sense it is patently obvious that God has an emotional life. Scripture tell us God is grieved; he is angry; he rejoices; he is moved to pity, full of mercy, overflowing in love. So if anger and joy and pity are emotions, then God has emotions. We should not be afraid to speak of God in the way Scripture does and the Bible is full of emotional language. If we try to push aside

¹⁴ *The Doctrine of God*, 151.

¹⁵ Thanks to Paul Helm for emphasizing this point in personal correspondence.

God's emotional life as nothing but a human way of talking about God (anthropopathism), the price will be too high. We'll be left with a God that seems hallow and distant.

And yet, we can't simply say God has emotions just like we do.

For starters, what is an emotion? Everyone talks about God and emotions and hardly anyone bothers to define what an emotion is. Is an emotion what takes places when the hearts pumps more blood and the glands release endorphins? Well, God can't have those sorts of emotions because he's not made up of glands and chemistry.

Is an emotion what you feel when someone punches you in the gut? You feel pain or anger. Or when someone tickles you and you want to giggle? Well, clearly God doesn't experience emotions in that way because God is spirit (John 4:24), and he doesn't have a body.

Likewise, as I said earlier, we would all agree that some emotions are inappropriate for God. God doesn't get anxious or stressed out or bitter. God is never overcome by emotion in the way we are. Emotions don't sweep over him involuntarily like they do for us.

God cannot be passive in relation to anything or anyone. That is to say, God cannot suffer change with respect to his nature, will, knowledge, or emotions.¹⁶ We would all agree that he cannot suffer change with respect to his nature; his essence is immutable. We'd also agree he cannot suffer change with respect to his will or his knowledge; God's eternal purposes and decrees do not change, and – since he knows everything – his knowledge can neither increase nor decrease.

But what about his emotions? Is it fair to say God cannot suffer change in his emotional life? Can we really say God's inner life is immutable? Yes, in the sense that he is never passively acted upon. We do not move God to tears in the strict sense of the word "move." He is not *overcome* with rage; he does not *fall* in love; he does not *get* frustrated. Emotions do not just happen to him, such that he is forced to act in a certain way in order to make himself happier or change his mood from bad to good. God is completely free. He makes decisions based on his own immutable will and unchangeable purposes not on changing emotional states.

So what is an emotion? In his new book released a few months ago, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that divine emotions are "concerned-based construals loaded with value." What in the world does that mean? Well, when you construe something you give it an interpretation, you render a meaning. A construal is simply how we perceive or comprehend or size up the world around us. An emotion is a type of construal. If someone slaps you on the back you may respond with anger or with joy depending on how you interpret the slap. If you are walking down a dark alley and

¹⁶ See Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing*, 397.

someone hits your back, you'll feel fear. If your teammate slaps your back after a touchdown, you feel joy. Same action, different construal.

When Vanhoozer calls divine emotions a concerned-based construal loaded with value, he's using super-smart language to say God is interested in the world he created. And he's always sizing up what is going on. Then he makes a value judgment of what's going on based on his character and purposes. His construal of the situation results in anger or grief or joy or love directed toward some object.

Here's where the distinction we saw earlier between passions and affections is helpful. The word "emotion" does not appear in any of our English translations of the Bible. And it wasn't until the Enlightenment that thinkers began using the word. Up to that point they spoke of passions and affections, which were far superior categories. But now we all default to think of emotions.

If we are equating emotions with the old sense of passions, then God doesn't have emotions. But if we are talking about affections, he does. God's emotions are cognitive affections involving his construal of a situation. Most of what we call emotion in God is his evaluation of what is happening with his creation. So God has real emotions but they are always active. They are not forced upon him. They are not dictated by others. God's inner emotional life suffers no change because his emotions come from his objective, always true, value-based construals.

As we talk about God's emotional life we must keep this in mind: his changing external emotions are but a reflection of his inner, unchanging nature and character. These emotional "changes" in God relate to the temporal changes in his creatures.

You all know there are a number of passages that talk about God relenting or changing his mind. But there are also plenty of passages telling us God does not change his mind. The best example of both of these is 1 Samuel 15. In verse 11, God says "I regret that I have made Saul king." Verse 35 tells us the same thing. But in verse 29 we read: "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." So here we have in the same chapter evidence that God does and doesn't change his mind. The only way to make sense of this is to understand that on one level God can regret and on another level it is impossible for him to have regret.

God is sorry in this passage because Saul has changed, but this does not mean God has changed. The change in God is a response to a change in someone else. In fact, God's "change" is a manifestation of his unchanging character. God's passion for the glory of his name, his passion for righteousness and justice never change. But when the external world changes God's relationship to that world also changes. So when Saul's behavior changed, God, immutable in nature and purpose, chose to respond to Saul in a different way in order to be true to himself. God changed his mind in order to not change his mind.

One way to think of God's immutability and his emotional life is to think of white light refracted through a prism. The light is unchanging. Its nature is consistent. But as it passes through the prism we see the white light in all the colors of the rainbow. In the same way God is immutable and impassible, but when his nature and character refracted through the prism of constant change, we see differentiation. The different colors are not an illusion. We really see them. They are really there. Just like God's emotions are not an illusion. The different colors are an expression of the same white light, just as God's emotional interaction with the world is an expression of his immutable, impassible character.

4. What is said about Jesus Christ cannot automatically and without qualification be said about God.

You've probably had enough new terms for one afternoon, but let me give you one more: "communication of idioms" or "communication of properties." It's easiest to think of the phrase as "the sharing of attributes." The concept goes back to Cyril of Alexandria but has been used by a number of theologians, including Calvin.

The communication of properties or the sharing of attributes provides a way of thinking about the two natures of Christ. According to the communication of properties (idioms) what can be said about either nature of Christ can be said about the person of Christ, but what can be said about the person of Christ cannot necessarily be said about either nature, and what can be said about one nature cannot necessarily be said about the other.

Here's Calvin:

Thus also the Scriptures speak of Christ, they sometimes attribute to him what must be solely referred to his humanity, sometimes what belongs uniquely to his divinity; and sometimes what embraces both natures but fits neither alone. And they so earnestly express this union of the two natures that it is in Christ as sometimes to interchange them. This figure of speech is called by the ancient writers "the communicating of properties."¹⁷

For example, you can say Christ took a nap in the boat. But you cannot say therefore the divine nature took a nap. You can say the world was created through Christ. But you cannot say the world was created through the human nature. What Christ did, he did as a single Person, the union of two natures. So what you can say about either nature you can say about the Person. But what you say about the Person you cannot automatically say about the two natures.

This gets a bit complicated, as you can imagine. You can say, for example, "God died" if you mean that God as a man in the person of Jesus Christ died. But you can't say "God died" if you

¹⁷ *Institutes*, II.xiv.1.

mean God as God died. That's why some newer hymnals will tweak *And It Can It Be* so instead of singing "That thou my God shouldst die for me" we will sing "That thou my Lord should die for me." It can be acceptable to say God died for me, but it opens you up to all sorts of problems if you aren't careful.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born, wept, suffered, and died. But this does not mean God was born, wept, suffered, and died. The second person of the Trinity suffered on the cross. But he experienced this suffering as a man. The temporal experiences of Jesus cannot automatically be assigned to one or the other nature. Rather the experiences of Jesus should be assigned to the divine Son in his human mode of existence.

So yes, Jesus shows us perfectly what God is like. He demonstrated God's love, power, and mercy. But this does not mean that every experience of Jesus can be predicated of God as God or of the divine nature. The communication of properties does not allow that. Common sense does not allow that. And Scripture does not allow that. God cannot be tempted, but we can affirm Jesus was tempted because what can be said about the Son of God in his existence as a man is not always true about God as God.

This leads to fifth and final argument for impassibility.

5. Without impassibility, the necessity of the incarnation does not make sense.

Listen to Hebrews 2:9: "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." This is a purpose statement. The Son of God had to be made for a little while lower than the angels *so that* he might taste death. Apart from the incarnation, the Son could not die, because God by definition is immortal.

If you keep reading in Hebrews 2 you'll see that Christ had to be "made perfect through suffering" (10). This doesn't mean he was lacking in moral excellence. It means the Son had to be qualified to be our redeemer. And what was the qualification? That he share in flesh and blood (14) that he might suffer as his brothers suffer (10, 18). Hebrews 1 exalts in the supremacy of God's Son. Hebrews 2 exalts in the condescension of God's Son. Were it not for the incarnation, Jesus Christ would not qualify as a sympathetic high priest, one who was tempted through suffering (2:18) and was made like his brothers in every respect except for sin (4:15).

Do you see the connection in all of this with the doctrine of impassibility? If God as God can suffer then the incarnation is robbed of its glorious condescension. There's no mystery and no majesty in the incarnation apart from impassibility. Why become a man if God is capable of experiencing all that needs to be experienced in order to save men?

With such a redundant incarnation, what is left for wonder and worship? Ignatius said that the God who cannot suffer, for our sakes accepted suffering. Irenaeus affirmed that in the incarnation the invisible was made visible, the incomprehensible comprehensible and the impassible passible. Gregory Thaumaturgas wrote that in Christ's suffering God shows his impassibility.

Our salvation required a Mediator unlike anything the universe had ever known: a God-man who would be both human and divine, mortal and immortal, passible and impassible. If God can suffer, if God can die, if God as God can experience loss, *cur Deus homo?* Why did God become man?

Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies! It's no mystery to say the *mortal* dies, just like there's nothing remarkable about saying the *passible* suffers. As one author puts it, "By dissolving the mystery, Theopaschitism makes easy and plausible what in reality is the deepest, most staggering and humbling Christian mystery of all: God, the impassible, suffers as a man."¹⁸

Why Is Impassibility Good News?

In the few minutes I have left let me suggest five reasons why the doctrine that says God does not suffer is actually very good news.

1. We have an unchanging God who is not in the same mess we are in. This is the truth that process theology misses. Process theologians—and you see hints of this all over the place in McLaren's new book—argue that God is immanent, so enmeshed in our world that he is bound up in all our brokenness, so that his effort to rescue us is an effort to rescue himself. God is the process of delivering himself just as we are being delivered. This sort of God is a far cry from the God who reigns in heaven, receives unceasing worship from the saints and angels, needs nothing from human hands, and always delights in his own glory and goodness.
2. This unchanging God – who is ontologically outside of our mess – is nevertheless intimately involved in our mess, which makes his presence all the more meaningful. When my son is working on Legos and getting frustrated because the boat is not coming together properly, I don't have to help him. I'm not screaming my head off because the flat, 2x2 red piece is missing. But because I love him, I stop what I'm doing (sometimes), get down on the ground, dig through the bucket and find the piece for him. Now he may not recognize it, but my love is more loving because I do not need to find the Lego piece to ease my emotional burdens.
3. God's love is freely given, thoroughly unmotivated by any need or deficiency in him. God does not feel inner angst, agony, or distress. He does not love in order to relieve the suffering he feels on account of our suffering. He chooses to love because he *is* love. In the Triune

¹⁸ Michael Ward, "Theopaschitism" in *Ancient Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe* edited by Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 68.

Godhead there is a constant fullness of mercy, joy, and goodness to which we cannot add and from which we cannot subtract. God always acts out of overflow, never out of want.

4. With divine impassibility, the incarnation is not a revelation of the eternal suffering of God, but rather the deepest expression of God's gracious character, whereby he chose, in love, to suffer as one of us. Our comfort in the midst of suffering is not that the Father suffered with the Son, nor that God continues to suffer with us. Our profound consolation is that, moved by love, God the Son, in perfect cooperation and agreement with the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, laid aside his immunity to pain so that he might suffer for us, as one of us.

The incarnation of the Son of God and his subsequent passion is more glorious, more mysterious, and more loving because God in the person of Christ was experiencing, by his own free choice, what God in himself had never experienced, and would never again experience, namely, human suffering.

5. Finally, impassibility is good news because only an impassible God who suffered as a man can truly sympathize with us. What good would it do to have a God who as God was overcome or distracted by pain? What we need is a God who knows what it is like to be a man.

Here's the irony: if God suffers as God, we actually lock him out of our experience instead of bringing him into it. What we need is the sure knowledge that the Son of God knows *exactly* what we are feeling.

So do not look to an angst-ridden, pain-stricken, eternally grieving God for comfort. Look to the cross. Carl Henry was right: "It is into the *why* of Calvary that we can now focus every other *me* of human existence."¹⁹

Christ is our sympathetic high priest, but he had to *become* this high priest. He had to be *made perfect* through suffering. He was not qualified to be our Redeemer or Sympathizer until he took on flesh to share in suffering with his brothers and sisters. And never forget: Christ did not suffer simply to identify with us, but to rescue us. We need someone to do more than *feel* our pain. We needed someone to *triumph* over it by conquering all that causes pain: sin, death, and the devil.

Our hope in death is that the Immortal died. And our comfort in suffering is that in the Incarnation the Impassible was made passible for us.

¹⁹ Carl F.H. Henry, *God Who Stands and Stays, Part Two* (vol. 6 of *God, Revelation and Authority*; 1983; repr., Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 299.