

Prologue to a Trilogy of Works

On the Role Played (Historically) by Divine Impassibility in Christological Construction

I INTRODUCING THE PROJECT: A TRILOGY OF DOGMATIC WORKS ON CHRIST, GOD, AND ATONEMENT

The present work is the first instalment of a “trilogy” of books that, taken together, comprise a single project. Other volumes may be added later, should strength endure. But the plan now is for just three. The first is devoted to the “person” of Christ, the second to the doctrine of the triune God of electing grace, and the third to the “work” of Christ.¹

Some readers might well be inclined to protest, upon reading these words, that one must not “separate” the person from the work of Christ. That is perfectly true, actually, though the history of theology has turned up several quite different reasons for saying so. And, most of the time, those who say it today do not take alternative explanations into account. Be that as it may, no “separation” will occur here. The treatment of the “person” of Christ in this volume will be carried out with a fully-developed understanding of his work already in view. And, after all, it is the narrated *history* of Jesus of Nazareth that will be basic to our concept of God in the treatment of God in Volume 2.

But where the order of teaching is concerned, a decision had to be made, quite obviously. Basic to the decision I have made is my conviction that “Barth’s rule” (as I call it) makes eminent sense on the basis of close attention to God’s Self-revelation in Jesus Christ as attested in the New Testament; indeed, it follows closely the way the New Testament writers

¹ All three first saw life in fulfilment of the obligations of lectureships. The present volume constitutes a revision and expansion of the T. F. Torrance Lectures given at St. Andrews in December 2007. The next book to be completed originated in the Kantzer Lectures at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in October 2011. The third volume will present a revision of the Croall Lectures given at New College, the University of Edinburgh, in January 2011.

themselves did theology. Barth’s “rule” is this: “statements about the divine modes of being antecedently in themselves cannot be different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation.”² Taken seriously, this means at a minimum that no statements can be made about the immanent Trinity that do not find a firm and clear root in the economy. Even more: Barth’s “rule” entails the claim that the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity do not differ in content; that no metaphysical “gap” may be introduced that would make the immanent Trinity to be somehow “more” than what is given to be known in the economy. What *is* permissible, I would say, is a quasi-transcendental method that asks, for example, what must God be in God’s Self if it is true that Jesus is Lord? Alternatively expressed: what are the ontological conditions in God of the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth should rightly have been worshiped as God, that he should have been seen by the earliest Christians as performing functions that Jewish monotheism would rightly have regarded as strictly divine prerogatives (creating, judging the world from the seat of eschatological judgment, etc.)? Again, such a method would constitute an alternative to those forms of speculation that find their ultimate ground either in cosmology (as with the ancient church) or anthropology (as with a good bit of “modern” theology). The point is that the doctrine of God should be grounded Christologically – which is why the Christology must come first.

I could, after completion of the present work, turn immediately to the soteriological significance of the lived existence of Jesus of Nazareth. But given what I will have to say about the theology of the cross, it made better sense to treat God before atonement – in order to clear away false understandings of what God can or cannot do on the basis of who and what Christ *is*. And so: the three volumes constitute collectively a dialectical movement in thought “from below to above” and only then, and on that basis, “from above to below.”

II A WORD TO THE SITUATION: THE CURRENT REVIVAL OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY

It wasn’t all that long ago when a sharp-eyed observer suggested that the theme of divine suffering had become a new orthodoxy.³

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 479. It should be noted that Barth himself calls this his “rule” (see *ibid.*).

³ Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: the Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* 103 (1986): 385–89.

He was worried that those who disagreed would be judged harshly. But he need not have worried; divine impassibility has made a comeback, and has done so with a vengeance.⁴ Good news for defenders of that ancient doctrine; not so good for those of us who consider that idea to be a pagan one in its origins and incommensurable with the God of the Bible! And yet, for those convinced that the biblical God suffered in Christ, there is a silver lining in the dark cloud that now envelopes us. That silver lining consists in the fact that most of the recent defenders of impassibility seem to be well aware that Christology must be the final testing ground. And the problem they face is enormous; I would go so far as to say, it is insuperable. The truth is that the elaboration of “orthodox” Christology in the fifth century stood very much under the control of a doctrine of God whose most basic commitments (simplicity and impassibility) were already firmly in place amongst Christians by the late second century at the latest. What that means is that it will not do simply to appeal to the orthodox Christological dogma to defend impassibility, since impassibility was necessary to its construction in the first place. Hence, a just and fair testing of the concept of impassibility cannot take place on the ground that the dogma provides. The question will always remain: should a God-concept that had its origins in the regnant philosophy of the time (i.e. “Middle Platonism”) be allowed to *continue* its unquestioned control of even

⁴ See, for example, Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); James Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Paul Gavriluyk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Paul Gavriluyk, “God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh” in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, OP, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 127–49; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003); David Bentley Hart, “The Lively God of Robert Jenson,” *First Things* 156 (2005, October): 28–34; Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bruce D. Marshall, “The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God” in *ibid.*, pp. 246–98; and Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, “God and Human Suffering of Creation and His Acts in History” in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, OP, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009).

the reformation of “orthodox” Christological doctrine (long after that piece of philosophy had been superseded in its own realm of expertise)? Should Christology continue to be so constrained by it that it can only rubber-stamp what was decided without its help?

The truth of the matter is that the concept of divine impassibility has no clear warrant in any biblical text or set of texts. The fact that attempts to demonstrate the biblical character of divine impassibility have always had recourse to passages witnessing to divine immutability instead (e.g. Num.23:19, 1 Sam.15:29, Mal.3:6, James 1:17) is telling. Such a strategy might have provided a plausible bridge to impassibility – *if* the passages in question were addressed to a metaphysical understanding of God as “pure being,” “being-itself,” or “the Absolute.” But that is not the case. Instead, the fact that “God does not change” is located here in the *personal* realm of God’s relation to Israel (i.e. in the realm of life and love). “Immutability” here does not mean (as it does in metaphysical reflection) that *what* God is, he always is without diminishment or enhancement. It means instead that God always remains unchangeably *who* he is as the God of covenant grace. Karl Barth used the German word *Beständigkeit* in place of “immutability.” Geoffrey Bromiley used the word “constancy” to translate that word – and that was not a bad decision, since “constancy” is certainly an implication of what Barth meant. But the basic significance of the word chosen by Barth is “persistence” – or even “perseverance.” It is a relational term, belonging to the sphere of “psychology”⁵ – that is, to that which pertains to a *person*, and to a concept of “being” elaborated under the control of an understanding of this person as revealed in Jesus Christ. Developed in this way, it is a term wholly appropriate to passages like Mal.3:6. But it is not possible to find in these passages the ancient metaphysical conception of “immutability.” And so no attempt to defend “impassibility” by reference to them can be successful either.

III BEFORE WE BEGIN: IMPASSIBILITY MORE CLOSELY DEFINED AND AN ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTED

In classical metaphysics the word “impassibility” meant initially (and literally) “without passions” – or, less literally, and more in line with

⁵ See on this point, Alexandra Pârvan and Bruce L. McCormack, “Immutability, (Im)passibility and Suffering: Towards a ‘Psychological’ Ontology of God,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 59 (2017): 1–25.

ancient Christian usage – “without *unworthy* passions.”⁶ But the more pressing question raised by Christian use of the term only finally puts in an appearance where it is applied to the incarnate Word. Can God the Word (the “Logos” of John’s Prologue) be acted upon? And, if so, what does “acted upon” mean? That the physical body of Jesus could be acted upon (and was), was readily granted by many of the Fathers. The afflictions and infirmities that come with the fall were thought to have been allowed to the body of the Lord incarnate, though the fact that such infirmities were believed to be the consequence of the fall – when joined with the additional belief in the sinlessness of Christ – might be seen to call even that much into question. So it was the case with at least one quite prominent Father, Hilary of Poitiers.⁷ But many granted this much – which meant that there was no remaining difficulty in affirming that Christ’s physical nature could be acted upon. Slightly more difficult was the vexing question of whether the soul of Christ could be acted upon, whether the pain and suffering inflicted upon his body could yield a real suffering and, perhaps, sadness and even terror in his soul. Here, Hilary was not alone in thinking that Jesus could not have known real fear.⁸ To the more important question, however, is *the eternal Logos* “acted upon” in that Jesus of Nazareth is acted upon? – the answer given was universally negative. The Logos was thought to share in the simplicity and

⁶ Paul Gavrilyuk has argued that etymology alone cannot decide the meaning of a term like “impassibility” (or *apatheia* – its Greek equivalent). See Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 2. That is certainly true, I think. It is the use made of the term by the Fathers that is significant. Where usage is considered, it becomes clear that the term never meant simply “without passions” but “without unworthy passions.” The Fathers knew their Bibles. They knew, for example, that the Bible regularly speaks of God as compassionate. So God can be “moved” by the plight of his people. That such “being moved” does not affect change in God was said to be due to the fact that God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of all that occurs will allow God to anticipate the plight of his people so that, yes, compassion is called forth in him but in a way that remains fitted to God’s nature – so, perhaps, without anxiety, worry, stress. God’s passions are so ordered by God’s reason that reason is never made captive to passions. God, we might say, is “totally in control of his emotions.” *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷ St. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate/On the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1898; republished as a standalone volume by Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), book X, 25, p. 440: “He came into the form of our body by an act of his own power. He bore our collective humanity in the form of a servant, but he was free from the sins and imperfections of the human body.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, X, 23, p. 438: “So our Lord Jesus Christ suffered blows, hanging, crucifixion, death: but the suffering which attacked the body of the Lord, without ceasing to be suffering, had not the natural effect of suffering.”

impassibility common to the members of the Godhead; as such he could not be acted upon.

“Impassibility” on this showing means much more than that God’s passions are always well-ordered. It means that God cannot be acted upon, not even when God is “present” in bodily form to those he encountered. It is at this point that the meaning of “impassibility” trailed over into the meaning assigned to the word “immutability.” To describe God as “immutable” meant that God is “changeless” in an absolute sense. That which cannot be acted upon does not “become”; it is “what” it is without reference to anything outwith itself, without a relation to anything belonging to the world of “becoming.” Thus absolute changelessness – and, indeed, timelessness – are necessary consequences of this more basic definition of “impassibility.”

But now let us try to see what would happen if we were to simply suspend belief in impassibility. What is rejected by those who defend impassibility would have to be admitted as possible: God can indeed be acted upon. God is “passible.” And yet it is also the case that not every conception of divine “passibility” is compatible with a biblical account of immutability. Not anything and everything that happens in this world happens in God. The being of God and the being of the world do not belong to a single continuum of reciprocally related beings. God is acted upon in this one human being because God unites himself with this one human and with him alone. The great weakness in “process” theism, it seems to me, is that it has typically sought to ground its metaphysics in modern physics (as opposed to the physics of the ancients). One cosmological starting point has replaced another. In neither case is Christology allowed to speak until an understanding of the God–world relation is already in place. In relation then to a more nearly biblical conception of “passibility,” the right question to ask is this: what must God *be* if it is the case that God really is acted upon *in Jesus Christ*? To give a satisfactory answer to this question will require a new Christology – and a new theological ontology.

IV THE OVERARCHING GOAL OF THIS TRILOGY

The ultimate goal of my project (taken as a whole) is to construct a personal ontology of the triune God that takes as its starting point the act of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ; a Christologically based ontology, then. The greatest portion of the work involved will take place in the second volume on God. Here I will simply lay the foundations for that

divine ontology with a Christology that advances two basic claims: first, the eternal Son has an *essential* relation to the personal life of Jesus. Second, the nature of that relation is best understood in terms of “ontological receptivity.” That, in fact, will be my explanation of the “how” of the *kenosis* spoken of in Phil. 2:7. Such a foundation will strictly limit what can be said about God’s “being” as God to what belongs to the sphere of personal life. The result will be what my sometime collaborator Alexandra Pârvan has called a “psychological ontology”;⁹ an ontology that breaks free from the confines of concepts like “being itself,” the “Absolute,” the “Unconditioned,” the utterly simple “One,” in order to restrict its attention to divine life and love. It too will offer an account of “being” and even of divine “essence.” But it will without departing from the sphere of divine life and love.

A (slight) retraction is necessary at this point. For many years now I have agreed with Karl Barth’s protests against the intrusion of metaphysics into Christian theology. Throughout that time I recognized that Barth also had at his disposal more than the rudiments of a divine ontology – though his efforts in this direction were incomplete and often lacked consistency. But I continued to insist that he was *not* doing metaphysics when reflecting on ontology as a Christian theologian – and frequently claimed that I would do the same. But here’s the problem. Ontology (of whatever sort) always reflects a series of metaphysical commitments. Classically, “ontology” (as an account of the relation of being to beings) was logically preceded by a set of metaphysical comments that understood “God” as the being of beings, so to speak; as that “being itself” in which all things that are must somehow participate if they are to “be.” If now Barth’s theological ontology offered nothing comparable to concepts like “being itself” or the “Absolute,” this means that his “ontology” reached no higher than God’s life and love. Indeed, it constituted a denial that any reality attaches itself to anything (allegedly) deeper or higher than lived existence. Such terms, he often said, describe nothing *real*. And yet, if Barth was doing “ontology” (and he was), then he too was engaged in a form of metaphysical reflection – albeit a metaphysics that had a different starting point and basis than did classical metaphysics. And so I was wrong to describe it as “anti-metaphysical” or even just “post-

⁹ See above, n. 5. The phrase is Pârvan’s, which she designed to give expression to the common ground emerging between us in a dialogue that took place between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2016.

metaphysical,” even though I remain convinced that Barth himself would have approved of such phrases.

What I would now say, when speaking for myself, is that the task of defining such terms is one that begins in a reflective engagement with God *in God’s lived relation to the world in Jesus Christ*. And it is a task that can only be completed after providing an initial treatment of all the problems that have arisen through reflection on the history of God’s “being.” Metaphysics lies at the end of our road, not at its beginning.

What I can say (for now) is that I will be asking (in Volume 2): what must God *be* if “Jesus is Lord?” What are the ontological conditions in God that make it possible that this statement – the profession of faith made by the earliest Christians – is true? In asking these questions (in the transition from Christology to the doctrine of God), I will indeed be doing a form of metaphysics. But I will not seek to “complete” my discussion of that form and how it relates to other forms until the very end of Volume 2 – at the earliest. What I refuse to do is to give full and complete definitions now, in advance of consideration of the subject matter. All definitions that emerge as we proceed along the path that we will now enter must remain partial and fragmentary.

The trilogy will end with a book on atonement and theodicy. Theodicy is a problem that has been poorly dealt with where reduced to a set of logical relationships amongst concepts (power, goodness, and evil). It is treated best where it is “located” in the event in which God made himself to be the solution at considerable cost to himself. It seems most appropriate, therefore, that consideration of the humanity of God should lead us finally to understand the overcoming of “death” in the “being” of God.

So much by way of Prologue to the three books as a unit. I turn now to the task of introducing this first volume.

Introduction

On the (Possible) Consequences of Affirming That Humility and Obedience Are Proper to the Eternal Son (A Programmatic Description)

I BARTH AND THE “POST-BARTHIANS”

If the humility of Christ is not simply an attitude of the man Jesus of Nazareth, if it is the attitude of the man because . . . there is a humility grounded in the being of God, then something else is grounded in the being of God himself. For, according to the New Testament, it is the case that the humility of this man is an act of obedience, not a capricious choice of lowliness, suffering and dying, not an autonomous decision this way, not an accidental swing of the pendulum in this direction, but a free choice made in recognition of an appointed order, in execution of a will which imposed itself authoritatively upon him, which was intended to be obeyed. If, then, God is in Christ, if what the man Jesus does is God’s own work, this aspect of the self-emptying and self-humbling of Jesus Christ as an act of obedience cannot be alien to God. But in this case we have to see here the other and inner side of the mystery of the divine nature of Christ and therefore of the nature of the one true God – that He Himself is also able and free to render obedience.¹

Rarely has there appeared in Christian theological history a passage more pregnant with momentous possibilities than this one. Some might be tempted to take it as suggesting no more than that the human Jesus was made the instrument of the Father’s redemptive purposes through his obedience to the Father’s will. “What the man Jesus does is God’s own work”: that much could have been said even by the most stringent Cyrilline. But, then, had it been Barth’s intention to affirm the broad lines of classical Christological orthodoxy, we would be hard pressed to explain why he says that the obedience of the human Jesus confronts us with the “inner side of the *divine* nature of Christ and therefore of the nature of the one true God” – or why he should say that God “is also able

¹ Karl Barth, *KD IV/1*, p. 211; English translation *CD IV/1*, p. 193.

and free to render obedience.” Read traditionally, we would expect him to say that it could only be the inner side of the mystery of the *human* nature of Christ with which we are confronted by Christ’s perfect obedience; the mystery of the “second Adam,” perhaps, of the human being in whom the creation of human “nature” is made complete. But that is not what he says.

Seen in context, it is clear that the mystery of which Barth wishes to speak is the mystery of Christ’s *deity*.

The mystery reveals to us that for God it is just as natural to be lowly as to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great, to be abroad as to be at home. . . . He is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us, as that which he is in himself, in the most inward depth of his Godhead. He does not become another God. In the condescension in which he gives himself to us in Jesus Christ, he exists and speaks and acts as the One he was from all eternity and will be to all eternity.²

The inner side of the mystery of which Barth speaks has to do with an inner-trinitarian relation; it is the relation of the eternal Son (or Logos) to the eternal Father in the immanent life of the triune God as the transcendent ground of all that the triune God does *ad extra*. “We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination.”³ What is happening here, I think, is that Barth is reading the lived relation of the Son to the Father characteristic of the Son’s mission in time back into the eternal processions – given that humility and obedience are grounded in the *being* of God. And so I return to the passage first cited above to ask: is there another possibility? Indeed, there is.

For if it is the case that the human humility and obedience of Jesus Christ are grounded, as Barth says, in God’s being as God (and are not to be seen as the consequence of a choice amongst options made for activity *ad extra*), then Barth has come very close to saying *not only* that there is in God an eternal humility and obedience that is rooted in the eternal generation of the Son, but also that this eternal humility and obedience has been concretely realized in time in, through, and *as* the obedient existence of Jesus; that the relation of the two is best described as one of an identity-constituting “anticipation” (in the procession of the eternal Son) and the fulfilment of that anticipation (in the incarnate life of the human Jesus in time), that these are not really two acts at all but one and the same act

² *Ibid.*, pp. 210–11; English translation, pp. 192–3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 211; English translation, pp. 200–1.