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IS THE GOD OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY APATHETIC?

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy

University of Mississippi

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the M.A. in Philosophy

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by

Kenneth Gilmore

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## ABSTRACT

The argument of my thesis is that the God of Christian theology has adopted the doctrine of impassibility from Plato and Aristotle. According to this doctrine, God does not experience a variety of psychological states such as anger, sorrow, joy, and love. I will argue that the doctrine of impassibility is not only incongruent with the God of Scripture who is dynamic, redemptive, and loving toward his creation, but that it is antithetical to other core fundamental doctrines in Scripture.

I begin by giving an overview of the debate in Part I by surveying the three views on passibility and impassibility in the schools of Thomistic, Reformed, and Open Theism. In Part II, I give the negative case against God's impassibility by looking at key texts in Scripture that are thought to give support to impassibility. In this section, I also criticize arguments commonly made for impassibility. First, I critically examine a notion of transcendence that is often used to defend impassibility and show how this notion would completely ignore scriptural evidence that God possesses different psychological states in his dialogue with humans. Second, in Part II, I respond to the argument that passibility puts God's sovereignty at risk and argue that a God who desires good for his creation is not problematic. In Part III, I lay out the positive case for why I think God is passible. My defense rests upon the idea of God's divine freedom, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and the concept that God is capable of redeeming his creation.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a very old debate within Christian theology on the question of whether God is *apathetic*: is God impassible? As I will describe below, many thinkers have claimed that the God described in the Bible is not apathetic, while others have insisted that this view is deeply heretical and that God, for a variety of reasons, must be eternally impassible. Moreover, this debate has spanned over many theological subjects, each dealing with a different aspect of God. First, there have been debates about the impassibility of God's *nature*: that is, over whether a substance that is perfect could have a metaphysical essence that admits of change. Second, there have been debates over whether God's *will* is impassible: could God decree a thing to be so, but then later change his mind and will something different? Third, thinkers have had disputes over whether God feels our pain and experiences various emotional traits in response to events. Fourth, and finally, there is the familiar debate over whether God already knows the future of all contingent possibilities of moral agents; if he does, then God's beliefs about what takes place in reality will never change even though this suggests that moral agents are not truly free; if he does not, then moral agents may be genuinely free, but then God's beliefs about what transpires in reality will need to admit of change.

After giving a brief overview of the major thinkers who weighed in on the question of whether God is apathetic, I will articulate my own arguments for the claim that the doctrine of impassibility is fundamentally inconsistent with the nature of God as revealed in Scripture. First, I will argue that the biblical passages often used to support God's impassibility are being misinterpreted and that the arguments commonly made in support of an apathetic God are

flawed. Second, I will present three arguments for the claim that God must be possible, given that God possesses divine freedom and love and that humans are made in the image of God.

## PART I: AN OVERVIEW OF THE DEBATE

### *1.1 The Thomistic and Reformed Tradition: God Must Be Impassible*

The doctrine of impassibility is defined as follows: “that nothing external can affect God – that nothing external can cause God to be in any state, and in particular can cause him to feel negative emotions like grief.”<sup>1</sup> Impassibility is given a very robust treatment in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas in his magisterial work the *Summa Theologiae*. Perhaps it is not surprising that Aquinas defends an impassible God, given that this work is so heavily influenced by Aristotelian metaphysical ontology and that Aristotle conceived of God as the Unmoved Mover.<sup>2</sup>

To appreciate why Aquinas viewed God as impassible, one should first look at how he took humans to conceive of God. Aquinas had such a high view of God that he did not believe that we could truly understand the nature of God unless it was revealed to us by divine revelation in the sacred writings of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas believed that Scripture reveals to us some divine qualities about God, but that it could not fully reveal to us the essence and nature of the divine self. In order for God to communicate to us, since we are so ontologically different from God, he has to communicate in language that we can understand. According to Aquinas, language describes things in three fundamental ways: our language use can be univocal, equivocal, or analogical.<sup>4</sup> With univocal language a word means basically the same thing when applied to

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1. Brian Leftow, “Immutability,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014), ed. Edward N. Zalta, revised August 5, 2014, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/immutability/>.

2 Timothy McDermott, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation, Questions 2-13 and 20-211, ST. 1.9 and ST. 1.10* (New York: Eyre & Spottwoode 1989), 336.

3. *Ibid.*, 346.

4. *Ibid.*



different beings. With equivocal language the meaning of a term changes dramatically when applied to two different beings. With analogical language, the meaning of a term changes proportionally when two different beings are described. Aquinas insists that our knowledge of God falls short of describing him exactly. God is infinite and we are finite. However, though we are different from God, Aquinas thinks we are not so different that our language about him is meaningless or merely equivocal. Our language is meaningful because it is analogical. Analogical language about God is possible because there is some sense in which man resembles God. Thus, when God speaks to us, he speaks in analogical language. Aquinas holds this view about analogical language because he thinks it helps us avoid the mistake of thinking of God as passible. Aquinas admits that biblical writers depict a God who changes, but he thinks these descriptions are merely human attempts to talk about a God who is, in fact, essentially unchanging: the words they are using do not perfectly and exactly describe God, but only refer to God analogically.

Aquinas further advances the position that, since God is beyond us ontologically, there can be no passions in God. He argues that passions are appetites, and appetites are bodily. However, because God is ontologically beyond anything human, God can have no body. Thus, he concludes, God cannot possess passions.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Aquinas argued, there are particular passions that are clearly unworthy and ‘unbefitting to God.’ That is, even if we were to agree that God is subject to passions, we could still argue that certain passions would be contrary to his character. Which passions? “Sorrow or pain, for its subject is the already present evil, just as the object of joy is the good present and possessed. Sorrow and pain, therefore, of their very nature cannot be found in God.” Again, some passions that are distinguished by what Aquinas calls their “mode” are unbefitting to God.

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5. McDermott, 334-37.

The mode is intrinsic to the passion, as we can appreciate by considering the distinction between joy and hope. Hope is not appropriate for God because it has as its object a good that is not yet possessed. “This cannot befit God, because of His perfection, which is so great that nothing can be added to it. Hope therefore, cannot be found in God. And likewise, neither can the desire of some [for] something not possessed.” A passion like fear cannot belong to God for both of these reasons. “By a twofold reason therefore, is fear excluded from God; both because it belongs only to one existing in potency and because it has for its object a threatening evil.”<sup>6</sup>

In this section, we have described Aquinas’s view that God is eternal, passionless, infinite, and unchanging. Such a God is ontologically different than we are. Aquinas admits that the biblical writers depict God as changing, but he interprets these as human attempts to talk about God. God is eternal and has no passions, for passions are associated with having a body; by contrast, human beings have passions and bodies. A God that is so different from us, resembling Aristotle’s non-communicating Unmoved Mover, can only communicate through analogical language. This, Aquinas thinks, is what we find in Scripture.

The conception of God as impassible is not a view we find only in medieval theology. In contemporary thought, this view is held by Reformed Theologians. Reformed theology has its roots in the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther and John Calvin. They defended the doctrine of God as impassible and, on this issue, followed Thomas Aquinas. Reformed theology grounds its whole theological outlook on the classical view of God, as well as the theological doctrines like omniscience and omnipotence that flow out of this view. Some of the leading theologians among Reformed Theologians who have taken a very strong position for God’s

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6. Ibid. The citations of Aquinas concerning appetites are taken from Aristotle’s *Physics and Nichomachean Ethics*.

sovereignty are R. C. Sproul, Bruce A. Ware, John Piper, and Norman Geisler. The Reformed Theologians' view of impassibility is consistent with the Thomistic tradition.<sup>7</sup>

### *1.2 Open Theism and Evangelicals: God Is Passible*

Open Theism is a view that calls into question the classical view of God held by both Thomism and Reformed Theology, arguing that this view does not pay sufficient attention to the way God is described in Scripture. Open Theism contends that “God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. . . . We respond to God’s gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses. . . . God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals.”<sup>8</sup> This dynamic God is the one we find in Scripture, and so Open Theists like John Sanders argue that if we compare this God of Scripture to the God described by Reformed Theology, it becomes clear that the Reformed conception of God is being taken from Greek philosophy. This model, Sanders and others argue, is inconsistent with the biblical model of how God is seen in both Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

The debate between the Reformed tradition and Open Theism’s approach seems to come down to the idea of whether God is viewed in “relational terms.” For example, Clark Pinnock, another proponent of Open Theism, argues that “we need a philosophy which values change and can imagine God, not as distant from the world and immobile, but as intimately involved with

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7. See Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); *Their God Is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); and John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) for those who argue for God’s impassability.

8. Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.

the world and dynamic.”<sup>9</sup> He further argues that “the Bible itself assumes libertarian freedom when it posits personal give-and-take relationships and when it holds people responsible for their actions. Compatibilist or determinist freedom cannot easily account for such things. On this matter I am moved by the Bible itself.”<sup>10</sup> Before Pinnock became an Open Theist, he had been committed to the Reformed tradition and its conception of God as being not only immutable, but definitely impassible. However, over time, Pinnock came to believe that this interpretation was the result of imposing Greek metaphysical attributes of God upon the biblical depiction of God in Scripture. Pinnock could no longer justify his position when he read certain texts in Scripture describing prayer and showing how God’s character responds to prayers; such a prayer-responsive God, Pinnock concluded, could not be completely sovereign over human affairs and the author of every event.<sup>11</sup>

Pinnock further argues there is a need to “reform . . . the doctrine of God . . . on the basis of the scriptural foundations. Influences that have distorted our understanding must be confronted so that we can achieve greater theological soundness. . . . [F]rom early times, under the influence of alien ideals of perfection, theology has lost somewhat the biblical focus.”<sup>12</sup> Like Sanders, Pinnock thinks that many of these distortions arise from reading too much Greek rationalism into sacred text. “A package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness.”<sup>13</sup>

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9. Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 90.

10. *Ibid.*, 91.

11. See scriptural texts like 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38:5 when Hezekiah prayed that the Lord would extend his life, and James 5:13-18, where “the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (v. 16).

12. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 41.

13. *Ibid.*

### *I.3 A Third Way? Lister's Dialectical Tension*

There are some philosophers who argue that the impassibility of God and the passibility of God are metaphysical concepts that can be held in tension with each other.<sup>14</sup> For example, Lister believes that when we survey the history of the church from the Patristic period up until the modern period, we see that the doctrine of impassibility inspires debate between those who support it against those who deny it. Lister views this debate as unfortunate because he thinks that the Scripture, properly read, supports *both* the ideas of God's transcendence *and* immanence – not in dualistic categories, but rather in juxtaposition to each other. He thinks we should see these positions in Scripture not in terms of either/or, but in dialectal tension with each other, informing us of God's transcendence and immanence in the world. By claiming that God is both impassible and passible, Lister emphasizes both polarities in the essence of God. The problem is not with these polarities, but with our cognition of God. Because of our limited conceptualization, we can see these two positions as an antinomy in God or in Scripture.

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14. Robert Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 29-37, gives an excellent survey of the debate throughout the history of the church.

## PART II: THE NEGATIVE CASE AGAINST GOD'S IMPASSIBILITY

So, who is correct in the debate about God's impassibility? Is the Thomistic/Reformed view the best? Or is it true that God is passible? Or should we embrace some third way, like Lister? I believe, like many Evangelicals and Open Theists, that God is passible and that the impassible view of God is false. In this second part of my thesis, I will argue against those who have defended God's impassibility, and in Part III of my thesis, I will offer arguments in favor of God's passibility.

### *II.1 Misunderstanding Passages in Scripture*

Many theologians who defend the impassibility of God turn to Scripture for support, but I believe that the texts cited in defense of impassibility destroy their true meaning. In this section, I will look at four of the main texts offered in support of impassibility. These are passages in Scripture that are taught to demonstrate that God is impassible, but under closer examination we will find the very opposite of God's impassibility.<sup>15</sup>

*Malachi 3:6*: "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." Does Malachi teach immutability in God's nature and affections? This text, taken within the context of the whole chapter, teaches that God is unchangeable in his *promise* to Abraham and Isaac. Here, God announces to heirs that he would still make good on the *oath* that he made to Abraham nearly seven hundred years earlier (Gen. 12). God will not change his

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15. There are other texts that Reformed Theologians use to justify the impassibility of God. See Isaiah 46:9-10 and 48:3-5. All scriptural citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: Lockman Foundation, 1995).

counsel (purpose) to make Abraham a great nation and also make all the nations of the earth blessed through him. So, this text does not teach that God has an impassible nature, but only that when God makes covenants and promises, he keeps them.

*Hebrews 6:13-18:*

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU." And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

Does Hebrew 6:13-18 teach God's immutability in his nature and affections? Or does this text teach merely that God is immutable in his *purpose* to bring to fruition the promise he made to Abraham in Genesis 12 to make a great nation from his loins through Isaac? It seems to me that God is here portrayed as unchangeable in his purpose. Here, he is unchanging in his call to the Gentiles to be saved by Jesus Christ, he is unchanging in his call for every penitent believer to have faith, and he is unchanging in his plea that believers accept faith in Christ as the grounds of justification in place of their own personal righteousness. This verse does not teach the immutability of God's nature nor does it show he lacks freedom to respond to free moral agents. Rather, it shows only that God is sticking by his commitment to fulfill his earlier promise.

*James 1:17:* "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." Does this James 1:17 passage teach the immutability of God's nature? I do not believe so. Rather, this text only teaches that God possesses moral perfection. James teaches that whatever is good is from God, and whatever is evil comes from man himself. Just as the Sun shines and radiates, so it is with God whose moral nature shines in its perfection so that no cloud of sin or darkness can cover or

hide his moral perfection. This passage (much like 1 John 1:5) says that God's moral character is perfect, and that his gifts will always come to us, but it says nothing about the impassibility of God.

In summary, none of these scriptural texts that are commonly used to justify the claim that God is impassible truly provide that support. These texts show that God makes promises, embraces purposes, and offers gifts that humans can count on and that God will reliably uphold. But these texts do not show that God has an unchangeable nature or will, that God knows all future contingents, or that God is without emotion.

## *II.2 A Misconceived Transcendence*

Let me now turn to analyzing the arguments that are often made in support of impassibility. In the Thomistic and Reformed traditions, there is great emphasis upon the doctrine of the transcendence of God and his sovereignty. Transcendence is the idea that God is ontologically beyond who we are and we cannot comprehend who he is. In this way, the Reformed view of God somewhat resembles the God of Aristotle who is eternal, unchanging, impassible, and has no bodily matter.

Aquinas and those in the Reformed tradition wish to emphasize transcendence because they believe acknowledging God's immanence in the world would force us to draw false conclusions. They argue like this:

- (1) If God is not fully transcendent, then God is not in complete control.
- (2) If God is not in complete control, then God cannot right wrong and give us hope.
- (3) God does right wrong and gives us hope.

Thus, God is fully transcendent.

In other words, it seems to many theologians in the Reformed tradition that a God who is not fully transcendent will also not be omnipotent or omnibenevolent.



I believe that this line of reasoning is problematic. In particular, I reject the second premise of this argument. Even if God is not in complete control of the universe, it does not follow that God cannot be a redeemer and give us hope. The God of Christian theology seeks to enter true partnership rather than dictate unilaterally how things will go, thereby giving his creatures some measure of freewill. It follows that divine sovereignty does not negate divine freedom, but our notion of divine sovereignty needs to be redefined in light of the fluidity of God who is open to the future, as I believe the evidence of Scripture warrants.

### *II.3 Ignoring God's Feelings and His Dialogue with Humans*

Theologians in both the Thomistic and Reformed traditions interpret descriptions of God having psychological states as merely misleading anthropomorphic or figurative language. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics such as emotions to God.

I disagree with these Thomistic and Reformed theologians, and I do not think there is anything misleading about portraying God as having various psychological states or feelings, desires, and the experiences of sorrow and compassion for those who repent. On the contrary, it would make perfect sense that the divine emotions of God are expressed through jealousy, provoked anger, joy, regret, love, and divine repentance.

First, consider the text of the Bible itself. In Scripture, we are not presented with a static view of God, but instead a view of one who is dynamic and who enters into divine-human dialogue with free moral agents to achieve the desired purpose/goals for humanity. God is often portrayed in Scripture as being frustrated with his people Israel. Often, he is shocked by their actions and never thought that they would have made some of their choices. This can clearly be seen when God instructs the prophet Hosea to go and get his wife who has played the harlot. In Ezekiel 16, God is depicted as a jealous lover torn between whether he should divorce his true

love or plead for her to repent and come back to him. God is depicted as a jealous God, when Israel plays the harlot in Ezekiel 16 and in Hosea.

Given that the Bible portrays God as having different psychological states, it is also appropriate that the Bible shows God using covenant or conditional language. After all, this sort of language assumes that God changes his beliefs based on how humans do or do not act. For example, God says to Abraham or Israel that if they are willing to do x, then he will be willing to do y. This indicates that God is willing to cooperate and work alongside human agents to create a better future, or even the best of possible worlds, for those who will trust him.

This kind of conditional language can be found throughout Scripture, and there is no reason to explain it all away simply by appealing to anthropomorphism – saying that God is merely using human language to accommodate his unchanging will and purpose. Explaining Scripture away like this ignores the fact that God is here depicted as acting in ways that are adequately described by human-centered language. For example, God in Scripture is depicted as being a jilted lover in his relationship with Israel in Hosea and Ezekiel. A lover’s quarrel or marital language suggests a contractual relationship between two parties. Again, consider that in Exodus and Deuteronomy God makes a covenant with Israel and she refuses to live up to her covenant and part of the contract. Finally, remember that Jesus, which God manifested in flesh, is the God-Man who inaugurates and ratifies a “New Covenant” not with Israel only, but to all those who are willing to trust God.

If God were truly emotionless, without changes in psychology, and beyond all dialogue with humans, the Scriptures would not depict God as surprised or disappointed, and Scripture would not show God forming covenants and contracts with humans since such activity requires God to dialogue with humans and change his beliefs based on what they will and will not do.

#### *II.4 A False Threat to God's Sovereignty*

The reason that many Reformed theologians hold to the doctrine of immutability is that they believe that a passible God is a God that is not sovereign. They reason this way:

(1) If God is subject to the reactions of human agents, then God cannot be in complete control of the universe.

(2) God is all-powerful and in complete control of the universe.

Therefore, God cannot be subject to the reactions of human agents.

I believe this argument is flawed because the second premise is false. It is true that Scripture depicts God as *maximally* powerful, but this does not mean that God *alone* has power. Other creatures exercise power as well, although not to the same degree that God does. Moreover, the conclusion of this argument ignores the very clear teaching of Scripture: God gives human agents power (freewill) to accept or reject God's will and purpose for their lives (see Luke 7:30).

Here is another version of the argument made by those in the Reformed tradition:

(1) God is all-knowing.

(2) If God can be taken by surprise, then God is not all-knowing.

Therefore, God cannot be taken by surprise.

This argument is flawed because the first premise is false. As we have seen, God has *maximal* power, not *complete* power. The fact that God has maximal power does not eliminate the possibility for him to react to the creatures he has created. But since God, in creating the best of all worlds, created creatures with free will, it would be incorrect to prohibit God from having the sort of responses that are appropriate to acts of free will. Such an appropriate response of God to his creatures in no way compromises the extent of divine power.

## *II.5 A Desiring God Is Not Problematic*

The New Testament teaches that God is love (1 John 3:16). Moreover, the New Testament teaches that God expresses his love not only in creation, but also in his divine providence for the redemption of fallen creatures. In fact, God so loves the creatures that he chooses to become sin-bearer in human flesh (*sarx*) to be the redeemer and to redeem fallen humanity. Thomistic and Reformed theologians think it would be heretical to claim, on the basis of these scriptural passages, that God's love is in any way based in desire. They make the following argument:

- (1) If God does have desires, then God needs or lacks something.
- (2) If God needs or lacks something, then God is not perfect.
- (3) God is perfect.

Thus, God cannot have desire.

I believe the first premise is false. I agree with Robert Adams, who refutes this view by advancing the position that God can desire and love his creatures without being deficient. He argues that when God desires, he does so by desiring the best for his creatures, and desiring that they choose what is best.<sup>16</sup> This is why the New Testament depicts God as “longsuffering” toward human beings, not wishing (desiring) that any should perish (2 Pet. 3: 9; 14).

Some theologians might also worry that by making God passible and attributing desires to God, we are claiming that God acts selfishly. After all, on this view, when God exercises his will, he does so to fulfill his own desires. But Adams successfully objects to this argument by drawing a contrast between self-interest, selfishness, and self-regarding. Self-regarding has to do with God's own interest in his creation by seeing that his project reflects his own glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Selfishness would depict an emotional aspect of God that would be a negation of God's

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16. Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134-35. Adams' chapters on “Loving the Good: Eros” and chapter 6 on “Grace” depict the notion of God loving finite goods.

moral perfection. But what we see depicted in Scripture is a God who is concerned about his creation and the human beings he has made. God has a self-interested investment in his creation in the sense that he is interested to see it reach the maximal capacity for which he created it. God is a fellowship of persons, a relational being, and open to the joy and pain of the world. God creates in order to create love and relationships – he delights to hear in the love of finite persons an echo of the love that constitutes his own reality. God’s desire for this kind of delight is not an exercise in selfishness.

## PART III: THE POSITIVE CASE THAT GOD IS PASSIBLE

### *III.1 God's Divine Freedom*

In Scripture, God is consistently depicted as being free to choose. God is free to create and he is free to be involved with his creatures that reflect his image and participate with him in ruling his creation (Gen. 1:26-28). God is not a static state as claimed in the doctrine of impassibility, which deprives God of his divine freedom. In Scripture, God is depicted as being free to do what he determines to be the best without being confined by any divine necessity flowing from his nature. Rather, God acts from his divine will. God is free to relate to his creatures as he thinks best. But in the classical view of God, which resembles Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, he is eternally unchanging, not exercising his will freely, and not experiencing any emotions.

Karl Barth, reacting to a nineteenth century and Enlightenment project that emphasized human reason and the doctrine of immanence, argued that it was God's divine freedom and grace that allowed God to be revealed in history and known by the miracle of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> What does it mean that God is free? Barth believed that the freedom of God is not to be captured by human reason and that there could be no divine constraint on God's divine power to act and choose as he wills.

Conceiving of God as radically free does not imply or lead to a tension between God's divine will and his divine reason. God in Scripture is adaptable to human decisions and not

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17. See Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 70.

immobile. He does not have to sit by helpless or unconcerned. God's love is expressed well by Barth who "divided the divine perfections into two categories, the perfections of the divine loving and the perfections of the divine freedom. This rubric replaced the traditional duality of God's immanence and transcendence."<sup>18</sup>

The best way of appreciating how God's radical freedom is perfectly consistent with the idea of divine perfection and divine love can be seen in the doctrine of the Trinity. In Scripture, God is said to be in relationship with the other members of the godhead known as the Trinity. The Trinity demonstrates that God is free within himself in relationship between the participants within the divine community. For example, one way of conceiving of the Trinity is as the Essential Trinity or also called the Immanent or Ontological Trinity. This view focuses upon the essence or substance of God; what God is actually like in himself as he stands outside the created universe. It is how God appears *to God*.

The so-called "Economic view" of the Trinity is concerned with how we experience God in our lives, in creation, and through salvation. This is how God appears to us. Some theologians point out that only the Son and the Spirit are directly met in the Economic Trinity. The Economic and Essential Trinity are not two separate entities – just two ways of looking at God. When God reveals himself to us, is it merely the "face" God wears as he turns to us, or is it how God is in himself? Is his face something he merely displays, or does his face unambiguously disclose his heart? The Western Church believes that they are pretty much the same and that we meet God fully and completely *as he is* through his actions. The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity. To put it another way: God's actions reveal who God is. And since God acts as a threefold God, God himself must be threefold.

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18. Grenz and Olson, 73.

Finally, in concert with the redemptive and atoning work of the Son, the Holy Spirit functions to bring about a renewal of creation and applies redemption in the lives of the fallen who are made in the image of God. This renewal and application is done by the proclamation of the church in her task of ministry of announcing to the world that times of refreshing and restoration have begun.

When one considers Barth's view of divine freedom and understand how the Trinity exemplifies freedom, one can see how God's divine freedom requires God to be passible. This simply means that God is free to respond and reveal himself to his creatures in Jesus Christ. God's revelation is God's gift to be received in faith; it is not human beings who define how God chooses to act, but God as Trinity chooses to reveal himself in redemption on behalf of fallen humanity. Barth believes that whenever we restrict God in his movement in the Trinity for redemption, we reduce him to our taxonomy and have domesticated God. Barth believes that God's self-revelation, which is an event, cannot and must not be reducible to human categories of reason, and this he finds as problematic and dangerous with natural theology. It is not that Barth rejects reason as an attempt to understand God's revelation, but the only epistemic ground for knowledge of God and about God is revelation and not reason. This epistemic grounding Barth believes allows God to be free in the self-communication of himself in the revelation of Jesus Christ as a human person and human history.

### *III.2 The Image of God*

The Scriptures teach that man is made in the image of God. This view of human beings is found in Genesis 1:26-28, where the divine triad speaks, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." This suggests that man is uniquely made and crafted to be an image bearer and a reflection of the God in the created order. Man in his original state was created with glory and honor and told to rule as a vice-regent over God's creation. Man's idea



and vision of how creation was to be cared for was to reflect his ongoing relationship with his Creator. This means that man must be understood from God's vantage point rather from a simply humanistic or scientific point of view. God's being must have some relations to us as human beings.

Theologians have debated down through the centuries as to the exact meaning of the phrase "in the image of God" – the *imago Dei*. This is a difficult idea because the God of Scripture appears to be a divine society. So, when we think of man made in the image of God, we cannot take this to mean merely that human reason is a reflection of the divine image, but that humans also reflect something complex, and reflect other aspects of God's being. After all, God is not depicted in Scripture as a God who reasons only, but is also depicted as having psychological states of getting angry, relenting, repenting, and feeling ambivalence about the actions of human beings.

However, although human beings reflect God, it is not the case that *everything* about humanity is a reflection of God. In Scripture, human beings are not only depicted as image bearers, but they are also depicted as fallen creatures and sinners. Sin is rooted into the very heart of human beings in the misuse of their free will, as Augustine argues. Human sin, according to Augustine, is rooted in the pride of human subjects who through their capacity for "self-transcendence . . . refuse to acknowledge [their] own creatureliness."<sup>19</sup> The Protestant Reformers had a correct view of human sinfulness "as an act of the whole person, so that no realm of human reality can be exonerated from complicity in our rebellion against God."<sup>20</sup>

Humans do not resemble God in their sinfulness. Nevertheless, despite their fall, they still possess reason – and reason is never so damaged that it cannot recognize rays of divinity shining

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19. Grenz and Olson, 104.

20. Ibid.

through the created order and grasp that there must be some divine reality behind the world of appearances. John Calvin said it well when he said,

For what man in all the world would not gladly remain as he is – what man does not remain as he is – so long as he does not know himself, that is, while content with his own gifts, and either ignorant or unmindful of his own misery? Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.<sup>21</sup>

Thomistic and Reformed theologians claim that the “image of God” refers only to human rationality, and thus they think that God resembles man only by being rational. The doctrine of the “image of God” teaches us by theological import that there is a point of contact between God and us. There is no reason we should limit our resemblance to God and claim that we resemble him only in our rationality.

### *III.3 A Redeeming God Must Be Passible*

First, consider that God enters human history. Since the days of the early church in the second century, scholars have argued with one another in trying to understand Paul’s teaching concerning the kenotic doctrine in Philippians 2:1-10. What did Jesus “empty himself” of when he took the “form of a servant”? What was it then that God gave up in what theologians refer to as “the Kenosis theory” found in John 1:1-18, 3:16; Matthew 1:23-25; Galatians 4:1-4; and Philippians 2:5-10? This is a difficult issue because it is hard to understand how God could become flesh, and hard to see how God could actually suffer at the hands of mere mortals. However one resolves these disputes, however, it is absolutely clear that by “emptying himself” Jesus had to undergo some important change. This, it seems, requires us to think of God as changeable and passible. Indeed, as Soren Kierkegaard famously pointed out, this is an incredibly radical change. The incarnation “involves a double paradox. It asserts that God has

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21. John Calvin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 320-21.

become human, that the Eternal has become temporal. And it declares that our eternal happiness has its foundation in a historical event.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, remember that God sent his Son to die and suffer at the hands of wicked man (see Isa. 53 and the crucifixion narratives in Matt. 26-27) in order to redeem the original sin of mankind. As described by Christian theology, humanity needed such reconciliation because of Original Sin. This doctrine not only has precedent in Scripture in the first man’s disobedience, but it is also grounded in the reality of all the leading church fathers from Augustine down to the Thomistic and Reformed tradition. It is the notion that human beings have a fundamental problem: they are in a state of rebellion and they are fugitives from a just God. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, the notion of original sin is the idea that humans misuse free will and the capacity of self-transcendence.<sup>23</sup> This radical disorientation of the self and the disordered affections are rooted in the noetic effects of the fall.

If God sent his Son to die on the cross as a response to the fallen condition of human beings, it seems that we must understand God as passible. After all, such a redeeming God is responding to the condition of humans and responding to their wickedness. It seems to me that the refusal by philosophers and theologians of the Thomistic and Reformed traditions to take seriously the idea of a passible God would require them to also downplay the importance of God as a redeemer. For if God is impassible, God cannot respond to sin as a redeemer. God would be immobile and could not express any feelings of concern about the creature and the fallenness of creation because, being immobile and impassible, he would be unable to perform or do anything.

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22. Grenz and Olson, 65.

23. Ibid., 263.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that the doctrine of impassibility is fundamentally inconsistent with the God of Christian theology. I have also argued that the biblical passages often used to support God's impassibility are being misinterpreted, and I have shown that the arguments commonly made in support of an apathetic God are flawed. I have presented three arguments that prove the God of Christian theology is passible, given that God possesses divine freedom and love and that humans are made in the image of God.

If my thesis is correct, a great deal of modern philosophical discourse in the reformed tradition is wrong because it depicts God in a way that is too much like the god described in ancient Greek philosophy. William Rowe, in his classical text *Can God Be Free?* captures this idea well when he points out that God's moral perfection and divine freedom are based on Aristotle's metaphysics of a perfect being without change:

For given that he is omnipotent and the creator of all things other than himself, it is evident that nothing *outside* of him determines him to create whatever he does create. . . . So, the fact that nothing outside of God determines him to create or act as he does clearly shows that God is an *autonomous* agent; he is self-determining in the sense that his actions are the result of decisions that are determined only by his own nature. . . . For in God there is no possibility of his passions overcoming the judgment of reason. . . . Since God is a purely rational being and not subject to uncontrollable passions that sometimes compel human beings to act, it is tempting to conclude that God enjoys perfect freedom of action.<sup>24</sup>

Like Rowe, I believe it is a mistake to ascribe impassibility to God. In this thesis, I have argued that it is a mistake to conceive of the Christian God as a transcendent being who does not change,

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24. William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (New York: Oxford Press, 2004), 15.

who does not feel, who does not covenant, and who does not seek to enter into dialogue with human beings.

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