The truth of divine impassibility: a new look at an old argument

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Introduction

From his Nazi prison cell in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge that ‘only the suffering God can help’. Just after the war, the Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori published his ground-breaking book, *Theology of the pain of God*, based around Jeremiah 31:20, where he developed a similar theology of the cross: the pain of God heals our pain. In the suffering of Christ, God himself suffers. In 1973 Jürgen Moltmann came out with his classic, *The crucified God*, where he takes this further and develops a critical theology of the cross. He holds that a ‘theology after Auschwitz’ has to revise completely the traditional doctrine of God that teaches divine impassibility. Moltmann at the outset reflects on his own experience: ‘Shattered and broken, the survivors of my generation were then returning from camps and hospitals to the lecture room. A theology which did not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have had nothing to say to us then’. The old teaching of classical theism that God is beyond suffering died in the death camps of WWII and was no longer tenable. Moltmann wrote his book, which had an enormous impact in its day, with the conviction that only if God is not detached from human suffering, but willingly enters into it with compassion, is there any hope for the future.

These are just three of dozens of theologians who over the last 50 years have argued that God not only suffered pain at the death of his own Son but continues to suffer in solidarity with his people today. However, the ecumenical consensus of the early church was that God is impassible. Theologians such as Cyril of Alexandria and Pope Leo I could claim that the Christian God became man and suffered in Christ, yet at the same time hold that it was the ‘impassible God’ that suffered in Christ. The patristic

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LTJ 45/3 December 2011
theologians simply believed that the doctrine of divine impassibility was consistent with the teaching of Scripture itself.\textsuperscript{5}

**The problem of divine apathy**

For many passibilists, the dominance of the axiom of divine apathy in the early church can only be explained by the fact that the majority of the Fathers were captivated by the spirit of Greek metaphysics which in turn distorted their understanding of Scripture.\textsuperscript{6} Paul Gavrilyuk, on the other hand, rejects this argument and holds that there was no consensus around divine impassibility among non-Christian Hellenistic philosophers of religion. He mounts an impressive case against the theory of theology's fall into Hellenistic philosophy and shows that it has been a monumental mistake to suggest that the patristic dilemma amounted to a choice between 'the unemotional and uninvolved God of the Hellenes and the emotional and suffering God of the Hebrews'. He argues that this is a false antithesis that fails to take account of the different ways in which divine emotions and divine involvement are portrayed in the Hellenistic world as well as 'the anthropomorphic representations of God that appear in the Greek and even in the Hebrew biblical text, as well as its early non-Christian interpreters'.\textsuperscript{7}

On the other hand, the testimony of the biblical narrative definitely stands at odds with the spirit of Greek philosophy. In Greek thinking, immortality, the absence of emotion and its accompanying impassibility (apathy), all belong to being itself. This is clear from Aristotle.\textsuperscript{8} However, where the biblical texts are taken seriously, there will be a grave conflict with Greek metaphysics and ontology. The event described in Hosea 11:7–11\textsuperscript{9} is ontologically unthinkable. 'Ancient metaphysics rejects it as mythology because it cannot abide the thought that there is a “coup”, a change in God himself'.\textsuperscript{10}

So then, what is at stake in the argument between the passibilists and the impassibilists? Impressive evidence can be adduced by both sides of the debate. If I can reduce it to its


\textsuperscript{6} This is Werner Elert's argument. See his seminal essay 'Die theopaschitische Formel', *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 4/5 (1950): 195–206. Oswald Bayer, 2007, *Theology the Lutheran way*, edited and translated by Jeffrey Silcock and Mark Mattes, Eerdmans, seems to follow a similar line. 'In its attempt to think about God in this way [namely that God's eternal being itself is profoundly affected by Jesus' death on the cross], Christian theology destroyed the axiom of divine impassibility (apathy). This belief had its source in Greek metaphysics which held that God, the unmoved mover, is immutable and therefore incapable of suffering' (9).

\textsuperscript{7} Gavrilyuk, *The suffering of the impassible God*, 46.

\textsuperscript{8} *Metaphysics* 1073a, cited by Bayer *Theology the Lutheran way*, 7; see also 31,32.

\textsuperscript{9} These verses demonstrate that God is affected by things outside himself: 'My heart is changed within me, I am full of remorse. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal'. Another key verse is Gen 6:6 where it says that 'the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it grieved him to his heart'. And there are numerous passages in Jeremiah that show that God is 'affected' by the behavior of his people: he displays love and compassions, as well as sorrow, anger, wrath.

\textsuperscript{10} Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran way*, 188.
bottom line, the passibilists argue that if God does not suffer with the world he created, he is and will be seen to be cold, detached, uncaring, and devoid of compassion. For pastoral reasons, God needs to be proclaimed as the one who suffers along with us. But more than that, God cannot be abstracted from the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. Jenson’s bottom line is that theology must be determined by the biblical narrative, and in particular the narrative of salvation. The transcendent God cannot be quarantined from the contingencies of time and history. The full implications of this could not be seen by the theologians of Nicaea and Constantinople. Hence, the doctrine of divine impassibility and immutability was not challenged. In Jenson’s opinion, it is time for western theology to move on from its captivity to what is effectively a pre-Nicene doctrine of God.11

The impassibilists, on the other hand, respond by saying that the biblical data already depicts God as caring and compassionate by nature. They insist that it is time to debunk the myth that divine impassibility implies that God is uninvolved in the life of the world. The early Christian theologians, who were informed by scripture, never thought the biblical God was like the self-absorbed God of Aristotle. Hart reaffirms that God is infinite, trinitarian love and rejects the idea that God’s identity is determined by his involvement in history: ‘God does not become God through the economy of salvation, but God is God antecedently in “God’s infinitely accomplished life of love” that is the immanent Trinity’.12 It is also said that to hold that suffering is part of God’s very being is not only to change fundamentally who God is, but it also means that God cannot be relied on to overcome suffering because God himself is a victim of suffering.

Before we are in a position to make any judgment on the contemporary discussion, we need to look at how this debate played itself out in the christological and trinitarian controversies of the ancient church and then consider how Luther dealt with the matter.

The ancient church debate

The question of whether God suffers is not new to theology but was debated already in the ancient church. Apart from patripassianism,13 the place where the question of divine suffering emerged most decisively is in the theopaschite controversy. I will attempt to outline briefly the main aspects of this dispute in order to provide a background for our discussion of Luther’s treatment of this topic.

Theopaschism was a neo-Chalcedonian controversy that erupted over the question of correct interpretation of the Council of Chalcedon (450). The council agreed that in Jesus Christ the two natures are united in the one person. But debate continued over whether there are two active subjects corresponding to the two natures of the God-man. An impasse was reached and the outcome was uncertain. Which would prevail: the

13 Patripassianism, a form of modalism, is the belief that the Father suffered with and in the Son on the cross. The distinguishing mark of patripassianism is not so much that it denies the impassibility of God but that it refused to maintain a distinction between the Father and the Son.
Apollinarist (Eutychian) confusion of natures or Diodore’s (Nestorian) separate subjects?
It was left to the great Eastern theologian, St Cyril of Alexandria (c 376–444), whose christology was authoritative for early Lutheranism, to fight for the orthodox interpretation of Chalcedon. For Cyril, the christological union was hypostatic, not simply affective (as taught by Nestorius), because the personal subject of the incarnation was none other than the divine Word. He insisted that the enfleshed Logos (mia physis sesarkomene) is a single concrete reality (physis).  

The theopaschite formula, ‘one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh’, played an important role in the neo-Chalcedonian controversy as it became ‘the via media’ between Nestorius and Eutyches since, as Bayer points out, ‘it allowed one to speak of the suffering of God in Christ without attributing the suffering to the divine “nature”, as is the case with Apollinarius’. This is a way then of distinguishing between an heretical (Apollinarian) and a Chalcedonian (orthodox) theopaschism. However, even though the theopaschite formula was eventually accepted by the Council of Constantinople, it was and will always be a ‘persistent stumbling block’ for those who held to the patristic axiom of the apathetic, impassible God.

Luther’s contribution to the debate

Luther makes a significant contribution to the debate over divine suffering and he does this by developing two christological motifs of the ancient church: the theopaschite formula and the communication of attributes. Luther works creatively with both these concepts in his treatment of the topic of divine apathy. In the process he revises Chalcedonian metaphysics as he faithfully explicates the christological dogma of Chalcedon.

The concept of the communication of attributes was not invented by Luther but had already been used by Cyril in his dispute with Nestorius, but Luther develops it further as he comes up with a new theological language (nova lingua), with its own new

19 Bayer, ‘Das Wort ward Fleisch’, 10; Dennis Ngien, 1995, *The suffering of God according to Martin Luther’s ‘theologia crucis’*, Peter Lang, NY, 68–86, also covers the topic of the communicatio idiomatum in its application to theological language.
grammar (*nova grammatica*),\(^{21}\) which is distinct from the general language of philosophy and is grounded in the biblical narrative and particularly the story of Jesus Christ. The same word may appear in the Bible as in philosophy (eg God or human being). The difference is not in the letter but in the spirit, in the way the word is used.

The best place to illustrate this is with Luther’s 1539 ‘Disputation concerning the passage “The Word was made flesh”’.\(^{22}\) Luther debates the thesis that God is man (*Deus est homo*).\(^{23}\) He says that the statement ‘God is man’ is a simple truth and not twofold as the Sorbonne had claimed. Luther contrasts the proposition ‘God is man’ with the proposition ‘every man is a creature’: the first is true *simpliciter* in theology but false in philosophy; the latter is true *simpliciter* in philosophy but false in theology. The problem is that the word ‘*homo*’ (man) is ambiguous, but Luther refuses to equivocate in order to accommodate philosophy. The term ‘man’ when it refers to a creaturely human being is one thing; however, when it refers to the man Jesus Christ it is another. When language is informed by Scripture it will not import into theology subject matter that is foreign to the biblical story, but it will be transformed by the biblical witness into the *nova vocabula* of theology under the impulse of the Spirit.\(^{24}\) The form of a syllogism may be the same in philosophy and theology, but the conclusions do not have equal standing. The subject matter of theology and philosophy is different, but not contradictory. So, for example, the terms ‘God’ and ‘man’ are different but not contradictory since they are united in the one person of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Luther clarifies his position with a second crucial thesis: ‘outside of Christ there is no God’ (*extra Christum non est Deus alius*).\(^{25}\) He argues here that it impossible to speak of God in general terms, as the philosophers do. When theology speaks of God, it is not the God of the philosophers but the God who became man in Jesus Christ. Luther says that there simply is no other God. God can never be separated from the man Jesus. There is no such thing as the general concept God—or if there is, it is an idol, or a pure abstraction. The only God is the God who lives, suffers, and dies in the flesh. Luther objects to speaking theologically about humanity or divinity as abstract categories. The problem with metaphysics is that it seeks to detach objects from their concrete particularity and to speak of them in an abstract way. In christology, this leads to privileging the two *natures* over the concrete *person* (as in Nestorianism), and the need to qualify Christ’s death as ‘death according to the human nature’.

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\(^{21}\) WA 39 II: 104,24 (arg 7) (Disputation on the divinity and humanity of Christ, 1540): ‘The Holy Spirit has his own grammar’.

\(^{22}\) LW 38:235-277

\(^{23}\) LW 38:250 (Argument 9).

\(^{24}\) LW 38:277. In WA 39 I:231,1–3 (version B) (Argument 15 of *Die Promotionsdisputation von Palladius und Tilemann*, 1537), Luther states: ‘All words become new when transferred from philosophy to theology’. For more on this topic, see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran way*, 77,78.

\(^{25}\) LW 38:258; see also LW 37:218 (Confession concerning Christ’s supper, 1528).
Nagel’s comments here are apt:

The traditional phrases ‘according to his human nature’ and ‘according to his divine nature’ Luther uses so that the distinction of the natures is not lost; but his usage of them has come free of the dualism which sees divine and human, heavenly and earthly, infinite and finite, impassible and passible, as opposites unreconcilable. They are if you look at God separately, and if you look at man separately, but in Christ this separation is gone. In Christ they have a new meaning; the old meaning applies only to them when separated. In speaking of him we may not speak of the divinity separated from the humanity, or of the humanity separated from the divinity. By such separation our Savior and salvation are undone. *Extra Christum non est Deus alius.*

In his 1540 Disputation against Schwenckfeld Luther continues to work at developing greater precision and accuracy in this new language of theology. The matter that has most relevance for our study here is the distinction he makes between concrete and abstract language. So for instance, the statement ‘God is man’ is true, but the statement ‘humanity is divinity’ is false and nonsensical. The latter is an abstract statement that has no theological cogency, whereas the former is true because God is man, not in the abstract, but only in the concrete particularity of the incarnation. Again, the statement that ‘God is immortal and therefore cannot become mortal’ is an abstract statement that is true in philosophy but not in theology. In theology, the impassible God suffers and dies in the incarnate Logos. Another aspect of this disputation that is relevant for our purposes is Luther’s rejection of qualifiers such as ‘according to the human nature’. He maintains that theological precision can only be achieved if we follow the logic of the *communicatio idiomatum* to its end. Quite specifically, that means we must reject the use of qualifiers to avoid the statement that God has suffered and died in Christ.

Luther leaves no doubt: after the incarnation, God is indeed passible and mortal, and not merely ‘according to the human nature’, as if the divinity could somehow insulate itself from the experiences common to all human beings. This insight into the new language of theology is one of Luther’s most important contributions to christology.

Nowhere does it come out more clearly and powerfully than in his 1540 ‘Disputation on the divinity and humanity of Christ’ where he says that this new way of speaking via the communication of attributes reflects the language and grammar of the Spirit. It is

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27 WA 39 II: 92–121. For an exhaustive treatment of this disputation, see Paul Hinlicky, ‘Luther’s antidocetism in the Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi’ in *Creator est creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation*, ed Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede, de Gruyter, Berlin, 139-181. The text of the disputation is not yet available in the American Edition of Luther’s works, but Hinlicky has included a translation of it as an appendix to his work (182-85).

28 WA 39 II:104,24 (arg 7). The particular merit of Hinlicky’s work is that he thoroughly refutes the specious claim that Luther’s christology is tainted by monophysitism and is consequently docetic.
only by means of this language that theology can confess what philosophy can only reject: that ‘creator and creature is [est] one and the same.’ Bayer argues that this ‘is’ that connects the ‘true God’ with the ‘true man’ in the confession that ‘God is man’ in Christ is no ordinary copula, understood as a declaration as in Aristotle’s logic of the sentence, but ‘it is an effective, indeed, a synthetic copula because it is grounded in the promise (promissio), and that means it belongs to the very heart of the gospel. This great mystery comes out in some of the classical Lutheran hymns. Think of the passion hymn by Johann Rist (1607–1667), where in the German original he writes: ‘God himself lies dead’.

This application of the communication of attributes in the hymnody and devotional life of the church is testament to the fact that Luther’s interest here is soteriological; his christology serves the proclamation of the mighty acts of God for the salvation of all people. This is clear from his famous words cited by the authors of Article 8 of the ‘Formula of Concord’ (1577):

Unless God is in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, will sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost. But if God’s death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale. Yet he can also easily go up again, or leap off the scale! But he could not have sat on the scale unless he had become a human being like us, so that it could be called God’s dying, God’s passion, God’s blood, and God’s death. For God in his own nature cannot die; but since God and man are united in one person, it is correct to talk about God’s death when that man dies who is one substance or one person with God.

If it were not for the doctrine of the communication of attributes, Christ would be nothing more than a man who died an exemplary death. This is the Nestorian and Zwinglian position that Luther rejects out of hand. But as it is, because of the unity of the two natures in Christ, his divine nature suffers along with his human nature via the communicatio idiomatum.

29 WA 39 II: 105,6,7 (arg 7).
30 Bayer ‘Das Wort ward Fleisch’, 24. Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 198, succumbs to the spirit of German Idealism in his rejection of the ‘is’ and hence of the hypostatic union. He accepts Luther’s basic christological confession that the Father’s heart and will are present in Christ but he says that ‘his dogmatic theory which describes Christ as true God and true man is not unified within itself but displays contradictions. Theology has to go beyond it.’ And theology did: in the Enlightenment it rejected Chalcedonian christology, with drastic consequences.
31 Noted by Bayer ‘Das Wort ward Fleisch’, 25. The Lutheran hymnal and supplement (1973/1987), like the German Evangelisches Gesangbuch (EG 80:2), has watered this down and replaced it with the less objectionable: ‘God’s Son is dead’ (LHS 63:2), but in doing so it has weakened the gospel and destroyed the truth of the biblical and Lutheran confession that in Christ God dies.
In fact, we could go a step further and say that his christology undergirds his sacramental theology. The same realistic, ontological understand of the 'is' (est) is at stake in Luther’s debates with the Sacramentarians and the Swiss when he insisted that the ‘est’ means ‘is’ and not ‘signifies’. The ‘est’ of the words of institution is of a piece with the ‘est’ of the church’s christological confession: the creator is a creature (creator est creatura), God is man (Deus est homo), God is possible (Deus est passibilis). In the same spirit, Luther in his Christmas hymn identifies the child in Mary’s lap with the creator of the universe. The Christ child is the creator. It is precisely this ‘is’ that represents Luther’s advance beyond the metaphysics of Chalcedon.

Concluding observations

We began by noting the general move against the notion of divine impassibility in modern theology, although that trend has been tempered by the appearance of a number of books and articles that reject the idea of divine suffering and reaffirm the patristic teaching of divine apathy. What has become apparent from our study of Luther is that much of the contemporary discussion is misdirected and misinformed because it uses terms like God and suffering in an abstract, philosophical way and does not employ the necessary linguistic rigour that Luther brought to the debate with his new language and new grammar of theology which makes a careful distinction between the concrete and the abstract. Simply to argue that God suffers or can’t suffer, is passible or impassible, misses the point because it lacks precision. Luther reminds us that God

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33 Interestingly, Bayer's critique of the 'death of God' movement that was prominent in the 1970s is that, however existentially motivated it may have been in responding to questions of the day, it misses the mark because it speaks of God in the abstract, which must inevitably happen when theology is driven by philosophy. He holds that the only place where we can talk properly of the death of God is in the Lord's supper. See Bayer, 1992, ‘Tod Gottes und Herrenmahl’, in Leibliches Wort: Reformation und Neuzeit im Konflikt, JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 289–305.

34 LHS 20:3: ‘... to be an infant small he deigns/ Who all things by His power sustains’. The communication of omnipotence by the divine nature to the human nature does not need to imply that Luther’s christology is tilted one-sidedly in the direction of the divine majesty (which Chemnitz later called the genus maiestaticum). Bayer notes that Luther favours a christology of earthly-historical contingency and divine lowliness. God's omnipotence does not contradict his incarnation, but proves itself in this very act ('Das Wort ward Fleisch', 33). Space does not permit a discussion of the evidence in Luther's christology for the genus tapeinoticon. On this, see Neal Anthony, 2010, Cross narratives. Martin Luther's christology and the location of redemption, Pickwick Publications, Eugene Oregon.

35 Nagel, ‘Martinus’, 46, nails it when he says, 'The gulf between Creator and creature is joined in Christ, and this can never be denied ... Luther pushes further than the prepositions, Cyril's ek and Chaldedon's en, to an est'.

36 Although he does not follow Luther’s line of argument, John Cooper, 2006, Panentheism. The other god of the philosophers: from Plato to the present, Baker, Grand Rapids MI, 404, makes a valid point when he says that ‘one need not abandon classical theism in order to affirm that “God feels our pain.” This is one of the great confusions in contemporary theology. In fact, classical theism can provide a more robust, proactive account of God's feelings than relational theology’. I agree with the basic tenor of his argument, even though I am not championing classical theism as such because of its trinitarian deficiencies.
per se is an abstraction; the only God we know is God in the flesh. God is not passible in the abstract, but only in the flesh of Christ.

Both the patristic theologians as well as Martin Luther make an important distinction in connection with the matter of divine apathy. The consensus is that the axiom of divine impassibility holds only in relation to the divine nature in itself, but not when we speak of God for us. In other words, it is correct to say that God suffers—but only when we are speaking of God's action in the economy of salvation. Luther normally guards against making the absolute statement that God suffers in himself. But when we are speaking of God in union with Christ, the incarnate Logos, we can say indeed that that God suffered and died.37 As we have seen, the way Luther arrives at this conclusion is via the axiom of the communication of attributes, the attributes peculiar to Christ's divine and human natures, and the new language and grammar of theology. Some theologians take a different starting point and follow Moltmann in developing a theology of the cross from a trinitarian perspective. It is ironic, however, that Moltmann, in his book The crucified God, does not actually speak of the death of God; the most he can say is that the crucifixion of Christ brings about 'death in God'.38 The reason Moltmann cannot go the whole way with Luther is because of the semi-Nestorianism in much of Reformed theology that does not permit it to employ the axiom of the communication of attributes.

Luther regarded the suffering of God in the suffering of the man Jesus as an incomprehensible mystery that can only be expressed paradoxically. I can only agree with those theologians who hold to the paradox that God suffered impassibility in the flesh.39 And yet I also know that many today are unpersuaded by the paradox and even less so by Luther's scholastics! Perhaps this is an issue that we still need to wrestle with as we engage the biblical texts in conversation with the church's tradition. For all our theologising this side of eternity is provisional. And so the conversation must go on.

It's in the spirit of ecumenical conversation that I give the final word to Christiaan Mostert who has written a very balanced article on the same topic. After carefully weighing up

37 I agree with Thomas Weinandy, Does God suffer? University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, 175: The way we understand the communicatio idiomatum 'continues to be the test of christological orthodoxy'. We cannot explore here the very interesting question of the evidence in Luther for the reciprocal transfer of the properties of the two natures within the one person. Some will understand the communication of attributes only in one direction, from the divine nature to the human nature. However, I believe that there is also evidence in Luther for the transfer of the properties of lowliness and weakness from the human nature to the divine nature (later called the genus tapeinoticon). This question is also bound up with how one understands kenotic christology in Luther.

38 The crucified God, 207.

39 I agree with Gavrilyuk's conclusion in his chapter, 'God's impassible suffering in the flesh: the promise of paradoxical christology' in Divine impassibility and the mystery of human suffering, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 127-149, even if we get there by different routes. Kevin Vanhoozer, 2010, Remythologizing theology: divine action, passion, and authorship, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 395-433, in his chapter on the impassible passion also discusses the communication of attributes but approaches it from a Reformed perspective. Unlike Luther, for him, this axiom 'both complicates and advances the discussion about Christ's suffering' (422).
the arguments of the passibilists and the impassibilists, and wrestling with the dialectic of God’s transcendence and compassion, he concludes with a word that gives the nod to divine suffering without qualification, for the sake of the gospel. He says that from the perspective of time, while the notion of divine suffering will not be the last word, nevertheless it ‘is the “telling word”, the word the gospel compels us to use’.40

40 Christiaan Mostert, 2011, ‘God’s transcendence and compassion’, Pacifica 24 (June), 188.