

PASSIBILITY, ATONEMENT AND
CRUCIFORMITY:

What Does “God Suffered on the Cross *For Us*”
Mean for us Today?

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Abstract

Does God’s suffering *for us* to save us as a past event have present application? If so, is this present application limited to salvation or is there something more we ought to be concerned with as obedient followers of Christ? In order to tenably answer my thesis statement (What Does “God Suffered on the Cross *For Us*” Mean for us Today?), I formulate three arguments: (1) God chose to suffer in love *because* of his creation *with* his creation and ultimately *for* his creation. I make the case that divine love is not limited merely to doing good things—benevolent love—but includes sharing in people’s sufferings—affectionate love; (2) a holistic Atonement theory must include both objective and subjective components, since God’s redemptive love transforms us to salvation and conforms us to love like Christ as our moral exemplar. And (3) to love like Christ entails obedience to God, which inevitably results in suffering for God via religious persecution.

Introduction

“There can be no love without suffering. Suffering in its widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of or in relation to another.”¹ This is similar to what the self-deprecating “Ridiculous Man” in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Dream of A Ridiculous Man* had come to appreciate most about his habitat here on earth. In his words, “We can truly love only with suffering and through suffering. We don’t know how to love otherwise; we don’t know any other love. I want to suffer so that I may love.”² Does it follow, however, that this conception of suffering-love properly describes God’s love for human beings, after all is it wise to compare the love of the divine to the love of a “Ridiculous Man”? In this paper I argue that not only does God suffer *because* of his creation (i.e., human beings with free will who rebel against him) he also suffers *with* his creation (viz., to strengthen and comfort) and *for* his creation (viz., to save). More specifically I answer the family of questions—what the crucifixion of God the Son accomplished in the past, what it accomplishes in the present, and what the causal relation is between them.

Of course to offer arguments as to why God suffers assumes that God does in fact suffer. But is this a warrantless assumption vis-à-vis perfect being theology? It appears that it is given the fact that church dogma throughout the majority of its history has necessitated that God’s perfection entails his immutability and impassibility (since he is in a perpetual state of divine blessedness and thus any vicissitude in him would be for the worse). The onus then is on me to demonstrate that God *can* and *does* in fact suffer. With epistemic humility I take up the gauntlet by arguing divine passibility from the perspective of philosophy and biblical theology.

¹ Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 117.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From the Underground; White Nights; The Dream of A Ridiculous Man; and Selections From the House of the Dead*, ed. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1980), 215.

I Philosophical Argument for Divine Passibility

To offer a proper defense of a qualified view of divine passibility (weak impassibility), it is necessary to discuss the doctrines of aseity, simplicity, and immutability, since these divine perfections are rightly understood as being integrally related. One may even be so inclined to locate these doctrines on a taxonomic scale with aseity as genus, simplicity as specie, and immutability/impassibility as sub-species.

I.I A Defense of Weak Aseity

I take a revisionist position on the doctrine of aseity. *Supra* Creation, God is not dependent on his creation for anything—existence, completeness, and/or blessedness. He is *a se* (“from himself”). *Infra* Creation, however, God is dependent on the creation, not for his existence, but to be completed in his temporality by sharing in the sufferings of his (free will) creatures. However, God did not have to suffer or be completed. He chose it freely *supra* Creation. I hold to a weak sense of aseity, which entails that before the Creation God was not dependent on anyone in creation for anything, whatsoever; however, since the Creation God is contingently dependent on his creation for emotional relationality and fulfillment, which blesses him,³ opposed to a strong sense of aseity, which entails that before or since the Creation God cannot voluntarily or involuntarily depend on anyone in creation for anything. What I call “strong aseity” is identical to the classical position of the doctrine of aseity.

Thomas H. McCall summarizes the tradition:

³ Marcel Sarot says something similar in relation to God’s (partial) dependency on his creation for divine happiness but only *after* he created his beloved: “He who was prior to His creation was perfectly happy without being in any way dependent upon anything or anyone else, makes His own happiness partly dependent upon humanity.” Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 88.

God does not depend on anything outside of himself for his existence; God says and identifies himself as 'I am,' and the fullness, sufficiency, and blessedness of his life come from himself. God does not need his creatures to exist, nor does he rely on them to be fully actualized. Rather he is, in the beauty of his own intratrinitarian life, both fully and completely himself and fully and completely satisfied in that fullness.⁴

I agree with McCall when he stipulates that “in the beauty of his own intratrinitarian life, [God is] both fully and completely himself and fully and completely satisfied in that fullness.” In other words, *within* his triumvirate of personhood, God does not depend on anything outside himself for his existence or fulfillment. The question is, however, whether God can choose to “limit” himself by becoming temporally and relationally dependent on his creation. I answer in the affirmative. Freedom is an integral attribute of God, which is grounded in perfect/great being theology. If freedom were void from the life of God, then he would not be a being worth worshipping. Obviously, freedom is necessary, but not sufficient to qualify as a great making property for God. A perfect being than which no greater can be conceived is also necessarily and infinitely wise, good, loving, sovereign, etc. Intuitively, I believe that human beings are justified in asserting that God can choose to humble or condescend or limit himself for the sake of his creation over the belief that God is limited in the sense that he never had a choice to limit himself to begin with. Of the two main views of the doctrine of divine freedom, libertarianism comes closest to represent the former view that God can choose to limit himself as a means to an end, and compatibilism comes closest to represent the latter view that God is necessarily limited by his inclinations. To be clear, the “means to end” relationship I am referring to *à la* libertarianism is not a means that *justifies* the end, but a means that *exemplifies* the end. That is, X as the means and Y as the end are necessarily related. Take the example that God chooses to limit himself (X) for the good of his creation (Y). X and Y are both motivated by love. Compatibilism, on the other hand, entails that God is necessarily limited in that he always acts according to his greatest desire. This implies that the divine cannot choose

⁴ Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 75.

between two, three, or an infinite amount of mutual desires. But why should we believe that God is necessarily limited in this way? Considering a type of necessity called causal determinism, God's choices are necessarily determined by his nature. This implies that God *himself* was not the ultimate cause of, say, the decree to create the actual world; his (greatest) desire determined him to do it. Thus, compatibilism constrains God into a corner limiting (from necessity) his free will. This compatibilist cul-de-sac is troubling for at least two reasons. First, not only does God not possess maximal power over his inclinations, he does not possess *any* power to veto one over another. According to Kenneth Keathley, this limited account of freedom goes contrary to the central component of the doctrine of creation that "God created freely, without constraint or necessity."⁵ And second, God's freedom is limited because it is necessarily *conditioned* to the conformity of his will with his desires. But if his freedom is conditioned, then the Creation was not a gracious act. In other words, for "God to create freely, and in order for God's act of his creation to be unconditional and gracious, His decision had to be free in a libertarian sense."⁶

1.2 A Defense of Weak Simplicity

I hold to what Jay Richards calls "Christian essentialism." According to Richards, this view has two parts: (1) God's essence possesses divine perfections and properties; and (2) God possesses essential and accidental properties.⁷ These theological tenets are compatible with weak simplicity.

In *The Untamed God*, Richards enumerates eight senses of simplicity that appear in Christian theology:

- (1) All divine properties are possessed by the same self-identical God.

⁵ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2010), 71.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jay W. Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 17.

- (2) God is not composite, in the sense that he is made up of elements or properties more fundamental than he is. He has no external cause(s), such as Platonic Forms.
- (3) God's essence is 'identical with' his act of existing. (Or perhaps: God's existence is not extrinsic to his essence.)
- (4) All God's essential properties are coextensive.
- (5) All God's perfections are [loosely] identical.
- (6) All God's properties are [necessarily] coextensive.
- (7) God's essential properties and essence are (strictly) identical with God himself.
- (8) All God's properties are (strictly) identical with God himself.⁸

Richards rightly categorizes (1) through (5) as *weak* simplicity and (6) through (8) as *strong* simplicity.⁹

The traditional interpretation of the doctrine of divine simplicity is (2), which entails (1)—God alone in his unified essence has or “possesses” all divine properties.¹⁰ I reject strong simplicity, starting with (6), because only God's essential properties necessarily coextend, while his accidental properties contingently coextend. Take for example two divine properties: love and Incarnation. God necessarily exemplifies (or stands in relation of necessarily exemplifying) the essential property of being loving in *every* possible world, which is different from the accidental property of the Second Person of the Trinity incarnating himself, which he contingently exemplifies in only *some* worlds. In other words, God has to be loving but he did not have to become human. Thus, if God stands in relation to a set of essential and accidental properties, they cannot all be necessarily coextensive. Moving towards (7), to say that God is identical to his essential properties is to make a category mistake. For example, according to 1 John 4:8 “God is love” but that is not the same thing as saying

⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Some theologians balk at the idea that God possesses or exemplifies properties because to possess properties is to be composed of properties. However, this argument is a *non sequitur*. God can possess properties and still remain a simple being. Nicholas Wolterstorff's assessment of twentieth century ontology of an entity (opposed to a medieval interpretation) is enlightening, which shows that all things are ultimately simple because they bear relations: “The essence of an entity is something to which it bears a certain relation—the relation of necessarily exemplifying it. Likewise a contingent property of an entity is something to which it bears a relation, the relation of contingently exemplifying it.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), 548. Utilizing Wolterstorff's “relation ontology,” God possesses properties, or more specifically, God stands in relation of necessarily exemplifying essential properties and he stands in relation of contingently exemplifying accidental properties. Therefore, (1) can be interpreted as: “All divine properties [bear the relation of being exemplified by] the same self-identical God.”

God acts lovingly. It is because God is love that he behaves in a loving manner. That is, the cause/effect relationship between God and his essential properties is that God is the causal agent of his loving acts. And if God is the cause of his loving effects, and causes and effects are not identical, then God is not identical with his essential properties.¹¹ Lastly, I reject (8) for two reasons: (i) of all God's properties his essential properties cannot be identical with God himself, as I have already demonstrated. And (ii) it is nonsensical to assert that God is identical to his accidental properties, which make up the rest of God's properties. By definition an accidental property is one that does not exist in every possible world. And by definition God is a necessary being that exists in every possible world. But if God is identical to an accidental property that does not exist in every possible world, then God, who exists in every possible world, does not exist in every possible world, which is to assert a bonafide contradiction, which is nonsensical.

More debilitating still for the advocates of divine simplicity who hold to (7) and (8) is that a strong sense of simplicity is difficult, if not impossible, to square with a trinitarian ontology of property relations (viz., there are different properties that manifest different relations within the imminent Trinity). Consider the fact that neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit possesses paternity. Likewise, neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit possesses filiation. And neither the Father nor the

¹¹ Moreover, not only is God not identical to his essential properties his essential properties are not identical each other. To say that God's essential properties like omniscience and omnipotence are *strictly* identical properties is to make another category mistake. The error is in categorizing these properties as being identical when in fact they are coextensive albeit necessarily coextensive (i.e., one property shows up if and only if the other property shows up). Consider a coextensive necessary truth (unrelated to the divine): all triangles are triangular if and only if they are trilateral. This proposition is true in all possible worlds; however, strict identity does not follow. That is, triangularity and trilaterality are not identical because "there is something true of being triangular that is not true of being trilateral, namely being triangular has the property of being an angle, whereas being trilateral does not have the property of being an angle." J. P. Moreland, "Francisco Suarez on the Various Kinds of Distinctions," *Lecture 8* (Fall 2008). Thus, even though these properties (trilaterality and triangularity) necessarily coextend they are not identical. The same goes for divine properties. In all possible worlds God necessarily exemplifies the coextensive essential properties of omniscience and omnipotence; however, they are not identical since there is something true of exemplifying omniscience that is not true of exemplifying omnipotence, namely being omniscient has the property of being all-knowing, whereas being omnipotent fails to exemplify the property of being all-knowing.

Son possesses spiration. Understandably, Alvin Plantinga calls the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity “a dark saying indeed.”¹²

Instead of saying that God *is* his properties, I prefer to say that God is identical to the *instances* of his properties. For example, God is an instance of goodness (or God stands in relation of exemplifying goodness). In the same way, God is an instance of libertarian freedom, which enables him to change in order to creatively manifest himself to his creation knowing all irreducibly tensed facts (“now” occurrences) about his creation.¹³

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 27.

¹³ The topic of whether or not God changes hinges upon his relation to time. I hold to a tense theory of time (A-theory), which entails that there are irreducibly tensed facts (true propositions that express states of affairs happening “now”). I believe that because God is temporal he appropriates knowledge of tensed facts, which enables him to grow in “experiential knowledge” (knowledge by acquaintance) via contingent properties. Assuming A-theory is true and thus tensed facts change, God must change because his knowledge of tensed facts change; otherwise, he would not be perfect in knowledge, since an atemporal God could not be omniscient. Change is an objective reality of “temporal becoming” (i.e., passing into and out of existence). Put differently, God is not limited to an eternal awareness of tenseless relations of *earlier than*, *simultaneous with*, and *later than* (B-theory). He allows himself to also experience facts temporally, so he can know concretely (experientially) what is happening “now” with his creation.

A-theory implies a dynamic view of time called presentism, which entails that the past and future are not happening simultaneous with the present; only the present is happening “now.” In this sense, only the present is real. This view of God’s temporality is compatible with his eternity (not to be confused with eternalism, which entails that the past and future are as ontologically real as the present). I believe presentism makes the most sense in light of God’s relation to the world. Eternalists disagree. Time is static on an eternalist view, which entails that the past and future are as ontologically real as the present. Time exists as earlier and later points on an eternal four-dimensional “block” universe. But if this eternal “block” is fixed, then not only is it the case that human beings cannot alter the future based on the present through an act of will that could have been otherwise, God is also causally inept. Put differently, for God to choose one thing over another, time must be dynamic not static. And the same goes for humans. What is even more problematic for eternalists is that evil never passes out of existence. This disturbing picture entails that all of the atrocities of human history will exist for eternity. Keith Ward describes the eternalists’ Achilles’ heel: “The torture of children is always as present to God as [is] the happiness of the blessed. Evil is never truly destroyed, and tears are never truly wiped away. They remain as real as they ever were.” Keith Ward, “The Temporality of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50, no. 1/3 (December 2001): 162.

I also concur with J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig in their assessment of A-theory as the objective reality of tense being “the best explanation of our experience of tense” not because we might formulate an argument to the effect but because “our belief in the reality of tense is much more fundamental than such argument suggests.” They go on to say, “We do not adopt the belief in an objective difference between the past, present and future in an attempt to *explain* our experience of the temporal world. Rather, our belief in this case is what epistemologists call ‘a properly basic belief...’” J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 380. In other words, I am *prima facie* justified in holding to a tense theory of time.

1.3 A Defense of Weak Immutability

God changes if only extrinsically or relationally (what is called weak immutability),¹⁴ which I believe is one of the key ingredients to divine perfection in a temporally changing and suffering world,¹⁵ contra strong immutability, which asserts that both extrinsic and intrinsic change are impossible for God because he is already complete and thus perfect. According to William Lane Craig, what accounts for God's extrinsic change is that "God stands in a new relation in which He did not stand before (since there was no 'before')." ¹⁶ This implies that if God had decided not to create a first moment of time, he would have continued in his atemporal state of existence not experiencing any relational change to his nature. Given the fact, however, that God chose to create, he necessarily changed, which entailed subjecting himself to a temporal and thus changing state of existence with his creation for eternity. Simply put, at the moment of Creation God drew himself "into time in virtue of His real relation to the world."¹⁷ Such a change in God via his *accidental* properties (e.g., creating, relating, and becoming temporal) constitutes a divine *extrinsic* change. Conversely, a change in God via his *essential* properties (e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and free will) would be a divine *intrinsic* change. According to weak immutability, God changes only extrinsically, while remaining intrinsically unchanged. And if God who is dynamic changes in virtue of his real

¹⁴ A relational change of God's extrinsic properties constitutes what philosophers call "Cambridge change," opposed to "real change" or a change of God's intrinsic properties.

¹⁵ Although I believe that God's extrinsic change is necessary in a temporal world to qualify for perfect being theology, I do not believe that weak immutability is sufficient to exhaust God's perfections, since Scripture also speaks of him being omnipotent, omnibenevolent, *ad infinitum*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87. This view of weak immutability is compatible with Malachi 3:6, which says, "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." This verse implies that God is necessarily faithful in keeping his covenant promise to Israel. In other words, it is impossible for God to experience *intrinsic* change regarding his omnibenevolent character. Thus, divine *extrinsic* change is compatible with God who does not *intrinsically* change.

I agree with Richard E. Creel who argues that "no being whose very nature [intrinsic being] is vulnerable to change could be worthy of unconditional worship." He goes on to say, "If the nature of God were subject to change by outside force, then God would not be omnipotent; if God were able to change his own nature, then he could not be trusted without concern; but by definition 'God' refers to one who is categorically omnipotent and trustworthy." Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 13.

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 87.

relation to a temporal world, then he risks, in that he opens himself up for the possibility of injury *because of* his creation. Simply put, if God changes extrinsically because of his decision to create and relate to mankind, it follows that he may be emotionally affected.

1.4 A Defense of Weak Impassibility

À la Gordon Lewis, the impassibility of God is “the doctrine that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.”¹⁸ Matter of fact, this has been the dominant view of the church up until the late 18th century. One of the most enthusiastic proponents of the view of (strong) impassibility during the Middle Ages is Thomas Aquinas. Passibility for Aquinas involves potentiality and potentiality involves change.¹⁹ The belief that God possesses unrealized potential is tantamount to saying that God’s *quidditas* is mutable and composed of parts, which is tantamount to denying the essential doctrine of simplicity, which is tantamount to repudiating the classic view of the doctrine of divine perfection. Thus, according to Aquinas, God can only be *actus purus* without *potentia*. Post Scholasticism, some Christian philosophers felt uncomfortable with the thought of God not being able to change in order to relate to his creatures with integrity because this seemed to “convey the idea that God was devoid of an affectional nature essential to personality and *agape* love.”²⁰ Enter weak impassibility.

The qualified view of passibility (weak impassibility) I am defending is succinctly stated by Paul S. Fiddes: “God *chooses* to suffer in love, if what he chooses to do is to put himself into a

¹⁸ Gordon Lewis, “Impassibility of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 598. In Richard E. Creel’s *Divine Impassibility*, he offers eight definitions of impassibility. It is the first definition (God lacks all emotions excluding bliss) and the last definition (God cannot be affected by external forces even if he wants to be) he marshals that I take issue with. See Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 9.

¹⁹ Lewis, 598.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

situation where he can be injured” (italics his).²¹ God chooses to put himself at risk to suffer because he desires to exercise his love, which may or may not be reciprocated. By “choosing” I mean God possesses libertarian freedom to have chosen otherwise (all things being equal) to suffer in love, which implies that suffering that is motivated by love is facilitated by free will.²² To be clear I am not defending the passibilist view—what I call strong passibility—that says that a loving God must suffer, because this entails that in order for God to love he necessarily (in the modal sense) suffers. The logical conclusion is that since God is love, and since he is also eternal, he has always suffered within the immanent Trinity even prior (logically not chronologically) to Creation, which is to deny the blissfulness and blessedness of God.

But what of the passibilist view—what I call weak passibility—that says that for God to love he necessarily (in a non-modal sense) suffers? This view differs from strong passibility because weak passibility holds that God suffers because of the creation, but more importantly there is only one way God loves and that is by being emotionally affected by his creation. With that said I would like to evaluate the opening quote of my paper, which speaks to the love all people experience, including God. “There can be no love without suffering. Suffering in its widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of or in relation to another.”²³ *Prima facie* Daniel Day Williams’ statement seems to be advocating the weak passibilist view. In context however his definition of love as “act and suffering” places him in the category of weak impassibility. In *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*, Williams *emphasizes* the aspect of God’s love that resonates most deeply with most people—affectionate love—the love that enables a concrete

²¹ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 61 (cited in text as *TCSG*).

²² If God suffers he suffers either voluntarily or involuntarily. To hold to the latter denotes that God has no choice in becoming emotionally involved with his creation. To hold to the former denotes that God willingly desires to become emotionally affected. This view has been called *weak* impassibility opposed to *strong* impassibility, which entails that God cannot be affected voluntarily or involuntarily by his creation.

²³ Williams, 117.

subject and object to enter into reciprocal relations. He does not however dismiss love as action—benevolent love—the love that enables people to perform good acts for other persons, which does not necessarily involve emotional reciprocity. Fyodor Dostoevsky’s existential quote (mentioned earlier), on the other hand, does seem to limit God’s love to affection only. The quote starts by saying, “We can *truly* love only with suffering and through suffering” (emphasis mine). One can argue that Dostoevsky like Williams is focusing on the deepest recesses of human longing for personal transformation via existential relationality. But the quote ends with “we don’t know how to love otherwise; we don’t know any other love. I want to suffer so that I may love.”²⁴ In my opinion Dostoevsky is propounding the weak passibilist position.²⁵ I employ these examples to tease out the finer distinction between weak impassibility and weak passibility.

Strong Impassibilists like Richard E. Creel argue that “Love is God’s very nature, and to love is to care about and act for the good of the beloved.”²⁶ Creel is faithfully forwarding the definition of divine love he inherited from the church fathers (excluding the Cappadocians) and the medieval theologians before him. For example, according to orthodox theologians like St. Augustine, the part of the divine psyche that is responsible for love is the *will* and not the *emotions*. For instance, “Augustine . . . distinguished between emotions and moral actions as far as the perfect love of God is concerned: ‘[God’s] pity is not the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer . . . the pity of God is the goodness of his help . . . when God pities, he does not grieve . . . he liberates.’”²⁷ *In nuce*, God is

²⁴ Dostoevsky, 215.

²⁵ Moreover, I believe Dostoevsky has the relationship between love and suffering backwards: “I want to suffer so that I may love.” Suffering does not necessarily entail love since one can suffer, say, from a tragic accident, which has nothing to do with love. However, to be gracious to the spirit of the text, he may be saying something like “suffering is a fact of *life*: life is relationality and all relationships hurt or disappoint in some way.” In this sense, I am inclined to agree with him. But even if the terms “suffer” and “love” are transposed so that the quote reads “I want to *love* so I can *suffer*,” he still has not gotten himself out of the love-as-affection-only category, which I argue against.

²⁶ Creel, 19.

²⁷ Augustine, *Contra Adversarium Legis et Prophetarum*, 1.40, trans. J.K. Mozley; quoted in *TCSG*, 17.

incapable of suffering. The key to understanding Augustine’s view of impassibility, according to Paul Fiddes, is that “ ‘affects are effects’ for God: he is not affected in his feelings by our sufferings, but he effects relief for us.”²⁸ Thus, God is incapable of blessing and being blessed by affectionate love; he can only bless others with benevolent love.

In contrast to this strong impassibilist concept of divine love, weak impassibilists conceptualize what I believe to be a better understanding of divine love by synthesizing affectionate love and benevolent love into a full-orbed concept of divine love. Weak impassibilists like Fiddes argue that God not only “effects relief” for his beloved by willing and doing good things for them, more importantly, he “affects relief” for them by sharing their sufferings in mutual fellowship in order to meet a basic need of personal affection—empathy.²⁹ (In this sense, God not only suffers *because* of his creatures and *for* his creatures to save them he also suffers *with* his creatures in order to strengthen and comfort them³⁰ psychologically so they feel hopeful and assured that God has not abandoned them emotionally during their darkest hour of need.³¹) I believe benevolent love has merits. But as Marcel Sarot rightly points out “[N]othing can surpass the idea of a God Who gave up part of His happiness in order to share the rest of it with His creation.” I believe Sarot is appealing

²⁸ *TCSG*, 17.

²⁹ Linda Zagzebski proposes that an omniscient being must have “total” (perfect) empathy with all conscious beings. She calls this divine property omnisubjectivity. Linda Zagzebski, “Omnisubjectivity,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 242. At this point I am not yet arguing that the concept of an omniscient God entails that he knows all the conscious experiences of his creatures (I argue that shortly.) Rather, I am proposing that a perfectly loving God entails that he loves by effecting and affecting relief for his creatures.

³⁰ Ohlrich, 88. *À la* Ohlrich, the fact that God suffers *for* us to save and suffers *with* us to strengthen and comfort is the fulfillment of “divine suffering love.” *Ibid.*

³¹ Sarot quotes Hugh Bickley’s story as a hospital chaplain: “ ‘I onced asked a patient who was a very close person to me and knew that he was dying what he looked for above all in the persons around him. He quickly replied, ‘For someone to look as if they’re trying to understand me and give a damn.’ I may not be able to fully know the grief of the terminally ill patient, but empathy explains how we may grieve with him and to some degree share his experience in an understanding manner.’ ” Hugh J. Bickley, “Communications, as Ministry, with the Terminally Ill,” *Abstracts of Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 8 (1979), 108; Sarot, 79. If empathy is in fact an essential component of love (granted it is a sufficient component), it seems strange not to ascribe empathy to God, who maximally possesses all perfections, particularly love.

to perfect being theology to substantiate weak impassibility as the better alternative within the im/passibility debate (and I agree with him).

He goes on to say,

In the first place, one can admire, worship, and even love_i [affectionately love] a blissfully impassible God, but the love_i can never be mutual. Of course God can and will be loving_b [benevolently loving] towards those who believe in Him, but He cannot love_i them in return. But then, in spite of the nobility of God's love_b, human beings will miss something. They will miss the mutuality that is characteristic of love_b, they will miss the feeling that they are important for God, that they themselves and what they do really matter to God. It is not that God is indifferent—one cannot accuse a perfectly loving_b being of that, but that He is emotionally out of reach.³²

But not only will human beings miss the mutual fellowship with an affectionate God, God misses these opportunities to know everything about his creation. This implies that a God who does not have experiential knowledge of what happens temporally in his creation is not omniscient.³³ I argue that for God to be all-knowing he must not only have propositional or intellectual knowledge of all tenseless facts he must also have experiential knowledge (knowledge by acquaintance) of all irreducibly tensed facts. Take for example a woman suffering from terminal cancer. As God's perfect propositional knowledge would have it, he has exhaustive epistemic awareness of the actual state of affairs of her suffering, say, the dates, times, and locations of her chemotherapy treatments. But this knowledge seems limited to *all* the facts of the matter; namely, the woman's conscious experience of suffering at the exact moment ("now" moment) of each of her chemo treatments. If God is impassible he cannot feel the feeling of her suffering or empathize with her emotions "because a copy of an emotion is an emotion."³⁴ Broadly speaking, the qualia (personal subjective

³² Ibid., 89.

³³ I concur with Zagzebski who attests that "an omniscient being would have to have the deepest grasp of every object of knowledge, including the conscious states of every creature." Zagzebski, 232.

³⁴ Ibid., 243. But how does God empathize or feel our emotions? Zagzebski suggests that the mechanism by which God empathizes is his direct epistemic access to first-person points of view. But does omnisubjectivity not imply that God experiences our first-person experiences as *his own* first-person experiences so that when I say, "I feel sick" God also says, "I feel sick," rather than "I know what it feels like for Chester to feel sick"? No! God retains his own

experience) of what it feels like for conscious beings to experience a spectrum of emotions including suffering, forever eludes an impassible God. I do not believe it is a stretch to say that if the knowledge of an impassible God is limited, then he is a quasi-maximal great being. According to the example given, an impassible God is limited in his knowledge by acquaintance of tensed facts. Thus, God is a quasi-maximal great being. But God is not a quasi-maximal great being. He is a maximally great being. Thus, God must not be impassible. Which is to say God must be passible in some way.

2 Biblical-Theological Arguments for Weak Impassibility

This section is bifurcated into two parts: The Pathos of God in the Old Testament, and The Pathos of God in the New Testament.

2.1 The Pathos of God in the Old Testament

Some theologians argue that there is no clearer picture of God's suffering than a literal interpretation of what the Hebrew prophets have recorded in the Tanakh. Moses records God's pathos as early as Genesis: "5Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Gn 6:5-6).³⁵ Far from being a *sui generis* historical event, God routinely suffered *because of* and *with* his beloved—Israel. Consider Isaiah 63:9: "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old." Isaiah goes

first-person perspective when he empathizes. That is, he has a dual perspective when he feels what others feel. Empathy is a copy of an emotion it is not identical to the target emotion. Zagzebski explains it this way: "Empathetic grief or anger is never exactly the same as the grief or anger with which empathizes because the empathizer is aware of her emotion as a copy, whereas the target emotion is not a copy of anything." She goes on to say that "the empathizer does not adopt the intentional object of the target emotion as her own intentional object." Ibid., 240.

³⁵ All biblical passages cited are taken from the NASB, unless indicated otherwise.

on to say, “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” (v. 10a). Also, in Hosea 11:8e, God says, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” (NIV). Ohlrich interprets it this way: “In the context here it describes upheaval, turmoil. The word translated ‘aroused’ literally means ‘contracted’ and implies that God’s compassion is deeply affected, even to the point of being in spasm. God is saying, ‘My heart is moved to its depths! I am in turmoil.’”³⁶ God’s personal involvement (emotional investment) as he endures through time and space with the world is telling: Throughout the OT God is said to be “sorry” (or “grieved”) causing his “heart” to be “moved to its depths” because of his covenant-love for Israel. T. E. Pollard calls the covenant God of Israel “the *Living God*” (italics his).³⁷ And Abraham Heschel adds that the “prophetic consciousness of God” is defined by the notion that “God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos.”³⁸

2.1.1 An Appeal to Anthropomorphisms with Objections

At this point a critic of weak impassibility may demur by appealing to anthropomorphism. That is, she may claim that the only way God can communicate to the world is through allegorical language. According to Calvin, God uses anthropomorphisms because “we cannot comprehend him as he is.”³⁹ And so, God graciously accommodates the knowledge of himself to us by “lisp[ing] with us as nurses are wont to do with children.”⁴⁰ Karl Barth, on the other hand, admonishes those who doubt that literal truth can underlie the biblical author’s figurative language: “It would be most unwise . . .

³⁶ Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP 1982), 51.

³⁷ T. E. Pollard, “The Impassibility of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955): 354.

³⁸ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 4.

³⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Bible Commentaries: Genesis, Part 1*, trans. John King (New York: Forgotten Books, 2007), 176.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 66.

to try to understand what the Bible says about God’s repentance as if it were merely figurative. For what truth is denoted by the ‘figure’ if we are not to deny that there is an underlying truth?”⁴¹ Gordon Lewis puts it succinctly: “All of these anthropomorphic expressions are figurative, but the figures of speech illustrate a nonfigurative point.”⁴² In other words, biblical authors use phenomenological language to communicate factual information. To say then that God has no emotions because he has no “heart” is like saying that God has no foreknowledge because he has no “eyes” to foresee. The truth is that just as God foreknows all truths about reality, he also experiences the joys and sorrows of his creation. So when Hosea writes that God’s “heart” is grieved for Israel, he does not intend for his *words* to be interpreted literally, but he does desire to convey a literal *message*—God is passionately concerned for his people.

2.2 The Pathos of God in the New Testament

This section is bifurcated into two parts: The Traditional Doctrine of the Hypostatic Union with Objections, and Revising Morris’ “Asymmetric Accessing Relations.”

2.2.1 The Doctrine of the Hypostatic Union with Objections

God is so passionately concerned for his people that he incarnated himself to be sacrificed in order to atone for the sins of the world. The doctrine of the hypostatic union—one person subsisting in two natures (divine and human) was codified at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 (although the concept goes back further). Accordingly, these two distinct natures co-exist substantively “without division and without separation” (*ἀδιαίρετως καὶ ἀχωρίστως*) in the *unio personalis* (“personal union”)

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *CD II/1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 498.

⁴² Lewis, 598.

of Christ. Passibility was said to be a property of the human nature, unlike impassibility, which was said to be a property of the divine nature. Commenting on this union without confusion of the two natures, Aquinas argues, “The Passion [of Christ] is to be attributed to the suppositum of the Divine Nature, not because of the Divine Nature, which is impassible, but by reason of the human nature.”⁴³ *In nuce*, only by his human nature does God the Son suffer.

With good reason some modern theologians react harshly to this dogma. T. E. Pollard argues, “To say that the Son of God, as divine, is impassible is to assert that the divine in Christ was unaffected by the human; and therefore that there is no *real* Incarnation, or if there is an Incarnation, it is *meaningless*” (italics mine).⁴⁴ Put differently, to say that the Logos is impassible makes the Incarnation Docetic, since God merely appears to be “man.” I believe that for the doctrine of the Incarnation to be understood as meaningful there must exist a communication of attributes from the human nature to the divine nature in order to affect *totus Christus* (“the whole person of Christ”) and a communication of attributes from the divine nature to the human nature in order to affect *totus Christus*.

2.2.2 Revising Morris’ “Asymmetric Accessing Relation”

Thomas V. Morris formulates such a proposal (albeit not with *natures*) regarding the accessing relation between the divine and human *minds* of Christ:

We can view the two ranges of consciousness (and, analogously, the two noetic structures encompassing them) as follows: The divine mind of God the Son contained, but was not contained by, his earthly mind, or range of consciousness. That is to say, there was what can be called an asymmetric accessing relation between the two minds. Think, for example, of two computer programs or informational systems, one containing but not contained by the other. The divine mind had full and direct access to the earthly, human experience resulting from the Incarnation, but the earthly consciousness did not have such full and direct access

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas *ST* III. Q.46. *A*.12.

⁴⁴ Pollard, 363.

to the content of the overarching omniscience proper to the Logos, but only such access, on occasion, as the divine mind allowed it to have. There thus was a metaphysical and personal depth to the man Jesus lacking in the case of every individual who is merely human.⁴⁵

The Logos encompassing the full scope of omniscience had *direct* epistemic access to the mortal mental life of the *theanthrōpos* (“God-man”) enabling the divine mind to know fully what was happening in the created mind of Christ. Also the human consciousness acquired knowledge of the divine consciousness, but its epistemic access of the divine may have been denied on occasion.

On this point John Hick offers a helpful critique of Morris’ model:

[Morris is mainly concerned with] the cognitive relationship between the two minds, divine and human. These are seen as repositories of information, as noetic structures or belief-systems; and the theory is concerned with the way and the extent to which each mind is conscious of the contents of the other. But such a view of mental life is one-dimensional.... For a living consciousness is not only a noetic structure but a dynamic activity, processing information received through the senses, continuously exercising a power of choice and decision, adopting attitudes, exerting oneself volitionally; and one perceives the world with varying affective tones, and feels emotions which are sometimes powerful and determining.⁴⁶

Hick is right to point out that Morris’ “asymmetric accessing relation” only captures the noetic aspect of consciousness and not the “dynamic activity.” The two ranges of consciousness—human *and* divine—within the person of Christ are a multi-dimensional matter. As a weak impassibilist I would like to employ Morris’ “asymmetric accessing relation” of the Incarnation model, while making a few adjustments.

First, dynamic human and divine characteristics need to be incorporated into the two minds view of the person of Christ. In other words, while maintaining the limited access of the human mind to the divine, the human consciousness of Christ was for the most part incapable of accessing the intellectual contents of God, and then again, the Logos may have allowed it to indirectly experience his emotional life. For example, Jesus at times had imperfect access to propositional

⁴⁵ Thomas V. Morris, “The Two Minds View of the Incarnation,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, gen. ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 573.

⁴⁶ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005), 50-1.

truths like the Second Coming (Mk 13:32). While other times, he embodied the wrath of God, such as when he cleansed the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers (Mt 21:12-13). And while maintaining the direct and full access of the divine mind to the human, I concur with Hick's implication that the Logos should have been emotionally affected by his own human experiences. These temporal events include (but are not limited to) the death of his friend Lazarus of Bethany (Jn 11:33-36), his blood-sweating prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:39-46), and, of course, the Crucifixion (Mk 15:22-41).⁴⁷ Thus, when the divine mind had direct and full intellectual and experiential access to the suffering of the human mind, the Logos suffered, which means the whole person suffered.

Second, the "asymmetric accessing relation" the Son of God enjoys with his incarnate mind needs to be properly grounded. There does not appear to be any significant difference between the "asymmetric accessing relation" of the divine mind to the human mind of Christ, and the "asymmetric accessing relation" of the divine mind to all human minds. Oliver D. Crisp makes the issue clear: "If this is the case [the two minds view of Christ], what distinguishes the epistemic access the Second Person of the Trinity has to the mind of Christ, as opposed to, say, the access he has to my mind?"⁴⁸ Morris addresses the issue by claiming that the Son of God enjoys a particular "metaphysical and personal depth to the man Jesus lacking in the case of every individual who is merely human."⁴⁹ That is, the Logos enjoys "unique metaphysical ownership"⁵⁰ of the human mind

⁴⁷ Barth, who seems to subscribe to a Christology of *genus apotelesmaticum* ("apotelesmatic genus"), inculcates this point by maintaining that the dual natures of the *theanthrōpos* were affected by his human experiences: "God Himself speaks when this man speaks in human speech. God Himself acts and suffers when this man acts and suffers as a man. God Himself triumphs when this One triumphs as a man" Karl Barth *CD IV/2* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 49. Jürgen Moltmann as does Barth believes that the Cross is an epistemic starting point for understanding the whole person of Christ, whom the Apostle Paul calls "the image of the invisible" (Col 1:15). I will let Moltmann speak for himself: "When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God', the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*.... The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about 'God' is to be found in this Christ event. The Christ event on the cross is a God event." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: SCM, 1974), 205 (emphases his).

⁴⁸ Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 158.

of Christ, which he does not have with other minds. I believe this is intuitively correct; however, I believe more can be said to better flush this out. Richard Sturch provides such an explanation.

He proposes a theory which he calls “central self,” which is encapsulated by “an awareness on the part of the Logos . . . that the human life ‘accessed’ *His own*.” That is, “the eternal Logos is aware that the thoughts [as well as the emotions], etc. of Jesus the Nazarene are His own. Jesus’ human, bodily causal powers [volition], however, are not those of the Logos, except at one remove, in that they are those of the man with whom the Logos is one.”⁵¹ There are two explicit concepts from this quote I will briefly discuss: (1) the access of the divine “central self” to *his own* human consciousness, and (2) the distinction between the causal powers of the human and divine.

First, the ontological “ownership” of the mental life of the human by the Logos is particular to the Second Person of the Trinity because he experiences it from the perspective of first-person—*de se*—awareness not only from a third-person—*de re*—awareness. That is, when Christ suffered by his human experiences he was not merely aware of these states indirectly but directly, which entails unique metaphysical ownership. For example, during the Incarnation, if one of Jesus’ disciples were to have asked him what it felt like to have been flogged, Christ may have responded like this: “*I* felt every lead ball and piece of bone tied to the ends of the Roman flagellum flaying open *my* flesh”; “*I* felt *my* blood drip down *my* back, chest, and legs”; “*I* felt like *I* was a lamb led to the slaughter.” He would not have limited his response to: “I was aware of every lead ball and piece of bone tied to the ends of the Roman flagellum flaying open *his* flesh”; or “I was aware of *his* blood dripping down *his* back, chest, and legs”; or “I was aware that *he* was a lamb led to the slaughter.” No! It was through

⁴⁹ Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 103.

⁵⁰ Crisp, 158.

⁵¹ Richard Sturch, *The Word and the Christ: An Essay in Analytic Christology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 133.

his “central self” that the Logos accessed *his own* human life.⁵² The first-*person* perspective of suffering implies the direct suffering of the *totus Christus*. Thus, I conclude that Sturch’s theory best explains what a modified version of Morris’ “asymmetric accessing relation” (*hereafter* MVAAR) asserts.

Second, what are we to make of the assertion that the human consciousness enjoyed a separate freedom from the divine? *Prima facie* to allow for dual freedoms seems to open up the possibility of tension between the two minds of Christ, since the human mind could have chosen to do or believe something that the divine mind did not approve. Obviously, we know that God incarnate did not sin. The question is, however, could he have sinned *in his human mind*? Theologians who have wanted to safeguard against this possibility have espoused the view that the will of Jesus *qua* human was identical to the will of Jesus *qua* divine. In other words, Jesus had only one will. This view, however, was condemned as heretical (monothelite heresy) at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. “The council was concerned to preserve Jesus’ full humanity, including his human will, and appealed to such texts as ‘I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which has sent me’ (John 5.30) and ‘Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me; nevertheless, not what I will but what thou wilt’ (Mark 14.36).”⁵³ Most modern theologians prefer the traditional view that Christ had a human and divine will. And of those theologians who hold to orthodox Christology, they explain away the tension that Christ could have actually sinned in his humanity by saying that if Jesus had in fact tried to sin, his divine will would have intervened and prevented him. The problem with this view is that it also explains away the meaning of the word “free” in free will. If the Logos had stopped the human will of Jesus from sinning (as noble as the idea appears), the divine act would have deliberately tampered with his “free” will relegating the notion of will to a diminutive

⁵² I would like to be clear that I am not denying the reality and/or importance of the third-person perspective of Christ’s suffering whereby we commonly attest that *he* in fact suffered. Rather, I am highlighting the necessity of the first-person perspective whereby the Second Person of the Trinity was fully aware of his own consciousness in statements such as “*My* God, *my* God, why have You forsaken *me*?” (Mk 15:34, emphases mine; cf. Ps 22:1)

⁵³ Hick, 56.

kind of freedom (compatibilism?), which if possible should be passed over for a more robust kind of freedom (libertarianism). But this brings us back to the problem we started with; that is, if Christ enjoyed dual freedoms—divine and human—choosing to sin was a real possibility for Christ *qua* human. Or was it? I hold to Christ’s divine and human freedom but I do not believe Christ could have sinned in this world. But how is this possible? I believe the tension can be solved if we employ an account of divine providence stemming from the writings of Luis de Molina.

Thomas P. Flint helps to explicate the Molinist account:

God’s exercise of providence is dependent upon His middle knowledge—His knowledge of contingent truths over which He has no control. The truths in this category that are of greatest interest to us are what I have elsewhere called *counterfactuals of creaturely freedom*. These counterfactuals are conditionals that, speaking loosely, tell God how any creature who does or might exist would freely act in any set of circumstances in which that creature could be created and left free. Given His knowledge of such counterfactuals, God can, by carefully selecting both beings He creates and the situations in which He places them, arrange things in such a way that His goals for the world are attained with certainty, but attained largely through the free acts of His creatures rather than through His causally determinative initiatives (emphasis his).⁵⁴

Molinism entails that God selects and actualizes a possible world from an infinite amount of possible worlds. He actualizes the world where people behave freely in circumstances he chooses to bring about his goals. The genius of this view is that God remains sovereign over his creation and human beings remain free to choose.⁵⁵ Before we forget the mystery we are trying to solve, Flint reminds us (by employing *natures* instead of *minds*): “Our quandary . . . is how to ascribe to the Son the impeccability his divine nature entails while also ascribing to him the kind of freedom his human nature and salvific mission seem to involve.”⁵⁶ So what exactly is Molina’s contribution to the Christological puzzle? There is no possible world in which the assumed human mind sins. That is, if

⁵⁴ Thomas P. Flint, “The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions,” in *A Reader in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 186.

⁵⁵ This is not to say that Molinism is without its problems, one of which is The Grounding Objection, which rightly critiques how God could possess “middle” knowledge.

⁵⁶ Flint, 188.

Christ's human mind is assumed by the divine, then the human mind remains sinless.⁵⁷ But does being sinless entail being unable to sin? Flint answers in the negative because Christ's human mind needed such freedom.⁵⁸

À la Flint, it follows then that

God must have arranged things in such a way that (i) CHN [Christ's Human Nature] was placed in *freedom-retaining circumstances* (i.e. circumstances that left open to CHN the genuine option to sin), and yet (ii) CHN did not in fact sin in those circumstances. And how did God manage to arrange things in this way? By employing His middle knowledge as to how CHN would freely react if placed in various different circumstances. Given this middle knowledge, God decided both to assume CHN and to place it only in those circumstances in which He saw that CHN would freely avoid sin (emphasis his).⁵⁹

In nuce, God employed his “middle” knowledge or knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom to actualize the possible world where Christ *qua* human never sinned even though he possessed the freedom to choose.

3 Philosophical-Theological-Biblical Arguments for Atonement

I have labored to set up a philosophical, theological, and biblical backdrop for the purposes of the Atonement, which should help answer this family of questions: What did the crucifixion of God the Son accomplish in the past? What does the crucifixion of God the Son accomplish in the present? and What is the causal relationship between the purposes of the crucifixion? Sections 1 and 2 have demonstrated that God can and does suffer *with* and *because of* his creation. Now in section 3 I would like to discuss what it means for God to suffer *for us* on the cross, and what “God who suffered *for us* on the cross” means for us *today*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Molina's Christological solution also helps us understand how CHM (Christ's Human Mind) could have always maintained perfect knowledge of all propositional truths, so CHM did not employ any false beliefs about the actual world.

If Jesus is God, and God suffers, then Jesus suffers. But what does the suffering and death of God the Son on the cross *for us* accomplish that his life did not? Atonement! Generally speaking, when theologians use the word Atonement it means to be at-one-ment with God the Father through Christ. In what follows I provide five brief views of Atonement with equally brief objections.

3.1 Five Brief Views of Atonement with Objections⁶⁰

The five views of Atonement I will discuss include *Christus Victor*, “recapitulation,” satisfaction, penal substitution, and moral influence.

3.1.1 The *Christus Victor* Model of Atonement⁶¹

Generally speaking, the *Christus Victor* model of Atonement entails that at the Cross God through Christ defeated Satan and all evil (Heb 2:14; 1 Jn 3:8). This spiritual warfare motif illustrates that through Christ’s victory all things have been reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-20; Col 1:20-22). As true as this may be, one critique that may be leveled at *Christus Victor* is that it is lacking a mechanism of the Atonement. In other words, asserting Christ’s victory over evil does not demonstrate *how* Christ defeated it.

3.1.2 The “Recapitulation” Model of Atonement

Irenaeus described his Atonement theory as “recapitulation.” That is, Christ via Incarnation unites himself with his workmanship, particularly sinful human beings, to represent them, and by some

⁶⁰ I would like the reader to know that I am aware that other models of Atonement exist like governmental, scapegoating, healing, etc. However, I chose this particular cluster of theories because I will combine them to form a meta-Atonement-like model in § 4.

⁶¹ I would like the reader to know that I am also aware that ransom theories are typically associated with *Christus Victor* motifs. However, I chose not to employ them because I disagree with the overall concept of Jesus having to ransom God’s creation from Satan.

mechanism of Atonement he creates a new humanity in order to present it to the Father. Simply put, “Christ both sums up and restores humanity.”⁶² It is the Incarnation that makes recapitulation possible.⁶³ Recapitulation, however, needs a mechanism of Atonement in order for it to work. This is not so much an objection against “recapitulation” as it is an awareness of its limitations.

3.1.3 The Satisfaction Model of Atonement

In the Middle Ages, with the cultural milieu of feudal obligation for vassals to pay honor to their lords, the human predicament of sin before God was seen as humans/vassals failing to pay honor due to their Lord/lord. God’s honor could only be satisfied or restored if “the debt of honour were paid—either by compensation or by penalty inflicted.”⁶⁴ And because an infinite God had been dishonoured by finite creatures God could not be satisfied by their penalty. Enter Jesus Christ—the God-man. St. Anselm writes that “none but God *can* make [atonement for sin] and none but man *ought* to make [it], [thus] it is necessary for the God-man to make it” (emphases mine);⁶⁵ hence, the title of his magnum opus, *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why Did God Become Human?”). One critique against the satisfaction model is that a benevolent God is free to forgive sinners without any strings attached. That is, a loving and good God does not need to hold a grudge and demand penalty until his honor has been restored.

⁶² Joel B. Greene and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 120.

⁶³ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 122.

⁶⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 8 (cited in text as *PEPS*).

⁶⁵ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 2.6.

3.1.4 The Penal Substitution Model of Atonement (*hereafter* PSA)

A cultural paradigm shift resulted from the time of the Middle Ages to the Protestant Reformation. The cultural milieu went from a feudal system of government to a criminal justice system. And thus, the feudal system of restoring a debt of honor either by compensation or penalty inflicted became the legal system of restoring a (legal) debt satisfying the wrath of God by penalty only. Paul S. Fiddes comments on the Creator-creature estrangement: “[The predicament] was understood in terms of there being law-breakers, summoned to receive condemnation at the divine bar of justice. Atonement, correspondingly, was a matter of satisfying not so much the honour of God as the demands of his Law, with Jesus punished as a substitute for guilty humankind.”⁶⁶ An objection against PSA is that if Christ paid for our sins in order to appease the wrath of God, then it makes God the Father a vengeful Creator whom Christ (thankfully) saves us from.⁶⁷

3.1.5 The Moral Influence/Exemplary Model of Atonement

On this view, God’s love through Christ’s obedience to God in life and death on the cross inspires human beings to love like Christ.

Peter Abelard puts it best when he says,

[I]t seems to us that in this [redemption] we are justified in the blood of Christ and reconciled to God, that it was through this matchless grace shown to us that his Son received our nature, and in that nature, teaching us both by word and by example, persevered to the death and bound us to himself even more through love, so that when we have been kindled [inspired] by so great a benefit of divine grace, true charity might fear to endure nothing for his sake.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *PEPS*, 9.

⁶⁷ Greene and Baker, 21, 88.

⁶⁸ Peter Abelard, “Commentary in the Epistle to the Romans,” in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright, vol. 12 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2011), 167-68.

One objection traditionally spearheaded against this view commencing with Bernard of Clairvaux is that it is not clear how God's love is restorative and thus objective.

3.2 Modified Moral Influence/Exemplary Model

In this section I present and defend Philip L. Quinn's view of moral influence. It is commonly held that Abelard's moral exemplary motif is purely subjective. Consider Richard Swinburne's statement: "Abelard's exemplary theory of the atonement, that Christ's life and death work to remove our sins by inspiring us to penitence and good acts, contains no objective transaction."⁶⁹ There is evidence, however, that suggests Abelard endorsed other views of Atonement, including PSA.

Consider his commentary on Romans 4:25:

[Christ] is said to have died on account of our transgressions in two ways: at one time because we transgressed, on account of which he died, and we committed sin, the *penalty* of which he bore; at another, that he might take away our sins by dying, that is, *he swept away the penalty for sins by the price of his death*, leading us into paradise, and through the demonstration of so much grace.... (emphases mine).⁷⁰

À la Abelard Christ was punished unto death for our sins sweeping them away so we no longer have to die and thus "leading us into paradise." Commenting on this quote, Philip L. Quinn rightly concludes, "So there is some grist for the exemplarist's mill even here but not for the strong thesis that the *only benefit* conferred on sinful humans by Christ's Passion is an inspiring example of love" (emphasis mine).⁷¹ But how are we to synthesize the content of both quotes—the former (subjective) and the latter (objective) in order to make sense of what Abelard is saying (assuming he is not contradicting himself)?

Quinn enlightens us once again:

⁶⁹ Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 162.

⁷⁰ Abelard, 204.

⁷¹ Philip L. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: 'Nothing Unintelligent, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral About It,'" in *A Reader in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 343.

It does seem fair to say that the dominant motif in Abelard's [*manward aspect of the Atonement*] is the power of love in us through Christ's Passion to transform us both by freeing us from slavery to sin and, more important, by winning for us the positive Christian liberty to do all things out of love for God. *Godward aspects of Atonement*, such as paying a debt of punishment owed to divine retributive justice, are relegated to distinctly subordinate roles in Abelard's account. But they are not altogether absent.... (emphases mine).⁷²

I think Quinn is right in subsuming the objective Godward aspects of Atonement under the subjective manward aspect of Atonement in Abelard. This interpretation takes a more holistic approach to understanding Abelard, which Quinn builds from in order to make a contribution to the moral exemplary motif. Because Quinn believes Abelard falls short (in the opening quote) of stressing the interior transformative power of God's love, which "exceeds any merely human example's power to inspire,"⁷³ he insists that human beings should stress that "there is in [the love of God for us exhibited in the life of Christ] a surplus of mysterious causal efficacy that no merely human love possesses." He continues, "And the operation of divine love in that supernatural mode is a causally necessary condition of there being implanted or kindled in us the kind of responsive love of God that, as Abelard supposes, enables us to do all things out of love and so to conquer the motives that would otherwise keep us enslaved to sin."⁷⁴ That is, it is the love of God in us that conditionally enables us to be motivated by Love to love God and others. *In nuce*, God's love necessarily changes us from the inside out. This revised moral influence theory not only seems to be in accord with the spirit of what Abelard is saying *if* one reads him systematically, it also, and more importantly, seems to be in line with Scripture: "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Thus, for a theory of Atonement to be complete it must incorporate both objective and subjective aspects like Quinn's modified moral exemplary motif (*hereafter* MMEM). (I will later employ MMEM into a meta-Atonement model.) To be clear, the goal of my paper is not to argue for a definitive

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 347.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 348.

mechanism of Atonement. My goal is to offer a tenable defense of what it means to say, “God suffered on the Cross *for us*” in relation to what that divine pathos means for us today. But before I address the question “What does ‘God suffered on the Cross *for us*’ mean for us *today*?” I need to address the question “What does it mean to say ‘God suffered on the cross *for us*?’”

3.3 God Suffered on the Cross *For Us*?⁷⁵

Because Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, and because Jesus suffered on the Cross, then God the Son suffered on the Cross. (Recall that employing MVAAR entails that whatever the human consciousness experienced the same can be said of the divine since he enjoyed direct and full access to *his own* mortal mental life.) Obviously, death via crucifixion is a brutal way to die. But more than just being a means to inflict physical trauma execution in first-century Palestine was associated with shame and humiliation, since only criminals were publically crucified as a way to deter crime. But Jesus had nothing to be ashamed of. He led a perfect, sinless life. (If he was ashamed it was vicarious.) No, rather Christ *qua* human and *qua* divine felt the physical pain of being crucified alive and the humiliation of being rejected by the world.

Via Christ’s passive obedience—suffering the consequences and judgment of sin—on the Cross he took the place of sinners. This statement implies a PSA model of Atonement. However, my aim in this section is not to draw out the “P” in PSA but the “S.” Leaving the “P” altogether out, I could say, “Christ died as a *substitute* in our place.” I will now examine some key biblical references

⁷⁵ To be clear, I am not propounding *patripassianism* (“[T]he doctrine that the Father suffered on the cross as well as the Son....” Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009, 460.)). The cause of filial suffering can be adequately distinguished from the cause of paternal suffering. One may be justified in believing that “while the Son suffers on the cross, the Father also suffers *as the Father* in the death of his Son.” Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2000), 16 (emphasis his). Or as I like to put it: God the Father suffers *in himself* because of his Son and the Son suffers *on the cross* because of the world.

for my case interjecting commentary where appropriate followed by an objection to substitutionary atonement.

What does Scripture say Christ did *for us* on the cross? The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:13a: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...” (ESV) Paul is reminding the Galatians that they (and all believers) have been “redeemed” because Christ became a curse. But why a curse? Paul reminds us: “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ ” (v 13b, ESV; cf. Dt 21:23). Obviously, this “tree” is a prophetic symbol of the Cross on which Christ was crucified. In Greek, the word “redeemed” means “to buy back” or “to ransom.” Hermann N. Ridderbos adds, “Paul calls this redemption a being *purchased free from the curse of the law*” (emphasis his).⁷⁶ Ridderbos rightly believes that what is at stake here is “satisfaction of violated justice, as is evident from the phrase: *from the curse of the law*” (emphasis his). He continues, “Behind the imagery employed, there very probably lies the old practice . . . according to which ransom money could be paid for a forfeited life (cf. Ex. 21:30).” Following this line of thinking, “those who were under the curse were to be regarded not merely as prisoners but as persons appointed to die (cf. Deut. 27: 15ff. and 30:15, 19).”⁷⁷ Without taking the NT use of the metaphor of “ransom” too far by which we are tempted to ask the fruitless query “To whom was Christ’s ransom paid?”, I agree with Ridderbos that Paul is probably borrowing from the Jewish legal code, which means that to emancipate oneself from the curse of the law is to “buy back” one’s freedom, and, more importantly, one’s life. Thus, Christ ransomed us from the curse of the Jewish legal code in order buy back our life and freedom.

Colossians 1:22 reads: “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...” (NIV) Paul is

⁷⁶ Hermann N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 126.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-27.

likewise exhorting the church to believe that Christ has “reconciled” believers by his *sarx* (“flesh”) through his death so they can be presented holy to him who is holy. N. T. Wright adds, “God’s purpose, then, is to create a holy people in Christ. This he *has* done in principle, by dealing with sin on the cross and thus already achieving reconciliation. This he *is* doing in practice, by refashioning their lives according to the pattern of the perfect life, that of Christ (see 3:10)” (emphases his).⁷⁸ (The past and present distinction of Atonement and the effects of Atonement will be important for the next section of my paper.) In Greek, the word “reconciled” means “to bring back a former state of harmony.” It is also important to note that it is by means of Christ’s “physical body” that believers have been brought back to a former state of harmony with God.

With connection to Colossians 1:18 (Christ as “the head of the body”), Wright makes several insightful observations that I will quote in full:

- (a) Jesus, as Messiah, represents, and is fully identified with, his people. He shares their ‘fleshly’ existence, so that, though himself without sin, he takes sins consequences on himself, becoming subject to death.
- (b) Jesus is also fully identified with God....
- (c) In Jesus, therefore, God identified himself with the sins of humanity. The cross is simply the outworking of this explosive meeting between the holy God and human sin.
- (d) Those who are members of Jesus’ ‘body’ thus find their sin already condemned in him, themselves reconciled to God.⁷⁹

As with Irenaeus Wright employs the concept of representation (“recapitulation”) by which Christ through his “ ‘fleshly’ existence” solidifies himself with all humanity to take our sins upon himself. At the same time Jesus is fully identified with God, which enables God to identify himself with sinful humanity. And what this “explosive meeting” of a holy God and sinful humanity accomplishes on the Cross is that sin is condemned in Christ so we can be reconciled to God.

⁷⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*, TNTC, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 83.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

And, lastly, in Romans 3:23-24 Paul says, “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” Paul uses the word “grace” to make his case that justification is a gift that would otherwise never be (spiritually) afforded by those who come up short of God’s holy standard, which means everyone—all Jews and Gentiles. In Greek, the word “justification” means “to declare or render righteous.”

Douglas J. Moo is helpful in explaining how Paul distinctly uses the word “justify”:

Paul uses the verb “justify” (*dikaioō*) for the first time in Romans to depict his distinctive understanding of Christian salvation. As Paul uses it in these contexts, the verb ‘justify’ means not ‘to make righteous’ (in an ethical sense) nor simply ‘to treat as righteous’ (though one is really not righteous), but ‘to declare righteous.’ No ‘legal fiction,’ but a legal *reality* of the utmost significance, ‘to be justified’ means to be acquitted by God from all ‘charges’ that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins (emphasis his).⁸⁰

Justification as a gift of grace that declares all believers righteous before God because they have been pardoned by God of all their “charges” that have resulted from their sins.

Through this brief exegetical study I have described what Christ accomplished on the Cross *for us* over 2000 years ago: (i) he ransomed us from the curse of the Law in order buy back our life and freedom; (ii) he was condemned so we can be reconciled and presented holy to God; and (iii) he declared us legally righteous. But not all people share the same appreciation for Christ’s substitutionary Atonement, particularly the concept that Christ was condemned or punished *for us*. Those theologians who are partial to a non-violent Atonement see the violence of the Cross as a work of sinful humanity not of God. God used the Cross as an opportunity to show human beings their violent proclivities. What Christ accomplished on the Cross was “not salvific in and of itself. His death was the consequence of his dedication to his mission....”⁸¹ J. Denny Weaver in his book *The NonViolent Atonement* uses David Brondos as a repetitive mouthpiece to combat the notion that humanity is ontologically changed by Christ’s redemption on the Cross: “In and of itself, Jesus’

⁸⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 227.

⁸¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The NonViolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 64.

death does not effect anything or produce any kind of change in the situation of believers or humanity as a whole.”⁸² Rather, “ ‘What Jesus died for is the same thing he lived for [i.e., his mission].’ When Paul refers repeatedly to the cross, that is not a statement that the cross itself is salvific, but rather a statement that the cross represents everything that Jesus lived and died for....”⁸³ These critiques, however, are not well taken, especially when viewed in light of Scripture. Consider 1 Corinthians 15:3, when Paul makes known to the Corinthians the simple Gospel message: “[T]hat Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures....” The plain, literal, common sense interpretation of this text is confirmed by—“the Scriptures”—OT predictions like Is 53:4-6.

I quote it in full:

⁴Surely our griefs He Himself bore and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him and by His scourging we are healed. ⁶All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

The language cannot be more explicitly substitutionary. Granted some Jewish scholars may argue that this pericope is not deuterо-Isaiah’s account of a literal Suffering Servant but rather a representation of Israel and the suffering she endured through exile. But I do not find this reasoning satisfactory. I do not see a valid reason not to hold that there may be two types of prophetic fulfillments—general and specific. According to the former category, Israel may be represented as a “suffering servant.” But that does not preclude the *full* prophetic fulfillment of Isaiah 53 to be finalized in a specific messianic figure—*Yeshua Ha’Mashiach*—Jesus the Christ.

In sum, I find the argument against substitutionary Atonement posited by Weaver to be unsatisfactory.

⁸² David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle’s Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 76; *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸³ Weaver, 65.

3.4 What Does “God Suffered on the Cross *For Us*” Mean for us Today?

I have argued for what the death of God the Son on the Cross accomplished *then*. Now I will conclude by arguing for what the death of God the Son on the Cross accomplishes *now*.

3.4.1 “Past Event and Present Salvation”⁸⁴

The Atonement is an objective tenseless fact. It cannot be recreated. It is a historical event, granted it is “the very special history of God with man, the very special history of man with God.”⁸⁵ Regardless, it is tenselessly stamped with a date, time, and location, which *can* never and *will* never be repeated. Consider the words of Paul: “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again” (Rom 6:9; cf. Heb 10:10-14). But this makes it sound like the work of Christ is not *en vogue* but mummified on a dotted timeline in a social science textbook. So what makes the work of Christ significant, alive, and relevant *for us today*? Simply put, the person of Christ—“the Son of the *living* God” (Mt 16:16, emphasis mine)—who is not separate from the work of Christ.⁸⁶ God the Son acted in the Atonement and God the Spirit acts today by bringing people to Salvation. Paul Fiddes explains it this way: “While God has certainly acted in the past event of the cross, he goes on acting in the process of salvation, taking the initiative in entering the lives of human beings and lurking them into response.”⁸⁷ Said differently, Atonement is an objective tenseless fact, a past event, and Salvation is a subjective tensed fact, a present event. Karl Barth puts it simply: “Jesus Christ is in fact

⁸⁴ I borrowed this phrase from the title of Paul S. Fiddes’ book *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989).

⁸⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 157.

⁸⁶ One can argue that Christ is God; and God is love; and to love is to act (although love is not only an act; it is also an emotion); thus, the person of Christ cannot be separated from his actions.

⁸⁷ *PEPS*, 27.

yesterday and to-day.”⁸⁸ But then is Salvation a process? I believe so. I am grateful to Kenneth Keathley for his contribution to the doctrine of soteriology with regards to his book *Salvation and Sovereignty*. In it he prescribes a model of Salvation,⁸⁹ which he calls “an ambulatory model of overcoming grace.”⁹⁰

He offers an illustration of an ambulance en route to the hospital, which I believe is helpful, and which I quote in full:

Imagine waking up to find you are being transported by an ambulance to the emergency room. It is clearly evident that your condition requires serious medical help. If you do nothing, you will be delivered to the hospital. However, if for whatever reason you demand to be let out, the driver will comply. He may express regret and give warnings, but he will still let you go. You receive no credit for being taken to the hospital, but you incur the blame for refusing the services of the ambulance.⁹¹

In this thought experiment human beings do nothing to help their condition. Rather, the only thing they do is resist. What I like most about this view of Salvation is that it is monergistic in that sinful humanity does not cooperate with God for its Salvation (rather God is the only one doing the saving), yet it also stays faithful to Scripture when it comes to humanity’s ability to frustrate (or as Keathley puts it “overcome”) the grace of God.⁹² (It also comports with libertarian free will, which I argued for earlier.) I also appreciate that it explains the Spirit’s work in conversion. In my life Salvation was most definitely a process; a process of patience, persistence, and love on God’s part, a process beginning with Atonement. I liken the causal affect of the Cross *then* to Salvation *now* to an illustration of a pearl necklace hung around God’s “neck.” The clasp symbolizes the Atonement

⁸⁸ Barth *CD IV/1*, 292.

⁸⁹ Keathley borrows from Richard Cross’ article “Anti-Pelagianism and the Resistability of Grace,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22:2 (April 2005).

⁹⁰ Keathley, 104.

⁹¹ Cross, 207; *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹² The example of Jesus reprimanding the Scribes and Pharisees comes to mind: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and *you were unwilling.*” Mt 23:37 (emphasis mine)

without which Salvation would cease to exist. There is one clasp but many pearls or Salvation experiences. When a sinner does not resist his/her transport to the ER s/he is embraced by God. S/he is like a precious jewel redeemed from a hard-shelled oyster (representing sin) and strung together with other pearls on a string around God's "neck." Like I mentioned earlier, the clasp on the necklace represents Atonement. Without the clasp the necklace would be a useless fiction. Likewise without the once-and-for-all Atonement the process of spiritual conversion would be a moot point.⁹³ The Atonement *then* enables there to be Salvation *now*. Moreover, Salvation is actualized when people believe and receive the Gospel by grace through faith. Assuredly, I agree with Scripture that faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8), but that does not preclude the fact that people are empowered with the choice to receive or reject God's gift of faith. And those who accept God's calling into his kingdom are also called to obedience in Christ-likeness (cruciformity).

3.4.2 Cruciformity

MMEM entails living virtuously and loving in Christ-likeness. And living and loving as Christ entails obedience to God. Christ himself reminds us, "If you love me, keep my commands" (Jn 14:15, NIV; cf. 1 Jn 5:3). Inevitably, obedience to God invites religious persecution. But cruciformity as obedience to God via virtuous living and religious persecution is impossible without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Michael J. Gorman puts it this way: "Cruciformity misunderstood as the human imitation of Christ is indeed an impossibility. However, cruciformity is the initial and ongoing work of Christ himself—by his Spirit sent by God—who dwells within each

⁹³ To be clear, I am not demanding that Salvation is always a process. No! The process is contingent. That is, it is up to the sinner: How long will s/he continue to resist God's grace? I am also not arguing that Atonement was a process as some theologians proclaim when they incorporate Christ's active obedience in conjunction with his passive obedience to Atonement. These theologians say that Atonement was not limited to the redemptive suffering of the cross but it extended to Jesus' life and ministry. I am not necessarily ruling this explanation of Atonement out of the realm of theological possibilities. The scope of this paper, however, limits me from proceeding further. But I would like to say that Resurrection as a different temporal event than Crucifixion does imply some kind of procession. Thus, one could make a case that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was all one atoning event.

believer and believing community, shaping them to carry on the story (Phil. 4:13).”⁹⁴ Similar to Philip L. Quinn’s view of moral influence by which God’s redemptive suffering in love on the Cross initiates our ability to love like Christ and thus be conformed to his image (cruciformity), Gorman is proposing that all forms of Christ-likeness, including suffering for God (the cause of Christ), are necessarily Spirit-inspired. A life of service and suffering is what Christians are proudly adopted into and what we joyfully embrace as the “cost” of discipleship. I am aware that it seems counterintuitive and even disturbing to utter the words “proud” and “joyful” in the same breath as “suffering.” But suffering as Christians for the purpose of disseminating the Gospel is not something we should be ashamed of or take pity in. Consider the Apostle Paul’s shocking declarations: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes....” (Rom 1:16) and “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your [the Colossians] sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24).⁹⁵ But is Paul promoting masochism? After all did he not say, “I rejoice in my sufferings”? And should we not be concerned that Paul seems to be diminishing the redemptive work of Christ while elevating his own human merit? After all did he not say, “I do my share on behalf of His body . . . in *filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions*”? If not, what might Paul have meant by the clause “In my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling

⁹⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 400.

⁹⁵ Granted Paul is referring to volitional sufferings in the name of Christ. So what are we to make of sufferings that Christians endure that are not intentional such as, say, cancer? John Piper has written on this exact topic in his book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* in a section entitled “Is There A Difference Between Conflict and Cancer?” I quote him in full: “The most significant difference between sickness and persecution is that persecution is an intentional hostility from someone because we are known to be Christians, but sickness is not. Therefore, in some situations, to choose to be public Christians is to choose a way of life that accepts suffering, if God wills (1 Peter 4:19). But suffering may result from living as a Christian even when there is no intentional hostility from unbelievers. For example, a Christian may go to a disease-ridden village to minister, and then contract the disease. This is suffering as a Christian, but it is not persecution. It is a choice to suffer, if God wills, but not from the hostility of others.... The suffering that comes is part of the price of living where you are in obedience to the call of God. In choosing to follow Christ in the way He directs, we choose all that this path includes under His sovereign providence. Thus, *all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering with Christ and for Christ—whether it is cancer or conflict.*” John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 256-57 (emphasis mine).

up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"? Is this meaning related to suffering via religious persecution? If so, was this suffering intended only for Paul or the original 12 apostles or for all believers everywhere for all times?

3.4.2.1 Divine Masochism—Our Inheritance?

Some theologians may argue that divine suffering seems masochistic, since God could have prevented his own suffering by choosing not to create libertarian free will creatures who would affect him emotionally. The problem with this assessment is that it assumes that God's motivation for suffering was for its own sake. But God is motivated from divine love to suffer. In a world replete with sin and evil, a perfect God cannot fail to suffer because he loves. François Varillon rightly ties God's suffering love to his perfect being: " 'In the order of being, suffering is an imperfection. But in the order of love, suffering is the seal of perfection.' "⁹⁶ Simply put, it does not follow that God is masochistic because he loves his creatures and risks being hurt when they fail to love him in return.

Neither is God a masochist nor is he promoting masochism. If the Bible is truly authoritative in that it is infallible—incapable of misleading—and divinely inspired—God-breathed—its divine content is coupled with a function of God's power, namely, the function of the Holy Spirit to inspire Paul to speak and act according to God's will for him, which is to love as God loves. In context, Paul rejoices in his sufferings not for sufferings' sake but for the sake of his brothers and sisters in Christ whom he loves.⁹⁷ His love emanating from and inspired by God's love

⁹⁶ François Varillon, *La Souffrance de Dieu* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1975), 71; quoted in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 35-6.

⁹⁷ In other words, the suffering Paul is referring to is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, particularly for the sake of others: "salvation to everyone who believes." Suffering with this purpose in mind is what enables Paul to *rejoice* in his sufferings. "The coexistence of joy and suffering can be found elsewhere in Paul (cf. 2 Cor 6:10), especially

is relational and thus reciprocal. But what is the relation between his sufferings and the wellbeing of others as it relates to him “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”?

3.4.2.2 The Apostle Paul—Megalomaniac or Minister?

I would like to commence this section by making a distinction between two types of theological sufferings: intensive and extensive. Intensive suffering refers to the redemptive sufferings of Christ, while extensive suffering refers to the ministerial sufferings of believers. It is the latter category that represents Paul’s sufferings.⁹⁸

In James D. G. Dunn’s commentary on *The Epistles to the Colossians* regarding Colossians 1:24, he talks about Paul’s ardent belief of fulfilling his eschatological mission.

He writes,

[Paul’s] claim is not megalomaniac.... It is rather the most striking expression of a conviction, which Paul seems to have had from the beginning of his apostolic ministry, namely that his mission was to fulfill or complete that of the Servant of Yahweh, that is, also of the suffering Servant of deutero-Isaiah. This underlines in turn the degree to which Paul understood his apostleship in eschatological terms as the last act on the stage of this world before (as we would say) the final curtain (particularly 1 Cor. 4:9). It was because Paul saw himself as a major actor in the final drama of God’s reconciling purpose that he could also see his all too real sufferings as somehow bringing to completion what was still outstanding of the sufferings of Christ (“crucified with Christ”) by which the world was redeemed and transformed.⁹⁹

Indubitably, Paul is not deluded about his role as a minister of the Gospel as if he could somehow supplement the redemptive sufferings of Christ for he understood the sacrificial efficacy

when this suffering is related to his proclamation of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:18-19).” David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 123.

⁹⁸ “Because Paul’s apostolic ministry is an ‘extension’ of Christ’s work in the world, Paul identifies his own sufferings very closely with Christ’s.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 152-53.

⁹⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 116-17.

of Atonement as a past event.¹⁰⁰ Paul's sufferings are extensively related to the eschaton.¹⁰¹ Douglas J. Moo writes, "These sufferings have no redemptive benefit for the church, but they are the inevitable accompaniment of Paul's 'commission' to proclaim the end-time revelation of God's mystery (vv. 25-27)."¹⁰² David W. Pao believes that these sufferings are "predetermined sufferings that are to take place in the end times."¹⁰³ Moo goes on to say, "It is this way that Paul's sufferings are 'on behalf of' the church, including the Colossian Christians."¹⁰⁴ So by remaining faithful to his apostolic mission, he suffers, which somehow benefits the Colossians and the church at large. The prepositional phrase "for your sake" may refer to saving the Colossians from "present suffering," à la N. T. Wright. Wright goes on to say that Paul is drawing the enemy's fire onto himself in order to allow the young church something of a respite from the fierce attacks they might otherwise be facing.¹⁰⁵ This seems right. However, more can be added. I believe the best explanation for the

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Colossians 1:18-20, 22. In light of the sufficiency of Christ's Atonement, J. B. Lightfoot writes, "The passion of Christ was one full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. In this sense there can be nothing **lacking** in Christ's sufferings. Christ's sufferings are different in kind from those of his servants; the two are incommensurable." J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, eds. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 82 (emphasis his).

¹⁰¹ Eschatological suffering may coincide with Revelation 6:9-11, which is the fulfilling the allotted number of martyrs "who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained."

¹⁰² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 153. Hans Boersma also writes, "The early Jewish Christians interpreted Christ's messianic suffering in light of the overall picture of the 'messianic woes' that would introduce the new age of the resurrection. The 'hardships' of Christ, suggests Peter T. O'Brien, need to be understood against 'the OT and Jewish background with its apocalyptic conception of the afflictions of the end time, the woes of the Messiah.'" Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC, 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 78; Boersma, 231-32. Moo writes, "Jewish literature speaks of the 'messianic woes,' tribulations to be endured by God's people in the days immediately before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus and the New Testament authors use similar language to describe the 'last days,' initiated with Christ's first coming and awaiting their fulfillment with the glorious return of Christ (see esp. Matt. 24:4-14 and par.)." Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 151. David E. Garland disagrees: "No text contemporaneous or predating the New Testament specifically refers to the 'afflictions' or 'the woes of the Messiah.'" David E. Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 120.

¹⁰³ Pao, 126.

¹⁰⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 153.

¹⁰⁵ Wright, 89. I do not, however, agree with Wright's argument that the Greek word ἀνταναπληρώω should only be translated "fill up in place of." It could also mean "fill up in response to," not to mention being related to "suffering for the sake of." Matter of fact, I believe both interpretations have scriptural support: the former being Paul suffering *in*

phrase “for your sake” comes from David E. Garland: “Paul was in prison because he proclaimed the gospel (see Eph. 3:1), and that struggle on their behalf (Col. 2:1) has brought the benefits of the gospel to them.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, *à la* Garland, preaching the Gospel, which is the reason why Paul suffered, was for the spiritual benefit of the Colossians. Amalgamating Wright and Garland’s interpretations, Paul’s sufferings afforded the Church of Colossae with both physical and spiritual benefits. Undoubtedly, “that struggle on their behalf” was physical in nature as Paul explicitly stated: “...in my flesh I do my share on behalf of [Christ’s] body....” This physical harassment is none other than religious persecution for the sake of believers and for Christ.¹⁰⁷

I would like to flesh out what Paul probably meant by the phrase “filling up [completing] what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” vis-à-vis his extensive suffering.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned earlier Paul suffered extensively for the cause of Christ. It is this type of suffering as “ministerial utility”¹⁰⁹ that completes Christ’s afflictions. But how? Biblical scholars are in disagreement over how to make sense of the mode of this ministerial utility. However, I believe John Piper is right when he says,

place of the Colossians (as well as suffering for the sake of the church), and the latter being Paul suffering in response to what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings.

¹⁰⁶ Garland, 122.

¹⁰⁷ *À la* David W. Pao, “In light of Paul’s earlier reference to ‘for your sake’ (ὕπερ ὑμῶν) and the phrase that follows, ‘for the sake of his body’ (ὕπερ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ), a certain sense of representation is likely present....” Pao, 124.

¹⁰⁸ The possible renderings of the phrase “in Christ’s afflictions” are many. Pao lists four: (1) “Christ’s own afflictions” (possessive genitive); (2) “afflictions for Christ” (objective genitive); (3) “afflictions in regard to Christ” (genitive of reference); and (4) “messianic afflictions” (attributive genitive). Ibid. Of these interpretations most contemporary commentators choose either the first (“Christ’s own afflictions”) or the fourth (“messianic afflictions”). But as Pao notes, the possessive genitive is unlikely “in light of the repeated references to the sufficient and final salvific work of Christ (1:18-20, 22; 2:9-10, 14-15).” Ibid., 124-25. Thus, the reading of the attributive genitive is most likely the correct rendering. Pao goes on to say, “This reading [of “predetermined sufferings that are to take place in the end times”] is further supported by a number of observations: (a) the reference to ‘that which is lacking’ may presuppose a predetermined quota; (b) the word for ‘afflictions’ (θλίψεων) is never used by Paul for Christ’s own atoning suffering; (c) the presence of a definite article (τῶν) before ‘afflictions’ may point to a precise kind of suffering that Paul has in mind; (d) the note on the necessity of Paul’s suffering as related to his calling as an apostle suggests the idea of a quota (1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 2:14; 4:11); (e) this present paragraph is flooded with eschatological references, especially in v. 26....” Ibid., 126.

¹⁰⁹ Lightfoot, 82.

“Paul’s sufferings complete Christ’s afflictions *not* by adding anything to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to save.”¹¹⁰ Simply put, by spreading the Gospel Paul extends his sufferings by persecution to complete Christ’s afflictions. Piper goes on to say that “the infinite value of Christ’s afflictions is not known and trusted in the world. These afflictions and what they mean are still hidden to most peoples. And God’s intention is that the mystery be revealed to all the nations.”¹¹¹ *In nuce*, God intends for all believers to fulfill their part *by* completing Christ’s afflictions like Paul *by* extending his sufferings *by* being persecuted *by* fulfilling the Great Commission *by* spreading the Gospel to all nations. There is strong scriptural support for this interpretation. Piper draws from the use of similar words in Philippians 2:30.

He writes,

Paul tells the church in Philippi to honor Epaphroditus [who almost died gathering support for Paul’s ministry] . . . and he explains his reason with words very similar to Colossians 1:24. He says, “He nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to *complete* [*antamaplērē*, a similar word to the one in Colossians 1:24] *what was lacking* [*ta husterēmata*, same words as in Colossians 1:24] in your service to me.” In the Greek original, the phrase “*complete what is lacking* in your service to me” is almost identical with “*complete what is lacking* in Christ’s afflictions.”¹¹²

What is lacking in both cases is a personal presentation by Christ to all nations.¹¹³ And what is God’s answer to this “lack”? God calls “the people of Christ (people like Paul) to make a personal presentation of the afflictions of Christ to the world.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Piper, 268 (emphasis his).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid (emphases his).

¹¹³ Ibid., 269.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

3.4.2.3 Cruciformity For All

Cruciformity as obedience to God in order to live godly lives entails virtuous living and religious persecution (the focus of this section being the latter). “Cruciformity is an ongoing pattern of living in Christ and of dying with him that produces a Christ-like (cruciform) person. Cruciform existence is what being Christ’s servant, indwelling him and being indwelt by him, living with and for and ‘according to’ him, is all about, for both individuals and communities.”¹¹⁵ Servants of Christ include apostles like Paul but are not limited to them. All apostles are Christ’s servants (disciples) but not all disciples are apostles. Simply put, all disciples of Christ are called to obey God by imitating Christ, which inevitably results in religious persecution. Take for example Christ’s sobering, stark reminder: “ ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you....” (Jn 15:20a) And consider his declaration to his disciples of a daunting image of their ministry: “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Lk 10:3). He also promised them: “¹⁶You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Lk 21:16-17, ESV). The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus anticipating the tribulation of the church vis-à-vis the eschaton: “⁹They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.... ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt 24:9-10, 13-14, ESV). Proclaiming the Gospel to all nations for Christ’s sake results in persecution and ultimately the apocalypse. Likewise, Paul did not consider these promises of suffering via persecution as limited to himself or the original twelve apostles. He strengthened the souls of the disciples “encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we

¹¹⁵ Gorman, 48-9.

must enter the kingdom of God' ” (Acts 14:22). He also encouraged the Thessalonians by exhorting them not to be “disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this” (1 Thess 3:3). “And when he wrote to Timothy, he made it a general principle: ‘Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Timothy 3:12). When he spoke of his sufferings, he did not treat them as unique, but said to the churches, ‘Be imitators of me’ (1 Corinthians 4:16).”¹¹⁶ It seems unquestionable then that Christ did not redeem us through suffering *from* suffering but he redeemed us through suffering *for* suffering.¹¹⁷

4 The Bowtie

Now to tie everything together: Atonement, Passibility, and Cruciformity. I believe the “recapitulation” model grounds the Atonement. That is, Christ representing humanity is what makes at-one-ment with God possible. But the motivation for Atonement is found in MMEM (i.e., God’s transformative love for us, which culminated on the Cross (in which God the *totus Christus* suffered *for us*), is what enables us to love others and obey God like Christ.) Admittedly, a conclusive mechanism of Atonement escapes me. With that said, however, the variety of mechanisms of Atonement I have listed like satisfaction or PSA can work in tandem with MMEM. Let us not forget that because of the historical act of Christ Salvation is an effectual reality *today*: “[N]ow is ‘the day of salvation’ ” (2 Cor 6:2b). MMEM reminds us that through Christ’s substitutionary death by which we have been reconciled to God we are also declared righteous and presented as holy. As Wright reminds us, “God’s purpose . . . is to create a holy people in Christ.”¹¹⁸ Peter echoes the OT when

¹¹⁶ Piper, 264-65. Garland writes, “Suffering comes with the territory of serving the gospel: ‘For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body’ (2 Cor. 4:11; see 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 1 Thess. 2:1-2; see Mark 13:10-13).” Garland, 120.

¹¹⁷ Boersma, 230.

¹¹⁸ Wright, 83.

he says, “[F]or it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ ” (1 Pt 1:16, NIV). MEMM inspires us to be like Christ who “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Christ lived a passionate and righteous life and this is what we are to emulate. Paul also exhorts us to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16) when he speaks of suffering for Christ. Lastly, I believe the *Christus Victor* model is best suited at the “end” of the Atonement or as the result of the Atonement. That is, because Christ reconciled and justified us to God on the Cross, and then rose from the dead, he overcame the powers of sin, suffering, and death, and thus he is victorious, and so are those who put their faith in him (cf. 1 Jn 5:4-5).¹¹⁹ Paul S. Fiddes reminds us, “[T]he victory of Christ at the cross empowers us to enter upon God’s victory in the present.”¹²⁰ With that said, it would only be appropriate to let Jesus have the last word: “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

Conclusion

I have argued philosophically, theologically, and biblically that God chose to suffer in love *because* of his creation and *for* his creation. I have demonstrated that a few of the characteristics God must possess to be perfect include libertarian free will and omniscience, the latter of which entails experiential knowledge of his creation (which also enables him to suffer *with* his creation), as well as intellectual knowledge. And in a world saturated with sin and suffering, a perfect God should not only love benevolently but also affectionately. I have also argued from Christology for a modified version of Thomas V. Morris’ “asymmetric accessing relation,” which entails that Christ *himself*—the

¹¹⁹ What fosters hope for suffering Christians is not just that God understands their sufferings because he too suffers with them but that he triumphed over his sufferings on Calvary in order to transform us to overcome our sufferings.

¹²⁰ *PEPS*, 135.

whole person (human and divine)—suffered in the Incarnation. Then, I moved to demonstrate how a modified version of Peter Abelard’s moral exemplary motif fits in the grand scheme of the Atonement—by placing love back into the divine category of transformative power to save, which inspires us to love virtuously in return. I have shown that what Christ’s crucifixion accomplished *then* and what it accomplishes *now* is that the Atonement is a one-time event with on-going opportunities for Salvation. The “ambulatory model” of Salvation complements this tensed-tenseless distinction by showing that Salvation is a process by which we respond to by faith. Lastly, I have demonstrated that to be imitators of Christ (cruciformity) God calls us to loving obedience via religious persecution. By proclaiming the Great Commission to all nations, we will inevitably suffer persecution but this is not by accident. It is by preaching the Gospel in a world hostile to God’s love that we are destined to suffer in order to “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” For this reason we rejoice in our sufferings.

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