

## “God Gave the Son—the Only One” (John 3:16): Theopaschism as Love

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It would be proper to begin with the definitions. What is theopaschism? It means the suffering of God, recognition or admission that God suffers or has suffered in some way. A proper distinction must be maintained though between theopaschism and passibilism. As a version of so-called “open theism,” passibilism claims that God suffers, so to speak, *simpliciter*, that it is within his nature to suffer. Passibilism would thus comprise not only representatives of theology that self-identify as Christians but also, to give just a couple of examples, proponents of process philosophy such as Alfred North Whitehead with his famous definition “God is the fellow sufferer who understands,”<sup>1</sup> or a prominent Jewish scholar such as Abraham Heschel<sup>2</sup> who, while demonstrating the marked difference between the passionate God of the prophets and the ideas of impassible Deity within the Greek or Eastern milieu, does not share any trinitarian understanding of the nature of the Godhead. So the concept of the suffering God within the framework of passibilism is not inherently associated with any trinitarian theology.

Unlike passibilism, theopaschism firmly connects the suffering of God with the Second Person of the Holy Trinity and specifically with the incarnation of this Second Person.<sup>3</sup> Martin Chemnitz correctly observes in the beginning of his *magnum opus* on Christology that “the divine nature . . . did not assume the human nature in an absolute sense, but only insofar as it pertains to the person of the Son. For the entire Trinity did not become incarnate, neither the Father nor the Holy

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 351.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> See Marcel Sarot, “Patipassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God: Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,” *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 363–375, for a more detailed discussion of these terminological distinctions.

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Ghost, but only the Son.”<sup>4</sup> This truth is wonderfully communicated in the famous verse of the Gospel of John: “The Word became flesh”<sup>5</sup> (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, John 1:14), which is central to the topic at hand.

The classic “theopaschite controversy” transpired in the sixth century revolving around the controversial formula “one of the Trinity has suffered [in the flesh].” After some church-political turmoil, this formula was recognized at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, which compelled Christians to confess that “our Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified in the human flesh, is truly God and the Lord of glory and one of the [members of] holy Trinity.”<sup>6</sup>

The spirit of this confession also shines through in the hymn of Justinian that serves prominently as an epigraph to the first volume of the commentary on the Gospel of John by William C. Weinrich.<sup>7</sup> That seems to me to be a fair indication that Weinrich considered this theme to be one of the most significant theological themes in John. Let me quote this hymn to give the context:

O Only-Begotten Son and Word of God, who, although immortal, for our salvation did yet consent to be incarnated from the holy mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, who without change was made man and was crucified, Christ, our God, who by death did trample death, who, being one of the Holy Trinity, is glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us!

Weinrich sees within the Christology of Justinian’s hymn that “the Son’s consent to be incarnated and to suffer for our salvation is located within the preexistent being of the Son with the Father.”<sup>8</sup> Observing the nuanced shifts as compared to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which uses the language of “descent from heaven,” Weinrich cites Constantine Newman to make the point that the language of the Word consenting (*καταδεξάμενος*) in the midst of his immortality to be incarnated from the Virgin Mary means that “the incarnation and passion are transferred back to . . . his eternal life in the bosom of the Father.”<sup>9</sup>

Weinrich also observes that the “theopaschite” emphasis means that the obedience of the Son to the Father, such as that expressed in Gethsemane, is founded

<sup>4</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>6</sup> *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. N. P. Tanner (Ann Arbor: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 118.

<sup>7</sup> William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), liii.

<sup>8</sup> Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 528.

<sup>9</sup> Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 529.

in the reality of God as Trinity, and at the same time reveals “[free] man partaking in the filial obedience of the divine Son.”<sup>10</sup>

However, what does it mean that the passion is grounded in the reality of the triune God? Does it mean that God undergoes passion within himself, though suffering in a way different than human suffering (different in a sense that it is not caused by anything external to God) yet utterly true and real?

This is a very serious question. It allows me to draw nearer to the problem or, perhaps, better to say, dilemma that I find in Christian theology, that is, in the Christian discourse on God and who God is, with hope that the Gospel of John would shed some light and hence show the way out of this predicament.

The substance of the question at hand is what really happens at the cross. What is the extent of revelation there? For example, Jesus says concerning the cross event: “When you have lifted up (ὑψώσητε) the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he” (ἐγώ εἰμι) (John 8:28). “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), Jesus further proclaims to Philip. Finally, Thomas sees the resurrected Jesus with stigmata still in his hands and his side and precisely at this point confesses: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). Other striking episodes could be deduced, but these suffice for the moment. Let us take it to the extreme: does God reveal himself in the crucified Jesus in such a way that we should reinterpret the inner life of the Trinity through the cross in a manner resembling the approach of Jürgen Moltmann epitomized in his well-known books *The Crucified God* and *The Trinity and the Kingdom*?<sup>11</sup> Should we make God passible in some way and so understand the mutual love of the persons as a kind of sacrificial self-giving characterized by suffering?

Or is it rather that God condescends to us poor humans, comes down to our level and acts, to use Luther’s language, *sub contrario*, under the opposite? This is what seems to me to be the thrust of Luther’s dichotomy between *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and *Deus revelatus* (the revealed God). After all, for Luther the theology of the cross was a matter of theological epistemology, rather than an ontological description of God. The cross is how we can recognize God and get to know him. This condescension motif was prominently picked up by the eighteenth-century theologian J. G. Hamann, now increasingly popular among those who want

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<sup>10</sup> Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 529.

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

to find new ways to communicate the Gospel to the postmodern world. And it readily appeals to those of us who are touched by the aesthetic side of Christianity.

To cut nearer to the bone, does God play games with us, or is he really different from the God of classical theism, such as the one we find among scholastic theologians? And if the latter is true, should we then discard such traditional attributes of God as immutability and impassibility and excise them from our dogmatic textbooks?

In an attempt to find a possible answer to these questions, let us touch on some key texts of John and the way Weinrich and other commentators treat them. For Weinrich, one of the key texts of the Gospel, to which he goes back over and over in his commentary, is John 1:29, where John the Baptist proclaims: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Such a designation of Jesus presupposes the Suffering Servant motif in Isaiah 53:7 and also the image of the Paschal Lamb as well as the story of the sacrificial offering of Isaac by Abraham in Genesis 22 as its possible background.<sup>12</sup> Both the image of the “Lamb” and the taking away of the sin of the world, in turn, point to the death of Jesus on the cross as that place where this removal of sin takes place. Any understanding of the lamb imagery has to take into account that the lamb is a sacrificial animal eventually to be slain. So it is precisely as the Lamb of God that Jesus will enter the passion.<sup>13</sup>

Identification of Jesus (as the Word made flesh) with the sacrificial Lamb of God suggests a hermeneutic for the reading of the whole Gospel. The one who makes the sacrifice is the Father, with the Son being in full accord with, and obedient to, the Father. A number of commentators have observed connections between John 1:29, 36 and John 3:16 with its language of God “giving his Son.”

For example, Herman Ridderbos correctly states that the “God-given sacrifice of Christ is of central significance.”<sup>14</sup> He then continues: “The common component in the two pronouncements is that it is God who makes the all-embracing sacrifice for the world.”<sup>15</sup>

John 3:16 is indeed located within this strong sacrificial context, the clearest example of which is the language of Jesus being “lifted up.” While C. H. Dodd recognizes that “the ‘elevation’ . . . suggests the thought of the cross,” he remarks

<sup>12</sup> Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 245.

<sup>13</sup> Kassian Bezobrazov [Кассиан Безобразов], *By Water and Blood and Spirit: Interpretation of the Gospel of John [Водою и кровию и духом. Толкование на Евангелие от Иоанна]* (Paris: Bibliothèque Slave de Paris, 1996), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 138.

<sup>15</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 138.

that “the suggestion is left undeveloped,”<sup>16</sup> with which I cannot concur. The focus of John here is to draw the reader’s attention to the character of God’s revelation. Thus, D. A. Carson misses the mark when he claims that the construction behind the phrase “God so loved the world” “emphasizes the intensity of the love,”<sup>17</sup> unlike Weinrich who points out decidedly that this construction demonstrates the form of God’s love (οὕτως, “so,” not in a sense of “so much” but rather “in such a way”). To love is to give. To love the world, which is fallen and dying, is for God to give his only Son for this world.

It is remarkable that here love is specifically being spoken of not as love within God nor the love of Jesus to his disciples, but as love to the whole world (for characteristics of the world, see John 3:19; 5:42; 8:42).<sup>18</sup> In the whole New Testament, it is Johannine literature (John and 1 John) that marks the greatest contrast between God and the world, which is especially staggering in view of the overwhelmingly positive connotations associated with it in antiquity. In John, the world (κόσμος) is presented as an entity hostile to God, which makes it all the more paradoxical that “the entire process of man’s salvation is set in motion by the love of God for the world.”<sup>19</sup>

Dodd sees in 3:16 an expression of the idea of unity as mutual indwelling. According to Dodd’s interpretation, “[God’s] life is the outpouring of love. . . . It is a radically personal form of life, manifested in the concrete activity of Christ in laying down His life for His friends; by which we know that God so loved the world that He gave His Son.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Alain Marchadour stresses that “the Father and the Son are in communion here in the same love for the world.”<sup>21</sup> And if we are to understand John 3:16 as a verse expressing trinitarian reality, then we cannot neglect the preceding Nicodemus story either with its drastic emphasis on the role of the Spirit (John 3:3, 5) for the new life that Jesus brings.

Besides the above-mentioned connection to John 1:29, John 3:16 alludes to the Prologue with its depiction of who it is that will undergo passion. Merely connecting suffering to the incarnation and seeing a manifestation of the “absolute love” of the

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Harold Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 353.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Arthur Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1991), 204.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1997), 51.

<sup>19</sup> Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 405.

<sup>20</sup> Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 197.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Marchadour, *Vangelo di Giovanni. Commento pastorale* (Milano: Edizioni san Paolo, 1994), 76.

Father in the giving and sending of the Son<sup>22</sup> just does not quite express the whole dramatic character of the event. The Father gave his Son to die—it was a sacrifice. Thus, Ridderbos again, commenting on John 3:16: “It is love that not only manifests itself in God’s power over death . . . in the death of Christ it also identifies with the world in its lostness and thus imparts the deepest meaning to the great statement in the prologue, ‘and the Word became flesh.’”<sup>23</sup>

But how can we account for God giving the one who is the “Word made flesh”? How can the “only-begotten Son” be sacrificially given to die (I do not share C. K. Barrett’s reluctance in seeing an allusion to Isaiah 53 behind *ἔδωκεν*<sup>24</sup>). Is there not a contradiction here? Already, Patristic-era witnesses recognized such tension within John 3:16. For example, Theodore of Mopsuestia, teacher of Nestorius, wrote in his commentary on the Gospel: “How then did he say, he gave his Only Begotten Son? For it is obvious that the Godhead cannot suffer; nevertheless they [divinity and humanity] are one through their conjunction. Therefore, even though the other suffers, the whole is attributed to the divinity.”<sup>25</sup> One can clearly see incipient Nestorian accents in this exposition of the John 3:16 text by Theodore, namely, that the Christ *qua* man is postulated as the separate subject who truly undergoes suffering, which is only nominally attributed to God on account of conjunction (*συνάφεια*), the moral union of God and man in Jesus Christ. Basically, Theodore relieves the tension by claiming that this elevated language only emphasizes the grandeur of the event, while nothing *radical* takes place. The view that would claim an “exception” for Theodore here<sup>26</sup> is hardly convincing. I would rather say that Theodore here only reinforces his rigid diophysite Christology and refusal to attribute suffering to God, who is inherently apathetic, and so his position here may be seen as a reinterpretation of the biblical text in an attempt to suit his philosophical presuppositions on the nature of God.

Such a solution, for all its attractiveness to the rationally predisposed reader, cannot help but turn the Gospel into an insipid diet, completely unexciting, and, what is worse, not true to the character of incarnational dialectic of John 1:14. By becoming flesh, the Word did not cease being Word, and, of course, the concept of external conjunction as an explanation of the unity of Christ is totally inadequate in

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 215.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. M. Conti, ed. J. C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Frank Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 134–135.

carrying across the sense of incarnation and the character of union between that which is divine and that which is human in Christ.

While Antiochene Christology trivialized the suffering of Christ by placing it within the humanity of Jesus understood only in the most concrete way, modern passibilists generalize the suffering of God by merging it with the suffering of humankind (I have to use modern writers, because we do not find passibilist views as a viable option in Christian theology until the twentieth century).

Moltmann, for example, critiques the axiom of the apathy (*ἀπάθεια*) of God by replacing it with the opposite one, the axiom of the passion of God. He understands the suffering of Christ as the suffering of the passionate God.<sup>27</sup> And even though Moltmann builds his passibilism (which he himself calls theopatheia) on the cross, one can argue that he creates an alternative metaphysics, which, although opposite to classical theism, is nevertheless a logically coherent system presenting God as the suffering God on account of his trinitarian love. “The divine suffering of love outwards is grounded on the pain of love within.”<sup>28</sup> Using early twentieth-century Anglican C. E. Rolt, Moltmann claims that God being love means being able to suffer: “in the eternal joy of the Trinity, pain is not avoided; it is accepted and transmuted into glory.”<sup>29</sup>

Moltmann explains love as self-communication of the good, which in turn presupposes the capacity for self-differentiation. It is in discussing this aspect of love that Moltmann utilizes John 3:16: “When we say ‘God *loves* the world’ (John 3:16), then we mean God’s self-communication to the world by virtue of his self-differentiation and his self-identification. When we say ‘God is love’, then we mean that he is in eternity this process of self-differentiation and self-identification; *a process which contains the whole pain of the negative in itself.*”<sup>30</sup> For Moltmann, the sheer communicability of love implies that theology of love is feministic rather than patriarchal.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the internal passibility of God leads him to “self-subjection to suffering.”<sup>32</sup> And this is where Moltmann’s pantheism comes forth: “Not only does God suffer with and for the world; liberated men and women suffer with God and for him.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 25. With such language, Moltmann brings to mind the earlier Japanese theologian K. Kitamori with his extravagant theology of the “pain of God.” See Kazoh Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1965).

<sup>29</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 57 (emphasis mine).

<sup>31</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 60.

To be sure, Moltmann is not an easy theologian to read and understand. Being a biased Russian, I tend to think that much of what he says of God's suffering is an adaptation of the thought of the early twentieth-century religious philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev, especially insofar as it pertains to the concept of freedom. But if my reading of Moltmann is correct, he strikes me as a person who attempted to resolve rationally that tension that is present in the biblical narrative and most transparently in John 3:16. So, although he is diametrically opposed to such an Antiochene theologian of late antiquity as Theodore of Mopsuestia, he resembles him in an attempt to create a metaphysics that would be philosophically coherent. For Theodore, God is impassible, and so he cannot be touched by the suffering of Christ. So while it appears that John 3:16 speaks about God giving his only Son to die for the world, for Theodore it is just a matter of language that does not have a referent in the real world: in reality it is *man* who suffers and God is absolutely outside of suffering.

In Moltmann's framework, however, God suffers in Christ. There is no question about it, but it is so because God suffers anyway. To say that God is love presupposes his suffering. While Theodore of Mopsuestia would be radically opposed to theopaschism of any kind, Moltmann would readily embrace it but at the same time relativize the cross by making God passible by nature.

So, within one framework the impassible God does not suffer because he cannot suffer. Within another framework, the passible God suffers because to be God is to be one who suffers. I must confess that I do not find either of these solutions attractive.

While I cannot possibly relate to the impassible God of philosophers, I at the same time do not want to be in pain forever, although in today's world one may encounter people who find pain pleasant and think that pain even intensifies pleasure. Suffice it to say that I find it odd thinking of God in such terms. Let me use an example from the parish setting. There is a lady in my Bible class at the church where I serve who recently suffered greatly because of the prolonged sickness of her mother, of whom she took care on top of all her other responsibilities. When confronted with the passibilist view, the lady said that it is quite depressing to think of the future life with God as implying any suffering. The notion of God suffering within himself or suffering with the world would hardly help the suffering person, as this person desires above all else for his or her personal pain and suffering to stop rather than be consoled by the fact that somebody suffers even in a greater and more radical way.

Is there a way out of this impasse? I believe so, yes, and it has been offered in the history of dogma. It is the language of a God who suffers and does not suffer at the same time, a God who overcomes suffering by his suffering. In the hymn of



Justinian quoted in the beginning, there is another significant theme, namely, that by his death Christ our God “did trample death.” Triumph over death in the death itself—that is the key, which figures prominently already in the writing of Origen’s disciple Gregory Thaumaturgus on the passibility and impassibility of God, *Ad Theopompum*. Gregory expressly says that “God submitted himself to Passion even though God is by nature impassible.”<sup>34</sup> In the encounter between the impassible God and the passion, it is God who gains victory. God is not defeated by the passions but rather overcomes them: God’s “impassible nature manifested its impassibility precisely in its passion.”<sup>35</sup> So by his suffering, God made the passions suffer, so to speak. Unlike interpretations that see lasting influence of the Greek philosophical idea of *ἀπάθεια* upon Christian theology,<sup>36</sup> I suggest that the biblical narrative such as the one we find in John 3:16 played a foundational role in Gregory’s presentation of the impassible suffering of God as an expression of his will and his love.

This language of God staying impassible even in the midst of suffering was prominently used by Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century, but the true champion of this theology is Cyril of Alexandria, fifth-century patriarch of that city. In his mature work *Quod unus sit Christus*, Cyril of Alexandria appeals to John 3:16 by way of proving the essential unity of the Son as the only begotten of the Father. His imaginary opponents, who most likely represent the likes of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia (whose lasting influence in the eastern part of the church Cyril attempted to disrupt in the end of his career), argue “that to have to say that the same one suffers and does not suffer makes it seem like a fairy tale. . . . For either, as God, he has not suffered at all, or alternatively, if he is said to have suffered, then how can he be God?”<sup>37</sup> This syllogism would lead Cyril’s opponents to the inevitable conclusion that the one who suffers is the descendant of David—man, and not God. For Cyril, this reasoning would undermine the numerical unity of Christ and make two subjects: one being a slave and a creature, and the other one his Master and Creator.

It is to counter this false understanding of Christology that Cyril addresses John 3:16. “It was the Only Begotten Son of God who has destroyed the dominion of

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<sup>34</sup> St. Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Life and Works*, trans. M. Slusser, The Fathers of the Church 98 (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 154.

<sup>35</sup> St. Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Life and Works*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Frohnhofen, *APATHEIA TOU THEOU: Über die Affektlosigkeit Gottes in der griechischen Antike und bei den griechischsprachigen Kirchenvätern bis zu Gregorios Thaumaturgos* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 219–220.

<sup>37</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. J. A. McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 117.

death; not a different son to him joined in a relationship to mediate this economy, but he himself, personally. He confirms this when he says: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.’”<sup>38</sup>

Let me draw your attention to the victorious motif in Cyril’s language: “the only-begotten Son of God has destroyed the dominion of death.” So it was for this purpose of destruction of death that the Son of God was given for our sake. Anybody less than he would not do. That is, it must be God himself coming to the cross as the Son, the “Word made flesh.” However, Cyril is careful to point out, as he also does in numerous other occasions, that “in his own nature he certainly suffers nothing, for as God he is bodiless and lies entirely outside suffering.”<sup>39</sup>

While on the surface this suspiciously resembles elements of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s language, their theologies are worlds apart. Suffice it to say that Cyril’s mind-blowing expression of the Word “tasting death in the flesh” of his notorious twelfth anathema is utterly incompatible with rigid Antiochene two-subject Christology. Thus, the theopaschism of Cyril demonstrates both that God is love and that God “did trample death” by his death.

Where did this theopaschite element of theology of the Gospel of John exercise itself in the practical sphere in the life of the church? I would say first and foremost in martyrdom. Jesus himself warned his disciples: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2). And in John 16:33: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

William Weinrich has made the point that the martyrs confessed the first article of the creed at their trial instead of the more expected (from our standpoint) appeal to the christological section, the second article. Weinrich explains this from the doctrine of creation, demonstrating quite convincingly that “martyrdom reveals the living God.”<sup>40</sup> To this I wholeheartedly agree, but I would add that the martyr’s confession of the first article was also the confession of God as free of the passions that characterized pagan deities, and so in the very event of the suffering of the martyr God would allow him to “suffer impassibly” just as Christ suffered. This comes through in apparent non-perception or overcoming of the physical pain on behalf of the martyr (whether through the experience of ecstasy, as in the case of Perpetua, or some other way is beside the point here). So Christian martyrs remained “impassible” in martyrdom despite the appearance to the contrary.

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<sup>38</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> William C. Weinrich, “Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology,” *CTQ* 66 (2002): 333.

A similar case can be built on the understanding of suffering in general. Patristic scholar Frances Young makes a pertinent remark that the fathers did not appeal to the sufferings of Christ when addressing the problem of suffering.<sup>41</sup> Rhetoric of “impassible suffering” allowed Christians to demonstrate the triumph of God over suffering. “In the world you will have tribulation (θλίψιν). But take heart; I have overcome (νενίκηκα) the world” (John 16:33)—that is the rationale for the christological, impassible suffering of the martyr.

I hope I have been able to demonstrate that while there is a certain degree of incompatibility between the impassibilist and passibilist frameworks, the patristic insight of Cyril, for which John 1:14 was the major influence, provides us with a clue on how to expound correctly the theopaschite character of John 3:16. While obvious solutions of building hermeneutical bridges between two kinds of discourse do not exist, we do well if we also, for our didactic and homiletical purposes, stick to the biblical narrative and for our purpose here the narrative of the fourth evangelist in particular, which combines the language of the one who is “the Word made flesh” with the description of this enfleshed Word undergoing passion and drawing all men to himself by this passion.

I believe that Weinrich’s insights—that the passion of John 3:16 is to be transferred back to the eternal life of the Logos at the bosom of the Father and that in the obedience of the free man, Jesus in his incarnation, we see the filial obedience of the divine Son revealed to us—are fundamentally correct, provided that we do not lose the incarnational aspect.

It seems that Cyril’s “impassible suffering” as a theological statement avoids the extremes of both the impassibilism of the “God of philosophers” and the passibilism of the modern theologians. The inherent flaw of both these positions is that such approaches do not operate (or at least, inherently do not have to operate) within the incarnational framework. In the formula of “impassible suffering,” both sides of the equation must be kept intact and in tension. No Hegelian *Aufhebung* is possible here, no development of any “idea.” Even after the resurrection, Thomas would proclaim “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28) when touching the crucified hands and pierced side of Jesus, and in the Book of Revelation, the proclamation of glory and honor to the Lamb continues forever (Rev 5:13). The formula, however, allows also for a certain degree of flexibility. Thus, both patristic theology with its emphasis on impassibility (as long as it does not fall prey to the Neoplatonic hierarchical understanding of reality in the manner of Pseudo-Dionysius) and Luther’s approach

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<sup>41</sup> Frances Margaret Young, “*Apathos Epathen*: Patristic Reflection on God, Suffering, and the Cross,” in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. A. Clarke and A. Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79.

with its emphasis on the suffering of God, on the cross, and on his revelation (as long as it does not develop into the panentheism of Moltmann or the cultural appropriation of today's sensitivities concerning suffering) may be upheld with the provision that the other side of the equation, so to speak, is not negated.

I further believe that the unifying element between the two accounts—and here the Gospel of John gives a major vision to us—is the understanding of God as love in how he is and how he acts, that is, how he gives in love. I understand that in *θεοπάθεια*, theopaschism, as a demonstration and revelation of love, God expresses himself. To be God is to be a giver. We humans are on the receiving end in our relationship with God (giving back to him by way of thanksgiving), but we are on the giving side in our relationships with the neighbor. That is, one can speak of God's suffering as an expression of his love to people or one can speak of God overcoming suffering and remaining impassible in his suffering as an expression of his love. Both accounts would essentially state the same thing.

When Jesus speaks to his disciples of his exaltation and being lifted up before the passion, he points to the cross. In the post-resurrection reality, however, this "ascent" embraces both the cross and the action of the Spirit, which comes from the crucified body of the Savior. Thus, there is a difference on this side of the cross and on the other side of the cross. Christ said, *τετέλεσται*, "it is finished" (John 19:30). God entered human history and said these words within this history. And yet in our personal story there is an eschatological dimension, this proverbial now/not yet tension. We still have the body that will have to die physically so that God can finally kill our sin along with the body that carries it. And so, on this side of the grave, there is love but also pain and suffering. Pain and suffering belong to our existence on this earth. On the other side, sacrificial love as giving oneself will remain, but it will not be accompanied by suffering and torment. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there shall not be pain anymore (Rev 21:4).