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## **An Apologia for Divine Impassibility: Toward Pentecostal Prolegomena**

**Daniel Castelo\***

Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Ave. West, Suite 204, Seattle, WA 98119-1950  
casted1@spu.edu

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the possibilities of maintaining divine impassibility for the viability of Pentecostal theology. The author integrates both his own experience as a believer and his sensibilities as an academic to provide an alternative narration of divine affectivity from the popular one advocated by other Pentecostal thinkers. Given the particularities of Pentecostal worship and the implications of a current theological movement to retrieve this feature of the ancient church's testimony, the author suggests that divine impassibility can be a mechanism by which to cultivate both critical and wonder-filled sensibilities among Pentecostal scholars.

### **Keywords**

Divine impassibility, Pentecostal prolegomena, doxology, experience

As a person who was raised in and presently identifies with Wesleyan and Pentecostal circles, I continue to experience the 'raised-eyebrow' effect when I tell people that I work with the issue of divine im/passibility, especially when I communicate that I hold that divine impassibility is a worthwhile and helpful feature of God-talk in the contemporary discussion where divine passibility is the norm. On the Wesleyan side, folks have a hard time seeing how divine impassibility can be reconciled with the 'theology of love' that is such a hallmark of the Wesleyan corpus. On the Pentecostal side, divine *apatheia* appears to be anything but viable given the proximity of the divine presence on the theological stage of Pentecostal worship. Why would a Wesleyan-Pentecostal devote his energies and efforts to think about a theme as antiquated and (more devastatingly) irrelevant to his own theological sub-traditions as divine impassibility? In typical Pentecostal fashion, I would like to offer

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\* Daniel Castelo (PhD, Duke University) is Assistant Professor of Theology at the School of Theology of Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, USA.

‘my testimony’ of how I came to think about divine im/passibility with the aim of showing that an account of divine impassibility can serve to chasten the Pentecostal theological task as it unfolds within the realm of divine affectivity particularly but also as it methodologically understands itself more generally. The creation of conceptual space for divine impassibility within constructive Pentecostal theology can aid Pentecostals to stay true to certain features of their vision of God that stems from their practice of worship.

## I

I first was awakened to the seriousness of divine impassibility when I began reading Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* during the summer of 2003 in the basement of the then un-renovated and unwelcoming Perkins Library at Duke University. I had first been exposed to Moltmann’s work during my seminary education at the Church of God Theological Seminary (now Pentecostal Theological Seminary), and I had developed a great admiration for him since not only was he a suggestive and cutting-edge constructive theologian, but he was also one of the few theologians outside of the Movement who took Pentecostal claims and experiences seriously. This openness of Moltmann is a great credit to this amazing man. All Pentecostal students of theology should honor and hold in great esteem the way Moltmann embraced the Movement; it is a great tribute to him that he was able to see Pentecostals for who they were, to worship with them, and (quite importantly) to listen. In the early days of formal Pentecostal scholarship, when the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* and its monograph series began to take shape, Moltmann was one of the few, reputable, non-Pentecostal scholars who stood in solidarity with us.

But as I began to work through *The Crucified God*, I experienced certain internal reservations about his overall argument in that text. Part of the reason for my disquiet inevitably stemmed from my reading Moltmann at Duke where a deep respect for the church catholic had emerged (in some tension perhaps with the Duke Moltmann knew in the 1960s). Throughout my theological journey, the early church mothers and fathers proved crucial to my own formation, and my experiences at Duke only confirmed to me the value of these great saints. What I found in Moltmann’s treatment of the early church as it related to the theme of divine impassibility was a rushed and insufficiently nuanced presentation;<sup>1</sup> thus began my quest to work through

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<sup>1</sup> My doctoral dissertation at Duke titled, ‘Only the Impassible God Can Help: Moltmann and the Contemporary Status of Divine Impassibility’ (PhD diss., Duke University, 2005)

the theme of divine impassibility in two phases: What divine impassibility meant for the early church<sup>2</sup> and what potential this theme had for informing and possibly reorienting readings such as Moltmann's and the contemporary expressions of this issue.<sup>3</sup>

In 'going back to the sources', I found divine impassibility to be a heavily disputed and densely complicated theme within the history of Christian reflection. It became evident to me that there was no single account of divine impassibility to which the early church subscribed, and this diversity was attributable to several factors: the complexity of theological speech itself, the metaphysical intransigence of Christian God-talk (especially in light of the person and work of Christ) when compared to alternatives in broader cultural expressions, and the varying and competing accounts of the affective life, both in its human and subsequent revelatory instantiations. To state the matter all-too-briefly, I came to conclude that an espousal of a qualified account of divine impassibility was a helpful way to keep passibilist speech about God honest. In other words, a strategy for reminding passibilists of the need to qualify their own proposals was a historically, theologically, philosophically, and pastorally framed espousal of divine impassibility. I found myself a part of a small but emerging group of scholars (usually stemming from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions) who were growing dissatisfied with the hegemony and limits of the passibilist perspective.<sup>4</sup>

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focused almost exclusively on Moltmann's corpus. I have summarized some of my arguments from this work in my article 'Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61.4 (2008), pp. 396–407.

<sup>2</sup> As I began to engage seriously the historical side of this issue, I stumbled across Paul L. Gavrilyuk's impressive text, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) while I was at Emory University doing some intensive research for my dissertation in the winter of 2004–2005. Gavrilyuk had beaten me by a couple of years in elaborating the issue in ways that I felt were necessary. Although I was saddened to see him reach the finish line before I did, it was worthwhile in the end: Gavrilyuk, as a historical theologian, was able to engage the source materials in a more competent way than I could have ever done, and it was a point of assurance to me that others were sensing the same need of nuancing the contemporary discourse of im/passibility in historically informed ways. I found it a great honor to be asked to review this text at a subsequent point; the review can be found in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.1 (2007), pp. 100–103.

<sup>3</sup> This last concern led to the significant revision of my dissertation, which recently saw the light of day as *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Gavrilyuk, worth noting here is Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) and David Bentley Hart, 'No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility' *Pro Ecclesia* 11.2 (Spring 2002), pp. 184–206 and later *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

However, my reasons for siding with the impassibilists were not simply because I was seeking historical coherence between contemporary and past expressions of God-talk; although coherence in theological speech across time is a concern of mine, I also aligned myself with this side of the debate because of deeply wrought convictions about the nature and work of God that emerged from the worshiping communities I have been a part of and the kinds of experiences I have witnessed in such settings. In my way of envisioning the matter, Pentecostal experience of God and a certain account of divine impassibility go hand in hand.

One of the most influential experiences for the development of my theological thinking and sensibilities stems from being a member of Westmore Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee for the best part of ten years during the pastorates of Floyd McClung and David Bishop. Although community was always a challenge in this church since many of the families (including my own) who attended Westmore were involved in denominational bureaucracy, worship at Westmore was a gripping experience for me. The praise, the choir, and the preaching were often anointed, and, usually through the ministry of the choir, messages in tongues and interpretation would erupt. Having been raised in a Pentecostal environment all my life, it was not until I attended Westmore as a teenager that I had witnessed this kind of doxological and communal dynamic of tongues *and* interpretation.<sup>5</sup> I had witnessed plenty of instances of tongues, but this phenomenon of tongues and interpretation interrupting a worship setting was new to me. And the most impressive feature of this experience for me was not the actual tongues or interpretation but the *silence* that preceded it. A hush would often flow throughout the congregation, and I knew at that time that the Spirit was about to speak in us, through us, and for us, all to the glory of the triune God.

I have been trying to come to terms theologically with that silence for some time. It was a kind of silence that, at least in my case, struck me with a deep and holy fear.<sup>6</sup> And yet, at those moments, I did not want to be anywhere else in the world. It was a deeply unsettling and yet refreshingly invigorating silence. Nothing else needed to be said at that time because the presence of God was manifest. What more could a worshiping congregation want? When I read about how the Shekinah glory filled the temple in ancient Israel so that

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to my colleague Brian Bantum for helping me to see how this phenomenon is truly the Spirit's work of building community and interdependence.

<sup>6</sup> Experiences such as these led me to struggle to make theological sense of them; my deepest and most personal expression of this abiding burden and challenge has been 'The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method' *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (Spring 2008), pp. 147-60.

the priests could no longer minister (1 Kgs 8.10-11), when I read the prophet of Israel screaming “Woe is me!” because of his unclean lips during his vision of the heavenly throne (Isa. 6.5), and when I come across the continual praising and falling of the twenty-four elders before the Lamb who was slain, the Lion of Judah, in the Apocalypse of John, the only experiential analogues I have are these moments of silence, these moments of glory, which I have been blessed to witness firsthand.

## II

Pentecostals inhabit their identity with a very important conviction, one that perhaps they rarely (and so to their detriment) consider with any degree of theological sophistication, and that conviction is the belief that the God of Ancient Israel and the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who could appear at any time and at any place. We believe that God moves through the common and the mundane, be it our very selves or the circumstances and conditions that are part of our context. This conviction occasions great joy in that there is no person, experience, or situation that is out of the reach of God’s gracious and providential hand.

A moment in which theological underdevelopment demonstrates itself in light of this theme is when, to use the late William Placher’s notion, the divine transcendence is domesticated. A risk is always present among Christians and especially Pentecostals where a direct correlation can exist between the proximity of God’s work and the anthropologizing of God’s very self. The belief in the immediacy of God’s presence occasions moments when such manifestations are taken for granted, and given my experience, I have often witnessed Pentecostals speak quite lightly of the Spirit’s work in our midst. I must admit that I often cringe when I hear Pentecostals speak casually of what takes place in Pentecostal worship, be it at the altar or elsewhere, or when in jest we say that some place or event became meaningful only when tongues broke out.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Whether Pentecostals do this because others make light of their identity or because they themselves take their identity lightly is open for debate. But I have to admit that my theological thinking on this matter was greatly altered when my tenth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Schlaeger, a non-Pentecostal herself, chided our class once when some were blaspheming the practice of glossolalia. She remarked that she would not tolerate such indiscretions because, although she could not understand it, there was something solemn and beautiful about glossolalia. She taught me to rethink how what I had experienced all my life was in fact not common; it took an ‘outsider’ to inspire within me an appreciation for the sacredness of Pentecostal experience. Looking back on this Melchizedek moment, all I can say is: The Spirit works in mysterious ways.

There is something inherently beautiful but also quite sacred and terrifying about the divine presence in worship, and no description, either lightly and flippantly suggested or seriously and ponderingly offered, can adequately do it justice. After all, this is the God who not only struck blatant sinners like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5); this God also struck Uzzah who, in responding to a potential crisis, was simply ‘trying to help’ the Ark along (1 Chron. 13.9-10). Most of us would think that the examples of Ananias and Sapphira do not apply to us, but what about the case of Uzzah? Is it not true that all Christians, including Pentecostals, should be weary of allowing our theological discourse to over-determine our theological conceptualities, which in turn influence our theological sensibilities and so our spirituality, all in the name of “trying to help” us and others understand and systematize that which we have experienced?

And so this vision of God has guided me, both in my spiritual walk and in my theological thinking. With Steven Land, Terry Cross, Kenneth Archer, and others, I, too, am of the persuasion that Pentecostal theology should be undertaken in a manner that recognizes a deep spirituality undergirding the theological task. However, what is often missed by Pentecostals who think in such ways is the recognition that a deep apophaticism is key to the mystical enterprise.<sup>8</sup> The great spiritual masters of yore would often admit that there were limits to language and to experience itself when they were caught up in a vision of God. This “cloud of witnesses” who advocate a “cloud of unknowing” leads me to ask: Where is the apophatic side to Pentecostal spirituality? More pertinent to the present medium, where is the apophatic side to Pentecostal theology?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One of the best resources to argue for this claim is Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> In this light, Edmund J. Rybarczyk should be applauded for his article, ‘Reframing Tongues: Apophaticism and Postmodernism’, *Pneuma* 27.1 (2005), pp. 83-104. Although what I am espousing here moves beyond suggesting convergences between glossolalia and apophaticism, I think his intuition is right. Unsurprisingly, Rybarczyk is able to see this move because of his deep appreciation for the Orthodox tradition, one on display in his monograph *Beyond Salvation: Eastern Orthodoxy and Classical Pentecostalism on Becoming Like Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004). In the prior article, Rybarczyk remarks how the divine transcendence is revelatory, and yet ‘apophatic theology is best understood as a *kind of theological attitude*’ (p. 86, emphases in original). This attitudinal awareness is one that I am emphasizing as prolegomically inherent to the kinds of sensibilities and tendencies that ought to mark the task of constructive Pentecostal theology as it stems from the vision of God encountered and sustained in Pentecostal worship. Tony Richie makes an overture to such thinking as well in ‘Awe-Full Encounters: A Pentecostal Conversation with C.S. Lewis Concerning Spiritual Experience’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14.1 (2005), pp. 99-122 (especially pp. 112-13).

Given my experiences as a believer and my formation as a scholar, I resonate with Karl Barth's suggestion that speaking of God is both impossible and required and that in this midst we ought to give glory to God.<sup>10</sup> Language cannot carry the burden of encapsulating comprehensively and sufficiently the glory of God; metaphysical and epistemological categories are outstripped of their rhetorical power before the presence of God; even some of our most heartfelt convictions of who God is and how God is like can simply be scaffolding to aid us but in time require significant revision as we grow in wisdom and grace.

For these reasons, I find it lamentable that there is a group of Pentecostal scholars who challenge unequivocally and without reserve the notion of divine impassibility. They rehearse many of the arguments that have become standard fare in these debates, including that divine impassibility represents a Hellenization of the biblical portrayal of God, that the God of Christian faith is a passionate God of love (and so, possible to the exclusion of an impassibilist possibility), that the crucified Christ should once and for all dismiss any notion of God's *apatheia*, etc.<sup>11</sup> In short, they mistakenly equate Aristotle's 'Unmoved Mover' with past and contemporary Christian accounts of divine impassibility;<sup>12</sup> such a judgment is both unflattering to Aristotle but all

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<sup>10</sup> The quote can be found in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1975), p. 186. What I find so compelling about this statement is that Barth not only acknowledges the limits of human speech but also the imperative of the divine command to speak, and within this interplay, theology, when properly undertaken and offered, has to revert to doxology. On this score, the Orthodox tradition has been an important witness in that it has advocated true theology to be prayer, and I think Pentecostal theology can only mature within a similar, self-understood, doxological apparatus.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking specifically of Lee Roy Martin, 'Hearing the Cries of Yahweh: A Dialogue with Reviewers', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18.1 (2009), pp. 30-50 (especially pp. 46-50) and Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology*. JPTSup, 14 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), especially Chapter 2; although I am sure others exist in this camp, I point to these two because they espouse this caricature for different and important reasons. In line with such biblical scholars as Terence Fretheim, Walter Brueggemann, John Goldingay, and others, Martin advocates an exclusionary account of divine passibility as a result of his narrative/literary reading of the book of Judges; Martin makes a point to emphasize God's passionate concern for Israel in the face of Israel's recalcitrance and indifference. Solivan, on the other hand, follows a liberationist approach (one that traditionally draws from Moltmann's work in *The Crucified God*) in order to emphasize that God is not 'apathetic' to the lived *pathos* of believers, as exemplified in the experience of marginalization and oppression found among many Hispanic Pentecostals. In both cases, the citation and denial of divine impassibility serves a rhetorical function to make their cases for God's passion all the more convincing. I find this move to be neither necessary nor salutary.

<sup>12</sup> This move is often picked up by Pentecostals because of the influence of Clark Pinnock; as with Moltmann, so with Pinnock: I appreciate his hand of fellowship to us Pentecostals, and

the more unfortunate for its misrepresentative judgments on centuries of Christian tradition and figures, the latter ranging from the Apostolic Fathers on through to Thomas Aquinas and beyond.

The general consensus of early Christian witness and the current espousals for divine impassibility defy this portrayal in important ways. The vast majority of advocates for divine impassibility today believe that the Bible itself opens space for a specific approach to impassibility,<sup>13</sup> that the Christian confession does acknowledge God to be a God of love but that this love is something altogether different (and infinitely more challenging) than what we would have it be,<sup>14</sup> and that the person of Christ truly suffered.<sup>15</sup> What these passibilists find difficult to recognize is that an account of divine impassibility

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I have been deeply influenced by his work, especially *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), but I have similar reservations as those posed by Terry Cross in 'The Rich Feast of Theology: Can Pentecostals Bring the Main Course or Only the Relish?', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (2000), pp. 27–47. The difficulty with Cross' treatment as well as with others who deal with Pinnock's work (such as Scott A. Ellington, 'Who Shall Lead Them Out? An Exploration of God's Openness in Exodus 32.7–14', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14.1 [2005], pp. 41–60) is that they assume in varying degrees the terms which Pinnock sets up for discourse. Pinnock tends to make the case that the options are either the unchangeable, static, Hellenized God or the living God of the Bible; Cross rightfully wants to push beyond this dichotomy to create a dialectic, one that recognizes both God's immediacy and transcendence. I would want to probe further, though, by questioning the legitimacy of the options themselves as they have been narrated and justified by Pinnock and his followers. I entirely agree with Cross, however, that the 'either/or' paradigm is bankrupt.

<sup>13</sup> I make this case in 'A Crisis in God-talk? The Bible and Theopathy' *Theology* 110.858 (Nov/Dec 2007), pp. 411–16. The biblical overture toward such a move stems from the way the Bible challenges its own ways of speaking of God so that God-talk has both resonances with human reality and yet also marked contrasts in which the divine realm is altogether something beyond human comprehension.

<sup>14</sup> The claim that God is *actus purus* forms the basis for a depiction of love that is supremely realized and dynamic. On the basis of such an account, the claim that is often made among passibilists that 'to love means to suffer' falls paltry short of a vision of God's infinite, generative plenitude that implies both the endurance *and* overcoming of suffering.

<sup>15</sup> Yes, many past voices suggested that Christ 'only' suffered in his human nature and not in his divine nature. Although the tendency by many in light of this phrasing has been to dismiss the claim as insufficient and maybe even Nestorian, I find it to be consonant with the achievements and spiritual value of Chalcedonian reasoning. The similarity and dissimilarity between Christ and us are crucial for an account of redemption that is both 'with us' and 'beyond us', both being expressions of Christ being 'for us'. The felt need to speak that Christ suffered both in his humanity and divinity so that suffering touches the 'very being of God' is theologically unnecessary to me, but more to the point, I find this move to de-radicalize the wonder of the incarnation. For a very helpful reading of some of these issues, see the philosophically and theologically astute presentation in Bruce D. Marshall's chapter 'The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God' in James F. Keating and Joseph White, O.P. (eds.), *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 246–98.

does not necessarily exclude God from being passionate;<sup>16</sup> on the contrary, an account of divine impassibility can serve to make God thoroughly passionate by exposing in a *theological* way the language of ‘passion’. For instance, in the work of the two Pentecostal passibilists mentioned above, namely Lee Roy Martin and Samuel Solivan, one can find glimpses of the need for differentiating divine affectivity from human affectivity.<sup>17</sup> Such a move is consonant with a gesture noticeable (but oft-neglected) in one of the stalwarts hailed and championed by the passibilist cause, Abraham Heschel.<sup>18</sup> This differentiation, however, cannot exercise sufficient restraint and, more importantly, conceptual reorientation with simply minimal, passing references. That is why I am of the persuasion that as long as favorable statements are made of divine passibility, divine impassibility should serve as a terminological and conceptual term of qualification that cuts right through the logic of an account of divine affectivity.

Additionally, divine impassibility can serve theological discourse as an indicator of the divine transcendence that always precedes, undergirds, and follows holy reasoning. Pentecostals need to wrestle earnestly and thoughtfully on how to address the divine transcendence theologically. One possibility is through problematizing one of the key features of our God-talk, namely divine affectivity. A qualified account of divine impassibility forces us to rethink the cherished view of God’s passion so that at least we begin to see the limits of knowledge, metaphysics, and the theological enterprise. In short, divine impassibility can serve to help us recognize that even our most beloved speech practices can serve idolatrous ends when they insist on being heard in the place of the holy silence that occasionally emanates from the Spirit’s hushing.

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<sup>16</sup> The indefinite article here is crucial; there are many variations of divine impassibility as there are for divine passibility, a fact often lost on passibilists. Admittedly, some forms of divine impassibility throughout Christian history present a less-than-satisfying portrayal of God (see David Bentley Hart’s important case study in ‘Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God’ in Keating and White [eds.], *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, pp. 299–323). Unfortunately, rarely do passibilists acknowledge that there are equally less-than-satisfying accounts of divine passibility, some of which border occasionally on the mythological.

<sup>17</sup> Martin admits that ‘the affections of God are not equivalent to the affections of humans’ (‘Hearing the Cries of Yahweh’, p. 48), and Solivan remarks that ‘When the Scriptures speak of God as being moved to compassion, they are not employing anthropomorphic speech’ (*The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation*, p. 60). These gestures, however, are largely tangential to what they would otherwise say about divine affectivity.

<sup>18</sup> See my brief excursus on the matter in *The Apathetic God*, pp. 34–35 and Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, pp. 64–68.