The Christological Function of Divine Impassibility: Cyril of Alexandria and Contemporary Debate

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wycliffe College and the Theological Department of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael's College

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University of St. Michael’s College

2013

Abstract

This thesis contributes to the debate over the meaning and function of the doctrine of divine impassibility in theological and especially christological discourse. Seeking to establish the coherence and utility of the paradoxical language characteristic of the received christological tradition (e.g. the impassible Word became passible flesh and suffered impassibly), it argues that the doctrine of divine apatheia illuminates the apocalyptic and soteriological dimension of the incarnate Son’s passible life more effectively than recent reactions against it. The first chapter explores the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and the meaning and place of apatheia within it. In light of the christological tradition which Cyril epitomized, the second chapter engages contemporary critiques and re-appropriations of impassibility, focusing on the particular contributions of Jürgen Moltmann, Robert W. Jenson, Bruce L. McCormack and David Bentley Hart.
Acknowledgments

If this thesis communicates any truth, beauty and goodness, credit belongs to all those who have shaped my life up to this point. In particular, I would like to thank the Toronto School of Theology and Wycliffe College for providing space to do theology from within the catholic church. The ecumenical flavour of the education I have received has been both challenging and enriching. Second, I would like to thank my local congregation, Cedarview Community Church, for nurturing my faith and ensuring that my intellectual growth remains rooted in and oriented towards the concrete reality of Christ’s body. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, especially my wife for her ceaseless, multifarious support and encouragement throughout the process of research and writing.
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Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of influential theologians have questioned, critiqued and rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of divine *apatheia*. Of the various kinds of objections put forth, the one that perhaps stands out as the most compelling proceeds from Christology: If the church worships a passible man named Jesus as the eternal Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, then must we not conclude that the Trinity is passible?\(^1\) Regardless of any further qualifications we may be inclined to make, if we regard as God one who suffered and died for our sins, then do we not preclude any attempt to incorporate the language of *apatheia* into Christian discourse? These questions reflect the conviction that the notion of a deity which cannot be affected from without is utterly incongruous with the God revealed in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture. As Richard Bauckham concluded, “It seems increasingly obvious that the Greek philosophical inheritance in traditional theology was adopted without the necessary critical effect of the central Christian insight into the divine nature: the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ.”\(^2\)

In this thesis, I join the growing chorus of voices which, in opposition to this sort of christological critique, seeks to rehabilitate and enhance the doctrine of divine *apatheia* within Christian theology. I will argue that we need not reject the concept of impassibility in order to make sense of the christological economy to which Scripture witnesses, as if the language is inextricably tied to the conceptual world of an “unbaptized” Hellenism. When understood through the lens of the classical christological tradition, divine *apatheia* can illuminate the

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apocalyptic and soteriological dimension of the incarnate Son’s passible life more effectively than the alternative language and concepts proposed by its critics.

I will defend this thesis in two chapters. In the first chapter, I will explore the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria, “the chief protagonist of the classical doctrine of Christ,”3 drawing from a number of his anti-Nestorian works. I will approach the texts primarily as a systematic theologian interested in the inner coherence of Cyril’s Christology and the meaning and function of divine *apatheia* within it. Throughout his controversy with Nestorius, Cyril defended christological unity without ever abandoning the intrinsic impassibility of the Trinity. Is this the result of the lingering influence of Hellenism, or does impassibility cohere with a biblical, Nicene understanding of the incarnation? I intend to show that from Cyril’s perspective, divine *apatheia* actually illuminates the freedom of God to reveal himself and save humanity in the way that he in fact has, in the human and thereby passible man, Jesus Christ.

In the second chapter, in light of the christological approach of Cyril, I will engage and contribute to the contemporary im/passibility debate. As I explore differing theological and christological perspectives on impassibility, primarily those of Jürgen Moltmann, Robert W. Jenson, Bruce L. McCormack and David Bentley Hart, I seek to show that we need not reject divine *apatheia* in order to embrace and make sense of the biblical narrative of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Following the lead of Cyril, when we maintain the conceptual distinction between impassible deity and passible flesh, as well as their concrete unity in the person of Christ, we preserve the full significance of the incarnation as a revelation and gift of infinite Triune love. Hence, we ought to appreciate the paradoxical Christology characteristic of the thought and worship of much of the received Christian tradition.

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Chapter 1
Christology and *Apatheia* in Cyril of Alexandria

When the Alexandrian Fathers employed the language of *apatheia*, they were not simply paying homage to Hellenism’s apophasic tradition. A closer look reveals that the Fathers, culminating in Cyril of Alexandria, presupposed that the concept of divine impassibility undergirds and makes sense of the christological economy. While adamantly defending the reality of the Word’s suffering in his own human flesh, Cyril simultaneously upheld that the consubstantial Trinity precedes and transcends the possible order. He thus paradoxically confessed that in the incarnation the impassible Son became passible and thereby suffered impassibly. This is not simply a logical contradiction exposing the incompatibility of the notion of *apatheia* with the biblical narrative. Rather, in Cyril’s view, it is the most fitting way to speak of the ultimately ineffable reality of the mystery of Jesus Christ.

In this chapter, I seek to show that divine *apatheia* is as an integral, coherent part of Cyril’s biblical, Nicene, single-subject Christology. More specifically, the doctrine functions to illuminate the apocalyptic and soteriological dimension of the possible life of the eternal Son. The impassibility of the immanent Trinity does not negate the reality of the Son’s incarnation. Instead, it reveals the sense in which the possible existence of the Word proceeds from a gracious act of Triune love which is ordered to sinful humanity’s redemptive transformation. To deny divine impassibility, as Cyril conceived it, is thus to impoverish the mystery of God’s revelatory and salvific presence in Jesus Christ. I will begin the chapter with preliminary comments on significant debates among Cyril’s interpreters. Second, I will analyze the primary sources, first focusing on his theology of incarnation as event and then on his Christology proper. Finally, I will explore the function of *apatheia* within Cyril’s chirstological discourse.
1 Preliminary Considerations

As I explore the coherence of Cyril’s christological thought, a number of interpretive questions will arise which have yielded divergent scholarly opinions over the past century. In order to prevent such questions from sidetracking my theological analysis, I will summarize my presuppositions about the Alexandrian patriarch’s theological consistency, ideological context, and christological legacy.

1.1 Theological Consistency

Scholars have debated Cyril’s theological consistency. Some detect a substantial difference between the “Logos-Sarx” Christology of the exegetical, anti-Arian Cyril and the symmetrical Christology of the dogmatic, anti-Nestorian Cyril. Others claim that he eventually compromised on Christ’s unity as he made concessions to the Antiochenes. While this study does not address pre-Nestorian writings, numerous scholars have challenged the theory of Cyril’s inconsistency. He certainly sharpened his ideas and adjusted his terminology throughout the controversy, especially in dialogue with the more moderate and astute Oriental theologians. Nevertheless, Cyril’s thought remained substantially consistent throughout his life.

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1.2 Ideological Context

Scholars have similarly disagreed over the primary ideological issue at stake. Many modern surveys construe the Nestorian controversy in terms of tension between the Alexandrian emphasis on christological unity and the Antiochene defence of the completeness of Jesus’ humanity. In such presentations Cyril often emerges as a de facto Apollinarian who stressed the oneness of the incarnate Son at the expense of his human psyche. Over the last four decades, scholars have compellingly revised such an account. As a wide reading of the documents reveals, the primary issue underlying the controversy was not the completeness or commonness of Jesus’ humanity but the integrity and inviolability of the Godhead. If this correction is accurate, then the basic issue was God’s relation to the world. Is it metaphysically possible for the infinite Trinity to act in a finite creature? Can the immanently full Son empty himself? Can the intrinsically impassible Word become human and thereby suffer?

1.3 Christological Legacy

Questions concerning Cyril’s christological legacy likewise remain controversial. Did the Chalcedonian Definition vindicate or indict his Christology? Or did it represent a more or less equal compromise between the Cyrillians on the one hand and the Orientals and Westerners on the other? Due to his terminological imprecision and inconsistency, Cyril can appear, at times,
as a radical monophysite who would never have confessed the Chalcedonian Definition. Other times he appears as a dyophysite ally of the Orientals who would have embraced Leo’s *Tome* and Chalcedon’s refinements. As John McGuckin warns, the only way to grasp his thought adequately is to read him widely, always interpreting particular phrases and terms with reference to the overall trajectory of his thought. 9 Having applied this criterion to his key christological works, I understand Cyril’s thought as a substantial seedbed for Chalcedon. One of the chief emphases of the Chalcedonian Definition is that there is only one undivided and inseparable *prosopon* and *hypostasis*, “one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.” 10 As we will see below, this adequately captures Cyril’s primary concern. 11

2 Incarnation as Completed Event

Karl Barth has distinguished two complementary ways of conceiving and speaking of the miracle of the Word made flesh. 12 First, we may think about the incarnation as a *completed* event, its “static-ontic” aspect, or what Western theologians might call “Christology proper.” Second, we can apprehend the incarnation as a completed *event*, in its “dynamic-noetic” aspect.

In the following analysis I have used Barth’s distinction in order to delineate the main themes of Cyril’s Christology. 13 I will begin with the second way, Cyril’s theology of the incarnation as a

9 *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 145.
10 Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 86.
12 *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), I/2 (15.2), 172, 175, 179-80.
13 Compare R.A. Norris’s influential thesis that Cyril has two manners of christological thought, the “subject-attribute model” (cf. completed *event*) and the “composition model” (cf. completed *event*), “Christological Models in Cyril of Alexandria,” *Studia Patristica* 13 (1972): 255-68; cf. McKinon’s concise summary of Norris’s thesis in *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ*, 2-4. While I am indebted to Norris’s insight, I agree with Weinandy’s critique that the two models are properly understood as complementary, “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” 40. Moreover, we cannot always isolate specific terms or phrases according to a particular model. (I would perhaps accuse Van Loon of doing this, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, 544-9.) Instead, we must acknowledge that Cyril uses the same phraseology in different ways, sometimes to point to the priority of the Word,
completed event, because his static-ontic interest in Christ, his ontology of the incarnate One, always presupposes the dynamic-noetic aspect, the event in which the Triune God acts lovingly for fallen humanity’s redemption. In this sense, we might say that Cyril’s Christology is primarily “from above” insofar as it takes the subject and action of the eternal Word as its starting point rather than Christ as a finished composition. I will first address the distinction between the eternal, “pre-incarnate” Son from the event in which he becomes flesh, what I will call narrative duality. Second, I will address the sense in which Cyril identifies the eternally begotten One with the child of Mary, what I will call subjective continuity.

2.1 Narrative Duality

Cyril speaks of the incarnation in terms of a narrative duality in order to highlight its character as a gratuitous act of love. In his christological works, Cyril consistently distinguishes the immanent from the economic Trinity, the pre-incarnate from the incarnate Word, his eternal birth from his human birth. Although he has little interest in theorizing about a Logos asarkos, he recognizes the value of conceptually distinguishing the Son’s dual births or narratives. When we distinguish the Trinity’s immanent constitution from his economic activity, we recognize the contingent and free nature of the event in which the eternal Word of the Father takes on human existence for the salvation of humanity. We thereby apprehend the incarnation as a dynamic act of love for humanity’s benefit.14

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14 I believe Jaroslav Pelikan misrepresents Cyril when he identifies a Christology of “pre-existence, kenosis, and exaltation” as a Western insight that emerged over against the Cyrillian tendency to “lose sight of the times” in light of its “preoccupation with ontological questions raised by the union,” The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), 256-7. As I hope to establish, Cyril was indeed able to link a “doctrine of two natures to a dynamic soteriology.”
2.1.1 Distinguishing the Immanent and Economic Trinity

Throughout his anti-Nestorian works Cyril consistently distinguishes between the two “narratives” of the singular Son, one eternal or immanent and the other human or economic. As he repeatedly affirms in his Letter to the Monks of Egypt (Spring 429), one of his first responses to Nestorius’s critique of the Theotokos epithet, the Word who eternally co-exists with his Begetter “is also said to have been born of a woman in a fleshly manner.” The one who has an eternal “birth from God the Father” also “economically” “undertook our condition” in “these last times of the age since he became flesh.” Cyril often makes these distinctions in order to defend himself against Nestorius’s attempt to reduce single-subject Christology to absurdity. For instance, in book four of his Five Tomes Against Nestorius (Spring 430), Cyril defends the Eucharistic presence by distinguishing the immanent Triune Godhead from the economic body of the risen Son: “it is by no means the nature of the divinity that lies upon the altars of the churches, even though it is the body proper to the Word begotten of God the Father, and the Word is by nature and in reality God.” Lest we imply that God is intrinsically part of creation, we must distinguish that which makes possible Eucharistic participation (the Son’s economic birth) from the incorporeal procession which constitutes divine being (the Son’s immanent birth). Cyril provides a similar argument in his Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten (sometime after 431), an explanation of his Christology in the aftermath of the Ephesian Council (Summer 431). By virtue of the Son’s incarnation, “the Incorporeal One was with us” in an unprecedented, localized manner. Yet “in what pertains to his deity by nature he was not ‘with us’ because the distinction between Godhead and Manhood cannot be elided, for the difference

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between the natures is vast indeed.”

Once again, in order to preserve the transcendence of the Trinity, Cyril conceptually distinguishes the omnipresent divine nature from the localized Emmanuel. The same applies to the notion of divine kenosis. By virtue of his voluntary entry into the economy, the Word “appropriated the poverty of humanity to himself” and thus emptied himself. Yet kenosis does not apply to the divine nature abstracted from the economy. For the Word is always “‘full’ in regard to his own nature,” and “just like his Begetter, is unalterable and immutable, and was never capable of any possibility.”

Finally, in his last and most mature anti-Nestorian work, On the Unity of Christ (ca. 438), Cyril reiterates that nothing we say about the Word’s becoming and kenosis applies to deity apart from the economy, including the title “Christ.”

In light of the reality of the Son’s assumption of human existence, we attribute the Spiritual anointing of Jesus to the Word incarnate. However, “when we speak about his divine nature,” that is, “the Only Begotten Word of God considered outside all the limitations of the self-emptying,” it is “entirely unfitting” to speak of the Son extrinsically receiving the Spirit, as if they do not already share the same essence. In sum then, Cyril seeks to defend the reality of God’s presence in the Son’s economic, human and eschatological birth, becoming and kenosis. Yet to distance his Christology from an absurd historicism, he conceptually distinguishes two narratives, the Trinity-in-himself and the Trinity-in-history.

2.1.2 Incarnation as an Act of Love

There are a number of instances in which Cyril not only distinguishes the eternal from the historical narrative of God but hints that the distinction safeguards the intelligibility of the incarnation as a free act for humanity’s sake, an act of divine love. First, in his Letter to the Monks, Cyril clarifies that the form of humanity did not constitute the being of the Son. On the

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18 Ibid., 5/298.
contrary, the eternal Word was “free by nature as God, and the maker of all things who undertook a voluntary self-emptying for our sake.”

Second, in the final sections of his *Third Letter to Nestorius* (Fall 430), just before his infamous twelve anathemas, Cyril reiterates that the eternal Son “had no natural need, or external necessity, of a temporal birth in these last times of this age.” Instead, the Word who ontologically precedes the economy freely “united the human condition to himself and underwent a fleshly birth...so that...the curse upon our whole race should cease that drives our earthly bodies to death.” Finally, in *On the Unity of Christ* Cyril asserts that while economic becoming and kenosis do not constitute the divine being, “It was not impossible to God, in his loving-kindness, to make himself capable of bearing the limitations of the manhood.” For “he did not consider it beneath him to follow a path congruous to this plan, and so he is said to have undergone a birth like ours.” Cyril then highlights the redemptive motive of the Word’s voluntary kenosis: “he wished to make that flesh which was held in the grip of sin and death evidently superior to sin and death.” Against those who “bankrupt the economy of salvation” by arrogantly “finding fault with the Son, and saying that his decision to undergo a voluntary self-emptying for our sake was misguided,” Cyril rejoices that “out of tender love” it was the Son’s “good pleasure to save the whole human race in him by means of the incarnation.” As these passages reveal, Cyril consistently speaks of the Word in narrative dualistic terms, conceptually distinguishing his intrinsic consubstantiality with the Father from his voluntary consubstantiality with us, in order to deny that the incarnation proceeds from any inner necessity in the divine nature. Since God “chooses to adopt the limitations that apply to humanity as an exercise of [his] omnipotent freedom,”

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21 Ibid., 11/273.
apprehend the incarnation as something done for humanity’s benefit, a gratuitous act of divine love.

2.2 Subjective Continuity

Cyril speaks of the incarnation in terms of a subjective continuity in order to highlight its apocalyptic character. Whereas the conceptual distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity preserves the contingent and loving character of the act, their concrete identity ensures that the true God is its subject. Against Nestorius and his followers, Cyril insists that none other than the eternal Son is the dynamic subject of incarnation. Both before and after the union, the singular subject remains the eternal Word of the Father. This means that the incarnation is not just any divine act but the apocalyptic climax of salvation history. In Jesus Christ God gives us his very self and thereby reveals his very nature as Triune love.

2.2.1 Two Births, One Subject

In his anti-Nestorian works Cyril contends that the Son’s double birth applies to one continuous subject. In his Letter to the Monks, for example, he argues that while Mary had no part in the eternal generation of “the living and enhypostatic Word,” this same Word “was united to flesh endowed with a rational soul” and thereby “is said to have been born of a woman in a fleshly manner.” The same One who “has his existence without beginning in time” was born temporally of the Virgin. A similar theme emerges in the Second Letter to Nestorius (Winter 430), the letter sanctioned by the Council of Ephesus as an authoritative christological interpretation of Nicene faith. Cyril emphatically denies that the human birth of the Son is somehow constitutive of his divine nature, as if he “stood in need of a second beginning of

24 Many scholars note that this is Cyril’s main concern. See Jenson, Systematic Theology, 1:128-9; Young, Frances, “Theotokos: Mary and the Pattern of Fall and Redemption in the Theology of Cyril of Alexandria,” in The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria, 65; McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria, 186.
existence.”26 Yet at the same time, “because the Word hypostatically united human reality to himself, ‘for us and for our salvation,’” we confess that the eternal Son himself has “undergone a fleshly birth.” The Son did not unite with an “ordinary man previously born of the holy virgin” but himself underwent birth by virtue of the act in which he made flesh his own. In other words, despite conceptually distinguishing dual narratives, Cyril conceives of the incarnation in terms of a concrete continuity of subject. As he states in his Explanation of the Twelve Chapters (Summer 431), written to defend his anathemas against Oriental criticism, “before the incarnation while he is without flesh he is the Word, and after the incarnation he is the selfsame in the body.”27 As McGuckin succinctly summarizes, the subject remains the same even as “that subject now expresses the characteristics of his divinely powerful condition in and through the medium of a passible and fragile condition.”28

In order to render unequivocal the Word’s subjective continuity Cyril opposes the idea that the Word united with a particular, pre-existing man. Yet he also wants to affirm the reality of the assumed human existence. As he claims in book one of the Five Tomes, “the Word that is from above and from the Father came down not into the flesh of any particular person nor into a flesh alien to humanity.”29 This is perhaps Cyril’s clearest anticipation of the doctrine of anhypostasis and enhypostasis, upheld and strengthened by the Second Council of Constantinople (553).30 On the one hand, the flesh assumed by the Word is not its own particular person, a concrete entity subsisting prior to and apart from the union (anhypostasis). When we conceive of what the Word assumed prior to the union, we speak of human nature in

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26 Ibid., 4/263-4.
27 Ibid., 8/285-6; cf. Five Tomes, Cyril of Alexandria, trans. Russell, 158: “the same subject who before the Incarnation was Son and God and Word of the Father became after it a man like us.”
28 St. Cyril of Alexandria, 186.
30 Tanner, Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 114-22. On the later development of this doctrine, see Meyendorff, Christ in Eastern Christian Thought, 66-8, 77-9.
the abstract, the condition of being human. On the other hand, by virtue of the Word’s assumption of human existence, Jesus Christ really is a particular human person. As later theologians would explain, the primal and singular hypostasis of the Word personalizes human existence within himself (enhypostasis).  

One of the main ways in which Cyril defends subjective continuity is by attacking Nestorian phrases and ideas that seem to imply a dual subjectivity. In the first book of the Five Tomes, for example, he criticizes the contradictory manner in which Nestorius speaks of Mary. Given Nestorius’s denial of the Theotokos, Cyril wonders how he can call Mary the venerable vessel through which God uniquely passed: “If the divine is incorporeal, infinite and omnipresent and is not localized or circumscribed, how will it pass through an individual body?” In what meaningful sense did God pass through Mary if her child is not qualitatively different from a prophet indwelt by God’s Spirit? Cyril’s point is that we cannot make sense of Nestorius’s mariological language without the church’s confession that the one born of Mary is the eternally begotten Son of God. As Cyril suggests in his Explanation of the Twelve Chapters, Nestorius and his allies “only pretend to confess the term incarnation though in reality they do not admit that the Word of God became flesh, that is became man like us while remaining what he was.” This is evident when they speak of God indwelling a man, of God as Lord of the man, of the Word activating the man, of the man being worshipped alongside the Word, of the man

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31 As McGuckin explains, according to Cyril, while the Orientals were right to assume that every physis needs its own hypostasis in order to concretely exist, they were wrong to apply this rule to the incarnation. Because the divine hypostasis of the Word is transcendentally powerful, he can hypostasize a human physis, rendering it a concrete human being, within his own divine hypostasis, St. Cyril of Alexandria, 214-6.

32 In contrast to modern exonerations of Nestorius in view of his “true intensions” (e.g. Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition, 370ff.), if we assume along with Cyril that “a doctrine’s implicit premises are just as important as its explicit intentions,” then there is much validity in his critique, McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria, 164, cf. 158-9, 171-3. As Wickham states, Cyril’s portrait of Nestorius is a “legitimate caricature,” introduction to Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters, xxxii. Cf. Jenson, Systematic Theology, 1:128-9.

extrinsically receiving the Spirit, and of the man alone as high priest. All of these ideas
confuse the Son’s double birth with the birth of two subjects. In doing so, they undermine the
sense in which the incarnation is a unique event of divine grace. As Lionel R. Wickham
observes, in contrast to any theology of incarnation that depends upon “the responsiveness of
the human subject,” Cyril regards the incarnation as a divine act more basic than human
choice. This indeed is the deepest goal of the doctrine of anhypostasis and enhypostasis. When
we understand the incarnation as an “asymmetrical union” initiated and sustained by the Word,
we perceive the “utter prevenience and generosity of divine agency.”

Cyril also wants to maintain that the incarnation definitively reveals God. Whereas Nestorius
seems to presume that God could not make himself so immediately present in the world, Cyril
implies that God’s becoming flesh reveals his true character. As he affirms in his Explanation,

> When he became like us, even though he always remained what he was, he did not
deprecate our condition. No, for the sake of the economy he accepted, along with the
limitations of the manhood, all those things which pertain to the human condition and he regarded nothing therein as unworthy of his personal glory or nature.

Insofar as the Word himself “became like us,” we trace an inner consistency linking the gracious
act and the loving nature of the one who acts. To the extent that God himself, in the person of
the eternally begotten Son, is the subject of the incarnation, we apprehend it as an apocalyptic
event, a divine self-gift which reveals the nature of God as Triune love.

### 2.2.2 Biblical and Creedal Warrant

One of the hallmarks of Cyril’s christological work concerns the exegetical nature of his
theological argumentation. He does not understand himself as a novel thinker. Instead he seeks

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35 Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters, xxxv; cf. Fairbairn, Grace and Christology in the Early Church, 5, 63-129,
222; McKinion, Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ, 225, 230.
36 Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand
to defend the message of Scripture and its authoritative interpretation as summed up by the Nicene Fathers. There are a few passages of Scripture that he finds especially helpful. First, the most obvious verse that presumes one dynamic subject is John 1:14: “the Word became flesh.” Cyril frequently argues that Nestorius’s various double-subject conceptions cannot do any justice to these simple words. Second, Cyril often appeals to various parts of Hebrews 2:10-18, especially when defending his paradoxical language. For example, in book three of the Five Tomes he responds to Nestorius’s theory that we may only call the human temple in which the Son dwelt our brotherly high priest. He accuses Nestorius of twisting the plain sense of the text, insisting that none other than “the Word of God the Father put himself alongside us and became like us in every respect except sin.” Third and finally, the most significant christological text for Cyril (and his predecessors) is Philippians 2:6-11. He repeatedly argues that any attempt to apply the kenosis to a man detached from the eternal Word fails to make any meaningful sense of the text, which teaches that “He who was above us became as we are, and he who is naturally free was in the limitations of the flesh.” Of those who segregate the kenosis from God Cyril asks, “Where then is the self-emptying? To whom should we attribute it?” If incarnation consists of a divine indwelling of an independent man, there is no kenosis but rather “someone fulfilled.” The only way to maintain the intelligibility of Scripture is to identify the Word himself as the continuous subject of both his eternal generation and the economic becoming and kenosis.

From the beginning of the controversy, Cyril also appeals to the Nicene tradition. In his
\textit{Letter to the Monks}, against those crypto-Arians who worship a Son “who falls short of divine
transcendence, yet surpasses the limits of the created order,” he quotes the Nicene Symbol to
show how Nestorius logically undermines the trinitarian “faith of the holy Fathers.” The Symbol
unequivocally affirms that the One “who came down from heaven for us men and for our
salvation,” who became flesh “endowed with a rational soul,” who “suffered and rose again, and
in due season will return as judge,” this is “the One Lord Jesus Christ the Only Begotten Son of
God” who was “born from the essence of God the Father.”\footnote{St. Cyril of Alexandria, trans. McGuckin, 6-8/248-9.} As Cyril becomes increasingly
aware that Nestorius and his Antiochene counterparts are more than willing to verbally confess
the anti-Arian Creed, he takes on the task of supplying, in accordance with the Fathers, its
Symbol, which is based upon the narrative thrust of the Gospels, precludes a double-subject
explanation of the incarnation. There is only one subject of the soteriologically driven kenosis,
and that subject is none other than the Word of God.

\section*{3 Incarnation as \textit{Completed} Event}

Having examined Cyril’s theology of the incarnation as a completed \textit{event}, the dynamic-
noetic aspect of his Christology, in this section I turn to his theology of Jesus Christ as a
\textit{completed} event, the static-ontic dimension. I will begin with the sense in which Cyril speaks of
Christ as twofold, what I will call \textit{natural duality}. I will then turn to the sense in which he
affirms that Christ is one, what I will call \textit{natural-hypostatic unity}. 
3.1 Natural Duality

Cyril speaks of the incarnate Son as a natural duality in order to safeguard the soteriological purpose of the Word’s incarnate life. Despite his hesitancy to accept the orthodoxy of dyophysite language, the Alexandrian patriarch does not reject it altogether. In response to Oriental criticism, he constantly denies that his conception of a true union logically entails confusion or mixture, as if the Son and humanity have morphed into a third thing, a so-called *tertium quid*. His Christology explicitly excludes all forms of monophysitism, those which truncate Christ’s humanity and those which compromise the integrity of the Godhead. In fact, I will argue that from Cyril’s perspective, the soteriological intelligibility of the person and work of Jesus Christ demands that the Word remains fully God and his humanity remains truly human, even amidst the latter’s transfiguration by virtue of the union.

3.1.1 The Word remains True God

Cyril frequently clarifies that the union does not entail the negation of divine transcendence. The great mystery of the incarnation is that the God who, as James 1:17 attests, “is ever the same and does not admit to suffer the shadow of a change,” becomes man while remaining himself.44 As the Nicene Symbol presumes, the incarnate Word “did not set aside the fact that he was God (God forbid) but continues to be what he was and abides in the nature and glory of the Godhead.” Hence, Cyril strongly denies that his conception of christological unity requires God’s natural transformation. For example, as he responds to Oriental concerns in his *First Letter to Succensus* (ca. 434-438), he contends that “Even when he descended into our limitations,” the eternal Son incomprehensibly “remained in the transcendent condition of the

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The union occurs “in an ineffable way that transcends understanding, without confusion, without change, and without alteration.” And as he contends in On the Unity of Christ, “It was necessary, yes necessary, that [the Word] should be conformed to us in the limitations of the manhood while at the same time he authentically enjoyed transcendent divine status within his own essential being.” Cyril thus recognizes that an adequate Christology refuses to sacrifice the ongoing integrity of the Godhead in the name of single-subjectivity. It is a mistake to defend the true union by supplanting natural duality with natural confusion. Chalcedon would further elaborate on this years later.

Instead of seeking to explicate this ineffable mystery, Cyril focuses on the connection between inviolable divinity and the soteriological function of the incarnate Son’s life. In his Letter to the Monks, for instance, he asserts that the voluntary kenosis “did not deprive him of his God-befitting glory, nor did it alienate him from his preeminent transcendence over all things.” For the eternal Son “remained God even in his manhood,” which illumines the salvific efficacy of his work: “It is because Life suffered death in its very own body that it might be revealed as life when it brought the body back to life again.” The transcendent Son’s immutable, life-giving nature makes possible the vivification of his own humanity, by union with which we are saved from corruption. Cyril makes a similar case in book four of the Five Tomes when he responds to Nestorius’s objection to a Christology that “mingles the nature of the flesh with that of the divinity to produce a single essence,” the so-called tertium quid heresy that Chalcedon would definitively condemn. In response to this objection, Cyril denies the absurd notion that “God has been transformed into the nature of the body” and confesses that the Word “made the body born from a woman his own without undergoing change or alteration in

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any way.” And this christological paradox underlies the salvific efficacy of eucharistic communion: “For being life in virtue of being God, he rendered the body life and life-giving.”

As Thomas Weinandy summarizes, “It is precisely his wholly otherness as God which gives significance to the Son’s incarnate existence.”

### 3.1.2 The Reality of the Word’s Humanity

Many modern critics have implied that Cyril’s twin emphases, divine transcendence and christological unity, inevitably led to neglect of Jesus’ humanity. In reality, from his earliest to his latest anti-Nestorian works, he consistently conveys the incarnation as the assumption of bodily existence *endowed with a rational soul.* Yet even among scholars who acknowledge that Cyril cannot justly be accused of Apollinarianism, some complain that he insufficiently appreciates the significance of Jesus’ human soul. It may be true that his thought remained underdeveloped in this regard. But there are instances in which Cyril defends the soteriological necessity of the ongoing integrity of Jesus Christ’s humanity.

In book one of the *Five Tomes* Cyril criticizes Nestorius for undermining the soteriological trajectory of the eternal Son’s truly human birth:

> If he had not been born like us according to the flesh, if he had not partaken of the same elements as we do, he would not have delivered human nature from the fault we incurred in Adam, nor would he have warded off the decay from our bodies, nor would he have brought to an end the power of the curse which we say came upon the first woman.

As this quotation indicates, only the Son’s fully human birth makes possible the salvation of sinful humanity. Cyril goes on to clarify that Jesus Christ not only redeems humanity from physical corruptibility but makes possible our spiritual rebirth: “in Christ we see human nature, as if experiencing a new beginning of the human race, enjoying freedom of access to God.”

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49 “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” 46.
50 See the summaries of research cited in note 7.
Thus, Cyril is neither christologically Apollinarian nor soteriologically “physicalist.” Although he certainly emphasizes the physical effects of the fall and redemption, even early on in the Nestorian controversy he appreciates the theological value of the full humanness of the assumed flesh.

Cyril makes similar comments in his First Letter to Succensus. Since “human nature was suffering corruption because of Adam’s transgression, and since our intellect was being tyrannized by the pleasures or rather the innate impulses of the flesh, then it was necessary that the Word of God should be incarnated for the salvation of us who are on this earth.” In view of original sin, the problem of humanity is twofold: physical corruption and spiritual-moral disharmony. In order to remedy this twofold problem we need the Word to make human existence his own and thereby “destroy corruption within it since he is Life and Life-giver, bringing its innate sensual impulses to order.” The transformation of both our physical and spiritual condition requires that the Word assumes and thus deifies every aspect of his human existence. As Norman Russell points out, Cyril clearly presupposes Gregory of Nazianzus’ renowned dictum: “that which was not assumed was not healed.”

Immediately following this discussion Cyril makes an important distinction between the transfigured character of Christ’s humanity and monophysite confusion: “because it was God’s own body it transcended all human things, yet the earthly body itself did not undergo a transformation into the nature of Godhead.” Even “after the resurrection the same body which had suffered continued to exist, although it no longer contained any human weakness.” From

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Cyril’s perspective, to affirm that Christ’s humanity has been transformed into Godhead would be absurd. On the other hand, to affirm the ongoing reality of his humanity, his consubstantiality with us, is not to preclude its unprecedented transfiguration. In typical Alexandrian fashion, Cyril emphasizes that Christ is truly human but not merely human. The incarnate life of the Son of God is uniquely life-giving and sinless and as such makes possible our redemption from the corrupt status quo.

3.1.3 Shades of Dyophysitism

In addition to defending the ongoing integrity of the incarnate Son’s divinity and humanity, there are instances in which Cyril wrestles with dyophysite expressions. Such instances reveal that he consistently opposes the idea, soon to be championed by Eutyches, that the incarnation involves fusion or mixture. For example, in his Second Letter to Nestorius, Cyril clarifies that the incarnation did not require “the negation of the difference of natures.” Instead, “the Godhead and the manhood by their ineffable and indescribable consilience into unity achieved One Lord and Christ and Son for us,” so that there is “One Christ and Son from out of both.” Paradoxically, these comments appear to lend support to both dyophysite and monophysite Christology. On the one hand, Cyril denies that the incarnation necessitates a confusion of natures. Wickham’s translation of the line, “οὐχ ὃς τῆς τῶν φύσεων διαφορᾶς ἀνηρμεμένης διά τὴν ἕνωσιν” (“not implying that the difference between the natures was abolished through their union”) brings this out clearly. Chalcedon quotes this line almost verbatim in its Definition in order to denounce monophysite Christology. On the other hand, the “ἐξ ἀμφοῖν” (“out of both”) seems to deny an ongoing distinction between the two natures. One way to explain the dual

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emphases is to place them in Cyril’s anti-Nestorian context. In the same paragraph, Cyril clarifies that the union “was not effected only as a matter of will, or favour, or by the assumption of a single prosopon [προσώπον].” Evidently, he perceived Nestorius to be saying that the incarnation consisted of an outward or visible unity between two independent beings, accomplished by the divine will. In opposition to this, Cyril affirms that a true, irreducible union has ineffably occurred (hence the use of “ἐξ ἀμφοῦ”), not merely the outward unification of separate subjects, yet also without a change in the natures as such.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Cyril’s openness to natural duality comes from his Letter to John of Antioch (Spring 433), which includes his slightly amended version of the Formula of Reunion between the Alexandrians and the Orientals. Having added “the same one” to emphasize Christ’s single-subjectivity, Cyril agrees that dyophysite language can express orthodox Christology. Against monophysitism, the Formula uses symmetrical language, including phrases such as “perfect God and perfect man,” “consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood,” and a “union of the two natures.” To be sure, Cyril continues to use characteristically miaphysite language and prefers “from/out of” rather than “in” two natures. But as his agreement with the Formula reveals, he uses such language against the supposition of two independently subsistent entities, two separate realities, not against the conceptual distinction of the two natures of the one incarnate Son.

Finally, in his Second Letter to Succensus (ca. 434-438) Cyril addresses the specific objection that his miaphysis formula, μία φύσιν τοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη (“one incarnate nature

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59 On the meaning of προσώπον see Wickham, Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters, 6n7.
61 Cf. Ibid., 124n223, 193, 355n6.
of the Word”), logically entails a “mixture and confusion” of natures.\textsuperscript{62} He argues that the indissoluble union of the eternal Word with rationally animated flesh necessitates neither the transformation of Word into flesh nor vice versa. In fact, “each nature is understood to remain in all its natural characteristics…, though they are ineffably and inexpressibly united.”\textsuperscript{63} Cyril then employs his choice christological image, the union of soul and body in a human being. When these two non-consubstantial things “constitute the single nature of man,” “the difference in nature of the things that are brought together into unity is still present within the system of composition.” As this image suggests, a single-subject Christology does not logically entail a rejection of dyophysite language.

3.1.4 Distinction of Attributes

In addition to flirting with dyophysite language, Cyril conceptually distinguishes the natures by virtue of which Christ possesses particular attributes. Even though we attribute everything to the one subject of the incarnate Son, hence the legitimacy of the \textit{communicatio idiomatum}, we do not blur the distinction between divine and human capacities.\textsuperscript{64} In his \textit{Third Letter to Nestorius}, for instance, Cyril affirms that the subject of all actions and experiences of Jesus Christ is the “one enfleshed hypostasis of the Word” (ὑποστάσει μιᾷ τῇ τοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη).\textsuperscript{65} But while the Gospel sayings must be attributed to one concrete subject, “when [Christ] speaks of himself in a God-befitting way,…we are given to understand his divine and ineffable nature.” Within the framework of single-subjectivity, we can recognize what is “God-befitting” and what is proper to the “manhood.” For example, in his \textit{Scholia} Cyril distinguishes the nature by virtue of which Christ is a creature from the nature by virtue of which Christ is transcendent: “Even though \textit{as man} he is now designated as part of this world,"

\textsuperscript{64} McGuckin, \textit{St. Cyril of Alexandria}, 252n3.
even so, as God he was still above the world.”\textsuperscript{66} But again, we must remember that there is only one “he,” one hypostasis to which the attributes belong: the incarnate Son. As Cyril summarizes in his \textit{Letter to Eulogius} (ca. 433-5), “It is one thing to recognize a distinction in terms, but quite another matter to divide them between two personas, one beside another.”\textsuperscript{67}

The \textit{Formula of Reunion} mentioned above explicitly legitimates the practice of attributing sayings about the Lord to a particular nature: “[theologians] interpret the God-befitting ones in accordance with the Godhood of Christ, and the humble ones in accordance with the manhood.”\textsuperscript{68} Given John of Antioch’s full acceptance of the Theotokos, Cyril’s fear that this sort of language would legitimize a de facto double-subject Christology had dissipated. Within the framework of the confession of “One Christ, One Son, One Lord,” we may indeed distinguish the sayings according to natures. But we must not speak of Godhood and manhood as independent subjects of action. While Jesus Christ has two distinct sets of possibilities for action, some characteristically divine, others characteristically human, he remains the single subject who is simultaneously God and man.

To the extent that it precludes the notion of natural transformation, confusion or mixture, Cyril recognizes the need to conceptually identify two integral natures in Jesus Christ. Moreover, in the context of his christological work as a whole, we see that such a need coheres with his soteriology. If the Word ceases to be who he is, who can redeem and deify the flesh? If the humanity is incomplete or subsumed by deity, what relevance could Jesus Christ have in relation to the human problem of spiritual and physical corruption? In order for the incarnation to be intelligibly effectual, God must remain the unchangeably life-giving One, and the assumption must involve truly human flesh that remains such even as the Word’s personal

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 4/298, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 351.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 5/354.
possession thereof divinizes it. Natural duality thus safeguards the soteriological trajectory of the Word’s incarnate existence.

### 3.2 Natural-Hypostatic Unity

Cyril speaks of Jesus Christ as a natural-hypostatic unity for the same reason that he allows for natural duality, in order to reveal the soteriological dynamic of the Word’s incarnate life. At the height of the Nestorian controversy, Cyril vigorously contends that the miracle of incarnation leads to a concrete, irreducible unity, a singular natural-hypostatic subject. When speaking of Jesus Christ, we do not speak of the divine Son apart from the human flesh, nor vice versa, as if the union consists of an intimate relation of independent subjects. Instead we confess that from two natures, the nature of the divine hypostasis of the Word and the nature of the human flesh assumed, there is one enfleshed nature, one incarnate hypostasis, one subsisting subject. As I will argue, Cyril’s staunch defense of natural-hypostatic unity ultimately stems from his concern to preserve “the immediacy and validity of the divine presence in the Incarnate One,” the source of our salvation and the cause of our worship.69 Our sacramental participation in the flesh of Jesus Christ cannot be a transforming encounter with the life-giving Son unless the flesh is the Son’s own deified, human flesh. Moreover, our worship of Jesus is at best nonsensical and at worst idolatrous apart from a framework within which the flesh truly belongs to the Word. Insofar as we affirm the reality of the union, the Word’s true possession (or enhypostatization) of flesh, we grasp the significance of our encounter with Jesus Christ in the church.

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3.2.1 Union According to *Physis* and/or *Hypostasis*

Cyril frequently asserts the reality of Christ’s unity, but he uses various language, images and concepts to do so. Sometimes he describes the “union” (*henosis*) according to “nature” (*physis*) akin to the unity of soul and body in the human person; other times he speaks of a “personal/subjective” (*hypostatic*) union. Sometimes he simply confesses “one and the same” Jesus Christ “out of” two realities; other times he clarifies the merely theoretical nature of dyophysite distinctions. Such variegated christological language led to confusion in Cyril’s own day and continues to confound and divide scholars today. In this subsection I seek to show that Cyril’s anti-Nestorian Christology taken as a whole seeks to convey the unity of Christ in such a robust way as to preclude a dual subjectivity and to legitimize the *communicatio idiomatum*.

In his second book of the *Five Tomes*, Cyril affirms that “the Only-begotten, being God by nature, became man, not simply by a conjunction [συνάφεια]…that is conceived of as external or incidental, but by a true union that is ineffable and transcends understanding.”\(^70\) Against those who assign some attributes “exclusively to the Word alone” and others “exclusively to the man born from a woman,” Cyril contends that if Jesus Christ is “simultaneously both God and man,” then “every word befits him and everything will be said as from one person. For the incarnate nature [φύσις] of the Word is immediately conceived of as one after the union.” Even though “the flesh, by the principle of its own nature, is different from the Word of God,” and vice versa, like the union of soul and body in the human person Christ is “conceived of as one from both.” Similarly, Cyril sharply argues against the subsistence of two independent subjects in his *Third Letter to Nestorius*.\(^71\) Humanity and divinity in Christ are not merely “connected to one another by a unity of dignity or sovereignty,” united by a conjunction (συνάφειαν) in which honour is


shared between them. Nor should we speak of a “juxtaposition” or “relational participation,” as if the Word dwells in an independently subsistent man. All of these concepts deny “the very union which determines why we do not give associate-worship to someone alongside someone different.” Like “the indivisible unity” of soul and body, the Word has been both “hypostatically” (καθ' ὑπόστασιν) and “naturally” (κατὰ φύσιν) united with “his own” flesh, which explains why we worship one Jesus Christ. As these passages confirm, along with many others, “natural” and “hypostatic” unity do not necessarily convey the mechanics of the union. Rather, they safeguard the union and the corollary communicatio which common ecclesial thought and practice presupposes.

Despite Cyril’s openness to the orthodoxy of dyophysite language, he consistently qualifies its meaning. First, in the Scholia, having appealed to the complementarity of soul and body in the human person, he says of the christological union that “we must not divide this into two, even if we can still name each of the two united entities separately.” Second, in his Letter to John he affirms that “though we do indeed take cognisance of the difference of natures out of which we say the ineffable union was formed,” the union means that there is one united Christ. Third, in his Letter to Eulogius, Cyril compares the “one incarnate nature of the Son” (μίαν τὴν τοῦ υἱοῦ φύσιν σεσαρκωμένην) to the unity of the human person: “our intellect and deductive ability recognizes the difference, but we unite them and then recognize the single nature of man. This is why to acknowledge the difference in natures is not to divide the one Christ into two.”

As Athanasius taught, dyophysite language is orthodox insofar as it signifies a mere conceptual distinction between Christ’s divine and human attributes. But if it justifies Nestorian dualism, it compromises the orthodox faith. Fourth and finally, Cyril argues in the First Letter to Succensus

72 Ibid., 13/307.
73 Ibid., 8/346.
74 Ibid., 349-51.
that the “indivisible union” occurred “out of two natures” (ἐκ δύο φύσεως) without involving “confusion or change,” the result of which is the “One Incarnate Nature of the Word” (μίαν φύσιν τοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένην). Like the unity of soul and body, “theoretically speaking (but only in so far as it appears to the eyes of the soul) we would admit that there are two united natures but only One Christ and Son and Lord, the Word of God made man.”

Cyril succinctly conveys his understanding of miaphysite and dyophysite language in *On the Unity of Christ*. Having pointed out that the very concept of unity presupposes diversity, Cyril emphasizes that Christ’s natures “are not separated…in terms of individual distinctness, so that they exist apart from and distant from one another. On the contrary, they are brought together in an indissoluble union” so that we confess “one nature” of the Son even after his assumption of manhood. While “considered in the perspective of their respective and intrinsic beings,” Godhead and manhood are twofold, “in the case of Christ they came together in a mysterious and incomprehensible union without confusion and change.” Like the mysterious case of the soul’s union with the body, the distinction between natures remains “theoretically conceivable,” even as we confess their concrete subsistence in the one Jesus Christ.

By way of summing up Cyril’s understanding of Christ’s natural-hypostatic unity, some clarifications are in order. First, despite the ample amount of literature concerning the terms φύσις (nature) and ὑπόστασις (subsistence/subject/person), there remains almost as much confusion over Cyril’s use thereof as there was in his own day. Some interpreters understand both terms as denoting an independently subsistent reality, in which case any dyophysite language expresses a double-subject Christology. Others distinguish the terms in light of

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77 See Van Loon’s summary table of Cyril’s prominent interpreters, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, 200-2, 250. Despite its utility, the scholars whom he appraises do not always fit neatly into his Aristotelian categories. And neither does Cyril himself.
Chalcedon’s standardization.78 The third and perhaps most accurate approach recognizes that whereas Chalcedon clearly distinguished the meaning of φύσις (natural properties of a genus) and ὑπόστασις (personal existent or individual concretization), Cyril employs the terms imprecisely and most often interchangeably. In Alexandrian parlance, they usually signify that the incarnate Word is one concrete subject, which excludes the Nestorian idea that in Jesus Christ there are two subjects which can act and be acted upon. Thus, whether he affirms a “natural” or a “hypostatic” union, a single nature or a singular hypostasis, such language seeks primarily to supplant a de facto two-sons Christology with the confession that the incarnate Son of God is the one concrete, personal subject of both his divinity and humanity. As John McGuckin summarizes, in light of the mystery of the incarnation, “Cyril preferred to defend an intuited principle of single subjectivity regardless of the strains his varied use of technical terms placed on his hearers.”79

Second, although much has been made of the Apollinarian provenance of miaphysite terminology, Cyril explicitly opposes its Apollinarian interpretation.80 As I have already emphasized, the patriarch never promotes a union of the monophysite variety. Not only does he repeatedly clarify that the “one incarnate nature” is the product of a union between the Word and integral human existence, but he concedes the orthodoxy of conceptually distinguishing between what is characteristic of divinity and humanity. As his use of the soul-body illustration confirms, natural-hypostatic unity implies neither the incompleteness of the humanity assumed nor the transformation of Godhead into something different. Hence, as we have seen, while Cyril acknowledges that deity and humanity are always both involved in the acts of the one

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78 For example, see ibid, 507-9, 512-29. It seems to me that Van Loon overestimates Cyril’s terminological subtlety.
80 Most scholars now acknowledge this. See McKinlon, Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ, 188-96.
incarnate Son, he permits the practice of taking cognisance of the difference between divine and human attributes. Once again, John McGuckin summarizes well: Jesus Christ is “one theandric reality” involving “synchronic interpenetration” that does not compromise the “discrete existence” of the two realities.\(^{81}\)

In sum, we will inevitably have difficulty fitting Cyril’s thought into any precisely defined christological camp. To label him miaphysite, dyophysite, or Chalcedonian risks anachronistic misinterpretation.\(^{82}\) Cyril’s primary concern was to defend the incarnation as the loving act in which the Word makes human flesh his own, by a natural-hypostatic union, in order to redeem and transform sinful humanity through his life, suffering, death and resurrection. Beyond the images to which he appeals, Cyril does not probe the inner workings of the paradoxical union. Following the lead of Scripture and tradition, he simply says what he deems necessary in order to defend the reality of incarnation “for us and for our salvation.”

### 3.2.2 Soteriological Effect of the Union

Cyril’s defense of the natural-hypostatic unity of the incarnate Word is soteriologically driven. As Jaroslav Pelikan comments, “the relation between the divine and human in the person of Christ had to be adequate to effect [salvation] through a transformation of the very nature of man.”\(^{83}\) In order to redeem and transform sinners, the eternal Word made our flesh his own, communicating to our nature the very life-giving power of God himself. As John McGuckin puts it, the Word’s enhypostatization of human nature is the means by which he can “effect the regeneration of the human race, concretely, intimately, and personally.”\(^{84}\)

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\(^{83}\) Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, 333-4.

Cyril repeatedly emphasizes the soteriological necessity of Mary’s child being “the very own body of him who is the Word of the Father.”85 Against Nestorius’s implication that God uses Jesus as an extrinsic instrument, he insists in the Five Tomes that without transforming into the Godhead the flesh of the Word “became divine in virtue of its being his own.”86 We ought not to “mock the beauty of the truth,” as Nestorius does by pejoratively calling “the deification of the sacred flesh an apotheosis.” For the Word made human flesh his own for our sake, “so that we too might be enriched with a birth which is from God through the Spirit,…having been transformed into something that transcends nature.” Rather than an apotheosis, “there is imprinted in some way in those who have become partakers of the divine nature, through participating in the Holy Spirit, a spiritual likeness to him, and the beauty of the ineffable deity illuminates the souls of the saints.” In other words, our participation in Jesus Christ’s own deified flesh constitutes our Spiritual renewal and transfiguration qua human beings. Second, in the Scholia Cyril affirms that although human beings were rendered unworthy of the Spirit in view of original sin, because of Christ’s “unique triumph of sinlessness” humanity may receive Spiritual sanctification anew.87 Yet this presupposes that as the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ possesses both humanity and the Spirit as his own: “As a man he was anointed in the flesh, but as God he has anointed those who believe in him with his own Spirit.” In contrast to a Christology of conjunction, which would imply that a common man somehow earned the dignity of the divine nature, Cyril argues in light of Scripture that the Word made human existence his own so that “by this union” he might “endow it with the dignities of divine majesty.” Such dignities include both immortality and freedom from spiritual bondage. Finally,

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in *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril elaborates on the deifying effect of the incarnate Son’s life. Not willing “the penalty of Adam’s transgression to continue to pass on to us,” the Son made human flesh his own. And “since it was his own and personal flesh, that of the incorruptible God, he set it beyond death and corruption.” For “insofar as it became the body of the one who knew no transgression,” the Word’s flesh became “a holy and lifegiving thing, full of divine energy,” in which human beings can rise “above corruption and sin.” The Word thus made human flesh his own “in order to reconstitute our condition within himself.” In the one conceived by the Spirit, we are freed from Adamic corruption: “he transmits the grace of sonship even to us so that we too can become children of the Spirit, insofar as human nature had first achieved this possibility in him.” As Cyril summarizes, “he took what was ours to be his own so that we might have all that was his.”

As these passages confirm, Cyril understood salvation as the restoration of fallen humanity’s communion with God, the Spiritual reunion of the baptized with Christ to the Father through participation in the eternal Son’s life-giving human flesh. In light of such soteriological concerns, Cyril stresses the natural-hypostatic unity of Christ. Apart from such unity, the Word’s ownership of his flesh, union with Jesus’ body would not constitute reunion with God.

### 3.2.3 Ecclesial Experience of Salvation

Cyril’s Christology embodies Irenaeus’ dictum, “Our opinion agrees with the eucharist, and the eucharist in turn confirms our opinion.” Throughout his christological works Cyril both

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90 Quoted in ibid., 104, from *Against Heresies*, IV, 18, 4-5. While Van Loon helpfully reminds us that faith, baptism and the Spirit each have “an impact on the spiritual, moral, and physical sides of human life,” I disagree with his claim that the Eucharist in particular “plays a minor role in the Nestorian controversy,” *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, 574-6. Especially in relation to the topic of impassibility, the Eucharist is often in the background of Cyril’s christological discussion, which is why I have focused on this sacrament in particular. Cf. H. Chadwick, “Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 2, no. 2 (October 1951): 145-164.
implicitly and explicitly affirms that human sinners appropriate the divine life though the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Such appropriation consists of participation in the human flesh of Jesus, flesh which has become uniquely live-giving by virtue of its natural unity with the eternal Word. Through sacramental encounter with Jesus Christ, we experience the transformative power of the Triune life.\(^91\)

In the fourth book of the *Five Tomes*, in his explanation of John 6, Cyril criticizes Nestorius for dichotomizing Godhead and flesh, reducing the eucharistic body to that of a mere human. How could participation in a mere human body be effectual, since it would be “subject to decay and can in no way endow others with life?” Cyril accuses Nestorius of a false piety rooted in a presupposed incompatibility of God and kenosis:

> But out of his excessive piety he blushes, apparently, at the degree of self-emptying and cannot bear to see the Son who is co-eternal with God the Father, the one who in every possible respect is of the same form as him who begot him and equal to him, descend to such a humble level.\(^92\)

If Nestorius would accept the divine kenosis, he would be able to make sense of the Eucharist. But if we must choose between eating the Godhead on the one hand and the flesh of an independent man on the other, we will inevitably reduce it to absurdity. Cyril concludes that we consume “the Word’s own flesh, which has been made life-giving because it has become the flesh of him who lives because of the Father.” Only the flesh that truly belongs to the Word, in a natural-hypostatic unity, “has the power to endow with life.” Cyril reiterates this argument in his *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*, where his eleventh anathema had asserted that “the Lord’s flesh is life-giving and the very own flesh of the Word of God the Father.”\(^93\) In his explanation he affirms that far from “an ordinary man like us,” in the Eucharist we receive Christ’s body “as


\(^{92}\) *Cyril of Alexandria*, trans. Russell, 167-9, emphasis added.

something that has become the very own body and blood of the Word who gives life to all.”

Against Nestorius and those who have “dissolved the power of the mystery” by detaching the flesh from the Word, Cyril argues that the eucharistic act as attested in John 6 concerns our participation in a body that “is understood to be, and actually is, life-giving” by virtue of its natural unity with the eternal Word. Thus, within the framework of natural-hypostatic union, we apprehend the vivifying and deifying character of sacramental participation.

4 Christology and Divine *Apatheia*

Having analyzed the major themes of Cyril’s Christology, we may now turn to his christological use of divine impassibility. We should first establish a general definition of *apatheia* in patristic tradition. As Paul Gavrilyuk observes, part of the problem with late modern reactions against the doctrine is that they often proceed from “superficial philological overinterpretation.”

Modern thinkers frequently presume that the Fathers used the term to say much more than they intended to say, and with much more precision. In reality, as Gavrilyuk argues, *apatheia* was simply one of many indicators of the Creator’s ontological otherness, part of a Christian metaphysic rather than a psychological category. Unlike pagan deities, the biblical God is immutable and impassible in that his infinite being transcends the created order of change and affect.

Cyril of Alexandria appropriated this use of the term. But in contrast to his theological opponents, he did not see a contradiction between God’s *apatheia* and the reality of the christological economy, that is, the reality of subjective continuity and natural-hypostatic unity. Instead, Cyril implies that divine impassibility actually illuminates the deepest significance of

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the church’s christological confession. First, it clarifies the apocalyptic character of the act of incarnation. Second, it qualifies the passible existence of the Son as uniquely salvific.95

### 4.1 Apocalyptic Clarity

When Cyril employs the language of divine *apatheia*, he clarifies the apocalyptic character of the passible existence of Jesus Christ. The Son of God’s impassibility indicates that he is truly consubstantial with the Father. But while the passible order does not constitute the impassible Trinity, this does not mean that the economic, passible Jesus must not be the hypostasis of the eternal Son. On the contrary, the Son’s impassibility includes his freedom to become flesh, to manifest himself in a particular human life. In other words, for Cyril, the *apatheia* of the Son clarifies that his human “passibilization” is both freely chosen and revelatory, a gratuitous act of love which definitively manifests the true God.

#### 4.1.1 Opposing the Arian-Nestorian Paradigm

Like his opponents, Cyril believes in accordance with Scripture and the Nicene Fathers that the immanent Trinity is incorporeal, unchangeable and impassible.96 When he affirms the impassibility of the Son, he makes no grandiose claim. However, as recent scholarship has acknowledged, Cyril’s grasp of divine *apatheia*, and perhaps more broadly his concept of transcendence, differed radically from that of opponents.97 In light of his staunch defense of the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father, Nestorius considered himself to be a champion of Nicene orthodoxy. What Cyril perceived, however, is that Nestorius’s christological dualism

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96 This will become evident below, but here are a few texts for reference: Letter to the Monks, 15-6/253-4, Second Letter to Nestorius, 5/264, Scholia on the Incarnation, 25/317-8, all from *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, trans. McGuckin. While Pelikan rightly notes that divine impassibility was a “self-evident axiom” in the christological debates, he perhaps underestimates the extent to which the controversy turned on conflicting understandings of that axiom, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600), 229-32.

actually betrayed his theological solidarity with Arius. Both approaches presupposed the
metaphysical incompatibility of impassible deity and passible creation, the impossibility of the
immediate presence of transcendent God. Thus, ironically, despite his adherence to the letter of
Nicaea, Nestorius remained captive to the spirit of Arianism. As Robert Jenson observes, “the
shielding ontological space between God and the passible Jesus is simply pried open at a
different place.”  

Cyril thoroughly rejects this Arian-Nestorian paradigm. On the one hand, he absolutely
refuses to demote the Son in the manner of Arianism. Yet neither will he ease the apparent
tension between impassible deity and Jesus’ suffering by detaching the two in the manner of
Nestorius. Instead, he affirms paradoxically that in the incarnation none other than the eternal
Word, consubstantial with the impassible Father, made passible human existence his very own.
Cyril can do so because in contrast to the Arian-Nestorian paradigm, he presupposes that the
Trinity’s transcendence implies his infinite freedom to love, by which he creates and redeems,
without negating himself. In this regard, divine apatheia points to the fact that while the
passible order does not constitute the Triune life, God is free to manifest his inviolable love
within it, which he has in fact done in the Son’s assumption of a finite, human, passible
existence.

4.1.2 Impassibility and Incarnation

A number of passages generally confirm this point. First, while defending the Theotokos in
his Letter to Monks, Cyril argues that the Word’s “voluntary self-emptying” does not entail
God’s alienation from his own transcendence. On the contrary, the very freedom that
intrinsically belongs to transcendent God makes it possible for the Son to have voluntarily and

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98 Systematic Theology, 1:126.
Eerdmans, 2003), 356-8; McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria, 218.
intentionally “allowed death to pull down his own flesh.”

Second, as Cyril affirms in his *Five Tomes*, “He will not lose his being God because he became as we are. Why should that follow? Nor because he is God by nature will he be incapable of enjoying a likeness with us and have to reject being a man.” To say that the incarnation does not constitute divine nature is not to deny God’s freedom to effect it. In fact, to the extent that it was uncompelled and for our own benefit, it was consonant with divine love. Fourth and finally, one of the major themes of *On the Unity of Christ* is the relation of the Triune nature with the Son’s voluntary incarnation. The dialogue begins with a recapitulation of the Arian and Nestorian heresy, both of which Cyril roots in a failure to appreciate the prerogative of the gracious Triune God as revealed in Holy Scripture: “These shameless people dare to criticize his loving grace towards the human race, for they think that the fact that he…took up the limitations of this self-emptying…shows a lack of good sense.” They are “afraid to attribute human characteristics to him in case he might somehow be dishonoured by them, and brought down to a dishonourable state.” In Cyril’s view, this attitude stem from a seriously flawed theology. While kenosis cannot apply to the naked, pre-incarnate Word who is infinitely full, we must not preclude his “economic appropriation” of flesh. Because the immanent Trinity transcends creation, he is infinitely free to act within it, even to the extent of making human existence his own.

Other passages propose the compatibility of the Son with his assumption of humanity in particular reference to his intrinsic impassibility and incarnate suffering. In his *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters* Cyril defends the infamous theopaschite language of his twelfth anathema. He begins his explanation with an unequivocal affirmation of the implication of divine transcendence: “The Word of God the Father is impassible and immortal, for the divine and

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103 Ibid., 107, 110.
ineffable nature is above all suffering.” Yet in the very next sentence he just as strongly affirms the Word’s suffering in the flesh. While being impassible “in his own being, he made his own the flesh which is capable of death so that by means of this which is accustomed to suffer he could assume sufferings for us and because of us.” The intrinsic impassibility of the Son does not preclude his capacity to make passible flesh his own for our sake. Similarly, in the Scholia, Cyril explains that the benevolent kenosis of the Word presupposes his intrinsic fullness. We say that the Son emptied himself because the One who is intrinsically “unalterable and immutable, and was never capable of any passibility” “appropriated the poverty of humanity to himself,” including the capacity for human suffering. Finally, in On the Unity of Christ, Cyril sharply criticizes those who “find fault with the Only Begotten, and accuse him of having militated against his own glory by choosing inappropriately to suffer in the flesh.” Incarnate suffering was the Son’s prerogative, “since the manner of the economy allows him blamelessly to choose both to suffer in the flesh, and not to suffer in the Godhead.” Despite his intrinsic transcendence of the passible order, he freely chose to suffer in the human flesh he made his own for “the salvation of the whole world.” Anyone who denies this adopts the attitude of the Jews and Greeks who fail to grasp the cross as “a demonstration of the power that pertains to God” (1 Cor. 1:22-5).

Although the immanent Trinity is not ontologically defined by suffering, he is infinitely free to suffer by means of his economic appropriation of flesh. As McGuckin points out, Cyril conveys the incarnation as the event in which the transcendent God freely “appropriates to itself the fragile and powerless flesh” precisely in order to express “the perfect power of the

105 Ibid., 5/298.
Godhead.” The ontological distinction between God and creation does not mean that we must separate them in such a way that the economic activity of Jesus must be construed as other than that of the eternal Son. Rather, while intrinsically transcending the passible order, God has revealed and communicated his eternal, impassible love in a passible human life. In this way, the doctrine of divine impassibility allows us to apprehend the incarnation with full apocalyptic clarity.

4.2 Soteriological Quality

Cyril employs the language of divine *apatheia* to qualify the uniquely salvific character of Jesus Christ’s passible life. As I have already argued, Cyril rejects both monophysitism and Nestorian dualism, opting for a Christology of paradox: God makes true humanity his own while remaining God. The same holds true in his use of *apatheia*. By virtue of Christ’s natural-hypostatic unity, the impassible Son is truly the subject of his own passible flesh. At the same time, as the language of natural duality indicates, amidst his consubstantiality with passible humanity, the incarnate Son remains impassible insofar as he maintains his identity as eternally consubstantial with his impassible Father. In Jesus Christ we thus paradoxically encounter an *impassible sufferer*, one who impassibly lives out a passible human existence. Aside from providing a few images which, as he admits, fall short of explicating this ineffable mystery, Cyril generally refuses to try to explain it. Instead, he prefers to highlight its soteriological meaning. The Son truly suffers and dies in his flesh, and yet because he, as the impassible One, remains infinite Life, he ultimately destroys suffering and death once and for all. Unlike

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common human suffering, the possible life of the Word leads to the redemptive transformation of humanity.

4.2.1 The Paradox of Impassible Suffering

In the Second Letter to Nestorius, Cyril affirms two things. On the one hand, the Word did not suffer “in his own nature” since incorporeal divinity is inherently impassible. On the other hand, “in so far as that which became his own body suffered, then he himself is said to suffer these things for our sake, because the Impassible One was in the suffering body.” In his Third Letter Cyril conveys the same point even more starkly. Having confessed that the eternal Son “suffered in the flesh for our sake, in accordance with the scripture (cf. 1 Pet. 4:1), even though he is impassible in his own nature,” he affirms that on the cross the Son “impassibly appropriated the suffering of his own flesh.” As these passages show, Cyril seeks to affirm the Son’s human suffering as well as his intrinsic impassibility, to rule out both Nestorian dualism and patripassianism. This dual concern shows up continually in his christological works. For example, in the first book of the Five Tomes, Cyril criticizes Nestorius and his counterparts thus:

They bisect the one Lord Jesus Christ, dividing him into two separate sons, and remove from God the Word the sufferings of the flesh, even though we have certainly not said that he suffered in his own nature, by which we conceive of him as God, but rather have attributed to him along with the flesh the suffering that befell the flesh…

While suffering does not constitute the divine being, insofar as the Word’s own flesh suffered, we attribute suffering to one of the Trinity. Similarly, in the Scholia, Cyril defends the utility of speaking “in two manners” about the passion of the one Christ. He asks, “Since we believe that Our Lord Jesus Christ is one,…then how can we both attribute suffering to him and yet still

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111 Ibid., 6/270, emphasis added.
hold him impassible as God?” He answers that suffering applies to the economy in which, “because of the ineffable union,” the impassible Word reckons “those things that pertain to the flesh as his very own” while “remaining outside suffering in so far as it pertains to his own nature.” In other words, just as subjective continuity and natural-hypostatic unity presuppose narrative and natural duality, so the reality of Jesus Christ’s suffering presupposes the conceptual distinction between immanent impassibility and economic passibility. However, we must always recognize the conceptual nature of these distinctions. Cyril makes this clear as he deconstructs Nestorius’s concept of a relational union: “because of the intimacy he had with his own flesh, [Emmanuel] even suffered its infirmities.”114 Both the “natural and innocent passions” of his body as well as the suffering extrinsically inflicted upon it belong to the eternal Word of God. He thus “suffered impassibly,” which means that without transforming his impassible divine nature, he truly suffered in the passible human condition that was “his very own.” Whereas Nestorius distinguishes impassibility and passibility with reference to two independent (albeit intimate) subjects, Cyril and his adherents begin with the union, Jesus Christ’s single-subjectivity, “and only then do [they] attribute the passions to the flesh while keeping him impassible as God.” Our conceptual distinction of passible flesh and impassible deity only remains orthodox within the framework of the concrete unity of the incarnate Son, the impassible sufferer.

As Cyril sought rapprochement with John of Antioch and the Orientals, he tended to emphasize the inviolability of the impassible divine nature. For example, in his Letter to John he stresses that God “remains what he is and does not change or undergo alteration. Moreover all of us confess that the divine Word is impassible, even if in his all-wise economy of the mystery

114 Ibid., 35/332-5.
he is seen to attribute to himself the sufferings that befall his own flesh.” Similarly, in his *Second Letter to Succensus*, in the course of defending his miaphysite expressions against Apollinarian and proto-Eutychian interpretation, he clarifies that divine suffering only applies within “the whole system of the economy with flesh,” “which has to be seen as undergoing suffering while the Word remains impassible.” Yet Cyril by no means abandons the paradoxical reality of the impassible Son’s suffering. Hence, further on in the same letter he praises Succensus for grasping that “Both points must be maintained in relation to the one true Son: that he did not suffer as God, and that he did suffer as man, since *his* flesh suffered.”

Near the end of the same letter Cyril warns of the pitfalls of dyophysite language. Although we must distinguish between the nature of God and flesh, if we say that Christ suffered “in his human nature,” we must beware of Nestorian ideology, remembering that we distinguish the two natures only “at a theoretical level,” as in the case of the soul-body unity. While we can distinguish the nature by which the Son remains impassible, his eternal nature, from that by which he suffers, his assumed human nature, we do not isolate either nature as if they were dual subjects. We do not say, for example, that the human nature itself suffered, as if the human nature were its own personal subject. Instead we ought to confess that the eternal Son suffered *by virtue of* his human nature, in the human flesh he had assumed and made his very own. In view of the Son’s natural-hypostatic unity with his own flesh, the suffering applies to only one concrete subject: Jesus Christ, the impassible Word made passible man.

In *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril offers his mature defense of the “strange and rare paradox” of the impassible suffering of incarnate God. The suffering of the Son “does no disgrace to him” since “he did not suffer in the nature of the godhead, but in his own flesh.” Yet because the flesh

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115 Ibid., 9/347.  
116 Ibid., 2/360.  
117 Ibid., 4/362, emphasis added.
is his own, “the Lord of Glory is himself the crucified one.” His suffering and death were no “common thing,” as if they occurred to a mere human being. The Word of the Father himself suffers in the flesh, though “he retains his impassibility insofar as he is understood as God.” The Son suffered “in his own flesh” yet not in his “divine and transcendent nature.” Cyril reminds us that “the method of these things is altogether ineffable, and there is no mind that can attain to such subtle and transcendent ideas.” Indeed, the “force of any comparison falters here and falls short of the truth,” though Cyril does offer the “feeble image” of iron and fire as a tangible expression of this mystery “beyond all speech.”

Perhaps the closest Cyril comes to explaining the mystery is in a passage in the Scholia, although he is admittedly unclear. Having asserted the ineffability of Christ’s unity, he employs the soul-body illustration: “For the soul appropriates the things of the body even though in its proper nature it is apart from the body’s passions, as well as those which impinge on it from without.”

Although the nature of the soul “in no way” participates in bodily desire, “because of the union” the soul “takes the fulfillment of desire as its own gratification” and thus can be said to “share” in bodily experience. In a similar way, by virtue of his natural-hypostatic union with flesh, the impassible Word “was aware of what was happening within it” and “appropriated those weaknesses of his own body,” the body which was his and “no one else’s.” Regardless of what we think about the ancient notion of the impassible soul, we may still grasp Cyril’s basic christological point. The union of the impassible Word and passible flesh does not change the Godhead into something which it was not. Rather, in a way that transcends understanding, yet comparable to the mystery of the human person, the Word experiences human passibility while remaining impassibly divine.

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As many scholars note, when Cyril addresses the spiritual suffering that Jesus seems to have experienced, he appears to deny its reality.\textsuperscript{121} This occurs in the course of his extended discussion about Jesus’ supplications and dereliction on the cross.\textsuperscript{122} While such things are unfitting “if we set aside the form of the economy,” that is, if we apply them to the Son “nakedly or outside the limits of the self-emptying,” “it was necessary for us” to have true obedience exemplified by the incarnate One (1 Peter 2:20-1). With regards to the sorrow of Gethsemane, Cyril denies that Jesus “was overcome by fear and mastered by weakness,” lest he be perceived as less than God. Concerning the dereliction, Jesus spoke “on behalf of all our nature,” which was being reconstituted as “rich in all blamelessness and innocence.” His expression of abandonment was not a self-expression but a plea to the Father to bestow grace upon us on account of his redeeming work. While some scholars have taken these passages as evidence of Cyril’s de facto Apollinarianism, it should be noted that his concern was primarily soteriological. The notion that Jesus was truly human but not merely human applies just as much to his soul as to his body. While the rational soul remained human, by its union with the eternal Son, Jesus repossessed the moral freedom given to human beings in the beginning. For Cyril, this was soteriologically fitting, since Jesus’ sinlessness was the basis upon which he achieves our spiritual renewal.\textsuperscript{123} Cyril did not intend to deny Jesus’ human psychology, although he perhaps failed to appreciate that spiritual suffering need not imply moral failure. We may criticize his anthropological assumptions, yet we can still appreciate his primary concern: Jesus’ spiritual freedom, and ours in him.

Cyril evidently perceives that Nestorius and his followers refuse to acknowledge the true involvement of the impassible Word in passible human life. Against such a refusal he defends

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\textsuperscript{121} Pelikan, \textit{The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)}, 251.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 105-6.
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the reality of the Word’s incarnate presence. Nevertheless, as is evident from his paradoxical approach to the Word’s incarnate suffering, Cyril is no father of modern passibilist theology. For he refuses to go further than the proclamation of the ineffable mystery of the impassible Son’s human suffering. This is not surprising given Cyril’s self-understanding as one who is merely defending the implications of biblical, Nicene testimony to the unity of the Word made flesh.  

4.2.2 Impassible Suffering as Soteriological Qualifier  

Rather than delving into the mechanics of the paradox, Cyril conveys the mystery of the incarnate Son’s impassible suffering in terms of its salvific implications. In this regard, we discover a major theological impetus underlying his christological use of apatheia. Insofar as the subject of Jesus Christ remains impassibly life-giving, his passible flesh becomes the instrument of our redemption and deification, “first in the divine transformation of his own authentically human life, and then (as he was the paradigm of salvation in his resurrection) in the transformation of christians.” Jesus Christ’s passible existence is uniquely purposive and efficacious, ordered to the ultimate end of the suffering caused by sin and leading to death. Thus, as David Bentley Hart comments, apatheia is “not simply apophatic” but the very “ground of Christian hope.”  

Cyril closely identifies impassibility with the inviolable, life-giving nature of the divine. The Word “suffered nothing at all in his own nature for as such he is life and life-giver.” In this sense, impassibility qualifies the soteriological trajectory of the incarnate Son’s work. Jesus Christ  

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124 For pre-Nicene sources of qualified theopaschite language, see Meyendorff, Christ in Eastern Christian Thought, 70-1.  
laid down his life for the sake of all and for a short time, in an economy, allowed death to pull down his flesh. But then, as Life, he destroyed death, refusing to suffer anything contrary to his own nature; and he did this so that corruption should be weakened in the bodies of all and so that the dominion of death should be destroyed.

Jesus Christ truly suffered and died by virtue of his humanity, yet “since he is God by nature” and thus “the body of Life itself,” he rose again and crushed death once and for all so that those who are forgiven and baptised into his death “might rise up with him” and be “enriched with incorruptibility.” In the Third Letter to Nestorius, Cyril summarizes the purposive and transformative thrust of the Word’s paradoxical suffering:

…we confess that the same Son and Only Begotten God…suffered in the flesh for our sake, in accordance with the scripture (cf. 1 Pet.4.1) even though he is impassible in his own nature. In the crucified body he impassibly appropriated the suffering of his own flesh and ‘by the grace of God he tasted death on behalf of all’ (Heb.2.9). He surrendered his own body to death even though by nature he is life and is himself the Resurrection (Jn.11.25)...so that he might, in his own flesh,...lead the way for human nature to return to incorruptibility.128

While remaining impassible the Word suffered and died in his own flesh so that, having vivified and deified it, humanity could be saved through it. Hence, when we receive the Eucharist, “we receive it as truly the lifegiving and very-flesh of the Word himself. As God he is by nature life and since he became one with his own flesh he revealed it as live-giving.” If the flesh is not truly the impassible Word’s own, then our participation in it does not constitute our partaking of the life-giving nature of God.

At the end of his Explanation of the Twelve Chapters, Cyril defends his twelfth and final anathema, which proved to be one of the most controversial: “If anyone does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming first-born from the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be anathema.”129 Having explained that the Word intrinsically “gives life to all things and is greater

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128 Ibid., 6-7/270-1.
129 Ibid., 30-1/292-3.
than corruption,” he proceeds to affirm that the Word truly suffers by virtue of the union that makes possible existence his own. Instead of explaining how this is so, he stresses that his sufferings are “for us and because of us.” The impassible Word liberates us “from death and corruption by making his own body alive, as God, and by becoming the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, and the firstborn from the dead (1 Cor.15.20)” Insofar as the impassible and live-giving Word is the single subject of his own human suffering and death, suffering and death cannot conquer him. Instead they are defeated for our sake.

In a number of places Cyril affirms the soteriological trajectory of impassible suffering without much elaboration besides biblical quotations and allusions. For example, in the Scholia, he confesses that the impassible Son of God suffered “economically in the flesh for our sake and in accordance with the Scriptures: ‘For by his wounds we have been healed, and he himself was wounded because of our sins’ (Is.53.5).” In his Letter to John he clarifies that the impassible God suffered in the flesh he had assumed, as attested in 1 Peter 4:1, “so that we may believe him to be the Savior of all,” the one described in Isaiah 50:6. Finally, in the Second Letter to Succensus Cyril conveys the paradox of impassible suffering as the “rationale of the salvific Passion.” Those who seek to isolate the passible man Jesus from the impassible Son thus “[shake] the whole rationale of the fleshly economy.”

Perhaps the most explicit affirmation of the soteriological necessity of the Word’s ongoing impassibility emerges in On the Unity of Christ. Cyril explains that the Father “caused him who knew not death (since the Word is life and live-giver) to suffer in the flesh.” Yet as the impassible One Jesus Christ “he remained outside suffering in order that we might live through

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130 Ibid., 35/335.  
131 Ibid., 9/347.  
132 Ibid., 4/362.
By virtue of his impassibility, the incarnate Son’s death was not a death like ours. For as Cyril goes on to explain in light of Romans 6:5 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, “the Word was alive even when his holy flesh was tasting death, so that...the power of the resurrection might come upon the whole human race.” We do not call the Son blameworthy for his choice to suffer humanly. On the contrary, his incarnate suffering was uniquely “glorious, for the resurrection has testified that he is greater than death and corruption. As God he is life and life-giver, and so he raised up his own temple” and thereby offers salvation to those who believe. For “it was necessary for him to endure the cross on behalf of the life of all,” “so that he might restore the resurrection to those on earth,” which includes both spiritual and physical renewal. Only the impassible One can lay his life down in order to take it up again for the salvation of fallen humanity. While he did suffer in his very own possible existence, he remained impassible and thus made his body “capable of coming back to life again.” As Cyril concludes, “In this way he saved what was lost.”

Modern passibilists generally perceive Cyril’s paradoxical distinction between impassible divinity and incarnate suffering as a contradictory attempt to remain true to Scripture’s single-subject Christology without denying Hellenism’s concept of impassible deity. But from Cyril’s perspective, both Nestorius and the passibilists undermine the soteriological trajectory of the Son’s incarnate life. Nestorius does so by abandoning natural-hypostatic unity, whereas the passibilists do so by rejecting natural duality. Yet both preclude the whole point of the incarnation: the redemptive transformation of humanity via God’s life-giving presence in Christ. The impassible God humanly suffers not merely to demonstrate solidarity with us but to enable our transformation through participation in his own deified flesh. Because the Son does not

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134 Ibid., 118.
135 Ibid., 125-7.
cease to be the impassible One, his incarnate suffering is not “involuntary, tragically purposeless, and fatal” but rather “voluntary, soteriologically purposeful, and life-giving.”

This for Cyril is what Nicaea points to when it qualifies the eternal Son’s suffering as “for us and for our salvation.”

In sum, the doctrine of divine *apatheia* clarifies and qualifies the apocalyptic and soteriological dimension of Jesus Christ’s life. As John McGuckin puts is, Cyril conveys the intimate union of two realities, “the glorious power of the godhead” and “the tragic reality of the suffering human condition,” in terms of “a salvific act or life-giving transaction.” While the power of the Word “heals and transforms” the human flesh, the “fragile passivity” of such flesh “makes possible a revelation of the incomprehensible power” of God in a medium suited to “fallible and fragile human beings.” In other words, as the impassible Son made possible flesh, Jesus Christ both reveals and constitutes our salvific encounter with the boundless life and love of the Holy Trinity.

**Conclusion**

First, I have summarized Cyril’s theology of the incarnation as a completed *event* (the dynamic-noetic aspect) in terms of subjective continuity within the framework of narrative duality. On the one hand, Cyril conceptually distinguishes the eternal and incarnate life of the Son in order to establish the contingent, voluntary nature of the act. On the other, he affirms a continuity of subject to clarify the incarnation as a true act of divine self-revelation. In sum, Cyril makes the incarnation intelligible as a gratuitous act for humanity revealing the Triune God of love.

137 *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 185.
Second, I have conveyed Cyril’s theology of the incarnation as a *completed* event (the static-ontic dimension) in terms of both natural duality and natural-hypostatic unity. On the one hand, the legitimacy of dyophysite language points to the unconfused manner of the union, the ongoing reality of divinity and the integrity of the humanity, which makes possible God’s salvation of humanity in the life of the incarnate Son. On the other, Christ’s natural-hypostatic unity establishes that the humanity is truly the Word’s own and thus itself life-giving, which means that our sacramental partaking thereof constitutes participation in Life itself. In sum, both natural duality and natural-hypostatic unity undergird our soteriological apprehension of the incarnate Son’s life and work.

Third, Cyril’s doctrine of divine *apatheia* functions christologically to illuminate the sense in which the incarnation is an apocalyptic event making possible our salvation. First, God’s impassibility implies that while the passible order does not constitute his eternal identity, he is free to manifest himself in the economy in a human and thus passible life. Second, the ineffable paradox of impassible suffering ultimately points to the fact that the Son’s passible life had unique soteriological purpose and effect, destroying the power of sin and corruption. In sum, when the incarnate Son suffered, died and rose, he manifested and invited our participation in his eternal life of Triune love. As Cyril concludes, this is the “mystical, profound, and truly wonderful” character of the person and work of Jesus Christ.138

Chapter 2
Divine Apatheia in Contemporary Debate

In recent debates over im/passibility, theologians seem to agree on the need to engage the thought of Cyril of Alexandria. This is unsurprising given the dogmatic tradition’s affirmation of what is characteristically Cyrillian: a simultaneous defence of both divine apatheia and christological unity. But while many agree on Cyril’s foundational significance, recent appraisals of his thought have not been uniform. Does the Cyrillian paradigm ultimately expose the inadequacy of divine impassibility within Christian discourse? Or does it provide resources for a robust defense of its positive trinitarian and christological function?

In this chapter I will address these questions as I describe and evaluate four contemporary contributions to the debate. While the major critics of the doctrine seem to remain united with the tradition by a common theological grammar, I will argue that divine apatheia, properly understood, illuminates the Scriptural and creedal witness to God’s freedom to love in Jesus Christ better than the alternative language and concepts proposed by its critics. A rejection of the doctrine thus may actually impoverish rather than enhance our apprehension of the economy of salvation. In any case, as I will suggest, Cyril’s paradoxical language can function as a linguistic parameter that allows for diverse conceptual formulations yet tends to preclude impassibilist and passibilist extremes.

1 Contemporary Critics: Moltmann, Jenson and McCormack

1.1 Jürgen Moltmann

One of the more radical and influential christological critiques of divine apatheia comes from the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Seeking to develop a robust theology of the
cross in his groundbreaking work *The Crucified God*,\(^\text{139}\) he rejects traditional theistic and modern atheistic conceptions of the divine, those rooted in *a priori* metaphysical or existential theories which fail to take seriously God’s concrete abandonment of Christ on the cross.\(^\text{140}\) Despite recent advances in christocentric theology, Moltmann criticizes the likes of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and even Eberhard Jüngel for ultimately failing to interpret the cross as “a God-event in trinitarian terms.”\(^\text{141}\) The time has come for a “death in God” theology which apprehends godforsakenness as an event in God, the Son’s radical abandonment by the Father.\(^\text{142}\) The first step is to overcome what Karl Rahner identifies as the twin distinctions inappropriately presupposed by Christian thinkers: 1) the distinction between God’s simple nature and threefold personality, and 2) the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. Once we reject the priority of the one divine nature to the trinitarian persons and the priority of God-in-himself to God-in-history, we may finally conceive of “the nature of God” as “the human history of Christ and not a divine ‘nature’ separate from man.”\(^\text{143}\)

A critique of divine *apatheia* and the two-nature christological framework constitutes a foundational aspect of Moltmann’s trinitarian theology of the cross. In light of “the Platonic axiom of the essential *apatheia* of God,” early Christian thinkers stressed the “reciprocal relationship between two qualitatively different natures, the divine nature which is incapable of suffering and the human nature which is capable of suffering.” In this metaphysical framework, however, “the cross must be ‘evacuated’ of deity, for by definition God cannot suffer and die.

\(^{139}\) I chose to focus on this work because its basic proposals remain highly influential. For a more general survey of Moltmann’s Christology, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750-1990*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 202-211.


\(^{141}\) Ibid., 200-4. Cf. Moltmann’s appraisal of Luther on the *communicatio idiomatum*, 231ff.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 206-7.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 239-40, 244-5.
He is pure causality.”144 “Even Cyril of Alexandria, who more than anyone else stressed the personal unity of Christ against those who pressed for the differentiation of the two natures, was not able to remedy the ‘error’ which the whole of early Christian theology demonstrates at this point.” For instance, by his own logic Cyril should have attributed the dereliction “to the complete, divine and human person of the Son.” Instead, he retreats from such a confession and construes it as Christ speaking on behalf of humanity.

Moltmann does concede the need to qualify this sweeping critique. For example, on the basis of Nicaea, he argues that a denial of the changeability of the Trinity could be understood as a simple proclamation that God does not change as creatures do. Surely we ought to deny that “God is capable of suffering because of a deficiency in his being,” yet we must not remove God from “the suffering of love, in which one voluntarily opens himself to the possibility of being affected by another.”145 In this sense, while God is not passible as we are, he certainly suffers “out of the fullness of his being, i.e. his love.” As Moltmann perceives, such qualified divine passibility coincides with the humanistic soteriology of the Nicene Fathers. We must not convey salvation as a dehumanizing negation of all that characterizes this world. Instead we should conceive of salvation as the redemption of the human “in the community of the incarnate, the suffering and loving, human God.”

Moltmann also acknowledges that Christian thinkers reworked the concept of apatheia rather than simply adopting its prior usage.146 For the Sceptics and Stoics, divine impassibility meant metaphysical unchangeableness, psychological insensitivity and ethical freedom, three related ideals toward which humanitystrives. Judaism and Christianity inherited these meanings but

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145 Ibid., 229-31. This notion of suffering out of the fullness of love has inspired a number of critiques of impassibility. See Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, especially 16-25;
146 Ibid., 267-70.
sought to transcend them. Impassibility came to signify the spiritual freedom of humanity to correspond with “the perfect, all-sufficient freedom of the Godhead,” in contrast to those dominated by pathos, the compulsions of sinful flesh. This sort of apatheia functions as the ground of agape insofar as it denotes the self-possession prerequisite for self-giving. In other words, “the apathetic theology of antiquity” did not concern merely “the negation of need, desire and compulsion” but served as “a preparation for the trinitarian theology of the love of God and men.”

Such qualifications, however, do not mean that truly Christian theology can preserve a doctrine of apatheia. In his discussion of protest atheism, Moltmann indicts the concept as ultimately incompatible with the biblical God of love. An impassible God may be omnipotent, yet he is “a being without experience, a being without destiny and a being who is loved by no one.” He could only be feared, or in the case of atheism, replaced with the “richer being” of man who indeed “suffers because he loves.” The only cogent alternative to atheism and the classical theism against which it reacts is a theology of the cross in which “God’s being is in suffering and the suffering is in God’s being itself, because God is love.” Only if suffering is “the history in the midst of God himself” can God create the conditions of friendship characterized by sympatheia, openness to the other. “The person who can no longer love, even himself, no longer suffers, for he is without grief, without feeling and indifferent.” But if God is love, then he “constitutes his existence in the event of his love,” that is, “the event of the cross.” As Hegel taught, all who suffer by love thus enter into “the history of the human God” who subsumes all forsakenness, suffering and death and thereby sustains our love. For God

147 Ibid., 222-3.
149 Ibid., 253.
150 Ibid., 244.
“takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and godforsaken can experience communion with him.”

While Moltmann appreciates the tradition’s qualification of apatheia, he argues that Christian theology must supplant the “framework of the negation of the negative.” Against such theistic idolatry, faith in the cross of Christ “must understand the deity of God from the event of the suffering and death of the Son of God,” which requires a “fundamental change” in “metaphysical thought.” The cross is the event in which “the Son suffers dying,” and “in the infinite grief of love” the Father “suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.” Yet insofar as the Son’s godforsakenness was freely chosen, “precisely at the point of their deepest separation” the Father and Son express a “deep community of will.” Through their suffering out of love in the event of the cross, the Father and Son “constitute themselves in their relationship with each other.” The life of the Triune God is thus a history that “contains within itself all the depths and abysses of human history,” “the event of the love of the Son and the grief of the Father from which the Spirit who opens up the future and creates life in fact derives.” In this sense, the event of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion is that in which humanity enters “into the future ‘history of God.’

Preliminary Appraisal

Although Moltmann refuses to speak in terms of the paradox of impassible suffering, he does distinguish between deficient suffering and the Triune suffering that proceeds from abundant love. He also rightly opposes the Arian-Nestorian notion of impassibility, which tends toward an inadequate Christology and a dehumanizing soteriology. Here he agrees with Cyril, for whom the incarnation is the Son’s assumption of true human existence, a fitting act of a loving

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151 Ibid., 253-5, 275-6.
152 Ibid., 215.
153 Ibid., 243-7.
154 Paul S. Fiddes criticizes Moltmann for not being radical enough, The Creative Suffering of God, 135-43.
God making possible an integral life-giving transaction which restores humanity’s deepest telos. Yet Moltmann ultimately rejects the language of apatheia as incompatible with a theology of the cross. He not only refuses to attribute impassibility to the divine nature but undermines the very distinctions that make talk of a divine nature possible. Having intentionally collapsed the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, and having rejected a two-nature christological framework, he can no longer conceptually discern an ontologically prior impassible Son: “We cannot say of God who he is of himself and in himself; we can only say who he is for us in the history of Christ which reaches our history.”\textsuperscript{155} Nor is Moltmann willing to appropriate apatheia as a qualifier of the unique soteriological trajectory of Jesus’ human suffering. In Christ we are not divinized but humanized as we participate in “the trinitarian process of God’s history,” a history which embraces all finitude, godlessness, and abandonment, and which “presses toward eschatological consummation.”\textsuperscript{156}

Can one reject the conceptual distinction between immanent and economic, divine and human, while simultaneously upholding the transcendence of the Trinity and thus the sheer gratuity of creation and redemption? From Cyril’s perspective, it is the impassible God who can freely, out of his intrinsic love, create and redeem. Moreover, the incarnate Son suffers humanly for a life-giving purpose precisely insofar as such suffering does not constitute his eternal identity. Ironically, Moltmann’s theology of the cross seems to raise more questions about God’s love than it does illuminate the reality of such love. Cyril’s question put to Nestorius remains relevant at this point: If the passible life of Jesus is simply part of “the trinitarian

\textsuperscript{155} Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 238-9.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 255.
process of God’s history,” where then is the self-emptying? And we might also add, how then are we redeemed and vivified?\(^{157}\)

1.2 Robert W. Jenson

One of the main goals of the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson is to carry on Western theology’s “Gospelizing of Hellenism,” a project which in his view remains far from complete.\(^ {158}\) Part of this project involves a critique of divine *apatheia* in light of a fully trinitarian and christological metaphysic. Yet Jenson rejects Moltmann’s theatrical passibilism just as harshly as he rejects an unqualified impassibilist theology. He seeks to transcend this false dichotomy, suggesting that the double negative statement “God is not impassible” is the best way to describe the biblical God.

Jenson defines the christological problem as the clash of two presuppositions: divine impassibility and Nicaea’s attribution of suffering to the consubstantial Son.\(^ {159}\) Over against Antiochene-Western dualism, he appreciates the paradoxical, single-subject approach of Cyril, in which God impassibly experiences suffering in his own flesh. Yet while “Cyril’s *apathos pathoi* is on the right track,” Jenson thinks the formula needs further elaboration.\(^ {160}\) Following Maximus the Confessor’s assertion that the one hypostasis simply *is* the two natures, Jenson concludes that “the second identity of God is directly the human person of the Gospels, in that he is the one who stands to the Father in the relation of being eternally begotten by him.”\(^ {161}\) This means that “the man who is the Son suffers in that he freely assents to the Father’s command to do so, and so possesses the suffering as his own.” Whereas Cyril locates the paradox in the

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\(^{158}\) Robert W. Jenson, “Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis,” 118n1, 120-1.


\(^{160}\) Jenson, “Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis,” 120.

\(^{161}\) *Systematic Theology*, 1:137.
impassible Word’s suffering, for Maximus the mystery is that “the suffering Son is the Logos of the presumed impassible Father.” Yet for Jenson himself, even the impassibility of the Father must be rethought, especially in light of Second Constantinople’s dogmatic affirmation that “one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh.” While the qualification “in the flesh” made it possible “to regard his suffering” as “exterior to his identity as God,” the basic affirmation means that the Triune God “is not impassible, in any use of the adjective that would occur to a native user of Greek, Latin, or English.”162 Despite “the tradition’s sophisticated massaging of the notion,” the face-value of the word remains incompatible with the God of Scripture and dogma. But if Christian dogma linguistically rules out the terminology of impassibility, should we then side with the passibilists?

Jenson’s nuanced attempt to answer this question incorporates his unconventional theology of history and time. First, Jenson reinterprets the Son’s pre-existence.163 Having affirmed that “God the Son must ontologically precede himself as Jesus the Son,” he explains such precedence in a way that transcends the Greek dichotomy between linear time and sheer timeless being.164 Instead of a “simple scheme of successive states of the Word,” he proposes that the incarnation is an eternal act, that the eternal Word simply is Jesus. But in what sense then does Jesus pre-exist? Jenson explains that “the Son appears as a narrative pattern of Israel’s created human story before he can appear as an individual Israelite within that story.” What precedes the Son is thus not the Logos asarkos but “a pattern of movement within the event of the Incarnation, the movement to Incarnation, as itself a pattern of God’s triune life.” But lest someone accuse him of making created history constitutive of God, Jenson asserts that theoretically, apart from creation and incarnation, God would be just the same. Yet he denies

163 Systematic Theology, 1:138-44. Jenson draws primarily from John, Colossians, Irenaeus and Barth.
164 He elaborates on this theme in 1:207-223.
that we could ever know how this could be so. It is simply a contrary-to-fact possibility.

Returning to the topic of impassibility, he confesses that God surely transcends the contingencies of created time. But he does not do so by virtue of being timeless. Rather, God transcends suffering by triumphing over it: “the Father and the Spirit take the suffering of the creature who the Son is into the triune life and bring from it the final good of that creature, all other creatures, and of God.”

Second, Jenson construes God’s relation to time in light of western musical theory. If we understand Scripture’s narrative as “neither linear nor cyclical” but rather “the ordering of events by their mutual reference,” we can conceive of God’s story with us as that in which he appears as both passible and impassible “with different waves of the narrative.” God’s time is thus like classical western music: “a western composition’s total plot of tensions and resolutions has a bottom level of meter-bars, and as many superimposed levels of ever more encompassing “hyperbars”…What time it is in a piece of music thus depends on which level of bars or hyperbars you are asking about.” Similarly, says Jenson, by the testimony of Scripture, God is impassible “as the subject of his total history with us” but passible “when happening upon a lost sheep.” The problem with calling God either impassible or passible is that it requires abstraction from the narrative. Although we derive trinitarian doctrine “from the full biblical tale of his life with us,” in which he emerges as both impassible and passible in different ways, we must not abstract from it. Moreover, as orthodox Christology demands, “one persona of the immanent Trinity” is hypostatically identical with “one persona of the saving history,” which means that we “cannot deny the hypostatic identity of the inner-triune relations, all of which have the Son as a pole, with narrative relations of the saving history.”

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Christian confession stands the notion that the historical person of Jesus is one of the Trinity, then not only must we deny a *Logos asarkos* but we must refuse to abstract from the economy in all our theological endeavours. If we follow this rule faithfully, we simply cannot avoid speaking of God in historical/temporal/narrative terms (hence Jenson’s talk of God as event, conversation, drama, story, etc.), as truly identical with his economic revelation. This does not necessarily reduce God to linear time. The life of God transcends both linear time as well as its negation, which means he is neither passible (of the same historical order as creation) nor impassible (mere timelessness). Instead the inner trinitarian relations constitute “the archetype of all times.”

**Preliminary Appraisal**

Despite the apparent unorthodoxy of Jenson’s distinctive approach, he does not seek to undermine the doctrine of transcendence but to radicalize it. The Triune life as the archetypal narrative is neither utterly timeless nor confined by linear time, as if God must either negate or occupy the very same ontological order as creation. Rather, our time is analogous to the story which constitutes the Triune life, whose transcendence thereof does not entail its mere negation but the freedom to determine himself within it, in the human person of Jesus. However, especially when he speaks of the incarnation, Jenson does appear to make the Triune life ontologically dependent upon creation. In what sense is the Father ontologically prior to and distinct from creation if we cannot speak of a pre-incarnate Son? Even Wolfhart Pannenberg, one of Jenson’s chief theological influences, recognizes this problem. On the one hand, the Son’s “incarnation was not accidental to his eternal identity as Logos and Son of the Father” since he was always to become incarnate. On the other, since God already exists as “the power

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167 While I agree with much of Thomas Weinandy’s defence of *apatheia*, I’m not sure he sufficiently appreciates that Jenson does not intend to say that God and creation occupy the very same order, Weinandy, “God and Human Suffering: His Act of Creation and His Acts in History,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 99-116.
of the future,” “the Father is prior to that eventful actuality, and therefore the Son is also prior to his involvement in that dramatic history.” In this sense for Pannenberg we cannot reject talk of a *Logos asarkos* except by a denial that the Triune God ontologically precedes all other beings. Yet along with such a denial we lose the gratuity of the event of incarnation. Whereas Cyril spoke of the Son’s two births, what I summarized as narrative duality, Jenson appears to conflate the narratives in the process of defending christological unity and opposing metaphysical abstraction.

To be sure, his attempt to work out the metaphysical implications of christological unity clearly proceeds from his wrestling with the biblical narrative as summed up in Christian dogma. This is why even those theologians who defend impassibility find Jenson’s work to be powerfully seductive and thought-provoking if not finally compelling. But despite his nuances and qualifications, Jenson’s critique of divine *apatheia* appears to run up against the same problems as does that of Moltmann. Whereas Cyril’s paradoxical approach could make intelligible the utter gratuity of the act of incarnation, both Jenson and Moltmann appear to compromise the particular concept of transcendence, and the corollary conceptual distinction between the infinite and the finite, the impassible and the passible, that safeguards a theology of creation and incarnation as a free expression of divine love, an act which ultimately saves us from sin and its wages: suffering and death.

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169 Compare Gary Culpepper’s comments on the utility of such an abstract concept, “‘One Suffering in Two Natures’: An Analogical Inquiry into Divine and Human Suffering,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 90n31.

Bruce L. McCormack

In his significant contribution to the debate, the Presbyterian theologian Bruce L. McCormack argues that Karl Barth’s mature christological thought, especially as it is developed in light of his doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, supplants the categories of im/passibility with the notion of “divine constancy.”\(^{171}\) As McCormack outlines, Barth begins with a christological problem: If the man Jesus is by nature the Son of God, must we not attribute his obedience as suffering servant to the eternal God? In his quest to answer this question Barth distinguishes between the Son’s outer and inner “moments” of obedience, which in reality concern “human comprehension of a single moment in the divine life.” Contrary to the Fathers’ insistence on the newness of the incarnation, Barth aims “to bring the obedience of the Son in time and his obedience in eternity into the closest possible relationship.”\(^{172}\)

Barth’s account of the outer moment establishes that if God as God can and did empty himself in Jesus Christ, then “the “mystery” of the incarnation is finally the mystery of God’s own deity.”\(^{173}\) McCormack stresses that such christocentrism does not merely yield an epistemological principle, the unknowability of a God abstracted from his self-revelation. By means of his identification of “the human subject, Jesus of Nazareth, as God,” Barth advances a theological ontology that intentionally undermines the opposition between God-in-himself and God-in-history, an alternative to the classical tradition’s paradoxical Christology as well as the modern tendency to presume that the identification of the two introduces “a rift in the being of God.”\(^{174}\) When we “learn anew how to think about the being of God,” we can grasp that God’s

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\(^{174}\) Ibid., 165-7, cf. 154, 163. See pg.170n54 on the ongoing debates over Barth’s theological ontology.
free, loving election of himself to suffer and die is precisely what corresponds to his divine nature. While God’s unchangeable essence includes the possibility of what we might call “impassibility,” this possibility is contrary to what is actualized in Jesus Christ.

Although Barth resembles Cyril in terms of his commitment to both divine unchangeability and Jesus Christ’s single-subjectivity, McCormack points out that in his account of the Son’s inner moment, Barth defends divine immutability not as sheer paradox but by way of his trinitarian ontology. If we conceive of the Son’s eternal filiation as humility and obedience, we discern that God’s self-humiliation in Jesus Christ is not alien to the divine nature. Insofar as “the divine decision which sets in motion the economy of salvation is the act which constitutes God as God,” we conclude that “the Son in time perfectly “corresponds” to the Son in eternity.”175 To be sure, Barth continues to speak of God as “freedom in love,” which appears to indicate that the Triune essence is “above and prior to the eternal act of election.” Yet McCormack argues that in order to secure Barth’s main insight, the compatibility of divine unchangeability and freedom with kenosis and incarnation, we must utterly reject the idea of an impassible, self-contained Trinity. If suffering is simply “the outworking of an eternal humility that is truly essential to God,” then God is constant but not impassible.176

Barth also differs from Cyril in that, in contrast to the Alexandrian patriarch’s conception of the Word’s instrumentalization of the human flesh, which corresponds to his “soteriological commitment to a doctrine of theosis,” Barth treats Jesus as “a thinking willing, “performative agent” who has an independent power of action.”177 However, as McCormack explains, there are three reasons why this does not lead Barth to a Hegelian reductionism whereby, to use

175 Ibid., 170-1.
176 Ibid., 173. Compare Thomas F. Torrance, who calls God “invariant in love” and “constant in faithfulness” yet not impassible, Space, Time and Incarnation (London: Oxford U.P., 1969), 64-8, 74-5; cf. also Donald Macleod, The Person of Christ (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 186. For a reading of Barth which assigns more significance to divine freedom and the contingent nature of incarnation, see Molnar, Incarnation and Resurrection, 2-5, 125-6, 144-7.
177 Ibid., 169.
Jenson’s terminology, the second identity of God no longer precedes his human identity. First, Barth construes the hypostatic union not in terms of one moment but in terms of an ongoing process in which the Son continually gives Jesus “being and existence.” Second, Barth embraces the doctrine of genus tapeinoticum without compromising divine freedom. God freely decrees that besides the initial act of enhypostatization, the man Jesus becomes “the performative agent of all that is done by the God-human in his divine-human unity.” Although this is “a complex way of describing a single subject,” Barth remains Alexandrian in that he affirms one performative agent. Third and finally, insofar as “the modality of receptivity” constitutes God’s eternity, the second person is not the Logos asarkos. Yet this does not reduce God to human history since “the historical enfleshment is simply the actualization in history of that which God has determined for himself from eternity and which, therefore, is already in him.”

In sum, while both Cyril and Barth defend divine constancy and Christ’s unity, the latter stresses God’s humanization via the genus tapeinoticum rather than humanity’s divinization via the Son’s instrumentalization of human existence. This difference stems ultimately from a divergence between ancient, medieval substantialist and modern historicist-actualist conceptions of existence. Barth aims to supplant the substantialist concepts of both impassibility and passibility, “an altogether this-worldly dialectic,” with a truly christocentric theology. He thus speaks of impassibility only as a conceptual possibility which, while highlighting the freedom of God’s self-determination in Jesus Christ, we cannot attribute to the true God. Nor can we use it to qualify the soteriological trajectory of the Son’s incarnate life. If the Son is eternally constituted by the very “moment” of obedience which in history takes the form of suffering, and

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179 Ibid., 180-4.
if the performative agent of the God-human is Jesus, then to call the Son’s suffering “impassible” is to obscure its reality.

Preliminary Appraisal

McCormack’s critique of divine impassibility is substantially similar to that of Jenson. Both thinkers suppose that God’s unchangeable freedom must include his freedom to actualize himself in the possible economy, which is precisely what he has done in the historical person of Jesus. Both thus argue that to develop a concept of God by abstracting from this economy, to speak of an impassible Logos asarkos, would be to note a mere conceptual possibility which, if reified, amounts to idolatry.\(^{180}\) The only God who exists is the one who has chosen from eternity to be God for us in the human and thereby possible Jesus Christ. It is not simply that Christians cannot know God as impassible; no impassible deity exists.

Perhaps the main difference between McCormack and Jenson, aside from their soteriological differences, is that the former is constrained by Barth’s final unwillingness to collapse the conceptual distinction between the inner and outer moments, the immanent and economic Trinity. Despite the fact that we are dealing with “human comprehension of a single moment,” Barth still speaks of two moments. Moreover, their correlation does not negate the linguistic and conceptual necessity of distinguishing these moments, that is, the need to conceive of the inner’s logical priority to the outer.\(^{181}\) In other words, Barth seems much more attuned to the problems inherent in trying to square a historicist-actualist approach with the Christian concept of the transcendent Trinity, the God who is, even apart from creation, “freedom in love.”\(^{182}\)

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\(^{181}\) See Waldrop’s comments on the importance of Barth’s distinction between God’s act *ad intra* and *ad extra*, ibid., 95-6.

\(^{182}\) I’m not convinced that Barth would entirely approve McCormack’s “smoothed out” version of himself, “Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy?,” 172n58. For example, on pg.167 he describes one of Barth’s positive uses of impassibility as a reference to an unrealized possibility. But what Barth actually appears to say is that just as God’s freedom to become is included in his immutable essence, so also his freedom to suffer in Christ is
It seems to me that while McCormack has shown that Barth’s mature thought affirms the compatibility of unchangeable divine freedom with incarnate suffering, he has not compellingly defended the radical actualism by virtue of which the doctrine of divine impassibility becomes inappropriate. As we will see below, to affirm that the incarnation corresponds to, is consistent with, is the free outworking of the relations that constitute the Triune identity is not necessarily to deny that such an identity subsists “before” and apart from created history. Similarly, to say that the Son’s incarnate suffering and death is the fitting expression of his eternal identity is not to preclude his intrinsic impassibility. On the contrary, if impassibility signifies the uninterrupted infinity of Triune love, not merely the negation of the passible but the capacity of the Son to empty himself while remaining abundantly full, to take the form of a slave while remaining infinitely free, to suffer while remaining transcendently active, and to die while remaining life-giving, then impassibility provides precisely the conceptual means by which we might grasp the continuity of the eternal Triune life with the gratuitous act of creation and redemption. Perhaps God is his eternal decision to become and suffer in Jesus insofar as such economic activity is but the free overflow of the pure act of Triune love which God already (and impassibly!) is. In this regard, the Triune God who “internally and eternally” opens up to the other in Christ does so precisely as the God whose love infinitely precedes and transcends extrinsic change and affect.

2 David Bentley Hart’s Re-Appropriation

A re-appropriation of the patristic doctrine of divine apatheia constitutes one of the main concerns of the Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. In fact, in his magnum opus,

The Beauty of the Infinite, he begins his “dogmatica minora” with a rigorous defence of the classical doctrine. Hart begins with a critique of those who abolish “any distinction between God’s immanence within himself and his gracious presence within history.” While Karl Rahner’s axiomatic identification of the immanent and economic Trinity rightly implies that, in contrast to modalism, “the taxis of his salvific activity toward us is the same taxis that is his triune life,” the abolition of distinctions, which in late modern theology often takes the form of a “theological repristination of Hegel’s ‘trinitarian’ logic,” inevitably leads to problems:

If the identity of the immanent Trinity with the economic is taken to mean that history is the theater within which God—as absolute mind, or process, or divine event—finds or determines himself as God, there can be no way of convincingly avoiding the conclusion (however vigorously the theologian might deny the conclusion) that God depends upon creation to be God and that creation exists by necessity (because of some lack in God), so that God is robbed of his true transcendence and creation of its true gratuity.

Hart elucidates the problem by means of his critique of Robert Jenson. Despite being more careful and sophisticated than Moltmann and others, and despite his explicit assertion that God could have been the same apart from the economy, Jenson ultimately fails to grasp the logic of transcendence. If, on the one hand, “God could be otherwise,” as Jenson suggests, “then he already is God otherwise; this is who God is, which history can manifest but never determine.” This of course would undermine Jenson’s primary goal, which is to show how God truly determines himself in a particular history. In order to remain consistent with this goal, Jenson must concede that God is truly “bound to the conditions he elects,” which means that “there can be no identity of God as this God apart from the specific contours of this history.” But if this is the case, then God must be absolutely inseparable not merely from the man Jesus but from “the entire order of contingencies that Jesus inhabits.” While this sort of deity could be the ontic God

185 Ibid., 158-9.
186 Ibid., 157.
187 Ibid., 160-3.
of Heidegger’s critique or Hegel’s “totality of becoming,” he is not the transcendent Trinity of Scripture and dogma:

The God whose identity subsists in time and is achieved upon history’s horizon—who is determined, however “freely,” by his reaction to the pathos of history—may be a being, or indeed the totality of all beings gathered in the pure depths of total consciousness, but he is not being as such, he is not life and truth and goodness and love and beauty.  

This being the case, not only does such ontology remain metaphysically sub-Christian, but it also makes theodicy impossible. Since Jenson permits “no analogical interval…between God’s eternal being as Trinity and God’s act as Trinity in time, all of history is this identity,” including actual evil. Thus, ironically, the “postmetaphysical” refusal to abstract from the economy “has not made God our companion in pain, but simply the truth of our pain.” Hart concludes that while metaphysically “Jenson’s theology seems to fail Anselm’s test, morally it seems to fail the test of Ivan Karamazov.”

In accordance with Scripture’s witness to an infinite Triune God, Hart vigorously defends the notion of *apatheia*. In direct contradiction to Moltmann, he affirms that while an intrinsically passible deity might turn out to be loving in a reactive sense, “only a truly transcendent and passionless God can be the fullness of love dwelling within our very being, nearer to us than our inmost parts.” Hart defends this proposition in three stages. First, he argues that in patristic tradition *apatheia* emerged as the ground of agape, “a condition of radical attachment” rather than an “austere impassivity.” But this begs an obvious question: “Has not the meaning of the term impassibility been so thoroughly altered as to have no real use?” For Hart the answer

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188 “No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility.” 192. Hart insists that no “voluntarist caesura” between freedom and election can solve the problem, unless Jenson concedes that God already is himself apart from the economy, which is precisely what he refuses to do. (This same argument applies to McCormack’s position.)

189 *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 165. Since theodicy has been one of the main angles from which late moderns have critiqued impassibility, Hart often turns the tables on such critics, arguing quite forcefully that it is the passibilists who undermine the quest for a cogent theodicy.


192 Ibid., 193-5.
depends on how we conceive of love. Against those who construe love as something intrinsically bound up with pathos, he affirms that “love is not primordially a reaction, but the possibility of every action, the transcendent act that makes all else actual; it is purely positive, sufficient in itself, without the need of any galvanism of the negative to be fully active, vital, and creative.” Hence, insofar as love is basically the infinite act of being which is God, “when it is seen in its truly divine depth,” love is fittingly called apatheia.193

Second, Hart elucidates the trinitarian character of apatheia. Contrary to the removed deity of Hellenism, the Fathers conceived the Christian God as “an infinite gesture of self-outpouring love, the Father’s entire gift of his being in the generation of the Son and the breathing forth of the Spirit.” Insofar as “the eternal event that is God’s being” is nothing other than this “utter generosity and joy of self-giving,” “the single ardent movement of this infinite love, delight, and peace,” the Trinity infinitely transcends the order in which one can be changed as a result of being acted upon from without.194 For God’s love is intrinsically perfect, always already “pure positivity and pure activity” without limits.195 But this does not mean that God cannot love that which is truly other than himself, as Moltmann presumed. On the contrary, “because God’s is a trinitarian love, one that is always open to the other, it can include us in itself without changing in its nature: indeed love us with an ardor that no mere finite passion could evoke.”196 In this sense, the infinitely active love of the Trinity transcends what “any affect could possibly impress upon a passive nature; it does not require our sin and death to show us “mercy”: God

193 Modern critics of impassibility, especially those inspired by Moltmann, often appear to presuppose a basically reactive concept of love, the capacity to empathize or respond to the sufferings of another. From Hart’s perspective, while God certainly has empathy for human sufferers in the incarnate Son, we must not mythologize love such that it has no precedence to its passible manifestation. For God is not love if love is basically a reaction, called to being by the extrinsic. Cf. Emery’s Thomist critique of passibilist language in “The Immutability of the God of Love,” 64-8, 70-2.
loved us when we were not, and by this very “mercy” called us into being.” To say that God is impassible, therefore, is to say that he always “already” is infinite Triune love, a love whose fullness subsists apart from creation and incarnation and yet whose communal boundlessness remains intrinsically open to it.

The third stage of the argument concerns the manner in which the impassible love of the Triune God “seizes us up into itself.” Hart does not feel obliged to retreat from the conceptual distinction between immanent and economic in the face of christological dogma. Instead he affirms that “all that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God was and is in the supereminent, timeless eternity of his act of being, and would have been and would be with or without a world.” 197 Thus also, “Even the cross of Christ does not determine the nature of divine love, but rather manifests it, because there is a more original outpouring.” 198 Yet insofar as this manifestation involves what Scripture describes as becoming and kenosis leading to suffering and death, can we really avoid attributing to God the capacity to change and be acted upon?

Here Hart addresses the heart of the contemporary christological critique: Why maintain the language of apatheia if it inevitably appears as a “disorienting paradox” against the backdrop of the Christian narrative? 199 Is not the language tied to a metaphysic that we should lay down at the foot of the cross?

Hart responds with the rather audacious claim that the patristic paradoxes should be taken not primarily as apophatic qualifiers but as “simple formulae for explaining, quite lucidly, the biblical story of our salvation in Christ.” 200 To be sure, impassibility certainly includes the basic notion that the Triune persons are “impervious to any force—any pathos or affect—external” to their nature, which is why the Fathers never felt the need to exclude the term and its basic

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197 *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 158.
198 Ibid., 167.
200 Ibid., 201.
content from Christian theology. Yet when Cyril and others employed the term in christological contexts, when they clarified that the impassible Son suffered while remaining impassible, their aim was not to reject the reality of the Son’s human suffering but to deny “that God becoming human was an act of divine self-alienation,” that God must negate himself in order to love us in such an intimate manner.  

The Fathers sought to conceive of a meaningful divine kenosis while distinguishing it from the pagan idea of divine change. But lest we consider this a mere semantic move, Hart provides three related reasons why this distinction and thus the whole tradition of paradoxical language carries metaphysical weight. First, “the absolute qualitative disproportion between infinite and finite allows for the infinite to appropriate and accommodate the finite while remaining infinite.” As infinite being, that by which all finite beings exist, God can “disclose and express [himself] in one instance of the finite” without truncating his eternal life. By virtue of his transcendent fullness, the Son can empty himself in the economy while remaining superabundant. Second, insofar as human beings already bear the image of God, “the perfect dwelling of the eternal image and likeness of God—the Logos—in the one man who perfectly expresses and lives out what it is to be human is in no sense an alien act for God.” In that the Word is the archetype of humanity, human being is already fit to reveal the infinite, which helps one conceive of incarnation as manifestation rather than change. Finally and, as Hart notes, most importantly, since “God’s eternal being is, in some sense, kenosis: the self-outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit,” the incarnation is not a wholly new act, at least from God’s perspective. Rather, it exhibits “the nature of the whole

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204 Ibid., 358, cf. 322-4.
trinitarian *taxis.*” It is not qualitatively other than the pure act of love that constitutes the Triune life:

For God to pour himself out, then, as the man Jesus is not a venture outside of the trinitarian life of indestructible love, but in fact quite the reverse: it is the act by which creation is seized up into the sheer invincible pertinacity of that love, which reaches down to gather us into its triune motion.

In other words, the economic kenosis of the Word is simply the redemptive gift of participation in that which the Trinity eternally is: infinite, self-giving love. *Apatheia,* therefore, is not a divine attribute that drives a wedge between the true God and the story of crucified love. Rather, as the uninterrupted boundlessness of Triune love, impassibility reveals the incarnation as the true, temporal expression of the same infinite act by which God is God. Refined thus, the concept of *apatheia* means that in the human and therefore passible person of Jesus, we encounter the true God of transcendent love.

At this point Hart turns to the final aspect of his defence of the doctrine: its superlative soteriological purpose as the Alexandrians conceived it. In *The Beauty of the Infinite* Hart seeks to maintain Scripture’s language of sacrifice, in contrast to René Girard’s sweeping rejection thereof, while also undermining interpretations that fail to distinguish it from the secular economy of violence. Christ’s sacrifice belongs to “an extravagant order of sacrifice” whereby “the sacrificial outpouring of the infinite” overcomes the old economy of violence. 205 But as Hart contends, the whole notion of an extravagant order, the infinitely “excessive” character of Triune love, depends on the concept of transcendence to which *apatheia* bears witness, “a ceaseless outpouring of gift and restoration in an infinite motion exceeding every economy.” 206

In this sense, it is precisely the God who transcends the passible order who can suffer and die as an expression of infinite Triune self-giving and as a redeeming invitation to participate therein,

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205 Ibid., 353-4.
that is, by the gift of theosis. When “the very communicatio idiomatum of Jesus’ identity”
“opens out to embrace us within its mystery,” we are invited “into the radiant shelter of his
eternal peace, his apatheia.” The eschatological end of this exchange, this contact with
Christ’s life-giving flesh, is “the perfection of our nature in Christ’s resurrection body, a body
entirely divinized and so entirely without pain…, a body of love…reflecting without any
shadow of sadness the light that God pours graciously down upon it.” Through the Son’s
impassible appropriation of human suffering and death in Jesus Christ, God both embraces and
overcomes our estrangement. As Hart concludes,

> when the infinite outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit, enters our
> reality, the apatheia of God’s eternally dynamic and replete life of love consumes every
> pathos in its ardor; even the ultimate extreme of the kenosis of the Son in time—
> crucifixion—is embraced within and overcome by the everlasting kenosis of the divine
> life.  

Because God’s infinite life of love is impassible, the incarnate Son bears our condition as “an
act of saving love: as Easter.”

**Preliminary Appraisal**

Despite the radically different conclusion at which Hart arrives, some of his primary aims
correlate with those of Jenson and McCormack. First, Hart approaches the question of divine
apatheia from a trinitarian and christological perspective, determining its legitimacy in Christian
theology by virtue of its coherence with Scripture’s witness to the Triune God of love revealed
in Jesus Christ. Second, in congruence with Jenson and McCormack’s desire to convey the
history of Jesus as the place in which God freely determines himself, Hart stresses the
compatibility of the infinite with the finite life of Jesus, the correspondence of the incarnation

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208 Ibid., 359.
with the divine life. He even affirms that “in some sense” we may speak of an eternal kenosis which the Son’s economic self-emptying manifests.

In spite of such affinities, Hart explicitly contradicts attempts to collapse mental distinctions between God as such and God in history, and so he affirms the conceptual priority of the immanent to the economic Trinity, the Son’s eternal birth to his incarnation, and hence the distinction between impassible divinity and passible humanity. Hart thinks that such distinctions are not merely apophatic; they proceed from Scripture’s positive vision of a God who is transcendent love. If the Trinity is truly transcendent, the limitless being of all beings, the God whose freedom is simply the freedom to be infinite love, then the “absolute disproportion” between Creator and creature requires a clear conceptual distinction between divine and human love: “Whereas we…cannot know, love, or act save through a relation to that which affects us and which we affect, God’s impassibility is the infinitely active and eternally prior love in which our experience of love…lives, moves, and has its being.”

Nothing can interrupt or add to the ceaseless and superabundant self-giving that constitutes God’s eternal life. Hence, we must acknowledge the “analogical interval” between “God’s eternal being as Trinity and God’s act as Trinity in time,” even if doing so requires paradoxical language. As Hart concludes, the doctrine of apatheia “allows us to say not only that God loves…but that, simply enough, God is love.”

Yet far from confining God to himself, Hart clarifies that precisely because the Triune life is impassible, God’s love is infinitely excessive. He can thus, in loving freedom, create and redeem what is other than himself without negating his own aseity. He can invite the extrinsic to

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210 Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God,” in Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering, 301. Gilles Emery’s comments on Aquinas could apply to Hart’s approach: “Instead of positing a suffering that God possesses in a mode unique to himself…, Thomas Aquinas invites us to understand divine immutability itself as a transcendent perfection of the creator, with a mode profoundly different from created perfections,” “The Immutability of the God of Love,” 63-4.


participate in his own love without change because such love is impassibly infinite, a communion of self-giving that is always already overflowing and welcoming. Thus, the event of Jesus Christ is not understood as the historical point in which God determines or constitutes himself as Triune love. Rather, Christ is the historical form of the “original outpouring,” the economic manifestation of the infinite gift and receipt which is the eternal Son in communion with the Father and Spirit, which constitutes sinful humanity’s renewed participation in such communion. As Matthew Levering concludes in his analysis of Thomas Aquinas’s trinitarian ontology,

Christ, whose Paschal mystery is God’s revelatory gift of himself to us, thus reveals that “eternal life” (sharing in God himself) is sharing in God’s supreme self-giving – a self-giving that is, unlike human self-giving, without risk, suffering, or loss, in other words a self-giving that is glory.²¹³

By virtue of his human “passibilization,” the Son reveals and invites human beings to partake of the mystery of his own ousia: eternal, impassible, trinitarian love.

3 An Enhanced Cyrillian Approach

All three of the major critics of apatheia agree that while Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology was on the right track, it remained insufficient. On the one hand, his thought bordered on “postmetaphysical” revolution.²¹⁴ On the other, Cyril remained finally unwilling to subordinate Greek philosophy to the biblical narrative of crucified love. This inevitably led to the rather disorienting Christology of paradox, an approach that rightly transcends the dualism of the Antiochenes (and much succeeding Western theology) but wrongly refuses to allow the story of Jesus to reconfigure our theological ontologies. For these critics, then, the Cyrillian paradigm is a conglomerate theology which, despite its superiority to Nestorianism, fails to expel the alien

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²¹³ Levering, Scripture and Metaphysics, 142.
²¹⁴ Of course, many would say similar things about Martin Luther, who perhaps stood a few rungs higher on the ladder to revolution.
metaphysic inextricably tied to *apatheia*, a metaphysic which inevitably clashes with kenosis and incarnation. This is why Cyril marvels at the strangeness of the Christ event, and why he ultimately capitulates to dualistic formulations.

Along with Hart and others, I would argue that this sort of appraisal distorts Cyril’s achievement, which was to convey *apatheia* (albeit inchoately) in relation to a theology of incarnation rooted in John’s confession that God *is* love. When Cyril stressed the newness or strangeness of the incarnation, he thought of the unique, climactic character of the particular event of Jesus Christ in relation to the rest of salvation history, which Nestorius logically appeared to deny. Jesus was no mere prophet; he was Emmanuel, God with us in an utterly unprecedented manner. Yet such apocalyptic newness does not mean that the incarnation was an alien act for impassible God. On the contrary, Cyril insisted that this act of revealing, saving love is precisely the sort of thing a loving Creator could do and did do precisely while remaining himself. Moreover, Cyril’s language of narrative and natural duality did not justify an evacuation of deity from Jesus’ human life, as it did for Nestorius. Rather, it clarified that God remains God, even as incarnate, which is necessary for our salvation. Subjective and natural-hypostatic unity, and the corollary *communicatio idiomatum*, does not entail any sort of mixture or confusion. The impassible nature of the Son is such that he can freely assume a passible human nature, which is already fit to manifest the Logos, while remaining life-giving, so that in the man Jesus we salvifically encounter and participate in the “primordial” love of the Trinity.

What Cyril perhaps lacked was not an *affirmation* that kenosis and incarnation fittingly express the immutable, impassible Triune life but an explicit, robust *explanation* of such continuity in light of the logic of trinitarian ontology. In this regard, Hart enhances Cyril’s approach by clarifying that from the divine perspective, there is nothing alien in infinite being’s capacity to create and manifest itself in a particular finite being. The Son’s incarnate offering is
simply the free, historical expression of his eternal identity as excessive self-giving. Far from contradicting incarnation, immutability and impassibility illuminate its meaning as the event in which Son becomes a human being so that in him humanity can participate in transcendent love.

Hart thus shows that the Alexandrian defence of both divine impassibility and christological unity does not need to be accepted simply as ineffable paradox. To be sure, it is certainly appropriate to call it paradoxical insofar as the language of impassible suffering is oxymoronic. Moreover, it is appropriate to remind ourselves that in spite of conceptual clarification, we are speaking of a mystery that transcends human comprehension. Hart denies none of this, yet he insists on the responsibility of the Christian theologian to say why there is no logical contradiction. Hart thus transcends the Cyrillian approach of certain traditionalists, of which Jenson sensibly complains: “But if someone asks “How do you mean this paradox?,” it does not help simply to repeat, “It is a paradox.’” Whether or not one finds Hart’s explanation compelling, he certainly cannot be accused of simply retreating to the fortress of Christian paradoxology. He aims to clarify in which sense the concept of apatheia coheres with and illuminates the nature of infinite Triune love, its manifestation in Jesus Christ, and the church’s participation therein.

4 A Common Theological Grammar

It is one thing to argue that Hart best interprets and enhances Cyril’s christological thought. It is another to determine which approach is most fully Christian, that is, which most faithfully speaks of God and Jesus Christ in light of Scripture and the dogmatic tradition. Before doing such, however, it is important to recognize the underlying consensus among most participants in the im/passibility debate. Despite disagreement over the meaning and utility of apatheia in

particular, Moltmann, Jenson, McCormack and Hart all seek to answer the same underlying question. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, “To what metaphysics (and ontology of God) does the *mythos* of Jesus give rise?” In this sense, despite their linguistic and conceptual opposition, and the intensity of some of their rhetoric, the contributors have remained united by a common theological grammar, the essence of which concerns the Triune God’s freedom to be, do, act as he actually is, does, acts in the economy of salvation. Hence, each participant has intentionally sought to obey Rahner’s Rule.

In this regard, defenders of impassibility should appreciate the value of the critics insofar as they powerfully correct the kind of theologizing that leads to a degenerate sort of theism. For they are surely right in their quests to establish that salvation history culminating in the incarnation is truly the history of God with us, which means that contrary to *a priori* abstractions, we must let such history guide and refine our theological ontologies. Moreover, this corrective has not and perhaps will not soon become redundant, especially if the tide turns against those critical of *apatheia* (which currently seems likely). As Hart points out, sometimes the traditionalists who defend impassibility most resolutely can in fact be accused of a “sub-Christian” sort of theology, one which fails to rise to the true logic of trinitarian transcendence. In these instances, we should heed the voices of the critics. If our metaphysic requires the demythologization of the economy, as if to by-pass the order in which God graciously encounters us, then we are guilty of idolatry. A sufficiently Christian theology will illuminate the Triune God’s freedom to love as he actually does in Jesus Christ, in accordance with the biblical witness.

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217 As with most defenders of *apatheia*, I am doubtful about the extent and prevalence of such theism in the received tradition. I tend to think that Dostoevsky’s “protest atheist” reacts, at least primarily, against a peculiar modern reduction of deity rather than the object of the Fathers’ and early Medieval’s worship.

218 Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence.”
5 Final Appraisal of *Apatheia*

And thus we return to our primary concern in this discussion: Which language and concepts, which doctrines and ontologies, properly safeguard this divine freedom to love? As we have seen, many theologians have concluded that *apatheia* both linguistically and conceptually remains inadequate to do the job. It remains indelibly linked to an impersonal, unitarian conception of deity to which one must subordinate the narrative of Scripture culminating in the event of Jesus Christ. At its best, the doctrine expresses our epistemological inadequacy, a Cyrillian attempt to defend an ineffable paradox: the union of God and humanity, of the intrinsically impassible and the passible creature, in the mystery of the incarnate Word. At its worst, the doctrine simply justifies the dualism of Nestorius and the modern kenoticists, the tendency to ignore the plain sense of the Gospels, the concreteness of the truth which is Emmanuel, God with us as a particular human person. In both cases, the critics argue, we logically transgress Rahner’s Rule for the sake of our *a priori* metaphysic, implicitly in Cyril’s case and quite conspicuously in the case of Nestorianism or modern kenoticism.

Against this way of thinking, I would argue that divine *apatheia* affords a compelling theology of God’s freedom to love, one which illuminates the deepest meaning of the kenotic, incarnate, passible existence of the eternal Son. To return to Vanhoozer’s language, *apatheia* does not require the subjugation of the *mythos* to the metaphysic. As Hart’s enhancement of the Cyrillian paradigm suggests, when properly understood the doctrine points to “the implicit *logos* in the *mythos,*” an ontology which the narrative of the gospel indeed generates. This is true in at least two complementary ways.

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219 For a critique of modern kenoticism, see Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 205-12.
First, the divine apatheia reveals the truly apocalyptic character of the incarnation without compromising divine freedom and thus its utter gratuity. Divine impassibility is, at once, a denial that the Trinity’s love could ever be anything less than an infinite overflow, even apart from creation, and an affirmation that such love is intrinsically and infinitely open and free to create and redeem, disposed to invite that which is other to participate in itself. In this respect, the doctrine testifies to the truth that God is the freedom to be who he is, infinite love, both immanently and economically. This does not constitute a transgression of Rahner’s Rule. Instead, it clarifies that while the Trinity who is love “in himself” is God “for us” in Jesus Christ, the whole economy proceeds from the superabundant love which God always “already” is. Precisely because God’s love is infinite, we must at once deny all limitations upon it, including the possibility of extrinsic interruption, alteration or addition. Yet we simultaneously affirm in view of the trinitarian character of such limitlessness, that God can and did, out of his immutable and impassible self-giving depths, create and redeem, even by the eternal Son’s condescension to incarnate suffering and death.  

Second, the doctrine illuminates the unique soteriological (and eschatological) dynamic of the person and work of Jesus, hence Hart’s contention that apatheia functions as the ground of Christian hope. The Son’s human existence does not merely display God’s solidarity with us. As Cyril summarizes, “he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his.” The Word’s impassible appropriation of human suffering constitutes the renewed capacity of fallen humanity to participate in his own pure act of Triune love. This is not, as Nestorius and some critics assert, a dehumanizing apotheosis. Rather, insofar as moral and physical corruption characterizes the sinful economy rather than the created order, our

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221 Compare Paul I. Kim’s perceptive comments on Cyril’s deepening of the mystery of God’s presence in the world without historicizing the divine, “Apatheia and Atonement,” 222, 227-8.

redemption and deification through union with the flesh of the impassible One is true human fulfillment. We achieve our deepest telos when we, precisely as passible beings, partake of the boundless love of the Triune life, not by our escape from the passible order but by the union of the church with her Bridegroom, Christian participation in the divine within the Spirit-filled community of the incarnate One. The gift of Christ’s body thus nourishes the only life for which we are created: eternal life.

6 Semantic Considerations

Of course, even if one appreciates this particular interpretation of apatheia as an adequate way to understand the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the question of its semantic utility remains. If Hart is willing to concede that in a certain sense kenosis describes not simply the economy but the eternal act by which God is God, could he not confess that “in some sense” suffering describes the eternal Triune relations? If we may describe the infinite fullness of Triune communion as self-emptying, can we not find a way to identify the apatheia of divine love in terms of interpersonal affectivity? For example, Gary Culpepper argues for “a proper analogical attribution of suffering in God.”223 Seeking to unpack Moltmann’s assertion that the Christian God can suffer out of the fullness of his being as love, he concludes that the Trinity suffers in that “God is moved by another in the reciprocal relations of Father, Son and Spirit.”224 More particularly, he argues that “the reciprocal suffering of the Father and the Son, and the suffering of each of the Love that is the Holy Spirit, who unites the Father and Son across the infinite distance of their relations of personal otherness, identifies the eternal identity of God.” This sort of language leads Culpepper to identify the divine nature as “unchanging motion” and even

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224 Ibid., 82, 85, 89, 90.
“impassible suffering.”\textsuperscript{225} Jesus Christ thus reveals the eternal suffering of God not as self-alienation but as the “outward dimension” of “the joy of a life of suffering the knowledge of the other,” the “eternal suffering of knowledge and love in the Trinity.”\textsuperscript{226}

Culpepper raises the question of the distinction between analogical and metaphorical language. (Here I presume that Hart’s attribution of kenosis to God is metaphorical.) As Thomas Aquinas observed, insofar as we extract the “impulsion of the appetite” from its corporeal modality, we can attribute the formal aspect of certain passions analogically, not merely metaphorically, to God’s eternal being.\textsuperscript{227} There are particular passions, love and joy being the most obvious, which can properly apply to God to the extent that they analogically refer to their infinitely active and thus “passionless” form in the Triune life. However, in the case of suffering per se, while it can be \textit{metaphorically} predicated of the Trinity,\textsuperscript{228} it could only apply \textit{analogically} if one defines it in abstraction from its material aspect, not simply corporeal modification but the basic notion of being “moved” or “affected” by that which is outside of oneself. When Culpepper attributes suffering itself to the Triune relations, he either redefines suffering such that it no longer has any intelligible link to its commonly accepted meaning, or else the hypostases affect one another extrinsically, in a tritheistic sense. Hence, to attribute suffering to God analogically seems to be either ambiguous or heterodox, since one either redefines “suffering” in contrast to its basic meaning or renders the unity of the Triune nature unintelligible.

Nonetheless, it is easy to sympathize with Culpepper’s quest to find a single term and concept that can link God-in-himself to God-in-history without thereby reducing the former to

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 92, 94n37.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 96.
the latter. On the one hand, we search for that which confirms the concrete unity of
the immanent and economic Trinity (cf. Cyril’s language of subjective continuity and
natural-hypostatic unity). On the other, lest we undermine the freedom and transcendence of God as the
author of creation and redemption, we simultaneously need language of conceptual duality, that
which qualifies the infinite aseity of the Trinity (cf. Cyril’s language of narrative and natural
duality). Thomas F. Torrance identifies this need when he states that in the incarnation we
encounter “a coordinate system of divine and human, eternal and temporal, invisible and visible,
spiritual and material relations, and we want to coordinate them in one and the same language.
But this is exactly what we cannot do.” Attempts to do so inevitably fail and thus tempt
theology to lapse into either “mythological synthesis” or demythologization, both of which
contradict the proper logic of Christian thinking. One of the solutions Torrance proposes is
the “relational and differential mode of thought” characteristic of patristic theology, which
presupposes that Jesus Christ is the spatial-temporal place of contact and communication
between God and man and yet recognizes the Son’s transcendence of the whole created order.
Such a mode of thought involves “a kinetic way” of thinking (e.g. God’s economic
condescension) as well as an ontological aspect (e.g. hypostatic union), which together point to
“the intersection and overlapping of divine and human reality” yet without delimiting
transcendence by positing a confusion or separation between them. As Torrance concludes, the
merit of this relational-differential approach is that it both proceeds from and enriches ecclesial
reception of the gospel. It is simply “the organized form of apprehension and conceptualization
forced upon the Church by the ontic necessity of the given Reality of God in Jesus Christ.”

229 Even such a staunch defender of impassibility as Thomas Weinandy finds a way to call God’s intrinsic love
passionate, though he carefully qualifies such passion as “fully in act,” Weinandy, Does God Suffer?, 126-7.
230 Torrance, Space, Time and Incarnation, 76.
231 Ibid., 60-1.
232 Ibid., 77-81.
Conclusion

In light of Torrance’s comments, I would suggest that we need not transcend the paradoxical christological language of Cyril as appropriated by Hart. While God as love is infinitely active and thus impassible, he freely expresses and invites our participation in such love through the passible life of the incarnate Son. As Cyril pointed out, despite the unifying concept of love, the incarnation demands two manners of speech. In one sense, in his intrinsic nature, God as love is impassible, and yet in another sense, in the climax of the economy, his love takes the form of a concrete, passible existence. The eternal Word is at once the divine hypostasis who is eternally constituted by his transcendently active relations with the Father and Spirit and the one who lovingly became flesh and thereby suffered for the sake of our theosis, our participation, as passible beings, in the infinite activity of Triune communion. In order to do full justice to the reality of Emmanuel, therefore, we confess that the impassible Son became passible flesh (the dynamic-noetic aspect) and suffered impassibly (the static-ontic aspect), so that human sinners might participate in trinitarian love.

233 This despite Torrance’s own rejection of impassibility.
Conclusion: The Utility of Paradoxical Christology

Faced with the ineffable reality of the Word made flesh, Cyril of Alexandria doxologically proclaimed,

He who was above all creation was in our human condition; the invisible one was made visible in the flesh; he who is from the heavens…was in the likeness of earthly things; the immaterial one could be touched; he who is free in his own nature came in the form of a slave; he who blesses all creation became accursed; he who is all righteousness was numbered among the transgressors; life itself came in the appearance of death.234

I would suggest that when we use language like this, we starkly expose the typical idols of the Western intellectual tradition. Whether or not it provides, in practice, an uncritical retreat into paradox, it certainly seems to obstruct two extremes: a historicist-Hegelian reduction of the divine to creaturely history on the one hand, and an ontic-Hellenistic conception of a deity who is supreme and remote yet neither transcendent nor immanent on the other. In other words, the advantage of the paradoxical Christology of the Fathers consists in its tendency to preclude both mythologization and demythologization, the gospel’s “reduction down” to a human story and “reduction up” to an ontic presupposition.235 It encourages the habit of apprehending the protagonist of the gospel narratives as at once the Son begotten before all worlds and the child born of Mary, the impassible Word and suffering man, who died, rose and ascended for our salvation.

This is not to suggest, to Jenson’s dismay, that Western theology has completed the ongoing and never-ending task of “Gospelizing” our culture’s intellectual inheritance. I am simply suggesting that with respect to the im/passibility debate in particular, Christian theologians ought to allow the paradoxical Christology of the Fathers to function at least as a linguistic

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parameter within which to conceptualize.\textsuperscript{236} Perhaps the paradoxical phrases that pervade the ecclesial life of much of the received Christian tradition contain wisdom which modern minds cannot surpass. Perhaps they constitute the best attempt of the church to speak truthfully about, to and in the mystery of the transcendent and immanent Creator and Redeemer, the eternal Triune communion which the church knows through the Spirit as the loving Father our Lord Jesus Christ. In sum, perhaps this strange language remains the best way to confess that God is love, that God loves us through Jesus Christ, and that in Christ we abide in such love (1 John 4:7ff.).

\textsuperscript{236} On this precise point see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology,” in \textit{Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering}, 127-149.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

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Chapter 2: Key Theologians


**Secondary Sources**

**Cyril and Patristic Christology**


Im/passibility and Modern Christology


