

**Nicholas Wolterstorff. *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. xii + 196 pp. \$20 (paper).**

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Nicholas Wolterstorff has spent most of his career making it possible to take the claims of Scripture and Christian doctrine seriously in the philosophical guild. It is hard to overestimate that impact that the “Reformed epistemologists,” including Wolterstorff, have had in creating space for Christian philosophers to produce research challenging the positivistic consensus of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Wolterstorff has examined a breathtaking array of topics with great philosophical rigor, and in this book he turns his attention to liturgical theology.

The book promises something analogous to a transcendental deduction of the conditions which must be true about God based on the affirmations made of Him in the experience of worship and the language of liturgical texts. Worship, which Wolterstorff worthily defines as adoration, “a particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God’s unsurpassable excellence” (38), expressed in liturgical texts, is uniquely revealing of the attributes of the deity we believe in. Wolterstorff’s project here is related to that of the liturgical theologian David Fagerberg. The experience and articulation of adoration in worship, Fagerberg argues, is “*theologia prima*.”<sup>1</sup> The experience of worship can be translated into an academic discourse, which is secondary theology. In other words, secondary theology would be a discourse about what must be the case about God given the experience of worship.

Wolterstorff promises the application of philosophical rigor to the project that has been proposed by liturgical theologians. And Wolterstorff believes that the lack of philosophical rigor has generated a fundamental lack of clarity to the discipline of liturgical theology. According to Alexander Schmemmann and J.J. von Allmen, the main liturgical theologians Wolterstorff examines in the book, “the liturgy...contains theology ‘in code’; the task of the liturgical theologian is to ‘decode’ the code. I interpreted [them] as meaning that the task of the liturgical theologian is to make explicit and articulate the understanding of God implicit in the liturgy.” Wolterstorff maintains, however, that “when one actually looks at what Schmemmann does, I think most of it is better described as *theological reflections about* liturgy than as *making explicit and articulating the theology implicit in* the liturgy” (170).

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<sup>1</sup> David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007).

The project Wolterstorff has taken on is exciting and potentially enormously fertile, particularly since it is a project that has recently captivated not only liturgical theologians but also biblical scholars. A number of scholars of the early church now believe that the nineteenth century distinction between the “Jesus of history” and “Christ of faith” is artificial and that there is an organic link between the experience of the confession of Christ’s lordship in worship in the early church and the eventual articulation of Trinitarian belief in the “great church.” For a number of these scholars worship set the context within which it was possible to reason about the identity of Christ, and that this relationship was critical to understanding the emergence of Trinitarian theology.

Discursive reasoning alone did not produce the worship of Christ, but rather the worship of Christ ultimately produced the necessity of reasoning about the Trinity evidenced in the ecumenical creeds. Larry Hurtado, for instance, argues that one can see the foundations in which the prime theology of worship was beginning to inform the attribution of divinity to Christ in the Pauline corpus. In particular, in 1 Cor. 8:5-6, Paul takes the aggressively monotheistic confession of the *Shema* in Deut. 6:4 and inserts the confession of Christ as Lord together with YHWH into it: “This adaptation of the *Shema* may be Paul’s own creative formulation here, but as we have seen, the acclamation of Jesus as ‘Lord’ obviously had long been a traditional feature of Christian devotional practice in Pauline Christianity and in other Christian circles as well, in both Greek and Aramaic.”<sup>2</sup>

Wolterstorff’s project, then, is potentially game-changing not only for liturgical theology but for other cognate theological disciplines as well. That being said, Wolterstorff’s project is ultimately far more interesting in the announcement than in the execution, at least in this book, for several reasons. First, and most superficially, it is clear that Wolterstorff has not developed a profound familiarity with the disciplines of liturgics and liturgical theology. The only scholars he engages with any depth are the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann and the Reformed theologian J.J. von Allmen. This is not a fatal problem, but further immersion in the disciplines he purporting to critique from a philosophical perspective would probably have strengthened his analysis.

There are deeper problems with Wolterstorff’s analysis, however. He has publicly written about his incredulity towards a number of central affirmations made about God in the tradition. Most critically for this book, Wolterstorff rejects the doctrines of divine impassability and divine simplicity. Wolterstorff believes that the experience of God in worship and the liturgical texts through which we worship ought to lead Christians to question these doctrines as well.

It is difficult to imagine that the liturgists who composed the texts he examines share his opinions about how their texts undermine classical doctrines of the church. More importantly, however, Wolterstorff does not demonstrate a profound grasp of the doctrines he is criticizing in this text. Even if he has done so elsewhere, it is a failure of this work that he does not deal with the strongest formulations of the doctrines he is criticizing. This makes it far easier to dismiss them as products of

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114.

addled thinking. Lastly, he does not acknowledge the unintended consequences of rejecting the classical conciliar teaching about God and the difficulties that his alternative account is likely to engender for Christian teaching and preaching.

We can see what is at stake by examining his treatment of impassability. Wolterstorff distinguishes his own opinion that “God is indeed vulnerable to such negative emotions as anger and pity, or to something very much like those” from what is normatively presupposed by Christian liturgies. But he goes on to state that the liturgy presupposes that God is “vulnerable to *being wronged*” and in fact that God has actually been wronged (45-6). It does not seem to me that Wolterstorff has successfully bracketed his endorsement of God’s passability in this distinction, but rather has allowed it to color the way he reads the confession in liturgical texts.

If all that Wolterstorff means to say is that God permits his creatures to transgress His law, this is not, shall we say, a revolutionary idea. Yet Wolterstorff clearly means more than this. The evocative language of vulnerability entails an openness or exposure to being buffeted by forces outside oneself. He quotes John Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 9:5-6 to this effect: “This doctrine is to be carefully observed, that no one can be injurious to his brother without wounding God himself” (48). But to ascribe vulnerability to God in this way commits Wolterstorff to treating the doctrine of impassability as if it were identical with impassivity, framing it at the outset in such a way that it appears inconsistent with the narrative of Scripture. If one is vulnerable to wounding by the actions of other agents, but one is emotionally unaffected when in fact such wounds have been inflicted, that can properly be described as an impassive response.

A number of contemporary theologians for which Wolterstorff has showed a fondness elsewhere, in particular Jürgen Moltmann, have equated the doctrine of impassability with the idea of emotionlessness or impassivity, as if the fathers simply imported stoicism into the teaching tradition of the church. It seems that Moltmann and others who endorse the so-called “new orthodoxy” of God’s passability work with a caricature of the patristic consensus on this teaching, wherein an impassable God cannot attend to or be responsive to the pain and injustice of the world unless God is also vulnerable to it in a way that is analogous to human agents.

By contrast, however, according to Scripture and the consensual teaching tradition of the church, God experiences intense emotion in relation to his creation but not in the same way or mode in which human agents do. As Richard Muller, one of the premier historians of Protestant scholasticism writes: “the Reformed orthodox conception of divine impassability does not argue a God who lacks love, mercy, anger, hate, or (indeed!) pleasure, but who has all of these relations to the world order. The exclusion of ‘passions’ from the divine being never implied the absence of ‘affections.’”<sup>3</sup>

What the doctrine of impassability protects is the idea that God does not suffer emotion in the same way that we do. Our emotions are often out of proportion, out of the control of, or inconsistent with reason. We are assaulted and mastered by them, in other words. Considered in this way, emotions have been characterized as

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 of *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 33, cf. 310.

passions, and as Muller indicates above, it was crucial for the classical doctrine of God that he not be subject to passions in the way that pagan deities were. Cicero described these passions as “sicknesses of the soul,” because they destabilize the person. They overwhelm and overcome us, leading us to self- and other-destructive actions that we would, with a greater self-possession, proportion, or perspective, otherwise never commit.

God, according to the classical theological tradition, is not threatened or subverted by His emotional life in the same way as we are. He is attendant and responsive to human sinfulness, but His response is always proportionate and measured, and more importantly, always ordered to an end which He Himself has already specified. God does not, as it were, fly off the handle.

In this respect the Christian God is deeply opposed to the Greek deities who were driven by petty conflicts and jealousies. The Christian God could never be emotionally manipulated or in danger of losing control. As Lactantius summarized, “He has His wrath in His power and is not ruled by it, but...He Himself governs the wrath as He wishes.”<sup>4</sup> The fact that God always maintains rational mastery of his emotions while experiencing the full range of emotions compatible with his perfection was experienced as a tremendously liberating reality for the fathers. This context is extremely important for understanding why the doctrine of impassability developed in the way it did.

Even though Wolterstorff states that the liturgy commits us only to saying that God is vulnerable to being wronged, it is difficult to see what is gained for Wolterstorff in making this claim if it is not the case that those wrongs also make God vulnerable to anger and sorrow. Why use the term “vulnerable” in any case unless one wants to suggest that God suffers the passions of anger and sorrow as a result of this vulnerability? I doubt that any historic Christian theologian would disagree that God can be and is regularly wronged, and that God does not will being wronged in an active sense, although he does so will in a permissive sense – in the sense that in his almightiness he allows such wrongs against his person to occur.

However, it is a different claim that God *as a result* of the vulnerability to being wronged is also assaulted by the passions of anger and sorrow. Wolterstorff’s affirmation of both results, I believe, derives from his desire to preserve the liturgy’s sense that God is “one who can and does listen to us, and is capable of responding favorably to what we say” (61). But impassabilists, as I have already demonstrated, do not believe that the doctrine commits one to saying that God does not listen to us or that he is not responsive to us. The basis for God’s listening and responsiveness, however, is not his vulnerability to the world but the steadiness of His own character and purpose.

However, the most problematic feature of Wolterstorff’s discussion of the vulnerability and responsiveness of God is that it occurs in abstraction from any discussion of the incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation *per se* barely registers in Wolterstorff’s account, whereas it is utterly critical and indispensable for the discussion of how God can be vulnerable and suffer in the fathers. Christ suffers in his

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<sup>4</sup> Lactantius, *The Wrath of God*, in *The Minor Works*, trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 54 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1965), 21, p. 109.

human nature, and because his human nature is the human nature of the divine Word, through the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, God participates in the suffering of the human nature. But this is a different claim than the claim that God *in His divine nature* is vulnerable to suffering. It is because God is capable of experiencing suffering but not vulnerable to it that he can be the redeemer of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. If God were subject to the passions that besiege the human race his ability to act steadfastly for the reconciliation of the world to himself in Jesus Christ would be jeopardized.

This is not to say that there is not an incarnational logic imbedded in Wolterstorff's book. In at least three critical junctures Wolterstorff depends upon the doctrine of the incarnation. First, his summary of NT Wright's work makes clear that the purpose of the coming of Christ was to establish the kingdom of God, and "*that Israel's god is acting climactically in the career of Jesus himself*" (120). What Jesus accomplishes and the basis upon which we worship him depend upon the fact that the Word has assumed flesh in him.

Secondly, his helpful discussion of his earlier work on divine discourse in relation to preaching advances the helpful concept of "double agency discourse," which describes the "phenomenon of one person speaking on behalf of another" (141). This allows Wolterstorff to argue against the abstract and generalized account of divine discourse in Karl Barth. Barth argues that the preacher only speaks the promise that God is with us, what God has summed up in the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. But Wolterstorff helpfully argues that the preacher does not simply enact the general truth that God is with us in his or her address, but that the preacher applies "that general truth to the specific situations of the particular people before him or her" (144). The specificity and particularity of divine discourse, that it is truth translated and adapted to the conditions of different times, locations, and peoples, is a claim that depends upon the truth of the incarnation.

Lastly, his discussion of the Eucharist in Calvinian terms also depends upon the assumption of the doctrine of the incarnation: "The Eucharist is not completed by Christ offering himself to us for our partaking; it is completed only when we actually partake of Christ, when we receive Christ into ourselves, by eating the bread and drinking the wine, whereupon, by the power of the Spirit, Christ then dwells and works within us for our justification, sanctification, and glorification" (159). So undergirding much of Wolterstorff's analysis in this book is an assumption of the centrality of the incarnation. But nowhere does he make this assumption explicit, nor does he consider the difference that the incarnation makes in the worship of the Christian church, or the difference that the doctrine might make in shoring up the doctrines of impassability and simplicity.

It may be justly asked why I have spent so much time in this review grouching about Wolterstorff's rejection of divine impassability and quibbling about his choice of the word "vulnerable" to describe the divine nature. One might wonder whether this is finally a superficial critique of an otherwise sound book. I would answer that I have spent so much time criticizing Wolterstorff on these points because I believe it is characteristic of his treatment of Christian doctrine throughout.

There are moments where it seems that Wolterstorff has no genuine understanding of what he is criticizing at all, and the reader can leave profoundly

frustrated at his casual dismissal of critical predications made of God in the tradition, for instance, that he is *actus purus*. He ends the book with the cavalier dismissal of that term: "Could it be that part of the reason liturgical theologians have not discussed God as listener and God as vulnerable is that they too have been influenced by the long tradition of thinking of God as pure act, *actus purus*? Listening is an act, of course. But it is not "pure" act. It is response" (171). In all likelihood, Wolterstorff understands better than he indicates here the meaning of this term, but one could be forgiven for thinking that he lacks a sense of the doctrinal development of this term.

More pervasively, however, at crucial junctures Wolterstorff superficially links the rejection of key Christian doctrines, such as simplicity, to the kinds of statements made in Christian worship. But he does not ask the anterior question of why these concepts emerged within the tradition, of what aspects of redemptive history or God's action in the world they are meant to preserve. The elegance of the doctrines as they have emerged historically critically depends upon understanding the commitments that they were designed to protect. As a result of these flaws, this book, the premise of which is extraordinarily compelling, in the end turns out to be quite disappointing in the execution.