

Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint according to Open Theism

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Let me begin with a definition, since I was asked to write from the standpoint of open theism. A fresh branch on the stem of free will theism, open theism (or the open view of God) is a theological construct which (1) takes a libertarian stance on freedom, (2) denies middle knowledge, and therefore (3) believes that God manages the world without enjoying the degree of control over and the foreknowledge of contingent events that have traditionally been ascribed to him. In it, the idea of divine self-restraint is central. I think that God, although he could control everything, chooses not to do so but restrains himself for the sake of the freedom that love requires. It is essentially a theology of divine self-restraint and kenosis. God withholds his power out of respect for the integrity of his creatures. Open theism adds one important feature to free will theism, namely, the inference that, if certain aspects of the future are unsettled owing to human freedom, it will not be possible for God (or anyone) to know the future definitely and exhaustively. Some say that this limits God but they are mistaken. It is not limiting to say that God does not know future contingents, if they are not such as can be known. Would I be censured for not seeing the pink elephants in the room if there were not any?¹

One could also say that open theism is a form of relational theism, the approach to Scripture which views God as entering into reciprocal relations with creatures and experiencing genuine give-and-take. The idea is that God has made significantly free creatures upon whose actions he conditions some of his own actions. Deeply involved in human history, God acts, reacts, and interacts with us in personal relationships of love. Because not everything in the universe is already decided, some things about the future can be changed and/or turn out differently than they could have had we not acted. God does not force his love upon us but accepts a degree of vulnerability, especially the risk of being rejected. Open theism is a theology in which God enters into mutual and reciprocal relations of love and in which God makes a difference to creatures and they to him.²

¹For more lengthy depictions of the open model: see William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 97-108 and Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 71-118.

²For those who worry whether open theism is sound doctrine, I would simply note that its ideas can be found in such mainstream scholars as the following: Moltmann, Polkinghorne, Swinburne, Hasker, Fiddes, Torrance, Brummer, Ward, Jungel, Wolterstorff, Finger, Gunton, and Konig. Open theism might be “cutting edge,” but it is not “over the edge.”

The Divine Restraint

Divine restraint is a category which arises out of the nature of the divine project. In a world in which loving relations are central, God is “required” (in a certain sense) to exercise it. It will be necessary for God to self-restrain if this kind of world is to exist. This move on God’s part has been neglected by classical theology in which God’s transcendence (his being very far from us) tends to eclipse God’s condescendence (his being very close to us). In a one-sided emphasis, the attributes of transcendence have been over-noticed while the attributes of condescendence have been under-studied.³ This has resulted in the image of an omnipotent God and an impotent man and not the “strength in weakness” dimension which culminates in the cross of Jesus Christ. Unlimited power fosters subservience, not fellowship, and is not what God wants. God is unwilling (as it were) to be almighty without us. He is a God who wants covenant partners, not slaves. He has decided to be with us in faithful ways and to become involved in historical passage even at cost to himself.⁴

This “kenotic” act of self-restraint, which is voluntary on God’s part, does not reflect any limitation in God or any ontological diminishment. God surrenders power because he does not want to squelch the creature; God is moved by love to restrain the divine power, temporarily and voluntarily, out of respect for the integrity of creatures, even creatures whose activities fall short of God’s purposes. Because God wants to be involved in creation and to give the creature some “say so” in the flow of history, he restricts (to take the most familiar example) the full exercise of his power. This is not a renunciation of ontological powers but a way of exercising those very powers in love. Not wanting to compel love, which would hardly be worth having, God seeks mostly by persuasion to draw us to himself. God thus restrains himself in accordance with the way he has chosen to relate to the world. In light of the divine project, we must speak of certain restraints which God accepts for the sake of relationships with humans. Personal relationships require, if love is to be mutual, that God not force himself upon us, thereby subverting the precarious and vulnerable nature of love. E. Frank Tupper writes: “The (continuing) self-limitation of God coincides with the act of creation and the movement of history, a self-limitation that God the Creator has established for the sake of some measure of independence of the world as well as the possibility of genuine human freedom in the world.”⁵

³Wolfhart Pannenberg reviews the problem of Hellenistic influences in the early traditions: “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology* (trans. George H.; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 2:119-83. To avoid misunderstanding, open theologians must take care not to exaggerate the negative and minimise the positive side of these influences.

⁴Very informative is *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (ed. John Polkinghorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001). His own chapter in the book touches on four areas of divine self-restraint, the metaphor of self emptying (kenosis): a kenosis of omnipotence, a kenosis of simple eternity, a kenosis of omniscience, and a kenosis of causal status.

⁵E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of*

God undergoes changes in his modes of existence. He can restrain the exercise of certain of his properties, deciding in his wisdom when and how to act and not to act. God is sovereign even over his sovereignty and can restrict his unrestrictive, all-determining power, such that, while remaining blissful, he risks the pain of rejection and loss. God shares the human condition and feels the suffering of every creature as well as (one should add) the joys of creaturely happiness. I believe that there are gains and losses for God in this. It is not just a matter of God's giving up assets for others but also a matter of adding valuable experiences to God's life not gained in any other way. What God gives up in pure happiness, he regains in having unique experiences that can only be had in this way. What God loses in giving up complete control (for example), he gets back in gaining community. God restrains his divine properties in order that a universe of finite free agents might exist and, in so doing, realizes new aspects of his own divine nature as he enters into relationships of love with creatures. However, there is a balance; Keith Ward writes: "If we can speak of a kenosis in God, a renunciation of his absolute and unmixed perfection, we must also speak of a pleroma or fulfilment in God by which new forms of perfection are added by creatures to the divine life."⁶

Not a new idea exactly

One should not suppose that the idea of God experiencing certain restraints on his freedom is a new idea. We are used to thinking, in terms of his nature, that God can be restrained. For example, God cannot cease to exist or change his nature and God cannot commit a moral evil or break a promise. There are things God cannot do. We are also used to thinking, in relation to creation, that any world that God created would become a new factor in God's experience—as something that was not there before. Just choosing to have a creation at all would constitute a self-limitation of God because he would have to deal with it. God cannot both create and not create at the same time and the selection of any action limits him to that action and not to another. Free will theists would say that God cannot both give libertarian freedom and practice meticulous sovereignty at the same time. And, God's power is limited by the existence of finite beings, however weak, because they enjoy some level of capacity to oppose him. Also, God's knowledge is limited by the freedom of creatures to actualise new states of affairs and his happiness is affected by the suffering which is involved in creaturely existence.

It seems proper to say then that God experiences certain restraints which are appropriate in different circumstances. Aquinas was right to insist that God cannot do the logically impossible and that God cannot do and not do some particular action at the same time. This does not make God finite because the latter (finiteness) would require there to be a rival deity or an irrational given which God could not control, even if he wanted to. What I am talking about are voluntary

God (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1995), 327.

⁶Keith Ward, "Cosmos and Kenosis," in *The Work of Love* (ed. John Polkinghorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 152-66; here, 160. Cf. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 224-28.

self-restraints, taken on for the sake of whatever project God has set in place.

Areas of self-restraint

Self-restraint in the Area of Creation

One could posit that creation itself came about as a free act of self-restraint on God's part. Evidently God decided not to be alone and determined to be the creator of a non-divine world which would require restraints on his part. Out of many possibilities, God chose this world and not another one, a world which would not be crushed by divine reality or be absorbed into it, a realm which is not divine but not just nothing either. Thus God made a created reality outside of himself and other than himself to stand before him and relate to him. Only God could decide to do such a thing and, having decided it, could "withdraw" in order to make space. The world can be thought of as existing, thanks to a kind of contraction in God, and thanks to an act of self-emptying on God's part, which would lead ultimately to a divine descent into history and a divine self-surrender on the cross. The story of our world is really the story of the self-emptying of God. It proceeds from the love of God, a love which respects the integrity and freedom of human beings. This love gives the beloved "space" in which to grow as lover. God self-renounces his own unlimited power for our sake. Who other than the almighty could do such a thing? Who could pull back and create space for the creature, in order to make it relativity independent and capable of love? In the divine act of self-restraint, we recognise an act of true omnipotence. God, in his freedom, creates non-divine beings co-existing with his own being and capable of affecting him.⁷

In traditional theology we hear much more about the self-emptying of Christ than we do about the self-emptying of God. We are familiar with the idea that, in order to be incarnate, the Son had to curtail the independent exercise of certain properties, properties which were retained by the Father and the Spirit. This act of self-restraint made it possible for him to become fully human without contradiction. We have learned to think of the Word giving up the use of those attributes which would have conflicted with his human nature.⁸ But there is more to it than that. When the Lord immersed himself in history, there were also changes in God the Father. The incarnation (for example) made it possible for God to experience suffering contrary to the Platonic concept. It challenged the idea that the timeless is superior to the temporal and the changeless to the changing. It requires us to re-think the doctrine of God in some important respects. Rather than God being timeless and changeless, we should think of him as free, creative, and relational. In classical thinking, God is completely self-contained perfection which, if it were to change in any way, would suffer diminution. Therefore, nothing outside God can affect him in any way. But now we are able to think that God's

⁷Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 108-11 and "Is the Creation of the World Linked with an Act of Kenosis on God's Part?" in *The Work of Love* (ed. John Polkinghorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 137-51; here, 144-48.

⁸Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 551-76.

perfection includes real relationships with created realities which affect him. To speak boldly, God is a little different than he would have been had there been no such creatures and no such relationships. In a relational view, it would be less than perfect if God did not know what creatures experience affectively than if he did know them. This is a self-emptying which (paradoxically) spells gain as well as loss, enrichment as well as diminution for God.

God did not create the universe and humanity on the basis of some insufficiency in himself but out of the overflowing joy of life that burns within him. God did not have to create because, in the pre-creation situation, God lacked something. In the trinity, there exists from all eternity a relationship of love and communion between the persons of the godhead which is wholly satisfactory. No world need therefore exist for God to be love. A richness of divine life existed apart from creation and has always been there. Nevertheless, by restraining himself, God enriched himself in new ways and, by creating the world, realised possibilities that are eternally present in the divine being, and experienced new forms of value that otherwise would not have been actualised. This capacity for self-enrichment in God is (I think) limitless.⁹

Restraint in the Use of Power

God is omnipotent and has more power than any other being could possibly have. But God is free in the exercise of this unlimited power. He enables creatures to have their own proper autonomy and integrity. For example, if he creates free agents, he reins in his power. If he chooses not to force us to do things against our will, he takes risks. What gets “limited” here is not the fact but the use of his power which is restrained by his own choice. God made a significant world and leaves the development of it mostly in our hands. God is self-limiting in his love which makes room for the others. In Jesus, God is revealed, not as dominating power but as vulnerable love. The qualification of power is the most widely recognised and accepted aspect of the divine restraint.

Think of it this way. Self-restraint is implicit in the promises which God makes. A promise limits one’s options. In Noah’s time, for example, God said that such a flood will not recur. In saying so, God limited his options, He would be unfaithful if he did not honour the promise. God has set a limit on the exercise of his power. When his people sin, God is limited and cannot be present with them as he might wish. A personal relationship too involves a sharing of power and even conflict. The creature may be weak but it is not impotent. As so often in Israel’s history, God was not able to accomplish all that he wanted because of the failure of creatures who did not properly use the power which they had been given. Or, what is possible for God may be conditioned upon the nature of the situation. God has chosen to be dependent on human beings in carrying out his work in the world, but what he has to work with in terms of the human resources is often not the best. God has to accept what people do with the power they have. The results are very mixed. Creatures have power to reject God and can even make God appear helpless, although he is never ultimately so. The point is clear—God restrains his power in

⁹Dennis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 107-10.

accordance with the way he chooses to be related to the world and his people.¹⁰

God reveals himself as one who gives us room to move, even when we are rebellious. God wants to be humanity's partner even when humans choose to be his competitor. God withdraws and gives us room and, like the father in the parable, gives the inheritance even to the rebellious son, so respectful was he of the boy's freedom. Paradoxically, weakness can be an expression of God's greatness because there is always the hope that love will melt the resistance away. God is prepared to risk to obtain it and accepts the possibility that he may not get all that he wants. This is not taking risks for risk's sake; it has to do with the nature of the creation project.

Self-restraint in Relating to the World

Traditionalists are anxious about any idea that the world could impact God and affect his experiences. Aquinas (for example) taught that God, being outside of the whole order of creation, could not be affected by the creature, though he could affect them. This means that God is essentially non-relational and uninvolved with the world. The picture is that of an indifferent metaphysical iceberg or a solitary deity who suffers from his own completeness. It means that God is unable to suffer—in a divine way—with a suffering creation. Against such traditions, we should take the relationship of God with creation to be real, on the side of God as well as on the side of creatures. God is intimately involved in creaturely life. The world is contained in God (where else could it be?) and God indwells the world (how could he not?). In creating, God steps back (as it were) to make room for us. The decision to be creator called for voluntary divine restraint because of the relationships of reciprocity and mutuality that are involved. In such a situation, not only is creation dependent on its creator but God too is (in a way) dependent on creation. Not only is the world affected by God—God is affected by the world. God is sovereign over the world, but not in an unqualified way, since a degree of power has been given over to creatures. God is transcendent but not in isolation from the world. God has chosen to be bound up in the history of the world and accepts the limitations which this implies. God does not change with respect to his steadfast love but does change in the light of what happens in the interactions between God and the world. God's relationship with the world has integrity.

With respect to space, we can say that God made a realm in which to be active. For example, he created space and inhabits it like a kind of body. God takes up his abode in the world. Heaven and earth are his dwelling place and creation his living space. He stretched them out like a tent in which to dwell (Ps 104:1-3). He is not absent from but very much present in the world.

He has no need to work from outside the world when he is present in it. God works within the world. Though other than the world, God immerses himself in the world. God is in residence, as it were. Paul says, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Ac 17:28).¹¹ God penetrates the whole universe, such that

¹⁰Terrance E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, Mn: Fortress Press, 1984), 71-78.

¹¹All Bible citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

every part of it exists in him, though his being is much more than and is not exhausted by the universe. From one point of view, God is in the world. From another point of view, the world is in him. "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jer 23:24)¹²

In relation to time, God created cosmic time and relates to it as a temporal divine agent. God is at home with temporality, and his life is temporally ordered. God's temporality is strongly taught in scripture. For example, God makes plans and carries them out. He speaks of past, present, and future. God anticipates and plans for the future, he remembers things that are past, he addresses his people in the present. He is not thought of as timeless. The divine life has been temporally ordered at least from the creation. God is not above the flow of time and history, looking down on the earth, but has chosen to enter the historical flow. In a way, this "limits" God but in a way it does not. If God did not have temporal experiences, reciprocal relations would be impossible. If God did not have temporal experiences, he would not have a history. The Bible would be unintelligible. He could never change his mind or experience the joy of discovering something new. History would be little more than a boring drawing out of what has already been determined. The personal dimension of the divine life would be very hard to understand. By bringing into being a temporal creation, the nature of which is realised in its unfolding history, God has greatly honoured and given significance to time. And God has also dramatically exercised self-restraint out of love for us.¹³

Self-restraint Concerning What Can be Known

With regard to the foreknowledge of God, John Polkinghorne speaks of a kenosis of omniscience in these words:

The metaphysical picture with which we are working is that of a world of true becoming, open to a future that is brought about by intertwined causal principles, such as natural law, human agency, and special providence. Such a world is radically temporal. The future does not yet exist which leads us to the belief that even God does not yet know it. In other words, creation involves a kenosis of divine omniscience. God knows all that can be known and possesses a present omniscience but the divine engagement with the reality of time implies that God does not yet know all that will eventually be knowable and so does not possess absolute omniscience.¹⁴

Creating a significant universe has an effect on God in the realm of knowledge. It confronts him with a degree of uncertainty respecting the future. In scripture we hear God saying things like: "perhaps they will listen" and "If they

¹²Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 34-44. Cf. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Pantheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹³Gregory Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Here Wolterstorff speaks out boldly on the issue that God has a history and is not timeless, a very nearly meaningless notion.

¹⁴J. Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (ed. John Polkinghorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 90-106; here, 103-104.

will amend their ways.” Or, we hear God wanting to conduct a consultation with Abraham or Moses, concerning what to do next. He seeks their advice on hard decisions. Sometimes, God will ask a question like: “What am I going to do with you?” or “How can I pardon you?” In such texts, God shares the decision making process with those whose very future is at stake. Even for God there are things about the future which are not yet settled. There is a genuine openness to the future.¹⁵

It is not as if God actually limits his knowledge; rather, it is better to say that God created a universe with real temporality and true becoming. It was a sovereign decision on God’s part to have a world of this sort, one feature of which would be that its future could not be definitely and exhaustively foreknown. This was a possible universe (Does anyone disagree? Is it beyond God’s ability at creating?) and God chose to actualise it. This is not a limitation but a restraint in that God voluntarily chose to make such a world and conduct such a project which would be dynamic such that what will unfold in it and from it would not be knowable in advance in its entirety even by God. It is not the case that “God limits his knowledge.” It is more like God having a project which has room for the unexpected and in which things are left open, making space for our contributions to the (in part) creative project.¹⁶

Self-restraint in the Context of Spiritual Warfare

As a result of the decision to create a significant universe, evil became a problem and placed restraints on God at least to the degree that he permitted. He had given humans significant freedom so that we might opt for relationships of love with our maker and with each other. This was surely a worthy goal but at the same time a risky project, given the fact that we are free to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to God. In the case of humanity, there was the fall into sin, a historical event which antedates record keeping, which established a corrupt process. (As to its credibility, we can hardly understand the historical record, filled as it is with such hatred and violence without believing in something like the fall.) Something has gone badly wrong, introducing a situation of conflict between God and creatures at cross purposes with the divine plan. History has become a cycle of cumulative degeneration with disastrous historical consequences. (This point addresses not so much God’s self-restraint as the consequences of the kenotic act of creation in the first place.)

But that is not all. Something else has gone wrong in the realm of what the apostle Paul calls the principalities and powers. Paul identifies the problem: “Our struggle [and God’s struggle] is not against enemies of blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).¹⁷

¹⁵James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Terrance E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 45-59; and *God and the World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

¹⁶In the book *Predestination and Free Will*, (ed. David and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1986), it was an editorial mistake to have entitled my chapter, “God Limits his Knowledge.”

¹⁷Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997) and *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian*

Here is another dimension of rebelliousness which characterises life in this world, only beyond the human sphere, something more mysterious even than the fall. Supra-human powers that God does not entirely control are resisting God's will.

We are alerted to this dimension of darkness in Gen 1:2, which states: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Gen 1:2 is circumstantial, describing the conditions existing at the same time as the principle action indicated in 1:1. In effect, in the creation story at the very outset of the Bible, God faces a negative state of affairs not attributable to his actions but the dark power which is strangely there. Here is something that is not good and which God did not will and does not want. Gen 1:2 indicates that there is something drastically wrong with creation at the very outset. God, in creating the world, has to deal with what is called "formlessness and emptiness." The language of the verse does not suggest just a disordered situation waiting to be organised. The words have an association with divine judgment (Jer 4:23). It is not something which God himself would have made (Is 45:18). However it came to be there, it was a desolation contrary to God's will and introduced without any explanation. It was something contrary to God's will and displays the fragility and vulnerability of the creation.

Contrary to tradition and in agreement with most modern interpreters, Genesis 1 does not present a doctrine of "creation out of nothing." Rather it presents God establishing a life-sustaining order but in the face of serious opposition. Karl Barth was right to sense something menacing here, a kind of "nothingness" hovering between being and nonbeing. The main issue is that in the creation of this world as described in Genesis 1, God had to work with something already in existence, something which he could circumscribe but not (at least for now) annihilate.

I mention it because it makes Paul's point that God's is not the only power in existence when he creates. Therefore, the effort is not uncontested. We do not know where it came from but we can see that it poses a challenge to God's shalom. God can keep it at bay but this does not mean that it cannot arise again to do the world harm, especially when humanity embraces it and so awakens its destructive power. Having delegated freedom to the creature, human and angelic, God now finds himself with a fight on his hands from foes whose power is not inconsiderable. We do not know much about these dark forces and whence they came but we know that they occupy "space" and enjoy "say so" and are disregarded at our peril. It would appear that they exist because God made them and that they opted for evil not for good. God's restraint in creating made it possible as in the case of man.¹⁸

Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001).

¹⁸I agree with Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994) and Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). I was unconvinced by Paul Copan and William L. Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

There would surely have been acts of creation before this one and some of them may have been “creation out of nothing.” But in this case, in Genesis 1, God faced opposition for whatever reason. The fact is that in creating this particular world of ours, God faced opposition and was not in total control. He had to deal with a negative reality. God brought order out of what had been a chaotic situation. Creation was a mighty act, but it was against the backdrop of rebelliousness. The world that came into being in Genesis 1 was capable of mounting an opposition. It could (and did) resist God’s plans for it, by means of a freedom inherent in it which God had given and could not take away. In this case, God moved against the chaos to subdue it and to make earth habitable. God’s power here was not an absolute and naked power (as it would be under the “*creatio ex nihilo*” rubric) but an omnipotence contested and under challenge. Evidently, God cannot just bring about whatever he wants whenever he wants it. Freedom in the creature is deeply ingrained. God may have to deal with what presents itself to him, such as formlessness and emptiness. It could be that when God created the world about fifteen billion years ago, that it was created out of “nothing” in the sense that, prior to its creation, there were no enduring individuals sustaining a character through time, which is what is usually meant by “things.” We could say that the world of Genesis 1 was created out of relatively nothing.

Self-restraint Revealed in the Incarnation

Incarnation constitutes the ultimate in divine self-restraint and self-emptying. Its roots are found in the Old Testament. It is not alien to the kind of thing the God of Israel would do. On the contrary, in the Old Testament God often appears to Israel in human form, long before the new covenant. We call these events theophanies. Remember how Hagar reported having seen God and lived? (Gen 16:13) Such experiences were not unusual. One gets the impression that God preferred approaching his people clothed in a body rather than in a bodiless and vague way. Even if veiled in fire or cloud, God likes to come to humans as a human. Evidently the human form is not foreign to God. He chooses to take on this form, to “incarnate” himself in the weak creature, and to be present among us. Why does God do this? I think that he does it because he wishes to communicate with humanity in as personal a way as possible. Revealing himself in a thunder storm is one thing but appearing as a human being is something more and different. Storms overwhelm weak humans. Therefore God wills to be embodied in frail flesh. The God of Israel wants to be known as “incarnate,” not as un-incarnate. Surely it gives us a glimpse of his heart.¹⁹

The theme becomes more pronounced when we see God opening himself to the sufferings of his people. When they are bent on turning away, God feels it but cannot give them up (Is 1:2-3). His heart is broken but he will not execute wrath on them (Hos 11:7-9). God is affected by what they do—it moves him deeply. God mourns on account of them. He cannot remain cool and collected. God is wounded by the broken relationship. Even for Moab, a non-Israelite nation, God’s heart cries out (Is 15:5). He wonders how long this rebellion will last but cannot let them go. He will remain gracious, yesterday, today, and forever. God is

¹⁹Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 79-106.

still prepared to work with his faithless people, allowing them opportunity to participate in shaping their own future. God even suffers for them—he cries out like a woman in labour. Bearing the brunt of Israel's rejection, God cries out like a woman in travail—he gasps and pants (Is 42:14). It is as if God goes through labour pains in order to birth a new creation. He makes himself vulnerable in attempting to save them. Human sin is not without cost to God. It requires assuming a burden which only God alone can bear. Sin necessitates the suffering of God, as if redemption can only come this way.

The Christian gospel agrees with all of this and reports that God has come to us embodied and incarnate. The incarnation was an act of divine self-restraint by the Word of God in assuming our nature and in participating in human life and death. God stooped to take our flesh and become an actor on the stage of history. "Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7-8). In becoming man, the Word gave up certain of the divine attributes for a season for the sake of becoming fully human. God entered fully into the human situation and understood it from the inside. Jesus did not give up the qualities of God but the privilege of exercising them. He may have even given up the consciousness that he had such capabilities and had exercised them with the Father and the Spirit prior to the incarnation.²⁰

This is not a kenosis only of the humanity of Christ but a kenosis of divinity as well. Jesus belongs to the divine identity but is also the revelation of God who suffers and is passible. We need to be willing to include suffering and death in the identity of God. For this is the heart of the good news.²¹

Moltmann writes:

What is true of the self-limitation of omnipotence in God's love for those he created can also be said about the other metaphysical attributes of his divinity: omnipresence, omniscience, inviolability, and self-sufficiency. God does not know everything in advance because he does not will to know everything in advance. He waits for the response of those he has created and lets their future come. God is not incapable of suffering; he opens himself for the suffering of his people and in the incarnation for the sufferings of the love which is to redeem the world. In a certain way God becomes dependant on the response of his beloved creatures. In Christian theology one would not go as far as to declare God as in need of redemption together with his people Israel; but nevertheless God has laid the sanctification of his name and the doing of his will in the hands of human beings and thus in a way the coming of his kingdom. It must be viewed as part of God's self-humiliation that God does not desire to be without those he has created and loved and therefore waits for them to repent and turn back, leaving them time so that he may come to his kingdom together with them.²²

The incarnation of Jesus Christ constitutes the definitive disclosure of God

²⁰Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 248-50.

²¹Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

²²Moltmann, "Is the Creation of the World Linked with an Act of Kenosis on God's Part?", 148.

and gives assurance of the goal of creation which is the coming of the kingdom of God. This understanding of God in his self-limitation distinguishes a genuinely personal model of God's relationship to the world from an unqualified monarchical model with its implicit historical determinism as well as from various existential and process models that minimise God's purposeful participation in and direction of the history of creation en route to eschatological fulfilment.²³

Conclusion

God in freedom and love, desiring communion with finite creatures, adopts the posture of kenotic grace with its attendant risks of constraint and evil without which mutual love is not or may not be possible in the world. It pictures divine self-restraint at the beginning and pleroma at the end of history. It imagines God permitting creaturely unfaithfulness in order that these same creatures should share in the bliss of the triune God. I see cosmic movement from divine self-emptying and restraint to a creaturely fulfilment in God. We are in the middle of a sacred history in which a vulnerable God redeems all that went wrong and in which the new creation is being birthed. Listen to Keith Ward: "There is a very definite cosmic vision implicit in a Christian view of creation as a kenotic and pleromal process. As the beginning of creation is kenosis, so the end of consummation of creation is theosis. God shares in the pain and permits in the wayward freedom of creatures in order that, finally, creatures should share in the bliss and become vehicles of the truly creative of the divine nature. It is that cosmic movement from divine self-emptying to creaturely fulfilment in God which is the sacred history of the cosmos, and, it seem to me, the deepest meaning of the Christian gospel for this planet in the middle of its journey through the mystery of time."²⁴

²³Cf. the footnote in E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence*, 63-64.

²⁴Ward, "Cosmos and Kenosis," 166.



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