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Against a Process View of Divine Patience

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INTRODUCTION

When one chooses to tolerate suffering, waiting calmly without reacting emotively or physically, he is demonstrating the virtue of patience. Process theology claims that the patience of God is more or less identical to the experience of human patience. That is, when we sin and rebel against God, He refrains from smiting us, that we might repent and return to Him. In other words, God demonstrates patience when he restrains Himself temporally from interfering with or punishing mankind, waiting for their repentance. Such an explanation of divine patience may seem intuitive, but the patience of God is much greater, much deeper, and much more praiseworthy. One must be careful not to impose the finite and limited aspects of human patience onto God.

IMPLICATIONS OF IMPOSING HUMAN PATIENCE ONTO GOD

Viewing divine patience as it is viewed in process theology—temporally bound and essentially equivalent to human patience—has serious and problematic implications, as outlined below.

Divine Patience as Inaction

According to process theology, God's patience is merely a temporary state of inaction. Humans are limited by their nature. We are bound by the temporal dimension of time and cannot do anything instantaneously. Everything we do requires the use of time. In contrast, time is God's creature, and God cannot be limited by his own creation. God does not need to submit to the

confines of his own creation. In fact, God’s gift of time to us is a manifestation of His patience and love.¹ Without time, we would be helpless to act on, feel, or perceive anything in any way. In a sense, the “constraint” placed on us by time is the very means that frees us to experience God’s patience!

In reality, divine patience is full, active, and unceasing. Ron Highfield defines God’s patience as, “...His loving gift of space and time for creatures to exist and develop and act alongside Him as genuine others.”² Time and space are gifts that God is continuously giving. Time and space—and therefore all finite things—are completely dependent on God’s willingness to sustain them. Because creation’s reliance on time and space is continuous and absolute, were God to cease providing space and time for even a moment, all of creation would cease to be. For this reason, among others, we have no intrinsic right to anything—not even our own lives. They are gifts from God that we are called to dedicate to loving Him and our fellow human beings (Mt 22:36—40 ESV). In this way, God’s patience is truly a gift of love.

As creations of God, we have divinely instilled potential. God’s patience allows us to realize this potential. If we suppose that God’s patience is merely inaction, by what means would we develop and fulfill our God-given purpose and vocation? In short, we are dependent on God’s *action* of sustaining time and space for our forgiveness, love, and life; His inaction would be our doom.

Divine Patience as Self-Limitation

Second, the process interpretation of patience implies that God is self-limiting. A God that limits Himself to temporal constraints cannot be omnipotent, omniscient, or transcendent. God’s

1. Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 206.

2. *Ibid.*, 207.

attributes are simple and essential.³

Divine attributes cannot be pitted against other divine attributes; God and His nature are simple. A complete discussion of divine simplicity is beyond the scope of this paper,⁴ but remember that in our discussion above, we determined that God's patience is a manifestation of His love. Remember also that if God withheld His patience—which includes the gifts of time and space—even for a moment, we would cease to be. Therefore, were God to withhold His love—meaning His patience as well—for just a moment, we would in the same manner be destroyed.

What are the implications of God exercising a temporally restricted patience? God would not be omnipotent: God would not be able to control the world fully, having given some “power” to His creatures. He would not be eternal: He would be necessarily bound by time in order to exercise his “inactive” patience. He would not be omniscient: He could not know the future unilaterally; for, being in time, He could not know the decisions humans would make temporally. To subject Himself to time would also undermine His transcendence and providence.

Complicating the matter further for process theology, all of God's attributes are *essential* and cannot be changed. What God *is*, He is *in essence*. Therefore, if patience were merely a form of self-limitation, God would not be *eternally* patient. What are the alternatives? Proposing that God is eternally self-limited is to suggest that He has potential that is never realized, which for an omnipotent God is clearly nonsense. And if God were self-limited only when He chose to be, His patience would be a non-essential attribute, contradicting divine simplicity.

Divine Patience as Trinitarian

Third, such a view would require that divine patience have an object, namely a sinful and fallen

3. *Ibid.*, 209-210.

4. For a discussion of divine simplicity, see Highfield, *Great is the Lord*, 261-274.

humanity. But God's patience is His eternal and essential attribute. Patience is exemplified in the trinitarian relationships among the three persons. Patience has always been part of God's nature and always will be.

The divine patience of process thought requires an object: something in relation to which God might restrain Himself. However, humanity is not eternal. Isaiah compares men to grass that withers at the mere breath of God: "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field./ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass" (Isa 40:6—7). If patience is God's eternal and essential attribute, then what was its object before Creation, when humanity did not exist?

As an essential attribute, the Trinity is eternally patient within itself.⁵ In this inner-trinitarian relationship, the Father and Son, through the Holy Spirit, *are* the space and time in which the other lives. Thus, the Trinity has its own divine space-time: "The Father gives himself to the Son through the Spirit; the Father is the space and time where the Son lives; the Son returns himself to the Father in the Spirit and is the space and time where the Father lives."⁶ In other words, God's patience is not simply the suffering of another's existence, but the treasuring of a genuine other. This corresponds with divine simplicity; patience is a demonstration not only of God's love for His creation, but also of the Father's love for the Son in the Spirit, and the Son's love for the Father in return.

Divine Patience as Christocentric

Fourth, the definition of divine patience according to process theology leaves no room for the central role of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without a Christocentric view of

5. Ibid., 211.

6. Ibid., 211.

divine patience, God's patience with mankind would be in vain. Jesus Christ is the very basis for God's patience with mankind.

In an important sense, the saving work of Jesus Christ is necessary for the success of God's patience in turning the hearts of human beings. Humans are selfish. We strive to become like God. We show contempt for God's love and His patience. In fact, Paul writes that before we were reconciled to God through Christ, we were literally enemies of God (Rom 5:10). Left to our own devices, would we ever turn to our Creator in repentance and love, ready to eternally lay aside our sin and our pride? Even if we would, we cannot—foiled by our very nature; all have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Rom 3:23). David Lauber writes that only through Christ does God's patience demonstrate His providence: "Without God's saving presence in Jesus Christ, his waiting on the world would be in vain. In the light of his saving presence in Jesus Christ, God's waiting on the world remains determined by his own action and will."⁷

Suppose hypothetically that God was patient with us in a human sense, knowing we would never turn of our own accord, with no plans of redeeming us. Such a state of affairs would imply that God is betting on the fact that someday we will all of a sudden realize our true brokenness and "take up a life of obedience."⁸ Rather, God waits for us *because* of Christ. Because of Christ's obedience and penitence on our behalf, there is real hope for humanity. In this way, Jesus is the ultimate ground of God's patience. Paul writes that God tolerated our "former sins" so that everyone who has faith in Christ might be justified, and God's righteousness would be revealed in time (Rom 3:25—26).

Further, the Incarnation of Christ definitively counters process theology's self-limiting

7. David Lauber, " 'For the Sake of this One, God has Patience with the Many': Czeslaw Milosz and Karl Barth on God's Patience, the Incarnation, and the Possibility of Belief." *Christian Scholar's Review* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 167.

8. *Ibid.*, 168.

theory of patience.⁹ The reasoning for the process theory of self-limitation is that God's divinity is so holy, overwhelming, and consuming, that if He did not somehow limit Himself, there would not be room, space, or time for unholy and sinful human beings. In the Incarnation, Jesus was *fully* God and *fully* human. He united the divine and human natures and lived a perfect, obedient life. Through him, all of humanity is freed. In the union of our nature with the divine nature of Christ, God's space, time, and freedom become our space, time, and freedom.¹⁰ God can give Himself completely to us without consuming us; and if we return ourselves to Him completely, we become "genuine others" for the first time.

Divine Patience as Eschatological

Fifth, this explanation ignores the eschatological aspect of patience. Patience intends an end and is directed towards that end. However, the process view implies that God's patience is entirely directed away from our past errors; none of His patience can be directed towards the future, with the promise of complete reconciliation and the end of suffering.

In Scripture, the patience of God is equated with His salvation: "...count the patience of our Lord as salvation" (2 Pet 3:15). A few verses later, Peter instructs us to continue to grow in grace and knowledge (2 Pet 3:18). To grow in grace, knowledge, or anything else requires that we change from a previous state to a new and better state, and the ability to change requires the utility of space and time. To expend time and occupy space, we require God's patience as manifested by his continuous gifts of the former. Furthermore, when Peter exhorts us to grow in the above virtues, he implies that we have the ability to choose to do so or to choose not to do so.

9. Highfield, *Great is the Lord*, 212.

10. *Ibid.*, 212.

That is, God's gift of time and space out of His patience is closely related to the gift of God's freedom out of His love.¹¹ In light of this observation, we should view God's patience as forward- as well as backward-looking. Adopting the process view that God's patience is merely His withholding punishment for our past errors does not allow for such a belief.

Above, we noted that patience requires an object, but patience also intends some end. Its time is "time towards" that end.¹² Process theology's patience makes the fallenness and sinfulness of humankind the sole object, and implies that the directedness of God's patience is *away from* the past. God is simply waiting until we repent for our past wrongs. While there is truth to this, it is incomplete and even incoherent without an aspect of directedness toward the future.

To claim that patience is salvation implies that patience points toward a promised future. The author of Hebrews writes of Christ, "And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:9). To call Christ the source of eternal salvation necessitates the promise of a future. Of course, we are to repent for our wrongs and rejoice in God's mercy, grace, and patience—but there is no real sense in repenting for our past sins if there is no assurance of the future. Our existence and potential for growth in grace and knowledge are likewise dependent on the promise of a future. Therefore, the two senses of divine patience are mutually implied. How encouraging it is to know that God is patient with us despite our past wrongs and has promised us eternal salvation!

Repentance is directed towards the past and salvation is forward-looking, but God's patience also affects the way he relates to us every moment. The process view's insistence on equating divine and human patience means there would be no place for God's help, support, and

11. Rachel Muers, "Silence and the Patience of God," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 1 (January 2001): 86.

12. *Ibid.*, 87.

guidance as we develop and grow into the potential God intends for us. Such a God would be aloof, detached, and unloving. But God does not sit back and leave us alone, sustaining time and space and doing nothing more. Neither does He act coercively: His gift of patience entails His gift of freedom. Lauber writes that God accompanies His creatures on their way to the *telos* He has intended for them.¹³ He writes, “And he does so, not by compromising creaturely freedom, but by, in his own freedom, accompanying and sustaining his creatures so that they can reach his intention for them in their own genuine, creaturely freedom.”¹⁴ In every moment and with every decision, we are experiencing the patience of God drawing us toward the end that He has prepared for us: free relation with Him.

DIVINE PATIENCE AND DIVINE PERSUASION

Perhaps the most serious objection that can be raised against the process view of divine patience is that God would have no way to bring about what He intends for us—He could only sit back and hope that we might come around to loving Him. Process theology’s reliance on a human explanation of divine patience implies a human and thus fallible divine persuasive power: God can never be sure that His ends will be accomplished.

Process Theology’s Defense

Lewis Ford argues for the viability of the process view that God’s power is “persuasive” but not “coercive.”¹⁵ Ford defines power as the “capacity to influence the outcome of any process of

13. Lauber, “For the Sake of this One,” 165.

14. *Ibid.*, 165.

15. Lewis S. Ford, “Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good,” *The Christian Scholar* 50, no. 3 (Fall 1967): 236.

actualization.”¹⁶ According to Ford, this allows for both persuasive and coercive power. But God has no “coercive power,” by which Ford means that God cannot control the outcome of any event decisively. Ford writes that the possession of such power would contradict God’s perfection.

Ford first considers the implications of attributing to God “coercive power.”¹⁷ He argues that if the world is molded by God’s coercive power, then the world has no real independent existence of its own; the independence of the world would be illusory. That is, creation would have no independent actuality outside the divine mind. He writes that if coercive power is in God, “creaturely freedom is restricted, the reality of the world is diminished, [and] the divine experience is impoverished.”¹⁸

Creaturely freedom is necessary for the divine existence, says Ford, because it provides God with the only thing that He cannot provide for Himself: “a genuine social existence.”¹⁹ A creature whose actions are coerced or determined would not be a genuine other because it would have no ontological existence of its own. Self-activity is completely denied to the world if God is its primary, coercive cause.

In response to the claim that the eschatological triumph of good is meaningless unless God possesses the ability to ensure it comes about, Ford points out that such a promise would make our existence meaningless. He argues that if the ultimate triumph of good can be guaranteed, there is no need to strive for it.²⁰ It would make no logical sense and would be utterly

16. *Ibid.*, 236.

17. *Ibid.*, 237.

18. *Ibid.*, 237.

19. *Ibid.*, 237.

ineffectual to strive for the good if it will triumph over evil necessarily. Only in a world in which good may or may not win out is faith truly possible. He argues further that faith is reciprocal: We trust God to provide the world with the aim for its efforts, and He must trust us for the achievement of that aim. That is, God cannot control what happens; He can only provide us with a roadmap to the end He happens to want. In the meantime, God will do the best He can to move things along, employing His limited persuasive power and hoping for the best. Ford writes, “The world is a risky affair for God as well as for us.”²¹

Because God is temporally bound and cannot know what the future holds, He is also vulnerable and “open to all evil and tragedy.”²² God is fated to leave the running of His affairs mostly up to us, so He will inevitably face disappointment. He is saddened by the disparity between His initially proposed ideas and their faulty actualization. However, Ford writes that we need not fear, because God is tenacious and faithful: “God is a most sensitive individual, with the highest ideals, constantly thwarted at every turn, yet who resolutely refuses to give up his grip on either ideality or actuality.”²³

Ford also confirms that without knowledge of the future, God’s patience is firmly directed solely towards the past. Ford quotes foundational process thinker Alfred North Whitehead: “The ultimate evil in the temporal world lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a ‘perpetual perishing.’”²⁴ Ford responds that humanity’s hope for the triumph over this perishing is God’s experience of the past: “This perishing can only be overcome within a divine

20. Ibid., 244.

21. Ibid., 245.

22. Ibid., 245.

23. Ibid., 246.

24. Ibid., 249.

experience which savors every occasion, no matter how distantly past.”²⁵

A Response: Infallible Persuasion

I will begin by posing a question: Must God’s power be coercive to ensure His ends will be accomplished? Process theologians put forward a false dilemma in which both horns are disconcerting: Either God cannot be sure that He will accomplish His ends and thus sometimes will fail, or else He *can* be sure His ends will be fulfilled but must realize them through force or coercion. The former cannot be so because God proclaims that nothing is too hard for Him: “Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jer 32:27). The latter cannot be so, because we are free beings, evidenced by our capability to do both righteousness and wickedness. We are called to use our freedom for love and not sin: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13). How can God grant us freedom and still bring about His purposes?

As humans, we have a natural affinity for some things and a natural repulsion to their opposites. Highfield lists four forms of natural affinity: the desire for good, the attractiveness of beauty, the just demand of the right, and the power of truth.²⁶ We are also naturally repelled by their opposites: evil, ugliness, injustice, and falsehood. The fact that we are naturally attracted to and repelled by such things has been recognized for millennia, at least as far back as Aristotle, who wrote that we have an affinity for truth, justice, and goodness; and that any persuasion must

25. *Ibid.*, 249.

26. Ron Highfield, *God, Freedom & Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2013), 134.

take into account this natural tendency toward truth, justice, and goodness.²⁷ As humans, we want to be happy, and desire whatever we think will facilitate happiness.

However, we are finite creatures, and therefore our attempts to achieve happiness are bound to fail. We cannot see perfectly the good for which we are intended, so we are deceived by evil and sin. Since the time of the church fathers, Christian theologians have held that evil is not a substance, but rather a disorder or privation in a good thing.²⁸ We are drawn to sin because we think it will make us happy; we have a false belief that there is some apparent good in the sin, of which we are being deprived. When we allow ourselves to be fooled by the deception of sin, we are guilty of either laziness or thoughtlessness.²⁹

Process theologians claim that God's persuasive power is never fail-proof. John Cobb and David Griffin write that God's persuasion will always be deferential to human freedom: "God seeks to persuade each occasion toward that possibility for its own existence which would be best for it; but God cannot control the finite occasion's self-actualization."³⁰ But we noted above that human freedom is a gift of God and an aspect of His patience; it is not something that is inherent in our existence. But even if this were so, humans could continue to find reason after reason to reject God's limited persuasive powers and there would never be true reconciliation. But perhaps there is a middle ground between coercion and fallible persuasion: the infallible persuasive power of God. God moves without fail those he chooses to will His good will.³¹

27. Ibid., 132-3.

28. Ron Highfield, *The Faithful Creator: Recovering Creation and Providence for an Age of Anxiety* (2014), 351.

29. Ibid., 329-30.

30. Quoted in Highfield, *God, Freedom & Human Dignity*, 134.

31. Highfield, *God, Freedom & Human Dignity*, 137.

God alone possesses the necessary knowledge and abilities to be the ideal persuader.³²

The ideal persuader must have both the knowledge of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the thing to be communicated; and he must have the ability to place this thing so clearly before the minds and hearts of the listeners that their illusions and habits lose their power over the subject. No human persuader has these powers. We are finite and necessarily limited. We may not know the truth of the thing to be communicated, or else we may not be able to overcome the other's habits, illusions, insecurities, or opinions. But according to the above criteria, God is the perfect persuader: He knows the truth and goodness we need perfectly because He *is* the truth and goodness we need! He knows everything about us—all our thoughts, fears, habits, wishes, and hidden desires. He knows more about us than we do about ourselves. All God must do to persuade His subject is place Himself before the subject's spirit to move it where He pleases.

If this power sounds dubiously like coercion, consider the following. Under the influence of God's persuasion, we are by no means deprived of our free will. Freedom is a gift from God and He will not take it away from us. Notice that God never makes the decision *for us*. We remain free to make the final decision. One might object that in such a case, we would not realistically have been able to choose otherwise, and therefore infallible persuasion is thinly veiled coercion or determinism. Remember that we have a natural affinity for the good, beautiful, just, and true. God *is* the beautiful, good, just, and true and the ultimate source of each. When He places Himself before our spirits, we are simply choosing what we would have chosen had our knowledge of these things been clearer. If we always will what we believe will make us happy, consider what we would choose if we had perfect knowledge, with no delusions or deceptions to distract us. Through faith, we know that God is the ultimate good and the source of

32. The following line of reasoning is inspired by *Ibid.*, 136.

all things good. With perfect knowledge, therefore, we would always choose God; yet, hardly anyone would object in this case that they had been stripped of their freedom! This is an even higher freedom—the freedom from being deceived or deluded! If one insists on a definition of freedom that strictly allows for multiple alternatives, none of which is necessary, then he is really insisting on clutching to the freedom to choose to be deceived. What a pitiful desire! God is goodness and will always will good—He will not lead us to do anything that is not for His ultimate good, which also happens to be our ultimate good: attaining eternal life.³³

CONCLUSION

We have seen that God’s patience is much greater than human patience, and in many ways, dissimilar. None of the limitations that process theologians attempt to place on God hold up. And if one still insists that such limits are necessary, he must come to terms with a very different god than the one we find in Scripture. His god’s patience would demand inactivity. That is, such a god would have the capability to subject himself to his own creation! This god would limit himself, undermining the possibility of his being omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, or possessing almost every other perfection. His god would not be essentially or eternally patient, having no object on which to exercise patience before the existence of man. This god’s patience would be in vain because it would not be founded on the saving power of Christ. Mankind would have no assurance of a future, rendering this god’s patience meaningless. Most bitterly of all, his god would not be capable of ensuring that good will prevail over evil. His world would be a “risky affair” for his god and himself.

Having a better grasp on the patience of God, our call now is to imitate His patience. Our

33. Highfield, *The Faithful Creator*, 245.

practice of patience will naturally be limited by our finite nature. Nevertheless, we must be patient in suffering as Christ was (1 Pet 2:20), and we are to lead a life “with patience” (Eph 4:2). Such a life will require us to realize that we are dependent on God in every way, and it necessitates a faith that God is provident and will work all things together for our good (Rom 8:28). Moreover, we should rejoice in our patience, since Christ is returning to “save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:27)!

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