Abstract: Some classical theists contend that the Christian tradition demands affirmation of the following four tenets—divine simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility—in their absolute or strict senses, a position I refer to as strict classical theism. These four tenets, however, are the subject of considerable debate in recent scholarship. This article engages the ongoing debate by focusing on some significant difficulties strict classical theism faces relative to meeting two widely held standards of Christian theological method: the standard of biblical warrant and the standard of systematic coherence. First, highlighting classical Christology as a test case, this article suggests that strict classical theism faces pressure to either revise or abandon some contested tenets or confront the prospect of abandoning the standard of systematic coherence. Second, the article turns to highlighting some ways that strict classical theism struggles to meet the standard of biblical warrant, which might necessitate a reevaluation of some of its core claims and the viability of common appeals made to the Christian tradition in support of such claims. This article is not intended as a conclusive argument against strict classical theism but aims at the more modest goal of pressing these points regarding theological method, calling for serious consideration, and inviting further discussion.

Keywords: classical theism; theological method; doctrine of God; attributes of God; theology proper
If God cannot change in any way whatsoever, as timelessness and strict immutability require, then God cannot undergo any emotional changes. Instead, God is strictly impassible such that as James Dolezal defines what he considers the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, God “exists independently of all causal influence from his creatures.”

In other words, God cannot be affected by creatures and thus cannot become pleased or displeased by anything creatures do.

These four tenets face significant critiques, especially with respect to two primary lines of critique, namely, whether they are internally consistent and align with biblical teachings. These two lines of critique parallel two widely-held desiderata of Christian theological method on which I will focus in this article: (1) the standard of systematic coherence and (2) the standard of biblical warrant. The standard of systematic coherence requires that theological claims be consistent with one another and the standard of biblical warrant maintains that theological claims must be adequately grounded in what Scripture affirms on its own terms such that (in Gregory of Nyssa’s words) Scripture stands as “the rule and measure of every tenet.” Both of these standards enjoy widespread support in the history of Christian theology and a great many contemporary classical theists themselves affirm both of these standards.

Against this background, this article focuses on how (strict) classical theism faces significant difficulties meeting both of these standards, with the modest aim of pressing the point on both fronts in an effort to advance the conversation on whether strict classical theism can meet these standards or might be pressed by its core claims to abandon one or both of these methodological tenets. First, since most treatments of classical theism focus on internal consistency (i.e., the standard of systematic coherence), I will begin by briefly outlining some ways strict classical theism faces serious problems on this front (highlighting classical Christology as one crucial test case) such that adherents are seemingly faced with the decision of either abandoning one or more of the four contested tenets of strict classical theism (simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility—in their strict or absolute senses) or abandoning the standard of systematic coherence. Second, this article will turn to the standard of biblical warrant, which though it tends to receive less discussion in these conversations is no less problematic for (strict) classical theism. Here, again, it seems classical theism is faced with a choice of abandoning some core tenet(s) of strict classical theism or rejecting or modifying the standard of biblical warrant—with many appealing at this juncture to tradition as the normative interpretive arbiter of the theological interpretation of Scripture.

1. Classical Theism and the Problem of Systematic Coherence

Strict classical theism faces numerous challenges relative to the standard of systematic coherence. Rather than attempting anything like a comprehensive list of such challenges here, I will simply highlight some crucial Christological issues that are central to Christian theism.

1.1. Some Christological Problems

Strict classical theism raises a myriad of difficult issues for Christology, including relative to the very possibility of the incarnation. For instance, it is difficult to see how the Son could truly become human if the Son is truly divine in the way strict classical theism understands divinity such that the Son must be absolutely simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible. This difficulty is widely recognized among critics and advocates of strict classical theism alike. Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth suffered and, in this way and others, underwent changes and experienced succession in his life, involving genuine distinctions (including temporal moments, which strict classical theists would define as “parts” in his life, contra strict simplicity). How could Jesus of Nazareth, then, be strictly simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible? Put simply, “An impassible God cannot suffer, but the Son of God became incarnate and suffered on the cross.”
Centuries of Christological debates revolved around these issues and related problems regarding how to consistently affirm the incarnation, seeking to reconcile the nature and life of Jesus of Nazareth with claims like divine timelessness, immutability, and impassibility (apatheia). As R.T. Mullins puts it, “many of the early Christological heresies were motivated by the prima facie incompatibility of divine timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and the incarnation”.8 Paul Gavrilyuk likewise highlights the problems faced by those in the early ages of Christianity who “deployed divine impassibility in an unqualified sense, as a property that categorically excluded God’s participation in any form of suffering”.9

How, then, do strict classical theists deal with such glaring tensions? They employ various strategies, but the most prominent approach is that of reduplicative predication (often also spoken of in terms of “the qua move” or so-called partitive exegesis).10 This approach takes those characteristics and actions of Jesus thought to conflict with classical theism and attributes them to the human nature of Christ alone. Given this avenue, one can say “yes”, Jesus suffered, but he suffered only qua human (that is, only with respect to his humanity). One can then make a similar move with respect to any other characteristic or action of Christ that conflicts with strict simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility.

In my view, this kind of move is methodologically problematic in that it imposes an external standard that might distort one’s reading of Scripture (more on that later) and comes at the very high cost of effectively making Christ’s life, suffering, and giving of himself on the cross all amount to merely human sacrifices. If divinity is entirely timeless, immutable, impassible, and simple, then the Son cannot become human or be acted upon in any way that affects the Son’s divinity—the incarnation cannot affect divinity in any way whatsoever. But, then, if Christ suffered only qua humanity while his divinity was untouched by any change or suffering, how can we avoid concluding that Christ’s sacrifice was merely a human sacrifice?11 And, if the Son becoming human, suffering, and giving himself for us cost divinity nothing—indeed, did not affect divinity at all, in what sense does Christ’s divinity contribute to the atonement?

If Jesus’s temporal experiences relative to becoming human, living as a human, suffering, et al. can only be attributed to his humanity, then divinity is left entirely untouched by the incarnation and the cross. Hence, the sacrifice of Jesus seems to amount to a merely human sacrifice in which divinity makes no sacrifice whatsoever. Indeed, if the strict classical theist conception of God is held consistently, it would be impossible for God to sacrifice anything in any way that would affect himself, for he cannot be affected and cannot undergo change of any kind. How, then, could it be that Jesus’s life and willing suffering for us reveals or demonstrates the righteousness (Rom 3:25-26) and love of God (Rom 5:8) or how could it be true that one who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9)?

Even if the strategy of reduplicative predication works at the level of systematic coherence (which is a matter of ongoing dispute), then, it seems to me that the cost is far too high relative to the meaning and significance of the incarnation in which the divine Son of God becomes Immanuel—God with us. Even apart from the other problems mentioned above, strict classical theism faces serious difficulties in simply affirming that the divine Son became human in the first place. Accordingly, the classical theist Paul Helm frames the incarnation as “a unique case of God’s acting in time” with respect to which “God did not exist and then at some later point decide to become incarnate, for there is no change or succession possible in the timeless eternity of God’s life”.12 As such, Helm maintains that the “incarnation is the ‘projection’ of the eternal God”.13 It seems to me, however, that such a view of the incarnation as a “projection” is severely impoverished, amounting to effectively emptying the incarnation of much of its significance.

If divinity cannot change in any way whatsoever and cannot experience any passing of time (succession), the divine Son qua divine could not actually become human at all. At best, then, humanity is merely added alongside divinity in some mysterious fashion such that the divine Son is timelessly united to a human nature while leaving divinity utterly untouched. But, then, is there a real incarnation at all? That is, does the divine Son truly become incarnate. Put differently, can there be any genuine and non-obfuscutory sense in
which an absolutely simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible divine person actually becomes embodied in space and time? It does not seem so.\(^\text{14}\)

Beyond these issues, the Trinity doctrine presents other serious problems relative to affirming strict simplicity. For example, if one affirms that there are no genuine distinctions in God as divine simplicity is often defined (in strict forms), then one could not genuinely distinguish between the persons of the Trinity—amounting to a denial of the Trinity doctrine that is itself a core concept of Christian classical theism.\(^\text{15}\) To avoid this outcome, some advocates of strict simplicity posit the Trinity as the lone exception to the rule that there are no genuine distinctions in God.\(^\text{16}\) But, it seems that allowing for even one genuine distinction itself amounts to a denial of simplicity in its absolute sense and thus seemingly amounts to a denial of strict simplicity.\(^\text{17}\)

This is not even to mention a host of other serious objections raised in the discussion relative to the internal coherence of strict classical theism, such as how God could be simple and yet bring the universe into existence (modal collapse).\(^\text{18}\) To be clear, I do not mean to put these problems on the table in this brief article as defeaters (that would require extensive argumentation I do not have space to adequately set forth in a brief article like this), but as significant challenges that must be met by those committed to strict classical theism.\(^\text{19}\)

In this regard, the highly esteemed expert on medieval Christology Richard Cross goes so far as to say that a coherent model of the incarnation may require “an abandonment of a strong form of classical theism”, specifically he contends that “we need to abandon divine impassibility, immutability, and timelessness”.\(^\text{20}\)

1.2. Contradictory Christology?

For those who conclude strict classical theism is inconsistent with the incarnation (or other core claims of Christian theism), Jc Beall sets forth another option. Rather than abandoning the incarnation or classical theism, Beall suggests one might instead simply embrace a contradictory Christology. For his part, Beall contends that some of the core claims regarding the incarnation actually do amount to contradictions, for example, relative to the claim that Christ is immutable.\(^\text{21}\) On one hand, Beall operates on the assumption that Christians should affirm what he calls “orthodox Christianity” as articulated in the ecumenical creeds—a “Chalcedon-constrained christology”.\(^\text{22}\) Yet, he is convinced that “the central truths of Christ, as recorded in Chalcedon and creeds, screamingly seem to be contradictory... And yet, even with their screaming contradictoriness, they stand as defining truth”.\(^\text{23}\)

To address this situation, Beall advocates abandoning some tenets of classical logic in favor of subclassical logic. Most prominently, for our purposes here, Beall suggests that one might abandon the principle of non-contradiction in special cases such as that of the incarnation. To adequately engage Beall’s arguments for subclassical logic would require another work all its own, so I do not attempt to offer a refutation of Beall’s proposal for dialetheism here. Instead, I simply wish to register some practical concerns such a course would raise not only relative to classical theism and Christology, but for Christian theological method on the whole.

First, relative to the principle of non-contradiction, it seems that Jesus himself assumes this principle in his own teachings such as when he presents binary options (see, e.g., Matt 6:24; cf. Mark 3:22-26; John 8:44).\(^\text{24}\) Beall might seek to square his proposal with this and other kinds of biblical counterexamples by highlighting that he advocates for only specialized cases where one might need to adopt a theological contradiction and claiming “the patterns of reasoning are theory-specific and thus do not serve as counterexamples”.\(^\text{25}\) As Tom McCall points out, however, such a move “might seem to be unacceptably ad hoc”.\(^\text{26}\) To press this point further, it seems to me that Jesus and the apostle Paul employ principles common to classical logic in order to make universal claims that would be difficult, if not impossible, to square with seeing such principles as enjoying merely “theory-specific validity”.\(^\text{27}\)
Alongside this, there is the significant problem that allowing for contradictions would seem to lead to “explosion” (ex contradictione quodlibet), i.e., that admitting a contradiction into one’s system would allow for any and every statement to be affirmed as true. For example, if one admits contradictions into one’s systems, one could say that Jesus is God and Jesus is not God at the same time and in the same sense, seemingly evacuating either claim of any significance.

Though Beall and others take pains to claim that his proposal is limited to special cases such that it would not necessarily result in an explosion, it is quite difficult to see how this could be the case in a non-arbitrary or more than merely intrasystematic way. As McCall notes, at least in his initial work Beall did not mean to “license theological contradictions more broadly”. However, from my perspective, it is hard to see how Beall’s proposal does not amount to doing so whether he intends so or not. Only allowing the admittance of contradictions in the case of fundamental Christology does not seem to provide guardrails to avoid explosion, for what would prevent any theologian from making a similar move when pressed by a counterclaim that a particular aspect of their theological proposal(s) amount to contradiction? If contradiction is permissible regarding one core doctrine of Christianity such as the incarnation, why not relative to a second and third and so on? In other words, what would justify us from rejecting this move if employed at various other junctures of theology, such as Beall himself has gone on to employ to the doctrine of the Trinity more broadly?

In this regard, I agree with McCall’s worry that “many theologians will indeed take what Beall says as open season on the constraints of classical logic and, more importantly, to license contradictions galore”. Likewise, McCall rightly worries about the practical implications at the church level. These are extremely important concerns, especially in the disinformation age plaguing us in our current age. The costs of Beall’s proposal run high, at the very least lending some putative support to licensing theological contradictions and abandoning the standard of systematic coherence more broadly. This avenue might be open to the strict classical theist to employ relative to the contested points highlighted in this article and beyond, but I expect that most will consider the cost to be far too high to take this avenue. Indeed, doing so would arguably itself amount to an abandonment of the very classical tradition one is trying to defend. Absent taking this avenue, however, the strict classical theist seems to be left with what Beall and others consider “screaming contradictoriness”.

2. Classical Theism, the Problem of Biblical Warrant, and the “Great Tradition”

We have seen to this point that strict classical theism faces serious difficulties relative to consistently holding both that God is absolutely simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible and (among other things) that the truly divine Son of God became truly human in the incarnation, suffered and gave himself on the cross to save sinners. This is no small matter. These claims relative to the incarnation stand at the center of the Christian faith. If faced with a binary choice, it should be no contest. If strict classical theism is indeed incompatible with the incarnation, we must abandon strict classical theism.

2.1. Incompatible with Scripture?

Likewise, strict classical theism faces serious difficulties relative to the standard of biblical warrant. Many of the same Christological problems manifest themselves relative to the standard of biblical warrant and I will not repeat them here, but readers should note that many of the problems raised earlier in this article are not only problems for systematic coherence, but also stand in apparent contradiction to Scripture.

Beyond Christology, strict classical theism faces numerous other apparent contradictions with biblical accounts of the God-world relationship. Here, I will focus primarily on tracing just one significant line of evidence among many such lines. Specifically, I will briefly focus on the biblical depiction of God as one who undergoes emotional changes.
In this regard, James Dolezal rightly notes: “If temporal succession of life is denied to God, so then must be all those experiences, such as emotional change, that require time”. Likewise, Paul Helm cogently argues that strict immutability and impassibility follow from divine timelessness: “(1) God is timelessly eternal. (2) Whatever is timelessly eternal is unchangeable. (3) Whatever is unchangeable is impassible. (4) Therefore, God is impassible”. Elaborating on this same line of thought elsewhere, Helm explains, “a timelessly eternal God is immutable and so impassible in a very strong sense; he necessarily cannot change for change takes time, or is in time, and a timelessly eternal God by definition is not in time, and so his actions cannot take time, nor can he experience” changing emotions. However, this same argument also may be employed in the opposite direction. If God does undergo changing emotions then God cannot be strictly impassible, immutable, or timeless.

At this juncture, the strict classical theist faces a considerable difficulty. Scripture repeatedly portrays God as undergoing changing emotions, as classical theists themselves readily recognize. Indeed, Dolezal himself straightforwardly affirms that “many passages of the Bible” do “speak of God as undergoing affective changes”. To mention just a few examples for our purposes here, the Bible often depicts God as pleased or displeased in response to human dispositions and/or actions. Proverbs 15:8 states, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (cf. Prov 11:20; 12:22). Psalm 149:4 adds, “the Lord takes pleasure in his people” (Ps 149:4; cf. Col 1:10; 3:20). And the Bible also repeatedly depicts God as profoundly displeased, provoked to anger, and “grieved . . . to his heart” (Gen 6:6). Indeed, God’s chosen people “provoked [qatsap, hiphil, caused to be angry] the Lord . . . to wrath in the wilderness” (Deut 9:7) and in many other instances. Likewise, Psalm 78:40-41 recounts, “How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved [¯as.ab, hiphil, caused to be grieved] him in the desert! They tested God again and again and provoked [t¯aw¯ah, hiphil, caused to be pained] the Holy One of Israel” (see also Isa 63:10; 1 Cor 10:5).

The Bible also repeatedly depicts God’s compassion in deeply visceral terms. According to Jeremiah 31:20, God himself says of his people, “I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him” (cf. Isa 63:15; Hos 11:8-9). The Hebrew idiom translated “deeply moved” here (more literally translated in other versions such as the NASB as “My heart yearns”) uses imagery of roaring internal organs, portraying “God’s stomach being churned up with longing for his” people. Accordingly, John N. Oswalt writes, “the attribute of God to which the OT returns again and again is his compassion: his tenderness and his ability to be touched by the pain and grief of his people”. The NT likewise emphasizes “the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:78) in visceral terms, repeatedly describing Christ’s feelings of compassion and being moved by the sight of people in distress (Matt 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:41; 6:34; Luke 7:13; cf. Mark 10:21; Heb 4:15), emotions which correspond very closely to the many OT portrayals of God as profoundly moved by the sufferings of his people (e.g., Judg 10:16; cf. Luke 19:41).

In these and many other passages, the Bible portrays God as undergoing changing emotions responsive to humans. In other words, the Bible repeatedly depicts God as being “acted upon from without” (external passibility), experiencing feelings “caused by the action[s]” of humans (sensational passibility) while, at the same time, changing his own “emotions from within” (internal passibility) in response to creaturely actions (e.g., “restrain[ing] his anger”, Ps 78:38). In fact, as the advocate of a qualified form of impassibility Rob Lister notes, “Scripture never makes a direct assertion of a metaphysical doctrine of divine impassibility” and “does not supply” this “theological category”. Rather, “the biblical portrayal of divine emotion is both powerful and pervasive. One cannot read Scripture and come away with the conclusion that God is affectionless”. Likewise, strict classical theists themselves typically recognize that the Bible depicts God as undergoing possible emotions. Thus, Dolezal writes, “many passages of the Bible” do “speak of God as undergoing affective changes”. 
The conclusion that the Bible repeatedly depicts God as experiencing changing emotions in response to creaturely actions, then, is relatively uncontroversial. However, if such depictions of God are true, then God cannot be strictly impassible and, further, God cannot be strictly immutable or timeless, since emotional change is a kind of change and change takes time. In this and other ways, the biblical depiction of God also runs counter to absolute divine simplicity, for a temporal God cannot be absolutely simple (e.g., at least having numerous temporal moments and thus what strict classical theists would define as “parts” in God’s life). This all leaves the strict classical theist in the difficult position of arguing that, although the Bible frequently does depict God as undergoing changing emotions, such biblical depictions should not be taken as true depictions of God as he is.

This is only one line of argumentation among many that might be offered based on the teachings of Scripture. In my view, however, even such a brief synopsis of just a few of the problems relative to biblical warrant suffices to show that strict classical theism faces serious difficulties in this regard that are not easily brushed aside.

2.2. The Appeal to Tradition

We have seen that the claim that Scripture does “speak of God as undergoing affective changes” is not a controversial one and, if taken to be true, this claim entails that God is not strictly impassible, immutable, timeless, or simple. How, then, do strict classical theists who wish to affirm Scripture as uniquely normative deal with the biblical data in this and other regards?

At this juncture, some strict classical theists appeal to the Christian tradition and claim that Scripture itself must be read and interpreted through the lenses of divine simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility provided by the Christian tradition. However, in my view, rather than helping to resolve the difficulties, such an appeal actually multiplies the difficulties the strict classical theist faces.

To take one recent example that is representative of numerous others, Craig A. Carter appeals to what he calls the “Christian Platonism of the Great Tradition”, which he states “was developed in order to express the metaphysical implications of the doctrine of God that emerged from pro-Nicene scriptural exegesis in the fourth century, and as a result the exegesis, the dogma, and the metaphysics are all intertwined together”. For Carter and others who take an approach like this one, the metaphysical framework provided by “the Great Tradition” should be employed as an interpretive framework for reading and interpreting Scripture itself.

This is one form of “retrieval” theology (closely connected to the movement of ressourcement), which involves “a return to the ancient sources of the faith for their own sake”. Here, it should be noted that there are multiple forms and approaches to retrieval theology, some more nuanced and sophisticated than others such that they should not all be thought of as equivalent or in agreement with another or facing the same problems. In this regard, various forms of retrieval theology have become so prevalent even in Evangelical circles that Peter Leithart put it nearly ten years ago: “Evangelicalism is awash in the 3Rs: retrieval, renewal, and ressourcement”. Since then, this movement has only grown, with no signs of abating.

To take another example, Matthew Barrett argues for a retrieval theology that privileges “the Great Tradition... from the Cappadocians to John of Damascus, from Augustine to Boethius, from Anselm to Thomas”. In this regard, however, even sympathetic voices note that the notion of something like a monolithic “Great Tradition” is a myth. For example, responding to Matthew Barrett’s appeal to “the Great Tradition” quoted above, Richard Cross argues that the “very list of names” that Barrett marshals “shows the extent to which a unitary Great Tradition is a figment of the modern imagination”.

Further, even if there was a uniform “Great Tradition” to which one could appeal as the normative interpretive arbiter of Scripture, would not doing so evacuate and undermine the uniquely normative authority of Scripture itself? In what follows, I take up these two significant problems in succession:
1. How can Scripture have priority if there is an extra-canonical rule or rules to be used as its interpretive arbiter?

2. How does such retrieval theology work even on its own terms? That is, which tradition? Whose interpretation?

2.3. Scripture as Uniquely Normative?

In brief, the strict classical theist might argue that the classical tradition itself provides the framework for the best way of reading Scripture and, thus, apparent contradictions between classical theism and the teachings of Scripture are not actual contradictions but arise due to a failure to first presuppose the lens of the metaphysics of classical theism.

Dolezal is representative of this approach. As noted earlier, Dolezal affirms that “many passages of the Bible” do “speak of God as undergoing affective changes”. Yet, in keeping with his commitment to strict impassibility (which he views as the traditional view), Dolezal maintains that God does not actually undergo any emotional change. How does Dolezal both affirm that the Bible “speak[s] of God as undergoing affective changes” while also concluding that God does not actually undergo affective changes (as the Bible portrays)? He argues that God “communicates the truth about his infinite and unchanging existence under the form of what is finite and changeable”. Along similar lines, Helm argues that “the impression we may form, reading the biblical narrative, that God changes is [an] illusion”.

Thus, as Dolezal, Helm, and many other classical theists understand it, the Bible read on its own terms does give the impression that God undergoes affective changes and acts and interacts with the world in many ways that are incompatible with strict classical theism. Yet, they contend, one must not approach the biblical text without first presupposing the metaphysical framework and concept of God that is provided by the Christian tradition—that is, without presupposing the basic tenets of strict classical theism as lenses through which the Bible is to be read. For example, Dolezal straightforwardly argues that what he considers the classical understanding of God should be employed as “a hermeneutical principle” that “precedes Scripture and is brought to the text as a lens by which we are able to make assessments about the literal or figurative quality of the Bible’s varied statements about God”.

Such a method, however, imposes an extra-biblical metaphysical framework as a methodological norm that precedes Scripture and thus risks imposing alien presuppositions about God onto Scripture. Even if one believes the Bible itself teaches (for example) strict divine impassibility, presupposing the claim of strict impassibility functionally undermines the ability of Scripture to stand as the uniquely normative rule of faith and practice.

Of course, one could simply abandon the standard of biblical warrant as defined in this article, but this is not a live option for many strict classical theists. Indeed, to their credit Dolezal and many other strict classical theists directly affirm that “Scripture is the supreme judge in all doctrinal controversies about God’s nature”. At this juncture, however, I find it difficult to see how Dolezal and other strict classical theists that make this kind of move can escape a contradiction at the core of their methodological claims, between affirming the supremacy of Scripture relative to God’s nature on one hand while also claiming that one must first presuppose a particular understanding of God’s nature as “a hermeneutical principle” that “precedes Scripture and is brought to the text as a lens by which we are able to make assessments about the literal or figurative quality of the Bible’s varied statements about God”.

If one presupposes a particular understanding of God’s nature as “a hermeneutical principle” that “precedes Scripture and is brought to the text as a lens” through which to assess and interpret Scripture’s claims about God, how could Scripture actually function as “the supreme judge” with respect to “doctrinal controversies about God’s nature”? Such an approach methodologically bypasses the standard of biblical warrant, presupposing a particular understanding of God’s nature as a “hermeneutical principle” by which Scripture
should be interpreted such that Scripture itself could not reform that understanding of God’s nature.

Insofar as one presupposes an external understanding of God as “a hermeneutical principle” that “precedes Scripture” and through which Scripture itself is interpreted, Scripture cannot actually function as the supreme judge for one’s understanding of God. To uphold the standard of biblical warrant such that Scripture is allowed to actually function as the final norm of theological interpretation, Scripture must be allowed to judge and potentially reform one’s understanding of God, including traditional interpretations and metaphysical frameworks.

The strict classical theist is thus faced with a choice. Either employ Scripture as the supreme judge such that, at least in principle, the Bible could be understood as teaching something other than strict classical theism. Or, abandon the standard of biblical warrant so that one can consistently appeal to “the Great tradition” as a normative hermeneutical arbiter of Scripture.

At this juncture, the classical theist might attempt to opt for a weaker form of the standard of biblical warrant, one that allows the reading and interpretation of Scripture itself to be normed by some part(s) of the Christian tradition. In this regard, some argue that Scripture cannot function effectively as a sufficient theological norm given that it is interpreted different ways such that the classical tradition should be adopted as the rule by which to interpret Scripture. Doing so, however, would put the classical theist at odds with numerous revered voices in the very tradition to which she appeals. Specifically, some of the major voices in the Christian tradition maintain that the Christian tradition (including their own writings) should not be utilized as a rule of faith but only Scripture is to have such ruling authority.

To take just a couple examples, Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “we make the Holy Scriptures the rule and measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings” such that “we will adopt, as the guide of our reasoning, the Scripture”. Elsewhere, Gregory adds, “Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words”. Gregory and Augustine do not stand alone in the Christian tradition in this regard. Indeed, centuries later none other than Thomas Aquinas himself wrote: “canonical Scripture alone is the rule of faith” (sola canonica scriptura est regula fidei). Still later, voices like John Wesley go further, cautioning: “As to the Fathers and Councils, we cannot but observe, that in an hundred instances they contradict one another” and thus cannot “be rule of faith to us”. Indeed, as Oliver Crisp states, “the great majority of Christian theologians down through the ages” affirm “that Scripture is the norming norm in theology this side of the grave. Other theological norms, such as the canons of ecumenical councils or the confessions of particular ecclesial communities, or even the arguments of theologians, are to be understood in light of Scripture and as ancillary to Scripture”. Further, Jay Wesley Richards emphasizes that such a “commitment to biblical normativity” is not unique to Protestants, but is also “the norm among Catholic and Orthodox” theologians.

Insofar as this is so, with some of the most prominent voices in the Christian tradition themselves holding that Scripture is to take precedence over any traditional teachings out-
side of Scripture, consistency with the classical tradition requires that one’s understanding of theological dogmas (including theology proper) must meet a strong form of the standard of biblical warrant in which Scripture is “the rule and measure of every tenet”.\textsuperscript{79} As such, even if it were the case that the Christian tradition is definitively in favor of a particular understanding of God, appeal to that tradition absent biblical warrant would arguably be inconsistent with the very tradition to which it appeals.\textsuperscript{80}

2.4. Which Tradition? Whose Interpretation?

The appeal to the Christian tradition as a normative standard, then, seems to be at odds with these claims by some of its most prominent voices. Yet, even if this were not so, appealing to “the Great Tradition” faces additional problems relative to its workability in the first place.

For one thing, the Christian tradition is not monolithic. Which part(s) of the tradition, then, should be appealed to as the norm for our understanding of God, through which Scripture is to be read? And, even if one could answer that question adequately in a non-arbitrary way, the tradition itself is also subject to tradition and is variously interpreted by competent historical theologians, including when it comes to the tenets of classical theism. Accordingly, to employ “the Great tradition” as a hermeneutical rule one must first decide not only what part(s) of tradition are to function as such, but whose interpretations of the part(s) selected should be employed. In short, one must answer two very difficult questions: (1) Which tradition? (2) Whose interpretation?\textsuperscript{81}

Here, let me pause for a minute to dwell on an issue that is often all-too-quickly passed by. As briefly noted earlier, in a section titled “The Pluralism of the ‘Great Tradition,’” Richard Cross responds directly to Barrett’s appeal to “the Great Tradition” by noting that “a unitary Great Tradition is a figment of the modern imagination”.\textsuperscript{82} In this regard, Cross raises “the question of divine simplicity”, which is central to the claims of Barrett and other strict classical theists. Cross writes:

“It seems to me fairly clear that Augustine has a strong account of divine simplicity, such that God and God’s attributes are all identical with each other. We find this strand of thinking reproduced and refined in Aquinas. But what about the Cappadocians and John of Damascus, also mentioned as representatives of the ‘Great Tradition?’ All of these thinkers make a distinction between God’s essence and the ‘things around the essence’—a distinction that ultimately issues in Gregory Palamas’s strong distinction between the divine essence and the divine activities or energies. Palamas is usually taken to be the polar opposite to Aquinas here. But arguably he is a more faithful successor of the earlier Greek theologians than the latter is”.\textsuperscript{83}

Others also highlight what they see as differing models of divine simplicity in the Christian tradition, with Thomas Aquinas’s theology often set forth as a prime example of the absolute or strict form of simplicity that is widespread in the Christian tradition. Alongside this, however, John Duns Scotus and Gregory of Nyssa are set forth by some as exemplars who affirm other forms of divine simplicity (formal simplicity and generic simplicity, respectively).\textsuperscript{84} Whether or not there are in fact significantly differing models of divine simplicity in the classical tradition is itself a point of dispute among theologians (on which I do not mean to weigh in here), but the very fact that such disputes take place serves to highlight some crucial methodological issues involved at various junctures relative to appealing to the classical tradition.\textsuperscript{85}

Likewise, there are competing interpretations of the Christian tradition relative to divine timelessness. Many hold that divine timelessness is, in Paul Helm’s words, “the classical Christian view of God’s relation to time”.\textsuperscript{86} In contrast, however, Richard Swinburne holds a minority view, claiming that divine temporality is “the view explicit or implicit in Old and New Testaments and in virtually all the writings of the Fathers of the first three centuries”.\textsuperscript{87} While Swinburne’s reading of Scripture in this respect is less controversial, his reading of the early classical tradition in this respect is not shared by
most scholars.\textsuperscript{88} Supposing, then, that timelessness is the dominant classical view as most scholars believe, there nevertheless remains a conflict of interpretations over the ontology of time, specifically with respect to whether the classical tradition affirmed eternalism or presentism. On one hand, Katherin Rogers believes the “classic doctrine of [timeless] eternity” entails “eternalism”, which is the “view that the past and future are as real as the present, as opposed to presentism, the view that only the present actually exists”.\textsuperscript{89} Mullins, in contrast, argues that “presentism is the classical Christian position” and that this view itself conflicts with divine timelessness.\textsuperscript{90}

Competing interpretations of the classical tradition also appear relative to impassibility and immutability. On one hand, Dolezal is one example of those who claim strict impassibility “was the orthodox Christian consensus for nearly two millennia”.\textsuperscript{91} In contrast, Paul Gavrilyuk is representative of those who argue there was no singular, monolithic patristic view regarding the issue of divine impassibility and that many church fathers actually employed language of God suffering (theopaschite language).\textsuperscript{92} Likewise, Dolezal claims “the classical understanding of immutability argues that God’s ethical immutability requires his [strict] ontological immutability as its foundation”.\textsuperscript{93} In contrast, Thomas Oden held a different interpretation of the classical tradition in this regard, upholding a qualified form of immutability and stating: “It is precisely because God is unchanging in the eternal character of his self-giving love that God is free in responding to changing historical circumstances, and versatile in empathy”.\textsuperscript{94}

In these and other respects, Cross’s assessment that “a unitary Great Tradition is a figment of the modern imagination” rings true.\textsuperscript{95} Like Cross, others also emphasize that it is a mistake to think of the classical tradition as monolithic. As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes, “the leads provided by patristic theologies were developed in more than one way” and different systems “claimed to build on the same biblical and patristic foundations” and “rather than settling doctrinal issues—let alone ending debates—the fathers provided a fertile soil of reflections”.\textsuperscript{96} Andrew K. Gabriel likewise concludes, “classical theism may not be the near unanimous testimony of the Christian tradition, as some theologians claim”.\textsuperscript{97}

Whatever one thinks of the particular claims of these disparate voices, it is evident that competent scholars hold competing interpretations of the Christian tradition in various respects, including relative to each of the four core points of classical theism at issue in this article (among many others).\textsuperscript{98} It is difficult to see, then, how an appeal to the Christian tradition could adequately function as a hermeneutical principle on which to base one’s understanding of God’s nature. Such an appeal to “the Great tradition” seems to assume the tradition is unitary or monolithic in a way that does not square with the findings of leading voices in the discipline of historical theology and raises more questions that do not have easy answers, including which part(s) of the tradition and whose interpretation of those parts should be privileged as normative.

3. Conclusions

Relative to both the standard of systematic coherence and the standard of biblical warrant, then, the strict classical theist faces numerous significant methodological questions that should at least give one pause. Of course, one could simply abandon one or both of these standards. For the vast majority of Christian theists, however, the cost of doing so is far too high. To be clear, this article is not intended as a conclusive argument against strict classical theism, but aims at the more modest goal of pressing these points regarding theological method, which demand serious consideration—especially for the wide swath of Christian theists committed to the standards of systematic coherence and biblical warrant.

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One attempt at this worthy of close consideration by all interested in this discussion is (Duby 2022). Arguably, however, some of these tenets have parts depends on them for its existence and nature” (Leftow 1998).

(Dolezal 2019a, p. 18).

(Gregory of Nyssa 1893b, p. 439).

Of course, another avenue is to soften one or more of the four tenets, which many who claim the label of classical theism do. This critique focuses, however, on those committed to the absolute or strict forms of these four tenets as a package, which is what some argue just is traditional classical theism.

In this article, I intentionally focus on contemporary examples of strict classical theism because (as will be addressed later in this article), there is some dispute about which figures in the Christian tradition are truly representative of “classical theism”, a debate which I leave aside. This article, as such, is not intended as a referendum on classical figures, per se, but raises methodological questions relative to a chorus of contemporary voices.

(Mullins 2016, p. 64).

(Mullins 2016, p. 158).

(Gavrilyuk 2009, p. 143) Unlike Dolezal and others who identify strict impassibility with traditional Christianity, Gavrilyuk attributes this problem to the heretical “Docetists, Arians, and Nestorians” who all “deployed divine impassibility in an unqualified sense, as a property that categorically excluded God’s participation in any form of suffering”. (Gavrilyuk 2009, p. 143). In his view, traditional or classical Christology held a more nuanced or qualified conception of impassibility that allowed for divine suffering in Christ.


In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, “If God is incapable of suffering, then—if we are to be consistent—Christ’s passion can only be viewed as a human tragedy”. (Moltmann 1993, p. 22).

(Helm 2001, p. 54).

See note 12.

In this regard, see (Mullins 2016, pp. 189–94). For example, Mullins argues, “the de se beliefs of the human mind of Jesus” include “temporal beliefs that involve change, succession, variation of emotion, ignorance of the future, and an interruption of pure joy. These simply are not de se beliefs that any timeless, immutable, or impassible divine mind could entertain”. (Mullins 2016, p. 194).

As Tom McCall puts it, strict simplicity “truly may be inconsistent with trinitarian theology. If there are no distinctions within God, then the divine persons cannot be distinct. But if the divine persons cannot be distinct, then we do not have any doctrine of the Trinity”. (McCall 2014, p. 57) While affirming strict simplicity, James Dolezal himself recognizes, “it is a challenge to understand how there can be a real identity between the essence, which is one, and the divine persons, which are three. Prima facie it seems to contravene the law of identity”. (Dolezal 2014b, p. 88).

See, e.g., (Holmes 2012, p. 200). See also the treatments of this issue in (Dolezal 2011) (Duby 2016).

In this regard, in Book I, chapter L of The Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides refers to God’s “true Unity without any trace of compositeness or divisibility in any manner whatsoever” such that God has “no essential attribute whatever in any form or any manner”. Then, Maimonides contends: “If one believes Him to be One and to possess a number of attributes, one in fact says that he is One and thinks that He is many. This is the same as what the Christians say: He is one, but He is three, and the three are One. There is no difference between this and saying: He is One but has many attributes, and He and His attributes are One, though such a person may believe in incorporeality and in immateriality to the fullest extent”. (Maimonides 1995, pp. 65–66, italics original). I am indebted to Ryan Mullins for making me aware of this quotation.

See (Mullins 2013, p. 196).

One attempt at this worthy of close consideration by all interested in this discussion is (Duby 2022). Arguably, however, some of the moves Duby makes in defining divine simplicity, immutability, impassibility, and eternality in his attempt might put him outside the bounds of strict classical theism. To his credit, Duby writes relative to his own advocacy for an approach Christology guided by classical theism, “I am not implying that ‘classical’ theological commitments should be exempt from all analysis. Nor am I implying that there is complete uniformity to be found across the Christian tradition in authors like Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others”. (Duby 2022, xiii).
Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the NRSVue.

On divine pleasure and displeasure and the evaluative aspect of divine love more broadly, see (Peckham 2015, chps. 5–6).

(Dolezal 2014a, p. 134).

As Wolterstorff states, “God the Redeemer is a God who changes. And any being that changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession”. (Wolterstorff 2010, p. 178) In contrast, see (Blount 2002).

For example, Beall writes that on the standard account, “Christ is both mutable and immutable. But, at least on standard usage, ‘mutable’ and ‘immutable’ express contrary properties. Contrary properties are ones that are jointly had only at the cost of contradiction. And the target contradiction is manifest to many: it’s true that Christ is mutable (because Christ is human) but it’s false that Christ is mutable (because Christ is divine). And this is but one of many (many) such contradictions entailed by Christ’s two-natured being”. (Beall 2021, p. 3).

As Jay Wesley Richards put it, “no Christian theologian can tolerate definitions” of divine attributes “that contradict the claim that God became incarnate as the man Jesus, who mourned, suffered and died”. (Richards 2003, p. 41).

The Contradictory Christ

This is not simply a theoretical question. Others, e.g., (DeVito 2021), have floated proposals that do so relative to potentially resolving other theological conundrums. And Beall himself has expanded his case in a follow-up book wherein he argues the Trinity doctrine more broadly is contradictory, but true. (See Beall 2023).

As Wolterstorff states, “God the Redeemer is a God who changes. And any being that changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession”. (Wolterstorff 2010, p. 134) John Feinberg adds, “a God who changes his relationship with a repentant sinner incorporates a sequence in his handling of that person, but that sequence necessitates time and so rules out atemporalism”. (Feinberg 2001, p. 432) J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig maintain, further, “in virtue of his real, causal relation to the temporal world, God must minimally undergo extrinsic change and therefore be temporal—at least since the moment of creation”. (Moreland and Craig 2003, p. 527).

On divine pleasure and displeasure and the evaluative aspect of divine love more broadly, see (Peckham 2015, chps. 5–6).

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the NRSVue.
(Thompson 1980, p. 575). The collocation of מִאֵֽה + הָמָּה/הָמָּון—murmur, roar, or sometimes arouse—appears five times, always used of intense emotional feeling, whether with God as subject (Isa 63:15; Jer 31:20) or with a human as subject (Isa 16:11; Jer 4:19; Song 5:4).


See (Peckham 2015, chp. 6).

Here, I draw on the wording of the definition of impassibility in The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, which frames divine impassibility in these three ways. (Cross and Livingstone 2005, p. 828) In contrast, Scripture presents God as passible in all three ways.

(Lister 2013, pp. 173, 190).

(Lister 2013, p. 195).

See note 39.

Conversely, it is rare to find a divine temporalist who affirms that God has literal temporal parts (e.g., Hud Hudson). For much more on these and other difficulties, see (Peckham 2021).

(Carter 2018, xiii).

For example, D. H. Williams contends that, “[w]here no interpretative guide exists as a theological ‘court of appeal,’ hermeneutical fragmentation can be the only result”. (Williams 1999, pp. 89–97) As such, Williams argues, an extra-canonical “rule of faith or norm for interpretation is essential if orthodox faith is to be achieved”. (Williams 2005, p. 77) In the last two decades, many others have echoed calls akin to this one. See, e.g., (Oden 2003, p. 161). For a further discussion, see (Peckham 2016, chp. 4)

(Williams 1999, p. 229) Ressourcement stems from a renewal movement of Roman Catholic thinkers who called for renewed reading of the Tradition (particularly patristic theology), which was influential upon the ecumenical trajectory of Vatican II. See (Flynn and Murray 2012).

C. Kavin Rowe that there is an “organic connection between the biblical testimony and the early creeds, and the creeds can serve as hermeneutical guidelines to reading the Bible because it is the biblical text itself that necessitated the credal formulations”. (Rowe 2003, p. 4).

(Leithart 2015).

(Barrett 2023, p. 259).

(Cross 2024, pp. 10–11).

See note 39.

See note 39.

(Dolezal 2014a, p. 135) Dolezal and others here appeal to what might be called the accommodative language rationale, which is closely related to the impassibility or strict classical theism rationale. I have discussed these at length elsewhere. Here, suffice it to say that correctly recognizing that all language from God to humans is accommodative language does not provide license to deny the exegetical import of such language. See the further discussion in (Peckham 2021, pp. 33–37).

(Helm 2001, p. 46) See also (Dolezal 2019a, p. 34).

(Dolezal 2019b, p. 114) For Dolezal, this includes presupposing that God is pure act and thus necessarily “unmoved in his being”. (Dolezal 2019b, p. 114).

(Dolezal 2019b, p. 115).

(Dolezal 2019b, p. 114) See also (Carter 2018).

For a discussion of numerous such proposals, see (Peckham 2016, chps. 4–5).

See note 4.

(Gregory of Nyssa 1893a, p. 327).

(Augustine 1887b, p. 180) Of course, one might find other statements where Augustine appears to say the opposite, but that only presses the point further, for then it seems that Augustine makes inconsistent claims in this regard, further exacerbating the problem of which tradition is to be the norm and on whose interpretation.

(Augustine 1887b, p. 183) See the discussion of these and similar statements by Cyril of Jerusalem and Basil of Caesarea in (Armstrong 2010, p. 46).

(Augustine 1887a, p. 146) For the purposes of this discussion, we may set aside differences regarding what the biblical canon includes.
(Augustine 1885, p. 502).
(Thomas 2020, chp. 21, lectio 6).
(Wesley 1958, p. 134).
(Crisp 2013, p. 22) Uche Anizor adds: “Even where theologians diverge on the relation of Scripture to tradition, reason, or experience, they agree on the centrality and authority of Scripture for Christian theology” (Anizor 2018, p. 60).
(Richards 2003, p. 32).
See note 4.
For further discussion of these and related issues see (Peckham 2016).
See also (Peckham 2016, pp. 189–90).
(Cross 2024, p. 11).
(Cross 2024, p. 11) Compare the other critiques of Barrett’s reading of the historical theology in other crucial regards in this same issue of The Hanover Review, such as in Peter Opitz’s review (Opitz 2024) titled “Reformation as Renewal: Recatholicizing the Reformers by Manipulating Their Message?”
(McCall 2014).
For example, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz once argued with respect to the view of Gregory of Nyssa, “we are far from holding that divine simplicity entails that God only has a single property or that God has no properties—so far in fact that, in his hands, the doctrine of simplicity actually comes to entail that God has multiple properties”. (Radde-Gallwitz 2009, p. 212). More recently, however, Radde-Gallwitz has revised his interpretation of Gregory, formerly interpreting Gregory such that “the names of the propria... denote in a realist fashion inherent features of the divine nature”, but more recently being convinced by Richard Cross’s argument that these should be understood in a nominalist fashion such that “In God, what makes a sentence like ‘God is good’ or ‘God is unbegotten’ true is nothing other than the divine essence” and “for our language to be meaningful, the predicates naming divine perfections do not need to correspond to any extra-mental property; they need only signify distinct concepts”. (Radde-Gallwitz 2019, pp. 455–56). Regarding John Duns Scotus, Jeff Steele and Thomas Williams argue that “his allegiance to the doctrine of divine simplicity is purely verbal, that he flatly denies traditional aspects of the doctrine as he had received it from Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas”. (Steele and Williams 2019, p. 611). That is, “if we define divine simplicity in the manner insisted upon by the classical theism best exemplified by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—namely, that God is altogether identical with his attributes and these attributes are altogether identical with each other—then it’s obvious that Scotus rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity. What he calls simplicity involves mind-independent plurality—complexity, even if not (on Scotus’s stipulative understanding of the word) composition—in God: precisely what his predecessors ruled out in the name of divine simplicity”. (Steele and Williams 2019, pp. 630–31). This is consistent with critiques by his contemporaneous that he denied the doctrine of divine simplicity.
(Helm 2001, p. 28).
(Swinburne 1994, p. 138).
Richard C. Dales writes, however, that later—in the fourteenth century—divine temporality was the majority view at Oxford. (Dales 1990, p. 199). I am indebted to Ryan Mullins for making me aware of this. See, further, (Mullins Forthcoming, chp. 2).
(Rogers 2000, p. 59).
(Mullins 2016, p. 75).
(Dolezal 2014a, p. 125) See also (Weinandy 2000).
(Gavrilyuk 2006, pp. 89, 127) Specifically, Gavrilyuk makes an extensive case that there was no monolithic patristic view of impassibility, but “divine impassibility [was] primarily a metaphysical term, marking God’s unlikeness to everything in the created order, not a psychological term denoting (as modern passibilists allege) God’s emotional apathy”. (Gavrilyuk 2009, p. 139) Indeed, Gavrilyuk argues, “the picture of an essentially impassibilist account of God in patristic theology, varied only by the minority voices that advocated divine suffering, is incorrect”. (Gavrilyuk 2006, p. 20) Andrew Gabriel adds: “Clearly disagreement exists regarding the prominence of the doctrine of impassibility within the Christian tradition”. (Gabriel 2011, p. 10) Consider, for example, the view of Lactantius. For her part, Anastasia Philippa Scrutton adds, “some modern forms of passibilism may not be as much of a break from tradition as has generally been perceived”. (Scrutton 2011, p. 2).
(Dolezal 2014a, p. 129).
(Oden 2009, p. 68).
See note 82.
(Kärkkäinen 2017, p. 57).
(Gabriel 2011, pp. 10–11).

There are many other competing interpretations of the tradition relative to the doctrine of God specifically and many other areas of theology more broadly. For a discussion of numerous such issues in the doctrine of God, see (Peckham 2021, pp. 254–60).