

Book Review: God Is Impassible and Impassioned

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*God Is Impassible and Impassioned:
Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion*

Rob Lister

Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012

333 pages, Paperback

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst
formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to
everlasting, thou art God (Ps. 90:1-2).

Lister's thesis is that, though God is essentially impassible, which means He is not subject to passions like we are (Acts 14:15; James 5:17), yet, because of His immutable holiness and zeal for His glory, He "responds" to the moral actions and attitudes of His creatures, and that Scripture is full of these anthropathisms.

Q. Does God suffer or express emotion like we do? A. Only in the incarnate Christ. The eternal Trinity is forever perfectly blessed and happy.

Q. Then what about all the expressions of emotion attributed to God in Scripture? A. They are anthropathisms: human expressions attributed to God to enable us to understand His "responses." As Bruce Ware puts it,

God is eternally passionate for his glory, and now in the context of a fallen creation, when that glory is despised, eternal passionate jealousy gives rise in God to a new and contingent expression of white-hot anger against sin (p. 226).

God is at the same time outside time and throughout time. God is transcendent (high above, separate, self-existent, self-sufficient, and outside the created order of space and time) and also immanent or omnipresent throughout

creation by His condescension. These are examples of doctrinal duality. God is also both impassable (immutable and invulnerable) and impassioned (His eternal character necessitates holy “responses” to man’s ethical behaviour).

Thomas Weinandy rightly declares,

The OT never conceives of God’s transcendence in opposition to his immanence, as if that which makes God wholly other is different from that which allows him to be a personal God who lovingly acts in time and history ... That which makes him divine, and thus wholly other, and so transcendent, is that which equally allows him to be active within the created order and so be immanent (p. 222, n. 13).

Lister states that divine impassibility is the very foundation that gives rise to God’s perfectly fitted emotional and relational “responses” to His creatures (p. 172). This duality forms the fascinating content of this book by Lister, who is an assistant professor of theology at Biola University and who has researched extensively for his thesis. His bibliography is 30 pages long!

Reading this book was important for me, because I was challenged by three different people who believe that God has passions and actually suffered in His divinity in Christ. These are: a family member, a Christian friend and the director of an important Christian charity who has just written on the subject (albeit erroneously)!

First, it is important to define terms. God being impassable means He is, in His divine being, unchanging and not subject to variable emotions like we are. In His divine tri-unity, God is forever blessed and happy. God’s being impassioned means that He expresses Himself in “response” to His creatures, albeit in scripturally anthropopathic emotions which are in line with His unchanging holiness and glory. J. I. Packer is right:

[Impassibility is] not impassivity, unconcern, and impersonal detachment in the face of creation; not insensitivity and indifference to the distresses of a fallen world; not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief; but simply that God’s experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us, for his are foreknown, willed and chosen for

himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside, apart from his own decision, in the way ours regularly are (p. 238, n. 62).

Divine impassibility has been taught from the days of the church fathers and only recently has it been extensively challenged, for example, in the phrase “God suffers.” Lister quotes Irenaeus (c. 130-200):

For as he was man that he might be tempted, so also he was the Logos that he might be glorified. The Logos remained quiescent during the process of temptation, crucifixion and death, but aided the human nature when it conquered, and endured, and performed deeds of kindness, and rose again from the dead, and was received up into heaven (p. 70).

Tertullian (c. 160-225) viewed God’s responsiveness as flowing from, and being expressive of, His eternal and unchanging nature. Origen (c. 185-254), in contrast, viewed God, in His dealings with men as suffering human passions, not only in the incarnate Messiah but also in the pre-incarnate Logos and the Father as well. Athanasius (c. 296-373) instructed his readers that the incarnation was necessary to overcome the natural impassibility of the divine Being.

Augustine (354-430) further qualifies what Scripture means when attributing emotion to God:

But by the repentance of God is meant the change of things which lie within his power, unexpected by man; the anger of God is his vengeance upon sin; the pity of God is the goodness of his help; the jealousy of God is that providence whereby he does not allow those whom he has in subjection to himself to love with impunity what he forbids (p. 89).

Coming to the Reformation, Luther believed that God’s suffering is limited to the sphere of the incarnation. Regarding God’s being affected with grief, Calvin states, “God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains for ever like himself in his celestial and happy repose” (p. 116). Because it could not otherwise be known how great God’s hatred and detestation of sin is, the Spirit accommodates Himself to our capacity (using anthropopathic language).

Jurgen Moltmann is typical of modern passibilist thought, repudiating any denial that the sphere of the suffering of Christ extended to His divine nature: "A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man ... the one who cannot suffer cannot love either" (p. 128).

Another modern passibilist, H. Maldwyn Hughes, claims, "It is of the very nature of love to suffer when its object suffers loss ... If the suffering of God be denied, then Christianity ... must obliterate the statement 'God is love' from its Scriptures" (p. 133). But love in God existed within the Trinity from everlasting!

Taking the passibilist idea even further, Jung Young Lee states,

The Cross of Calvary *always* points to the eternal Cross ... The redemptive suffering of Christ on the Cross is a temporal manifestation of the eternal Cross ... The suffering and death of Christ on the Cross point to ... the eternal suffering and death of God on the eternal Cross (p. 138; italics Lee's).

Lister makes "two brief observations on modern passibilist treatments of the incarnation and the cross," namely,

First, it has been well said that the insistence of modern passibilists on ascribing suffering to the divine nature 'renders the assumption of humanity [i.e., incarnation] superfluous' [Paul L. Gavrilyuk]. In other words, the logic of redemptive history requires an incarnation precisely because the divine nature itself is not subject to or constituted by suffering in the sense that contemporary passibilism demands. The traditional view is that an incarnation was necessary precisely to overcome the impassibility of the divine nature. But if the divine nature is already passible, then an incarnation of a passible divine person in passible humanity would be redundant. Second, and closely related to the first observation, it is important to note that, whereas the classical view sees the cross in relation to the achievement of victory over sin, many contemporary passibilists see the cross instead merely as a sign of God's suffering solidarity, without the accompanying assurance that this necessarily portends any final victory. In that sense, the

passibilist actually downplays the power and significance of the cross (p. 139).

Passibilist theologians fail to interpret Scripture with Scripture and are guilty of making God in our image! They emphasize the perceived human needs of contemporary culture (for empathy in suffering) alongside an immanent divine struggle against oppression and injustice. This is more in line with liberation theology and the social gospel at the expense of God's transcendence, sovereignty and immutability.

Lister rightly accuses these passibilists of abstracting the event of the cross from its context, supplying it with another meaning and thus transgressing biblical authority, because Scripture not only provides a record of the events of redemptive history but also the authorized interpretation of these events.

Richard Creel contends that God is impassible because He eternally knows all possibilities and thus His will is eternally determined regardless of which possibilities become actualities. He should be conceived as eternally willing and doing everything that He ever wills and does. God's will in time is a "pre-sponse" as opposed to a "response" (p. 151).

Lister summarizes some of Creel's false doctrines:

God's knowledge of the future is passible, because he has exhaustive knowledge only of all abstract possibilities. God's knowledge of which possibilities become actualities is dependent on their being actualized by his libertarianly free creatures ... God's primary purpose in creation was to make free creatures, who in their freedom may "choose for or against his kingdom" (p. 152).

This is free will Arminian thought!

We must *never* take Bible expressions of God's emotion literalistically. Lister summarizes God as impassioned by stating that His emotional "responses" to His fallen and repentant creatures is the in-time expression of His eternal character and passion for His glory. Furthermore, he says,

God's omniscience and sovereignty preclude the possibility of God's ever having the kind of emotional experience that

we often do, namely, the experience of an emotional reaction due to the surprisingly unexpected or unforeseen (p. 253).

At this point, it is worth mentioning Lister's errors. First, he reckons that unregenerate man is still in the image of God with the image being damaged but not destroyed, wrongly citing Genesis 5:1-3, 9:5-6 and James 3:8-9 (p. 220), for the texts in Genesis are applicable to man in his original creation and James 3 refers to man's recreation in regeneration, and ignoring Jesus's clear teaching in John 8:44 that fallen human beings, exemplified by the Pharisees, are the seed of Satan! Second, he thinks that God decrees to save all head for head (pp. 182, 233-234), contrary to Romans 9:22-23. Thus Lister holds the well-meant offer: "God's love initiates the offer of grace" (p. 179). But does not God's love irresistibly confer grace and salvation (Rom. 8:28-39)?

God rejoices (Isa. 62:5), He is grieved (Eph. 4:30), His wrath burns (Ex. 32:10), He pities (Ps. 103:13), He loves everlastingly (Isa. 54:8) and He is jealous (Ex. 20:5). But these "responses" are not like ours. Every divine display of love proceeds from the initiative of God who is eternally, perfectly and unwaveringly passionate in the union of Trinitarian love (p. 199). God's eternal passionate commitment to His own glory leads to expressions of His jealous wrath as a fitting "response" to those who betray the covenant by idolatry (Deut. 4:23-24; 6:13-15), which is tantamount to adultery, and a judgment predicted and warned about in the covenant curses (Deut. 28:15ff.). However, unlike Jehovah's love, His wrath and jealousy are not intrinsic perfections in God but His holiness flaming out against sin (p. 201). Despite our iniquities, His steadfast covenant love keeps or wins back His elect remnant (Mal. 3:6).

Regarding Isaiah 63:9, "In all their affliction he was afflicted," Lister shows that this affliction was God's intention (Ex. 4:21; p. 213). God's covenant presence was with His people in Christ, who is both God *and man*, identifying with them, upholding them and ultimately freeing them. Surely the incarnation teaches us that Jesus, the image of God, perfectly displayed for us what godly human passion should be like!

The person of the Son experienced suffering and death humanly. As Thomas Weinandy states,

If the Son of God experienced suffering in his divine nature,
he would no longer be experiencing human suffering in an

authentic and genuine human manner, but instead he would be experiencing “human suffering” in a divine manner which would then be neither genuinely nor authentically human (p. 93).

One implication of all this is that by grace we will become more like Christ in His emotional perfection, “growing to love what He loves and hate what He hates.”

To sum up, Lister, I believe, thoroughly proves his thesis of an impassible yet impassioned God and, therefore, his book is a helpful preservative against modern liberal thought. This book ought to be in every theological library and is a must read for thoughtful, well-educated Christians. Highly recommended.

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