

Doctrine of God

God's Impassibility

*For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.*
- Isaiah 46:9

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

- James 1:17

*There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, **without body, parts, or passions**; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. – Westminster Confession of Faith (Ch. 2)*



Passion (from the Greek verb *πασχω* meaning *to suffer*) is a very strong feeling about a person or thing. Passion is an intense emotion, a compelling enthusiasm or desire for something.

“the state or capacity of being acted on by external agents or forces...intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction.” – Merriam-Webster

- The doctrine of Divine Impassibility is an ancient Christian belief, confessed throughout the long history of the Church. It belongs to those doctrines often referred to as classical Christian theism. The importance of Divine Impassibility is well-known by theologians and has been fixed since the early centuries of the church.
- Divine Impassibility is confessed by every major English Protestant church—both the 42 Articles of the Church of England of 1552 and the 1563 revision known as the 39 Articles; the 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith*; the 1658 *Savoy Declaration* of the English Congregational churches, and the 1677/89 *Second London Confession* of the Baptists, (reprinted in America with two additions in 1742 as the *Philadelphia Confession*).
- And yet over the past 150 years the doctrine of Divine Impassibility has been criticized, modified and rejected, so that today it is an unpopular doctrine among evangelical theologians.¹

Does God Suffer?

- For generations believer and non-believer have asked whether or not God suffers. Ellie Wiesel the Auschwitz survivor and author of such books as Night was once asked where God

¹ <https://credomag.com/article/what-is-impassibility/>

was as prisoners were hanged in the infamous Nazi death camp. His famous reply was that God was on the gallows hanging with the innocent sufferers. From the confines of his own imprisonment Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Only the suffering God can help."

- What are we to think of the cross? Jesus was brutally executed and experienced the wrath of God poured out upon him. Does it not seem odd, at best, to suggest that God does not suffer?
- The traditional doctrine of divine impassibility states that God does not have "passions" and therefore that God is not susceptible to being moved this way or that by external influences. It means that God is not governed by emotions or outward pressures to which he must respond.
- The point of the doctrine is not to deny that God interacts with his creatures in a meaningful way. It is rather to insist that God's interactions with his creatures are governed solely by his unchanging wisdom and goodness. No external counselor, no external benefactor moves God to act and interact with his creatures the way he does (Rom 11.34-35).
- God acts and interacts with his creatures according to his impassible wisdom, goodness, and power. Impassibility may be **defined** in this way: "God does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by his relationship to creation."
- More technically and precisely, **the doctrine of God's impassibility is the denial that God is liable to suffering in his own nature the way creatures are in theirs.**
- Being creatures, we are not only the subject of actions, but we *receive*, or suffer, the actions of others. But God, who is wholly unique from his human creatures, is not subject to change as a result of the actions of his creatures. God has no "fellow creatures" who might impinge on his turf, as it were. "There is no shared ontological plane or space whereby God might become subject to any vicissitudes of creaturely action" (Wesley Hill).
Those who predicate any change whatsoever of God, whether with respect to his essence, knowledge, or will, diminish all his attributes: independence, simplicity, eternity, omniscience, and omnipotence. This robs God of his divine nature, and religion of its firm foundation and assured comfort. - Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158
- Impassibility is an aspect of divine immutability (God cannot change or be changed), of divine simplicity (the sovereign God does not depend for this existence on 'parts' which are more fundamental than he is) of divine necessity (God exists non-dependently), and of divine eternity (God is not bound by time, with part of his life in the past, as all his creatures are). God's immutability covers his will, his decrees, his promises and counsel, and of course, his emotional life. Its biblical basis is found in such passages as:

James 1:17

Psalms 102:29

Isaiah 14:24; 46:10

Romans 11:29

2 Corinthians 1:18-20

Hebrews 6:17; 13:8

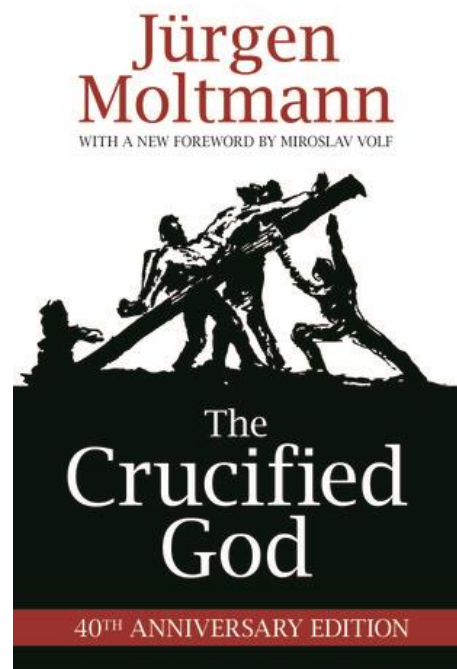
Via Negativa

- Christian theologians have acknowledged that it is easier to say what God is not than what he is – we call this the *via negativa* or the way of negation. The doctrine of God's Impassibility is one of many such negations. Just as God is infinite—not finite, immortal—not subject to mortality, incomprehensible—beyond our ability to comprehend and immutable—not changeable, so also God is impassible. He is not subject to passions.

- On the other hand, when making positive assertions about God we must keep in mind what some refer to as the **Way of Eminence** (not to be confused with “imminence”). The way of eminence teaches us that when God is described to us in terms of virtues (loving, just, merciful, righteous, etc) we recognize that those virtues exist originally, eternally, essentially, and perfectly (i.e., eminently) in God. Since God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, he is perfect in all that he is. His love, mercy, justice etc. are infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Our problem is that we forget this basic truth and impute to God our ways of possessing and expressing those attributes.
- This is the root of modern exceptions to the historic Christian doctrine of Divine Impassibility. It makes God over in the image of humanity.

Modern Challenges

- One noteworthy development in 20th century theology was the radical denial of God’s impassability.
- **Jürgen Moltmann**, the German theologian from University of Tübingen, was perhaps the most influential voice of this “new orthodoxy” of God’s suffering. In more recent years denials of divine impassability have been voiced by **Miroslav Volf** of Yale Divinity School. One of the most influential voices in the debate was Japanese Lutheran scholar **Kazoh Kitamori**, who spoke of “the pain of God.” Kitamori reasoned that God’s majesty and power are his ability and will to share in human misery.
- But it is not only theological liberals who deny the classic formulation of God’s emotional life. Conservative reformed theologians such as J.I. Packer and Donald MacLeod have either denied or greatly modified the historic position. It should be noted however that these theologians understand God’s emotional life in a profoundly different way than do liberal scholars. For instance the liberal position is that God becomes a victim of human cruelty. Conservatives like Packer and MacLeod hold that God chooses to enter human suffering in a way that is consistent with his unchanging nature.
- Fascinatingly the contemporary assertion that God suffers is beginning to show some cracks. Criticisms are being voiced by feminist and liberation theologians who suggest that a suffering God may rationalize a passive acquiescence to violence. **Feminist theologian Johann Metz** writes, “[D]oes not all this talk of the suffering God reveal something like an aestheticization of all suffering?”
- I’m confident that many objections to the doctrine of divine impassibility rest upon fairly simple misunderstandings about what the doctrine implies (e.g., that God is “apathetic” toward his creatures) or about where the doctrine comes from (e.g., Greek philosophy rather than Holy Scripture). Nevertheless, not all objections can be explained by misunderstanding or misinformation. There is a certain class of objections that arise from perceived tensions between the doctrine of divine impassibility and what are (rightly) deemed as realities central to the gospel.



Paul Helm on Divine Impassibility:

But none of this means that God is devoid of (what we call) feelings. He loves his creation, he cares for his people, he hates unrighteousness, and so on—he is pure

goodness. The trouble is that we are in something of a bind when we attempt to articulate this further. When we think of constancy, steadiness, and dependability at the human level we think of people possessing dispositions that are virtuous. So a person who dashes into the icy water to save the child expresses courage, a courageous disposition. He may never have to act in this way again. But in God these dispositions are never latent, for there is no “slack” in God, but he is utterly engaged. So what are we to make of the expressions of divine anger, or of compassion, in Scripture? We are to understand them in terms of the “big picture” or (in more academic language) a “pattern of judgment” about God, and thus to see them as expressions of the divine fullness accommodated to the real-time situations of his people, their characters and needs, and of God's purposes for them. For instance, to draw out their faith, (as with Hezekiah) or their obedience, (as with Moses) or their patience (as with Job).

So divine immutability does not signal total inaction or immobility, like the face of the Moon, a state incapable of personal relationship. Rather, it speaks of firmness, faithfulness, covenantal constancy, grounded in who God essentially is. Likewise divine impassibility is not impassivity, but constant goodness, variously expressed (according to God's will and to the specifics of human history) as (for example) love, or wrath, or mercy. Such expressions are rooted in the immutability of the divine nature, the fact that God is unchangeable in goodness and perfection, and cannot be deterred or deflected by outside forces. Of course God's immutable relation to his creation is not perceived as such by it, but what is perceived is a function of the situation or condition of the creaturely recipient. Just as (we say) the Sun is now setting, now rising, so God is now wise, now just, now loving etc. depending on the human circumstances in which he is “encountered” and on God's purposes in these circumstances.

Effect, not Affect

- While Scripture in some places does seem to attribute emotions to God, we must look past the human language to the perfections they signify. For example, love is in God as an eternal perfection, not as a passion brought about by an encounter with the creature. Theologians have often said that when God is described in the language of human emotion, these are expressions of **effect**, not **affect**. In other words, we are reading about the effects God causes us to experience of himself, not effects that we have caused God to experience in himself. If we read of them in the same way that we experience human passions and affections, we diminish God, making him only a greater version of ourselves.²

Is Divine Impassibility Biblical?

- Of course, we want to ask whether this doctrine is biblical. And in answering that question we have to know what we are looking for. If we are looking for a verse that says, “God is impassible” then we’re going to be disappointed. But remember the “word / concept fallacy.” The fact that the word is not used does not mean that the concept or doctrine is not taught. Rather we have to consider the Bible's use of language – univocal or analogical? We have to interpret Scripture with Scripture. What do the Scriptures – as a whole – teach about emotions and God, and how can we formulate a responsible and faithful answer?

² <https://credomag.com/article/what-is-impassibility/>

- We will consider four points, focusing on how God describes himself in the Scriptures, and how God teaches us to interpret his own language regarding himself. I am indebted to an article on divine impassibility by Samuel Renihan for this outline.³

1. The Bible describes God in the language of human experience and emotion, but denies that those very experiences are in God.

- In 1 Samuel 15:11, God declares, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." Later in 1 Samuel 15:29, the same passage, this statement is qualified and controlled. "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." Other passages, like Numbers 23:19-20, reinforce the truth that the difference between God and creatures controls the way we read creaturely language about God. It says, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"

2. The Bible describes God in a way that makes it impossible for him to undergo anything or be acted upon.

- Consider Genesis 1:1. There is a Creator, and there is creation. God did not create something greater or more powerful than himself, nor did he confine himself within the time and space of his creation. God is eternal and *a se*, of himself, and all things are "from him and through him and to him" (Rom. 11:36). As a result, "God is always the agent, never the patient."
- God is always fulfilling his purposes and never changing his mind, as stated in Numbers 23:19-20. God's covenant name, "I AM WHO I AM," is self-revelation using the "to be" verb. God is and that of himself. He is perfect absolute independent being, the source of all that exists, the Creator of all things. God can neither be added to nor subtracted from. God's perfections cannot diminished or improved upon.
- God himself declares his perfect unchanging nature to his people in Malachi 3:6, "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." And we are told the same in James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." The truth that **a)** the Bible describes God in the language of human experience and emotion, yet **b)** denies that those experiences are in God, combined **c)** with the Scriptures' description of the perfection of the being of God, provides a firm and certain conclusion.

3. We must not equate the human language used to describe God with God himself.

- "We can no more contain God in our language than you can contain the ocean in a thimble." The infinite cannot be contained within the finite. This means that our minds as well as our language can never fully comprehend or give expression to God. But this does not mean that we cannot know God in a meaningful way. Though we cannot know God fully, we can know him truly. God does fit his self-revelation to our creaturely limits but that knowledge is nevertheless true and meaningful.
- If God spoke to us in a way that was not fit to our limits we would be hopeless to comprehend. So, God speaks to us in our language. Or as Calvin says, God speaks to us in the "lisp" of a parent to a young child. But this also reminds us that God has not been contained in that language. We cannot draw a straight line from the language God uses to communicate with us to the true essence of the Creator without qualifying that language.
- There are two sides to be balanced here. **On the one hand**, we can't reduce God to the creaturely language used to describe him. God is not like us.

³ <https://credomag.com/article/does-god-experience-emotional-change/>

- **But on the other hand**, we have to remember that these passages are still telling us something. God is speaking to us in our language, and while we cannot contain him within our language and thoughts, that doesn't mean there is nothing for us to learn.
- For example, when Scripture speaks of God repenting, regretting, or relenting, the point of connection is not between human ways of repenting and an emotional state in God, but in the action taken. When someone repents, they stop doing what they were doing, and they begin to do something else.
- So also, God created man, then he destroyed man; God made Saul king, then he removed him; God threatened judgment on Nineveh, then he forgave them. You can call that repentance because of the analogy between God's action and human actions, without taking along with it the baggage of human passions and emotional turmoil.
- When we repent, it's because something confronts us, we are moved, and then we are changed. Typically, we understand repentance as turning from sin to righteousness. In the most general sense repentance means that we encounter a problem or a failure, we regret a decision, and we change something or take a different course. But God is eternal and has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, accomplishing all his holy will.
- So, God's repentance from our perspective, confined to time as we are, is a reversal of actions. But all things which come to pass were decreed by God in eternity. Therefore, God decreed from all eternity both to create mankind, and then to destroy him with water. He eternally decreed both to make Saul king and then to remove him. From eternity God decreed to threaten Nineveh with judgment and then to deliver them upon their repentance. We see all of these events play out in time.

4. We need to distinguish between our eternal God in himself, and the outworking of his decree in time and space.

- God is not limited by time. He is eternal. He created time. And everything that God has done, is doing, and will do in time is the fulfillment or the outworking of his eternal decree. This means that if we ascribe things like emotions to God, or reactions like repenting, relenting, regretting, or being provoked to wrath, and if we understand those as God existing in time and acting in time rather than the outworking of his eternal and singular decree, we will have collapsed eternity and time, and collapsed the Creator into a creature.
- God's decree is one simple cause with an unfathomable (to us) multitude of effects, all of which coalesce in the glory of God through the redemption of the elect in the death and resurrection of Christ, and the judgment of the unbelieving. What this all boils down to is that we speak of God in a way that fits with his infinite being and perfection. And we speak of creatures in a way that fits their finite being and imperfection. The Scriptures themselves teach us to do this when we consider what they say about God, about creatures, and about God described in the language of creatures.
- "Because God is God, I AM WHO I AM, and because he is the eternal Creator, he is unchangeable, always accomplishing his purposes, but never being acted upon. God pours out love, mercy, and justice from the unchanging infinity of his perfect being. And though the Scriptures describe God in creaturely language, and though we experience God's perfections of love, mercy, and justice in temporal sequences, we cannot conclude from our creaturely perspective that God is emotional. Rather, as the Scriptures have taught us, what we call emotions are unchanging essential perfections in God."⁴ (Samuel Renihan)

⁴ <https://credomag.com/article/does-god-experience-emotional-change/>

Is God Apathetic?⁵

- If God is impassible, does that mean that he is stoic, lifeless, indifferent, apathetic, and incapable of love or compassion? That is, unfortunately, the all-too-common caricature. Actually, impassibility ensures just the opposite: God could not be more alive or more loving than he is eternally.
- Remember, scripture not only says God is immutable but also says he is infinite (Ps. 147:5; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 1:19; 2:7). He is immeasurable, unlimited not merely in size but in his very being. He has no limitations; he is absolute perfection. If God is infinite, then never is it the case that something in God is waiting to be activated to reach its full potential. To use fancy theological language, there is no passive potency in God. Rather, God is his attributes in infinite measure. Put otherwise, he is maximally alive; he could not be more alive than he is eternally. The church fathers liked to make this point by calling God pure act (actus purus). He cannot be more perfectly in act than he is, otherwise, he would be less than perfect, finite and in need of improvement.
- Apply this truth to an attribute like love, for example, and it becomes plain why impassibility makes all the difference. If God is impassible, then he does not merely possess love, he is love and he is love in infinite measure. He cannot become more loving than he already is eternally. If he did, then his love would be passible, it would change, perhaps from good to better, which would imply it was not perfect to begin with.
- In that light, impassibility ensures that God is love in infinite measure. While the love of a passible God is subject to change and improvement, the love of an impassible God changes not in its infinite perfection. Impassibility guarantees that God's love could not be more infinite in its loveliness. God does not depend on others to activate and fulfill his love; no, he is love in infinite measure, eternally, immutably, and independently from the created order.
- All that to say, it may seem counterintuitive, but only impassibility can give us a personal God who is eternal, unalterable love. Far from apathetic or inert, impassibility promises the believer that God could not be any more loving than he is eternally. That is something a passible God cannot promise.

Impassibility is our real hope in times of suffering

- I said it once, but I'll say it again: ideas have consequences. Although it may not seem like it at first, a passible, suffering God is one dangerous idea. It is dangerous because it undermines the Christian's confidence and assurance—even the Christian's hope—especially in times of real hardship. If God is subject to emotional change, how do we know whether he will stay true to his promises? His gospel promises might change as quickly as his mood swings. And if God is vulnerable to emotional fluctuation, what confidence do we have that his own character will remain constant? His love might not remain steadfast, his mercy may no longer be eternal, and his justice can guarantee no future victory.
- But it's also a depressing idea. As Katherin Rogers confesses, "Myself, I find the idea of a God who is made to suffer by us, and who needs us to be fulfilled, a depressing conception of divinity." It's depressing because it does not turn us to God as our rock and our fortress (Ps. 18:2), but instead makes us pity God as one who is just as impotent in suffering as we are as his finite creatures.
- The good news of impassibility, however, is one of hope. When life's most difficult trials hit hard, the inscrutable plan of our personal and loving God does not waver because he is a God who is immutably impassible.⁶

⁵ <https://credomag.com/article/on-first-principles/>

⁶ Ibid.