

OCCASIONAL NOTES

Strangers Rest Evangelical Church

Spring 2019

www.strangersrest.org

"Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself"
(Psalm 50:21)

The Doctrine of Divine Impassibility

The doctrine of God has been the theme for recent editions of the Occasional Notes. It has reminded me that I have neglected possibly the most important aspect of the Christian life. In Philippians 3:8-10 Paul wrote that he counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. Knowing Christ means knowing God for in Christ the fullness of the Godhead dwelleth (Colossians 2:9) and the knowledge of Christ is the knowledge of God because he who has seen Christ has seen the Father (John 14:9).

One of the doctrines of God that has become a matter of controversy is God's impassibility. That is the doctrine that God does not undergo emotional change and cannot be acted upon by his creatures. In other words, his Being cannot be affected by anything outside Him. Because He is simple He cannot be affected by anything inside Him either.

By impassible I mean that God is not subject to passions such as anger or regret, sadness or pain. This doctrine is questioned today. The doctrine of God's impassibility stood unchallenged for centuries. So much so that John Owen wrote "It is agreed by all that those expressions of 'repenting', 'grieving', and the like, are figurative, wherein no such affections are intended as these words signify in created natures, but only an event of things like that which proceedeth from such affections"¹.

Certainly Divine Impassibility appears in all the great reformed Statements of Faith such as the Westminster Confession and the 1689 Baptist Confession. However over the past century this doctrine has been questioned and is perhaps



summed up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his comment, "only the suffering God can help"².

Some Evangelicals speak about God's impassibility meaning not that man can force a change in God's emotions but that God can choose to have emotions which are included in his infinite being.

Such a view appears to be saying that God's emotions are subject to change but unlike us He is completely self-controlled. We shall return to this later. If God experiences emotional change, can He still be immutable and unchanging? I hope to show you that this is not possible. However, this view of God is known as theistic mutualism – that God is capable of change. However the danger of promoting a God that is subject to emotional change is that we are projecting man's view of God onto God leading to a God in man's image and therefore to idolatry. This is what this article aims to guard against.

Plainly, there is a difficulty that we need to resolve because there are scriptures that appear to show that God does exhibit emotions towards His creatures. We will look at some of those emotions below.

1. **Deuteronomy 9:19-20:-** For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure, wherewith the LORD was wroth against you to destroy you. But the LORD hearkened unto me at that time also. 20 And the LORD was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him: and I prayed for Aaron also the same time.

Here Moses is referring to God's anger

¹ Exposition of the Book of Hebrews by John Owen at p278 of Volume 26 of his Works by William Orme (containing the 5th volume of his exposition)

² Bonhoeffer, DI, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London SCM, 1967), p197

against Aaron and the People of Israel who made a golden calf to worship while Moses was receiving the Law on Mount Sinai.

2. **Genesis 6:6-7:-** And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. 7 And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

Here the Lord has said that he will destroy man because he was grieved in his heart and had changed his mind and now regretted that he had created him.

3. **1 Samuel 15:10-11:-** Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, 11 It repenteth me that I have set up Saul *to be* king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night.

In this passage the Lord states that he has changed his mind about making Saul king and now regretted his decision.

4. **Jonah 3:10:-** And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not.

Having threatened, through Jonah, that God would destroy Ninevah he then changed his mind after they repented.

Let us now look at some scriptures that indicate the opposite: that God does not have emotions and does not change his mind:-

1. **Numbers 23:19-20:-** God *is* not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do *it*? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? 20 Behold, I have received *commandment* to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.
2. **1 Samuel 15:29:-** And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he *is* not a man, that he should repent.
3. **James 1:17:-** Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

In these three passages we see that God cannot lie and cannot change his mind because he is not like a man. It is particularly interesting to note that in the same chapter (1 Samuel 15) it is

recorded that God repents of making Saul king and then a little later that the Lord is not a man that he should repent.

4. **Isaiah 27:4** Fury *is* not in me: who would set the briers *and* thorns against me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together.

Here the Lord specifically states that fury is not in Him. The Hebrew word is 'chemah' which means anger which is how it is translated in the NIV. In other words God does not get angry!

5. **Malachi 3:6:-** For I *am* the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

Here God says that He does not change which rules out changes of emotion.

The following scriptures make it impossible for God to go through emotional changes:

1. **Genesis 1:1:-** In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth;

As the Creator of the world God is outside time and cannot therefore have emotional changes that are by their nature within time otherwise he is like his creatures.

2. **Exodus 3:14:-** And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: And he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me;

As we have already seen at the beginning, this passage teaches us that God is pure being and does not become. Indeed, there is no becoming with God. He is, or to quote the passage, "I AM THAT I AM". We must therefore deny any emotional change to God because this would involve a new manner of God's being which would deny this great revelation to Moses: "I AM THAT I AM".

3. **John 4:24:-** God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth;

The significance of this verse is that it demonstrates that God is omnipresent: he is present everywhere and even in hell (Psalm 139:8). He is not to be conceived as a being with a body who is confined to a certain place, dwelling in a temple made by hands.

This is how Thomas Watson puts it in "A Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly's Catechism" at p43:



If God be a Spirit, then he is impassible; he is not capable of being hurt. Wicked men set up their banners, and bend their forces against God; they are said

to fight against God. Acts 5:39. But what will this fighting avail? What hurt can they do to the Deity? God is a Spirit, and therefore cannot receive any hurtful impression. Wicked men may imagine evil against the Lord. Nahum 1:9. 'What do ye imagine against the Lord?' But God being a Spirit is impenetrable. The wicked may eclipse his glory, but cannot touch his essence. God can hurt his enemies, but they cannot hurt him. Julian might throw up his dagger into the air against Heaven, but could not touch the Deity. God is a Spirit, invisible. How can the wicked with all their forces hurt him, when they cannot see him? Hence all the attempts of the wicked against God are foolish, and prove abortive. Psa 2:2, 4. 'The kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord and against his anointed. He that sits in the heavens shall laugh.' He is a Spirit, he can wound them, but they cannot touch him.

4. **Acts 14:15**:- (Barnabas and Paul speaking): And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.

This verse specifically speaks about God not having passions like we do. The word like-passions is *homoioopathēs* in Greek. It is only used twice in the New Testament. The other time it is used is in James 5:17 where we read that Elijah "was a man subject to like passions as we are".

Reconciling the Scriptures

How then are we to reconcile these scriptures? The answer is that those scriptures that speak about God's relationship with his creatures must be read in

the light of the scriptures that speak about God's essence or what He is eternally.

Looking at the first set of scriptures which speak of God changing his mind we can see them from two perspectives. From a human perspective these events (the Flood and the rejection of Saul as King) represent major shifts in the history of God's dealings with mankind. However, for God these events were part of his redemptive plan in accordance with his eternal decree. If God were a man in charge of the plan of redemption then he might be in an emotional conflict due to the frustration of his purposes by the sin of the people in Noah's day or by King Saul. This might force him to put in place an alternative plan. However God cannot be frustrated with himself while executing his perfect plan for the redemption of His People.³

We therefore have to read the passages that speak of God changing his mind anthropopathically. In other words, it is to attribute human emotions to God in a figurative sense in order to explain his interaction with his creatures whereas in truth he does not possess those emotions. When we read that God has eyes (2 Chronicles 16:9), hands (Exodus 15:17), feet (1 Kings 5:3), ears (James 5:4) or nostrils (Exodus 15:8) we do take these scriptures literally because we know elsewhere that God is a spirit (John 4:24) and is omnipresent (Jeremiah 23:23-24) and therefore has no body or body parts.

This is how Stephen Charnock puts it in "The Existence and Attributes of God":



... God accommodates himself in the Scripture to our weak capacity. God hath no more of a proper repentance, than he hath of a real body; though he, in accommodation to our weakness, ascribes to himself the members

of our bodies to set out to our understanding the greatness of his perfections, we must not conclude him a body like us; so, because he is said to have anger and repentance, we must not conclude him to have passions like us. When we cannot fully comprehend him as he is, he clothes himself with our nature in his expressions that we may apprehend him as we are able, and by an inspection into ourselves, learn something of the nature of God; yet those human ways of speaking

³ This paragraph is taken from "A Position Paper Concerning the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility" Presented by the

ought to be understood in a manner agreeable to the infinite excellency and majesty of God, and are only designed to mark out something in God which hath a resemblance with something in us; as we cannot speak to God as gods, but as men, so we cannot understand him speaking to us as a God, unless he condescend to speak to us like a man. God therefore frames his language to our dulness, not to his own state, and informs us by our own phrases, what he would have us learn of his nature, as nurses talk broken language to young children.

Let us take the Genesis passage describing God's repentance that he had made man on earth that led to the Flood. John Owen commented on that passage in these terms⁴:



What but his [God's] mistake and great disappointment, by a failing of wisdom, foresight, and power, can give propriety to these attributions unto God? The change God was going then to work

in his providence on the earth was such or like that which men do when they repent of a thing, being "grieved at the heart" for what they had formerly done. So are these things spoken of God to denote the kind of the things which he doth, not the nature of God himself; otherwise such expressions as these would suit him, whose frame of spirit and heart is so described: "Had I seen what would have been the issue of making man, I would never have done it. Would I had never been so overseen as to have engaged in such a business! What have I now got by my rashness? nothing but sorrow and grief of heart redounds to me." And do these become the infinitely blessed God.

The point that John Owen was making was that it would not be becoming of God to have made a mistake and changed his mind about the creation of man because he had not foreseen the result of His work. After all God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9-10). Therefore, God could not literally have been grieved in His heart and

repented of making man but the actions he took were, to man living in time, as if God had undergone these emotions although He did not in fact do so.

When God speaks of a change of course he is therefore speaking by an anthropopathy (the phenomenon of attributing human feelings to non-humans – in this case to God).

Thomas Watson puts it this way which I think is helpful:

Repentance is attributed to God figuratively. Numb 23:19. 'He is not a man that he should repent.' There may be a change in God's work, but not in his will. He may will a change, but not change his will. 'God may change his sentence, but not his decree.' A king may cause sentence to be passed upon a malefactor whom he intends to save; so God threatened destruction to Nineveh, but the people of Nineveh repenting, God spared them. Jonah 3: 10. Here God changed his sentence, but not his decree; it was what had lain in the womb of his purpose from eternity.⁵

It is important that we distinguish between passions and affections. Because God is the source of the existence of all things outside himself, he cannot be acted on by anything. He is outside his creation and cannot be affected by it. As Eliphaz the Temanite said to Job (albeit that he misunderstood Job): "Can a man be profitable unto God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous? Or is it gain to him that thou makest thy ways perfect?"

God therefore does not possess passions. That is passions cannot be stirred up in Him. However, he does possess affections which express God's character. God is perfectly joyful, perfectly loving, perfectly holy and communicates these eternal perfections to his creatures in time.⁶

Paul wrote that God is "blessed for ever," (Romans 9:5); "He is the blessed and only Potentate," (1 Timothy 6:15); "God all sufficient," (Genesis 17:1). John Owen drew these conclusions in Volume 12, Chapter 4 of his Works:

But can he be blessed, is he all-sufficient, who is tossed up and down with hope, joy, fear, sorrow, repentance, anger, and the like? Doth not fear take off from absolute blessedness? Grant that God's fear doth not

⁴ The Life and Works of John Owen (Volume 12, Chapter 4)

⁵ A Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly's Catechism (pp. 61-62).

⁶ Based on an extract from "Only the non-suffering God can help": Recovering the glory of divine impassibility by Mark

Smith published in the Churchman

https://churchsociety.org/docs/churchman/126/Cman_126_2_Smith.pdf

long abide yet whilst it doth so, he is less blessed than he was before and than he is after his fear ceaseth. When he hopes, is he not short in happiness of that condition which he attains in the enjoyment of what he hoped for? and is he not lower when he is disappointed and falls short of his expectation?

Mark Smith made a similar point in his article in the Churchman. He wrote that a suffering God would not fully love because, if capable of being hurt himself, He could provide no hope of release.

Consider the promise in Revelation 21:4:

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

This promise would be meaningless if God suffered in himself as we do. How can a God who is suffering wipe away our tears if He has tears as well? Would he not be a God worthy of our pity rather than our worship? Who would wipe away His tears?

When we come to the Lord Jesus, we see that he showed human emotions. For example:

1. Cleansing the Temple: John 2:14-16:- "And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: 15 And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; 16 And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise."
2. John 11:35:- "Jesus wept" over the tomb of Lazarus.
3. Luke 19:41:- And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it;
4. Luke 22:44:- And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

These are just a few examples of the Lord Jesus showing his emotions. These emotions are real emotions just as our emotions are real because He experienced them in His human nature.

In Hebrews 4 we read:

Verses 14-16:- Seeing then that we have

a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* profession. 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are, yet* without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

As our High Priest the Lord Jesus was touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knew what it was to be tempted to anger and to lose self-control yet he was without sin. In other words, the Lord Jesus kept perfect control of His emotions which of course is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23).

The Lord Jesus did not suffer at all in His Divine nature which is why, in order to enter into our sufferings, He became a man and experienced human emotion in his human nature only. However, because the Lord Jesus, having both a divine and a human nature, was one person, we are able to say that God suffered on the cross and that God died but he did so as a man. While the Lord Jesus died as a man He was still upholding all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3) in His Divine nature.

God eternally decreed all of history, and gives effect to it by a single, eternal creative act. Nothing in his decree ever changes; nothing in the single creative act ever changes. Man's perception is one of temporal interaction and progression (which is why he appears to experience divine expressions of anger, pleasure etc.) because he is confined to perceiving things temporally. That is not how God perceives things in eternity, though in the incarnation he was able to share man's perception (Hebrews 4:15) by partaking in human nature.⁷

It is right to say that God's joy is permanent, just as is his love and his wrath. However it is wrong to imply that God experiences changing emotions, except in the incarnation when he became a man and therefore experienced emotional change, in his human nature.

This is what Herman Bavinck in Reformed Dogmatics, Volume II, God and Creation wrote at p158:

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.

Concluding Comments

The Christian ultimately can gain no comfort from a passible God who suffers in time with us. As Mark Smith pointed out in his article in the Churchman, when we are ill we need a doctor who is able to heal us. We would not be helped by a doctor who catches our illness and is similarly incapacitated by it. God does sympathise with us in our weakness because the Lord Jesus, as a man, suffered on our behalf so that sympathy is genuine.

In Psalm 119:71 we read: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes." The Christian needs to know that his suffering has some point within God's sovereign purposes.

However, if God reacts to our suffering as we are experiencing it then we have no guarantee that He can see the end from the beginning and that He is able to use that suffering for our benefit. The comfort of Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, would be lost because God is caught up in the same web of suffering as we are ourselves.

Ironically, one of the charges against impassibility is that it imports Hellenistic influences into Christian theology. But in fact the opposite is the case. The Gods of the Greeks were passibilists. For example Ares was the son of Zeus and Hera yet, according to Homer both of his parents hated him. The Greek "gods" were passible, made in the image of man. Those who argue for a passible God fall, like the Greek gods, into the condemnation of Psalm 50:21: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself."

This does not mean that God's dealings with sinful humanity are not subject to radical change. We have already seen that they are and Isaiah 54:7-8 illustrates it again:-

For a small moment have I forsaken thee;
but with great mercies will I gather thee. 8 In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer.

However, these changes in God's actions towards us are not based on temporary emotional change in God but on his unchanging nature of justice and mercy as he works out his eternal decree towards

mankind.

Finally, divine impassibility does not mean that God is unresponsive to the prayers of the repentant (see Isaiah 19:22) or that He is unresponsive to those who in faith (and in various emotional states as troubled or challenged believers) call on His name (e.g. Psalms 18:6, 34:4, 118:5). In other words, the biblical exhortation to place our faith in the Lord's unchanging, trustworthy character is the perfect answer for fallen, frail and passible human beings.⁸

We worship a God who is altogether above and beyond our human imaginations. His love is perfect because it is transcendent and impassible. Let us embrace the impassible God and exclaim with Paul at the end of Romans 11:33-36:-

O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Visit to the Philippines

By Joel Munday



Ernie, Joel, Mark and Martin Erdmann

Between Friday, 22 March and Wednesday, 3 April God paved the way for a very special opportunity in my life. I joined Pastor Mark Mullins, Pastor Ernie Amurao and Dr. Martin Erdmann, his wife Joy and daughter Estelle on a trip to the Philippines. Our purpose was to strengthen and encourage our Brethren in Christ, both by visiting the churches and holding a ministers' conference.

⁸ I am grateful to James Crabtree for suggesting the points in this and the preceding two paragraphs.

Our hosts were Pastor David Evasco and his wife Cristal. Pastor Evasco is the minister of Banaba Baptist Mission, Tarlac. This is a church plant of Bamban First Baptist Church. They currently meet in the porch of a house, but by God's grace have recently purchased a plot of land and will begin building a formal church building imminently.

The majority of our time before and after the conference was spent with the Fellowship at Banaba Baptist Mission. The first engagement of our trip, however, took place at Bamban First Baptist Church on the evening of Saturday 23 March. A concert was held for the local churches involving an address by Pastor Mullins, hymn singing and music for solo violin – myself being a violinist.

On our first Lord's Day, Pastor Mullins preached at Banaba Baptist Mission, while Dr Erdmann spoke at Bamban First Baptist Church. I accompanied the former. The morning service takes place at 8 am, followed by Sunday school. Pastor Amurao led the Adult Sunday School, while Pastor Mullins and I led the Children's Sunday School. During the afternoon, a Sunday School Extension takes place. Pastor Evasco and I took the church mini-van around the local streets picking up many young children between the ages 4 and 12 and bringing them to the church. Mrs Erdmann addressed the children, and Estelle – an artist by profession – led an art activity.

The conference took place between Monday 25 and Thursday 28 March on the coast of the South China Sea in the region of Zambales. Approximately 30 men attended, both pastors and students of the Central School of Theology. The structure of each day was as follows: morning devotions with local pastors at 6.30am followed by two lectures before midday, a further lecture commencing at 4pm followed by a time for Questions and Answers, and evening devotions with Pastor Amurao. Both Pastor



The Evening Devotion at the Conference

Mullins and Dr Erdmann gave 5 lectures. Pastor

Mullins addressed the doctrine of the Godhead; Dr. Erdmann addressed the Eternal Decrees of God and the fundamental truths of the Gospel.

Having returned from Zambales, on Friday 29 March an evening prayer meeting was held at Banaba Baptist Mission, followed at 6.30am the following morning by a special meeting of prayer for the new church building. This took place at the location at which it is to be built. Later that day we attended the Youth Fellowship, at which Pastor Mullins spoke.

On the second Lord's Day, 30 April, I accompanied Pastor Mullins as he spoke at Trinity Baptist Church, at the invitation of Pastor Pons Medina. Dr. Erdmann preached at Banaba Baptist Mission, and in the evening we all returned to the Mission for a special programme of thanksgiving at Banaba Baptist Mission.



Pastor Brian and Nessie Ellis at home

Our last engagement took place on Monday 2 April. We journeyed to the capital city of the Philippines, in

order to visit the Christian Compassion Ministry's children home, which is overseen by Pastor Brian Ellis. I performed a short concert for the children, while Estelle taught an art lesson.

It was a very special encouragement to us all to witness the zeal for the Lord among the Philippine brethren. We witnessed a great deal of commitment and excitement among ministers and members for the Lord's work. There was a genuine desire and Berean-like open-mindedness to hear the sermons and lectures Pastor Mullins and Dr Erdmann had prepared, accompanied by much gratitude. A great deal of prayer is needed for these believers, who are serving God in a poverty-stricken country with so many of its population turned to false gods.

Praise and Prayer Requests

For Praise:

- For another year the Lord has blessed, the church anniversary being in May 2019;
- For the provision of a pianist since September last year which has been a great blessing;
- For the return of a young couple now with their two baby boys and the burden of the husband to teach the children apologetics to help them answer the secularism in their schools;

- For a blessed trip to the Philippines in April 2019 and the opportunity to speak to 30 pastors or students at a conference on the Trinity and the Gospel;
- For Open Air preaching opportunities;

For Prayer:

- That every child who attends the church, occasionally and regularly, would come to know the Lord Jesus as their own Saviour from their sins;
- That the Lord would continue to bless the preaching of the Word on the Lord's Day and during the week, and that the Word would reach the hearts of listeners, present and online, and change lives.
- That God would continue to provide grace for the administration and smooth running of the church, including its premises;
- That the Lord would send more workers for the Harvest Field; and
- That more local individuals and families would join the church and fully participate in knowing and serving the Lord.



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