

An Exposition of the 2nd (1689) London Baptist Confession

Chapter 2: Simplicity and the Doctrine of Impassibility

1. The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of himself, infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself; **a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions**, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, 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.

[1 Corinthians 8:4, 6; Deuteronomy 6:4; Jeremiah 10:10; Isaiah 48:12; Exodus 3:14; John 4:24; 1 Timothy 1:17; Deuteronomy 4:15, 16; Malachi 3:6; 1 Kings 8:27; Jeremiah 23:23; Psalms 90:2; Genesis 17:1; Isaiah 6:3; Psalms 115:3; Isaiah 46:10; Proverbs 16:4; Romans 11:36; Exodus 34:6, 7; Hebrews 11:6; Nehemiah 9:32, 33; Psalms 5:5, 6; Exodus 34:7; Nahum 1:2, 3.]

1. What is the definition and history of divine impassibility?

a. Definitions:

- i. Simplicity: "God is a most simple, unmixed and indivisible essence. He is incapable of the least composition...without parts, members, or qualities."¹
- ii. Divine impassibility: "God does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by his relationship to creation."²
- iii. "Passible" means to be acted upon ("patient" as someone acted upon). Passibility is a creaturely characteristic—we are very passible.
- iv. The passion of love is being denied in God but not the *perfection* of love; He *is* love.
- v. Emotions are human; perfections are divine.

b. History:

- i. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus ("The impassible became passible in Christ."), Augustine, Luther, Calvin, the Puritans, Spurgeon, etc.
- ii. First Council of Toledo (400 A.D.) -- Anathemas:
#6 "If anyone should say or believe that the Son of God as God suffered, let him be anathema.
#7 If anyone should say or believe that the human Jesus Christ, as a human, was incapable of suffering, let him be anathema."
- iii. Divine impassibility was not questioned until the 20th century led by Jurgen Moltmann.

c. Misunderstanding or inaccurate descriptions:

- i. Emotional connection and relationship require emotional change or suffering (empathy).
- ii. "A God without passions is a cold and robotic god without emotion."

2. What do the Scriptures say?

a. Some describe God using human characteristics or experiences.

- i. Genesis 6:6-7
- ii. Deuteronomy 9:7-8
- iii. 1 Samuel 15:11

b. Some passages deny these very things in God.

- i. Numbers 23:19
- ii. 1 Samuel 15:29
- iii. James 1:17

¹ George Swinnoek, *The Blessed and Boundless God*, p. 24.

² Samuel Renihan, *God without Passions a Primer*, p. 19.

- c. Some describe God in a way that makes these passions impossible.
 - i. Genesis 1:1
 - ii. Exodus 3:14
 - iii. Acts 14:15

The *changes* attributed to God (e.g., repentance) are descriptions of the unfolding plan of God in the “theatre of creation” and are described in language accommodated to us (cf. “the arm of the LORD is not so short...”).

3. How do we reconcile these differences?

- a. We must give priority to passages that teach His nature over those that describe actions.
- b. We must not equate the human language used to describe God with God.
- c. Human language cannot contain who God is.
- d. None of this makes God’s revelation false.
- e. We must distinguish between God Himself and the outworking of His eternal decree.

4. We must understand what constitutes human nature.

- a. What are the “parts” of human nature?
- b. What are the “faculties” of human nature?
- c. What are affections (being “affected”)?
- d. What are passions?

“They are perfections in Him what are affections in us.”³

5. How do we know God?

- a. What is God?
 - “...whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself”*
- b. Knowing Him by His name – I AM.
- c. Knowing Him by His attributes.
- d. Knowing Him by negation.
- e. Knowing Him by positive correlation with humans.

6. Conclusions

- a. God is a being entirely unlike us (cf. Psalm 50:21).
- b. God does not have parts or passions because He is...
 - i. A most pure spirit.
 - ii. He is simple.
 - iii. He is immutable (unchanging).
 - iv. He is most wise and omniscient.
 - v. He is sovereign, having decreed all things from eternity.
 - vi. He is immovable.

7. Applications:

- a. This is ground for unending worship.
- b. This is the ground of security.
- c. This is the ground of hope (cf. Malachi 3:6).

³ Thomas Adams, 1629.