

THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD

(Tom Constable)

Many theologians have held the doctrine of "divine impassibility" over many centuries. This doctrine is as follows: Nothing in the created universe, external to God Himself, can cause Him to suffer or to be affected at all. This was a tenet of the Greek Stoics, and perhaps that is one of the roots of this view today.

This doctrine may raise questions in the minds of some concerning God's responses to His people's obedience, on the one hand, and their disobedience, on the other. Does man's obedience make God happy? And does our disobedience make Him sad? This is the impression that most people would draw just from reading the Bible.

Certainly the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) portrays God, as the father in the story, rejoicing over his younger son's repentance and return home. It pictures a "happy" God. Likewise, the Flood account presents God as "sorry" that He had made man (Gen. 6:6). Also, the fact that Jesus, who is the ultimate revelation of God the Father, "wept" at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35), and showed compassion and anger during His earthly ministry, shows that God is not impassible. These are only three of many examples in the Bible presenting God as happy or sorry that human beings made certain decisions. They picture God as responding to human activity.

Yet because God is who He is, many theologians have concluded that He acts completely independent of any human influence. When Scripture describes God as responding to human actions, they say, it uses anthropomorphic expressions (i.e., descriptions of God in human terms even though He is not a human—apart, of course, from His incarnation in Christ). God was sorry He made man only in the sense that humankind's rebellion was an evil thing. It did not make Him sorry in the sense that man's action elicited a response of sorrow from God.

These theologians believe that when we read in the Prophets, for example, that the sins of the Israelites grieved God's heart, or that God was angry with people, we need to understand such statements as in no way contradicting His impassibility. They are simply descriptions of God as though He were a human responding. Actually, they say, He does not respond; in other words, He does not react to man's acts on the basis of or with emotion. His orientation toward sin is consistently negative, and His orientation toward righteousness is consistently positive, regardless of any human activity.

Other theologians view statements of God's responses to human actions as genuine responses. While there are admittedly many anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible, these theologians believe that some references to God responding, while anthropomorphic, are descriptions of how God really does respond. These texts indicate that He does respond to some human actions.

I tend to agree with the second position. I have found nothing in Scripture that tells the reader to understand God as not truly responding to human actions, including prayer. Rather I find much that leads the reader to conclude that God does indeed respond to some (not all) human activity.

It seems to me that the doctrine of impassibility rests on a philosophical deduction concerning God, rather than on solid Scriptural revelation. Nowhere does God say in Scripture that He does not respond to human action, though, being holy, He is of course not subject to sin or sinful human beings. On the contrary, the writers of Scripture wrote repeatedly that He does respond to human activity.

"Open theists" take the fact that God responds to some human activity too far. They believe that there are things that God does not know until humans act. This view goes beyond the biblical revelation to the opposite extreme. It denies the omniscience of God and limits the sovereignty of God. "Process theologians" take this even further than Open theists. They believe that God is in the process of developing as a result of human activity.

