

Does God have feelings?

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For nearly the entire history of Christendom it has been held that God does not have feelings. Yet, how is it that this could be maintained despite the frequent references in Scripture to his emotions? And for what reason was it so emphatically held? The suffering of the 20th century has led to a dramatic reversal of this monolithic doctrine. Yet, is this simply a modern reaction, or is there validity in accepting a radical revision to this view of the character of God?

I REMEMBER THE TIME when someone first told me about the phrase ‘without passions’ in the 39 Articles of the Anglican Church. I was shocked that anyone could think that God did not have feelings. However, I later learnt that this view was held by nearly every Christian theologian until the end of the nineteenth century. How and why was this view so widely accepted when the Bible seems to regularly speak of God’s feelings? Is it reasonable to instead believe that God *does* have feelings?

One of the main reasons that some say God has no feelings is that it implies that he is open to change. For, if a person has genuine affections, then he or she must be willing to be *affected* by a person or event. So, for example, if I see a lost child, then if I have compassion I will be *moved* to change my plans so that I can help him find his parents. My actions will demonstrate my compassion. Likewise, when God hears us cry to him in prayer, since he is our heavenly Father he will also be *moved* to change his plans to relieve our suffering or grant us perseverance. His actions will also demonstrate both his faithfulness and his compassion.

However, any suggestion that God is subject to any change is strongly refuted by many evangelicals. On the one hand, their opposition appears to have scriptural support (Psalm 102:27, Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17).¹ Yet, I suspect that their reasoning owes much to secular, not Biblical thinking.

Ancient Greek thinkers imagined God to be emotionless, unaffected in any way by the material world. Aristotle saw God as distant and separate from the world, (an ‘unmoved mover’), Plato regarded emotions as part of the body, (so since God has no body, he has no emotions), and the Stoics saw emotions as a weakness.

This thinking gave rise to the development of what is commonly known as *Classical Theism*. This philosophical view explains God’s character by comparing him to human qualities. In some areas his character was said to be *superior* to that of humans. So, for example, he was regarded as *all* knowing and *all* present. In other areas, his character was said to be *different* to that of humans. So, he was regarded as *not* limited by a material body and *not* bound to time.

Significantly, Classical Theism understood God as without change (*immutable*) and without emotion (*impassive*). For, since change always occurs over time, and God is outside of time, (another claim of Classical Theism), they concluded that God cannot change. Likewise, since they regarded

emotions as a sign of weakness, and God is not weak, they concluded that God does not have any feelings.

This general perception of God's character has had a significant influence on the way that Christians have understood him, even to the present day.² Classical Theistic descriptions of God, (such as *omniscient*, *immutable* and *eternal*), continue to be used in modern theology textbooks. Yet, not only are the *words* used, but the sentiment is also expressed by some theologians.³

Nonetheless, there are some aspects of Classical Theism that both reflect and preserve Biblical notions of God's character. It can protect us from viewing God in ways that see him as so intimately involved with his creation that he actually evolves within human history. Likewise, it helps us avoid speaking of God in ways that suggest instability in his character, such as having the potential to break his promises. Classical Theistic descriptions of God also protect his absolute sovereignty from any suggestion that humans can act independently of his will.

Yet, must we go further and say with the Classical Theists that God has no emotions? I don't think so. Firstly, feelings do not necessarily entail weakness, as the ancient Greeks suggested. Whilst it is true that human feelings have become spoilt with sin, it does not follow that God's emotions are also spoilt. Our emotions can cause us to change our character, but God's character will never change. Our feelings can distort our decision-making, but God always makes the right judgement, regardless of his emotions.

Secondly, and most significantly, there are widespread references to God's emotions throughout Scripture. God hates (Isaiah 1:14), is angry (Nahum 1:2, Zechariah 1:15), has compassion (Psalm 103:13), is jealous (Exodus 20:5, Zechariah 1:14), grieves (Genesis 6:6, Ephesians 4:30), is insulted (Hebrews 10:29), laughs (Psalm 2:4), is pleased (Leviticus 3:16), rejoices (Psalm 104:31, Isaiah 62:5), and loves: "The Lord set his affection on your forefathers and loved them" (Deuteronomy 10:15).

So, how do those who deny any emotions in God deal with these passages of Scripture? Quite simply, they view them as mere figures of speech. In the same way that we cannot expect God to literally have human body parts, (as Scripture speaks of in Exodus 3:20, Deuteronomy 4:34; 9:10, Psalm 11:4, Isaiah 37:17), they say that we cannot expect him to literally have human emotions. In other words, they claim that if we are prepared to accept statements of his physical nature as

anthropomorphisms, (figures of speech assigning *physical* human characteristics to God), then we should also be prepared to accept statements of his emotional nature as *anthropopathisms*, (figures of speech assigning *emotional* human characteristics to God).

Thus, they state that not only does God have no feelings, but the reason he *appears* to have them is so that we can better imagine what he is like. So, they claim, he *accommodates* himself to our limited understanding by using human analogies. This view was consistently expressed by John Calvin who stated that "...such forms of speaking *do not* so much express clearly *what God is like* as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity".⁴

Yet, it seems somehow unsatisfactory to claim that God only *appears* to have feelings. Nowhere more is this the case than when we suffer. If God only *appears* to have feelings, his sympathy can seem hollow and unauthentic.

It is thus probably no accident that the suffering of the twentieth century has led modern theologians to challenge the traditional view of God's impassibility. Increasingly, the stoic god of the Classical Theists appeared distant and silent in response to the tragedies of human suffering. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his prison camp expressed, "Only the suffering God can help."⁵

Yet, when we try to find a suffering God in the pages of the Bible do we fall into the same trap as those who look there for an 'unmoved mover'? I don't think so. Whilst it is true that we must always be wary of how our worldview shapes our reading of the Bible, I believe that there is a good case for claiming that God *does* have feelings.

The case for divine emotions was persuasively made by Jürgen Moltmann, in his influential book *The Crucified God*. He argued that when Jesus Christ suffered on the cross, both his human *and* his divine natures suffered. In doing so Moltmann differs with those who claim that only the *human* side of Jesus experienced suffering, leaving his divine side free of emotion. Thus they can maintain that since Jesus' divine nature did not suffer, then *God himself* did not suffer.

However, those who split the two natures of Christ in such a stark way are at risk of undermining the Biblical claim that Jesus was fully God and fully man. For, if Jesus was not both divine *and* human, then his entire mission of salvation was undermined.⁶

Nonetheless, the reason that Moltmann saw this issue as so important to his case was that if it is true that Jesus' *divine* nature suffered, then *all of God* suffered. For, since the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father (John 10:38; 14:10-11), it follows that when Jesus suffered, *the Father also suffered*. Indeed, as Moltmann said, "The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son".⁷ Thus, the crucifixion of Christ affected *all three* persons of the Trinity, making it an event *inside* God.

So, if Moltmann is right in saying that God has feelings, then how does he deal with our earlier problem of preserving the changelessness of God? His solution is to say that God *does* change, and that he changes over time as humans change through history. Indeed, he is prepared to say with Process Theologians that God is *becoming*. Yet, despite his other helpful observations, it is at this point that he departs from the Bible's teaching on God's character. For, Scripture regularly states that God does not change.

So, where does that leave us? It seems that we must either ignore the parts of the Bible that speak of God's emotions, or ignore the parts of the Bible that speak of God's changelessness.

However, there is a third option. If we look closer at the four passages that we mentioned earlier, we see that the change referred to is in God's *character*. We are told that God's character does not change, so that we will be encouraged to rely on his promises (Psalm 102:27, Malachi 3:6), and so that we will preserve the original teachings about Jesus (Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17).

Yet, these passages *do not* claim that God is completely changeless. Indeed, there are places in the Bible where it shows that God *does* change. He saves the Ninevites despite originally stating his intention to destroy them (Jonah 3:10). Likewise, he promises that he will act according to our requests made in prayer (James 5:16). If God is immutable, as the Classical Theists claim, then in these two instances God must be only *pretending* to change. Yet, it seems clear that the Bible shows that God does change in some sense.

However, it is vital that we remember that this ability to change, even in response to his creatures, occurs within the framework of his absolute sovereignty (Genesis 50:20, Ephesians 1:11). Whilst it is hard to understand how God can remain sovereign whilst still reacting to his creation, we must resist the temptation to emphasise one aspect over the other.

The Classical Theistic view of an *emotionless* God also falls short of the picture of God revealed in the Bible. For, God *does* have feelings, because God is love. In fact, he has revealed that his feelings are part of his very nature. So, in Exodus 34:6-7 he states that he is “the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Indeed, I think it is fair to say that if we deny that God has feelings, then we discount his sympathy as mere illusion. *Sympathy* requires *pathos*. If God cannot suffer, then he does not know what we are going through when we suffer. Likewise, if he cannot suffer then he does not know what it is like to be fully human. However, this seems to be contrary to our understanding of the incarnation, where God came as a man and suffered so that he could help us (Hebrews 2:14-18). Additionally, it undermines any claim that God suffered genuine grief at the death of his son, something that is at the heart of the notion of sacrifice.

Furthermore, one must also challenge whether the God of the ancient Greeks has any relation at all to the God of the Bible. Classical Theism views God as distant, without emotions, and beyond the reach of his creation. However, the Bible reveals God as one as repeatedly acting within history out of love to reconcile his fallen world to himself in Christ.

A further danger for those who promote divine impassibility is that they are forced to read Biblical references to God’s feelings in a way that is contrary to its plain meaning. As Packer has said, ‘Surely we must accept Barth’s insistence that at every point in his self-disclosure God reveals what he essentially is, with no gestures that mystify, and surely we must reject as intolerable any suggestion that God in reality is different at any point from what Scripture makes him appear to be.’⁸

So, are the 39 Articles wrong when they say ‘without passions’? Some modern commentators, who wish to affirm both divine emotion and orthodox Anglicanism, have interpreted the term ‘impassive’ to mean nothing more than a denial of God’s “impotence and imperfection”.⁹ If this is the case, then the sentiment expressed in the Articles is to be commended. However, if by saying ‘without passions’ the 39 Articles mean that God does not have emotions, then I believe that they are wrong. God has feelings. He suffers with us in our sufferings, and rejoices with us in our happiness. Nowhere more was this seen than at the cross, where God, who became one of us, suffered for us so that we might no longer suffer death (Hebrews 2:14).

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¹ We will consider some of these passages later.

² See the extensive treatment in J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: a Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926).

³ For example, see H. Blocher, 'Divine Immutability,' in *The Power and Weakness of God*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990).

⁴ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, XX & XII, LCC, ed. J.T. McNeill; tr. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 1.13.1. Italics added.

⁵ Cited in R. Bauckham, 'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology, *Themelios* 9, 3 (1984), 9.

⁶ Probably the best expression of the two natures was made at the Council of Chalcedon. Jesus had "...two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence".

⁷ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), 243.

⁸ J. I. Packer, 'Theism For Our Time,' in *God Who is Rich in Mercy*, O'Brien, P.T. & Peterson, D.G (eds.) (Homebush West: Lancer, 1986), 15.

⁹ So, Griffith Thomas, W.H., 6th ed., *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Vine Books, 1978), 15.