Voices: Does God suffer? A consideration of God's feelings

April 7, 2020

The British New Testament scholar and theologian N.T. Wright recently published a brief article in *Time Magazine* about the Christian response to COVID-19. While well-received by many, Wright's article was not without its critics.

Some Christians, particularly among the Reformed, took exception to what they saw as Wright's caricature and dismissal of classical theism, including statements such as: "Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible."

While some of Wright's critics were not very charitable, theologian Wyatt Graham has written an irenic and helpful response. But I don't plan to wade into the debate over Wright himself and his article. Rather, I want to address specifically God's "impassibility."

A historical perspective

While widely unknown or rejected in modern theological circles, divine "impassibility" pretty much was embraced unanimously by Christians until the 19th and 20th centuries. From the Fathers through the Reformers and beyond, this was the virtual consensus of historic Christianity in all its branches—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.

This began to change in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. Impassibility often has been grossly oversimplified to mean, "God doesn't suffer." Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann have

argued this idea was derived from Greek philosophy, not the Bible; the world needs a God who cares and suffers with us.

I certainly sympathize with this perspective and once held it myself. But my opinion changed after studying the early Church Fathers at Truett Seminary, which helped me understand this picture of impassibility and early Christian theology is oversimplified.

Yes, early Christian theologians used some of the language and concepts of Greek philosophy, but so did the New Testament authors (See Graham's article above for a slightly lengthier treatment.). Moreover, impassibility absolutely does not mean God is emotionless, uncaring, cold, etc.

God's steady emotions

Put simply, God's impassibility means God's emotional state is not contingent upon anything other than God himself. God is in absolute, perfect control over his emotions, and nothing outside of God can provoke God's emotional response against his will.

Remember God is eternal and self-existent. He existed in eternity past as perfect, self-sufficient, and lacking nothing (Exodus 3:14; Psalm 90:2; 102:25-27; John 1:1-4; Acts 17:24-25). God did not create the universe because he needed something from it or because he was lonely. God doesn't need anything else to be emotionally fulfilled. God created the world as a perfectly free act of his own will.

This actually is very good news for us. Can you imagine if God became so emotionally overwhelmed he acted in ways inconsistent or unpredictable? We as finite, fallen human beings act in such ways all the time, often with catastrophic consequences. God is immune from such things (1 Samuel 15:29; Malachi 3:6).

God’s love remains sturdy and steadfast even in the midst of worldly chaos. His love does not fluctuate based on the kind of day he’s having, and God is invulnerable to emotional manipulation.

God’s feelings are (not) like our feelings

The Bible is full of passages describing God’s emotions using the language of human emotions (e.g, Genesis 6:6; Psalm 78:40). This is undeniable; even advocates of impassibility recognize this fact. But what does such language mean, exactly?

Christians historically have understood these passages to be using “analogical language.” Since God is infinite and cannot be comprehended fully by finite humans, God uses language we can understand to communicate with us. For example, the Bible frequently speaks also of God’s “hands,” “face,” etc. (e.g., Isaiah 31:3; Leviticus 26:17). God does not have these body parts literally —except in the incarnate Christ—but such language helps our understanding.

Applied to God’s emotions, we can say they are *analogical but not identical* to our human emotions. Put another way, God’s emotions are like ours, but God’s emotions also are different than ours. They are similar enough that the analogical language communicates truth comprehensibly but different enough that we cannot say God’s emotions and ours are the exact same.

As I mentioned above, we humans are emotionally unstable. We struggle to control our feelings. Whether I hear the news of a friend’s unexpected death or learn of the new life in another friend’s womb, I cannot control the immediate feelings that come, and I must struggle to control the response I enact. God’s emotions are not like that.

Our emotional God

However, there is more to God's emotional life than what I describe above. The eternal, divine Son took on flesh, becoming fully human (John 1:14). The divine nature took on human nature, and in so doing, God the Son as Jesus of Nazareth experienced the full range of human emotion.

Jesus Christ cried like us and laughed like us. He felt real pain when Lazarus died (John 11:30-35). He felt real fear in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:38-39; Luke 22:41-44). He felt real despair from the cross (Mark 15:34). He felt real tenderness and love toward those in need (Matthew 9:36). He felt real happiness and joy, too (Luke 10:21).

We can and should affirm God is grieved by sin, suffering and death. We should affirm God is with us in our pain, and he understands. We do not worship a God who is distant, uncaring or emotionless.

But I believe we also must affirm God's impassibility. We must affirm God's emotions are not unstable and difficult to control like ours. We must affirm God is steady and unchanging, a safe harbor in the midst of the storm. We must affirm God is invulnerable, and that includes invulnerability to the vagaries of human passions.

The impassible God is the God who can both grieve with us and guarantee we are safe eternally with him.

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