"Greater Is He Than Man Can Know": Divine Repentance and a Brief Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility & Affectability

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The subtitle of this essay incorporates an acknowledged absurdity. That I am even endeavoring a "brief inquiry" into profoundly complex issues[2] that have been deliberated for centuries by the greatest minds of the Church may seem alarmingly arrogant, hopelessly simplistic, or even theologically dangerous. I hope it is none of these. It is intended to be an honest attempt to let the biblical data itself shape at least my own theological thought and speech.

The question of divine repentance frames the context in which this essay will explore the larger theological issues indicated. Does God "repent" or not? Our instinctive answer might be "no" on the basis of a brace of scriptural statements that seem to compel that conclusion. Many more passages, however, state that God *does* repent than that he does *not*. Out of 105 occurrences of the Hebrew verb in question (נחם), thirty-five (33%) refer to God. Of those, twenty-seven (77%) indicate that God does repent, while only eight (23%) imply or insist that he does not—only two of which state in direct propositional form that God does not repent as a point of principle or divine character.

Of all the texts that address divine repentance, none illustrates the problem more economically than 1 Samuel 15. This passage displays the difficulty in microcosm because it includes within a single context point-blank assertions that God both *does* and *does not* repent.[3]

I repent that I have set up Saul to be king (v. 11).[4]

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[2] The complex issues identified in the title bleed into arguably even more complex issues such as divine aseity and simplicity. (Who would have thought that simplicity could be a complex issue?) For thoughtful analysis of these related issues see John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 325–37 and John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 225–30, 600–08.

[3] The critics' charge that such contradictions prove the Bible's human origin and fallibility betrays a fundamental ignorance of human nature (as though the writer himself would not have noticed and removed such an obvious contradiction) and overestimates the originality of their powers of observation.

[4] Unless otherwise noted, Scripture citations are taken from the *New King James Version*® (copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson; used by permission; all rights reserved). Emphasis has been added to the citations here. These citations represent my own translation to illustrate the consistency of the Hebrew term in the text, which is otherwise masked by various translations in these different verses (even within the same versions). For example, the NASB 1995 translates the same Hebrew word as "regret" (vv. 11, 35) and "change his mind" (v. 29).

> *The Strength of Israel will not . . . repent,* for he is *not* a man that he should r*epent* (v. 29).
> *The LORD repented* that he had made Saul king over Israel (v. 35).

How can Scripture sensibly affirm—within mere sentences from each other, no less—both that God does not, and yet does, repent? Moreover, if "repent" means to change (one's mind), how can God do that if he elsewhere affirms that he is changeless or immutable (Mal 3:6)? The following chart summarizes the most immediately relevant textual data regarding divine repentance.

Table 1. Biblical Data on Divine Repentance

Passages Asserting That God Does/Will Not Repent	Passages Asserting That God Did/Does Repent	Brief Contextual Description
	Pentateuch	
	Gn 6:6,7	God repented that he had made man; parallel to "it grieved him into his heart" (lit.); v. 8=Ex 32:11–14
	Ex 32:12, 14*	God repents of judgment in answer to prayer
Nm 23:19		God is not a man who lies or repents
	Dt 32:36	God will repent himself on his servants
	Historical Books	
	Jgs 2:18	God repented because of Israel's groanings
1 Sm 15:29 (2x)	1 Sm 15:11, 35	God repented regarding the kingship of Saul
	2 Sm 24:16	God repented of the angel's destruction
	1 Chr 21:15	Parallel to 2 Sm 24:16
	Poetical Books	
	Ps 90:13	Prayer that God would be sorry for his servants
	Ps 106:45	God relented of his chastening on his people
Ps 110:4		Yahweh has sworn and will not repent
	Ps 135:14	Yahweh will judge his people and will repent himself concerning his servants
	Prophetic Books	
Jer 4:28		I have purposed and will not repent
	Jer 15:6**	I am weary with repenting
	Jer 18:7–10**	God responds to human responses
Jer 20:16		Let that man be like the cities that Yahweh overthrew, and did not repent
	Jer 26:3, 12–13,18-19**	God responds to human responses (note unconditionality of Micah's prophecy, v. 18)
	Jer 42:10	I repent concerning the disaster that I have brought upon you
Ez 24:14		I, the LORD, have spoken *it*…I will do *it*; I will not hold back, nor will I spare, nor will I repent
	Jl 2:13,14**	God responds to human responses
	Am 7:1-6*	God repents in answer to prayer
	Jon 3:9, 10; 4:2**	God responds to human response
Zec 8:14		Just as I determined to punish you, and I would not repent, so I am determined to do you good

Note: Passages marked with * and ** will be referenced later in the essay.

So does God repent, or not? And if so, what does that mean? How does this impact our understanding and explanation of the nature and character of God? In order to get a feel for the larger theological context in which these questions need to be explored, it is necessary to traipse around the theological barn a time or two before returning to the original issue of divine repentance.

Common Explanations of Divine Repentance

Several attempts at resolving this conundrum surface in the literature. Some offer helpful insights. But all of them seem to me to fall short of a satisfactory solution.

An Emotional Nuance Not a Volitional Nuance

On this view, when God "repents" it means he regrets the way a situation has turned out (though, of course, it never surprises him).[5] By contrast, assertions that God does not "repent" imply a *volitional* orientation of the word, denying that God ever "changes" his mind, his purposes, or his emotions. Bruce Ware's excellent case against Open Theism incorporates this less-than-compelling argument, asserting that in 1 Samuel 15 the Hebrew word is to be understood in an alternately "weak sense" (in 15:11, 35) and "strong sense" (in 15:29).[6] This suggestion seems too arbitrary, too conveniently subjective a solution for obviating the dilemma of the same Hebrew word being used within a single context both to deny and to affirm that God does this. A more objective, exegetically anchored solution would be preferable.

A Change of Action Not a Change of Mind

In addressing the apparent discrepancy in 1 Samuel 15, Matthew Henry offered a theologically astute and arresting juxtaposition: God "does not alter His will, but wills an alteration." In other words, God does not change his mind, only his method or his ways. In a way, that's a helpful distinction. But what exactly does it mean? How does it adequately explain, for example, Exodus 32, where God announced his intention to destroy Israel and start over with Moses (32:9-10), and then "repented" by diametrically reversing his previously stated intention (32:14) in response to Moses' intercession (32:11-13)? Henry's turn of phrase sounds theologically snug but fails to reflect a meaningful reading of the Hebrew word for "repent."

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[5] For many theologians, as we shall see, even any statement of divine "regret" is fraught with theological impossibility and therefore purely anthropopathic.

[6] Bruce Ware, *Their God Is Too Small* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 33–34. Scott Oliphint critiques a similar view when he cites "some confusion over the concept of *anthropomorphic*. It is thought that, for example, when Scripture speaks of God changing his mind, we are to read that anthropomorphically, but that when Scripture says that God [does not] change his mind, we are to read that literally." *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 123.

Anthropomorphism, More Properly, Anthropopathism

In this view, references to God's repentance express God's response to situations from a strictly human point of view; if it were us responding to the situation, we would call it "repenting" or "changing our mind."[7] It is a purely human way of expressing God's posture toward a situation, but it does not represent any *actual* divine experience or action. Yet in what way is this helpful, or even meaningful? This is perhaps the classic explanation of choice among theologians, but it strikes some as unsatisfying, unnecessary, and *perhaps* even unauthorized. After all, we are dealing with expressions that go to the heart of God's very nature, character, and behavior. Moreover, the issue is not merely scriptural assertions that God does not do this but also repeated and apparently contradictory assertions to the contrary that God *does* do this (under certain circumstances). Nevertheless, the anthropomorphic explanation segues into a larger issue that warrants further exploration.

Anthropomorphism as a Category of Theological Explanation

On one level, anthropomorphism is a sound and necessary hermeneutic. After all, we know from Scripture itself that God, as spirit, is incorporeal. But the concept of anthropomorphism also raises some additional questions.

Do Anthropomorphisms Genuinely Advance Understandability?

Anthropomorphism is commonly explained as the language of accommodation.[8] That is, God speaks to us in ways that we can understand and relate to. As Vern Poythress frankly observes, however, anthropomorphisms are no more understandable than non-metaphors.

> Consider an example. Exodus 15:6 says, "Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy." The stock explanation using accommodation would say that this description of God is an accommodation to human capacity, through anthropomorphism. Yes, it is an anthropomorphism. But does this verse really have much to do with the concept of accommodation? . . .
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> Similar truths could have been expressed in other ways, without the use of vivid metaphors. For example, as an alternative we could say, "The Lord exercises his power to defeat the enemy utterly." That way of saying it is not colorful, not poetic, not rhetorically engaging. But it says some of the same things that the poetic expression does. Thus, the Lord could have spoken in an alternative way without using vivid anthropomorphisms. But he did not. Why not? The doctrine of accommodation, by itself, says only that God addresses human beings according to their capacity. Both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical forms of expression meet this criterion. Indeed, anything that is intelligible human

[7] Commenting on Genesis 6:6, for example, Calvin says, "The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sakes he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. . . . The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. . . . This figure, which represents God as transferring to himself what is peculiar to human nature, is called ἀνθρωποπάθεια"—i.e., anthropopathism. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (1847; reissue, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), *loc cit.;* https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01/calcom01.xii.i.html.

[8] Oliphint, 123; Frame, 152, 367.

> language meets the criterion! Accommodation says only that Scripture is intelligible. It does not explain why the Lord in one text chooses one particular kind of intelligible speech in contrast to many other alternatives. Thus, accommodation does not really explain anthropomorphism or any of the particulars.[9]

In other words, it's not as if we *need* anthropomorphic language in order to understand God better. Accommodation itself is a weak explanation for anthropomorphism.[10]

How Do We Even Know How to Define the Nature and Characteristics of a "Spirit"?

We are at a distinct disadvantage when we try to define dogmatically the qualities of a class of being that we cannot see or experience apart from such a being's self-disclosure. We cannot impose our own ignorant conceptions of what a "spirit" can or cannot be like.[11] We must instead rely on scriptural data to determine what a spirit is or is not. That includes Scripture's own descriptions of spirit beings, as well as its record of *what those who have seen such a being* have seen. So, what do we know for certain about spirits? As it turns out, very little.

The Problem of Limited Knowledge

We know that spirits are non-corporeal—that is, they do not inherently possess physical or material substance (though they can apparently assume physical form temporarily for the purpose of communication or self-revelation; e.g., Gn 18:1ff; 32:24ff.). A spirit clearly possesses the same *capacities* (sight, knowledge, memory, voice, movement) of which our material body parts—including the mind itself—are the physical extension and expression.[12] Yet because of our physical and epistemological limitations, how would we know whether a spirit does or does not have *spiritual* "form"?

Arguments for anthropomorphism correctly deny that God has *physical* or *material* body parts—though, again, as the Creator of matter he can incorporate materiality into his self-revelations when he so chooses (per some of the OT appearances of the Angel of Yahweh and, consummately and uniquely, the incarnation). It is specifically the issue of materiality that explanations of

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[9] Vern Poythress, "Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation," *WTJ* 76 (2014): 150.

[10] Nor do we want to be guilty of chronological snobbery—to say nothing of linguistic ignorance—by suggesting that ancient Hebrews needed concrete language because they were incapable of abstract thought.

[11] I do not mean "ignorant" in any pejorative sense here, but quite literally. We have no experience of spirits and therefore no direct knowledge of exactly what does or does not constitute a spirit, apart from incorporeality—and even that can be at least temporarily suspended.

[12] Many clarify that "the arm of God" is an anthropomorphism because, they explain, God obviously has no arms. Yet in my admittedly limited experience most Christians intuitively shy away from asserting with equal certainty that the "mouth of the Lord" or "the eyes of the Lord" or "the face of God" are pure anthropomorphisms; few, it seems, are comfortable insisting that God is utterly faceless. If such features demand physicality, then so should voice and speech (which, in our experience, demand lungs, lips, tongues, and vocal cords); but again, the voice and speech of God (or angels) are never explained as anthropomorphism. My point is simply that our intuitive inconsistency in this area underscores our ignorance and the appropriateness of a little less theological self-confidence and a little more epistemic humility.

anthropomorphism emphasize.[13] Beyond immateriality, however, *how do we know* what a spirit has or has not?

The Difference between Literal and Physical.

We correctly affirm that God is not a *physical* being (i.e., material); yet we insist with equal correctness that he is a *literal* being (i.e., real, actual, not figurative or metaphorical or imaginary). Angels, fallen and unfallen, are literal but not physical beings. Is it possible that while God as spirit certainly has no *physical* hand or arm or mouth or eyes, he may, nonetheless, actually have hands and arms and mouth and eyes—in short, the very "features" that he keeps saying throughout Scripture that he has? And if not, how would we know? God expressly denies his physicality but never denies his possession of form or features. A strict anthropomorphism rests on philosophical assumptions about what a spirit can and cannot be like; it does not emerge from explicit biblical theological data.

The Second Person of the Godhead is a different matter, and yet not entirely irrelevant to the discussion. The glorified and now eternally incarnate Christ is empirical proof that there is no inherent contradiction between even *physicality* and deity, eternality, omnipresence, immutability, aseity, or any other divine attribute. Christ retains every attribute of deity even in conjunction with his incarnate physicality. So, there is no theological or philosophical incongruity between *materiality* and deity. Nevertheless, the focus here is on God in his ontological essence, and we are compelled to affirm that he is immaterial—not because materiality contradicts some philosophically or theologically imagined conception of deity, but simply because he says he is immaterial. The issue of form, however, is another matter.

The Question of Form

Herman Bavinck argues on the basis of Deuteronomy 4:12, 15[14] that God has no form.[15] John Frame correctly counters, however, that the passage "does not say that God is without form; it only says that God did not display his form to Israel on Mount Sinai."[16] God revealed no form on that occasion for a very specific reason that he explains in 4:15–18[17]—namely, he did not want them

[13] Explanations of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) statement that God is "without body, parts" regularly conflate the two words (from "body, parts" to "bodily parts"), seemingly to underscore that the point is immateriality. E.g., A. A. Hodge explains, "God is a free personal Spirit, without bodily parts or passions," and "We deny that the properties of matter, such as bodily parts and passions, belong to him." *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2004), *loc. cit.*

[14] "And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. . . . Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire."

[15] Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), 175. This is the proof text cited in the WCF for the phrase "without body, parts," along with John 4:24 and Luke 24:39 (which is addressed below).

[16] *Doctrine of God,* 589.

[17] "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, *lest you act corruptly* and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male

reducing his infinite glory to any limited, inadequate, and therefore inaccurate physical representation of any kind.[18] He exceeds and transcends all such representations. And yet Genesis confirms that *we ourselves* are living, breathing, physical "images" of the true God.

Moreover, God actually *does* reveal "form" on most other occasions.[19] For instance, why should Exodus 24:10 specify that when Moses and the elders "saw God," they saw a pavement of sapphire "under his *feet"?* Why not just "under him"? We need no reference to "feet" to accommodate our understanding of what is going on. We have no further description of exactly what they saw, except that they were seeing and worshiping him from a distance (24:1; cf. v. 12)—as if that is as high as their gaze ventured or was able to see; but the fact of his literal presence is undeniable.

Numbers 12:8 is even more explicit. Moses alone actually saw the *form* (תַּבְנִית)[20] of God—in what is certainly a reference to Exodus 34—where (as God himself describes it) God covered Moses *with his hand* while he passed by (Ex 33:22) so that Moses could see only *his back* (Ex 33:23), because (God explains) no living human could see *his face* and live (Ex 33:20). How can God's statement mean anything other than that, according to God himself, he has a face?

Ezekiel 1:26–27 states that the prophet's vision included "the likeness of a throne" and "on the likeness (דְּמוּת) of the throne was a likeness with the appearance (מַרְאֶה) of a man high above it"; the description includes "the appearance of his waist and upward" and "the appearance of his waist and downward." He concludes, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (1:28). The term ("appearance") denotes what it *looked like*. Block explains, "What Ezekiel sees is not an actual representation but a reflection of deity."[21] Again, the question I wish to raise is, what exactly does that mean and how do we know?[22]

To affirm that God is spirit does not require denying that he possesses the form or features that he repeatedly attributes to himself. It necessitates denying the *corporeality* of these features; but to

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or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth" (emphasis added).

[18] Frame adds that God "intends to assert his exclusive right to make images of himself" (589).

[19] Compare "you saw no form" with the pre-incarnate Son "being in the form of God" (Phil 2:6). Owen says that God's only "form" is his essence; yet spirits clearly can have what we call recognizable "form"—they are never depicted in Scripture as merely nebulous, amorphous "presences." John Owen, "Sermon XI. The Humiliation and Condescension of Christ" (1681), in *The Sermons of John Owen* (n.d.; reissue, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), *loc cit.;* https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons/sermons.vi.xiv.html.

[20] *Temunah* (תַּבְנִית) occurs about ten times (5x in Dt 4–5); the Israelites are commanded to make no *likeness/form* of God or anything else for worship (Ex 20:4); that command is justified by the assertion that at Sinai the Israelites heard God and saw physical manifestations of his presence but did not see any *similitude* or *form* on which to base any depiction or image of God for worship (Dt 4:12, 15, 16). In a probable reference to awaking from death, the psalmist exults in the notion that he will be satisfied, in the resurrection, with God's likeness/form (Ps 17:15). A NET Study Note says, "It is unlikely that the psalmist had such a highly developed personal eschatology," but Job clearly did (Jb 19:25–27). *The NET Bible, Version 1.0* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies, 1996–2006), *loc cit.* Cf. my *Beyond Suffering,* 121–23.

[21] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108.

[22] Cf. Ez 8:2, "he stretched forth the form [תַּבְנִית] of a hand and took me by a lock of my hair." The same term is used to signify a *blueprint* (Ex 25:9, 40), or a representative (Ez 8:10, of "every form of creeping thing"), or an appearance (Ez 10:8, of cherubim possessing "the form of a man's hand under their wings").

suggest that God has arms or eyes or mouth does not mean that he has *physical* arms or eyes or mouth; literal reality is not defined by physicality.

Some object that any sort of spiritual "form" or "features" necessarily entails limitations to deity. I would offer two counter-observations. (1) We could argue that point on a *philosophical* level, but part of my larger point is that we simply do not know enough about the metaphysics of spirit to opine with any epistemological certainty or authority. But more to the point, (2) the objection must explain how the now eternally incarnate Second Person of the Godhead can have *physical* form and features and body parts without any limitation to his possession and exercise of all the attributes of deity. If there is no inherent contradiction between even *physical* form and illimitable divine attributes, there can be no inherent contradiction between spiritual form and illimitable divine attributes.[23]

The Implications of Christ's Testimony regarding Spirits

When Christ appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, they thought he was a spirit (Lk 24:37)—even though he had arms and legs and eyes and a mouth. In other words, they saw no contradiction in a "spirit" having those features; they clearly expected a spirit to look like a "disembodied" person—a spirit person rather than a material person. Moreover, when Jesus corrected their misconception, he did not say, "How could I be a spirit? A spirit does not have arms or legs as you see I have." Rather, he said, "A spirit does not have *flesh and bones* as you see I have" (v. 39). Jesus' argument implies that what is specifically contradictory to "spirit" is materiality or physicality, not form.

Jesus' revelation about Lazarus and the plutocrat also opens a brief window onto the nature of afterlife. The rich man in hades requests that Lazarus—a spirit without a resurrected body—be permitted to "dip his *finger* in water" to ease the rich man's thirst (Lk 16:24). Angels, too, are defined as spirit beings, yet they are routinely described as having shape, form, and features, and not just when they interact directly with humans. Are these also anthropomorphisms? Or is it possible that angelic spirits have non-physical yet literal form?[24]

Tentative Observations

First, to be clear, *I am not arguing that God has "bodily parts."* God is spirit (Jn 4:24) and therefore not in any sense corporeal (though, again, the same cannot be said of the Second Person of the Godhead). Second, *I am also not insisting that God has "body parts,"* or that he *must* have the "features" regularly attributed to him in Scripture. I am suggesting that (1) there seems to be no biblical basis for asserting with such sublime self-assurance that God *cannot* have the literal yet non-physical form or features that he repeatedly represents himself as having and which he nowhere denies possessing, and

[23] For a brief summary of the biblical arguments for the now-eternal incarnate existence of Christ, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 542–43. Cf. also WCF, 8:2.

[24] This may suggest another objection: What about zoomorphisms? First, unlike anthropomorphisms, they are extremely rare; I am aware of three or possibly four references to God's "wings" (Ps 91:4; Jer 49:22; Mal 4:2; possibly Jer 48:20). Second, God consistently and overwhelmingly presents himself as a *person*, not an animal; and we are made in his image. Those factors justify, in my view, taking zoomorphisms as exclusively and purely metaphorical.

that (2) the presumed proof to the contrary, based on the affirmation that "God is spirit," is rooted in two fundamentally flawed assumptions: (a) that *literal* necessarily implies *physical*, and (b) that our philosophical understanding of what a spirit can and cannot possess is definitive for interpreting the biblical record. The only definitive ground we have for asserting what a spirit is or is not like is the scriptural record of God's self-disclosure and of human experiences with spirits.

Surely it is on some level presumptuous (despite the best of intentions) to categorically insist that we understand God better than he describes himself, and to devise philosophical explanations for insisting that he cannot really have what he keeps saying he has. The issue raises a question that reverses our anthropocentric perspective and allows us to peer for a moment through the opposite end of the telescope, so to speak: are all references to God's human-like form anthropomorphisms, or are *we* merely limited, humanized, physicalized theomorphisms? Vern Poythress observes that "God made man in the image of God. Man is *theomorphic* (in the "morph" or "form" of God). In a sense the word anthropomorphic has the order exactly backwards. God is the original and human beings are the derivative."[25] The hermeneutic of anthropomorphism argues that God describes himself like us. And yet the doctrine of creation teaches that God made us like himself.

Anthropopathism as a Category of Theological Explanation

Anthropomorphism finds fairly broad agreement among more traditional-thinking theologians. Once one steps into the realm of anthropopathism, however, the debate becomes not only more vocal but also more internecine. Scott Oliphint asserts that "the 'consistent view' of the Reformed has been that those passages which speak of God's affections do so 'metaphorically,' or 'improperly,' or 'anthropopathically.'"[26] There seems to be less consistency among the Reformed in this area than Oliphint implies, however.

Augustine said, "Thou lovest without passion; . . . Thou art angry without emotion."[27] Anselm similarly wrote, "Thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of Thy being. . . . we experience the effect of compassion, but Thou dost not experience the feeling."[28] Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock explained that "those expressions of joy, and grief, and repentance" attributed to God in the Scriptures "signify . . . that if God were capable of our passions, he would discover himself in such cases as we do."[29] Put more colloquially, the Bible's emotional depictions of God (on this view) amount to "what-God-would-feel-if-he-could-feel-but-he-can't-so-he-doesn't." As Poythress observes (above), it is unclear how such a view is deemed helpful in understanding God. Nevertheless, the anthropopathic explanation clearly has an extensive and significant history.

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[25] Vern Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 121–22. Poythress himself actually credits this observation to J. I. Packer. Frame, too, makes a similar remark (368).

[26] Oliphint, 211.

[27] *The Confessions of St. Augustine,* Book I, Ch. IV.

[28] Anselm, *Proslogium,* Ch. 8.

[29] Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: R.T. Carter & Brother, 1874), 342.

No modern consensus appears, however, even among Reformed theologians on the issue of anthropopathism and, specifically, impassibility.[30] Some apply anthropopathism only to certain "problem" passions such as jealousy, repentance, or grief.[31] For others, however, that does not go far enough. Kevin DeYoung sided with Charnock's view, lamenting, "Some theologians, theologians we respect, theologians with the best of intentions, sometimes look for ways to tweak this classic understanding of immutability; and the impetus is to find a way to make God more relatable, to seem more involved, more engaged, more relational with his creatures."[32] Sometimes, however, the impetus has nothing to do with wanting a different kind of God but with simply wanting to bring one's theological description of God more in line with what God says about himself in his own self-revelation. DeYoung proceeds to quote Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Once you pull on the thread of impassibility, a lot of other threads come along with it. Aseity, for example. . . . One also has to give up on immutability and eternity. If God really responds, God is not metaphysically immutable and, if not metaphysically immutable, not eternal."[33] Wolterstorff argues—and DeYoung agrees—that the classic statement of impassibility cannot be abandoned without ultimately undermining aseity, immutability, and even eternality. And yet no less a Reformed thinker than John Frame argues to the contrary: "God's suffering love in Christ . . . does not cast doubt upon his aseity and unchangeability"[34]—let alone his eternality.

Who, then, are we to believe? Is anthropopathism the best explanation for *all* of God's emotional self-descriptions? Just *some* of them?[35] And if the latter, on what basis are we to distinguish between divine emotions that are purely metaphorical (anthropopathic) and which are genuinely experienced by God? Is anthropopathism even a legitimate theological/hermeneutical phenomenon? Or is it primarily a philosophical construct? Does God actually experience any of the emotions that he describes himself as having in Scripture? Or are such expressions purely metaphorical because an

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[30] The definition of impassibility depends on whom one asks. In Aristotelian thought, impassibility describes God as impervious to and unaffected by anything that happens in the world. In essence, it is emotional immutability; God is "unmoved" not only in absolute ontological terms (the unmoved Mover) but in emotional terms as well. Some theologians defend impassibility by clarifying it in one way or another. Cf. Oliphint, 86–87; J. I. Packer, "God," *New Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 277. Others disavow impassibility entirely (see references to Grudem, Reymond, and Feinberg below).

[31] In commenting on WCF 2.1, A. A. Hodge explains that when the Scriptures speak of God's "repenting, of his being grieved, or jealous, they use metaphorical language . . . teaching us that he acts toward us as man would when agitated by such passions." *Westminster Confession: A Commentary, loc. cit.* He takes the same position in *Outlines of Theology,* rev. ed. (1879; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 132. Yet he speaks of God's wrath, or love, or compassion in quite a different category, not metaphorically but as literal realities to be taken at face value.

[32] Kevin DeYoung, "The God Who Is Not Like Us: Why We Need the Doctrine of Divine Immutability," Together for the Gospel 2018; http://t4g.org/media/2018/04/god-not-like-us-need-doctrine-divine-immutability/. DeYoung went on to cite Charnock as an example of the correct view of divine impassibility.

[33] Ibid.

[34] *Doctrine of God,* 616.

[35] "Not all expressions of emotion in God are anthropopathic, although some are." Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume I: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary), 201. The complication that arises at this point is subjectivity. According to McCune, "genuine emotion in God" includes love, compassion, anger, and hatred, but not laughter (Ps 2:4). Why?

immutable God cannot experience genuine emotion or be in any way actually affected by events outside himself without compromising his immutability, self-sufficiency, and even eternality? Full-bore anthropopathism would seem to be the logical concomitant of full-bore anthropomorphism.

Yet many—including even some very Reformed theologians—are not prepared to subscribe to anthropopathism. John Frame, citing and concurring with D. A. Carson, attributes the notion that "emotions are unworthy of God" to the influence of Greek metaphysical thought. Such views "are not biblical," says Frame, and therefore "provide no basis for denying the existence of divine emotions."[36] In his dispute with the Socinians, John Owen denied that there are "affections and passions in God, as anger, fury, zeal, wrath, love, hatred, mercy, grace, jealousy, repentance, grief, joy, fear."[37] After affirming Owen's basic arguments, however, Oliphint proposes a crucial qualification to the traditional view of impassibility: "Once God determines to condescend to his creation, that determination itself includes limiting characteristics and properties that God assumes. Because God determines to do this, all limiting characteristics are *self*-limiting, first of all. . . . He does not *have* to do this; he freely chooses to do it."[38] That discreet modification (sovereign self-limitation) of the more traditional Reformed expressions of the issue of divine emotion is substantive, significant, theologically well-grounded, and driven by biblical theological data. J. I. Packer likewise qualifies impassibility to mean "that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him *at their own will*. In so far as God enters into any suffering and grief, it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim."[39]

Toward the other end of the theological spectrum, Arminian Jon Tal Murphree similarly explains how "we can reconcile the notions of impassibility and affectability. The secret is found in a two-word modifying phrase: *without consent*. God is impassible *without consent* to be affected, but He is affectable *with consent*. . . . Scripture depicts a God who has chosen to be affected by His subjects."[40] In other words, an immutable part of God's immutability is his sovereign choice to be affected in the ways he says he is, and to change his posture, relations, and interactions in genuine response to human reactions in the ways he says he does. It is difficult to see on what *scriptural* basis any theologian, Reformed or otherwise, can justify explaining God's actions and attributes in ways that actually contradict his own repeated self-descriptions.

Others are less optimistic about retaining the concept of impassibility at all. Wayne Grudem rejects it as plainly contrary to Scripture and erroneously defended in the Westminster Confession of

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[36] *Doctrine of God,* 609–10. Might not a rigid anthropomorphism that denies not only materiality (correctly) but also form and features also be attributed to similar influences?

[37] Cited in Oliphint, 212.

[38] Oliphint, 218 (emphasis original).

[39] "God," 277 (emphasis added). Packer argues that this is the "Christian mainstream" understanding of impassibility.

[40] *Divine Paradoxes: A Finite View of an Infinite God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian, 1998), 124 (emphasis added). Murphree was a longtime theology professor (now professor emeritus) at Toccoa Falls Bible College.

Faith.[41] John Feinberg declares that "it is necessary to reject divine impassibility."[42] Robert Reymond also provisionally denies impassibility.[43] Perhaps this is becoming the new "consistent view" even among Reformed theologians.

We need to be prepared to go *only* but *fully* as far as God's self-revelation compels. A genuinely biblical-theological approach to God's self-revelation must be prepared to affirm both *what* God has chosen to say and *how* he has chosen to say it. And as it happens, Scripture has a great deal to say about the emotional dimension of God (see Appendix).

Carson raises the problem that absolute sovereignty and absolute omniscience creates for divine emotion. How can God genuinely respond emotively to what he both controls and foreknows?

> It is no answer to espouse a form of impassibility that denies that God has an emotional life and that insists that all of the biblical evidence to the contrary is nothing more than anthropopathism. The price is too heavy. You may then rest in God's sovereignty but you can no longer rejoice in his love. You may rejoice only in a linguistic expression that is an accommodation of some reality of which we cannot conceive, couched in the anthropopathism of love. Give me a break. Paul did not pray that his readers might be able to grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of an anthropopathism and know this anthropopathism that surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:14–21). . . .
>
> Yet before we write off the impassibility of God, we must gratefully recognize what that doctrine is seeking to preserve. It is trying to ward off the kind of sentimentalizing views of the love of God and of other emotions in God . . . [that make him] superficially attractive because he appeals to our emotions . . . [but at a cost of making him] a finite God . . . gradually diminished and reduced from what he actually is. . . .
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> . . . . If God loves, it is because he chooses to love; if he suffers, it is because he chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that he sustains no "passion," no emotion, that makes him vulnerable from the outside over which he has no control, or which he has not foreseen.[44]

It is entirely scriptural to deny that God is ever at the "emotional mercy" of anyone or anything outside himself. But it should strike us as suspicious when a theological explanation essentially argues, for purely logical or philosophical reasons, that the Bible cannot really be saying what it repeatedly seems to be saying, unless there is some compelling scriptural statement or principle to back up such an argument. It is also difficult to maintain that the human capacity for emotion—which distinguishes us from all other creatures—is not part of our creation in the image of God and has no actual correspondence in God whatsoever. That would seem to imply that humans possess more self-

[41] *Systematic Theology,* 165–66. As to the WCF, Oliphint argues that historically a passion "in scholastic terminology is that which is causally dependent on an external acting agent, and it affects the subject intrinsically. So, when the Confession denotes God to be 'without passions,' what it is saying is that, however and whatever God 'feels,' he does so according to his own sovereign plan and not because he is dependent or because something independent of him caused him to *re*-act to something outside himself" (86–87). Perhaps he is correct; but such nuance seems rare in many Reformed explanations of impassibility based on WCF phraseology.

[42] *No One Like Him,* 277.

[43] "Thus whenever divine impassibility is interpreted to mean that God is impervious to human pain or incapable of empathizing with human grief it must be roundly denounced and rejected." *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 178–79.

[44] D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 58–60.

expressive and relational capacity than the infinitely personal God who made us. Such a conclusion is not only illogical but also contrary to the way God describes himself in Scripture.

Thesis on Anthropomorphism, Anthropopathism, and Impassibility

My thesis, then, is a simple and perhaps (at this point) underwhelming one. In view of the pervasive and ongoing impact of our fallenness, the intellectual and perspectival limitations of our humanity, and the necessarily partial nature of divine revelation, theologians should be less sanguine about their ability to explain with dogmatic confidence aspects and qualities of the character and being of God that are both experientially and revelationally beyond us.

This is a call not for theological agnosticism on these points but for more candor, modesty, and epistemic humility in our theological formulations and assertions about a being infinitely beyond our experience and comprehension. Ironically, probably no one has expressed this better than John Owen himself:

> Notwithstanding all our confidence of high attainments, all our notions of God are but childish in respect of his infinite perfections. We lisp and babble, and say we know not what, for the most part, in our most accurate, as we think, conceptions and notions of God. We may love, honor, believe, and obey our Father; and therewith he accepts our childish thoughts, for they are but childish. We see but his back parts; we know but little of him. Hence is that promise wherewith we are so often supported and comforted in our distress, "We shall see him as he is," we shall see him "face to face". . . . The queen of Sheba had heard much of Solomon, and framed many great thoughts of his magnificence in her mind thereupon; but when she came and saw his glory, she was forced to confess that the one half of the truth had not been told her. We may suppose that we have here attained great knowledge, clear and high thoughts of God; but, alas! when he shall bring us into his presence we shall cry out, "We never knew him as he is; the thousandth part of his glory, and perfection, and blessedness, never entered into our hearts."[45]

To apply my thesis more specifically, then, I am suggesting that (1) anthropomorphism is a legitimate explanation *only insofar* as it specifies that God (Father and Spirit) has no *material* form or *physical* features, and that (2) anthropopathism and impassibility can be useful categories *only insofar* as they specify that God experiences no *sinful* emotions, nor is he subject to any change, reaction, or response outside his control or apart from his own consent to be affected.[46] Once we exceed these scripturally grounded qualifications, I fear that we confuse logical assumption with logical necessity, and philosophical speculation with theological certainty.

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[45] John Owen, *Temptation and Sin* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2001), 65. This is a published edition from Owen's larger work *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.

[46] "God is *impassible* in the sense that he cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction that he does not desire to have or allow to happen. . . . God is *impassioned*, and he may be affected by his creatures, but as God he is so in ways that accord rather than conflict with his will to be so affected." Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 36.

Considerations for Arriving at a Scripturally Informed Conclusion regarding Divine Repentance

This section looks more closely at the major "problem" texts concerning God's repentance—Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. A number of considerations can help us navigate our way through the forest of seemingly contradictory scriptural statements about divine repentance.

The Centrality of Context

Numbers 23:19 is uttered by Balaam in his second prophetic pronouncement regarding Israel. Balaam was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. Insisting he could only utter whatever God put into his mouth, Balaam agreed and Balak conceded. When Balaam opened his mouth pronouncing God's blessing on Israel (vv. 1–10), Balak—frustrated and displeased—moved Balaam to another vantage point, hoping to elicit a different pronouncement (vv. 11–14; Balak's third try in vv. 27–28 clarifies Balak's thinking—"perhaps it will please God that thou mayest curse them for me from there"). It is in this context that Balaam utters the assertion of verse 19: "God is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" In other words, God is not fickle. Once God has committed himself by stating his intentions, a change of location or vantage point is not going to make him change his mind or go back on what he said.

First Samuel 15:29 involves precisely the same sort of context; God had issued an explicit charge and warned of the consequences of disobedience (1 Sm 12). Now that Saul had not only broken that charge but also failed to own his sin and repent sincerely, God is not about to go back on his word.

The Significance of Explicit Contrasts and Parallels in the Text

Numbers 23:19 draws a series of clear and explicit contrasts between God and man. First, God is not, like man, vacillating, shifting, manipulatable, bribeable. Second, for God to repent of what he had previously pronounced through Balaam (vv. 7–10) would be the equivalent of lying. "Repenting" in this context, then, would be changing—indeed, reversing—the unconditional purposes he already said he would fulfill for Israel. To expect that God would utter otherwise from a different vantage point (as Balak hoped) was to assume that God was as capricious, his words as unreliable, as sinful humans. Note the concluding elaboration to this effect: "Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it" (vv. 19-20, ESV). One cannot manipulate the true God as one can do with humans, to make him do anything other than what he has already spoken. God's irreversible commitment to a previously stated and unconditional purpose is crucial here.

The same contrast surfaces in the statement of 1 Samuel 15:29; God is not like man. The same parallel surfaces as well; in this case, repenting would be the equivalent of lying. In this context, God had anointed Saul as king with a strict warning of what would happen should he fail. Those consequences are set in motion when God announces through Samuel, "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king" (v. 23). Saul pleads for a reprieve (vv.

24–25), but Samuel reiterates exactly the same sentence (v. 26) and as he turns to leave, Saul in desperation grabs Samuel's mantle and accidentally tears it (v. 27). That becomes a prophetic picture that prompts Samuel's third pronouncement (v. 28), punctuated with the assurance that what God has spoken will not be altered—he is not like a man who can be persuaded to change what he has purposed; to do so, especially with no genuine repentance on Saul's part, would be to forfeit his integrity (v. 29).

The Point of Other Non-Repentance Passages

In table 1 the rest of the texts listed under "Passages Asserting That God Does/Will Not Repent" (besides Nm 23:19 and 1 Sm 15:29) are not categorical assertions that God does not repent. They are either (1) specific historic pronouncements of which he *did not* repent, or (2) prophetic pronouncements of which he *would not* repent.

God Does Respond Emotionally to Human Actions

God's capacity to grieve in response to our changing circumstances is an element of his infinite personality, in the image of which we are finitely fashioned. We might choose a certain course of action and even say, "I know I'm going to regret this"; and sure enough, sometimes we do. That does not necessarily mean we should not have done it, or even that it was a bad decision at the time. We just came to regret the way it worked out—even if we suspected the possibility ahead of time.

Similarly, God knew the sin and sorrow that would enter the world when he created man. That does not mean he wished he had never created, or that it was a bad decision, or that he was unpleasantly "surprised" by the outcome. It is part of God's real reaction to developing circumstances, even when they are foreknown. The same is true with his reaction to Saul in 1 Samuel 15.

God Does Respond to Prayer[47]

If God is omniscient, then he already knows what he will end up doing; so how can that honestly be called "changing his mind"? But if God is not only omniscient but also immutable (unchangeable) in his character, purposes, and pronouncements, then how can he meaningfully respond to prayer? Because part of his immutable character is his mercy and grace and self-professed responsiveness to man. Note God's response to Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of his nephew Lot (Gn 18:20-33). But that does not mean that God is obligated to respond positively to prayer once his purpose is irreversibly determined. Note God's assurance to Ezekiel that even the intercession of Noah, Job, and Daniel could not deter his decision to judge Judah (Ez 14:14, 20).

[47] See * references in table 1.

God Does Respond to Human Responses[48]

God never changes his character. Part of his character is his reliability and faithfulness to his Word. But according to his own self-revelation in the Bible, part of his character is also *to change his posture and actions when people change theirs toward him*.

This is not a mere anthropomorphism. All believers, prior to their conversion, were aliens from God under his wrath and condemnation (Jn 3:36); and yet, after conversion, they are accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1:6). That represents an actual change in God's posture and disposition toward us. God pronounces judgment on the sinner, but when the sinner repents of his sin God "repents" of his judgment—without ever altering his character. That is easy for us to understand because the condition is built into the gospel. God sent Jonah to Nineveh with an apparently unqualified warning ("Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed"), yet when they repented, so did God—again demonstrating that God "repents" without ever changing his character or contradicting his word (Jon 3:4, 9,10; 4:2).

Similarly, God may promise blessing on obedience to his word, but when someone like Saul rejects the word of the Lord, the promised blessings are forfeited; and the Lord may be said both to regret or grieve over man's actions, and to change his intentions regarding Saul. God appointed Saul in response to the demand of the people—a concession the consequences of which grieved God. And whereas he would have blessed Saul with an endless dynasty (13:13), those good faith intentions were also forfeited.

By way of illustration, we can watch a movie we have seen before—maybe even several times—so that the events and the outcome are not surprising to us in the least, and yet still laugh or cry as we watch the familiar events unfold. Or we may watch a videotape of a ballgame whose final score we already know and display genuine emotional expression regarding events we already foreknow.

Obviously, we are dealing with a dimension of mystery, as we are finite representations of an infinite God, with limited capacities of the perfections of his personality. God reveals himself to have an emotional capacity (he loves and hates, may be grieved or joyful). This may strike us as strange, because most of our emotions are generally reactionary to largely unexpected events. With God there are no unexpected events. When we "repent" in the sense of changing our minds it is often due to the unanticipated development of circumstances or the reception of new information—both of which are also impossible for God.

Conclusion regarding Divine Repentance

We return, then, to the original conundrum that introduced us to the larger issues of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in search of a more biblical-theological solution. Does God repent or not? Yes and no. That is the only genuinely biblical answer to the question, because the Bible says both "yes, he does" and "no, he does not." The difference lies not in the subjective dictates

[48] See ** references in table 1.

of a previously decided theology based on what makes sense to us, nor on invented lexical senses that allow the same word to be used in completely contradictory ways, but in the objective implications of the context. Three conditions can be summarized as follows:

1. God never "repents" of any absolute and unconditional pronouncements; to do so would be to lie, like man does. God is always unfailingly true to his covenants and his words.[49]
2. God may "repent" in the sense of altering his posture or disposition, or changing from his expressed intentions of conditional promised good or conditional warned judgment in response to (a) intercessory prayer (e.g., Ex 32:9–14), or (b) a change in man's posture toward God (Jer 18:7–10).
3. God does "repent" in the legitimately lexical sense of regret or grief over evil and its effects; that does not mean he "changes" his mind in the sense that he realizes that he made a bad decision, or wishes he had not done something, or is surprised by the outcome; it simply means that he responds genuinely and emotionally even to foreseen developments.

So, for example, the threats of God that express his hostile posture against sinners are neither empty words, nor are they necessarily irrevocable (unless he indicates otherwise, as he does on occasion, Jer 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). God's threats are often warnings designed to produce a repentant and submissive response.[50] When they do not, the threat is unfailingly fulfilled. But when they do, God may change his posture. "God's relenting is his sovereign decision," notes Frame. "His right to withdraw his announced judgment and blessings is part of his sovereignty."[51] Again, part of God's immutable character is to respond to human responses to his words and works (Jer 18:7–10; 26:3, 12–13, 18–19).[52]

Final Thoughts

I will conclude with a sermon quotation, a biographical illustration, a biblical example, and an apropos scriptural prayer. The sermon quotation comes from B. B. Warfield on Philippians 2:5–8.

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[49] Openness theologian John Sanders posits that Genesis 2–3 recounts the first example of divine repentance, a "divine relenting from negative consequences in favor of mercy." God—not unlike an indulgent parent, it seems—simply chose not to do what he solemnly said he would do. In a sense, Sanders argues, Satan was right and God was wrong. After all, they did not "die" that day, precisely because "when God faces the sin, he cannot bring himself to fulfill his threat." *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 48. Rather than even considering the possibility that the concept of dying in Genesis 2:17 might be meaningfully informed by other Scripture (e.g., Eph 2:1–3), Sanders seems perfectly willing to throw the integrity of God and his words under the theological bus in favor of a more appealing divine attribute.

[50] Two illustrations (one fictional, one historical) of this communicational phenomenon are Henry V's Har Fleur ultimatum (heeded by the French) in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and President Truman's two ultimatums (ignored by Japan) prior to dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[51] *Doctrine of God,* 564.

[52] This consideration opens up a whole separate discussion of prophetic contingency. Based on Jeremiah 18, some have erroneously argued that all prophecy that is not *explicitly* unconditional is implicitly contingent. See, for example, Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic," *JETS* 53/3 (September 2010), 563–64; Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 76–77. But that is a subject for another essay.

> Men tell us that God is, by very necessity of his nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducement from without; that he dwells in holy calm and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human sufferings or human sorrows forever . . . . *Let us bless our God that it is not true.* God *can* feel; God *does* love. . . . We have *scriptural warrant* for believing that God has reached out loving arms and gathered to his bosom that forest of spears which otherwise had pierced ours. But is this not gross anthropomorphism? We are careless of names: it is the truth of God. And we decline to yield up the God of the Bible and the God of our hearts to any philosophical abstraction.[53]

The biographical illustration comes from Humphrey Carpenter's biography of J. R. R. Tolkien: "What [Tolkien] once wrote of prejudices held by C. S. Lewis could have been said of [Tolkien himself] in his old age: 'He had several [prejudices], some ineradicable, being based on ignorance but impenetrable by information.' . . . It was not so much a matter of prejudice as the habit (and it is not an uncommon Oxford habit) of making dogmatic assertions about things of which he knew very little."[54]

Theologians, too, can become habituated to making dogmatic assertions about things of which they know very little. Indeed, this "habit of making dogmatic assertions about things of which he knew very little" is precisely what Job, in the end, confessed and repented of: "*You asked,* 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I [recant] and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3–6).

Finally, I like to think of Psalm 131:1 as the theologian's prayer: "LORD, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes lofty, nor do I strut in great matters or in things too wonderful for me."[55] I can think of no more appropriately biblical posture for theologians (of all people!) to cultivate when it comes to matters so clearly beyond our experience, our knowledge, and our comprehension.

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[53] "Imitating the Incarnation," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 570–71 (emphasis added).

[54] Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 235–36.

[55] My translation. I have used the word *strut* to translate the common Hebrew verb meaning "to walk" [הלך] because there are, of course, many different kinds of walking, depending on the implications of the surrounding context.

Appendix:
The Emotional Capacity of God to Suffer with His People

The notion of divine *suffering* is one of the specific areas that the doctrine of impassibility is intended to guard against. And yet there are numerous passages that describe a dimension of God's emotional experience that may be identified as divine empathy. "This emotional empathy," notes Frame, "can be called 'suffering,' although that is perhaps a misleading term. There is no reason in these passages to suppose that God suffers injury or loss." Nevertheless, "God experiences grief and other negative emotions, not only in the incarnate Christ, but in his non-incarnate being as well."[56]

Judges 10:15–16: "And the children of Israel said to the LORD, 'We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray.' So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And *His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel."*

Isaiah 63:9: "*In all their affliction He was afflicted,* And the Angel of His Presence saved them; *In His love and in His pity* He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them all the days of old." E. J. Young comments: "This is one of the most remarkable verses in the prophecy and one of the most disputed. . . . *In all their affliction, there was affliction to Him.* The meaning is beautiful and filled with great comfort for God's people. Calvin says that in speaking this way God declares the incomparable love He has toward His people. . . . When affliction is directed against us and we must suffer for His sake, we may remember that He too is bearing that affliction and suffering."[57] Gary Smith concludes, "Surely God's emotional involvement with people who are unfaithful affects him with grief, and he delights and gains pleasure from those who honor him."[58]

Note also Isaiah 15:1–5:

> The burden against Moab. Because in the night Ar of Moab is laid waste And destroyed, Because in the night Kir of Moab is laid waste and destroyed, He has gone up to the temple and Dibon, to the high places to weep. Moab will wail over Nebo and over Medeba; On all their heads will be baldness, and every beard cut off. In their streets they will clothe themselves with sackcloth; On the tops of their houses and in their streets everyone will wail, weeping bitterly. . . . *"My heart will cry out for Moab;* His fugitives shall flee to Zoar, like a three-year-old heifer. For by the Ascent of Luhith they will go up with weeping; For in the way of Horonaim they will raise up a cry of destruction."

Isaiah 16:9–13 is similar:

> *Therefore I will bewail the vine of Sibmah, With the weeping of Jazer; I will drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Elealeh;* For battle cries have fallen over your summer fruits and your harvest. Gladness is taken away, and joy from the plentiful field; In the vineyards there will be no singing, Nor will there be shouting; No treaders will tread out wine in the presses; I have made their shouting cease. *Therefore my heart shall*

[56] *Doctrine of God,* 612–13. Frame notes only a couple such passages. This appendix highlights many more, adding emphasis to the key statements.

[57] E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:481.

[58] Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66,* NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 671.

> *resound like a harp for Moab, And my inner being for Kir Heres…. This is the word which the LORD has spoken concerning Moab* since that time.

Jeremiah confirms this divine response in 48:30–32a: "I know his wrath," *says the LORD,* "But it is not right; His lies have made nothing right. *Therefore I will wail for Moab, and I will cry out for all Moab; I will mourn for the men of Kir Heres. O vine of Sibmah! I will weep for you with the weeping of Jazer."* And Jeremiah 31:20 adds, "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; Therefore *My heart yearns for him;* I will surely have mercy on him, *says the LORD.*

Ezekiel 6:9: "Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive, because *I was crushed by their adulterous heart* which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations." Ezekiel 21:16–17: "Swords at the ready! Thrust right! Set your blade! Thrust left – Wherever your edge is ordered! "*I also will beat My fists together, And I will cause My fury to rest;* I, the LORD, have spoken." Ezekiel 22:12–13: "'In you they take bribes to shed blood; you take usury and increase; you have made profit from your neighbors by extortion, and have forgotten Me,' says the Lord GOD. 'Behold, therefore, *I beat My fists* at the dishonest profit which you have made, and at the bloodshed which has been in your midst.'"

Hosea 11:7–11 records these words of Yahweh:

> "My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? *My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.* I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror. They shall walk after the LORD. He will roar like a lion. When He roars, then His sons shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like a bird from Egypt, like a dove from the land of Assyria. And I will let them dwell in their houses," says the LORD.

Isaiah 53:3–5: "He is *despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,* and we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was *despised,* and we did not esteem Him. *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;* Yet we esteemed Him *stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.* But He was *wounded* for our transgressions, He was *bruised* for our iniquities; The *chastisement* for our peace was upon Him, And by His *stripes* we are healed." This final passage raises the incarnational factor in the discussion of God's impassibility. Despite systematic theological arguments for divine impassibility, it seems difficult to circumvent the following conclusion, each point of which has independent scriptural corroboration: (1) Christ suffered; (2) Christ was fully God and fully man, united in one indivisible person; (3) therefore, God is capable of suffering.

Two points need to be made here. First, *the doctrine of the hypostatic union* prohibits us from isolating this emotional capacity as an expression of Christ's human nature only. The objection may be raised: "What about Christ's capacity to die? Must not that experience be isolated as a capacity of his human nature only? Does Christ's capacity to die mean that God is capable of dying?" If by "die"

one means experiencing *bodily* death, that is by definition a capacity exclusively limited to human nature (since God has no corporeality). If, however, by "die" one means ceasing to exist or even ceasing *conscious* existence, even humans do not "die" in that sense. So, the fact that Christ died does not mean that God, as God, is capable of dying.

Second, *the doctrine of the Trinity* prohibits us from relegating such emotional capacities to the Second Member of the Godhead only (cf. the capacity of the Holy Spirit to be "grieved"; Is 63:10; Eph 4:30). It is also difficult to circumvent the idea that God is capable of suffering if we are willing to accord God the *positive* emotional activities of compassion, joy, love, and delight. For example, Isaiah 62:4–5 says, "You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, Nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate; But you shall be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; *For the LORD delights in you,* And your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, So shall your sons marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, *So shall your God rejoice over you."*

Finally, Christ is the ultimate, visible, incarnate expression of the divine capacity to suffer and feel with (*com* - *passion*) his people in their sufferings (cf. Heb 4:15).