

The Affirmation that God is “Without...Passions”

[William Tate](#)

Although they produced an English document, the theologians who prepared *The Westminster Confession of Faith* had all been educated as Latinists, and their English word choices sometimes follow, more or less closely, Latin originals. The meanings of words derive from usage more than from meaning, with the result that careless etymologizing can be misleading. Nevertheless, when such words occur, it can be helpful for readers less familiar with Latin to consider the shared etymologies of cognate words as a means of gaining understanding.

The first paragraph of the second chapter of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* includes in a list of attributes of God an affirmation of what traditionally has been called God’s “impassibility,” the teaching that God is “without...passions.” This doctrine needs to be carefully explained because, due largely to the influence of the Greek philosophical tradition, it has often been misunderstood. Thinkers within the Christian tradition have sometimes shown a tendency to coalesce their understanding of the God of scripture with Aristotle’s idea of a “prime mover” of the universe. According to this tradition, for God to be moved by something else implies that he is controlled by something else; but if He is controlled by something else, then that something else is higher than God, which is, by definition, impossible.¹ It helps to remember here that “to move,” “motive,” and “emotion” are cognate words; when something “moves” us, it stirs our emotions—or becomes a “motive,” a force *to put us in motion*. We don’t make these connections in our everyday use of these words, but we need to notice them to understand the tradition. On *this* understanding of the terms, God cannot be moved. And therefore, on *this* understanding of the terms, God must not have “emotions” or “motives”—forces which *control* Him. When the tradition denies that God can be moved, it means that *nothing greater than God controls God*; God is entirely free, entirely self-sufficient, entirely self-governing. With this sense in mind, we can appropriately recognize that to say that God is motiveless emphatically does *not* mean that He has no purpose.

¹ “Supreme being,” another phrase from the philosophical tradition which has been absorbed by Christianity, points to this definition: God must be the highest being—if anything else controls or limits God, then *that* being is really “supreme” or “superior” and must therefore be God.

Similarly, most modern ears hear “without passions” as synonymous with “emotionless,” meaning something like “without feeling,” and again it’s important to understand the terminology. Both “passion” and “impassibility” are related to the word “passive.” In the tradition, “active” is the opposite of “passive;” an “agent” (cognate with “active”) is one who acts, a “patient” (cognate with “passive” and “passion”) is one who is acted upon. To be passionate in this sense is to be *controlled* by forces (including what we now think of as emotions) stronger than our wills; to be a patient is to be governed by the will of another. But God’s will cannot be overruled; He will not be ruled by another. To say that God is “without passion,” therefore, properly means that God is not *passive*, not *acted upon* or overruled by any other power or influence; He is the Supreme Free Agent; all of His actions are free; none of His actions is constrained.

To say that God is “without passion” should *not* be understood as a denial that God *feels* or a denial that He has emotions in something like—though also different from—our usual sense of the word. Scripture clearly affirms that God feels love, compassion, pity, hatred, and anger. Because our emotions are unreliable, inconsistent, and always affected (or infected) by our sinfulness and fallibility, our experience of emotion is only a very imperfect indicator of God’s experience. For example, when we feel hatred, it tends to overrule our feelings of love, so that we don’t fully experience both at the same time, we experience both as fluctuations, and we register our emotions as changeable.

Because God is whole and holy, His love, compassion, pity, hatred, and anger are perfect and can co-exist and endure in Him in a way that is impossible for us. In fact, it might be more correct to say that these are in God a *single* indistinguishable “emotion” which is essentially co-extensive with His will. Affirmation of God’s impassibility underscores God’s unchangeability. That God feels (in some sense) does not imply in Him, as it does in us, inconsistency or inconstancy. To affirm that God doesn’t change is to affirm that He is always faithful to Himself, though from our (limited and fallen—and historical!) human perspective, to talk about what God does means to use the language of change.

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