

The Early Church Fathers on Hellenism and Impassibility

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Some misunderstanding has arisen regarding my view of the relationship between the church fathers and Hellenism and I would like to clarify my stance. In my chapter in the *Openness of God* (1994) I was more negative than I was when I covered the same material in *The God Who Risks* (1998), yet, even in the earlier work did not say that the early fathers were uncritical of Hellenistic philosophy. Rather, I said that they needed to be more critical on some issues pertaining to the divine attributes. I said that the fathers did not sell out to Hellenism and want to repeat that here. It was legitimate for them to work with the best Greek philosophical thinking of the day just as theologians today attempt to utilize the best learning in fields such as linguistics, psychology and philosophy. They desired to distinguish the Christian God from the gods of polytheism and though they found ideas in the philosophical discussions of deity useful for this end, they were also critical of various philosophical conceptions of divinity. However, I have changed my mind even more since 1998 concerning the degree to which the early church fathers were negatively influenced by Hellenistic philosophy.

One of the main obstacles for me had been the affirmation of divine impassibility by the fathers. From the middle ages to today, impassibility has generally meant that God is not affected by creatures. This had baffled me because these same fathers also said that God responded to our prayers, was compassionate, and even experienced changing emotions. It seemed to me that they contradicted themselves. I was not alone in reading the fathers in this way since this is the way the predominance of the secondary literature has interpreted them. However, Paul Gavriilyuk's *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford, 2004) has helped me a great deal on this matter. According to Gavriilyuk, most of the early fathers did not have the stronger definition of impassibility in mind. Though there is no single definition of impassibility in the fathers, generally speaking they meant only that God could not suffer physically since God was not embodied or that God could not be forced to suffer or that God is not overcome by emotions as we are apt to do.

From the second through fourth centuries there was no standard definition of divine "impassibility."ⁱ For Christian writers it did not mean that God was apathetic, distant, or lacked compassion. God did experience mercy and love. Christians disagreed with one another whether God experienced anger depending on whether or not they thought this emotion "fitting" for God. The word functioned in a couple of ways. First, it was a way of qualifying the distinction between creator and creatures. God is incorruptible while we are not. But we will be made impassible (incorruptible) in the eschaton. Also, we are prone to be overwhelmed by emotions, particularly negative ones, but God is not. Hence, it was used to safeguard divine transcendence (aseity) rather than deny psychological emotions to God. Second, it functioned to distance the Christian God from the gods of polytheism. They were passible in the sense that acted capriciously and lost control of themselves. In contrast, the Christian God faithfully loved, was patient, and acted consistently.ⁱⁱ Hence, it is clear that when the fathers said God was impassible they did not intend to rule out that he has emotions or that he is affected by and responds to us.

The Council of Nicea in 325 took up the matter and declared that the divinity of the Son was immutable. In its historical context this does not mean that God cannot change in any respect. Rather, the pronouncement occurs at the end of lengthy list of Arian statements including the famous “There was once when he was not.” The statement regarding divine immutability is there to safeguard the full divinity of the Son, not to rule out reciprocal relations between God and humans. After Nicea the question was raised as to the precise way in which Jesus is both human and divine. Apollinaris, Eutyches, Nestorius, Cyril and others tried to answer this and, once again, divine impassibility was a key issue.ⁱⁱⁱ Cyril, whose view carried the day, seems to claim that only physical bodies can suffer and since God is not physical God cannot suffer. No one can stick a spear in God’s side.

Consequently, the Son took on a complete human nature by which his humanity suffered while his divine nature did not. Cyril is not excluding emotions to God (though he does not think it appropriate to predicate “grief” or “sorrow” of God).^{iv} Cyril’s position was endorsed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The preamble to the statement produced by the Council lists a number of views that are rejected: Nestorius, Arius, Eutyches, and Apollinaris. Of interest to this study is the condemnation of those who say the “Godhead of the only-begotten is passible.” In context, divine impassibility is used to safeguard the full divinity of the Son from Arianism and perhaps also monophysitism.^v Overall, it seems they thought that anyone who said the divinity of the Son suffered implied that the Son was corporeal before the incarnation and therefore a creature. In conclusion, these Councils declare heretical those who say God is mutable and passible only if these doctrines are used to undermine the full divinity of Jesus.

This development is good news for it enhances the degree to which the openness model agrees with more of the tradition. Some have criticized openness for departing from “the” tradition and a few even called it “heresy.” A few responses are in order. First, “the” tradition is not singular for there are multiple streams. Those who accuse us of rejecting “the” tradition usually enshrine their own particular tradition as “the” tradition. Second, it is true that the vast majority of theologians have affirmed that God is timeless and has exhaustive definite foreknowledge. However, it is also true that the vast majority of theologians until about 1750 believed that all young children that died unbaptized (or without Christian parents) were damned to hell. Few believe that anymore. As was discussed earlier (2.3), traditions have erred and do change. Though there were few in the past who affirmed dynamic omniscience, today many orthodox Christian scholars hold it. Also, typically overlooked is how the doctrine of exhaustive foreknowledge has been used. I will seek to show that dynamic omniscience finds agreement with the purpose of the doctrine of exhaustive foreknowledge in the freewill tradition. Finally, regarding the charge of heresy it should be noted that no ecumenical council discussed this issue and a theory of omniscience has never been a test of orthodoxy.^{vi}

ⁱ See Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, pp. 15-16, 48, 58, and 70.

ⁱⁱ For citations of the fathers on these meanings see *ibid.*, Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, pp. 6-11 and Chris Hall, “The Church Fathers on Impassibility,” in John Sanders and Chris Hall *Does God Have a Future?* (Baker, 2003), pp. 109-112. Prestige (p. 7) seems to suggest that the fathers also meant that God

was not affected by us, that our prayers do not affect God and that God never does anything in response to us. If so, then he goes too far.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Gavriyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, chapter 6.

^{iv} See Gavriyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 162. Cyril says this would imply impotence in God.

^v Those who said God suffered as a “mixed” being undermined the homoousios (one substance) of the Son with the Father who is impassible.

^{vi} It is conservative evangelicals, usually Calvinists, who accuse open theists of “heresy.” Evangelicals are prone to use the H-bomb on each other. B. B. Warfield called the holiness view of providence heretical because it led to faith-healing movements. Machen called premillennialism “a very serious heresy.”

Cornelius Van Til called Gordon Clark a heretic and Clark was tried for heresy at Wheaton College. E. J. Carnell called Fundamentalists “cultic,” “sectarian,” and “heretics.” Evangelicals have demonized other evangelicals over evolution, charismata, mega churches, worship styles, women in ministry, inerrancy, the millennium and, dialoging with Catholics to name but a few instances. See Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 104-111 and my “On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism” *Journal of Biblical Studies* [<http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org>] 2, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1-44.