

God's Impassible Love as Foundational for Our Expression and Experience of Genuine Biblical
Love

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Introduction

What is love? While the world's search for the answer is futile, Christians know the truth: "God is love" (1 John 4:8, ESV). But what does that mean? Specifically, what can we understand and say about the love of God that will edify the church? While the simplicity of John's statement is comforting, Christians ought to use it as a foundation to humbly engage in the task of describing God's love at a deeper theological level. Paramount to a successful endeavor in this regard is a continual reminder of our goal, namely, to glorify God and thereby edify his church.

To that end, we will analyze two seemingly opposed attributes of God: his impassibility and his love. However, as we shall see, these attributes are gloriously intertwined and augment one and other such that we can describe God's love as impassible. This has pastoral and practical applications for us. Namely, the impassible love of God, bolsters us to love others in a manner that is neither driven by nor devoid of emotion. In other words, because of God's impassible love as our source and sustenance, we can express biblical love on the human level, as we were created to.

To support this argument, we will pay particular attention to Pauline theology as expressed in his epistles. For that purpose, our argument proceeds in the following manner. First, we will lay groundwork by surveying relevant systematic theology. Second, we will explain and synthesize divine impassibility and love. Third, we will analyze and exegete Pauline epistles to support our argument. Fourth and finally, we will conclude with the pastoral and practical application of God's impassible love.

Relevant Systematic Theology: Communicable and Incommunicable Attributes of God

Overview of the Communicable and Incommunicable Attributes of God

When discussing the attributes of God, the necessary first step is to distinguish between his communicable and incommunicable attributes. Pratt's description of God's attributes is helpful. He writes,

“Divine attributes [are the] perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations. In other words, God's attributes are those qualities of his essence without which he'd no longer be God... His communicable attributes are those qualities of God's essence that creation can share in limited ways. His incommunicable attributes are those qualities of God's essence that creation cannot share.”¹

Regarding how we understand God, Pratt also writes, “biblical faith calls on us to affirm that God is both different from and similar to his creation.”² This is an important framing for our understanding of God's love and his impassibility. Regarding God's love, a communicable attribute, we understand this attribute because we are “made in his image” (Genesis 1:27). That is, in our experience and expression of human love, we reflect, but do not identically mirror, God's love. On the other hand, God's impassibility is incommunicable because we do not understand it, even in part, through our human experience. The Westminster Confession of Faith lists several of God's communicable and incommunicable attributes:

“There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all

¹ Richard L Pratt Jr., *The Attributes and Work of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), ch. 5, url: <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzMzOTQzNDhfX0FO0?sid=d9965c72-25b3-483f-9408-fe69bd36cb9f@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

² Pratt, *The Attributes and Work of God*, ch. 7.

things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal most just and terrible in His judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty” (WCF 2.1).

Communicable and incommunicable attributes of God can be distinguished, but never separated, for, they are all crucial aspects of God’s identity. Each attribute exists in relation to his other attributes such that we can never isolate them from each other. In other words, we recognize God’s oneness, even when we study God’s attributes individually. Beeke and Smalley explain this well,

“The attributes of God are revealed concerning the one divine nature. Though there are many attributes, God himself is one. Moses wrote, ‘Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD’ (Deut. 6:4) ...God’s attributes are not parts of him, but aspects of who he is. God is not a composite of his attributes, for he has no parts...God’s attributes are not identical with each other but distinct characteristics of his nature as he has revealed it. To say that love, wisdom, and power are the same is to evacuate all meaning from language and to destroy all true knowledge of God. However, this is not to deny God’s essential unity. Turretin said, ‘Although the attributes are essentially and intrinsically one in God, yet they may properly be said to be distinguished both intellectually . . . and objectively and effectively as to their various external objects and effects.’”³

³ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology Volume 1: Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), ch. 27, url: <https://web-p-ebcsohost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzIxNzk2MzZfX0FO0?sid=ce41a8f8-4715-42f9-9d1a-347cbbca9796@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

It is with this framework that we discuss the two attributes of God fundamental to our discussion: God's love and impassibility.

Relevant Systematic Theology: The Love of God

Love ought to be prevalent in our daily lives, and the root of our love is that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, ESV). But, what does that mean? Love, on a human level, is a beautiful hint of God's love. In this sense, the love of God is a communicable attribute. We shall distinguish between those aspects of love that are uniquely divine and those that are the human reflections of the divine. Regarding the former, there are three types of God's love to study: benevolence, beneficence, and complacency. Regarding the latter, we shall see that biblical love, on a human level, is relational, unifying, and emotional. Importantly, studying God's love enables us to know God more and thus be edified to exhibit biblical love in a manner pleasing to him.

Love is Relational

Bray helpfully frames the discussion by emphasizing that we must begin to answer the question “what is love?” by realizing that God is trinitarian. That is, he is fundamentally three persons and one nature. By virtue of his threefold personhood, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he is relational.⁴ In explaining this, Bray writes, “Our knowledge of God comes through the Holy Spirit of the Son, who integrates us into his own relationship with the Father...”⁵ Bray goes on to explain the logical implications for the Christian: “The love which the Bible speaks about is not a self-centered kind of preening in the mirror, but a concern for others. We are expected to treat

⁴ Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), ch 7, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzExNDA1ODJfX0FO0?sid=61a7d15f-3541-4e02-8ca8-1f51899ef6c0@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

⁵ Bray, *God is Love*, ch. 7.

others with the same consideration that we would want them to show us.”⁶ Bray illustrates the human reflection of divine love well in explaining the relational nature of love.

Love is Unifying

In the trinitarian relationship, we see not only the Father and Son, but also the Holy Spirit. That the Holy Spirit applies the love of God to a multitude of believers. Christ’s church is an indication of the expansive nature of love. Bray writes, “He is now sitting at the Father’s right hand, pleading for us on the basis of that sacrifice, and so a third person becomes necessary in order to apply that work in our hearts. That person is the Holy Spirit, who represents both the Father and the Son and makes them present and active in our lives.”⁷ The work of the Holy Spirit shows us that love is not confined to two persons but expands into the world and is communal. For instance, in a marriage relationship, the love that a husband and wife have for one another is manifest and expanded in the procreation of children. In this way, marriage reflect the image of God’s relational and expansive love.

Trinitarian theology affirms both the three persons of the Godhead and their unity in one divine nature. In this sense, we say that God is one in nature and three in person. Therefore, love necessarily is deeply unifying, something that brings one out of the many. We see this in God himself. Jesus calls for such unifying love multiple times. For instance, he prays to the Father on behalf of all Christians: “... that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21, ESV). In expositing this verse, Mounce helpfully explains that love is fundamentally unifying:

⁶ Bray, *God is Love*, ch. 7.

⁷ Bray, *God is Love*, ch. 7.

“The unity for which Jesus prays, however, is analogous to that of the Father and the Son (‘just as you are in me and I am in you’) - a unity in which the members do not lose their identity. Unity does not require uniformity. The true secret of Christian unity is for believers to be one with each other by virtue of being one with the Father and the Son. This is a supernatural unity that expresses itself in love.”⁸

The experience and reality of genuine unity, anchored in the truth, is a fundamental expression of biblical love.

Love is Emotional

In addition to being relational and unifying, love is also emotional. No one exemplifies the emotional nature of love better than Jesus. Warfield links the compassion of Christ with his love. He writes, “... Jesus’s primary characteristic was love, and love is the foundation of compassion...Love lies at the bottom of compassion.”⁹ In explaining this linkage, Warfield uses the parable of the rich young ruler as an example. He states, “The heart of our Savior turned yearningly to the rich young man and longed to do him good; and this is an emotion, we say, that especially in the circumstances depicted, is not far from simple compassion.”¹⁰ For Warfield, love is certainly not a form of action without feeling, rather, love is deeply passionate and emotional. Calvin augments Warfield’s claim in explaining the feeling involved in the believer’s conversion. He preaches,

⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), ch. VC3, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzE3ODExNTVfX0FO0?sid=aa577ff0-101e-4554-be27-a575f48742e6@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

⁹ B. B. Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 40-41.

¹⁰ Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*, 41.

“Now let us come to the third bond, which depends upon the third love that God shows us: which is that He not only causes the gospel to be preached unto us, but also makes us to *feel* the power thereof, so as we know Him to be our Father and Savior, not doubting but that our sins are forgiven us for our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, who brings us the gift of the Holy Ghost, to reform us after his own image” (emphasis mine).¹¹

The Love of Benevolence, Beneficence, and Complacency

How do we make sense of these aspects of biblical love? Theologians have helpfully described three types of God’s divine love. In simple terms, the love of benevolence is God’s love of good will towards humanity. That is, by nature of his being and his action of creation, God is predisposed to have a benevolent attitude towards humanity. The love of beneficence is God’s action upon his love of benevolence. In other words, because God has a benevolent attitude towards man, he provides for mankind in accordance with his attitude. On the love of beneficence, Jesus says, “For he [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45, ESV). The love of complacency builds on the love of benevolence and beneficence in specifically highlighting God’s special love in saving his elect.

As they pertain to Christians, rather than man generally, the types of God’s love find different expressions, which Flavel and Pictet helpful expound. Flavel writes,

“The original spring or fountain of our best mercies, the love of God. The love of God is, either benevolent, beneficent, or complacential. His benevolent love is nothing else but his desire and purpose of saving, and doing us good; so his purpose and grace to Jacob is

¹¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 167.

called love, Rom. ix. 13. "Jacob have I loved;" but this being before Jacob was, could consist in nothing else but the gracious purpose of God towards him. His beneficent love is his actual doing good to the persons beloved, or his bestowing the effects of his love upon us, according to that purpose. His complacential love is nothing else but that delight and satisfaction he finds in beholding the fruits and workings of that grace in us, which he first intended for us, and then actually collated or bestowed on us. This love of benevolence, is that which I have opened to you, under the former head, God's compact with Christ about us, or his design to save us on the articles and terms therein specified."¹²

Notice that nothing outside of God prompts any of the types of his love in particular reference to his elect. It was not the action of Jacob that persuaded God to bestow an attitude of benevolence towards him, for example. On the other hand, God's posture towards Jacob from eternity past was always one of love. Pictet also helpfully explains the three types of God's love:

“The love of benevolence is that by which God is moved to will some good to his creature as a creature, without any regard to the excellence which may be in it. This kind of love is the same as his goodness, and by it God, from eternity, willed good to the creature, even though unworthy, and deserving of hatred. The love of beneficence is that by which God does good in time; this expression in time must be noted, so that this love may be distinguished from the love of benevolence, which is from eternity. The love of complacency is that by which God is inclined towards the creature that is just and holy.

¹² John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Mr. John Flavel* (London, UK: W. Baynes and Son, 1820), 62-64.

By the first kind of love, God elects us; by the second, he redeems and sanctifies us; by the third, he rewards us being holy.”¹³

Pictet’s further emphasizes that God’s love of beneficence, to the believer, is God’s monergistic work of salvation in his or her heart. The love of complacency, according to Pictet, is God’s enjoyment, joy, and delight in the sanctification of his children. Such love, as explained by Flavel and Pictet, is not only theologically rigorous and helpful, but it also exhibits the relational, unifying, and emotional aspects of biblical love.

The Nature of Divine Love

Because God is love, we can further understand the attribute through an analysis of Paul’s well-known “love passage.” Paul writes, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV). In this passage, we see that love is both a noun and a verb, which must be distinguished but not separated when discussing love as an attribute of God. As a noun, love simply is, but as a verb, love acts. Similarly, God simply is (Cf. Exodus 3:14), yet God also acts. Importantly, God’s action is not motivated by anything outside of himself, for then God would be dependent upon that motivation. Oliphant explains this well in the following example:

“For example, is God essentially infinite? If we affirm that God is essentially a perfect Being (one who lacks nothing), if we affirm his character as a se, then it cannot be that he is in any way essentially limited by anything outside of himself, since to be limited would

¹³ Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology* (Monergism Books), 97.

by definition be a lack; it would be a constraint placed on God by something else, be it space or time or human choices.”¹⁴

This truth is fundamental for understanding the impassibility of God.

Relevant Systematic Theology: The Impassibility of God

Defining and Surveying Views on Divine Impassibility

Earlier we quoted WCF 2.1 regarding the attributes of God. We will again examine a particular section of this text: “There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or *passions*... (WCF 2.1, emphasis mine). Passions is a seventeenth century synonym for emotions. This poses an apparent problem since we have just discussed the emotional aspect of love. We will explore this further in later sections once we have defined impassibility and surveyed important Christological distinctions. However, as an initial comment, we can say that to understand passions in the Westminsterian context, we must realize that the divines speak of passions insofar as they are externally motivating agents upon God. That is, it is simply impossible for emotions to act upon God in a manner that would coerce or even encourage him to action.

What does it mean that God is without passions? Theologians have termed this attribute the impassibility of God, and Burlet defines this term well: “Traditionally, the doctrine of divine impassibility has meant that God is not and cannot be changed or affected by anything that is external to himself or outside of his being. This does not mean that God is lacking affection or

¹⁴ Scott K. Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), ch. Introduction A, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzExNDA2MDBfX0FO0?sid=168e299f-d907-49c2-a429-ea3b9988f360@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

that God does not have emotions such as love, joy, jealousy, or grief, among others...”¹⁵ We will extensively survey the topic before responding to criticisms and explaining its harmony with the attribute of God’s love.

Scholars wrestle with divine impassibility from a variety of angles. For instance, Randles frames his inquiry of impassibility in writing, “Our question is whether the divine nature, considered apart from the human, was capable of enduring suffering.”¹⁶ Randle contends that the God, according to his divine nature, is incapable of suffering and is therefore impassible. One of the chief reasons for his position is that to deny the impassibility of God logically requires that we feel pity for God which is a “conclusion so intolerable [that it] must be untrue.”¹⁷

Brasnet grounds divine impassibility in the divine will or purpose. He writes,

“... the eternal purpose is unchanged. There is something almost terrible and awful in the grim relentlessness with which the divine purpose holds upon its way. It knows no change or alteration, no human power or power of other realms can undermine its constancy or turn it by a hair’s-breadth from its course. Here is the divine strength, here is the citadel of the divine impassibility – a citadel never stormed nor captured.”¹⁸

Recognizing the critique that divine impassibility might imply a form of divine stoicism, as it were, Brasnet compares God’s relation to his emotions with human’s encounter with ours. He writes, “With us [humans] the emotions are often the masters of the man... Of all this there is

¹⁵ Dustin G. Bulet, “Impassible Yet Impassioned: The Doctrine of Divine Impassibility in Conversation with the Noachian Deluge of Genesis,” *Didaskalia* 28 (2017-2018), 98.

¹⁶ Marshall Randles, *The Blessed God of Impassibility* (London, UK: Charles H. Kelly, 1900), 2.

¹⁷ Randles, *The Blessed God of Impassibility*, 3.

¹⁸ Bertrand R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1928), 6.

nothing in God...the emotions of Deity are... disciplined, harmonious emotions... the divine judgement is never warped by passion, nor on the other hand, is it ever vitiated by absence of passion.”¹⁹ Brasnet’s survey of divine impassibility serves as a helpful foundation in understanding the differences in divine and human interactions with emotion.

Mozley briefly examines divine impassibility through a critical-scholarly lens before denying it. Of divine emotion and impassibility in the Old Testament, he writes,

“What we need to attend to is not the language of J and its ascription to God of bodily characteristics, but the picture of a mental and emotional life in God which is common to the prophets as well as to the earlier documents. God was... other than man... But these convictions were in no way incompatible with feelings being attributed to God.”²⁰

Regarding the New Testament, Mozley argues that Paul’s admonition to “not grieve the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30, ESV) is an argument against divine impassibility.²¹

He then provides a survey of the doctrine in church history. Broadly speaking, divine impassibility seems to have more adherents than detractors amongst the early church fathers, the Alexandrian theologians, the scholastics, and the Reformation theologians. In his extensive analysis, Mozley points out the tension that proponents of divine impassibility throughout the ages have rigorously wrestled with. He says, “To suppose that Christian thinkers carelessly passed over all that seems to us involved in our belief in God’s loving care, his fatherly

¹⁹ Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 16-17.

²⁰ J.K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Press, 1926) 3.

²¹ Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 6.

providence, and his moral purposefulness, would be the greatest injustice both to their words and their thought.”²²

Modern authors have similarly wrestled with divine impassibility. Matz and Thornhill survey four views of God’s emotions and suffering: strong impassibility, qualified impassibility, qualified passibility, and strong passibility. Dolezal summarizes and defends strong impassibility, which “maintains that God is without passions. He neither undergoes affective change nor feels the actions of creatures on himself.”²³ This is the doctrine of impassibility that we have discussed thus far. Castelo takes a qualified impassibility position, which is a middle ground that errs on the side of divine impassibility. He holds this position for a few reasons, but two chief ones that he maintains are “God’s emotional life is analogous to human emotional life” and “God’s nature is passible but only to the degree that God allows Godself to be.”²⁴

Peckham upholds the qualified passibility position in arguing for the “understanding that God has genuinely responsive emotions that are distinctly divine.”²⁵ Oord holds the strong passibility position, which is the opposite of divine impassibility. Oord writes, “As I see it, God relates with creation. By ‘relate’ I mean God influences creatures and creatures influence God. God is passible, to use the ancient language; God is relational, to use the contemporary term. God is affected is vulnerable, suffers, receives, or responds to creation.”²⁶ For the sake of our purpose, we hold the strong impassibility position when we refer to divine impassibility.

²² Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 46.

²³ James E. Dolezal, “Strong Impassibility,” in *Divine Impassibility: Four View of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 13.

²⁴ Daniel Castelo, “Qualified Impassibility,” in *Divine Impassibility: Four View of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 54.

²⁵ John C. Peckham, “A Qualified Passibility Response,” in *Divine Impassibility: Four View of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 81.

²⁶ Thomas Jay Oord, “Strong Passibility,” in *Divine Impassibility: Four View of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 128.

Rennie takes a strong impassibility position. In further defining the term, he writes, “... impassibility, as understood by the classical Christian tradition, does not merely exclude negative emotional changes in God, such as sorrow or pain, but any emotional change whatsoever. God’s love and joy cannot grow or become further aroused. The idea is not merely that God cannot suffer, but that he cannot, in any sense, *undergo* inner emotional changes of state, ‘whether enacted freely from within or effected by his relationship to and interaction with ... the created order.’”²⁷

Rennie continues to argue for divine impassibility largely based on hermeneutics. He writes, “... because God is incomprehensible and fundamentally different from us (metaphysical assumptions), those passages which predicate changing emotions or affections of God must be understood in the mode of analogy (epistemological conclusion).”²⁸ In other words, seemingly changing emotions in the divine nature must be strictly understood as anthropomorphic.

Synthesizing the Love and Impassibility of God

God’s Divine Love and Impassibility

With the framework of communicable and incommunicable attributes of God, we have defined the communicable attribute of God’s love and the incommunicable attribute of God’s impassibility. But, as we mentioned, we can distinguish but never separate divine attributes. How can God be both loving and impassible? More pointedly, how can God be unmoved by human suffering? We will answer each of these in turn.

²⁷ Charles J. Rennie, “Analogy and the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility,” in *Confessing the Impassible God: The Biblical Classical, and Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility*, ed. Ronald S. Baines, Richard C. Barcellos, et al (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2015), 47.

²⁸ Rennie, “Analogy and the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility,” 50.

Regarding the former question, we can begin by understanding that God's love is eternal and uncaused by anything external to himself. Rather than seeing impassibility and love as contrasting opposites, it is more appropriate to view them as complementary truths that augment each other. Analogously, and less controversially, we know that a deeper apprehension of divine grace augments the divine law and vice versa. The same is true of divine love and impassibility. In addressing the charge that impassibility necessitates apathy, Lister writes, "God's relational passions accord completely with his [immutable] will, but his passion is no less passionate for being perfectly voluntary."²⁹ He then explains the two attributes in conjunction to illustrate this: "God's covenantal affections toward a fallen creation... are not random, disconnected and *ex nihilo* emotional experiences. Rather, they are the suited emotional manifestations of divine love in the face of a fallen and rebellious order."³⁰

How are we to understand God as being impassible in the light of human suffering? To be sure, God has divine love, affection, and emotion in the face of human suffering, but the key point of impassibility is that he is not subject to these emotions. They do not move him to act, rather he acts in accordance with his unchanging will. He comes before his emotions, and because of this, we can better understand Paul's confident admonition: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39, ESV). The goal of theology is to know God more, and by knowing God more by studying his divine impassibility and love, we are

²⁹ Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 243.

³⁰ Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned*, 243.

encouraged by the Holy Spirit to love in the manner we are called to according to our human nature.

Divine Impassibility's Relation to Human Love

The crucial step in further understanding how divine impassibility and love augment one another is to understand Christology, namely the hypostatic union in the person of Jesus Christ between his human and divine natures. Of the hypostatic union, Macleod writes, “The term ‘hypostatic union’ encapsulates three truths: that Christ is one person; that the union between his two natures [human and divine] arises from the fact that they both belong to one and the same person; and that this one person, the son of God, is the Agent behind all of the Lord’s [Jesus’s] actions, the Speaker of all his utterances and the Subject of all his experiences.”³¹

Intricately related to the hypostatic union is the function of the divine and human natures of the person of Christ. Jesus is truly God and truly man, and he acts according to each nature appropriately. For instance, according to his divine nature, Jesus did not die on the cross because the person of Jesus, according to his divine nature, cannot die. But he did die according to his human nature. The person of Jesus did not have a switch to turn on or off his two natures, rather, as Macleod says, “Neither the divine nor the human is now excluded from anything he [Jesus] does.”³² And crucially for our discussion, it is also true that, “a humanness which has divine attributes is not humanness at all.”³³ Because Jesus models biblical love not only according to his divine nature, but also according to his human nature, we can follow his example. We too need

³¹ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 189.

³² Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 199.

³³ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 197.

the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to love in a manner pleasing to God as we emulate Jesus's perfect model.

With this understanding of Christology, we can combine it with our discussion of communicable and incommunicable attributes. Divine impassibility is an incommunicable attribute and is therefore exclusive to God's divine nature. Love, however, is a communicable attribute which means that it applies both to God's divine nature and is communicated in some way to the human nature (though, not in a manner identical to the divine nature). Therefore, the person of Jesus is the only way to understand how God's impassibility and love synthesize according to the divine nature, and he also is the example of how we are to exhibit and pursue love as humans.

According to his human nature, Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit and perfectly exemplified biblical love on this plane. Rather than being a hindrance to this end, Jesus's intimate knowledge of God, including his knowledge of divine impassibility and love, encouraged him even more in this task. Jesus teaches that biblical love is summarized in loving God and loving neighbor: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22: 37-39, ESV). Warfield understands that Jesus's knowledge of God enabled him to perfectly exemplify biblical love. He writes, "his [Jesus's] love to the Father was the source of his obedience to the Father."³⁴ Similarly, our love for God, exhibited in knowing him more intimately through an understanding of his divine

³⁴ Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*, 44.

impassibility and love, is the foundation for our striving to practice biblical love on the human level.

A natural question arises from this. If divine impassibility and love motivate biblical love on the human level, ought our love be motivated by emotions? Certainly, biblical love on the human level can be motivated by emotions, but it should not always be. The Christian does well to avoid both hyper emotionalism and stoicism, for neither reflect biblical love. That God's divine love is a communicable attribute, means there are elements of his love reflected in his creation. Human love as an action, apart from dependence on emotion, is certainly commendable in this sense. In speaking of Jesus's display of anger as a component of his human love, Warfield writes, "...this may indicate its [love's] cause lay outside the objects of his compassion."³⁵ In other words, Jesus's love in this instance may not have been motivated by his emotion of anger toward unrighteousness. Yet it is also true that we see Jesus acting in human love after being emotionally moved. For instance, we read, "When he [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14, ESV).

Love in the Pauline Epistles

Paul's epistles contain helpful information on divine impassibility, love, and biblical love on a human level. Our chief argument is that divine impassibility and divine love augment one another. And therefore, by studying these attributes of God, we know God more, and are enabled to practice biblical love. We will support each component of our argument by exegeting texts from Pauline epistles. First, we will explore the relational, unifying, and emotional aspects of biblical love. Then, we will survey Paul's teaching on divine impassibility and love. Finally, we

³⁵ Warfield, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*, 61.

will finish with a pastoral exhortation to know God more by studying his attributes and thus be encouraged and enabled by the Holy Spirit to love in a manner pleasing to him.

The Aspects of Biblical Love in the Pauline Epistles

Paul clearly teaches that biblical love is relational. In his epistle to the Galatians, he exhorts his audience to, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2, ESV). The connection between love and relationship is clear. To bear another’s burdens, one must be in intimate relation with him. By claiming that this fulfills the law of Christ, Paul harkens us back to Jesus’s summary of the law: to love God and love neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:30-31). Luther states clearly, “The law of Christ is the law of love...To love is not to wish one another well, but to carry one another’s burdens – that is, things that are grievous to us, and we would not willingly bear.”³⁶

Elsewhere, Paul explains the relational aspect of biblical love to the Romans. He writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:15-18, ESV). Here, Paul shows the countercultural aspect of genuine biblical love. By nature, we esteem ourselves by disassociating ourselves from those who are deemed to be in a lower societal class. Moreover, Paul’s exhortation to live peaceably with all implies that his view of biblical love extends to unbelievers. Andria explains, “Paul moves from relationships between believers to relationships

³⁶ Martin Luther, *Galatians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), ch. 6, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzExNDA5NDBFhX0FO0?sid=75b51499-5048-4a45-8542-5596405dbcf0@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

with those who do not know God, and who may even be enemies of God and of believers.”³⁷

That biblical love overflows unbelievers is evident by Jesus’s love for us as Paul explains earlier in the epistle: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, ESV).

Paul is also clear that biblical love is inherently unifying. In his epistle to the Ephesians, he urges them to,

“...walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6, ESV).

He again notes the importance of bearing each other’s burdens in love, but also explains the reason for doing so: unity in love. Because the triune God is one, Christ’s body is to model biblical love towards each other by maintaining the unity of the Spirit. Osborne explains, “The idea of “keeping” something implies guarding and preserving it. Paul’s readers must maintain unity and peace in their churches at all costs. Through the phrase ‘unity of the Spirit’ Paul is identifying the Spirit as the creative source; it is he who has produced this unity.”³⁸

³⁷ Solomon Andria, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), ch. 33, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE1MjQ5MDJfX0FO0?sid=e491e565-6c43-4f58-b713-3442b331e4bc@redis&vid=1&format=EK&rid=1>

³⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), ch. 8, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE2NDk2MzhfX0FO0?sid=3266b8ac-04b5-424a-bb21-45efaba564bc@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

Paul similarly expresses the unifying aspect of biblical love in his first letter to the Corinthian church. He writes,

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Corinthians 10-13, ESV).

In this instance, he argues that believers’ unity in the Spirit is grounded in their union with Christ. Allen and Swain explain that “... classical Reformed theology strongly emphasizes the horizontal dimension of union with Christ... union with Christ involves covenantal incorporation into ‘one, new humanity’ in which Christ has made peace, breaking down the ‘dividing wall of hostility.’”³⁹ Because each believer is united to Christ in salvation, we are necessarily united to each other corporately. In other words, to love Christ is to love the body of Christ.

Paul is also clear that love is emotional. This is evident from his own emotional writing in his first epistle to the Thessalonians. He explains,

“But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our

³⁹ Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Press, 2020), ch. 30.5, url: <https://web-p-ebshost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzI2NjY1MzFfX0FO0?sid=0c3f5f93-f787-4ba1-9531-d27ab57c5c02@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain” (1 Thessalonians 2:17 – 3:5, ESV).

Paul’s language such as “torn away” and “could bear it no longer” exhibit his deep emotional regard for the Thessalonians. So deep was his love for them that he sent Timothy. Phillips explains Paul’s emotion driving him to action: “Paul was moved by the Thessalonians’ afflictions out of a passionate concern that they not be moved from their faith.”⁴⁰

Paul also emphasizes the emotional nature of love in his second letter to the Corinthians. He writes, “For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you” (2 Corinthians 2:4, ESV). To Paul, genuine, biblical love is manifest in emotional expression. Garland explains, “His [Paul’s] love for them motivated his actions entirely...Paul insists that the grief he caused

⁴⁰ Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), ch. 1.9, url: <https://web-p-ebscohost-com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzIzOTEyODBFX0FO0?sid=ba572672-7fbc-4c20-baa6-1349fc91c69f@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

them was the surest sign of his love.”⁴¹ The Pauline epistles are replete with examples of emotion being a fundamental component of biblical love.

Conclusion

We have seen that God is both like us and unlike us. In his communicable attributes, God reflects himself in his creation. Such is the nature of God’s love, for we can experience God’s love towards us on the human plane. In his incommunicable attributes, God is wholly other than us. Such is the case with the impassibility of God. Humans, being finite, cannot experience a life devoid of externally motivating passions. By understanding God’s impassible love towards us, we are enabled to love in a manner pleasing to God in accordance with our finite human nature. As we have seen, Jesus in the Gospels and Paul in his epistles illustrate that biblical love is relational, unifying, and emotional. And it is only through a thorough and appropriate study of theology, that is, a study whose aim is a deeper knowledge of God, that God’s impassible love encourages us to love how he commands.

⁴¹ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1999), ch. 2, url: <https://web-p-ebshost.com.rts.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzIxNjMwNTNfX0FO0?sid=8bb1b42a-52f3-4a86-88db-549f76ed6f90@redis&vid=0&format=EK&rid=1>

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