The SBJT Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Michael A. G. Haykin, Jeremy Pierre, Christopher W. Cowan, Robert Vogel, and Rob Lister have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What is the significance of the term Father for Christian prayer and worship?

Michael A. G. Haykin: One of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus' understanding and practice of prayer is his use of the Aramaic term *abba* to speak to God the Father. It is a practice that has absolutely no parallel in the Pharisaic or rabbinic culture of his day. The term originated as a term used by toddlers. The Jews had a saying, for example, that when a child could say "abba and imma" ("mommy and daddy"), he or she was ready to be taught the Scriptures. But, as James Barr has pointed out, even if *abba* did originate as a word of children, by Jesus' day it was also a word that adults would use just as much to show reverential love and respect to their earthly fathers.[1] And when it was used by adults, it had the meaning of "dear father." Thus *abba* conveys the idea of a reverential loving relationship to a divine Father who is passionately committed to heeding the prayers of the one praying. It needs noting that even examples of Jewish prayers addressing God as simply "Father" are almost non-existent (for one, see Ecclesiasticus 23:1, penned two centuries or so before Christ).

Now, what is literally amazing is that this term that goes to the very heart of Jesus' prayer-life, *abba*, is found on the lips of his disciples as they pray. As Paul tells us in Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15, the Spirit of Jesus enables Christians to speak to their God as "Abba, Father" (as Paul puts it in Rom 8:15, it is the Holy Spirit "by whom" [*en hō*] we utter this term of endearment). The Spirit replicates within Christians the prayer-life of their Master, a key truth that is frequently overlooked in much teaching about prayer.

Given the importance of the term *abba*, it is noteworthy how frequently God as Father appears in prayer texts in the New Testament. Take, for example, Paul's letter to the Ephesian

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house-churches. Paul begins with a request that "grace and peace" from "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2) be given to his readers. The Apostle then blesses "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" for the rich spiritual blessings that he has given to his new-covenant people (1:3–14, especially verse 3). In light of these blessings, Paul asks "the Father of glory" to give the Ephesian Christians "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" to understand their status in Christ and God the Father's commitment to his covenant. Of course, from the vantage-point of the Old Testament many of the Ephesian believers, being Gentiles, were estranged from the God of Israel and his covenantal love (2:12). But due to their faith in Christ, they have now been brought near to God and "through Christ both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father in one Spirit [*en heni pneumati*]" (2:18). This inclusion of the Gentiles within the new covenant moves the apostle again to prayer, bending his knees in prayer to "the Father"—not a usual bodily posture for prayer according to the Scriptures, contrary to popular opinion (3:14). As Paul lays out some of the ways in which Christians, both Jew and Gentile, need to live in light of God's paternal relationship to them, he emphasizes that their speech needs to be marked by regular thanksgiving to "God even the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:20). And surely, given this prominence of God as Father in the prayer and worship texts of this letter, this is part of what is meant by the phrase "praying in the Spirit [*en pneumati*]": it means to approach God as one's loving, heavenly Father. The letter closes in good biblical fashion with a benediction as Paul prays that the brothers and sisters in Ephesus know afresh and ongoingly "peace … and love with faith from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

SBJT: In counseling situations where people have come from backgrounds with poor fathers as role models, how do we help them understand the Fatherhood of God?

Jeremy Pierre: Unreasonable, dissatisfied men roam this world. And many of them have children along the way. This is no surprise to our culture, which has been pointing this out for a while now. The terrible father is a recurring motif in our literature and a common feature in our experience. You can read Mark Twain and Richard Wright, or you can talk to your child's classmate or a friend from church. A good dad is hard to find.

This fatherhood crisis is wreaking havoc on the culture in which we're ministering. People have generally lost the sense of what a strong, self-sacrificing father looks like, largely because they've never seen one. Anyone with a listening ear and a speck of empathy can see the unique difficulty that growing up under a crummy father can cause.

Our early relational experiences—particularly with those entrusted with our care—shape us profoundly. That's not a bad thing. In fact, it's part of God's design for human development. Through fathers and mothers, children are given a framework for understanding the world and everything in it, from important things like morality to relatively trivial things like clothing styles. Why else would God be so adamant that parents teach their children the knowledge of him in the context of the everyday activities of life (Deut 6:7; 11:19)? And alongside the words they speak, parents are to model the character of God in their affection for, generosity to, and patience with their children. This should be particularly true of how a father should relate to his children (Ps 103:13; Matt 7:9-11; Eph 5:4; Col 3:21; 1 Thes 2:7-12).

So how can ministers of the gospel help people whose fathers were bad role models?

First, we recognize that earthly fathers can lie to their children about the nature of fatherhood, provoking them to believe things about fatherhood that are not true. Sadly, there is a wide spectrum of sins a father can commit against his children.

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Some fathers are volatile and moody, subjecting their children to an anxious existence arranged around the goal of not setting them off. Other fathers are uncaring and unmotivated, showing little interest or delight in their children and thus depriving them of confidence in the relationship. Others are dissatisfied and accusatory, subjecting the children to impossible standards and punishing them with insults and manipulation when they aren't met. Still other fathers are lazy and indulgent, satiating their children with brightly colored distractions so that he can pursue distractions of his own. Each of these ways of relating to children lie to them about the nature of authority, fatherly dedication, familial intimacy, and the privileges of sonship.

Second, we recognize that these false beliefs about fatherhood can hinder a person from trusting the fatherhood of God. This is not to say that something irreparable gets knocked loose in the subconscious during the developmental years. Rather, the false beliefs formed through experience can be more functionally significant than those a person learns from Scripture. Often, people approach God with the kind of suspicion they developed for their fathers, projecting on him the same moodiness or ill intent they suffered under. But this is to interpret God in precisely the wrong direction. We don't project on God things from our experience. He reveals himself to us, by which we then understand our experience. This leads us to our next point.

Third, we recognize that God's revelation of himself as Father is ultimately the only way to undermine false beliefs about fatherhood. Believing the gospel of Jesus Christ is more than just believing that my sins are forgiven and that Jesus is my righteousness. It is also involves believing in my adoption as a son (Eph 1:5; Gal 4:5) so that I can call out to God with the intimate confidence of a child-heir (Rom 8:15-17). So intimate is this relationship, in fact, that Jesus asks his Father that the world would be scandalized by knowing that "you love them even as you loved me" and "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:23, 26). God includes his children in the love he has for the eternal Second Person of the Trinity. Even those with excellent earthly fathers cannot imagine such generous divine fatherhood!

Faith in such a surpassing vision of fatherhood is a gift that God gives by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of his Word. So we unapologetically rely on the Word to do what it alone can do. And as we cast this positive vision of God as he has revealed himself, we should also help identify and consciously put off those false beliefs about fatherhood that undermine childlike trust.

For instance, we may challenge folks to consider the following lines of questioning to identify and oppose false beliefs provoked by poor fathering:

> How is your conception of God similar to your conception of your earthly dad? Volatile and moody, uncaring and unmotivated, dissatisfied and accusatory, lazy and indulgent? What does Scripture say about your conception of God?
>
> How do you feel toward God? Do these feelings line up with what you know from Scripture or with something else? What do your feelings indicate about your attitude toward God?
>
> What is the Father's disposition toward you? Are you thinking of your relationship with God as dependent upon your efforts to appease him? Does God put the burden of the relationship on your shoulders?

Fourth, we help men to be earthly fathers who reflect their heavenly Father. People with inadequate dads may know better than anyone else how important a good dad is, but may feel the least equipped to be one since they didn't benefit from a personal example. Specific instruction in parenting is very helpful for those who lack the background to sense it naturally; but the more specific the instruction, the more caution should

be given not to imply that there is a single system of parenting that, if followed, will result in being a good dad. I've seen men from homes with poor or absent fathers become almost militaristic in an attempt to avoid being an inattentive dad; I've seen others become almost indulgent in an attempt to avoid being a harsh one.

The secret to becoming a great father is not so secret: by faith, be a child of your heavenly Father. As you trust your Father, you will know what fatherhood was meant to be. Here's a pertinent prayer from Paul—that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Eph 1:17-18).

SBJT: Is it acceptable for evangelical Christians to refer to God as "Mother"?

Christopher W. Cowan: In recent years, some evangelical egalitarians have advocated—or at least expressed openness to—speaking of or addressing God as "Mother" or with the feminine pronoun "she." Let me offer a few brief objections to this proposal:[2]

(1) There is no biblical precedent for referring to God with feminine terms such as "Mother" or "she." Scripture uses many masculine appellatives, names, and titles for God (e.g., Lord, Father, King, Judge, Savior, Ruler, Shepherd, and Husband) and consistently uses masculine pronouns for God. We also find "ungendered," impersonal titles, appellatives, and predicate metaphors used for God (e.g., Rock, Fortress, and Shield). However, no similar feminine terms or pronouns that predicate God occur in Scripture.

(2) Biblical, masculine language for God is not culture-dependent, but rather is God's chosen self-revelation of his identity. Some have argued that the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel dictated the biblical use of masculine terminology for God. However, other ancient Near Eastern cultures, though no less patriarchal than ancient Israel, worshipped masculine *and* feminine deities (see feminine deities [See Judg 3:7; Acts 19:34]) and even referred to one and the same God as both "Father" *and* "Mother." Thus, ancient Israel's culture did not of necessity require masculine language for God.[3]

Furthermore, the masculine language for God in the Bible is not primarily due to what Israel or the early church thought about God. Ultimately, this way of speaking of God comes from God himself. Because the Bible is God's own chosen self-revelation, we must take seriously the language God chose to use to communicate to us what he is like. It cannot be dismissed as merely the by-product of a patriarchal cultural.

(3) The use of "feminine imagery" for God in the Bible neither requires nor permits us to refer to God with feminine terms such as "Mother" or "she." At times, Scripture describes God's actions using feminine figures of speech. For example, Deut 32:18 says, "You ignored the Rock who gave you birth; you forgot the God who gave birth to you," and Hos 13:8 says, "I will attack them like a bear robbed of her cubs" (see also Job 38:29; Ps 123:2; Isa 42:14, 66:13). However, the Bible also uses similar figurative language to speak of the actions of *male human beings*. In 2 Samuel 17:8, Hushai says that David and his men "are warriors and are desperate like a wild bear robbed of her cubs." The Lord announces that Israel will one day "nurse at the breast of kings" (Isa 60:16). Paul tells the Galatians that he is "suffering labor pains" until Christ is formed in them (Gal 4:19), and he claims that he and his co-laborers treated the Thessalonians "as a nursing mother nurtures her own children" (1 Thess 2:7). Do these statements imply that we are to refer to any of these men as "mother" or "she"? Of course not. Such language is simply a literary device that makes for a vivid description. If, then, this figurative language does not result in feminine titles for male human beings, neither does it

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imply the same for God.

(4) All feminine metaphors for God in the Bible are verbal—none are names or titles for God (like "Father"). While the Bible uses many masculine terms as names, titles, and metaphors for God (see #1 above), all feminine metaphors are *verbs*, imaging some of his actions (e.g., "the God who *gave birth to you*," Deut 32:18). Scripture states, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps 23:1), "God is King" (Ps 47:7), "Your husband is your Maker" (Isa 54:5), and "You [Lord] are our Father" (Isa 63:16). But it does not predicate similar *feminine* names, titles, or metaphors for God (such as "God is our Mother"). Moreover, second and third person verbs in the Hebrew Old Testament are inflected for gender. So, though Scripture may employ *verbal feminine metaphors* to describe God's actions, the consistent use of *masculine verb forms* in these cases precludes us from envisioning God as "Mother."[4]

(5) "Father" is a name or title that communicates something real about God's nature. Scripture does not call God "Father" merely because he is like human fathers but because he is "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3). God is the Father of the Lord Jesus in a way that he is not a Father to believers (John 20:17). Likewise, though Christians are made "sons of God" by adoption in Christ (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5), Jesus is the Son of God in a way that Christians are not (Mark 1:11; John 1:14, 3:16). The titles "Father" and "Son" do not apply to the first two persons of the Trinity merely as a result of the incarnation. This Father-Son relationship has *always* existed. Prior to the incarnation, the "Father" sent his "Son" into the world (John 3:17, 16:28). Moreover, the Son lives because of the Father (John 6:57). As the Father has "life in himself," so he has granted the Son to have "life in himself" (John 5:26). Since "the Word" is not created but has eternally existed (John 1:1), this should be understood as an "eternal grant" from Father to Son and testifies to the eternal nature of the Father-Son relationship.[5] Thus, the name or title "Father" communicates something real about God. God *is* the Father of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In light of the above considerations, Scripture does not permit the practice of referring to God with feminine terminology like "Mother" or "she." Although only a few evangelical egalitarians have opened the door to feminine language for God, many churches in mainline denominations have been doing so for years. Yet evangelical believers, pastors, and churches should hold fast to the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures, for the glory of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

SBJT: What advice would you give to pastors on how to preach the doctrine of the Trinity?

Vogel: Some preachers might be tempted to avoid preaching the doctrine of the Trinity, given its difficulties. However, emphasizing this doctrine in our teaching and preaching in the present day is of great importance. Trinitarian theology is a central distinguishing mark of orthodox Christianity. Errors concerning the doctrine itself and the related doctrines pertaining to each of the three persons of the Godhead are regularly at the core of the heretical teaching of cults. Accordingly, solid expository preaching of the doctrine is needed to equip the saints in an understanding of the Truth, and to confront the heresies that are as old as the early church and as contemporary as today's newspaper.

Following are some suggestions for preaching the doctrine of the Trinity.

(1) Emphasize why the doctrine of the Trinity matters. Despite some popular objections that doctrines such as this are not practical, truth matters! Right Christian living proceeds from right Christian belief; and conversely, errors of belief will produce errors of practice. A. W. Tozer rightly contended that a right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well.

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The doctrine of the Trinity matters because truth matters, and there is much confused belief about God promoted in our day. Cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses deny the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, on occasion I have heard Christians say that Islam's god, Allah, is the Christian's god called by an Arabic name; that is, they believe that Muslims and Christians worship the same god, but we call him by different names because we speak different languages. However, Allah is not triune, and therefore, cannot be the Christian God by another name. In addition is the confusion caused by imaginative Trinitarian creations such as those put forth in William P. Young's novel, *The Shack*. Preaching and teaching the doctrine of the Trinity helps believers discern truth from error in all of the "God-talk" that is out there.

Trinitarian doctrine gets to the heart of our confession of God's identity, how he accomplishes his eternal purposes, and how we are to relate to each person of the Godhead. These teachings involve spiritual matters that far transcend earthly concerns, and are central to the Gospel that defines the Church.

(2) Do not expect to explain the doctrine fully. Assertions of the doctrine of the Trinity appear to be contradictory. That is, how can God be both one and three at the same time? Indeed, this is a favorite attack by those who deny the doctrine.

Though this suggestion may frustrate an expository preacher, do not try to explain the doctrine fully; for the doctrine of the Trinity can be defined and affirmed, but not fully explained. Much mystery surrounds this truth. Many objections to the doctrine are rooted in a human rationalism that is permitted to sit in judgment on divine revelation.

Attempts to explain the doctrine of God to human satisfaction have frequently resulted in heretical teaching, often concerning the person of Christ, and have given rise to cults (such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Unitarianism). And while various analogies have been used by preachers seeking to explain the doctrine (e.g., the three parts of an egg or the triple point of water), such attempts fail to capture all dimensions of the doctrine adequately. Better to teach people to affirm what the Bible affirms, and acknowledge that to explain the triunity of God fully would be to explain Him away.

(3) Use methods of both textual and topical exposition. Because the doctrine is inferred rather than explicitly taught in Scripture (the word "trinity" is not found in the Bible), the preacher must show how the doctrine is true to Scripture's teaching. In the pulpit, this goal may be accomplished using one of two expository approaches. First is the textual expository approach, in which a single passage is selected for its treatment of some aspect or aspects of trinitarian theology, and then explained and applied in the sermon. A sermon series consisting of messages of this sort could provide, cumulatively, a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine.

The alternate approach is to prepare and preach a topical expository sermon on the doctrine. Following the approach of the systematic theologian, this form of expository sermon draws together a limited number of biblical passages, each of which teaches some aspect of the doctrine. The preacher then weaves the passages together in a logical sequence, and explains what each text means and how each contributes to an understanding of the doctrine. Using this approach, the preacher can treat the doctrine in a single sermon.

(4) Preach texts that teach the deity of each of the respective persons of the Godhead. In the course of preaching individual texts of Scripture, on occasion one will find an assertion of the deity of one or another of the persons of the Godhead. Such opportunities to affirm the deity of that person should not be missed, even if the primary emphasis of the text lies elsewhere. For example, Ananias was rebuked for lying to the Holy Spirit, and informed that he had lied not to men, but to God (Acts 5:3-4). While the passage may not be intended to teach the deity of the Holy Spirit, His deity is claimed there, and bears mention in the interest of Trinitarian theology.

Here are some suggested texts pertaining to

the deity of each of the three persons of the Godhead: the deity of the Father (Matt 6:26, 30-32; 19:23-26; Mark 12:17, 24-27; Eph 1:3-4; 1 John 2:1; 1 Cor 8:4, 6; 1 Tim 2:5-6); the deity of the Son (John 1:1; 8:58; 14:9; 20:28; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; 2:9; Heb 1:1-10); and the deity of the Spirit (Gen 1:2; Ps 139:7-8; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor 2:10-11; 3:16).

At the same time, preach texts that emphasize the oneness of God (e.g., Deut 6:4; Gal 3:20; Jas 2:19) to avoid the appearance of tritheism.

(5) Feature Trinitarian implications in those passages in which all three persons are mentioned together, noting particularly how their individual roles are distinct and complementary. Some texts may not directly assert the deity of each person of the Godhead, but having established the deity of each of the three persons from texts that *do* teach the deity of each, the preacher can explain the working dynamics among the three. For example, at Jesus' baptism all three persons are present simultaneously, a refutation of the heresy of modalism (Matt 3:16-17). Further, Jesus promised the disciples that the Father would send the Holy Spirit in His (Jesus') name to teach them all things (John 14:26). The Great Commission teaches that Christian baptism is administered in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). The great work of salvation is planned by the Father, executed by the Son, and applied by the Spirit (Eph 1:3-14). (For other texts of this type, see 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14; 1 Pet 1:2; Gal 4:1-7; Jude 20-21).

(6) Apply the doctrine practically. Some may contend that the doctrine of the Trinity does not lend itself to application. While such a claim may be rooted in too narrow an understanding of application, it *is* true that the doctrine primarily concerns what we know. However, practical application may be inferred from what we know. For example, John 1:1 affirms the deity of Jesus. While the statement itself may not involve practical application, much may be inferred from that statement. If Jesus is God, He is worthy of worship. His teaching possess divine authority, and is to be heeded as such. The efficacy of His death to save sinners depends upon His own sinlessness, an attribute of God alone. Each of these inferences is deeply significant for the believer's faith and life practice.

SBJT: How Should We Think of God's Impassibility?

Rob Lister: Answering this question requires saying just a bit about the doctrine's history, because one of the primary difficulties in discussing divine impassibility is that ancient and modern theologians typically do not mean the same thing by it. Modern Protestant theology has deviated from the dominant perspective on divine impassibility in church history by largely criticizing and rejecting the doctrine. And yet, much of the modern criticism stems from a basic misunderstanding of what impassibility was traditionally taken to mean. Specifically, contemporary passibilists (i.e., those who oppose the doctrine of divine impassibility) have frequently rejected impassibility on the grounds of the mistaken notion that divine impassibility is roughly equivalent to divine aloofness. To be sure, if this understanding of divine impassibility were accurate, then we should reject it as an attribute of God. But again, although this "equation" has become common in modern theology, there is very little church historical evidence to sustain the claim that impassibility was ever commended as a doctrine of divine aloofness. What's more, there is ample historical evidence, from the time of the early church up to and beyond the Reformation, that the dominant strain of thought about impassibility was much more thoughtful and well rounded.

We know that traditional thought about divine impassibility was well rounded because the historically mainstream affirmation of divine impassibility was nearly always held in tandem with a simultaneous affirmation of God's caring and affective engagement with his creation. Such a dual affirmation is instructive, for it shows us that the issue with impassibility, classically speaking, is

not *if* God experiences affection, but *how* he does. As a doctrinal concept in Christian theology, then, the traditional view did not use divine impassibility to posit the metaphysical aloofness of God. Rather, this dual affirmation indicates that impassibility was employed to set a limit in our thinking about the nature of God's affective engagement with creation. Understood in this manner, impassibility does not teach that God is immune to affection, but it does remind us that the divine experience of affection cannot be conceived of identically to human affective experience. In other words, impassibility establishes the boundary of the analogy between divine and human affection.

The critical theological principle undergirding this kind of differentiation is the Creator/creature distinction. When we apply this distinction to the consideration of divine affection by affirming the doctrine of divine impassibility, we are simply acknowledging that, as the Triune creator—who is, among other things, eternal (e.g., Ps 90:1-2, 93:2, Isa 57:15), omniscient (e.g., Isa 46:8-11; Acts 2:23-24; Ps 139:4), sovereign (e.g., Dan 4:34-35; Eph 1:11), and holy (e.g., Isa 6:1-7; Jas 1:13)—God's affective engagement with creation is always *voluntary*. To be more specific still, when we say, "God is impassible," we mean that God cannot be forced, manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction against his will. But this is not at all the same thing as saying that God is devoid of emotion, nor is it the equivalent of saying that he is not affected by his creatures. Indeed, God 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 by those whom, in love, he has made.

As we can easily see, when we keep in mind the Creator/creature distinction and its implications, we are (rightly) allowing our doctrine of God to theologically inform our interpretation of God's affective displays in Scripture. Thus, while we rightly conclude from Scripture's many portrayals of divine passion (e.g., jealousy, Deut 4:23-24; love, Exod 34:6-7; wrath, Exod 32:7-10; joy, Isa 65:19; grief, Ps 78:40; compassion, Ps 103:13) that God's affective engagement with his people is profound, we are, once again, hedged by Scripture's cumulative teaching about God from making the hasty (but not infrequent) assumption that, in order to be "real," God's affective engagements must exactly conform to the paradigm of human affective experience. To be sure, these kinds of texts do display God's gracious and voluntary investment of himself in covenant relationship with his people, the upshot of which is that God's engagement is born out of his faithfulness to his covenant, which of course ultimately indicates that he is faithful to himself. What's more, we must also keep in mind that God stands over that same covenantal arrangement as the transcendent Lord who foreknows and ordains all that takes place, the nature of his covenantal responsiveness included. Thus, taken holistically, Scripture drives us toward the appropriate balance, wherein we come to understand that, in his covenantal affection, God is sinlessly, passionately, and *voluntarily responsive* to the spiritual fluctuations of his people, though, once again, he is never *ultimately passive*, in the sense of being involuntarily forced into an emotional experience that he does not intend to have.

So, to sum up several of the distinctives that divine impassibility helps us see concerning that nature of God's affection, we may highlight the following three points: (1) because God is perfectly holy, he never experiences sinful passions (e.g., greed, lust, unjust anger), (2) because God exhaustively foreknows the future, he never experiences an emotion born out of being surprised by the unexpected, and (3) because God is sovereign, he is never emotionally manipulated against his will by his creatures. And to these three, we can add a fourth that isn't often contested but is true nevertheless: (4) because God is a spiritual being (e.g., John 4:19-24), his affective experience is

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unaccompanied by the embodied manifestations of emotional flux (e.g., tears, "butterflies" in the belly, or an adrenaline rush) that are part and parcel of human experience.

Having made all of those points, however, we must keep in mind that these dissimilarities from human affection do not stem from a faulty dispassion in God, but from an ethically perfect passion in God that in turn reminds us that there are key dimensions of the human affective experience that fall dramatically short of the standard of divine affection. Most notably, whereas God hates sin and loves his own glory with infinite perfection, we, who dabble with sin, neither hate sin as we ought, nor pursue righteousness as we should. In this sense, then, it is not we who are affectively strong but God. So, yes, because God is God and not a creature, his affection is different in some key respects from human affection. In acknowledgment of this, we rightly affirm that God is impassible. But again, the differences between divine and human affection result ultimately from God's affective perfection, rooted in the eternally undiminished reality of intra-Trinitarian delight (e.g., John 17:24; 1 John 4:7-12). In acknowledgment of this, we also rightly affirm that God is, properly speaking, impassioned.

Finally, although I don't have the space to say nearly as much as I would like to say about the implications of Christ's incarnation and crucifixion for the doctrine of divine impassibility, for now, at minimum, it bears stating that the second person of the Trinity had to become incarnate in order to overcome *natural* divine impassibility (i.e., the impassibility of the divine *nature*), and thereby accomplish the redemptively necessary goal of *humanly* experiencing suffering and death on behalf of sinners. This account of the incarnation and atonement is important, because it reminds us that the purpose of the Son's incarnational mission was to save sinners and not to manifest a supposed eternal suffering of God, as some have argued.

Obviously, there's much more to say than can succinctly be said here. Anyone who is interested in reflecting further on the topic of divine impassibility and its many biblical and theological implications may want to take a glance at my upcoming publication (Nov 2012) with Crossway entitled *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion*.

ENDNOTES

[1]James Barr, "'Abba isn't 'Daddy'" *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 39 (1988), 28–47.

[2]This is a modified and abbreviated version of Randy Stinson and Christopher W. Cowan, "How Shall We Speak of God? Seven Reasons Why We Cannot Call God 'Mother'," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 20–23.

[3]See Helmer Ringgren, "'*b*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. Johannes Butterweck and Helmer Ringgren; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 2-3; John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 152-53; and Roland M Frye. "Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 27.

[4]See Paul Mankowski, "The Gender of Israel's God," *This is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel Jr.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 36-37.

[5]See D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 37-38. On the eternal nature of the Father-Son relationship, see also, Bruce A. Ware, "Could Our Savior Have Been a Woman? The Relevance of Jesus' Gender for His Incarnational Mission," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 8, no. 1 (2003): 33.