

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY AMERICAN CONFSSIONAL PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGIANS.

J. LIGON DUNCAN III,
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Determining the precise position of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on the topic of divine impassibility depends not only on the definition and connotations of this concept, but upon one's interpretation of the opening section of the *Confession's* second chapter which reads: '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...'. The *Confession* is unambiguous, here and elsewhere, in its affirmation of God's eternity, immutability, infinity and incorporeality.¹ Philosophically speaking, it is possible to deduce from each of these characteristics a doctrine of divine impassibility. But of greater importance to ascertaining the *Confession's* opinion on this subject is the determination of the meaning of the phrase 'without body, parts, or passions' and particularly that of the word 'passions' in this context.

Chapter two of the *Confession* represents a comprehensive revision and expansion of the first of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562-3), the initial sentence of which reads: 'There is but one living and true God, everlasting, *without body, parts, or passions*; of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker, and the preserver of all things both visible and invisible.' Hence, the crucial phrase 'without body, parts, or passions' was directly borrowed by the Assembly of Divines from the earlier document and resituated in a longer list of attributes. Older commentators on the *Thirty-Nine Articles* uniformly argued that this phrase meant that God was without emotions and incapable

¹ See also Larger Catechism Question 7 and Shorter Catechism Question 4.

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

of suffering. For instance, William Beveridge vehemently asserted that God is:

not subject to, nor capable of love, hatred, joy, grief, anger, and the like, as they daily arise in us imperfect creatures; but he is always the same immovable, unchangeable, impassible God: and therefore in all our contemplations of the Divine essence, we are not to conceive him as one passionately rejoicing, or grieving for any thing, as we do, but as a pure and perfect essence, without body, parts, and passions too....²

Beveridge's contemporary, Gilbert Burnet, concurred in this opinion, though his language is more temperate. He explained that 'Passion is an agitation that supposes a succession of thoughts, together with a trouble for what is past, and a fear of missing what is aimed at. It arises out of a heat of mind, and produces a vehemence of action. Now all these are such manifest imperfections, that it does plainly appear they cannot consist with infinite perfection.'³ Burnet goes on to say that the anthropopathic language of Scripture is to be understood as reflecting the divine volition not divine affections, emotions or passions.

Some commentators on the *Westminster Confession* have taken this line too. For example Robert Shaw suggested that the language of Scripture which ascribes to God human passions is, in fact, only being employed 'in accommodation to our capacities.'⁴ He then goes on to quote Burnet approvingly as to the reason for and significance of the anthropopathisms of Scripture. More recently, the American philosopher and theologian Gordon H. Clark, in his popular exposition of the *Westminster Confession* entitled *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, has argued for his own version of divine impassibility based on divine immutability. According to Clark, the critical phrase 'without body, parts, or passions' indicates (among other things) that God is not emotional. He questions: 'Do we ordinarily consider it a compliment when we call a man emotional? Can we trust a person who has violent ups and downs? Is it not

² William Beveridge, *The Doctrine of the Church of England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1840), pp. 34-35. An incomplete edition of Beveridge's commentary appeared in 1716, eight years after his death. The edition quoted here gives no publication information concerning the older printing.

³ Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1831), p. 34. Burnet's work first appeared in 1699. This edition provides no information on previous printings.

⁴ Robert Shaw, *The Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, Edinburgh and London: Blackie and Son, n.d.), pp. 24-25.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

unwise to act on the spur of the moment? Would then an emotional God be dependable? How could God have emotions, if he is immutable?'⁵ For Clark, the term 'passions' as employed by the Assembly of Divines was synonymous with emotion or affections. He quotes from Bradwardine that 'God is not irascible and appeasable, liable to emotions of joy or sorrow, or in any respect passive,' and goes on to add the words of Toplady:

When love is predicated of God, we do not mean that he is possessed of it as a passion or affection. In us it is such... but if, considered in that sense, it should be ascribed to the Deity, it would be utterly subversive of the simplicity, perfection, and independency of his being. Love, therefore, when attributed to him, signifies... his eternal benevolence, *i.e.*, his everlasting will, purpose and determination to deliver, bless, and save his people.⁶

Thus Clark understands the Scriptures' application of human affections to God to be accommodation, indicative *not* of divine affections but of divine volition.

However, many of Clark's fellow Presbyterians fail to share his views on the divine affections or his exegesis of the *Confession's* statement on God's being without body, parts, or passions. A look at various other commentators on the *Confession of Faith* will reveal differing opinions on the precise significance of the word 'passions' and more restrained estimations of what it means for God to be without them.⁷ If, for example, we turn to the Presbyterian theologians of nineteenth-century America we will find a fair range of sentiment concerning the relation of the divine affections to the idea of divine impassibility. This should not be construed as resulting from indifference to the theology of the *Confession*, for if we take a representative selection of confessionally-committed theologians we would still find a variety of emphases. In the north-eastern states, for instance, we may look to the older and younger Hodges of Princeton, that bastion of Presbyterian orthodoxy. Charles Hodge and his son A.A. Hodge argued for strong confessional fidelity throughout their careers and wrote numerous articles in an effort to foster the same among the ministers and professors of the

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965) p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ See for instance Francis R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards: An Exposition* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1896), p. 54; A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1870), pp. 48-49; and Edward D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols* (Columbus, Ohio, 1900), pp. 140-142.

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Presbyterian Church.⁸ Additionally, we may consider W.G.T. Shedd, defender of the Westminster Standards in the midst of the New School Presbyterianism of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Shedd declared war on proposals for confessional revision with the publication of his little book *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*.⁹ If we turn to the South, we find at Union Seminary in Richmond, Robert Lewis Dabney, perhaps the best-known of the southern systematicians. Dabney was zealously committed to the doctrine of the Confession and his final address to the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church contained a call for comprehensive subscription to the Westminster Standards.¹⁰

Yet as we survey the writings of these men on the subject of the divine affections and divine impassibility, we will find a diversity of emphases despite their common confessional commitment. In our review of these nineteenth-century American confessional Presbyterians we will seek to contribute to the general debate of divine passibility and impassibility via the considered reflections of four great theologians; to ascertain the main issues of discussion in their day concerning divine impassibility; and to assist in the evaluation of the ideas of passibility and impassibility from a confessional perspective.

Charles Hodge

Among these nineteenth century theologians there were two prime concerns in treating the issue of impassibility. The first was to define the concept of 'passions,' and the second to relate the denial of divine passion to the idea of divine affections. In the course of attending to this second task, the Bible's ascription of various affections to God had to be explained as well. We have already noted in this regard that Gordon Clark, in his informal commentary of the *Confession*, denies that God has emotions and suggests that the language of Scripture which speaks of God in terms of human passions is reflective of divine volition *not* divine affections. There could hardly be a more striking contrast to this than the view of Charles Hodge. In his

⁸ For instance see Charles Hodge's discussion of subscription in 'Reunion,' *Princeton Review* 34 (1867): 493-522.

⁹ W.G.T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed – A Defence of the Westminster Standards* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893).

¹⁰ Robert L. Dabney, 'The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession: Its Fundamental and Regulative Ideas, and the Necessity and Value of Creeds' in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly* ed. Francis R. Beattie (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897).

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

Systematic Theology, amidst his consideration of the attributes of God, Hodge addresses the assertion of the scholastic theologians that 'God cannot be subject to passivity in any form.'¹¹ Hodge says:

Love in us includes complacency and delight in its object, with the desire of possession and communion. The schoolmen, and often the philosophical theologians, tell us that there is no feeling in God. This, they say, would imply passivity, or susceptibility of impression from without, which it is assumed is incompatible with the nature of God.¹²

After criticizing philosophical definitions of God's love – that love in God is 'that which secures the development of the rational universe' or that by which God engages in self-communication – Hodge clearly sets forth his own position:

If love in God is only a name for that which accounts for the rational universe; if God is love, simply because he develops himself in thinking and conscious beings, then the word has for us no definite meaning; it reveals to us nothing concerning the real nature of God. Here again we have to choose between a mere philosophical speculation and the clear testimony of the Bible, and of our own moral and religious nature. Love of necessity involves feeling and if there be no feeling in God, there can be no love.¹³

Hodge is no less lucid in setting out his view of the anthropopathic language of the Bible:

We must adhere to the truth in its scriptural form, or we lose it altogether. We must believe that God is love in the sense in which that word comes home to every human heart. The Scriptures do not mock us when they say, 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.' (Ps. 103:13) He meant what He said when He proclaimed Himself as 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth.' (Ex. 34:6) ... God is love; and love in him is, in all that is essential to its nature, what love is in us.¹⁴

Finally, in contrast to Clark's exclusion of the idea of divine affections and emphasis on divine mental activity and volition, Hodge says: '(God) ceases to be God in the sense of the Bible, and in the sense in which we need a God, unless He can love as well as know

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1871), 1:428.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1:428.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:428-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

and act.¹⁵ For Hodge mind, will, and affections are three necessary components in human personality, and they are no less essential to the divine essence.

Hodge's concern in arguing for the emotional aspect of God's love is at once to refute the philosophical abstractions of Bruch and Schleiermacher on the subject, and to affirm the importance of taking seriously the Bible's imagery concerning the love of God for his people. Whether or not one shares Hodge's commitment to Scottish Realism (and the language of 'Common Sense' is certainly patent in these passages), his insistence on the point of contact between human and divine emotional life is compelling, particularly in the day of Moltmann.

A.A. Hodge

While Charles Hodge does not engage in any discussion of the phrase 'without body, parts, or passions,' his son and successor at Princeton, A.A. Hodge, takes up this issue both in his commentary *The Confession of Faith* and in his *Outlines of Theology*. He understands the *Confession's* phrase that God is 'a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions' to stress the incorporeality of God. He says:

When we say God is a Spirit we mean – First, Negatively, that he does not possess bodily parts or passions; that he is composed of no material elements; that he is not subject to any of the limiting conditions of material existence; and consequently, that he is not to be apprehended as the object of any of our bodily senses.¹⁶

He confirms this view in his commentary on the *Confession*, where he says:

We deny that the properties of matter, such as bodily parts or passions, belong to him. We make this denial – a) because there is no evidence that he does possess any such properties; and b) because, from the very nature of matter and its affections, it is inconsistent with those infinite and absolute perfections which are of his essence, such as simplicity, unchangeableness, unity, omnipresence, etc.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

¹⁶ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1883), p. 140.

¹⁷ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1870), p. 49.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

Hodge seems to intend to restrict the idea of 'passions' to '*material* passions' by his subtle alteration of the phrase 'body, parts, or passions' to '*bodily parts or passions*' – a phrase which he repeats no fewer than four times. This is further confirmed by the emphasis of the above quote in which he denies God's corporeality on the basis that matter and *material affections* are inconsistent with the perfections of God. He certainly does not think that this sort of impassibility rules out divine affections, for in elucidating the phrase God is 'a most pure spirit' he contends that 'By Spirit we mean the subject to which the attributes of intelligence, *feeling*, and will belong, as active principles' (emphasis mine).¹⁸ Here Hodge is following on his father's view that the divine personality possesses knowledge, will, and affections: while qualifying this affirmation with the phrase 'as *active* principles.' Even so, Hodge elsewhere explains the anthropopathisms of Scripture as mere imagery:

When (the Scriptures) speak of (God) repenting, of his being grieved, or jealous, they use metaphorical language also, teaching us that he acts toward us as a man would when agitated by such passions. Such metaphors are characteristic rather of the Old than of the New Testament, and occur for the most part in highly rhetorical passages of the poetical and prophetic books.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that Hodge omits reference to God's love, joy, pity and the like in this explanation of the anthropopathic language of Scripture. Charles Hodge had been concerned to stress the human-like emotional quality of God's love but A.A. Hodge is most interested in warning against imputing to God unworthy human passions. Here, as elsewhere, A.A. Hodge manages to avoid contradicting his father's statements on the divine affections while conveying a different impression in his own formulations.

W.G.T. Shedd

W.G.T. Shedd, in his *Dogmatic Theology*, has a quite extensive discussion of the significance of the phrase 'without body, parts or passions.' In the first place, he understands it to assert the incorporeality of God.

In saying that God, as a pure spirit, is 'without body, parts or passions,' a definite conception is conveyed by which spirit and matter are sharply distinguished. Matter may have bodily form, be divisible, and capable of passions: that is, of being wrought upon by other pieces of ponderable

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

matter. None of these characteristics can belong to God, or to any spirit whatever.²⁰

Next, Shedd explains the word 'passions' and argues for God's impassibility.

In defining God to be 'a most pure spirit without passions,' it must be remembered that the term 'passion' is used etymologically. It is derived from *patior*, to suffer. Passion implies passivity. It is the effect of an impression from without. ...God has no passions. He stands in no passive or organic relations to that which is not himself. He cannot be wrought upon, and impressed, by the universe of matter and mind which he has created from nothing.²¹

Then, having affirmed divine impassibility, Shedd relates it to the concept of divine affections.

It is important to remember this signification of the term 'passion,' and the intention in employing it. Sometimes it has been understood to be synonymous with feeling or emotion, and the erroneous and demoralizing inference has been drawn, that the Divine nature is destitute of feeling altogether.²²

And so Shedd is concerned to stress that his acceptance of the doctrine of divine impassibility is not to be understood as a denial of feeling in God. In this connection Shedd comments on the passages in the Bible which ascribe emotion to God. The challenge is to affirm that they speak of a real divine emotional life without attributing to God affections which are seemingly inconsistent with his divine character as described in other portions of Scripture. Shedd approaches this problem in a distinctive way by setting up a standard by which one can determine whether an anthropathism is to be taken figuratively or literally. He says: 'The Scriptures attribute feeling to God, and nearly all forms of feeling common to man. That all of these are not intended to be understood as belonging to the Divine nature is plain, because some of them are as incompatible with the idea of an infinite and perfect being as are the material instruments of hands and feet attributed to him in Scripture.'²³ Shedd continues:

²⁰ W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 Vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891-4), 1:165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1:170-1.

²² *Ibid.*, 1:172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:173-4.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

The criterion for determining which form of feeling is literally, and which is metaphorically attributable to God, is the divine *blessedness*. God cannot be the subject of any emotion that is intrinsically and necessarily an unhappy one. If he literally feared his foes, or were literally jealous of a rival, he would so far forth be miserable. Literal fear and literal jealousy cannot therefore be attributed to him. Tried by this test, it will be found that there are only two fundamental forms of feeling that are literally attributable to the Divine essence. These are love (agape) and wrath (orge). Hatred is a phase of displeasure or wrath. These two emotions are real and essential in God; the one wakened by righteousness, and the other by sin.²⁴

In this line of argumentation Shedd is, as we have noted, quite distinctive, but his conclusion to the discussion does not materially differ from A.A. Hodge's. Shedd says: 'While therefore God as a most pure spirit has no passions, he has feelings and emotions. He is not passively wrought upon by the objective universe, so that he experiences physical impressions and organic appetities, as the creature does, but he is self-moved in all his feelings.'²⁵

R.L. Dabney

In his discussion of divine immutability, Robert Lewis Dabney takes up the question of the relation of God's affections to the doctrine of impassibility and comments: 'Our Confession says, that God hath neither parts nor passions. That He has something analogous to what are called in man active principles, is manifest, for He wills and acts; therefore he must feel. But these active principles must not be conceived of as emotions in the sense of ebbing and flowing accesses of feeling.'²⁶ Dabney's concern here is to affirm the completeness of personality in God without leaving him open to the charge of inconstancy. As for Scripture which attributes human agitations to God, Dabney says:

When, therefore, the Scriptures speak of God as becoming wroth, as repenting, as indulging His fury against His adversaries, in connection with some particular event occurring in time, we must understand them anthropopathically. What is meant is, that the outward manifestations of His active principles were as though these feelings then arose.²⁷

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:174.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:178.

²⁶ Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 153.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Dabney's brief treatment of impassibility in his *Systematic Theology* concentrates on deflecting misunderstandings about the divine emotional life rather than making a strong affirmation of it. However, he balances this emphasis in a fuller consideration of the subject in an article on the free offer of the gospel entitled 'God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy.' Dabney reminds us that:

the Confession declares God to be 'without passions.' So the theologians tell us that we must ascribe to him no 'passive powers'; for then he would not be immutable. He acts on everything; but is acted on by none. He is the source, but not the recipient of effects. This is indisputable. But we should not so overstrain the truth as to reject two other truths. One is, that while God has no passions, while he has no mere susceptibility such that his creature can cause an effect upon it irrespective of God's own will and freedom, yet he has active principles. These are not passions, in the sense of fluctuations or agitations, but none the less are they affections of his will, actively distinguished from the cognitions in his intelligence. They are truly optative functions of the divine Spirit. However anthropopathic may be the statements made concerning God's repentings, wrath, pity, pleasure, love, jealousy, hatred, in the Scriptures, we should do violence to them if we denied that he here meant to ascribe to himself active affections in some mode suitable to his nature. ...The other truth is, that objective beings and events are the real occasions, though not efficient causes, of action both of the divine affections and will. Are not many divines so much afraid of ascribing to God any 'passive powers,' or any phase of dependence on the creature, that they hesitate even to admit that scriptural fact? ...'God is angry with the wicked every day' (Ps. 7:11); 'But the *thing that David* had done displeased the Lord;' 'My delight is *in her*' (Is. 62:4); '*In these things* I delight, saith the Lord' (Jer. 9:24). Is all this so anthropopathic as not even to mean that God's active principles here have an objective? Why not let the Scriptures mean what they so plainly strive to declare? But some seem so afraid of recognizing in God any susceptibility of a passive nature that they virtually set Scripture aside, and paint a God whose whole activities of intelligence and will are so exclusively from himself that even the relation of objective occasion to him is made unreal, and no other is allowed than a species of coincidence or preestablished harmony. They are chary of conceding (what the Bible seems so plainly to say) that God is *angry because* men sin; and would go no farther than to admit that somehow he is angry *when* men sin, yet, because absolutely independent, angry only of himself.²⁸

In this long paragraph Dabney both vigorously affirms the reality of the divine affections and cautions against inferring too much from

²⁸ Robert L. Dabney, 'God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy,' in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, ed. C.R. Vaughan (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 1:291-2.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

the idea of divine unsusceptibility. It is also apparent from this passage that Dabney understands the *Confession's* statement on God being without passions to have reference to the broader question of divine susceptibility (which Shedd called 'passivity'), of which the issue of divine affections is but a part. However, perhaps Dabney's greatest contribution to this discussion of divine impassibility is his relating of the question of the divine affections to the incarnation. Neither of the Hodges nor Shedd ventured to address the issue of the passibility or impassibility of the Saviour. The problem raised by the embodiment of the Word for the idea of divine impassibility is obvious. Christ was the suffering servant, living and dying in sorrow. If God is impassible and Christ is the God-man, then how could Christ have suffered? In response to this dilemma, some have suggested that only the human nature of Christ wept and grieved and suffered. Dabney considered that solution extreme and in the above-mentioned article sets forth his own view. Dabney is arguing for the compatibility of the free offer of the gospel to all humanity with the divine election of only some. While affirming the divine effectual call, he appeals to the many scriptural passages which speak of the universal, indiscriminate compassion of God for the sinner as proper grounds for a genuine, comprehensive gospel offer. It is in this context that he touches on the relation of Christ's human and divine natures in his emotional life.

The yet more explicit passage in Luke 19:41,42, has given our extremists still more trouble. We are told that Christ wept over the very men whose doom of reprobation he then pronounced. Again, the question is raised by them, if Christ felt this tender compassion for them, why did he not exert his omnipotence for their effectual calling? And their best answer seems to be, that here it was not the divine nature in Jesus that wept, but the humanity only. Now, it will readily be conceded that the divine nature was incapable of the *pain* of sympathetic passion and of the *agitation* of grief; but we are loath to believe that this precious incident is no manifestation of the passionless, unchangeable, yet infinitely benevolent pity of the divine nature. For, first, it would impress the common Christian mind with a most painful feeling to be thus seemingly taught that holy humanity is more generous and tender than God. The humble and simple reader of the gospels had been taught by them that there was no excellence in the humanity which was not the effect and effluence of the corresponding ineffable perfections of the divinity. Second, when we hear our Lord speaking of gathering Jerusalem's children as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and then announcing the final doom of the rejected, we seem to hear the divine nature in him, at least as much as the human. And third, such interpretations, implying some degree of dissent between the two natures, are perilous, in that they obscure that vital truth, Christ the manifestation to us of the divine nature. ...It is our happiness to believe that when we see Jesus weeping over lost Jerusalem, we 'have seen the

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Father,' we have received an insight into the divine benevolence and pity.²⁹

In this passage Dabney acknowledges not only a divine emotional life for both the Son and the Father, but also that this emotional life entails grief, sorrow, pity, and compassion. His concept of 'passionless yet infinitely benevolent pity' is his attempt to come to grips with the scriptural testimony to both God's sovereignty and his divine compassion. With all Dabney's concessions and qualifications, this statement still constitutes the most forceful affirmation of passive or complacent affections in God of the four theologians we have reviewed. Furthermore, his stress on the compassion of the Father and on the incarnate Son's revelation of the Father's affections evidence Dabney's unique contribution to the discussion on divine impassibility among nineteenth-century American Presbyterians. Nevertheless, Dabney does not address the most difficult question in regard to the relation of impassibility to the incarnation, that of the divine passibility in the immolation and dereliction of the beloved Son. In fairness to Dabney, however, we may be reminded that his Presbyterian contemporaries either fail to comment on this issue or assert that only the human nature of Christ suffered in his humiliation and crucifixion.³⁰

Summary and Conclusion

Having briefly reviewed the main statements of these theologians on divine impassibility and the divine affections, we may now offer a few comments on the similarities and differences in their treatments of the subject.

1) Of the three theologians who addressed the *Confession's* language 'without passions,' each affirmed a doctrine of divine impassibility. Only Charles Hodge does not acknowledge this explicitly. This may be because he treats the subject of the divine

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:308.

³⁰ Charles Hodge is nonplussed in regard to this matter and says: 'Into the relation between his divine and human nature as revealed in these experiences, it is in vain for us to inquire.' *Systematic Theology*, 2:615. A.A. Hodge, W.G.T. Shedd, and Dabney's southern contemporary, John L. Girardeau, all assert that *only* the human nature suffered. See Hodge, *Outlines in Theology*, p. 406; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:425; and Girardeau, 'The Person of Christ,' in *Discussions of Theological Questions*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1905), pp. 408-9.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

affections under the heading of the goodness of God (whereas Shedd and Dabney take up the topic in their sections on immutability), and because he is arguing against opinions which he feels compromise the personality of God by denying the divine affections. There is no evidence that he would have any quarrel with the others' general approval of the idea of divine impassibility.

2) There are, however, slight differences among the other three in their definition of the word 'passions.' A.A. Hodge seems to understand 'passions' to refer to '*bodily* passions.' Shedd is concerned to distinguish 'passions' from 'emotions' or 'feelings.' For Shedd, the confessional term 'passions' refers to the idea of passivity (the state of standing in passive relation to anything outside oneself). Dabney also views 'passions' as having reference to passivity. But he adds that, though 'passions' are not emotions, emotions come into consideration in the *Confession's* phrase 'without... passions' because emotions can be a form of passivity.

3) With regard to the meaning of the phrase 'without body, parts or passions,' A.A. Hodge argues that these words are intended to stress the incorporeality of God. W.G.T. Shedd is in full agreement, for he says the phrase is meant to help distinguish matter and spirit. Hence, they both take the clause to be an assertion of the immateriality of God. Dabney concentrates more on 'passions' and in his *Systematic Theology* reads the phrase as a whole to be a denial of human-like emotions in God (though not a denial of active principles in God which correspond to human active principles). However, Dabney makes it clear elsewhere that the phrase 'without body, parts or passions' is primarily a denial of the susceptibility of God, meaning that God is not the subject of any physical passions or involuntarily open to other sorts of external agency.

4) Concerning the divine affections in relation to impassibility, there are a range of emphases in each author. Charles Hodge seems not to be interested in asserting divine impassivity nor in addressing the difficulties concomitant with holding to a position of potential divine passivity, but is more concerned to affirm the inclusion of feeling, and especially the emotional aspect of love, in the divine essence. Furthermore, he is the boldest of the four in arguing for the similarity between God's love and our love. A.A. Hodge also asserts that the attributes of intelligence, *feeling*, and will belong to God as spirit but does not emphasize the point like his father. Shedd states that God has no passions, but that he does have emotions. These emotions, according to Shedd, are self-moving. Additionally, Shedd is anxious to say that these feelings are compatible with and necessary to the divine essence. Dabney, on the other hand, is reticent about the ascription of emotions to God, because it seems to imply ebb and flow. However, Dabney allows and even stresses that there is

THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

something analogous to human feeling in God, and further states that these 'active principles' in God, which are analogous to human emotions, are the springs of the divine volition.

5) Each of the four theologians, not surprisingly, acknowledges that the anthropomorphic language of Scripture, if taken literally, is not consistent with the spirituality of God. However, in regard to anthropopathisms, their opinions vary. The older Hodge stands out among them when he argues that the anthropopathic language of Scripture concerning God's goodness and love must not be explained away but adhered to in its scriptural form. Simultaneously, however, he says that references to God as repenting are to be classed with anthropomorphisms. Unfortunately he does not address the language of Scripture which ascribes to God 'negative' affections such as grief, sorrow, anger, and so on. A.A. Hodge, in distinction from his father, suggests that the anthropopathisms of Scripture such as grief and jealousy are metaphorical and reflective rather of the divine actions than the affections. It is interesting to note again, however, that he does not mention anthropopathisms which represent the goodness of God and hence, does not necessarily come into conflict with his father's position. Shedd offers yet another opinion. He says that as Scripture attributes a whole range of human feeling to God, many of these must be understood figuratively. However, there are two fundamental forms of feeling that are literally attributable to God, love and wrath. Finally, Dabney is similar to the younger Hodge, when he asserts that scriptural language describing God as wroth or repenting is to be understood as illustrative, not of the divine affections themselves, but of the outward manifestation of God's active principles. Nevertheless, Dabney is also careful to warn against any view which ascribes a 'hyper-impassibility' to the divine essence, and counsels (in a manner similar to Charles Hodge) that we should not recoil from the simple statements of the Word.

If we interpret the Westminster Divines' statement that God is 'without body, parts, or passions' in the light of the commentaries of these four theologians, then we may suggest that the *Confession* intends by this phrase to expand on its assertion of the spirituality of God by stressing his incorporeality and unsusceptibility. This view is confirmed by the fact that in the *Confession* the phrase 'without body, parts, or passions' follows the declaration that God is 'a most pure spirit' which the Assembly then seems to qualify with its next three statements: first, this spiritual God is invisible; second, he has no body or bodily parts; third, along with the second point, he is not susceptible to physical pain or involuntarily subject to external influence. Hence, the *Confession* asserts a doctrine of divine impassibility but not a doctrine of impassivity.

DIVINE PASSIBILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

The discussion of passibility and impassibility in nineteenth century Presbyterian theology is an humble one when compared to the one surrounding the theology of Jurgen Moltmann. Indeed, Hodge's, Shedd's and Dabney's freshest emphases and insights seem like minor adjustments when compared to Moltmann's assault on impassibility. Nevertheless, the work of these men, and particularly their criticism of older scholastic teaching on divine impassibility, does not fail to show the way forward in a confessional approach to this important issue in modern theology.