

**A Position Paper Concerning the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility  
Presented by the Theology Committee  
of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America**

**Introduction**

Our Confession unequivocally affirms that God is “without . . . passions”(2LCF 2.1). This is an affirmation of the classical doctrine of divine impassibility (DDI) consonant with the unified voice of historic confessional Reformed theology, particularly as articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (2.1), the Savoy Declaration (2.1), and the 42/39 Articles of the Church of England (Art. 1). The DDI asserts that *God does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by his relationship to creation*. He is not changed from within or without; he remains unchanged and unchanging both prior and subsequent to creation.

In light of present-day attempts to modify the DDI, it is incumbent upon ARBCA to publish its position on this vital issue. This will ensure greater understanding and unity among its member churches. The position adopted by ARBCA will be used to inform and examine those churches seeking membership, to establish a standard in controversy (should it arise in member churches), to serve as a standard for materials published by ARBCA, and to examine home and foreign missionaries supported by ARBCA churches.

The DDI has come under attack within the last century in various theological traditions. Many who would be classified as mainstream evangelicals have jettisoned this doctrine. There are a number of evangelicals who wish to retain some form of divine impassibility while at the same time attempting to affirm that God is also passible. Instead of affirming divine impassibility as an attribute of God that is a necessary consequent of divine immutability, they postulate a God who displays a full array of emotions which are subject to change according to his sovereign will. Rather than saying God does not suffer or undergo any emotional change whatsoever, some wish to affirm that God undergoes change in relation to the created order, just not involuntarily. From this perspective, while God expresses an array of divine emotions, he is affirmed to be in some sense impassible.

This Position Paper contends that only the classical DDI is compatible with the doctrine of God revealed in Scripture and articulated in the 2LCF. It is presented as follows: 1. the importance of the DDI; 2. biblical and exegetical foundations of the DDI; 3. an overview of a systematic theology of the DDI; 4. an overview of the 2LCF on the DDI; and 5. affirmations and denials pertaining to the DDI.

**1. Why is this matter important?**

The 2LCF regards the DDI as a necessary and intricate element of the doctrine of God. One cannot dismiss, discount, or modify the confessional DDI without reformulating the doctrine of God. Bavinck says:

Those who predicate any change whatsoever of God, whether with respect to his essence, knowledge, or will, diminish all his attributes: independence, simplicity, eternity, omniscience, and omnipotence. This robs God of his divine nature, and religion of its firm foundation and assured comfort. (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158)

This doctrine is important because it is the teaching of Holy Scripture and is affirmed by our Confession. It is essential for ARBCA due to our formal commitments as an Association. The ARBCA Policy Manual 3.7.1 reads:

Strict/Full subscription is the acceptance, from the heart, of the Confession as an integrated whole, together with each Article (herein after Chapter) within it. It is the conscientious affirmation of: 1) each doctrine as stated in the Confession, 2) the integrity of that system of doctrine, historically defined by the Reformed faith, and 3) our Baptist distinctives, particularly enunciated therein.

Our formal commitments make it obligatory for us to confess the DDI as stated in our Confession.

## **2. Biblical and exegetical foundations**

At the foundation of the confessional formulation of the DDI are principles of interpretation, which when applied consistently, necessitate the conclusion that God is “without . . . passions” (2LCF 2.1). To these principles we now turn.

### **• Hermeneutics**

One of the most important hermeneutical principles affirmed by our Confession is *the analogy of Scripture* as expressed in 2LCF 1.9.

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: And therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one) it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.

The Scripture speaks in such a way as to require viewing certain texts literally and others metaphorically or anthropopathically; otherwise we are left with seemingly contradictory propositions respecting the doctrine of God (cf. John 1:18 with Exod. 33:23). Thus the more clear passages, having been interpreted according to their divinely intended sense, serve as the foundation for interpreting the less clear passages.

An example of two texts which inform the DDI will help illustrate this point. When texts that posit divine repentance (e.g., Gen. 6:6-7) are compared with texts that deny the very same thing (e.g., Num. 23:19) the exegete is left with few options. If we are to maintain a right view of scriptural authority and infallibility, we cannot simply take both texts literally. These texts highlight the interpretive challenge in that they cannot be true in the same way, at the same time.<sup>1</sup> The proper method for interpreting these kinds of texts is to give priority to those which speak of God ontologically (e.g., Exod. 3:14; Num. 23:19), what he is eternally or in his essence. Ontological propositions must be given priority, not only because they are more clear and less difficult, but also because what God is in himself precedes what God is like toward us. The latter presupposes and must be interpreted in light of the former.

The 2LCF also recognizes the principle of *the analogy of faith*: the clear passages of Scripture yield clear theological conclusions. Thus when the 2LCF states that the “true and full sense of any Scripture” (1.9) must include the theological primacy of clear texts, it recognizes that more

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the texts do not make affirmations that need reconciliation; i.e., God is “A” and God is “B.” They actually make opposite affirmations, or better, an affirmation on the one hand and a denial on the other; i.e., God repented and God does not repent; God is “A” and God is “not A.”

than grammatical and lexicographical principles are necessary for rightly dividing the Word of God. One must interpret the texts of Scripture theologically in the context of the entire canon.

What these two principles require is that we compare Scripture with Scripture, but not in a theological vacuum. When biblical texts speak to the doctrine of God, we must understand them in the light of the whole. The Scriptures must be interpreted both exegetically and theologically. Therefore the DDI cannot be divorced from the rest of the doctrine of God, especially his incomprehensibility, immutability, aseity, and simplicity, to which the 2LCF gives rich evidence. The 2LCF rightly points to the interpretive practice of comparing Scripture with Scripture, exegetically and theologically, so as to understand all that it teaches respecting the doctrine of God. This necessitates taking the Scriptures which speak of God in the language of human passions as anthropopathic, since this alone does justice to the unified sense of Scripture.

- **The Old and New Testaments on the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility**

It is difficult to interpret what a particular text may be teaching about God without a proper framework drawn from the entire canon. The Scriptures sometimes disclose certain truths about God by using language borrowed from common human experience that portray him as changing. The central issue when interpreting these passages is methodological. Scripture uses the common experiences of men to convey the idea of God's omniscience, wrath, and judgment. That is, Scripture speaks of the manifestation of God's infinite nature, though from our perspective it appears as change. In this view, the language of change is understood metaphorically or anthropopathically, rather than in a literal or univocal fashion. This is the best and time-proven method of interpretation. Sample texts from both Testaments will now be examined under four headings: nature of God texts, immutability/impassibility texts, apparent passibilist texts, and the NT theology of the incarnation.

#### *Nature of God texts*

Exodus 3:14 says, "And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Moses foresees the Israelites asking him, "What is his name?" Keil and Delitzsch write:

The question, "What is His name?" presupposed that the name expressed the nature and operations of God, and that God would manifest in deeds the nature expressed in His name. God therefore told him His name, or, to speak more correctly, He explained the name יְהוָה by which He had made Himself known to Abraham at the making of the covenant (Gen 15:7), in this way: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, "I am that I am," and designated Himself by this name as the absolute God of the fathers, acting with unfettered liberty and [independence]<sup>2</sup> . . . (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 1:442)

The name reveals the nature and works of God. "I AM" reveals God's transcendence and simultaneously discloses his immanence, without conceiving his transcendence as a problem that his immanence must overcome. The triune God relates to Israel directly as the eternal, infinite, triune God. Exodus 3 teaches us that God is the great, eternal, self-sufficient, and transcendent God. It also teaches us that this same transcendent God-by virtue of his infinite perfection-is the merciful, gracious, and faithful God of Israel. God's relationship to his people

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation reads "self-dependence." We have consulted the original German text and German language resources prior to making this change of translation. See the *Oxford Duden German Dictionary*, s.v., Selbständigkeit (which is the term employed in the original German text).

is based on his eternal, essential existence as "I AM." It is the aseity of God that is the ground of his immanent relationship with his people. Furthermore, God's self-declared name reveals God's unchanging nature. As the "I AM," God doesn't *become*, he is. This name shows "the constancy and certainty of his nature, and will, and word. The sense is, I am the same that ever I was" (Poole, *Commentary*, Exod. 3:14).

Psalm 90:1-2 declares, "A Prayer of Moses the man of God. Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You *are* God." The psalmist declares both the eternity and immutability of God. He then declares how this eternal and immutable God relates to his creatures (vv. 3ff). God's closest, most immanent of relationships to his creation are based directly on his eternal, unchangeable nature, such that there is no need to posit a duality in God between his transcendence and immanence.

"No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*" (John 1:18). The essence of God cannot be seen and has not been "seen...at any time." Invisibility is properly predicated of God's essence and, therefore, what he is eternally. John had events from the book of Exodus in his mind as he wrote the final verses of his prologue. He understands some of the language Moses used as anthropomorphic, depicting divine revelation in human ways of knowing. God does not have a literal face (Exod. 33:20, "You cannot see My face . . ."). God does not have a body; he is invisible (cf. Col. 1:15 and 1 Tim. 6:16).<sup>3</sup>

"God is spirit" (John 4:24). God is uncreated, independent, self-existent, eternal, and simple spirit (e.g., Exod. 3:14; Psalm 90:2). He is a one-of-a-kind "spirit." He does not and cannot become less or more "spirit" for this is what he is eternally.

Acts 17:29 reads, "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising." Paul sets forth the supremacy of the Creator in Acts 17:24-26a, evoking the OT (cf. Isa. 42:5). God is not dependent upon creatures (Acts 17:25), he created all things in general and the human race in particular (Acts 17:25-26), and is not contained in men's temples or represented by their art (Acts 17:24, 29). The Creator/creature distinction is maintained by Paul. The Athenian idolaters should repent and believe on the Lord Jesus (Acts 17:30). "[T]he Divine Nature" is not like that which is created; it is of a different order of being. God is separate, transcendent, not like the creature and therefore, is not subject to the same sort of things that affect man.

Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." "Attributes" describe something about God's essence. An attribute is not a part of God, for he is not composed of divine things. All of God is all that God is. Divine attributes tell us something about the essence of God and are, therefore, identical with his existence, both eternal and unchanging. Attributes are revelations of God to us, not alterations or a refashioning of God for us. These are called "*invisible* attributes," though "clearly seen, being understood through what has been made . . ." "Eternal power" is predicated of God. Power refers to divine omnipotence, exhibited through what God does, limited by his own nature. "Eternal" refers to that which has always existed, not bounded or hedged in by any created entity. The things that have been made had a beginning. There was a time when everything other than God was not. God does not become; he is (e.g., Exod. 3:14;

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<sup>3</sup> It can be said that God the Son as mediator has a body but only according to his human nature.

John 1:18; 4:24; 1 John 4:8). Eternal power knows no exhausting; it is revealed without depletion. Creation testifies to the invisible, eternal power of God. God's nature is "divine." Nature refers to that which makes up the primary qualities of an object or person. God's divinity is "clearly seen, being understood through what has been made." Man knows God inescapably. God does not take upon himself the things predicated of him in Romans 1:20 in order to become Creator. That which had always been (i.e., God) became known (i.e., revealed) to man the creature, without ceasing to be what it always was and ever shall be.

In 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul identifies the object of praise as the incomprehensible one who is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise." The eternity of God is one of the attributes unique to him. Employing the way of negation (i.e., apophatic theology), the Apostle asserts that God is "immortal," that is, incorruptible, immune from decay. Being incorruptible and immune from decay implies immutability, for God "can neither be changed for the better (because he is the best) nor for the worse (because he would cease to be the most perfect)" (Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:205). God is "invisible." The Scripture speaks of the invisibility of God relative to the fact that he is spirit (John 4:24). In Exodus 33:18-23, Moses asks to see God's glory. The God who revealed himself as "Yahweh" to Moses previously in Exodus 3:14 declares in 33:20, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." That God is spirit (John 4:24) underscores, of course, the spirituality of God, which implies his invisibility, the reverse also being true. God is "the only God" (NASB), a statement that highlights his independence and unity, specifically his unity of singularity. The immortality of God is specifically relevant to the DDI as it highlights the separateness of God from his creation and underscores his incorruptibility and imperishability, both of which indicate that he is in fact immutable and therefore impassible.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love is what God *is*, not what he *has* or *becomes*. Love is not a capacity in which God increases or diminishes. God does not have the potential to be loving or the potential to be more or less loving. Therefore, in the technical language of Christian theism, there is no potentiality in God. Since God is what he is, love is necessarily and eternally what he is, fully realized (i.e., actualized) and infinite. He is "most loving" (2LCF 2.1). Affirming impassibility does not reduce divine love to a distant, cold, inert numbness. Divine love is unchanging love that moves and shapes us (it is fully actualized), but is not moved or shaped (by God or us) in order for God to love us. It may be experienced by us in differing degrees, but it does not exist in God in differing degrees. God loves us without increasing or diminishing love in himself.

### ***Immutability/impassibility texts***

There are several OT passages that relate directly to the DDI. For example, Numbers 23 continues the narrative of the encounter of Israel with Balak, who has enlisted Balaam to curse Israel. God proclaims to Balak through Balaam:

And Balaam took up his discourse and said, "Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor: God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. (Num. 23:18-20)

God's opening call for Balak's attention reveals that his most foundational problem was a decidedly corrupt conception of Israel's God. Through Balaam, God declares that he "is not a man...or a son of man," calling attention to the Creator/creature distinction. God's blessing is irreversible because it does not originate in his willingness to bless or in the lack of his

willingness to curse. God declares that his act of blessing Israel is grounded in his very essence; because he is God and not a man nor the son of man the blessing is irrevocable. It is not that God *will not* revoke his blessing; it is that he *cannot* revoke it. God first sets himself apart from mankind ontologically by way of negation and then expresses the consequences of this foundational theological reality in several ways. God himself makes evident in his Word the necessary distinctions between God and man, the Creator and the creature. God provides for us a way or method of naming himself. "God is not man...nor a son of man" is the fundamental starting point for what follows. Balak's folly was in thinking there was a level of essential commonality or identity between God and man. God establishes the practice of describing the Creator/creature distinction by the way of negation, i.e., what God is not. As Psalm 50:21 confirms, our sinful tendency is to think God is "altogether like" us. While there are ways that the *imago Dei* reflects *our* likeness to God in certain limited respects, this biblical truth does not permit attributing all that is true of the image-bearer to the infinite Creator. The *imago Dei* also highlights those ways in which God and man are not alike. It is to these dissimilarities that God turns as the direct consequences of his foundational theological declaration that he is not a man.

The clauses which follow this basic negative declaration give greater clarity to the implications or consequences of the Creator/creature distinction revealed by God. The first consequence is that God does not lie. God and mankind bear no similarity here. Nevertheless it is likely that there is more to God's declaration than simply that he does not lie. What follows God's assertion that he does not lie nor repent is the avowal that what he has spoken stands; he will make good on his word. Embedded in this further clarification is the awareness that the Creator does not lie because whatever he purposes, whatever he says, must certainly come to pass. It cannot fail: first, because it is *ontologically* impossible for God to lie (cf. Heb. 6:18) and second, because he will *sovereignly* and *infallibly* ensure that it "stands." The blessing previously pronounced on Israel is as certain as the very being of God. God's word is inseparably connected to God's essence; his word cannot fail because he cannot lie. The implications for this respecting the DDI come to center in the parallel construction that God uses to underscore this distinction. God treats the possibility of his telling a lie to be of the same cloth with the possibility of his repenting.

God's affirmation that he is "not a man...nor a son of man" assures us he does not repent. This Hebrew word is translated as "repent" (KJV, NKJV, NASB,) or as "change his mind" (ESV, NIV, NRSV). Of the slightly more than one hundred uses of this verb in the Hebrew OT, 35 are predicated of God. Some passages mention God's repentance while others assert he does not repent or change his mind.<sup>4</sup> What are we to make of this data? One issue that warrants care is that, as Butterworth acknowledges, the "classification of the meanings of this root is difficult" (Butterworth, "נָחַם (nāḥam)," *NIDOTTE*). This confirms that simple lexicography will not supply sufficient materials to iron out all the wrinkles, although it does provide the important starting point. We must remember that the word is negated in the Hebrew text reflecting that God, because he is not a "son of man," undergoes neither the subjective affect nor the objective effect underscored by "repent." The core idea here is one of objective change and the subjective human emotional aspects that apply to it, neither of which, according to these two texts, can be properly predicated of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Numerous passages mention God's repentance (Gen. 6:6, 7; Exod. 32:12, 14; Judg. 2:18; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; 2 Sam. 24:16; 1 Chr. 21:15; Psalm 90:13; 106:45; 135:14; Jer. 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Ezek. 5:13; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:9, 10; 4:2), while others assert that God does not repent or change his mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Psalm 110:4; Jer. 4:28; 20:16; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14).

The DDI is a subset of at least two foundational theological premises fleshed out by Numbers 23:19. The first is the ontological foundation of the Creator/creature distinction: "God is not a man." He is unchangeable both subjectively and objectively. He does not change because it is contrary to his essence. He cannot change any more than he can lie. God does not claim *volitional* reasons but *ontological* reasons for his own immutability and impassibility. The second foundational premise is that the DDI is necessarily a theological consequence of divine immutability. In other words, divine impassibility is a subset of God's incommunicable attribute of immutability. If, as Numbers 23:19 insists, God is incapable of change, then he is incapable of repentance in the proper sense. This is the very point of Numbers 23:19. Balak misunderstood both the essence of God as a whole and his immutability.

This text informs us not only that repentance is not a divine attribute, but that it most certainly *is* a human trait. God is not distinguishing between human repenting and divine repenting. Repentance is not to be found in God; it is contrary to the very essence of God. Conversely, we are to understand that God is confirming that repentance *is* of the essence of the creature. More specifically, repentance is of the created anthropological realm; repentance belongs properly to man but not properly to God. Therefore all references elsewhere in Scripture that speak of God as repenting must be understood as God reveals them to be in this text—as anthropopathisms.

Commenting on this text, Calvin says there is a "dissimilitude between God and men" (Calvin, *Commentaries*, 3:211). This compels the conclusion that Numbers 23:19 (and 1 Sam. 15:29) teaches that repentance does not properly belong to God but does belong to man. It is anthropological in nature and so must be treated as such. The predication of repentance to God in passages such as Genesis 6 (see below) are examples of applying terms to him analogically which are proper only to humans, terms which do not properly belong to God. They are equal in nature to terms which apply physical arms (Deut. 32:27) to God. This is the necessary consequence of comparing Scripture with Scripture.

1 Samuel 15 is an important text in a discussion of the DDI if for no other reason than its double declaration that God "regretted" or "repented" (vv. 11 and 35) and its assertion that God does not "repent" (v. 29). In all three cases the Hebrew word is the same as in Numbers 23:19. In fact, the construction in 1 Samuel 15:29, as Klein notes, "is virtually a verbatim quotation from the oracles of Balaam (Num. 23:19) . . ." (Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC, 154). In light of this we will build upon the exegetical and theological foundation of Numbers 23:19.

The affirmation that God "regretted that he had made Saul king" (1 Sam. 15:35) comes at a point in the narrative history where it looks like a major change in the purpose of God is being revealed. He is about to reject Saul judicially, his sons, and his whole tribe (the Benjamites) from the future royal plans for Israel. In this instance, the repentance ascribed to God in verses 11 and 35 stand within the narrative in a similar way to that of Genesis 6 (see the treatment below), describing from a human perspective the major shift in direction God initiates in the light of Saul's sin and his judgment on that sin.

This underscores an important point often ignored in the handling of this and similar texts by modified passibilists, especially those who wish to translate "repent" as an emotionally-laden term with respect to God. The incursion of sin in the redemptive-historical narrative is front and center to the expressions of God's repentance in Genesis 6:6-7 and 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35. Nonetheless, what God repents of in these four uses of the term is his own action; if God is emotionally upset, we must assume God is upset with himself for what he has done. Notice carefully Genesis 6:6, "The LORD was sorry that He made man . . .," Genesis 6:7, "for I am sorry that I have made man," 1 Samuel 15:11, "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king . . .,"

and 1 Samuel 15:35, “The LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.” In each context, there is both the third person narrative expression of God’s regret and the first person confession of God’s regret. By refusing to see these texts as anthropopathic expressions that give context to the revelation of major changes in God’s redemptive dealings with creation (Gen. 6) or Israel’s king (1 Sam. 15:11 and 35), we are left to see them as expressions of God’s emotionally-charged response to his own actions. The consequence of the modified passibilist view is that we must assume the sequence of God’s action, man’s sin, and then God’s emotionally-charged frustration *with himself* as expressing the main point of the narratives.

How we understand these biblical expressions of God’s repentance, however, necessitates reading them in direct correlation to the revealed truth of who and what God is. Hermeneutics and theology dovetail. Either God is undergoing some sort of emotional turmoil for what he has done, or he is using language that would be expressive of a man’s emotional turmoil at the frustration of his own purposes to articulate a major shift in the narrative’s trajectory. God is about to judge mankind and start over with Noah (Gen. 6) and to judge Saul and start over with David (1 Sam. 15). From a human perspective these are redemptive-historical moments that come as major shifts. But for God, they were part of his redemptive plan, according to his eternal decree. A man might be emotionally conflicted if his purposes were frustrated by the sin of others and he was forced to put an alternative plan in place. To read this of God is to assume that somehow he is frustrated *with himself* while executing his perfect plan for the eternal redemption of his elect. Given these two options, reading these texts anthropopathically becomes a necessity. To do otherwise is to alter significantly the biblical and theological representation of the being and nature of God.

The irrevocability of God’s declaration of judgment on the kingship and dynasty of Saul (v. 29) is not anchored in God’s will, but in his essence: “because He is not a man.” His word of judgment cannot fail because ontologically he cannot go back on it. To do so would be tantamount to God denying himself. God has not changed but acted in perfect consistency with his own immutable nature and according to his own unchangeable word. To assume that divine repentance in 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 is proper to God is to assume that he is emotionally conflicted because of honoring his word and removing Saul from the kingship, none of which the text itself teaches.

The narrative descriptions of divine repentance in 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 frame the judicial rejection of Saul in human terms. From a human perspective, it looks like God changed his mind. But the larger narrative reflects that Saul’s kingship was Israel’s attempt to be like the other nations and constituted a rejection of God’s dominion over them from the start. When Saul failed to obey the Lord, God, in judgment, acted in accordance with his word—he removed the kingship from Saul and moved forward to David. God does not emotionally regret this decision for that would put him in conflict with his own judgment and prophetic word. As this was God’s plan all along, it is impossible to imagine that God is ontologically, volitionally, or emotionally conflicted here. Verse 29 actually confirms God’s solemn declaration of judgment on Saul’s dynasty according to his eternal decree, and the use of anthropopathic language confirms that there is no emotional conflict in God. In other words, he is not passible.

Finally, let us not read some form of numbness in God into the narrative of Saul’s rejection. God’s interaction precludes such a false assessment. He has been extremely patient with Israel and careful to warn and exhort Saul. Furthermore, God is, and has been all along, moving toward the establishment of the Davidic kingship, the precursor to the arrival of the future king who would reign on the throne of David forever (Isa. 9:7; Jer. 33:17; Luke 1:32). God’s eternal design for the monarchy in Israel was moving forward according to his eternal decree and



sovereign will. To suppose that God was somehow emotionally conflicted at this point is to misread the text and to misrepresent him.

Malachi writes, "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). Malachi 3:6 is parallel in structure, each term of the first clause corresponding to one in the second. "I" corresponds to "you," "the LORD" to "sons of Jacob," and "do not change" corresponds to "are not consumed." The clauses relate to each other as cause and effect. This is shown by the first word of the verse ("for") and the logical conjunction ("therefore") that introduces the second clause. It is because the LORD does not change that the sons of Jacob are not consumed. God's claim of changelessness is not limited by the text. It is not any one attribute in particular to which he refers. God is speaking of his one, simple nature. God himself declares in clear terms his own absolute immutability. He states that his immutable nature is the basis for his dealings with his people. God relates to Israel, not as a response to Israel's behavior, but in love, according to his unchanging nature.

The NT also addresses divine immutability and the DDI. Acts 14:15 says:

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.

The words "same nature" are from the Greek word ὁμοιοπαθεῖς, which is literally, "pert. to experiencing similarity in feelings or circumstances, *with the same nature* τινί, *as someone* Ac 14:15; Js 5:17" (BDAG). This truth is declared to reject worship being given to man, with the obvious implication that worship is due to God alone. God is "the living God" (Acts 14:15), which is a common OT designation for God, "especially when contrasting him with dead idols (Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Ps. 84:2; Hos. 1:10)" (Marshall, "Acts," *CNTUOT*, 588). God is not of the same nature as man. He is of a different order of being; God is the Creator, and man the creature. This distinction reminds us of God's transcendent perfection, that he is unlike us. God is not subject to passions; man is. God is not changed from without or from within; he remains unchanged and unchanging.

James 1:17 says, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." James amplifies "the Father of lights" with the words "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." Though that which God created may change, he who created does not. God is essentially and, therefore, eternally immutable. God is *not like* that which he has created. James argues from the immutability of the divine nature (v. 17) to the immutability of the divine goodness and love toward those who have been "brought forth by the word of truth" (v. 18). God does not pass from one state of existence to another; he is what he is (cf. Exod. 3:14; John 1:18; 4:24; 8:58; 1 John 4:8). He reveals to us more of who he is but that does not change him, though it changes us. Because immutable, God is impassible, neither experiencing change from within or from without, unlike that which he has made.

### ***Apparent passibilist texts***

In Genesis 6:1-7, Moses shows his readers God's view of the deluge. He portrays God as perceiving man's thorough and incessant wickedness, and therefore as regretting having created him. This regret grieves God to his heart. He then decides that he will "un-create" the world, destroying man and beast, birds and creeping things from the face of the earth. God will act in a manner that is the reverse of his creative acts in Genesis 1.

Genesis 6:6 says that God “was grieved in his heart.” It is readily admitted that “in his heart” is anthropomorphic in that God does not have a physical heart. Since this phrase is anthropomorphic, the natural question arises as to whether the former term (“grieved”) should be understood figuratively. The latter phrase being obviously anthropomorphic, the most natural interpretation of the former term (“grieved”) would be anthropopathic.

The figurative language of this text communicates a truth regarding the infinite God. When the wickedness of man became constant, did God know? Indeed, for we are told that “God saw the wickedness of man.” This is not a new evaluation of man based on his digression further into sin. Rather, it is a statement that the omniscient God knows even the unexpressed thoughts and intentions of our hearts. The sins of man are not neutral to the immutable and most holy God. He who eternally loves righteousness must be eternally disposed to judge evil. Moses depicts the action of God as analogous to a man who un-does all he had begun. The actions God was about to undertake in destroying the world that then was are likened to the actions of a man who had been greatly and unjustly grieved. God reveals this in an anthropopathic manner, not only because it resonates with our own sense of justice, but also for the sake of our instruction. He would teach us that he inviolably and immutably hates our sin, so that we might in like manner hate it and understand how contrary it is to the original created order. As Calvin well noted:

The repentance he is speaking of is to horrify us at ourselves and not to indicate that God is changeable. So it ought to astonish us that God says he repents of having made man and that he is grieved and saddened in his heart for doing so. It is certain, as I have said, that there is no passion in God. . . . It is very certain Moses did not intend to change God’s image and say that he is subject to passion, that he is subject to repentance the way we are, but he wanted to touch us with horror when he said God repents. The term means that God disavows us as his creatures because we are no longer those whom he made and formed. (Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 563, 564)

Repentance is not attributed to God properly, but according to the manner of men.

In Genesis 22, God tests Abraham, instructing him to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. As Abraham raises the knife to obey God’s command,

the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham. . . . Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; *for now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ (Gen. 22:11-12, emphasis added)

Taken literally, the verse would indicate that God had just learned that Abraham truly feared and trusted him. This is how Open Theists understand this passage. Some in our day hold that this text indicates God is relationally mutable. Others, though similarly, hold that while God is essentially omniscient, he nonetheless has assumed certain covenantal properties for the sake of condescending to us in order to relate to us. The latter two views both reflect a form of relational mutability when it comes to God’s knowledge which must be denied, along with the view of Open Theism. These two views have the same result in terms of how God relates to men. Both Open Theism and the modified view portray God as waiting to see what Abraham will do in order to learn about Abraham. The distinction between these views is that, in Open Theism, the lack of knowledge is inherent in the essence of God; whereas in the modified view, God is essentially omniscient, his lack of knowledge being rooted in the relational mutability or covenantal properties he chooses to take to himself. In Open Theism, God’s ignorance of the future choice of Abraham is *natural* to God. In the modified view, his ignorance is found *only* in

what he takes to himself of his own sovereign choice. Both views teach that the relationship of God to Abraham is predicated on a God who watches Abraham in order to learn. The modified view presents God as relating to Abraham through relational mutability (in this case, a knowledge that grows or changes). A contemporary proponent of the modified view, K. Scott Oliphint, states that God takes on covenantal properties that are “conducive to his interaction with his creation generally, and specifically with his people” (Oliphint, *God with Us*, 194-95). One of these covenantal properties, according to Oliphint, is the development of knowledge (Oliphint, *God with Us*, 194). This implies that the eternal attributes of God (at least some of them) are not, in themselves, conducive to interaction with his creation. This also implies that, in order to relate to men, God must take to himself covenantal properties which are different—even opposite—to what he is ontologically. In the modified view, the best way for God to relate to men is to become different from what he is essentially.

If Genesis 22:11-12 teach that God grows or acquires knowledge in any sense it would contradict the clear teaching of such passages as Psalm 44:21, Proverbs 15:3, Isaiah 40:28, Romans 11:33, Hebrews 4:13, etc. Genesis 22 utilizes a figure of speech to declare that God knows Abraham’s act as an evidence of his faith. Charles Simeon comments on this passage:

THERE are in the Holy Scriptures many expressions, which, if taken in the strictest and most literal sense, would convey to us very erroneous conceptions of the Deity. God is often pleased to speak of himself in terms accommodated to our feeble apprehensions, and properly applicable to man only. For instance: in the passage before us, he speaks as if from Abraham’s conduct he had acquired a knowledge of something which he did not know before: whereas he is omniscient: there is nothing past, present, or future, which is not open before him, and distinctly viewed by him in all its parts. Strictly speaking, he needed not Abraham’s obedience to discover to him the state of Abraham’s mind: he knew that Abraham feared him, before he gave the trial to Abraham: yea, he knew, from all eternity, that Abraham would fear him. But it was for our sakes that he made the discovery of Abraham’s obedience a ground for acknowledging the existence of the hidden principle from which it sprang: for it is in this way that we are to ascertain our own character, and the characters of our fellow-men. (Simeon, *Horae Homilicae*, Gen. 22:12)

Calvin similarly states that God is speaking to us “according to our infirmity. Moses simply means that Abraham, by this very act, testified how reverently he feared God” (Calvin, *Commentaries*, 1:570).

As noted above, some claim that God created properties (i.e., covenantal properties) that he took on prior to the incarnation that will endure into the eternal state. Becoming the covenantal God, it is claimed that the mode of God’s existence has changed for eternity (Oliphint, *God with Us*, 254-55). That which God took on in time to become the covenantal God is not and cannot be shed by God in the eschaton. This proposal entails that God cannot be transcendent and immanent (in the classical sense) so must become something (prior to the incarnation of the Son) he was not (prior to the creation of all things) in order to reveal himself to or interact with us for eternity. God as condescended and God in himself are two modes of existence or orders of being—one temporal and contingent (i.e., created) and the other eternal and non-contingent (i.e., uncreated). According to this view, God reveals himself in a condescended, covenantal mode of being, a mode of being not co-extensive with who God is prior to creation. According to the confessional view, it is affirmed that God created as he existed from all eternity, and when he reveals himself to us through and subsequent to creation it is the same God revealing himself (2LCF 4.1). No created covenantal properties are needed. God can and does remain who

he is but utilizes language suitable to our capacities of knowledge and experience when revealing himself to us.

It is crucial to assert that creation is a distinct order of contingent and temporal being and thus to be distinguished from God, who is self-existent, necessary, eternal, and non-contingent being. Both Testaments affirm a distinction between God and creatures (e.g., Gen. 1:1ff; Num. 23:19; Psalm 19; etc.). Nature had a beginning and exists subsequently contingent upon divine providence (Col. 1:16-17). All things that came into existence did so without the use of previously existing materials (Heb. 11:3). The things that have come into being are obviously not God. God is eternal being; things come into temporal being. God is uncreated, and has life in and of himself eternally (John 5:26), does not lie, change, deny himself, and cannot be added to or subtracted from. Two texts in Acts distinguish between the divine nature and human nature and other created things (cf. Acts 14:15 and 17:29). The Creator is of a different order of being from the creation. This distinction is crucial to maintain.

The DDI asserts that God cannot change from within or from without because of what he is and what he is not. He is God, the Creator; he is not creature. He can and does reveal who he is to creatures, but he does not refashion himself or add attributes, perfections, or covenantal properties to do so. He does not become something he was not in order to reveal who he is; he simply reveals who he is.

### *The New Testament theology of the incarnation*

Some have attempted to argue against the confessional DDI by an appeal to the doctrines of the incarnation and the sufferings of Christ. Failing to maintain the Creator/creature distinction, some ascribe suffering to the divine nature of Christ and even to the Father and Holy Spirit. These are mistakes with mammoth implications.

The doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (i.e., the communication of idioms) is important in a discussion on the DDI. Muller defines it as follows: “*communication of proper qualities; a term used in Christology to describe the way in which the properties, or *idiomata*, of each nature are communicated to or interchanged in the unity of the person*” (Muller, *Dictionary*, 72). To what is this referring? The Confession gives assistance at this point:

Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated by the other nature. (2LCF 8.7)

Among the texts cited by the 2LCF is Acts 20:28, which says, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (KJV). Assuming this translation and leaving the textual variant aside, this text contains the communication of idioms doctrine. God is said to have blood. Since God is “without body” (2LCF 2.1), how can this be? The answer is that sometimes the Bible attributes that which is proper to one nature to the *person* of the Son.

Muller goes on to say, “the two natures are here considered as joined in the person, and the interchange of attributes is understood as taking place at the level of the person and not between the natures” (Muller, *Dictionary*, 72). This means that, though our Lord suffered according to his human nature, the human nature remained united to the divine nature and was supported and sustained throughout the sufferings. The incarnate Son, according to his divine

nature, upheld the incarnate Son, according to his human nature.<sup>5</sup> The work of mediation is the work of both the human and divine natures of the Son. In fact, the Son's work of mediation, according to his divine nature, actually predates the incarnation itself (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Pet. 1:10-11) and so could only be the work of his divine nature. The NT necessarily contains the doctrine of the communication of idioms. Though some have not been faithful to this crucial teaching, especially as it relates to the sufferings of our Lord, it is vital to distinguish between what Christ does according to his divine nature and what he does according to his human nature, lest suffering be attributed to the divine. Though the Son of God became flesh (John 1:14), he never ceased being what he always was and ever shall be, "who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 9:5). This is the mystery and glory of the incarnation. The Word becoming flesh is not the Word ceasing to be what he always was. The incarnation wrought no change in the Word's deity. When John says, "And the Word became flesh" in John 1:14, it is understood as the person of the Son assuming the nature of man (cf. Phil. 2:5-8).

What Christ suffered he did so as punishment for human sin due to the justice of God and according to his human nature. Positing divine suffering ends up being a form of *theopassianism* (i.e., God suffered) or a form of *patripassianism* (i.e., the Father suffered), both of which were amply discussed and condemned by the early church. The Son suffered according to his human nature. God, as God, cannot suffer. Suffering entails the deprivation or loss of something good. Neither of these can be true of God, as God, without there being change in God, as God. The Lord suffered and died as man, as he lived as man, for us. His sufferings were due to our sin and endured by him according to his human nature alone, though upheld by the divine nature. Each "nature [does] that which is proper to itself" (2LCF 8.7). Any form of divine suffering must be rejected because it fails to uphold the mystery of the hypostatic union and to distinguish between what Christ does according to his human nature and what he does according to his divine nature. Again, it is confessed (and in good Chalcedonian fashion), "Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself" (2LCF 8.7a). Suffering is not proper to the divine nature of Christ, nor the Father, nor the Holy Spirit *ad extra* or *ad intra*.

### • Conclusion

The classical and confessional view best explains all the Scriptures. By properly accounting for anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language in the Bible, it allows the clearer passages to interpret the figurative ones. It understands that the eternal God directly governs, guides, and relates to men through his providence. It provides the context for understanding how an unchanging God relates to his creatures, using language accommodated to those creatures. In this view, God is neither compounded, nor disunified, nor self-contradictory. Rather, he is simple, in perfect unity with himself. God is, indeed, "without . . . passions."

### 3. Systematic Theology

When considered in relation to the divine essence and attributes, the divine affections, and the person and work of Christ, the confessional DDI is a truth we must teach and uphold with great care.

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<sup>5</sup> The incarnation and work of the mediator terminate on the Son, though "willed and effected" (Muller, *Dictionary*, 213) by each person of the Godhead.

- **Impassibility and the Essence and Attributes of God**

The DDI cannot be affirmed or denied in isolation from the other divine attributes. God cannot be divided. To modify or reject the DDI is to unravel the carefully formulated confessional doctrine of the divine essence and attributes (cf. 2LCF 2.1-2). The DDI is inseparably related to all the other divine attributes, most notably, infinity, simplicity, immutability, and omnipotence.

### *Infinity*

“Divine infinity is often articulated negatively as the opposite of finitude and positively as God’s plentitude of being and nature” (Dolezal, *God Without Parts*, 77). There is, in other words, no limit to God’s being and perfections (cf. Job 11:7; Psalm 145:3; 1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 40:13; Matt. 5:48). Viewed in this light, the DDI does not rob God of affection, but rather affirms that his affections are infinite with respect to time (i.e., eternal) and perfection. It is of the essence of God *to be* (Exod. 3:14), not to *become*, and therefore he has no beginning or end. He eternally subsists in the fullness and perfection of his own being. He is in “every way infinite” and therefore “*most holy, most wise, . . . most loving*” (2LCF 2.1, emphasis added).

Yet to suggest that God’s affections change is to deny that he is infinite. If God were to undergo an emotional change, or acquire a new emotional experience, that change would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, then he must not have been infinite in perfection prior to the change, and therefore was not God. If for the worse, then he would no longer be infinite in perfection after the change, and therefore no longer God.

Moreover, if God subsists in the plentitude of his infinite perfection, why would he undergo change? If God were to self-will his own emotional or relational mutability, unto what end would he do so? What greater affection, and what greater perfection, could he attain that he does not already eternally have in himself? Likewise, would he rob himself of any of his infinite perfections through change? And why should he? For an infinite being, “[t]o be immutably good is no point of imperfection, but the height of perfection” (Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1:328).

God is most loving, therefore, because he is infinite love in himself. To suggest that God undergoes emotional changes of state or mind as he relates to his creatures may have a certain emotional appeal to some, but in reality such a suggestion presupposes that God is less, not more, loving.

### *Simplicity*

The doctrine of divine simplicity teaches that God is “without . . . parts” (2LCF 2.1), that he is his existence, essence, and attributes. God is his existence, and therefore cannot but exist as he always is. Unlike every other being (i.e., creatures), he cannot not exist as he is, and therefore is unchangeable by nature or essence. In order to maintain that something in God undergoes change, emotions or affections included, God’s aseity (i.e., necessary and independent existence) and simplicity must be denied.

God is his essence. This cannot be said of any individual created being. *All that is in God is God*. Therefore, in order to maintain that something in God, such as emotions, undergoes change, God’s *essence* must be capable of change, which is impossible.

God is his attributes. There is nothing in God that is not God. There are no accidental properties, qualities, or attributes in God; all that is properly predicated *of God is God*. For example, God does not merely *have* love as an *accidental property*, such that it can grow and diminish without undergoing *substantial* change. Instead, *God is love*. Therefore, his love is as

unchanging as his essence and existence. In order to predicate an emotional change in God, the classical and confessional understanding of divine simplicity and aseity must also be rejected.

### ***Immutability***

Divine immutability refers to God's inability to undergo any change whatsoever (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17), whether considered absolutely (with respect to his essence and attributes), relatively (with respect to space, time, and creation), or ethically (with respect to the constancy of his character). While impassibility more narrowly concerns the affections of God, immutability is the glory of every divine attribute and perfection, and therefore cannot be modified without consequence. Likewise, because the doctrine of impassibility is a subset of immutability, any revision of the former necessitates a corresponding revision of the latter. It is the case, in fact, that God is either immutable in every way, his affections included, or not at all (cf. Heb. 6:18). As such, modifications of the confessional DDI also entail modifications of the doctrine of divine immutability. This is most notable when theologians attempt to construe the DDI in relation to divine sovereignty, suggesting that God is sovereign over all his emotional or affectional changes (i.e., relational mutability). The theological price to pay for this shift is too great. It not only compromises the doctrines of God's infinite sovereignty, simplicity, aseity, and omnipotence, but it also requires that we deny the doctrine of God's immutability. It dangerously, though perhaps unwittingly, supposes two mutually exclusive gods, the one who is (transcendent, impassible, immutable, and so on) and the other who is with us (immanent, passible, mutable, and so on). Change is change, and any change in God would undermine his immutability. The same thread unravels the whole garment.

### ***Omnipotence***

The divine attribute of omnipotence is significant to any discussion of the DDI because it maintains both that there is no passive potency in God to be other than he eternally is (i.e., pure act) and that all active potency can be attributed to God, yet with an important qualification. When a husband exercises his active potency or power to love his wife, he undergoes a change from "being capable of" to having that capability "realized." Unlike creatures, in the exercise of his power, God is not seeking greater fulfillment or perfection in his own being. To maintain that God is pure actuality is not to close God in a cold, dark box and deny him the ability to act. Rather, it is to confess that he is pure *act*, all-potent, an ever-living, always active agent capable of affecting change outside of himself (i.e., in his works *ad extra*), without, however, himself undergoing any change whatsoever. Thus, a proper understanding of omnipotence denies God the active potency to affect his own change. Therefore, to say that God is sovereign over his own emotional changes would require that he have power to bring about his own passive potency. Indeed, it would require that there be in God a mixture of active and passive potency, which necessarily entails a rejection of divine simplicity, immutability, and a loss of the Creator/creature distinction.

He is "all-potent" because his power is as infinite and perfect as his being. His power is in need of no further perfection, either from an internal or an external principle. Any change whatsoever in God has to be explained either in terms of greater perfection or lesser perfection. The former would imply that God was not yet infinite, while the latter would imply that God is no longer infinite. If God is not infinite, then God's power cannot be infinite. If God possesses passive potency, then he cannot possess an infinite active potency, in which case he would be unable to actualize any of what Scripture terms his "mighty works" (Deut. 3:24; Psalm 145:4; Matt. 11:20-21).

To pull the thread of divine impassibility is to unravel the whole truth of God's existence, essence, and attributes.

- **Impassibility and the Divine Affections**

Because God is infinite, simple, immutable, and omnipotent in his being, it is necessary to affirm the confessional DDI. To predicate of God emotional changes of state will inevitably undermine the very attributes that distinguish the Creator from the creature. But what does this entail for the divine affections, especially God's love? It must be affirmed that love may be properly predicated of God in a manner consistent with his peculiar mode of being and immutable perfections both *essentially* (or, absolutely) with regard to the love by which he loves himself (*ad intra*) and *relatively* with regard to the affection by which he loves his creatures with respect to himself (*ad extra*). While the inequality among the objects of God's love denotes a real distinction in the creature, and the degree to which each experience his love, it cannot thereby imply a change or variation in God whose love is as immutable as his being.

### *The objects of God's love*

God's love *toward us* has its source and foundation in God's love *in and for himself*, wherein he most perfectly, unchangeably, and absolutely loves himself. Therefore, God's love *toward us* must be understood in relation to God's love *in himself*, his own goodness being the primary object of his love. Such a starting point will result in the conclusion that God's love toward his creation, particularly his love for the elect, is as immutable, fixed, and constant as God's love for himself, however varied our experience of its effects may be.

Generally, love is a fixed disposition of the will which seeks union with that which it deems good and "having obtained it to rest in the same . . . whereby one doth entirely adjoin himself to an other, and wholly doth both rest and delight himself in him" (Zanchi, *Life Everlasting*, 357). Christian theologians have always located the *summum bonum*, the highest good, in God alone, for he alone is goodness (Matt. 19:17). Therefore he alone is the proper object of his own love, eternally resting and delighting in his own infinite goodness.

### *1) The love of God proper*

This natural love which characterizes the divine life has been made known to us in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John is replete with references to the Father's unparalleled love for the person of the Son, and the Son's uncompromising love for the Father (John 1:18; 3:34-35; 5:20; 14:31; 15:9; 17:24; cf. Prov. 8:27, 30; Matt. 11:27; Col. 1:13). The life of God is one of infinite delight, rest, and satisfaction in his own perfection. The Father infinitely delights in the express image of his nature in the Son, the Son reciprocally in the Father, both in and by the Holy Spirit that proceeds from them both. In short, God is pure actuality; his love needs no object outside himself for his own eternal complacency and joy. He is "*most loving*" in himself (2LCF 2.1, emphasis added), so as to admit neither increase nor decrease. Rather than a cold and stoic deity, "God is the fullness of an infinitely completed, and yet infinitely dynamic, life of love, in which there is regard, knowledge, and felicity" (Hart, "No Shadow of Turning," 197).

### *2) The love of God by participation*

Love, as we know it, frequently involves the lover seeking out greater fulfillment through union with the beloved, but not so with the triune God whose act of creation is purely gratuitous. God's love *toward us* has its source and foundation in God's love *in and for himself*, wherein he



most perfectly, unchangeably, and absolutely loves himself. The most blessed God rests and delights in himself, and in others with a view to himself as something of himself (i.e., in his own goodness variously communicated to his creatures according to their capacities of nature and grace). In return, God commands each accordingly to find their rest and delight in the same – to love most what he loves most, himself.

However, the Lord does not will to communicate his goodness, or the enjoyment of it, to all alike, and therefore he is not said to love all with an equal love.

God loveth not only himself, but also every thing that he hath made: although he love not all things with an equal love. For he loveth the better things better than those things that are less good: the godly than the ungodly. (Zanchi, *Life Everlasting*, 356)

The Lord loves all the works of his hands (Psalm 104:31), but especially man whom he created in his own image (Matt. 6:26b). Furthermore, his love for mankind is not without distinction, for he has most discriminately set his love upon the elect alone (Rom. 5:8).

Notwithstanding these distinctions, “the love of God is free, infinite, constant, and everlasting” (Zanchi, *Life Everlasting*, 356). Such distinctions are not to be understood as varying degrees of emotion within the divine life, but rather denote the varying degrees to which God wills each creature respectively to participate in the divine goodness, or more precisely, its effects.

All of these distinctions refer to a real difference in the creature, the nature of the covenant to which they are adjoined, and their experience of, and participation in, the unchanging love of God, but not a difference within the divine life itself. Although *our* relation to the love of God may vary according to the will of God, his love does not. Such variation in our experience of the effects of God’s unchanging love is not the result of any change in his affections; he has not, nor could he, will such a change in himself. Without willing any change in his own imperfectible and impassible affections, God wills change in our experience of his love, resulting only in a changed relation on our part to his infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible love.

This is most profoundly evident with regard to the love which God communicates to the elect according to the covenant of grace, to whom he grants the highest participation in that communion which he has in himself. Jesus, in his High Priestly prayer, thus said to the Father:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:20-24)

With regard to the elect, God gratuitously wills more than a general participation and experience of his goodness, and promises as much in the new covenant (Jer. 31:33-35).

Three distinctive characteristics of God’s love toward his elect emerge. In the first place, it is a *saving* love (cf. Rom. 9:13; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:4b-5; Titus 3:4-8; 1 John 3:1; 4:10). He loves his elect people with a saving love, effectually unto the end that they would be adjoined with their Savior in glory, according to the new covenant. Accordingly, it is in the second place, a *mediated* love grounded in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the mediator of the covenant.

The ground of this love cannot be found in man, not even the elect who are themselves equally deserving of God's revenging justice (Rom. 5:8), but only in Christ who is himself *beloved* of God (Matt. 3:17).

God's love to Christ is the foundation of his love to us, Matt. 3:17; Ephes. 1:6. God loves all creatures with a general love, Matt. 5:44, 45, as they are the work of his hands; but he doth delight in some especially, whom he hath chosen in his Son, John 3:16; Ephes. 1:6. (Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, II.viii., 71)

It could be no other way, for there was no other way for God to love sinners with a saving love without injury to his honor, justice, or holiness. Divine wisdom made a way of communicating his love to us in Christ without injury to the honor of his justice. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10; cf. Rom. 3:25-26). God's love for the elect is a mediated love, grounded in his eternal and unchanging love of the elect *in Christ*. He does not love us for our own sakes, but for Christ's sake. "He chose us in Him [i.e., Christ] before the foundation of the world, . . . by which he has made us accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:4, 6).

The love of God, understood in the context of the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), is the antecedent love of God. In love, the Father gave an elect humanity to the Son (John 17:6), and in love the Son redeemed those whom the Father had given to him (John 6:39). The primary object of the Father's love was his Son, and the first cause of Christ's love was not something within the elect, but purely because the Father's love-gift required it. All consequent benefits of God's love that flow down to the elect through the covenant of grace are procured by the mediation and merit of Christ (2LCF 8.5).

In the third place, God's love for the elect involves the highest *participation*, in that he makes them participants in that eternal, infinite, and unchangeable communion between the Father and the Son (John 17:26). On account of creation, all mankind are by nature capable of communion with God, but are by sin rendered morally incapable. Only through the grace of God in Christ, by virtue of the new covenant in his blood, are the elect alone given a renewed nature capable of participating in the fullness of his love. Distinctively with regard to the elect, the lover is most fully united with the beloved, through his *beloved* Son, Jesus Christ, so that they too may behold, rest, and delight in his love.

In this way, it may be affirmed that God loves the elect more than the rest of mankind, not for anything in themselves, nor as a heightened or differentiated emotion within the divine life itself, but by his gratuitous will to grant the elect, to the utmost of their re-created capacity, a participation in his infinite and unchanging love. He has loved his elect with the same all-sufficient, infinite, eternal, perfect, and unchangeable love with which he has loved his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, if God's love for the elect is grounded in his love for Christ, and is a participation in the same, it cannot be otherwise concluded but that it is as eternal and unchangeable as his love for himself in Christ. Indeed, God's love is eternal and immutable, even as he himself is eternal and immutable.

### *Love and its mode of being*

God's love stands in relation to the divine nature in a mode proportionately similar to the way human love stands in relation to human nature. The perfection of God's love is, in some significant ways, differentiated from human love, given the difference between God's nature and human nature. Therefore, we must avoid the mistake of assuming that every perfection of

love in the creature must have a corresponding perfection in God. Likewise, we must insist that sympathy, insofar as it implies suffering and a loss of joy, would be an imperfection in God, though it could be considered a perfection in man.

Since change is inseparably annexed to how we experience love, how can love be predicated of a simple, infinite, and omnipotent God who in no way undergoes change? When love is predicated of God, the emotional change and suffering that is so often associated with our experience must necessarily be figurative.

### **1) Love and emotional mutability**

God's love stands in relation to his nature, and therefore is like God himself, absolutely and immutably fixed without need or capability of emotional arousal. This in no way implies that God's love is cold and detached, but that he does not undergo changes of inner emotional state, whether freely from within or from without. There is nothing in his people that could arouse God's love. The Lord set his love upon Israel simply because he loved them (Deut. 7:7-8). Pointing forward to the day of redemption, the prophet Zephaniah comforts the people of God, not by telling them that God's love will be aroused, but that "he will be quiet [over you] in his love" (Zeph. 3:17).

In God, there is no arousal of love because his love is infinitely and immutably fixed upon his own infinite and immutable goodness and the creature's unmerited participation in it. And therefore, it is especially this fixed position that we call love. It is a fixed disposition of the will that takes delight and rest in union with the beloved.

Placing the emphasis upon the fixed disposition of love in no way implies that God is unable to act or relate. It is from this fixed position, not the arousal *per se*, that love gives rise to all sorts of actions aimed at union with the beloved. With respect to God's works *ad extra*, his love is the infinite, dynamic, fixed fountain of all of his works of creation, providence, and redemption (cf. John 3:16).

### **2) Love and sympathetic suffering**

God's love is the fixed and immutable fountain of all motion outside of himself (*ad extra*). As such, few would be willing to say that God's love is a fixed fountain of pity. And yet, it can be difficult for us to conceive of love apart from God's ability to be emotionally affected by the affliction of his people. But as with change in general, sympathetic suffering is not a necessary ingredient of love as such.

Although we necessarily begin with an understanding of love based upon our own experience, we are thereby drawn to a consideration of love in God. In doing so, we must remember that not every perfection in man has a corresponding perfection in God because his being is not like ours.

Wherefore that rule which we have used elsewhere, is to be held, that whatsoever imperfection we find in our affections, we are first to take that away, and then the same affections, love, and mercy, being purged as it were from all imperfection, is to be attributed to God. (Zanchi, *Life Everlasting*, 358)

Divine and human love are as different in kind as God's being and man's being are different in kind. This means that we must not only take away "whatsoever imperfection we find in our affections," but also any perfections in us that would imply an imperfection when considered in relation to the nature of God revealed in Scripture. Contrary to human experience, therefore,

God is able to love with sincere and perfect compassion without co-suffering. Suffering for another, or in response to the suffering of another, is not what makes compassion praiseworthy. What is praiseworthy is the love that is revealed through the sympathetic suffering.

It is, in fact, morally inconsistent to locate our comfort in the notion that God is suffering with us in our distress, rather than finding our comfort in his impassible compassion that, because he does not suffer, is fully able to overcome the suffering of his people. Sympathetic suffering, though inseparable in human experience, is not of the essence of love; it is not what makes love praiseworthy. If a mother wept bitterly with her children but did not pick them up, wipe away the tears, and bandage the wounds when it was within her ability to do so, we would not look upon her tears as compassion. God *is* impassible and infinite love, and from that dynamic fixed fountain overflows compassionate relief, yet without suffering.

While a lack of co-suffering may indicate an indifference toward our fellow-man, this is not so with God. Loving his creation, and especially the elect, with respect to himself, he freely identifies himself with his people. Apart from co-suffering, he empathetically identifies with them in their suffering as though it were his own (Prov. 14:31; 17:4; 19:17; Isa. 63:9). That which united them is not a mutual experience of suffering, but love. Love has the ability to unite the person loving and the beloved as if to form one person. God's love unites his people to himself, in participation of his goodness, as if to see them as something of himself.

This provides tremendous insight into the spirit and intent of those passages that speak of God as though he were afflicted in our affliction. The point is not that he suffers with us, but that he identifies with his people in their affliction *like* a father or mother would with their children (e.g., Deut. 1:31). Like a father, he seeks to provide compassionate relief to his children as if their suffering were his own. He so identifies with his people that he loves them as though they were part of himself.

Sympathetic suffering, though inseparable in human experience, is not of the essence or perfection of love *as* love. It is not sympathetic suffering itself that consoles the beloved, but the love that is revealed through it. Therefore, when Scripture attributes such suffering to God *as God*, it speaks figuratively (i.e., anthropopathically) and thereby signifies the love with which God identifies with his people in their affliction so as to relieve them *as though* it were his own. Love, in that mode of being which stands in relation to the divine nature, is neither overwhelmed by suffering nor capable of it, and therefore is fully able to overcome it—a conclusion profoundly affirmed in the person and work of Christ.

- **Impassibility and Christology**

Much confusion concerning the confessional DDI can be avoided when we understand that impassibility refers to an attribute of God and is a topic of Theology Proper, rather than Christology. The confessional DDI does not deny the real emotions and sufferings of Jesus Christ. Neither, however, can the emotions and sufferings of Christ, the God-man, be marshaled against the DDI. Orthodox Christology upholds the truth that God, *as God*, cannot and does not suffer, emotionally or otherwise, nor is there any need for him to do so. We are not in need of a God who suffers *as God*, but rather an impassible God who, by suffering *as a man*, is able to overcome suffering on behalf of man.

### ***Suffering and the communicatio idiomatum***

On the grounds of the incarnation of the Son and the union of the two natures in his person, it might be objected that since it was the Son of God who became a man and suffered, therefore God, *as God*, must be capable of suffering. Yet the doctrine of the communication of properties

precludes the predication of suffering to the deity of Christ. This important doctrine presupposes the careful and precise Christology of the 2LCF 8.2.

The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God . . . did . . . take upon Him man's nature . . . yet without sin . . . so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

The biblical distinction between Creator and creature is maintained as the divine and human natures of Christ are distinguished, but not separated. In the incarnation, the divine nature of the Son did not become human and the human nature did not become divine. The eternal Son of God became what he once was not (very man), without ceasing to be what he always was (very God). Herein lies the mystery and wonder of the incarnation, that the divine Son assumed a passible human nature, without any alteration or subjugation of his impassible divine nature. Being united in the person of the Son, both natures maintain their peculiar properties.

The peculiar properties of one nature are not attributed to the other nature so as to confuse the two. It is not proper to human nature to exist of itself any more than it is for the divine nature to be born, suffer, or die. Yet, according to the *communicatio idiomatum*, the attributes of both may be predicated of the one *person*. The distinction of natures aside, the acts of Christ, the mediator, are always attributed to the whole person, the Son of God incarnate, albeit not to the whole of the person (i.e., both natures considered in the abstract). As such,

Christ suffered, not according to both natures, nor according to the Divinity, but according to the human nature only, both in body and soul; for the divine nature is immutable, impassible, immortal, and life itself, and so cannot die. But he suffered in such a manner, according to his humanity, that by his passion and death, he satisfied for the sins of men. (Ursinus, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 151-52)

Therefore, in the words of Gregory of Nazianzen, Jesus Christ was "passible in his flesh, and impassible in his godhead" (Schaff, *NPNE*, 7:439).

It needs to be stressed that even if the Son of God, *according to his deity*, were capable of suffering, it would not have produced any benefit for sinners. Indeed, it was not necessary that he suffer according to his divine nature, for "since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:21). The Lord Jesus did not suffer for himself, much less for God, but on behalf of sinful man, as a man, according to his human nature (1 Tim. 2:5). Nevertheless, it was also necessary that he was God, insofar as "The divine nature sustained the humanity, in the sorrows and pains which were endured, and raised it when dead unto life" (Ursinus, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 216). The Son of God did not "become incarnate in order to overcome . . . divine impassibility," as Lister poorly expresses (Lister, *Impassible and Impassioned*, 37). Rather, his divine impassibility enabled him to overcome human suffering. Satisfaction for our sins had to be made by a God-man because only God can make satisfaction and only man owed satisfaction. Insofar as the mediator is truly man, he was capable of suffering for man, and insofar as he is also the impassible God, he was fully capable of *overcoming* suffering on behalf of his people.

According to the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, orthodoxy has always confessed that the person of the Son of God suffered and died, not, however, according to his deity, but

according to his humanity, the former incapable of suffering, the latter fully capable of suffering. Therefore, it is profoundly appropriate to confess that the Son of God emotionally and physically suffered, or that the impassible suffered. And yet, it is profoundly unorthodox to conclude from this that God, *as God*, is therefore capable of suffering.

### ***Analogy and the revelation of God in Christ***

With a two-natures distinction in mind, it may be helpful to ask, in what manner does Jesus Christ reveal the Father? It is not uncommon for those who otherwise maintain a two-natures Christology to use the inner life of Jesus as a paradigm for understanding the inner emotional life of God. It is presupposed that because Jesus Christ is truly God, he must therefore provide a univocal core through which we may locate parallel kinds of experiences within the Godhead. Yet even in the incarnation God reveals himself analogically, so that a direct line cannot be drawn between God revealed in the flesh and God as he is in himself. To suggest otherwise would inevitably confuse the two natures of Christ and obscure the distinction between Creator and creature.

All that Christ experienced in the flesh, on behalf of his people, he experienced as a man. All that the Son of God did in the flesh, he did, not as God within a man, but as a man. Hence, in the incarnation, God is not revealed as God in a man, but as a man. “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18). We must not forget that it is as a man that he has done so. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14). In this way, God has condescended in the revelation of himself in the person of Jesus. He is the express image of God, the image of the invisible God, who has declared the Father whom no one has seen, and is the fullest and final revelation of God, and indeed is God. Nonetheless, he is God *in the flesh*, and as such preeminently reveals God to us analogically, according to his creaturely mode of being.

This means that love cannot be predicated of God-in-himself and God-in-the-flesh univocally, but only analogically. In other words, the love which he reveals to us in his own person is most certainly the love of God, but it is God’s love clothed over in flesh. That is, Christ reveals God’s love to us in a different manner to how it is in God himself—as a perfection in man, rather than its infinite mode of being in God himself. In the flesh, God’s incomprehensible divine love is most fully and perfectly communicated to his people *in a human manner*, accommodated to our capacity.

### ***The love of God and a truly Christ-centered hermeneutic***

We need a sympathizing savior on account of our sin and misery, and, as it has been shown, it is no imperfection in God, *as God*, to be incapable of such things. The Son of God did not assume a human nature in order to overcome a problem within the Godhead but freely and graciously to provide the remedy for sinners. So that, in Christ the mediator, we discover that what cannot be properly said of God, *as God*, may now be said of God, *as man*, on behalf of man.

When the glory of God in Christ and his work as mediator are understood as the scope of Scripture (2LCF 1.5), we are able to apply a truly Christ-centered hermeneutic to the OT. That which was improperly and figuratively predicated of God, after the manner of men, in the OT finds its proper and formal fulfillment in the person and office of Jesus Christ. For instance, in Isaiah 63:9, God is described figuratively and improperly, after the manner of men. “In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old.” God did not

undergo grief, but he was *like* a father to Israel who was afflicted in the affliction of his children. He not only identified with them in their affliction, but in compassion he relieved them of their distress as surely as if it were his own.

Isaiah was reminding Israel that although the people of God could expect suffering and affliction, they may also expect him to be their deliverer. He is assuring those who trust in him that nothing can separate them from his love; “the Angel of His Presence” will save and deliver them. And yet, Isaiah has already revealed to them that their deliverer will endure a brutal participation in their affliction (Isa. 52:13-53:12). The Lord was pointing his people to “the Angel of His Presence,” the Son of God incarnate. In the greatness of God’s love, he has not only freely identified himself with his children in their misery, but he has acted in wonderful and glorious compassion to relieve their affliction as surely as if it were his own. Indeed, in the person of Christ, God assumed our misery as his own.

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9)

In all our affliction, the Son of God was properly and formally afflicted, *as a man*. In Christ, it may properly be said that *God* was afflicted in the affliction of his people, *as a man*.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews labors to show the necessity of the incarnation.

Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Heb. 2:17-18)

It was necessary that God become a man, not only that he might make propitiation as a man, but also that he might be a sympathizing High Priest on behalf of man.

While sympathetic suffering is a perfection in relation to human nature, it entails an imperfection, insofar as it implies suffering, in relation to the divine nature. Although God lacks no divine perfection of love or mercy, apart from the incarnation he is incapable of human sympathy. It was necessary that God become a man that he might be tempted and suffer as a man, so that he might be able to sympathize with weak and sinful man. God loves in a new way in the person of Christ; i.e., in a human way.

Those who predicate sympathetic suffering of God, *as God*, rob the Son of God of the unique and gracious design of his coming in the flesh. God’s people are not crying out to hear that God knows their suffering in a divine way, but that there is one such as themselves who is seated upon the throne of grace on their behalf, who knows their suffering and weaknesses in a human way. As man, Christ is fully able to sympathize with our weaknesses; as God, he is fully able to help in time of need.

#### **4. Confessional Theology**

The first chapter of the 2LCF, *Of the Holy Scriptures*, provides for us the *principium cognoscendi* or principle of knowing. “[T]he *principium cognoscendi*, the principle of knowing or cognitive foundation, is a term applied to Scripture as the noetic or epistemological *principium theologiae*, without which there could be no true knowledge of God and therefore no theological system . . .” (Muller, *Dictionary*, 246). The second chapter, *Of God and of the Holy Trinity*, supplies us with

the *principium essendi*. The *principium essendi*, the principle of being or essential foundation, is a term applied to God considered as the objective ground of theology without whom there could be neither revelation nor theology. These two chapters provide the foundation for everything contained in the 2LCF. God's being and essence, in fact, are the foundation for the existence of Scripture itself. Apart from God, there is no revelation. The nature of infallible, inerrant Scripture rests on the eternal, immutable God. Whatever follows in the 2LCF is molded and shaped by these two foundational principles. Immediately following the chapter on God, we encounter teaching about his decree, executed in the works of creation and providence. This is followed by a chapter describing the fall of man (chapter 6 elaborates on the doctrine found in 5:4), and then a lengthy section (chapters 7-20) describing God's saving purpose, granted to his elect, in and through Jesus Christ. As such, upon the foundation of Scripture and God, the 2LCF unfolds an understanding of God's works *ad extra*: creation, providence and redemption. This leads to a section on the liberty God gives to his people and finally to two chapters describing his eschatological purpose. As a whole, the 2LCF is a tightly woven garment—a system of theology based on scriptural exegesis, foundational principles, and mutual dependence.

The doctrine of chapter 2 is presented in three paragraphs. The first might be called "The One True God," the second "God's external relations," and the third "God's internal relations." The 2LCF follows the standard order of treatment of Theology Proper. The Baptists were men concerned not with philosophical speculation, but with a demonstration of the teaching of Scripture. The movement from general to specific is important to note. All that is stated in paragraphs 1 and 2 applies to the Godhead in unity. The third paragraph details the doctrine of the Trinity in classic Nicene language. It is a standard articulation of the doctrine of God, based in Scripture and the reflection on Scripture found in the best theologians since the Apostolic era. We should be highly cautious of modifying its doctrine or terminology.

Paragraph 1 deals with the identity of the one true God. God's self-existence and self-knowledge are presented; God exists in and of himself, he alone knows himself thoroughly. Where the Presbyterians in WCF wrote, "There is but one only, living and true God . . ." the 2LCF beautifully personalizes the statement, making it more intimate, "The Lord our God is but one only living, and true God." From the outset of the chapter, God is presented as the one true and living God in his relation to his people. The editors of the 2LCF are keenly aware that the God who is "infinite in being and perfection" (2LCF 2.1) does not need to become other than what he is in order to relate to humans; he relates to us *as* the one true living God. This is a significant observation, setting a climate for the following phrases. When, for example, the paragraph states that God is "without . . . passions," the sense of this phrase must be understood in reference to the preceding "The Lord our God." Though opponents of the confessional DDI seek to characterize it negatively, for our fathers it was in no sense at odds with a genuinely personal God. Likewise, we must notice that our God is said to be infinite in perfection. God lacks nothing, and his perfection knows no bounds. There can be no sense of any kind in which God comes short of this perfection. He is incapable of further perfection, just as he is incapable of diminished perfection.

Divine perfection is foundational to all of the statements in this paragraph, each one being built on the preceding truths and connected to those that follow. God's oneness is a perfection. If there are two gods, then each relies upon some former cause outside of itself for its existence. However, if God is the one true God, then he is truly perfect. This is asserted in God's aseity. His subsistence, or manner of existence, is of himself. This perfect independence makes God "a most pure spirit." Because he is one, there is no multiplicity in him. There are no causes or effects in God. He is all that he is, simply, infinitely, and perfectly. God's unity, simplicity,



actuality, and spirituality necessarily contain further truths. A purely actual, spiritual, perfect, infinite being cannot have passions. A self-existent eternal being is the only truly immortal being.

Paragraph 1 of the 2LCF reflects interconnected development in the doctrine of God, all of which begins with a strong foundation of divine perfection. It is important to understand the interwoven character of these statements so that we can place the phrase “without . . . passions” carefully within its context. We may summarize the design of the paragraph simply. The attributes of God outlined in this paragraph are intended to highlight that God is in his very existence complete and perfect unto himself or, as stated simply by the Confession, “every way infinite.” Even the attributes modified by the superlative “most” teach that God is utterly infinite and independent as the holy, wise, free, and absolute God. We are taught, moreover, that God is “working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory.” His glory consists in and is expressed by the fact that he is “most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering,” etc. The phrase “without . . . passions,” therefore, does not contradict or diminish the fact of God’s love, graciousness, mercy, and long-suffering. Taken as a whole, this first paragraph of chapter 2 is a wonderfully balanced, carefully nuanced doctrine of God. He is unlike any of his creatures and glorious in his being. He is loving, gracious, merciful, and long-suffering, he hates sin, and is a pure spirit who has no body, parts, or passions.

The phrase “without body, parts, or passions” is found in a carefully constructed section of the first paragraph. It is preceded by another important addition, the clause “whose Essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself.” This is notable in that it emphasizes the Creator/creature distinction. God alone is able to comprehend his “whatness,” or to state this differently, man cannot comprehend God in his essence. The clause is immediately followed by a series of phrases that presuppose God’s incomprehensibility. God is incomprehensible because, unlike the creature, he is “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.” Thus, these attributes, even divine impassibility, are incommunicable and set forth the absolute distinction between the Creator and creature. Lest the point be missed, the Baptists inserted an exegetical statement immediately after the words “without body, parts, or passions.” It reads “who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light, which no man can approach unto.” Once more, emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of God. Unlike his creatures, he alone is immortal by nature. Therefore the framers of the 2LCF clarify the sense of “without...passions” by setting it in the context of God’s incomprehensibility and ontological dissimilarity. In the case of “passions” attributed to God, they cannot and must not be understood as though God were a being like our own; the being of God, unlike the being of the creature, is “without . . . passions.”

This phrase “without body, parts, or passions” is intended to serve further as part of the description of God as a “most pure spirit.” He is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17), not possessing the physical characteristics of his creatures. He is incorporeal, not a composite being, and he has no passions. All of these are aspects of the doctrine of divine simplicity. While most Christians acknowledge that the many texts in Scripture which describe God having physical characteristics (i.e., eyes, hands, heart, etc.) are metaphorical, and are willing to affirm that God is not a composite being, the sense of “passions” as intended by the confessional doctrine is frequently misunderstood or redefined.

There is no doubt as to how the word “passions” is to be understood. Muller says:

An affection is usually favorable or positive, whereas a passion is usually negative. . . . A passion, most strictly, is a form of suffering and would not have the connotation of a permanent disposition. . . . Passions . . . indicate a declension from an original or natural condition that is at variance with the fundamental inclination of the individual—and, therefore, a loss of power or self-control.

. . . Since a passion has its foundation or origin *ad extra* and its terminus *ad intra*, it cannot be predicated of God and, in fact, fails to correspond in its dynamic with the way that God knows. An affection or virtue, by way of contrast, has its foundation or source *ad intra* and terminates *ad extra*, corresponding with the pattern of operation of the divine communicable attributes and, in particular, with the manner of divine knowing. (Muller, *PRRD*, 3:553, 54)

“Most strictly” passions are “usually negative,” insofar as they usually “indicate a declension” or “a loss of power or self-control.” It is easy to see how rage, for instance, could be considered a negative passion or “a form of suffering.” Moreover, a passion may refer to any internal emotional change, positive or negative, that has its cause in something external to itself. More generally, the term passion may refer to any change that has its terminus *ad intra*. The issue is neither merely whether the change is negative or positive nor whether it is caused from without or within, but whether or not God is in any way capable of *inner* emotional changes of state.

Creatures experience passions as a response to new external stimuli, but, as Muller points out, God neither acquires new information nor responds to external stimuli. Likewise, creatures may experience passions in a positive sense, as when someone’s joy is perfected. Something is lacking in the creature, and it seeks to complete itself. But God lacks no perfection. If we remember that the statement “without body, parts, or passions” is found in the context of the uniqueness of God, it becomes clear that he neither needs perfecting nor responds to external stimuli. He knows all things and cannot be taken off-guard by any action in the universe he created and rules. Moreover, because of what he is, he is imperfectible. Passions may be ascribed to creatures in their finitude, but cannot be properly predicated of the infinite God. This is not to deny genuine love, mercy, wrath, etc. in God. It is simply to say that these things must be understood in a sense appropriate to the nature of God.

The phrase “without . . . passions” is an important and foundational doctrine in the system of the 2LCF. It functions as part of the doctrine that the immutable God is unique, self-existent, and perfect in every way. It teaches us that he does not have emotions univocal to human emotions, yet it never teaches or even implies that there is no love, grace, mercy, wrath, etc. in the true and living God. In the 2LCF, divine impassibility is founded in the eternal nature of God, and has significant implications for the topics of theology found in the rest of the document.

## **5. Affirmations and Denials**

The discussion above enables us to make the following affirmations and denials concerning the confessional DDI.

1. **We affirm** the unity and analogy of Scripture, which states that unclear, difficult, or ambiguous passages are to be interpreted with clear and unambiguous passages that touch upon the same teaching or event (2LCF 1.9). **We deny** that the purported meaning of any text may be pressed in isolation or contradiction to other passages of Scripture.
2. **We affirm** the unity of Scripture and the analogy of faith, which states, “the true and full sense of any Scripture” (2LCF 1.9) must be interpreted in a manner consistent with the

system of doctrine “necessarily contained” (2LCF 1.6) in the whole of Scripture. **We deny** that the purported meaning of any text may be pressed in isolation or contradiction to systematic theological considerations and that which is necessarily contained in the whole of Scripture.

3. **We affirm** that passages which speak of God’s being and essence must be given interpretive priority, not only because they are the less difficult and ambiguous, but also because what God is precedes what he is like toward us. The latter must be interpreted in a manner consistent with the former. **We deny** that passages which posit divine passions (i.e., what he is like toward us) take priority over passages which speak of God’s being and essence (i.e., what he is).
4. **We affirm** that the foundation for language about God is the reality of creation *ex nihilo*. This principle grounds the way of causality, which states that we may know something about the cause (i.e., God) from the effect (i.e., creation). **We deny** that scriptural language about God is equivocal, that is, for example, that love is predicated of God and man in a completely unrelated sense.
5. **We affirm**, in all scriptural language about God, both the way of negation, which states that he is that being who is infinitely unlike all other beings, and the way of eminence, which states that he is infinitely greater than the language and analogies used to reveal him, so that divine love is as different from human love as God is from man. **We deny** that scriptural language about God is univocal, that is, for example, that love stands in relation to God in the same way it does to man, albeit more perfect.
6. **We affirm** that all scriptural language about God is analogical, which states that divine love stands in relation to the divine nature in a mode proportionately similar (and proportionately different) to the way human love stands in relation to human nature. **We deny** that scriptural language about God must be either univocal or equivocal.
7. **We affirm** that *some* scriptural analogies with respect to the affections of God are anthropopathisms, wherein the thing attributed to God exists in him figuratively. **We deny** that *every* scriptural analogy with respect to the affections of God refers to something *proper* to God, wherein the thing attributed exists in both the Creator and the creature formally.
8. **We affirm** that biblical anthropopathisms signify that which is in God truly but figuratively. Anthropopathisms signify something that is in God, not according to the letter, but according to the design of the analogy, and in a manner consistent with the whole of Scripture and suitable to the divine perfections. **We deny** that anthropopathisms empty the scriptural analogies of meaning or fail to reveal something about the God who is.
9. **We affirm** that God is pure *being* without *becoming*. **We deny** that there is any *becoming* in God.
10. **We affirm** that, given *what God actually is*, infinite, simple, and immutable in perfection, we must also confess that God *is* infinite, simple, and immutable love. **We deny** that God has the potential to be other than infinite, simple, and immutable love.
11. **We affirm** that God is his essence *and* existence, and therefore cannot but exist as he eternally and essentially is. **We deny** emotional change in God, for that would involve a new manner of God’s existing, which would compromise God’s aseity (i.e., his necessary and independent existence).
12. **We affirm** that love (and all other affections proper to God) is not an accidental or relational property that God has, but what he is. Therefore, an emotional change in God of any kind would necessarily entail a change in the essence and existence of God. **We deny** that God

has any accidental or relational properties, that is, properties that are distinct from his essence.

13. **We affirm** that only an impassible God is truly and fully “most loving” (2LCF 2.1). **We deny** that the confessional understanding of divine impassibility leads to a view of God that is cold and impersonal.
14. **We affirm** that God is impassible without qualification. **We deny** that God can, in any sense, undergo inner emotional changes of state, and that God is without passions merely in the sense that he is incapable of suffering, surprise, or being overwhelmed.
15. **We affirm** that God, who is his essence and existence, has no cause; his existence is necessary and therefore unchangeable. **We deny** that God can be his own cause, and that he is capable of sovereignly affecting his own emotional change of state.
16. **We affirm** that passages which speak of the arousal or pacification of God’s affections imply a change only in God’s external (*ad extra*) works. **We deny** that passages which speak of the arousal or pacification of God’s affections imply an internal (*ad intra*) change in God.
17. **We affirm** that all of God’s affections are infinite in perfection. Therefore, if God were to undergo an emotional change, that change would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, then he must not have been infinite in perfection prior to the change, and therefore was not God. If for the worse, then he would no longer be infinite in perfection after the change, and therefore no longer God. **We deny** that it is an imperfection in God to be incapable of emotional change.
18. **We affirm** that God loves his creation, particularly his elect (John 17:23-24), with a view to himself (Rom. 11:36). His affection is therefore as immutable, fixed, and constant as his love for himself, however varied our experience of its effects may be. **We deny** that the triune God’s infinite delight in his own infinite perfection (i.e., his blessedness) undermines his ability genuinely to love his creation.
19. **We affirm** a real distinction among creatures, and the degree to which each is made to experience God’s love and participate in his goodness. **We deny** that the inequality among the external objects of God’s love (i.e., creation, humanity, the elect) implies a change or variation in God whose love is as immutable as his being.
20. **We affirm** that the confessional DDI supports and necessitates the free offer of the gospel and Christian missions (2LCF 7.2). **We deny** that the confessional DDI in any way hinders the free offer of the gospel or Christian missions.
21. **We affirm** that God has freely chosen to relate every creature to himself, that a creature may change in his relation to God, and that by virtue of Christ God graciously effects such a change in the elect without any change of relation in himself. **We deny** that a change in the creature can bring about any change of relation in God.
22. **We affirm**, in agreement with Chalcedonian Christology and the communication of properties, that “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated by the other nature” (2LCF 8.7). **We deny** that the divine nature underwent suffering or change in the passion of Christ.
23. **We affirm** that the classical DDI as expressed by the 2LCF 2.1 is founded in the Scripture, “necessarily contained” (2LCF 1.6) therein, and therefore consistent with and essential to the system of doctrine delivered to us through special revelation. **We deny** that the classical DDI as expressed by the 2LCF 2.1 is a scholastic dogma founded in philosophical and metaphysical speculation based on natural theology.

**24. We affirm** emphatically, therefore, that the classical DDI as expressed by the 2LCF 2.1 is the teaching of Scripture. This is our Association's confessional commitment.

Respectfully submitted,

ARBCA Theology Committee