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Pentecostals and Divine Impassibility: A Response to Daniel Castelo*

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Abstract

This article responds to Daniel Castelo's recent recommendation of the doctrine of divine impassibility to Pentecostals. In contrast to Castelo's proposal, this article argues that Pentecostals are justified in dropping the term 'impassibility' and, moreover, that Pentecostals have a pneumatological reason for affirming divine passibility implicit within their spirituality of speaking in tongues.

Keywords

divine impassibility, passibility, speaking in tongues, Holy Spirit, doctrine of God

Building on his previous work on the doctrine of divine impassibility, Daniel Castelo recently recommended the doctrine of impassibility to Pentecostals. In doing this, Castelo is certainly going against a trend in both Pentecostal theology and contemporary theology at large.¹ While I appreciate the reasons that Castelo offers for affirming the doctrine of impassibility, in this article I will point out how Pentecostal theology also gives reason to affirm divine passibility. While this might seem to contradict Castelo's recommendation of the doctrine, our recommendations can actually be complementary to one another. Nevertheless, in the end, I do think it best that Pentecostals

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¹ For example, in the same volume as Castelo's article, see Chris E. Green, 'The Crucified God and the Groaning Spirit: Toward a Pentecostal *Theologia Crucis* in Conversation with Jürgen Moltmann', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 19 (2010), pp. 127-142.

(and others) drop the use of the term ‘impassibility’ in reference to God in contemporary theology.

Before turning to my recommendation of divine passibility, it is first necessary to clarify Castelo’s proposal. Castelo advocates the doctrine of divine impassibility to Pentecostals with the aim of recommending that Pentecostals develop an apophatic side to their theology, which would be consistent with apophatic characteristics of Pentecostal spirituality. He writes, ‘Pentecostal experience of God and a certain account of divine impassibility go hand in hand’.² Castelo recalls times when Pentecostals have a quiet moment during a worship service when they sense the presence of God. In contrast to a frequent desire of Pentecostals to express themselves with many words, these quiet moments are ‘the holy silence that occasionally emanates from the Spirit’s hushing’.³ Here Castelo identifies an apophatic practice in Pentecostal spirituality. He believes this apophatic practice lends support to the use of the doctrine of impassibility in service to an apophatic doctrine of God and in service to Pentecostal theology in general. The overall idea is that, in contrast to those Pentecostals who have fully embraced the doctrine of divine passibility (without qualifications), a doctrine of impassibility is a means of reaffirming divine transcendence and the limits of our knowledge of God.

At first glance it might seem that Castelo is arguing in favor of the view that God is completely dispassionate and without emotion (a proposal that just about any contemporary theologian would find problematic). It might seem this way because Castelo does not significantly expand on his understanding of divine passibility in his recent article. However, Castelo’s proposal becomes clearer when one reads his recommendation of divine impassibility to Pentecostals along with his other work on divine impassibility. In recommending the doctrine of divine impassibility, Castelo is not advocating for a full dismissal of divine passibility. Indeed, he recognizes that the contemporary critique of divine impassibility is valid to some extent. However, his concern is that ‘divine passibility has to be checked and qualified in order that it does not become overly sentimentalized or domesticated’.⁴ For Castelo,

² Castelo, ‘An Apologia for Divine Impassibility’, p. 121.

³ Castelo, ‘An Apologia for Divine Impassibility’, p. 126.

⁴ Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Paternoster Theological Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), p. 3. Castelo affirms the reaction against divine impassibility on p. 39.

theologians are not in a situation of having to choose either impassibility or passibility, for both are necessary and even ‘essential to one another’.⁵

Castelo offers two main reasons for affirming that God is ‘apathetic’ or ‘impassible’. First, he employs the doctrine of impassibility as an apophatic qualifier. Here Castelo affirms the work of Paul Gavrilyuk, who argues that Patristic theologians viewed God as passionate while at the same time employing the concept of impassibility as an apophatic qualifier. To utilize the idea of divine impassibility as an apophatic qualifier is to say that God’s passions differ from human passions and that God does not have emotions that might seem morally problematic.⁶ This is the point that Castelo is primarily concerned with in his recent article in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*. Castelo’s second overall reason for affirming the doctrine of divine impassibility is that he wants to affirm that God is impassible in his actions. That is, God is not inhibited by his suffering—God is not ruled by his passions and, therefore, God remains in control of his actions. Castelo emphasizes that God suffers only voluntarily and for the purpose of redemption.⁷ With respect to Jesus Christ, specifically, Castelo emphasizes that he is impassible in the sense that Jesus does not suffer only as a martyr or rebel; rather, his suffering is ‘an act of solidarity [that] can be a hopeful, redemptive, and ultimately glorifying expression of God’s love’.⁸

To summarize, Castelo’s recommendation of the doctrine of divine impassibility does not mean a rejection of divine passibility, but only that God does not have ‘negative’ passions that limit God’s ability to control himself, and that God suffers for the purpose of overcoming suffering. In this sense, one might say that God suffers impassibly.

It is true that theologians too frequently affirm divine passibility without sufficient qualifications. It is also true that theology must take account of the points that Castelo wishes to make with his doctrine of divine impassibility. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that one (Pentecostal or not) must include a doctrine of impassibility in one’s theology in order to adequately address Castelo’s concerns. In other words, I am not convinced that the doctrine of impassibility is necessary.

⁵ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, p. 19. Also, Daniel Castelo, ‘Continued Grappling: The Divine Impassibility Debates Today’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 12.3 (2010), pp. 364–372 (367–368).

⁶ Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 16.

⁷ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, p. 128. Similarly, Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 51.

⁸ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, pp. 129–130.

To highlight this point, the main theologian whom Castelo critiques with respect to divine passibility (Jürgen Moltmann) actually addresses some of Castelo's concerns, while at the same time dropping the term 'impassibility'. I agree with many of Castelo's critiques of Moltmann's doctrine of God.⁹ At the same time, however, Moltmann does adequately address one of the reasons that leads Castelo to argue in favor of the doctrine of divine impassibility—namely, that God in Christ suffers voluntarily and for the purpose of redemption. First, Moltmann qualifies his affirmation of divine passibility as being voluntary when he asserts that the suffering of God is 'active suffering, the suffering of love, in which one *voluntarily* opens himself to the possibility of being affected by another'.¹⁰ Furthermore, Moltmann also affirms that the suffering of the Son of God on the cross is redemptive; therefore, he implicitly affirms that the suffering of God does not inhibit God's redemptive activity. Christ's death is salvific in that he died 'for us'. Moltmann writes, 'The phrase "died for our sins" means that the cause of his suffering was our sins, the purpose of his suffering is expiation for us, the ground of his suffering is the love of God for us'.¹¹

With these two affirmations that the suffering of the Son of God on the cross is voluntary and for salvific purposes, Moltmann addresses Castelo's second reason for affirming divine impassibility, although without affirming the doctrine of divine impassibility himself. One can address Castelo's first reason for affirming the doctrine of divine impassibility (i.e. the need for an apophatic qualifier) easily enough simply by noting that human suffering and divine suffering are not one and the same. That is to say that when one speaks of divine suffering, one has reached beyond the limits of human knowledge and language for one does not know precisely what it is like for God to suffer. It is clear then, that one can address the perceived need for the doctrine of impassibility without necessarily affirming the term itself. However, one might wonder, why would one want to avoid using the terms 'apathetic' or 'impassibility' in reference to God?

⁹ Andrew K. Gabriel, 'Beyond the Cross: Moltmann's Crucified God, Rahner's Rule, and Pneumatological Implications for a Trinitarian Doctrine of God', *Didaskalia* 19.1 (2008), pp. 93-111. Compare Castelo, 'An Apologia for Divine Impassibility', p. 119 and Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, pp. 69-110.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 230 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 183. In contrast to this reading of Moltmann, Castelo (*The Apathetic God*, p. 102) seems to agree with those who believe that Moltmann does not adequately explain why the Father would allow the Son to suffer on the cross.

While I do not think it is *necessary* to drop the term ‘impassibility’ from Pentecostal theological vocabulary, it might be *best* to drop the term ‘impassibility’ simply because of how the term has been used throughout church history after the Patristic era and because of how the term is often understood (and used) in contemporary theology. When Castelo defends the idea of divine impassibility, his primary concern is not with defending the term itself. Rather, one of his main concerns (this is his starting point) is to correct misinterpretations of the way the Patristic Fathers employed the doctrine and to defend their use of the doctrine. He emphasizes that in the early church theologians used the idea of divine impassibility in a variety of ways and that

taken on its own, *apatheia* largely did not mean ‘indifference’ to the early church when used in relation to God. On the contrary, the early church used *apatheia* in an attempt to safeguard the divine transcendence in an apophatic manner, especially within those contexts in which the notion of ‘suffering’ was gaining acceptance as a category to be used in relation to the godhead.¹²

In making these observations, Castelo has done a great service to both historical and contemporary theologians. However, when it comes to appropriating the significance of Patristic expressions of divine impassibility, one should not only take into account the Patristic theologians. One must also consider how the doctrine of divine impassibility has been employed in subsequent history. And the problem is that many medieval and contemporary expressions of divine impassibility are not consistent with Patristic formulations of the doctrine. For example, Thomas Aquinas suggested that God does love, and even that God loves all things, but that this is not a passion or feeling for God. Rather, love exists for God only as an act of the will. That is, God does loving things, but not out of passions.¹³ In contemporary theology, Thomas Weinandy defends the doctrine of impassibility; and, although he affirms that God experiences passions such as delight and joy, he argues that any metaphors of divine suffering must be ‘purged of the passible and emotional connotations’ of human suffering.¹⁴ These expressions of divine impassibility are not utilizing the idea of divine impassibility solely as an apophatic qualifier. In fact, these expressions of the apathetic God are no more apophatic than contemporary expressions of divine passibility because these claims of impassibility aim to give specific content to the doctrine of God (saying that God *is* not passionate in a certain manner).

¹² Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, p. 2.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.20, a.1 and Ia, q.20, a.2.

¹⁴ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 169.

Theology must always adjust to its context. For the majority of theologians (and pastors) today, impassibility does not mean what it meant for many Patristic theologians nor what it means for Castelo. Even Castelo himself recognizes that ‘the word “apathetic” in today’s context suggests “indifferent”, “detached”, and so forth’.¹⁵ Given that the terms ‘impassibility’ and ‘apathetic’ are so often understood in this way in the contemporary context, it seems that the terms no longer serve the academy well and probably even less so the church at large. If the term ‘impassibility’ has taken on new (and objectionable) meanings through the history of theology, it may be best to drop the term impassibility (although it is not improper to use the term *together* with passibility, as Castelo does). Following from Castelo’s work, it is clear that we do not need to drop the term on account of its overall Patristic usage. It is just that the Patristic usage is not all that needs to be taken into account.

Contemporary theology has offered many reasons for affirming the doctrine of divine passibility. Most of these come from Christological perspectives, which affirm that the Son of God suffered on the cross, and sometimes, by extension, that the Father and the Holy Spirit suffered by virtue of their participation in this event. Beyond these common arguments in support of the doctrine of divine passibility, Pentecostals can also find reason for affirming the passibility of God in their spirituality. More specifically, a Pentecostal theology of speaking in tongues supports this doctrine.

Pentecostals speak in tongues for different reasons on many different occasions. Sometimes it is a joyous occasion of celebration and praise, sometimes it is during a time of turmoil, and at other times it is just when we are longing for something more than life currently offers. In some of these occasions Pentecostals can find a correlation between their personal groaning and the groaning of the Spirit who is praying through them as they speak in tongues. Paul writes of such experiences in Romans, when he writes that believers ‘who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly’ (8.23; cf. 2 Cor. 5.2) as we await our final redemption and that, while we remain in our state of weakness, ‘the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express’ (8.26).

As Pentecostals pray in tongues in this manner, they are not only guided by the Spirit in their prayers, but they also sense the passion of the Spirit of God. This passion of the Spirit comes as the Spirit voluntarily enters into the weak human state, shaping people into a new creation and drawing people into the kingdom of God. Like a mother giving birth to her child, the Spirit suffers for

¹⁵ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, p. 14.

redemption's sake that people might be born again, groaning with people in their groaning, and even helping people to groan when 'we do not know what we ought to pray for' (Rom. 8.23). This Pentecostal sensitivity to the groaning of the Spirit supports a doctrine of divine passibility.¹⁶

In conclusion, Pentecostal spirituality supports a Pentecostal doctrine of divine passibility. Castelo has correctly cautioned contemporary theologians that Patristic theologians generally did not use the term 'impassibility' in the same way that many people understand the term today, nor in the manner that many contemporary theologians think that the Patristic theologians used the term. However, it seems unnecessary for Pentecostals to continue to teach the impassibility of God given that there are other ways of making the qualifications regarding divine passibility than the route that Castelo takes. Furthermore, the term 'impassibility' can even be unhelpful in contemporary theology due to the high possibility that it will be misunderstood. In affirming the doctrine of passibility I do hope that I am not among (in Castelo's words) those 'Pentecostal scholars who challenge unequivocally and without reserve the notion of divine impassibility'.¹⁷

¹⁶ I offer additional pneumatological reasons for affirming the doctrine of divine passibility in chapter five of Andrew K. Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

¹⁷ Castelo, 'An Apologia for Divine Impassibility', p. 124.