

THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

- It has been said that the only constant in life is change...the world is always changing and so are people
- As part of God's created order, we are always subject to change, which is unavoidable
- As we grow up and grow old in years, change pervades every part of our lives...our relationships, jobs, emotions, residences, bodies, desires, plans, and thoughts are in a constant state of flux
- Technology changes, nations change, opinions change, styles change
- We cannot conceive of an existence without change as it is hard for anyone to go a day, even an hour, without changing in some way
- Revelation tells us that there will be great changes in the heavens one day...stars are going to fall from the sky...the sun will go out...the moon will turn to blood...everything is going to go haywire in the sky
- And there will be great changes on earth during the Tribulation...earthquakes (Rev 6:12)...mountains and island will move (Rev 6:14)...a third of the earth scorched (Rev 8:7-10)...huge hailstones will fall (Rev 16:20-21)
- We live in a world that is dominated by consistent change
- However, change is not something God ever experiences...he is immutable and unchanging
- His immutability is one of his perfections which distinguishes him from all his other creatures
- "Herein we may perceive the infinite distance which separates the highest creature from the Creator. Creaturehood and mutability are correlative terms."¹
- At the heart of Christianity stands the Creator-creature distinction, defined in part by God's immutability."²
- God never changes his mind or his course of action
- He is an immovable rock, a mighty fortress, who is the only sure anchor in an ever-changing world
- The unchangeableness of God is one of the most glorious and hopeful comforts we as believers can cling to in the midst of the many troubles of life

WHAT IS DIVINE IMMUTABILITY?

What it Means

- The term "immutable" means "unchanging, absolute, unalterable, fixed, permanent, unable to be changed"
- When applied to God, it means that God is perpetually the same, subject to no changes...it is one of God's incommunicable attributes
- When we say that God is immutable we mean that he is devoid of all change, not only in His being, but also in His perfections, purposes, and promises
- There is no arbitrariness in God...no capriciousness...he is not impulsive, fickle, erratic, flighty, unpredictable, inconsistent...he is not growing or developing...he is consistently the same
- He is the same unchanging God that he has been from eternity past...and will the same unchanging God in eternity future

¹ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 38.

² Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 689.

- Lyric from *Immortal, Invisible*: “We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish but naught changeth thee”

Unchangeable in Essence

- God’s nature and being are subject to no changes or mutations
- This unchangeability in God’s essence is closely connected to his eternity...since change takes place over time and God is not subject to time, he does not change
- There never was a time when God was not there...there will never be a time when he will cease to be God
- God has not evolved, grown, or improved...all that God is today, he has always been, and will always be
- He cannot change for the better...or change for the worst...because he is already perfect
- Since he is unaffected by anything outside of himself, he cannot improve or deteriorate in his essence as he is perpetually the same
- He is altogether uninfluenced by the passing of time as he exists outside of time

Exodus 3:14 ~ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”

Psalms 102:25-27 ~ Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. 27 But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.

Malachi 3:6 ~ For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

James 1:17 ~ Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.

Hebrews 13:8 ~ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.

- It is important that God not change either for the better or the worse
- On the one hand, God cannot change for the better, because that would mean that He had been imperfect before
- On the other hand, God cannot change for the worse, because that would mean He would become less than He once was

Unchangeable in Character

- Whatever God’s attributes were before creation, they are precisely the same now, and will remain the same forever
- His power is the same it has always been...his wisdom is undiminished...his holiness is not reduced at all
- All of his attributes are constant, steadfast, eternal, and unalterable

Jeremiah 31:3 ~ The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.

Psalms 100:5 ~ For the LORD is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting And His faithfulness to all generations.

Psalms 136 ~ for his lovingkindness is everlasting...for his lovingkindness is everlasting

Psalms 138:8 ~ The LORD will accomplish what concerns me; Your lovingkindness, O LORD, is everlasting; Do not forsake the works of Your hands.

Isaiah 40:28 ~ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.

John 13:1 ~ Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

- “God’s other attributes also guard his immutability from misunderstanding. The Bible describes him as the living, personal, and active God. God is not ‘immobile’ like a lifeless, inert block of stone...God dwells in immutable activity and dynamic rest...God is not a ‘stagnant ocean’...He is the ‘fountain of living waters (Jer. 2:13).”³

Unchangeable in Word

- God’s Word can never be altered or abridged...and it cannot fail to come to pass
- His standards are the same from generation to generation

Psalms 119:89 ~ Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.

Psalms 119:151-152 ~ You are near, O LORD, And all Your commandments are truth. Of old I have known from Your testimonies That You have founded them forever

Psalms 119:160 ~ The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting

Matthew 5:17-18 ~ Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

John 10:35 ~ The Scripture cannot be broken

- Although fallen humans tend to twist the truth, change their minds, or mislead others intentionally or unintentionally, God neither lies nor takes back what he says

Numbers 23:19 ~ God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

1 Samuel 15:29 ~ Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.

Titus 1:2 ~ in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,

- Furthermore, although human laws changes, God’s Word stands forever

Isaiah 40:8 ~ The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.

1 Peter 1:25 ~ BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.” And this is the word which was preached to you.

Unchangeable in Plans

- God’s will never varies and his eternal decrees can never be altered...he is immutable in his counsel
- God never is forced to change his plans or come up with a “plan B”...his purposes are never altered
- All that He has in His Word committed Himself to do, He will do...no part of His eternal plan changes
- God’s purposes always override and encompass human plans

³ Ibid., 691.

Psalm 33:10-11 ~ The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation.

Proverbs 19:21 ~ Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand.

- No one can frustrate, annul, or change God's plans

Job 23:13 ~ But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does.

Isaiah 14:26-27 ~ This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. 27 For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?"

Isaiah 46:9-10 ~ Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'

Romans 11:29 ~ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Hebrews 6:17-18 ~ In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

- "This clearly indicates that immutability signifies more than simply God's covenant faithfulness since the assurance of His covenant faithfulness is itself staked on His unchangeable being... The plain sense appears to be that God's unwavering covenant faithfulness is worthy of our hope precisely because it is rooted in His unwavering and unchangeable being."⁴

- Scripture speaks frequently of purposes of God that he has had for all eternity, which will not change

Matthew 25:34 ~ Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1:4 ~ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

Ephesians 1:11 ~ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

Revelation 13:8 ~ All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.

- God's eternal and glorious plan will never be thwarted!

DOES GOD SOMETIMES CHANGE HIS MIND?

- When we talk about God being unchanging in his purpose, we often wonder about passages where God appears to have changed his mind
- While on first glance it may appear that God changed, in reality he didn't and there is another explanation

Genesis 6:6-7 ~ The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them."

⁴ James Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 18-19.

- This text does not indicate that God wished he had done something different or changed his mind about his creation...sin does not cause God's plans to fail (see Gen 50:20)
- Rather, it indicates God's immense sorrow and displeasure over sin...and a change in his dealings with man
- Nothing in this text indicates that God's character changed...instead, this instance should be understood as a true expression of "God's present attitude or intention with respect to the situation as it exists at the moment. If the situation changes, then of course, God's attitude or expression of intention will also change. This is just saying that God responds differently to different situations."⁵
- "God's relationships with creatures in time...are not part of God's essence; they are among God's outward actions, and changes in them involve no change in God himself."⁶

Exodus 32:9-14 ~ The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 "Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " 14 So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

- Even though v. 14 indicates that God "changed His mind," this must be understood in light of the texts that indicate that God doesn't change
- It is helpful to understand a difference between divine "decrees" and divine "intentions:"
 - Divine "decrees" are unconditional, binding obligations which will come to pass no matter the reaction of the listeners
 - Divine "intentions" are conditional in that they don't bind God to a stated course of action
- Furthermore, God said that he would send judgment provided that the situation remained the same
- However, the situation changed...Moses started to pray earnestly and interceded on behalf of the people
- Moses' prayer changed the situation...as a result, God responded to that changed situation by answering the prayer and withholding judgment

1 Samuel 15:10-11 ~ Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, 11 I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night.

1 Samuel 15:35 ~ Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.

- Although it sounds like God changed His mind about selecting Saul as king, this just shows God's present attitude toward Saul and his present displeasure toward Saul's sinful actions
- He was displeased with Saul's disobedience; it brought him great sorrow that Saul disobeyed him
- However, God was in no way changing His mind about the wisdom of His plans...nor was he indicating that, if he could go back and not make Saul king, he would do so
- This becomes clear in v. 29 ~ Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind
- This incident shows us that "God's previous action led to events that, in the short term, caused him sorrow, but that nonetheless in the long term would ultimately achieve his good purposes."⁷

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 164.

⁶ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 705.

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 165.

Jonah 3:10 ~ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it

- Similar to the situation at Mt. Sinai, God relented from bringing destruction on Nineveh, not because he changed his mind, but because the people repented of their sin
- The change was on the part of the Ninevites and God was responding to them
- “The purpose for proclaiming a warning is to bring about repentance. Once the people repented, the situation was different, and God responded differently to that changed situation.”⁸
- No change in His eternal purpose is implied when He begins to deal with a person in a new way
- It is important to note that “in each case it is the human agent who changes; God then responds according to his unchanging nature to the altered circumstances.”⁹
- Also, it is important in each of these instances to understand that “[w]hen speaking of Himself, God frequently accommodates His language to our limited capacities...When He institutes a change in His dealings with men, He describes His course of conduct as ‘repenting.’”¹⁰
- The language of divine repentance is analogical and anthropomorphic

THE PROBLEM OF PROCESS THEOLOGY

- Process theology is a theological position which holds that process and change are critical components of genuine existence and that the only absolute which exists in the world is change
- Therefore, for God to be genuine, he also must be changing over time, just like everything else that exists
- They hold that God is continually adding to himself all the experiences that happen in the universe and is, therefore, continually changing
- Open theism was a recent expression of process theology
- “The real appeal of process theology comes from the fact that all people have a deep longing to mean something, to feel significant in the universe. Process theologians dislike the doctrine of God’s immutability because they think it implies that nothing we do can really matter to God. If God really is unchangeable, process theologians will say, then nothing we do – in fact, nothing that happens in the universe – has any real effect on God, because God can never change. So what difference do we make?” How can we have any ultimate meaning?”¹¹
- They content that immutability suggests imperfection in God...and the thinking is that ability to change is better than being unable to change
- “In order to avoid completely losing the continuity of God’s identity, process theists regard Him as comprised of two aspects of being: one absolute and the other relative...Such dipolarity is designed to allow God’s identity both to remain constant and to be subject to genuine process and development, especially in the context of a relationship with beings outside of Himself.”¹²
- Process theologians reason this way: “If God cannot be moved in any way, as the classical position clearly requires, then how can He genuinely relate to us, care for us, and delight in us? How can we have an

⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁹ Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, 58.

¹⁰ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 38.

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 166.

¹² Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 9.

authentic, personal relationship with Him, and He with us, if there is no give-and-take? Reciprocity and self-giving are the keys to all significant relationships, are they not? If God only gives to us but does not receive from us, then He seems to be missing out on a crucial component of the relationship.”¹³

- Although not a process theologian, Bruce Ware is a theistic mutualist, arguing that Scripture teaches God’s ontological immutability and relational mutability
- He argues that our choices and actions do have an effect on God himself and, as a result, he is moved by by the decision and situations of his children¹⁴
- Despite these arguments of process theologians, open theists, and theistic mutualists, they all fail to take into consideration that nothing about God’s being is derived or caused to be
- He is not subject to change because every change involves a cause that would bring him to a state of being that he lacks in and of himself
- There is nothing outside of him that could increase, alter, or augment the fulness of his being

IMPLICATIONS OF GOD’S IMMUTABILITY

- At first, it may not seem that important to affirm that God is immutable; however, if we stop to consider the implications of this perfection of God, they are numerous

It is Meant to Comfort Us

- The fact that God is unchanging is a great comfort to us who are facing constant challenges and adversities in an ever-changing, God-hating world
- God’s immutability makes Him a fixed point in an otherwise turbulent world
- “The greatest and only consolation of Christians in their adversities, is the knowing that God lies not, but does all things immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, changed, or hindered.”¹⁵
- “Herein is solid comfort. Human nature cannot be relied upon; but God can! However unstable I may be, however fickle my friends may prove, God changes not. If He varied as we do, if He willed one thing today and another tomorrow, if He were controlled by caprice, who could confide in Him? But, all praise to His glorious name, He is ever the same. His purpose is fixed, His will is stable, His word is sure. Here then is a rock on which we may fix our feet, while the mighty torrent is sweeping away everything around us. The permanence of God’s character guarantees the fulfillment of His promises.”¹⁶

It is Meant to Help Us Trust Him

- If God were mutable, then this would require the acquisition of something new, something that was not there previously
- And if God were to acquire something he was previously lacking, then this would shatter the perfection of being that pertains to him

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ See his book *God’s Greater Glory*

¹⁵ Martin Luther

¹⁶ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 39.

- “If God doth change it must be either to a greater perfection than he had before, or to a less...If to the better, he was not perfect, and so was not God; it to the worse, he will not be perfect, and so be no longer God after that change.”¹⁷
- And if God could change for the worse, then what kind of God might he become? If he could become a little bit evil, then how do know he could not change to become largely evil?
- It would be very difficult to trust a mutable, changing God like this because we would not be sure which God we were trusting in at that moment
- Because only God is immutable, he alone is worthy of our complete trust

Psalm 62:5-6 ~ My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him. 6 He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.

It is Meant to Drive us to Prayer

- If God were constantly changing, there would be no hope in prayer since God might grant a petition one day and then deny it another day
- Some might object: What is the use of praying if God’s will is already fixed and prayer doesn’t change his mind?
- But we are reassured in Scripture that we should pray and that we must pray because God does hear the prayers of his children
- Prayer does work!

James 5:16 ~ The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

- When we do pray, we can be confident that God uses the means of our prayers to accomplish his purposes; this is how prayer “works”
- We have to admit that there is some mystery in prayer and that we don’t know how God sovereignly ordains all things but at the same time uses the means of our prayer to accomplish his will
- However, we don’t need to understand that mystery entirely; rather, we pray knowing that somehow our prayers are part of how God works all things to our good and his glory in his unchanging purposes
- Furthermore, we don’t have to try to figure out what kind of mood God is in or try to guess how he is going to respond today
- There is no divine inconsistency, so when we pray we come to a God who is stable and consistent

It is Meant to Serve as a Warning to the Unsaved

- God will not change someday in His attitude toward sin...He has always hated sin, rebellion, disobedience
- God has promised that there are consequences for those who reject Christ and chose to live their own life apart from Him!
- “Herein is terror for the wicked. Those who defy Him, who break His laws, who have no concern for His glory, but who live their lives as though He existed not, must not suppose that, when at last they shall cry to Him for mercy, He will alter His will, revoke His word, and rescind His awful threatenings...God will not deny Himself to gratify their lusts. God is holy, unchangingly so. Therefore God hates sin, eternally hates it. Hence the eternity of the punishment of all who die in their sins.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:331.

¹⁸ Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 40.