

AN EVANGELICAL REFORMULATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD

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The past twenty-five years have witnessed a number of significant restatements of the doctrine of divine immutability in light of an increasing appreciation for God's real relatedness to the world.¹ In particular, many Roman Catholic theologians have devoted much thought to this doctrine in an attempt to answer the harsh attacks of process theology against Thomas' development of the doctrine.² But only recently have evangelicals entered this contemporary discussion,³ and here their contributions, though very helpful and insightful, have only suggested general lines of the doctrine's reconstruction. The purpose of this article, then, is to offer a more thorough reformulation of the doctrine of divine immutability in a manner that holds firmly to the evangelical commitment to Scripture as the authoritative source of the self-revelation of God.

The place to begin is with a brief examination of the key Biblical texts that speak most clearly of God's immutability. We should avoid, as much as possible, reading into the text senses of change or changelessness that are foreign to Scripture's own statement. Following this, we will propose what seem to be the senses both of immutability and mutability that may properly be attributed to the God of the Bible.

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¹God's "real relatedness" stands in contrast to his "relation of reason." Much of classical theology so stressed God's absolute immutability that his relationship to the contingent and changing world could only be conceived, if at all, as a relation of reason—i.e., a relation that is not real in God but obtains only insofar as God knows from all eternity that creatures will be really related to him. See e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IA, 13, 7. For contemporary affirmations of God's real relatedness to the world after wrestling with the traditional denial of this doctrine see esp. W. E. Stokes, "Is God Really Related to this World?", *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 39 (1965) 145-151; W. J. Hill, "Does the World Make a Difference to God?", *Thomist* 38 (1974) 146-164; W. N. Clarke, *The Philosophic Approach to God: A Neo-Thomistic Perspective* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, 1979) esp. 90-98.

²A helpful article here is B. L. Whitney, "Divine Immutability in Process Philosophy and Contemporary Thomism," *Horizons* 7 (1980) 49-68. For additional discussion of the process doctrines of divine mutability and immutability along with contemporary responses see B. A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God" (doctoral dissertation; Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984), chaps. 6 and 7; "An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 175-196.

³See e.g. D. G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 1. 27-28; C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Stands and Stays*, part 1 (Waco: Word, 1982), 5. 286-306; S. T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 41-51; R. H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 99-105.

I. BIBLICAL ATTESTATION TO GOD'S CHANGELESSNESS

Throughout the history of the Church, theologians have referred to numerous Biblical texts in support of their teaching on the doctrine of divine immutability.⁴ Among the references cited, three in particular have been prominent: Ps 102:25–27, Mal 3:6, and Jas 1:17.

In Ps 102:25–27 the psalmist contrasts the permanence and constancy of God even over the heavens and the earth. A. A. Anderson notes that elsewhere in the Psalms the heavens and earth are pictured as symbols of stability and permanence (e.g. 78:69; 104:5; 119:90; 148:6),⁵ and thus in this psalm the writer purposely selects objects that are commonly thought of as constant and unchanging to emphasize the finality of God's changeless and ongoing existence when contrasted even with that which, above all else in the finite realm, pictures true permanence.

The phrase that is of special importance is in v 27 (MT v 28), *wē'attā hū'*, translated here as "But thou art the same." The same phrase (in first person: *'ānī hū'*) occurs in Deut 32:39 and numerous times in Isaiah (41:4; 43:10; 43:13; 46:4; 48:12), and in each of these cases a more literal rendering of the Hebrew is commonly given—viz., "I am he." Here in Psalm 102 it seems clear that the pronoun *hū'* is used to express the uniqueness of Yahweh's constant identity and endless existence in contrast with what passes away.⁶ This is also supported by the LXX (Ps 101:28) rendering of this passage and the quotation of it in Heb 1:12, both of which read *su de ho autos ei*, "But you are the same." The use of *autos* with the article expresses identity or sameness,⁷ and thus the changelessness of God's very being and existence is affirmed. The clear stress of this passage is on the very self-existent being of God, which remains though all else perish. It is not, then, God's ethical expression but his actual nature that the psalmist has in mind in his attribution of self-sameness.⁸

Mal 3:6 also lays stress on the very being of God, which remains changeless. But in addition, God's ethical dealings are also portrayed as constant. In the immediately preceding context Yahweh has just told again of his coming judgment against those who have refused to follow his ways. There will be no exceptions: The sorcerers, the adulterers, the oppressors will all be judged by

⁴Most often, the immutability of God's essence and attributes is said to be supported by Exod 3:14; Num 23:19; Ps 90:2; 102:25–27; Mal 3:6; Rom 1:22–23; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 1:10–12; Jas 1:17. The immutability of God's knowledge and decree is seen in Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Job 42:2; Ps 33:11; 110:4; 147:5; Prov 19:21; Isa 14:24; 43:13; 46:8–11; Mal 3:6; Luke 21:33; Rom 9:11, 18; 11:29; Eph 1:11; Heb 4:13; 6:17–18; Jas 1:17.

⁵A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2. 711.

⁶On the function of the pronoun *hū'* in Ps 102:27 see F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 3. 117; Anderson, *Psalms*, 2. 711; BDB 216.

⁷See BDF, sec. 288; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 687.

⁸The *JPSV* translation of Ps 102:28 reads: "But Thou art the selfsame, / And Thy years shall have no end."

God's swift action. And immediately following this announcement of God's sure judgment comes the statement of v 6: "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."

The statement of God's changelessness at this point in the narrative functions in at least three different but related ways. First, the statement "I the Lord do not change" is a clear assertion that the very nature and being of God remains forever what it is. Again, as in Psalm 102, it is not the Lord's dealings or one of the Lord's attributes (e.g. faithfulness, justice) that is explicitly referred to as changeless; it is the Lord, Yahweh himself, who is said not to change.⁹ Second, the statement "For I the Lord do not change" at the beginning of v 6 functions to emphasize the certainty of the foretold judgment of v 5. The intrinsic immutability of God's character is the basis for believing the truthfulness and certainty of his word. Third, the changelessness of God's character also forms the basis for the certainty of God's continued faithfulness to his covenant people Israel. His commitment to love them uniquely is inviolable because it is an expression of his very nature, which cannot change.¹⁰ This important text serves to inform us, then, both of the intrinsic immutability of God's own nature and of the extension of his changeless character in his ethical dealings with people.

Jas 1:17 expresses also the dual truths of God's own intrinsic immutability and ethical faithfulness, but here in a different manner than was just observed in Mal 3:6. The statement of v 17 that every good and perfect gift comes from the changeless Father of lights is offered by James as the explanation of his previous assertion that God never tempts anyone (1:13–15). He warns his readers never to say, when tempted, that God has brought this temptation to them. God, says James, cannot himself be tempted and he tempts no one. Of course one may then wonder on what James' confidence is here founded. To this issue James directs his instruction of vv 16–18, which instruction centers on the immutable character of God's own nature, the God from whom comes only and always good. Martin Dibelius summarizes well the central point of Jas 1:17:

God is without change. From this main idea one is obviously supposed to conclude that God, the giver of good things, is not capable of sending evil as well, for such change is contrary to his nature. . . . The saying, which portrays God as the giver of good things, is supposed to confirm the idea that temptations do not come from God; the stressing of his unchangeableness is obviously intended to exclude the possibility that sometimes good comes from God and sometimes evil.¹¹

⁹The Hebrew *lo' šāntī* (Qal perfect) is translated in the LXX as *ouk ἔλλοιόμαι* (perfect middle indicative of *alloioō*). The use of the Greek perfect especially highlights the ongoing permanence of Yahweh's changelessness.

¹⁰J. Baldwin (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* [London: InterVarsity, 1972] 245) comments concerning Mal 3:6: "There is utter consistency in God's dealings with men. He who once loved Jacob (1:2) did not cease to love his sons, though they continued to take after their father and were cheats and supplanters (Gn 27:36; cf. Mal 3:5)."

¹¹M. Dibelius, *James* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 102–103. For good discussions of this passage see also J. B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); P. H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

Again, then, two central truths about God are expressed: the former concerning God's nature, and the latter God's dealings with his creatures. First, God as "Father of lights"¹² is himself not subject to intrinsic variation (*paralagē*), and the light he gives can never be shadowed or darkened or in any way altered (*tropēs aposkiasma*). Second, because God is himself changeless and because God is changelessly good, one may be confident that every gift from his hand is wholly good. God's own nature is exempt from change, and hence his relations with humans express only and precisely who he is.

II. SENSES OF IMMUTABILITY PROPER TO THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

With this examination of Scripture's own attestation to God's changelessness in mind, we wish now to delineate distinct senses in which the unchangeableness of God should rightly be understood. In distinguishing these senses of the immutability proper to God the endeavor is being made to express faithfully what God has told us of himself, neither overstating nor understating his self-disclosure on this point, since serious problems can result if either imbalance is accepted. Opposition should be registered here to calling God's resistance to change that of "absolute immutability," for this not only violates what shall later be argued are valid senses to conceive of God's ability to change, but it also blurs certain distinctions that are called for by Scripture in relation to his inability to change. There is equal opposition, however, to such treatments of God's changelessness (e.g. as in process theism) that relegate his immutability fundamentally to his immutable and essential changeability. God's self-revelation must be the sole guide in thinking on this or any other issue relating to who God is, and clearly the Scriptures say something quite different about God's incapacity to change than is said of the God of process thought.¹³

1. *Ontological immutability.* First, the God of the Bible is unchangeable in the supreme excellence of his intrinsic nature. This may be called God's "ontological immutability"—that is, the changelessness of God's eternal and self-sufficient being. This sense of God's ontological immutability is the primary and most fundamental sense in which the Scriptures speak of God's constant self-sameness. It is a first-order conception under which any other sense of divine immutability is dependent. As we noted when examining the classical Scriptural texts relating to God's changelessness, the Biblical writers affirmed that God himself is unchangeable, that who he is as God is ever the same. And clearly when consideration is given to the broader self-revelation of God, that he is altogether complete in the fullness of every excellence, a better understanding may be achieved of why it is only proper for the writers of Scripture to acknowledge and affirm the impossibility of change in the intrinsic nature of God.

¹²See esp. Davids, *Epistle* 87–88.

¹³For a sustained critique of process theism from an evangelical scholar well-acquainted with process thought see R. G. Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983). See also Ware, "Exposition," esp. 191–196.

God is the one and only eternally self-existent being, whose very life encompasses the fullness of all value, worth, virtue, goodness, holiness, power, knowledge, and all other perfection. The God testified to in Scripture is the source of all lesser reality (Acts 17:25; Rom 11:36), he is the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17), and as such he must necessarily contain within himself all such excellence since there is no other source but God for these good bestowments. The thought that God might in some way gain value from finite beings is completely foreign to Biblical thinking. God is debtor to no one. Instead he is the sole source and giver of all good, so that even when a virtue given to and mediated by his creatures is offered back to him, one must acknowledge that ultimately God alone is the eternal possessor of all that is excellent.

In this regard, affirmation is here made of the long tradition of Church theologians who have stressed that it is impossible for God to change for better or for worse.¹⁴ Either course of change is precluded by his being eternally self-sufficient. God cannot gain any value, since he eternally encompasses all such value in his own intrinsic being. And God certainly does not lose any value in his creation of lesser reality, since all that is shared with others *ad extra* is always his own and in the end returns to him (Rom 11:36). Scripture's affirmation that God does not change refers fundamentally, then, to his ontological immutability, to the changelessness of who he ever is as God.

We may also note briefly the vast difference between this sense of ontological immutability here being proposed and the sense of the immutability predicated of God's abstract nature in process theism. In process thought, though God's eternal existence is affirmed, yet some form of reality other than God must also eternally exist in order for God to exist. No particular universe need exist, but some universe or other is necessary for God to be.¹⁵ And further, the actual make-up or content of God's concrete reality is dependent largely on the experiences of all the entities of the universe, for the concrete nature of God is the bringing together of all the value prehended from the universe at large.¹⁶ That God is, then, is immutable, though his being depends absolutely on the eternal existence of reality other than his own. And that God's concrete essence prehends always the totality of the experiences of the world is immutable, though the actual make-up of who God is in reality is dependent in large part on the input of others into his nature.

The God of the Bible is ontologically unchangeable in quite a different sense.

¹⁴See e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter to Eustathia, Ambrosia, and Basilissa*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2, V; Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2.10, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2, IV; Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia*, 11 vol. (vol. 1-4 ed. Bernardinus a Portu Romantino; Collegii a St. Bonaventura, 1882-1902), I, Sent. Lib. I, dist. VIII, part 1, art. II, q. I, 4; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IA., q. 9. 1-2; F. Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencicae* (4 vol.; New York: Robert Carter, 1847), Loc. 3, Q. XI, 4.

¹⁵See e.g. C. Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 1948) 88-89; *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden: Archon, 1941) 108.

¹⁶God's "supreme relativity," his apprehension of all the value from the whole universe, is a constant theme in Hartshorne's *Divine Relativity*; see e.g. pp. 11, 21, 22, 44, 60, 80, 82, 88, 94.

God is immutable not only with regard to the fact of his eternal existence but also in the very content or make-up of his eternal essence, independent of the world. He does not depend for his existence on anything external to him. The Scriptures present God alone as eternally existing when nothing else was, and they reveal him as the originator of all temporal reality. Furthermore this eternal existence of God is not conceived as empty or void until it is given form by something outside it. To the contrary, God's existence forever encompasses all perfection, and hence this true and living God, as revealed in Scripture, is not dependent in the least on anything external to himself for any quality or value or perfection. Indeed all such qualities are his alone, and their manifestation in the contingent world reveals not the intrinsic worth of finite reality, which worth can then be added to the nature of God, but rather it expresses the free grace of God to share what is his alone with that which stands before him only as its humble recipient. The line of dependence between God and the world is asymmetrical. God exists in the fullness of his own intrinsic perfection from all eternity, and his creation of a temporal and contingent reality *ex nihilo* only expresses *ad extra* what is intrinsic to the very nature of God. Whatever value or goodness we have as finite creatures we owe completely to our gracious Giver, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things (Rom 11:36). Thus in affirming God's ontological immutability the true and living God is attributed with the changelessness of his own independent existence, essence and attributes, which qualities of being have ever been his alone and to which no further quality or value can possibly be added.

2. *Ethical immutability.* The God of the Bible is also unchangeable in his unconditional promises and moral obligations to which he has freely pledged himself. This may be called God's "ethical immutability," the faithfulness and reliability of God by which he is true to his word and unailing in accomplishing what he has promised. The divine ethical immutability is secondary and derivative in nature in that it presupposes (1) God's ontological changelessness, (2) the existence of a contingent and temporal moral order, and (3) the free decision of God to pledge himself to his creatures in certain ways that accord with his intrinsic nature. As such, then, God's ethical immutability is a second-order type of changelessness. It involves the free commitment of God in relation to his moral creatures to act in certain freely-determined ways and carry out certain freely-determined promises. These commitments and promises to which God pledges himself are not intrinsic to his immutable divine nature as such, in that it is possible for them never to have been made. Were God not to have created a moral order, or were he not to have pledged himself in the ways he has, these commitments and promises would not be. But God has created and has so pledged himself, and these pledges, rather than being intrinsic to his very nature and hence necessary, are instead freely self-imposed and self-determined. God's ethical immutability, then, is the expression in time of God's eternal intrinsic nature both of the ways in which he freely chooses to pledge himself and of his utter reliability and faithfulness in accomplishing all he has promised.

Now while God's promises and commitments are not necessary strictly speaking, it is equally important to stress that they are nevertheless faithful

expressions of God's nature and character. Stated differently, although God's ethical commitments to his creatures are not determined by his divine being, they fully accord with and truly express that same eternal nature.

Certain of the Church's earliest theologians expressed the importance of understanding God's faithfulness to his promise as rooted in his immutable nature,¹⁷ and here their insight on this important point is followed. One may be confident that God will act as he has said he will act precisely because God's ethical commitments are the natural yet free expressions of his unchanging intrinsic nature. As the apostle Paul says, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13). Thus it seems mistaken to understand the divine immutability, as it sometimes is, solely in terms of God's faithfulness to his promise.¹⁸ The examination of Mal 3:6 and Jas 1:17 above has shown that in Biblical thought God's ethical consistency is based on his unchanging nature. The ethical activity of God is only consistent and reliable if it is rooted in the very nature and character of a God who does not change.

Consideration should be given here to one other important point that can best be seen if we look briefly at Isaac Dorner's significant contribution to the modern discussion of divine immutability.¹⁹ Dorner stressed, and rightly so, that our conception of the immutability proper to God must account for rather than conflict with God's vitality. The God of the Bible is actively involved in the affairs of the world, and hence the sense of immutability proper to this living and active God, says Dorner, is the immutability of his ethical nature. For Dorner, God constantly changes in his affairs with people as he encounters new happenings and responds to changing situations, but God's changes always express rather than deny his unchangeable moral nature.

There is partial truth to what Dorner advocates. As shall be discussed in more detail below,²⁰ God does change his stated activities in certain cases but always in ways that express his ethical nature. The problem with Dorner's view, however, is that he bases the ethical consistency or faithfulness of God strictly on God's unchanging ethical nature (e.g. that God is always loving, holy, just) rather than on a more complete sense of the fullness and supreme excellence of God's immutable being. While it is true that Scripture grounds the faithfulness of God's word in his own ethical character, the fulfillment of

¹⁷See e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 5.14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*; Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2.14.10. On the connection between God's ontological and ethical immutability in Athanasius see esp. E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 124–125.

¹⁸Hartshorne proposed that we understand the immutability of God as presented in Scripture as ethical only (*Man's Vision* 112; *Divine Relativity* 22–24). I. Dorner also emphasized above all the immutability of God's ethical nature ("Über die richtige Fassung des dogmatischen Begriffs der Unveränderlichkeit Gottes," *Jahrbucher für deutsche Theologie*, 1856–58, now in Dorner, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1883] 188–377).

¹⁹The pertinent section of Dorner's "Unveränderlichkeit Gottes" may be found in translation in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology* (ed. C. Welch; New York: Oxford University, 1965) 115–180.

²⁰See esp. the forthcoming discussion on the senses of mutability proper to God, later in this article.

his word may depend on more than God's changeless ethical nature. It may depend as well on God's immutable power, or knowledge, or wisdom—i.e., facets of the nature of God that are not part of his moral nature, properly speaking. Especially when one observes the magnitude of what God has promised, one sees that God's faithfulness to his word requires that he be ontologically immutable in the full sense described above and not only ethically consistent.

Take for example the promise of God to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3; Gal 3:14–22). Here is a promise of enormous magnitude, especially in view of its fulfillment from the vantage point of the cross and the NT. In making this covenant with Abraham, God was committing himself to the fulfillment of a task that required everything from his sovereign control over history to his limitless power over sin and death along with the infinite wisdom needed to plan and accomplish what he here promised. Thus while it is no doubt true that the faithfulness of God to fulfill this promise depended in part on his being a God who does not lie and who seeks to accomplish what is right (i.e., on his ethical immutability), in addition the fulfillment of this promise required also that God have the knowledge and wisdom and power and authority and sovereignty necessary to do in fact what he promised he would do. Furthermore it is essential that God have these attributes without fail so that his word could be accomplished no matter the opposition or obstacles it would face. The certainty with which the Scriptural writers affirm God's faithfulness to his promise presupposes not only his immutable moral nature, which assures us of his unflinching intent to do as he pledged, but also a fuller sense of his complete ontological immutability guaranteeing the limitless resources necessary to accomplish precisely that to which he freely committed himself.

III. SENSES OF MUTABILITY PROPER TO THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

Having stressed what may now be called God's "onto-ethical immutability"—viz., the changelessness of his nature and word as just discussed—consideration must now be given to the ways in which the self-revelation of God also describes certain changes that take place as God involves himself intimately with his creation. In what has thus far been said, an endeavor has been made to delimit the senses of changelessness appropriately elicited from God's self-disclosure rather than upholding a blanket sense of absolute divine immutability. Surely the Bible speaks meaningfully of God's immutability in the manner discussed above. But just as surely the Bible speaks about the active, intimate and concerned involvement of God with his creation, an involvement that includes innumerable changes both on the part of God and on the part of his creatures. To these senses of mutability proper to the living God we now turn.

1. *Relational mutability.* The Scriptures affirm one predominant sense of God's changeability under which specific manifestations of it are evident, and this may be called God's "relational mutability." From the creation of Adam and Eve to the consummation of history, God is involved in pursuing, establishing and developing relationships with those whom he has made. After hu-

mankind rebelled against God, the dominant purpose of God with regard to his fallen human creatures has been to restore his personal relationship with them, which he intended from the beginning.

That God changes in his relationship with others is abundantly clear from Scripture, and therefore this relational mutability of God is upheld while at the same time it is denied that such relational changes in any way threaten or endanger the immutability of his intrinsic nature or freely spoken word. In fact, when rightly understood the relational changes that occur through God's interaction with his creatures, so far from conflicting with his immutable character, actually express it.

Anselm observed long ago that one's essence need not change as a result of changing relationships with others. He argued that though another person is born, to whom one now has numerous relations which can develop or cease and all of which were formerly nonexistent, this can occur without causing any necessary changes in one's own person.²¹ This point is vital for our present discussion. God freely involves himself within the spatio-temporal structure in which we humans live, and he does so not as a mere passive observer. God's involvement in history is pervasive and comprehensive. His activity extends from his ordering of the vast universe (Ps 103:19; Dan 5:35) to his concern over one sparrow that falls (Matt 10:29). And at the heart of his involvement in history is his constant endeavor to be properly related again with those who turned from him.

As one reads Scripture one cannot but notice the abundance of occasions where God changed in his attitude and relationship with his creatures. Psalm 78, for example, recalls some major events in the history of Israel, highlighting especially the continual changes both in Israel's loyalties to God and in God's attitudes toward his people. A pattern seems evident—viz., that first God would promise to shower blessings upon Israel if she would obey, and just when God began to bless, Israel would rebel, incurring instead God's wrath and judgment. Israel would then repent and God would forgive and once again bless her until she again rebelled, bringing God's judgment on herself—and so the pattern continued. The same stress on God's changing attitude toward people is found in the NT. Paul, for example, describes the results of justification in terms of our having "peace with God" (Rom 5:1) in the place of his former attitude of "condemnation" (8:1).

In light of the Scriptural evidence that God indeed changes in relationship with his creatures, it follows next to relate this facet of God's self-disclosure to what has already been discussed regarding his onto-ethical immutability. Three comments are in order. First, while the Scriptures are replete with accounts of God's changed relationships (e.g., from one of wrath to mercy or vice versa), these changes of relationship neither entail nor involve incidentally changes in God's intrinsic nature. Certainly one cannot imagine from a Biblical

²¹Anselm, *Monologium*, in *Anselm of Canterbury* (ed. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson; London: SCM, 1974), 1. ch. 25: "For it is true that I am neither taller nor shorter than, equal nor similar to, a man who will be born after the present year. But after he is born, I will surely be able to have and to lose all of these relations to him—according as he will grow or change in various of his qualities—without any change in myself."

perspective that such changes could be the result, for example, of a change in God from goodness to malevolence. Even when God displays his fiercest wrath on human sin, the Scriptural writers never allow us to think that this occurs because God has succumbed to the forces of evil. What is said here of God's goodness could be said of all his attributes. God's power is not diminished nor is his holiness compromised when he forgives and withholds his wrath though at first he threatened to judge. God's justice is not abandoned nor is his righteous standard relaxed when God acts to redeem what he formerly held under condemnation. Though God changes in his relations to his creatures, God remains precisely who he ever was, is and shall be.

Even more important is the second point—viz., that God's changes of relationship actually express rather than deny his immutable nature and word. Indebtedness for this insight is here expressed especially to Isaac Dorner and Karl Barth.²² As they have explained, because God's intrinsic moral nature is unchangeable it must always and without fail express itself in ways appropriate to the moral state of any given human situation. Thus when the human moral state changes (e.g. from rebellion to repentance) the immutable divine nature must now reflect itself in ways that are appropriate to this new situation. Hence changes in God's attitudes and actions are naturally brought about as God consistently applies the standards and requirements of his constant moral nature in ways that correspond to the moral changes continually undergone by his creatures.

Barth was right, then, to speak of a "holy mutability of God"²³ whereby God is understood to change in his attitudes, conduct and relationships with humans in ways that both accord with his changeless intrinsic moral nature and properly confront the human moral situation. Whereas humans are involved in unholy changes by which they violate God's immutable moral standards, God's changeability is always and only holy in that it upholds God's intrinsic moral requirements while at the same time it alters God's relationship in ways that are appropriate to the human moral state of the moment.

A third point follows from this discussion. A good number of theologians throughout the history of the Church had denied of God any change whatever because they conceived of change as always and only for either the better or the worse.²⁴ That there might be some sort of change that involved no such qualitative increase or decrease was not always given due consideration. But the relational mutability of God as has been presented here is of just such a sort. God is made neither better nor worse by his relational changes. He neither increases nor decreases in excellence since he is, as already stated, the fullness of all excellence. Indeed God cannot change for the better or the worse, but he can change in some sense nonetheless. He changes from anger to mercy, from blessing to cursing, from rejection to acceptance. Each of these changes is real

²²See Dorner in Welch, ed., *God and Incarnation* 145–165; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh; T. & T. Clark, 1956–75), II/1. 496.

²³Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1. 496.

²⁴See n. 14 above.

in God, though no such change affects in the slightest the unchangeable supremacy of his intrinsic nature. God's relational mutability only expresses in time and in personal relationship the changelessness of his intrinsic nature and free word.

2. *The question of God's repentance.* One of the most common questions raised in the minds of readers of the Scriptures in relation to the notion of God's changelessness concerns the numerous instances in which God is said to "repent" or "change his mind" regarding an action he had done (e.g. Gen 6:6-7; 1 Sam 15:11, 35) or a promise (e.g. Jer 18:10) or threat (18:8; 26:13) he had formerly made.²⁵ The question is a serious one because there seems, at least *prima facie*, to be a basis here for attributing a sense of change to God that is not relational only but that is also fundamental or essential within God himself. How should one understand assertions of the divine repentance in a manner that is faithful to God's full self-revelation? Do these repentance texts conflict with the onto-ethical immutability of God advocated above? A number of points need to be made in dealing with this issue.

First, the theologians of the Church have regularly treated all such assertions of God's change of mind or repentance as anthropomorphisms.²⁶ That is, such statements are understood not as literal assertions about God but as human and metaphorical ways of expressing certain truths that extend beyond human experience. God, then, does not actually repent, but the Scriptural writers use this and other similar terms to express the change in his action toward his people—e.g., he formerly threatened judgment but now he blesses. A natural human way of expressing such a change of action is with a term such as "repentance" or "change of mind," for human repentance or change of mind is indeed often accompanied with such changes in action. The Scriptural writers use such terms from ordinary human experience, then, to describe the radical change that often occurs in God's attitude and action toward his people, while not intending to depict God as having had a literal change of mind.

Second, the Church theologians who have proposed that we understand the divine repentance as anthropomorphic were not arbitrary in this interpretation, and though more will be said later in support of their view, here argument shall be offered for their fundamental correctness. That there are anthropomorphisms in Scripture is not genuinely disputed by most readers of the Bible.

²⁵The "repentance" of God is spoken of often in the OT but only once in the NT, and this reference (Heb 7:21) is a quotation from one of the OT denials of God's change of mind (Ps 110:4). The Hebrew verb in this regard is always *nĥm* (used in the Niphal, Piel, Pual and Hithpael), "to be sorry, repentant, comforted." It is used of God thirty-five times, twenty-eight of which are positive (i.e., God may or does repent) and seven negative (i.e., God does not or cannot repent). The positive usages: Gen 6:6, 7; Exod 32:12, 14; Deut 32:36; Judg 2:18; 1 Sam 15:11, 35; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15; Ps 90:13; 106:45; 135:14; Jer 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Hos 13:14; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2. The negative usages: Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 110:4 (cf. Heb 7:21); Jer 4:28; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14.

²⁶See e.g. M. Luther's comments on Gen 6:6 and Joel 2:13; J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.17.12-14; A. Polanus, *The Substance of Christian Religion* (London: By R. F. for John Oxenbridge) 10-11; S. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977 [1797]) 125; Turretin, *Institutio*, Loc. 3, Q. XI, 11.

The clearest examples of anthropomorphic language concern the ascription to God of various bodily parts (e.g. ears, Ps 31:2; mouth, 33:6; eyes, Isa 1:15; hands, 41:10; heart, Gen 6:6; and even wings, Ps 57:1).²⁷ It has been almost universally agreed upon among Christian interpreters that these references to physical members are not to be taken literally but refer to attitudes, attributes, or activities of God. So the question is not whether there are anthropomorphisms in Scripture but rather which assertions in fact are anthropomorphic and which are literally descriptive of God.

The Church theologians supported their anthropomorphic interpretation of the divine repentance by analyzing the conditions that are sufficient to produce a change of mind and then noted that none of these conditions can obtain in God. Calvin's treatment of the divine repentance²⁸ illustrates this well. He proposed that a change of mind can occur when any one of three conditions is present (or any combination thereof): when one is "ignorant of what is going to happen, or cannot escape it, or hastily and rashly rushes into a decision of which he immediately has to repent."²⁹ Essentially, then, a true change of mind can occur when one learns something of which one was ignorant, or when one lacks the power to do as first planned, or when one gains a fresh insight or a new perspective on a situation leading to a reconsideration of one's former intent. But how can it rightly be said of the God of the Bible that he lacks either knowledge, power, or wisdom? Clearly it cannot. God's knowledge is boundless (Ps 147:5; Isa 40:13-14; Rom 11:33-34), his wisdom is flawless (Job 38-39; Ps 104:24; Jer 51:15; 1 Tim 1:17), and his power is inexhaustible (Num 11:34; Deut 3:24; Ps 115:3). Thus, it is here affirmed with the long tradition of Church history that since the conditions involved in a true change of mind cannot be present in God, the Scriptural assertions of God's repentance may best be understood as anthropomorphic expressions for his changed action.

Third, it seems that more can be said in support of the traditional interpretation, and this by means of refining the notion of anthropomorphism. Since the question here is whether the repentance assertions are anthropomorphic in nature, it would be helpful to establish a criterion to guide in determining where it is legitimate to understand the language of Scripture as anthropomorphic on this and other such issues. May I suggest here that such a criterion is implicit in much of the traditional handling of the divine repentance, and it is this: A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him. To take the clearest example of anthropomorphism earlier discussed—that of the ascription to God of bodily parts—it seems clear that the fundamental reason why one may feel confident in understanding these physical ascriptions in a nonliteral way is that elsewhere God's self-revelation discloses that God is not confined physically (1 Kgs 8:27), nor can he be seen (1 John 4:12), but he is in fact spirit (John 4:24). That

²⁷Cf. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958) 39-42.

²⁸Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.12.

²⁹*Ibid.*

is, Scripture clearly presents God (*qua* Spirit) as transcending the finite physical features it elsewhere attributes to him. It seems justifiable, then, to take these physical descriptions as anthropomorphic.

Now in regard to the issue of the divine repentance, it seems that one may apply this criterion to further support what the Church theologians have consistently affirmed. Though there are numerous references in Scripture to God's repentance, there are also a few important texts that deny of him any such change of mind. Num 23:19 contrasts God with humanity specifically on this issue. Whereas humans may change their minds on what they have said, the Balaam oracle proclaims:

God is not a man, that he should lie,
or 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 fulfill it?

Likewise 1 Sam 15:29 (significantly, within the context in which it is said that God regretted making Saul king—15:11, 35) records Samuel's words that "the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man that he should repent." In addition Ps 110:4; Jer 4:28; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14; Rom 11:29 each speaks of the unchangeableness of God's decision in particular instances. It seems, then, that there is additional warrant for understanding these repentance texts as anthropomorphic, for they ascribe to God certain features that Scripture itself elsewhere says are of a finite human quality and hence are transcended by God.

Last, an endeavor should be made to express more clearly just what these repentance passages mean since it has been proposed that they should not rightly be taken as literal statements of God's change of mind. In general it seems best to understand God's repentance as his changed mode of action and attitude in response to a changed human situation. In other words, these passages refer fundamentally to God's relational mutability as discussed above. The Church theologians expressed a point that modern interpreters continue to stress ³⁰—viz., that God's threat to judge certain people for their sins often comes through the prophet with an explicit or implicit condition attached: If the people repent of their sin, God will withhold the judgment that he so forcefully said would come. Passages that contain this condition explicitly seem less problematic. For example, Jer 26:13 proclaims that if the people of Judah turn from their sin and obey the Lord, God will "repent of the evil he has pronounced." In such a case the consistency of God's ethical immutability is upheld and expressed through his appropriate response to the human moral situation. God acts in ways that correspond to the moral state in question, and when the moral state changes in obedience to his word his action accordingly changes.

There are other passages, however—such as Jonah 3:9–10—that state no such condition, and here it may seem that God did indeed change his mind about how he would act toward the people. The message God gave Jonah to

³⁰See e.g. H. H. Rowley, "The Nature of God," in *The Faith of Israel* (London: SCM, 1956) 67; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961–67), 1. 210–217, 266; A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962), 2. 11, 66.

preach, as revealed in chap. 3, is strictly unilateral and absolute: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). And though the Ninevites had no explicit assurance that God would withhold this calamity, they fasted and repented in the hope that God's judgment would be abated (3:5-9). But when God saw that they turned from their wickedness, he accordingly withheld his foretold judgment. It seems best, then, to understand the unilateral pronouncement of God through Jonah as containing an implicit condition, for God acts always and only in accord with his moral nature, and when people turn from their sins he in turn adjusts his course of action in ways that express his unchanged intrinsic nature in his relational interactions.

Therefore God does not change his mind, as do humans. He never lacks the knowledge, wisdom, or power that would lead him to reconsider what he has said. His pronouncement of judgment, then, when in the end it is not carried out, is shown to have come with the gracious condition that where there is true repentance he will gladly pardon and forgive. God is slow to anger and eager to forgive (Ps 103:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), and the passages telling of God's repentance proclaim above all this truth about the true and living God.

3. *Changeable emotions in God.* The doctrine of the divine impassibility has been a subject of considerable discussion and dispute since the days of early Greek philosophy.³¹ The term "impassibility" has been used in two quite different senses. The first and most fundamental sense refers to God's freedom from external influence on his nature and will. God cannot be aroused from without so as to be forced to act, as it were, against his better judgment or will.³² Regarding this sense of "impassible," no hesitation whatever is here felt in affirming its correctness. God as the all-sufficient and all-powerful Creator of everything certainly conditions all else while he himself remains completely unconditioned in his intrinsic being and will. The second sense refers to the lack of any negative emotions (or emotions in general) in God. In post-Reformation orthodoxy, for example, God was conceived by some theologians to be good in every respect so that he experienced only an undefiled sense of joy and blessedness but never any real sense of anger or wrath.³³ Much recent thinking

³¹See e.g. J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1926); B. R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: SPCK, 1928); T. E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," *SJT* 8 (1955) 353-364; and esp. the recent superb study, R. E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986).

³²J. Moltmann (*The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* [New York: Harper, 1974] 229) expresses this idea when he states that "God is under no constraint from that which is not of God." See also G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1952) 6-7: "Just as God is supreme in power and wisdom, so is He morally supreme, incapable of being diverted or overborne by forces and passions such as commonly hold sway in the creation and among mankind. The word chosen to express this moral transcendence is 'impassible' (*apathēs*). . . . Impassibility then implies perfect moral freedom, and is a supernatural endowment properly belonging to God alone."

³³See e.g. Charnock, *Existence* 125; B. Pictet, *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845) 87; J. Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626), 1. 1.

has been done on the question of whether there are changeable emotions in God,³⁴ and it seems only appropriate to address this issue briefly since the Scriptures are replete with references to various divine passions.

The early Church theologians were divided on the issue of whether God had changeable emotions. Arnobius and Augustine, on one side, argued that passions indicate disturbances and weakness and hence are not properly found in God.³⁵ But thinkers such as Tertullian, Novatian and Lactantius, on the other side, proposed that whereas God is exempt from corruptible emotions as would harm his nature, he experiences true and varying emotions in a manner appropriate to his perfect divine being.³⁶ The issue is reduced, then, to whether the emotions ascribed to God in the Bible are literally true of him or whether they are mere anthropomorphic expressions.

On this issue of emotions and anthropomorphism, two comments will be made. First, by utilizing the criterion developed above for genuine anthropomorphic expression, it seems here that there is no basis for calling such emotions mere anthropomorphisms. The Scriptures offer abundant references to various emotions in God. He is said to be angry (Num 12:9; Josh 7:1; Isa 42:25), wrathful (2 Kgs 22:13; Ps 110:5; Jer 10:10), jealous (Exod 20:5; Josh 24:19; Zech 1:14), compassionate and merciful (Ps 103:8; 145:8; Jer 3:12), patient and long-suffering (Exod 34:6; Num 14:8; 2 Pet 3:9)—just to name a few. But in all of Scripture's references to emotions as these relate to God, there does not appear to be any instance in which it is said that in reality God transcends these emotional qualities. There seems to be no clear direction, then, as there was with regard to the question of the divine repentance, for taking the ascriptions of divine emotions in any way other than at face value.

Second, it appears that the fundamental reason why theologians of the past have felt constrained to deny the real existence of emotions in God is that they conceived of emotions as a form of weakness, a limitation, a disturbance to one's inner life that resulted often in mishap or poor judgment. But as Heschel insists, "the Bible [does not] share the view that passions are disturbances or weaknesses of the soul, and much less the premise that passion itself is evil, that passion as such is incompatible [*sic*] with right thinking or right living."³⁷

³⁴See e.g. J. Y. Lee, *God Suffers For Us: A Systematic Inquiry Into A Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1974); Heschel, *Prophets* 2; G. Wondra, "The Pathos of God," *Reformed Review* 18 (1964) 28–35; K. J. Woolcombe, "The Pain of God," *SJT* 20 (1967) 129–148; L. J. Kuyper, "The Suffering and the Repentance of God," *SJT* 22 (1969) 257–277; W. McWilliams, "Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology," *SJT* 33 (1980) 35–53; *The Passion of God* (Macon: Mercer University, 1985); Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, ch. 7: "Divine Impassibility in Feeling."

³⁵Arnobius, *Case Against the Pagans* 1.18, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 7 and 8 (Westminster: Newman, 1949); Augustine, *On The Trinity* 13.16, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, I, III; *Enchiridion*, 33, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, I, III.

³⁶Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.16, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III; Novatian, *The Trinity* 5, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 67 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1974); Lactantius, *The Wrath of God* 1–5, 13–16, in *Lactantius: The Minor Works* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1965). See also J.R. Hallman, "The Mutability of God: Tertullian to Lactantius," *TS* 42 (1981) 373–393.

³⁷Heschel, *Prophets*, 2. 37–38.

While it is undeniably true that emotions may sometimes overrule one's best judgment and lead one into actions that one later regrets as foolish, it does not follow that emotions are necessarily of this bent. Emotions have as much potential for good as for ill in that they can also stir one up toward holiness or compassion or faithfulness. Therefore if emotions are thought of as the gifts of God that only lead to misconduct when used improperly, then it seems evident that emotions can rightly have a place in God.

The abundance of Scriptural evidence of God's expression of emotion and a more positive understanding of their nature lead to the conclusion that the true and living God is, among other things, a genuinely emotional being. Heschel suggests that instead of thinking of the emotions ascribed to God as anthropomorphic, we should rather consider our own human experience of proper emotions as theomorphic,³⁸ as part of what it is to be created by God in his image. The God of the Bible is personal, and while no change can ever occur to the supreme excellence of his intrinsic perfection, he has freely chosen to relate with us, his creatures. His relational changeableness includes, then, his experience of variable emotions as he interacts with us at every level and expresses himself in ways that accord both with his unchangeable character and our changeable states.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the endeavor to take seriously the self-revelation of God in this discussion of the divine immutability, the goal here has been to form our conceptions of change or changelessness in relation to God as much as possible from the Scriptural text. As a result, God has been presented as one who is both independent and self-sufficient and hence immutable in respect to his supreme self-existence, while also relational and self-involving and thus changeable in his comprehensive interaction with his creatures.

We have been privileged here to gain a glimpse into the nature and workings of God through our focused attention on one facet of his character. As has been seen, God stands outside all lesser reality while he also freely chooses to stand within it. His changeless character is made manifest precisely within the changing world he formed. In a word, then, this study has endeavored to show that the God of the Bible, who is ever unchangeable in himself, willingly changes in his relational involvements to which he gives himself fully. He who eternally is is both with us and for us.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 37-40, 50-52.