

# Doctrine of God

## The Immutability of God

*With [God] there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

- James 1:17

*We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but naught changeth  
Thee.*

- Walter Smith



- A proper approach to the doctrine of God is to discipline our minds to conceive of God only in terms of his being the One in whom there can be no improvements. God's perfection carries with it the idea that it is impossible to conceive of anyone greater.
- Aquinas referred to God as the "Unmoved Mover." Some contemporary theologians have dismissed this title as being too dependent upon Platonic thought. It makes God too distant, they reason. But it is a helpful way to understand God as One who is unlike his creation in the most fundamental ways. God is the only unmoved Being. That is, God is not changed. Everything in creation is acted upon or moved by forces outside itself. For example, we are constantly being acted upon by everything from the weather to the amount of fuel in our cars to the amount of sugar in our blood to the strength of an internet connection to the attitudes of those close to us. To be acted upon in such a way as to bring about change is part of what it means to be finite. But since God is infinite, since he can never be anything other than perfect, he cannot and will not change.
- One aspect of the biblical and historic Christian doctrine of God that has come under criticism from various quarters is the teaching that God is **immutable**, i.e., that God does not change. In modern theology (as distinct from confessional Reformed theology that is done in the modern period) it is considered axiomatic that everything changes and that, in some way, God is also in process. It is widely thought by modernist theologians that God is, in some way, becoming, that he is in some way contingent upon us. Some evangelicals have attempted mediating positions between these views and the traditional or "classical" doctrine of God. They state that God changes but only because he decides to change.
- But there are serious problems with this line of thinking. As Matthew Barrett writes:  
Variation in God would spell the death of his own perfection. No longer would he be someone than whom none greater could be conceived. If he were to change for the better, that would imply that he was less than perfect beforehand. There was some type of deficiency and imperfection to his being. If he were to change for the worse, that would imply that he *was* perfect but no longer *is* perfect. An imperfection has been added to him or a perfection in him has been lost. So he must change either from better to worse or from worse to better. In either option God ceases to be *eternally good*...Immutability, we are impelled to conclude, is essential and necessary to God's identity as the perfect, supreme being...  
On the other hand, if such a change were voluntary, God would be at odds with himself. For he would have willed change in his being even though his perfections defy any change, at least as long as they are to remain *perfections*. In other words, he would have willed that his perfections become less than perfect.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019) pp. 94-95.

## I. Biblical Proofs

Systematic theology works both from the explicit teaching of Scripture and from those good and necessary inferences drawn from Scripture.

### James 1:17:

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

- The words follow after James has stated that God is not like his human creatures. We are double-minded and changing but God is not. According to 1:11, flowers fade but God does not. We are tempted, we sin but God is not and does not (v. 14). All good gifts come from our unchanging God. He is reliable because he does not change. In his sovereign providence, he controls all things but is not controlled by them. He is the Creator (v. 18) not the creature.

### Hebrews 13:8:

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

- Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were tempted to turn back to the Old Covenant types and shadows and away from the sufficiency of Christ. The writer reminds them that though they are tempted to be faithless to him who died and was raised, God cannot be faithless. He does not change. He is the One who said to Moses (Exod 3) "I Am Who I am." He is worthy of trust because he is immutable. There is no variation in his faithfulness.

### Hebrews 6:17–18:

*So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.*

- Christians may rest safely in God's promises because he is faithful not only in his intentions but in his nature. By nature God is unchangeable. He swore by himself and since he is immutable so too is his promise. God can be relied upon to always keep his word.

### Number 23:19

*God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

- This is substantially the same teaching we see in James chapter 1 and in the other passages but expressed by way of rhetorical questions. The expected answer in each case is, "No." In contrast to humans, who do change and lie, God, who is not human, who does not have "parts or passions" (i.e., he is simple and he doesn't suffer change) is not mutable and therefore he does not lie.
- This is the first proof text to which Thomas Aquinas appealed in his *Summa Theologiae* (1a 9.1) under this heading, "immutability."

### Malachi 3:6

*"For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."*

- This of course is a key text declaring the immutability of God. The text literally reads, "For I Yahweh do not change..." Immutability belongs to God's essence. Further, the wording indicates the uniqueness of immutability as a personal quality. Only the Lord is immutable. Everything in all creation undergoes change. God alone never changes.

- From passages such as these the great Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof concluded that the doctrine of immutability is:

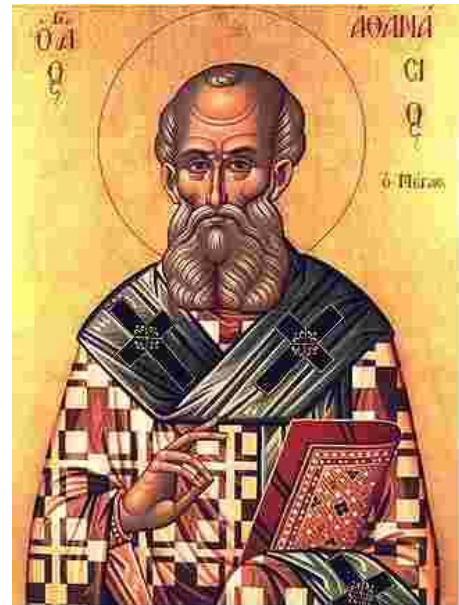
*...a necessary concomitant of his aseity. It is that perfection of God by which he is devoid of all change, not only in his Being, but also in his perfections, and in his purposes and promises.*

- The biblical God is not subject to history. Though he acts in space and time, God is not subject to change by forces within creation. This is not to say that he is cold or remote from our needs. God is, after all, our heavenly Father from whom we ask and receive our daily bread and forgiveness of sins. That is why we confess in Heidelberg Catechism 26:

*Q: What do you believe when you say: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth"?*

*A: That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that in them is, who likewise upholds and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ, His Son, my God and my Father, in whom I so trust, as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this vale of tears, He will turn to my good; for He is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father.*

- The God whom we trust is eternal. God upholds and governs all things. If he is mutable, even in the slightest—if God changes at all, he changes completely. If there is any change within God then he is not perfect since any change in God either moves him closer to or further away from perfection. We trust God because he is reliable and he is reliable because he does not change. The God who is immutable, is sovereign. He determines all things and his sovereign providence is such that we may even speak of him sending calamity upon us (Isaiah 45:7). He is so powerful and powerfully involved that he actively turns evil to our good. We can trust that he does so because he is sovereignly immutable.
- The early Fathers articulated Christian theology in a context that was dominated by paganism. The gods of the pagans are nothing if not mutable. Read the classical myths. They are capricious. Their emotions flare. They are subject to emotional change. They can be threatened by the powers of other gods. They can be rash and then suffer the consequences of that rashness.
- Against the pagans the early Christian theologians asserted the immutability of God. Over against the dualism of Manichaeans (i.e., the notion that there are two great competing principles, good and evil), the fathers asserted the utter uniqueness, simplicity, and immutability of God. Against the Gnostics they asserted that God does not become more or less than he is. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was, is, and shall be what he is. Augustine reflects on God's immutability repeatedly in his *Confessions* (c. 397–98).

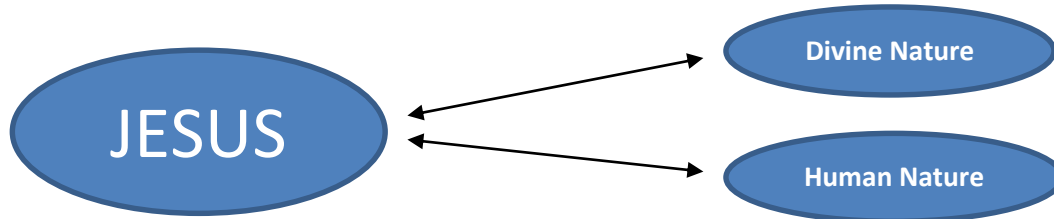


## II. The Ecumenical Creeds

- In the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (325; 381) we confess that God is “almighty.” He is Creator of all things. He is uncreated. It never entered the minds of the Nicene fathers that

when they said, “almighty” they meant “almighty but mutable. They intended us to think exactly the opposite.

- The *Definition of Chalcedon* (451) declares that our Lord Jesus Christ is “perfect” in Godhead and perfect in manhood” and “the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.” This assumes that we understand what it means to say, deity and humanity. Jesus is one person with two natures. His deity is immutable and his humanity mutable. Jesus was beaten. He did suffer. However, we cannot say that God suffered. The one person Jesus suffered according to his human nature. What we say about either of the natures of Christ we can say about the person but not the reverse.



- The *Athanasian Creed* (most likely composed well after Athanasius during the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century) addresses the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology:  
...We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; **the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal**. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinities, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity...
- When we confess coequal and coeternal “majesty” and “glory” the clear implication is that majesty and eternal glory are immutable. God cannot be eternal and mutable. Finally, we note that the *Athanasian Creed* says that God’s power is unlimited. If he is mutable, if he is more or less or something other than what he is, then he is not unlimited in power. In the catholic creeds any theory of divine mutability runs into a serious obstacle.

### **III. The Doctrine of God's Immutability**

#### **A. Three Aspects of God's Immutability**

##### **1.) God's Absolute Immutability**

When there was nothing else but God, God was immutable. All God ever was, he now is, and always will be. "For I the Lord do not change..." (Mal. 3:6). Immutability marks all of God's attributes. For instance, God's omniscience, omnipotence, love, justice, goodness, etc are unchanging.

##### **2.) God's Relative Immutability**

Scripture represents God's immutability in relation to:

- *His eternal decree*

Ps. 33:11 – "The council of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations." God has decided freely of his own will to fix his eternal decree, he will never rescind it.

- *His creation*

There is a sharp distinction between the Creator and His creation. Everything in creation changes. The Creator never changes (Ps. 102:26-27).

- *His work of redemption*

God's commitment to his people is immutable. He will never abandon his covenant. "For I the Lord do not change; *therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed*" (Mal. 3:6).

##### **3.) God's Mediatorial Immutability**

God's immutability is also seen in relation to the incarnation. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). Jesus is God incarnate. The God-man is, "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Jesus remains forever the God-man for he is immutable. He lives forever as our Mediator and Intercessor.

#### **B. Seven Qualifications of God's Immutability**

- 1.) God is immutable but not inactive or inanimate.
- 2.) God is immutable but not impersonal.
- 3.) God is immutable but not apathetic.
- 4.) God is immutable but not implacable.
- 5.) God is immutable but not unapproachable.
- 6.) In his incarnate pre-glorified state Jesus possessed a mutable humanity.