

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	23		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	1 Timothy 1:17; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17		
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THE NATURE OF GOD: IMMUTABILITY, GOD IS UNCHANGING

One obvious fact about human beings, observes Peter Toon, is that they change. They grow from being babies to children, from children to young adults, and then from adults to old people. Though there is continuity of identity, their size and appearance change. So also do their ideas, views, tastes, preferences, and prejudices. In fact, everything about us undergoes change, gradually if not rapidly. Even those things around us which appear never to change, the mountains for example, are never exactly the same each moment, for chemical changes are taking place. Although we have no direct experience of unchangeableness, we do nevertheless live out our Christian lives and offer our prayers and worship on the assumption that God never changes in His attitude toward us. We presume that His character and His relationship with us are constant.¹ God's immutability is closely linked to His eternality (see number 19 in this series) but they are not identical. Boice explains, "The eternity of God means that God has always existed and always will exist; nothing comes before Him, nothing after. The unchangeableness of God (immutability) means that God is always the same in His eternal being."² Orthodox Christianity has always affirmed the immutability of God. Over the last decade, a number of high profile, self-proclaimed evangelicals have attacked this doctrine. Influenced by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, this group of "evangelicals," who usually identify themselves as "Open-View" theists, are leading the charge in vilifying this doctrine by misrepresenting it. Clark Pinnock is a good example of this procedure. He begins by calling God's immutability "Platonic" thinking based on a "Greek model." He then argues that if God is immutable, "there cannot be genuine freedom." He even claims that it came from "Aristotle's God." According to Pinnock, the orthodox view teaches that that God is "static" and "immovable." Then, having defined the doctrine by using Greek concepts, he turns around and condemns it as Greek philosophy! This is the logical fallacy known as "stacking the deck" or "building a straw man." Louis Berkhof, in his systematic theology, correctly notes, "The divine immutability should not be understood as implying immobility, as if there is no movement in God . . . The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. There is change round about Him; change in the relations of men to Him, but there is no change in His Being. His attributes, His purpose, His motives of actions, or His promises."³ The early Church did not adopt the god of Aristotle and then proceed to try and find Scriptural support for it. They condemned Aristotle as an atheist because he did not believe in a God who existed prior to, independent of, and apart from the world which He made out of nothing. Also, Aristotle believed in many finite gods. Thus he was an idolater as well as an atheist. Christian theology derived its doctrine of the immutability of God from the Holy Scriptures and not from the atheistic philosophers of the ancient world. The God who has revealed Himself in Scripture is "faithful," "dependable," and "unchanging." This is what historic Christianity has confessed for 2,000 years. The Open-View theists consistently misrepresent the Christian doctrine of the immutability of God because they begin with false assumptions.⁴

I. SPECIFIC TEXTS

- A. *Numbers 23:19*: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, *that he should change his mind*. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and then not fulfill?”
- B. *1 Samuel 15:29*: “The Glory of Israel does not lie or *change his mind* for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.”
- C. *Psalms 102:26*: “The earth and the heavens will perish, *but you remain*; they will all wear out . . . *but you remain the same*.”
- D. *Malachi 3:6*: “For I, the Lord, *do not change*, therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”
- E. *2 Timothy 2:13*: “If we are faithless, *he remains faithful*; for he cannot deny himself.”
- F. *Hebrews 6:17-18*: “Because God wanted to make *the unchangeable character of his purpose* very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath (see Gen. 15:8-18). God did this so that, by two *unchangeable things* in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may be greatly encouraged.”
- G. *James 1:17*: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

These verses emphasize what Reymond calls the *constancy* of God’s being (or nature or character) and purpose, which constancy in turn guarantees that he remains always one and the same true God, faithful to himself, his decrees, and his works.⁵

II. **THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS.** Philosophy per se is not a bad thing. Reasoning as such is never condemned in Scripture. To think deeply about any matter is highly commendable. Os Guinness laments that to many in our evangelical churches, the life of the mind is sorely neglected. “Anti-intellectualism is a disposition to discount the importance of truth and the life of the mind. Living in a sensuous culture and an increasingly emotional democracy, American evangelicals in the last generation have simultaneously toned up their bodies and dumbed down their minds. The result? Many suffer from a modern form of what the ancient stoics called *mental hedonism* – having fit bodies but fat minds.”⁶ A brief summary of the philosophical arguments for the immutability is as follows:

- A. Because God is perfect, He cannot change, because all change is either increase or decrease, improvement or decline, and perfection can neither be improved upon nor lost.
- B. Because God is pure actuality, there can be no change in Him, for all change is actualization of potentialities that are present.
- C. If God could change, He would not be uncaused, and therefore could not be the cause of anything else either.
- D. If God could change, we could not have confidence in His preserving all things that are, since His ability to do so might decline or alter.
- E. If God could change, we could not have confidence in Him to keep His promises, thus losing an essential component of Christianity.⁷

There are at least three specific things we can deduce from this doctrinal truth:

(1) ***God’s Nature Does Not Change***

God cannot grow older; He does not gain new powers nor lose ones He once had. He does not grow wiser, for He already knows all things. He does not become stronger; He already is omnipotent, powerful to an infinite degree. “He cannot change for the better,” wrote A. W. Pink, “for He is already perfect; and being perfect, He cannot change for the worse.”⁸

(2) ***God's Truth Does Not Change***

Sometimes we say things we do not mean, or we make promises we cannot keep. Unforeseen circumstances make our words worthless. Not so with God: "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). David agreed when he wrote, "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. . . Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever: (Ps. 119:89, 152). God never has to revise His opinions or update His plans. He never has had to revamp His schedule. Yes, there are a few passages of Scripture that speak of God as regretting a decision and changing His mind (Gen. 6:6-7; 1 Sam. 15). In these passages, Scripture shows God changing His response to people because of their behavior. But there is no reason to think that this reaction was either unforeseen or not a part of His eternal plan. As J. I. Packer put it, "No change in His eternal purpose is implied when He begins to deal with a man in a new way."⁹

(3) ***God's Standards Do Not Change***

The Ten Commandments are not just an arbitrary list of rules; they are a reflection of the character of God and the world that He chose to create. We should not bear false witness because God is a God of truth; we should not commit adultery because the Creator established the integrity of the family. "Be holy, because I am holy" is a command in both Testaments (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). God intended that the commandments hold His standard before us. "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:35). The command to love the unlovable is rooted in the very character of God.

CONCLUSION: As we bring this subject to a close, we must "not limit ourselves to human contemplation of God, but must ask for the light of the revelation of God Himself. A classical Scripture proof is 1 Samuel 15:29: 'Also the strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent' (cf. also Num. 23:19). God remains the same, in contrast with the passing and decay of everything that exists (cf. Ps. 102:26-28). 'For I am the Lord, I change not' (Mal. 3:6). The image of the rock stands for invariability. 'Ascribe ye greatness unto our God. He is the rock, his work is perfect' (Deut. 32:3-4). A clear text in the New Testament is James 1:17. With 'the Father of lights . . . is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' Reference is made to 'the immutability of his counsel' (Heb. 6:17). 'The gift and calling of God are without repentance' (Rom. 11:29). Reformers such as Luther and Calvin directly follow Scripture in speaking of God's immutability. Luther says (with an appeal to Malachi 3:6 and Rom. 11:29) that our comfort is that even if we change, we may yet seek refuge with God who is unchangeable. If God would not be faithful to his promise, our faith would come to an end. God has manifested himself in the flesh. It is an immense joy that he is unchangeable and that he cannot deny himself, but keeps his promises. Luther criticizes Erasmus by saying that God works everything in an unchangeable manner and that his will cannot be resisted, changed, or thwarted (WA, 43:458, 461; 18:619). Therefore God's immutability gives comfort, joy, and certainty to believers. One could also refer to it as God's veracity or his faithfulness to his promises. According to Calvin, God's children may trust that God will remain the same to them in the future. God is not like human beings who weary of their own generosity, or whose resources are spent. He is permanently himself (*Institutes*, 3.20.26). The terms truthfulness and faithfulness are used in the same context. A synonym of immutability is constancy (*Institutes*, 1.17.12)."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹P. Toon, *God Here and Now: The Christian View of God* (Tyndale, 1979), p. 99.

²J. M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: The Sovereign God I* (IVP, 1979), p. 183.

³L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1939), p. 59.

⁴Citations by Pinnock are from the critique by R. A. Morey in *The Battle of the Gods: The Gathering Storms in Modern Evangelicalism* (Crown, 1989), p. 209.

⁵R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 178.

⁶Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Baker, 1994), p. 9.

⁷For an expanded analysis of these points see M. J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Baker, 1998), pp. 97-100.

⁸Cited by E. W. Lutzer, *Ten Lies About God and How You Might Already Be Deceived* (Word, 2000), p. 44. This section is adapted from Lutzer.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰V. Genderen, W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (P & R, 2008), p. 176.