

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY (Part 2)

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, 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 The expression *God Almighty* is extremely important. Among other things, it expresses the very nature of God. Donald Bloesch writes: "Classical theism, which sought to employ philosophical concepts in elucidating the biblical vision of God, presented a picture of God that often stood at variance with the biblical witness. God's perfection was envisaged in terms of his total unchangeability (*immutabilitas*), his invulnerability to suffering (*impassibilitas*), his completeness (*actus purrus*), and his possession of all possible values (*ens realissimum*). This depiction of God was commonplace among the church fathers and the doctors of the medieval church, including Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. It was also reflected in Reformation and post-Reformation orthodoxy as well as in the idealistic philosophy of Descartes and Leibniz (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)."³ The God of the Bible is unchangeable. 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 1:1. 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).⁴ 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

- I. **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

II. **THE IMPORTANCE OF GOD'S IMMUTABILITY.** Perhaps a lot of evangelicals would consider this to be one of those doctrines that is of little importance – too abstract, too impractical to have any real significance. W. G. T. Shedd observed that the texts that we have looked at teach that, “The immutability of God is the unchangeableness of his essence, attributes, purposes, and consciousness. Immutability results from eternity, as omnipresence does from immensity. That which has no evolution and no succession is the same yesterday, today and forever: *I am Jehovah, I change not* (Mal. 3:6); *the heavens shall perish, but you shall endure* (Ps. 102:26); *with whom is no variableness (parallagē), neither shadow of turning* (James 1:17). Immutability belongs to the divine essence; God can have no new attributes. It belongs also to the divine will; his decrees are unalterable. The Socinians Crellius and Vorstius deny this latter, asserting that God can will what he once nilled and nill what he once willed. This is contradicted by Scripture: *God is not a man that he should lie; nor the Son of Man that he should repent* (Num. 23:19); *my counsel shall stand* (Isa. 46:10); *the counsel of the Lord stands forever* (Ps 33:11); *the Lord has sworn and will not repent* (110:4); *the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent* (1 Sam. 15:29); *whereby God, willing to show the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath* (Heb. 6:17). Immutability also characterizes the divine consciousness. Nothing new is added to it, and nothing old is subtracted from it. Infinite knowledge is a fixed quantity, and so is an infinite experience. God is immutable because (a) his being is from himself and not from another; (b) he cannot change for the better or for the worse; (c) all causes and reasons for change are wanting, namely, dependence upon another, error of mind, inconstancy of will and purpose. The act of creation *ex nihilo* made no change in God. It did not affect his own eternal essence; and his will and power to create were the same from eternity. Emanation *ad extra* would make a change in the essence. This is the outward effluence of substance and diminishes the mass from which it issues. Incarnation made no change in God. Divine essence was not transmuted into a human nature, but assumed a human nature into union with itself.”⁸ Carl Henry adds, “A creator and sustainer of the world who is vulnerable to mutability, a redeemer and judge of mankind whose essential nature might waver and whose purpose may vacillate, is not a Deity in whom we can ever be religiously at rest. The gods of change and caprice belong to the world of paganism. A Deity of shifting whims and moods is too much like mere mortals to worship.”⁹

CONCLUSION: 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."¹⁰

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."¹¹

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.

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* (IVP, 1979), p. 183.

³D. Bloesch, *Christian Foundation: God The Almighty* (IVP, 1995), p. 91.

⁴cf. J. Van Gendersen & W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (P&R, 1992), p. 176.

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.

⁸W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Third Edition (P&R, 2003), p. 284.

⁹C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority V* (Word, 1982), p. 288.

¹⁰Cited by E. W. Lutzer, *Ten Lies About God and How You Might Already Be Deceived* (Word, 2000), p. 44. This section is taken from Lutzer.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 45.