### God’s Immutability

**1. Biblical data**

God’s immutability is expressed in His unchanging nature, standards, promises and plan. The following passages of Scripture underscore God’s unchanging nature:[[1]](#footnote-1)

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

- For I, Yahweh, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed (Mal 3:6).

- Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (Jam 1:17).

- Jesus Christ {is} the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8).

Some individuals do not agree that the above-cited passages prove God’s immutability, feeling rather that they refer to God’s faithfulness to His people. We respond that the latter implies the former – God’s faithfulness in based on His immutability. He is faithful because He does not change. Additionally, Hebrews 13:8 speaks of Christ Himself, not of His faithfulness. In Malachi 3:6, we encounter the verb שָׁנָה (*shana*), which is best translated “change”: For I, Yahweh, do not change (שָׁנָה)». The idea of “faithfulness,” though, is expressed by the Hebrew root אָמָן (*aman*).

In the case of Psalm 102, God’s nature is being compared with the changing created order. The contrast here is not between God’s faithfulness and the unfaithfulness of creation, but between God’s unchanging nature and the fluidity of nature. These verses are quoted in Hebrews 1:12, where we see a comparison with the how angels may change. Again, the question is not one of faithfulness, but nature or essence.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We may, however, speak of alterations in God’s feelings or emotions. According to Scripture, God expresses various emotions, such as joy (Isa 62:5), irritation (Ps 77:40), satisfaction (Eph 5:10), dissatisfaction (Eph 4:30), compassion (Ps 102:3), anger (Ex 32:10), etc. God possesses the full spectrum of emotions, just as humans do, who were created in His image.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some thinkers in Church history, however, rejected the idea of emotions in God, and created the theory of God’s “impassibility,” which we will investigate later in this chapter.

God’s standards also do not change, since they are based on His unchanging nature:

- The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting (Ps 119:160);

- For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt 5:18).

In a similar way, God’s plan for His creation does not change. We cite the following passages in support:[[4]](#footnote-4)

- The counsel of Yahweh stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation (Ps 33:11)

- The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isa 40:8).

- Forever, O Yahweh, Your word is settled in heaven (Ps 119:89).

- {This was} in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph 3:11).

We can say the same for God’s promises:

- “For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken," says Yahweh who has compassion on you (Isa 54:10).

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

- God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num 23:19).

- … in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago (Tit 1:2).

Likewise, God’s Word not infrequently speaks of God as a “fortress” or a “rock.” Isaiah 26:4 states, “Trust in Yahweh forever, for in GOD Yahweh, {we have} an everlasting Rock”, and Isaiah 44:8, “Is there any God besides Me, or is there any {other} Rock? I know of none.”

At times is does appear that God’s plan changes, or that His promises are not fulfilled. In such cases, God is altering the *application* of His plan depending on whether or not people fulfill the conditions He requires. For example, if someone rejects God, that person may forfeit the blessing that God had promised. In Jeremiah 18:10 we read, “If they do that which is evil in my sight, that they obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them (American Standard Version).”[[5]](#footnote-5)

On the other hand, if a person turns to the Lord, that individual can escape the punishment God had intended: “He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will {not} turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him (Joel 2:13-14).[[6]](#footnote-6) A good example from the biblical narrative is when, thanks to Moses’ intercession, “Yahweh changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people” (Ex. 32:14; сf. Jer 26:13; Jonah 3:10).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Therefore, when considering God’s unchanging plan, we must remember that His plan always remains in effect. However, He may apply it differently in response to how people respond to Him. Those who fulfill His conditions receive a blessing, while those who reject Him suffer the corresponding consequences.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Additionally, one must keep in mind that an apparent change in God’s plan may actually be the initiation of a new stage in the unfolding of that plan. The clearest example here is the introduction of the new covenant, which replaced the old covenant (see Jer 31:31-32).

Finally, we must examine instances in Scripture where it seems that God regretted something He did and “repented.”

- Yahweh was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart (Gen 6:6).

- Then the word of Yahweh came to Samuel, saying, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (1 Sam 15:10-11).

Does this mean that God made a mistake and regretted what He had done? How can we reconcile this with the claim of God’s perfection? In seeking a solution, we must take into consideration several factors. First, the Bible specifically states that God does not repent:

- God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent (Num 23:19).

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

We see further evidence of this truth in the following instances:

- For this the earth shall mourn and the heavens above be dark, because I have spoken, I have purposed, and I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it (Jer 4:28).

- Yahweh has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4).

- I, Yahweh, have spoken; it is coming and I will act. I will not relent, and I will not pity and I will not be sorry (Ezek 24:14).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Second, God’s “repentance” differs from human repentance. This is evident in the use of different Hebrew terms. The verb used for God’s “repentance” is נָחָם (*naham*) in the Niph’al form, which means “be comforted,” “regret,” “rethink,” or “have compassion.”[[10]](#footnote-10) For human repentance, another verb in employed – שׁוּב (*shuv*), which means “to turn.”

The difference between these acts of “repentance” is again the use of anthropomorphism in respect to God. His “repentance” is an expression of His dissatisfaction, displeasure, and grief regarding human disobedience. So then, when it is written that God had “regret that I have made Saul king,” (1 Sam 15:10) or that He “was sorry that He had made man on the earth” (Gen 6:6), He is expressing His grief in terms familiar to His hearers.

It is interesting to note that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translates these “repentance” verses differently. In Genesis 6:6, instead of the literal translation that God “was sorry that He had made man on the earth,” we read, “God was angry that He made man.” In Exodus 32:12, where Moses prayed that God would change His mind about {doing} harm to His people, the Septuagint renders it, “Have mercy on the evil of Your people.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This observation is consistent with the general trajectory of the Septuagint translations to avoid any anthropomorphic description of God.

**2. Theological Investigation**

**а. General Features**

Respected theologian Wayne Grudem describes this aspect of God’s nature in the following way: “God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Grudem also states, “The definition given about specifies that God is unchanging – not in every way that we might imagine, but only in ways that Scripture itself affirms.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Along with presenting a biblical defense for this doctrine, Nelson Pike claims that admission of God’s timeless nature forces the conclusion of His immutability as well: “If an object changes, that object is different at a given time from what it was at an earlier time. This is what it is to change. Thus, in order to change, an object must exist at two moments in time. It follows that if an object is timeless … it does not change.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

One may object, however, that the doctrine of God’s immutability contradicts His role as Creator. If God created the world at a moment in time, does this not imply that He Himself changed? Previously He was not the Creator, but afterward He became so.

On the other hand, if God created all things from nothing, then no change occurred in His basic nature. If He had formed the universe from His own substance, then He would have experienced change. Since, however, He created all from nothing and, in essence, is distinct from the created order, no change need occur in His basic nature. We can also add that from eternity past God intended to create. So then, in this respect one may consider Him the Creator from eternity past.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A similar question arises in respect to the incarnation of God the Son. Did His nature change when He became man? We respond that in His incarnation, the Son did not cease being God. His divine nature experienced no alteration, was not diminished, and suffered no corruption. The incarnation involved no loss of divinity, but rather the adoption of humanity. Therefore, the incarnation did not compromise the Son’s immutability.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**b. Extreme Views**

Two serious aberrations of this doctrine exist that we need to address. Some claim that God’s immutability excludes that God possesses changing emotions. This is termed God’s “impassibility.” On the other extreme, proponents of “process theology” feel that God changes in His very nature, that is, He is undergoing development on the way to perfection.

**1) God’s Impassibility**

The teaching of God’s impassibility dates back to Greek philosophical thought. In their cosmology, the Greeks focused heavily on God’s perfection. They believed that change introduced imperfection. Therefore, God cannot be subject to change in any respect. If something changes, it cannot be perfect because either it changed from being perfect to being imperfect, or it changed from being imperfect to being perfect. Aristotle, also affirmed that the slightest change indicated imperfection. Therefore, he also allowed no change in the divine.[[17]](#footnote-17) Many Church Fathers and mediaeval theologians followed his thinking. Their influence is felt in the Church even today.

Another adherent of this teaching in antiquity was the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who dedicated an entire work to the question: *On the Unchangeableness of God*. Philo explained the attribution of emotions to God in Scripture by considering them figures of speech.[[18]](#footnote-18) Another native of Alexandria, the Church Father Clement, embraced this teaching in his doctrine of the “Christian gnostic.” He taught that in their time, the apostles overcame all emotion: not only negative ones, like anger, fear, and lust, but also positive ones, like courage, zeal, and joy. They felt that this was a way to be imitators of God.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another proponent of this view was Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), who commented on this topic in his work *Proslogion*. Along with Philo, he considered God’s emotions in Scripture to be figurative speech. He asserted that Scripture so speaks of God as a condescension to us, but God, in fact, has no feeling. Anselm explains, “You are truly compassionate in terms of our experience. Yet you are not so in terms of your own.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In his wake, Thomas Aquinas, a fervent disciple of Aristotle, affirmed, “Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided this is regarded as an effect, not as a feeling of suffering.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Some proponents of this theory go to the extreme of claiming that God is impassible to the point that He is indifferent toward people, even if they are headed for eternal damnation. When we read that Jesus had compassion, it is thought that He was acting purely out of His human nature. In His divine nature, however, He felt no mercy.[[22]](#footnote-22) Bray seeks to soften this position by saying that, even though God’s nature is impassive, the Persons of the Godhead in their individuality may be moved by human need.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Even the highly respected theologian Millard Erickson holds to the doctrine of God’s impassibility, yet in a more moderate form.[[24]](#footnote-24) On the one hand, he admits that God has certain emotions. On the other hand, he feels, being a Calvinist, that since God will unfailingly accomplish His plan regarding each human and already knows his or her outcome, there is nothing for Him to react to emotionally. Erickson is ready to ascribe to God *empathy*, in that He understands our feelings. However, God lacks *sympathy*, that is, our condition in life does not move Him to action. Finally, in Erickson’s opinion, the eternal damnation of unbelievers causes God no grief.

In our refutation of this doctrine, we recall our discussion of the doctrine of God’s personhood, which requires that He possess all the character qualities of a person, including emotions. In addition, the Bible teaches that God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). Genuine love is not merely action, but is accompanied by corresponding feeling.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Furthermore, the biblical records shows that God’s emotion do indeed move Him to action (see Matt 14:14; 15:32; Mk 6:34). This reveals that emotions are a meaningful aspect in God’s nature. Contrary to Aquinas’ teaching, in these examples Christ’s emotional response *preceded* His actions. The incarnate Son of God, in fact, displayed the entire range of emotion. His compassion far exceeded what one would expect from a human. Thus, we conclude that Christ’s compassion was an expression not only of human pity, but also divine love.

In addition, we affirm that changes in God’s emotional state in no way introduces changes in His nature. After expressing emotion of any kind, God remains that same God as He was before. In order for God to act in accordance with His nature, in fact, He must express emotion. In expressing His wrath, love, or any other attribute, He will express them with the corresponding feelings. The psalmist, for example, writes, “Yahweh takes pleasure in His people.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

We also reject Bray’s suggestion that God may have emotions in His *Persons*, but not in His *nature*. His theory creates an inappropriate division between God’s Persons and His nature. In fact, if all the Persons of the Godhead possess the same trait, then that general characteristic is considered part of God’s nature along with all His other common attributes.

Bloesch’s view is more credible. He claims that although in principle nothing can cause a change in God, He nonetheless can allow Himself to react emotionally to the human condition. He enjoys total freedom both in His actions, and in His reactions to His creatures.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Greeks believed that God does not move, but is static. They thought that one who moves has not yet fulfilled his or her potential, since there was a place he or she had never been before. This is why Aristotle named the Highest Being the “Immovable Mover.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Plato taught that God is in a state of “Uninterrupted tranquility.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Such a depiction of God, though, does not agree with the biblical portrayal. Although the omnipresent God does not need to “move” from place to place, He nonetheless acts. Erickson rightly states, “The God we find in Scripture is not a static being, as is Aristotle’s God. He is rather an active, dynamic being, at work in the world.”[[30]](#footnote-30) At the same time, there is stability and predictability in His actions: “His actions are in keeping with the fundamental nature, with his values, plans, and decisions.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Bloesch also affirms that God acts, but is not developing or undergoing change.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The Greeks taught that since the world undergoes constant change, God must separate Himself from the world in order not to participate in its changing nature.[[33]](#footnote-33) He cannot even think about the world, but only about His own perfections.[[34]](#footnote-34) This idea actually intrigued some early Christian thinkers.[[35]](#footnote-35) Yet, serious Bible students will quickly dismiss such thinking. God not only intervenes from heaven in the affairs of people, but came Himself to the earth in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. As David wrote, His thoughts towards us “outnumber the sand.” (Ps 139:18).

In summary, Erickson details all the possible ways in which a being may change: growth, decline, movement, relational change, aging (experience), alteration, reversal, change of mind, change of action, and obtaining knowledge.[[36]](#footnote-36) One may add to that list change in mood (emotions). Adherents of the doctrine of God’s impassibility do not allow God to change in any respect. However, the Bible gives us a picture of an unchanging God, who nonetheless possesses emotion, acts in the world and can change His responses toward people. Therefore, Nash questions whether we may consider a God who cannot personally relate to people a truly perfect God.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**2) Process Theology**

Process theology is a relatively new philosophical movement, which began in the 20th century and advances the claim that God is in the process of becoming perfect. This teaching is also known as “panentheism,” which means “God in all.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

This teaching was anticipated in antiquity by the idea of a developing God advanced by Diogenes. The Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853—1900) proposed a similar theory, positing the existence of a “dipolar” Absolute, which process theology affirms as well.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The modern development of process theology, however, traces back to Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), who himself borrowed heavily from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). This teaching was, in fact, a reaction against the doctrine of God’s impassibility. The starting point for Hartshorne was to demonstrate that the world actually does have an effect on God.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Process theology operates on a totally different worldview than the typical perception of reality.[[41]](#footnote-41) According to this teaching, reality consists not of material objects, but of constantly changing events and processes. The basic units of reality are not material objects, but moments of experience, called “actual entities”. Every moment is a new reality.

God participates in the formation of these actual entities, but cannot completely control their formation. All that God can do is exert an influence on their formation. In addition, other factors, both animate and inanimate, possess a certain “freedom” to make their contribution to defining actual entities. God Himself does not know what the new actual entities will look like. After an actual entity appears, God, by observing its result, enriches His personal experience and is enabled thereby to make a better contribution to the formation of the subsequent actual entities. In such a way, God undergoes change and moves toward perfection.[[42]](#footnote-42)

So then, God and the universe, especially humans, labor together to improve conditions in the world. God accomplishes His plan in cooperation with and in dependence upon human beings.[[43]](#footnote-43)

As mentioned before, this teaching is also termed “panentheism.” In theism, God created all things from nothing. He is Lord of all and completely self-sufficient. He does not depend on creation for anything. He is unchanging and perfect. He cannot become better than He already is. Panentheism, which means “God in all,” holds that God created all from a preexisting “chaos.”[[44]](#footnote-44) God permeates His creation with His presence and participates in the formation of actual entities, which, as we have mentioned, make up reality.

Process theology advances the thesis that God has two “poles”: His “abstract essence” and His “concrete actuality.” The former is stable and not subject to change, while the latter may and actually does alter. His abstract essence is transcendent and is “located” beyond the limits of creation, as the soul is in relation to the body. His concrete actuality permeates the material world.[[45]](#footnote-45)

One of the qualities ascribed to God’s abstract essence is His ability to perceive all reality simultaneously. Another is His goodwill toward the world – He is always working toward its good.[[46]](#footnote-46) God’s omniscience, however, does not include knowledge of the future. He does not know even His own future. He is still considered omniscient, though, in the sense that He knows all that can be known at any moment in time.[[47]](#footnote-47)

God’s perfection is understood in a similar way. In Hartshorne’s opinion, God is as perfect as He can be at any one time. At the next actual entity, though, He can attain even higher levels of perfection. Hartshorne states, “To attribute change to God, so far from conflicting with permanence or stability in his being, means rather that nothing positive that ever belongs to God can change but only the negative aspect of the not yet being this or that.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Process theology rejects other fundamental biblical truths, such as the deity of Christ, His physical resurrection from the dead, and His redemptive sacrifice on the cross. In this regard, Hartshorne writes, “I have no Christology to offer, beyond the simple suggestion that Jesus appears to be the supreme symbol furnished to us by history of the notion of a God genuinely and literally ‘sympathetic’… receiving into his own experience the sufferings as well as the joys of the world.[[49]](#footnote-49)

In refutation of process theology, we advance the following objections. First, the Bible clearly speaks of God’s aseity, or self-sufficiency – He does not depend on creation for anything (Ps 50:12; Isa 40:13-17; Acts 17:24-25; Rom 11:34-36). Second, the Bible teaches the immutability of God’s nature (Ps 102:26-27; Mal 3:6; Jam 1:17). Scripture also claims that God’s plan does not alter. God always accomplishes what He sets out to do (Ps 33:11; Num 23:19; Eph 3:11; Heb 6:17-18; Eph 1:11).[[50]](#footnote-50)

Third, process theology encounters a logical problem in its understanding of reality. If each actual entity is a new reality, then how can one prove that an individual remains the same individual from moment to moment? If “reality” does not subsist in concrete objects, but only in temporal processes, we have no guarantee of the preservation of the individual over time.[[51]](#footnote-51)

It is also hard to conceive how inanimate objects, which have no volitional capacity, can contribute to the formation of new actual entities. Adherents to this system posit the existence of a power called “creativity,” which is located in God and stimulates all existing things to participate in this process.[[52]](#footnote-52) Yet, if God is the one who stimulates this process, then in what sense does the world actually make a real contribution to the formation of actual entities?

In addition, process theology is self-defeating. If the reason it was created was to bring God closer to creation, it actually has the opposite effect – it denies the worshipper personal fellowship with the Lord. As Loomer notes, the God of process theology is not one to whom a person may turn in prayer.[[53]](#footnote-53)

We must also consider Whitehead’s claim that “Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty.”[[54]](#footnote-54) However, this suggests that the power “creativity” is greater than God and therefore is the true God.[[55]](#footnote-55) Nash aptly observes that panentheism requires the existence of a theistic God to substantiate the system.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Finally, if God must constantly deal with the imperfections both in Himself and in the world, what guarantee is there that good will eventually triumph over evil?

**3. Conclusions**

In the light of our overview of the biblical and theological data examined above, we conclude that God is unchangeable in his nature, plans, standards, and promises. However, He actively intervenes in the affairs of people, expresses genuine emotion, and may alter how He applies His plans or promises depending on people’s response to Him. Bloesch provides this helpful recap: “The God of Greek philosophy cannot change; the God of modern spirituality must change; the God of biblical religion may change, if he wills – not in the integrity of his being but in his interaction with his human creation.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

How does the doctrine of God’s immutability aid the believer in practical Christian living? We may mention several items. God’s immutability inspires confidence in His promises. If God has promises something, He will certainly fulfill it. Similarly, God’s warnings are to be heeded as well. In addition, since God does not change, we can be assured of a stable relationship with Him and the constancy of His love for us. Finally, this doctrine shows us God’s superiority over creation, giving us still another reason to praise Him.[[58]](#footnote-58)

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