

LOGOS QUESTIONS

Can God Change?



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LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

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Introduction

Philosophers and theologians are a funny bunch. They get hung up on various puzzles of existence. There are riddles within reality that captivate their attention. Sometimes they like to ask the big questions like “Why does the universe exist?” and “Does life have a purpose?” As a Christian, I think that the answers to such questions can be found in the nature and existence of God. Why does the universe exist? Because God wanted it to exist. Does life have a purpose? Yes. Your purpose is to glorify God by cultivating righteousness, and by loving truth, beauty, and goodness.

Of course, my answer to these questions presupposes a certain understanding of God’s nature or character. I am assuming that God is the sort of being who cares about truth, beauty, and goodness. From a Christian perspective, that might seem like a safe assumption. However, in moments of crisis, one might worry that God could stop caring about those things. One might look at the violence and evil in the world, and ask if God still cares about truth, beauty,

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As a Christian theologian, one of the riddles of existence that most captivates my imagination is the nature of God. What is God like? This God whom I worship, whom I have devoted my life to. What is He like? In this booklet, I want us to explore this question by focusing on an aspect of the nature of God called *immutability*. Immutability is one of those big theological words, but don’t let that scare you. It simply means that God is unchanging. Immutability can be a puzzling concept at first glance, and my hope is to untangle the puzzle by explaining what it means to say that God is immutable, and how this helps us understand God’s love and trustworthy character.

In order to accomplish this, I will proceed slowly in a few short steps. In step 1, I will introduce you to two rival views on God's immutability. In step 2, I will ask you to consider some theological reasons for and against each rival view. In step 3, I will turn to the Bible, and see what it has to say on the matter. I will point out that the Bible seems to favour one view over the other. Then, in step 4, I shall offer some concluding thoughts on God's immutability as it relates to His love and trustworthy character.

What is Immutability? Two Views

If one reflects on the claim that God is immutable or unchanging, a particular question will naturally arise. In what way is God unchanging? There are two broad sorts of answers to this that Christians have given.

Some theologians say that God does not change in any way, shape, or form.¹ Let's call this view *strong immutability*. The strong immutability view maintains that any kind of change in God, no matter how small, would somehow shatter God's perfect nature.² Thus, God must not be able to change in any way. This is the traditional view, and it was the dominant view for most of church history. In order to understand just how strong this form of immutability is, ask yourself the following question: "Can God change in _____ way?" You can fill in the blank with whatever you want, but the traditional answer will always be "No." For example, you can ask, "Can God change in His relationship to me?" The answer is no. This might sound surprising. You might think that God changes from *being angry to being happy* when you repent of your sins. Yet the strong immutability view says that this is not the case. It says that God remains the same, but *you* begin to experience God differently once you repent of your sins.

“Some theologians say that God does not change in any way, shape, or form”

Not every theologian is satisfied with this traditional view.

Some theologians say that God must be able to change in certain ways as He interacts with

His creation. These theologians affirm a view called *weak immutability*.³ This view says that God's essence, nature, or character cannot change, but that God can change in the ways that He expresses His character. For example, this view says that God's essential nature is loving, and God cannot cease to be loving. Yet, this view will claim that God can change in how He expresses His love towards creatures. For instance, God will be disappointed when

¹Peter Lombard, *Sentences I*, Distinction XXXVII.7.

²James E. Dolezal, *All That Is In God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 19.

the creatures He loves do sinful things. God will become happy when the creatures that He loves repent of their sins. God doesn't change with regards to *being loving*, but how God expresses His love can change depending on what the situation calls for.

Theological Considerations

At this point, you might be wondering which view to affirm. As I said before, the strong immutability view has been overwhelmingly affirmed throughout Church history. It is only within the last 100 years or so that the weak immutability view became more widely accepted among Christian theologians. While that is a nice historical fact, you will probably want to know what reasons there are for favouring either view.

Allow me to start with a reason in favour of the strong immutability view. I will call it *The Argument from Perfection*. This has been a very popular argument in the Christian tradition.⁴ It starts with two assumptions.

First Assumption: God is the greatest possible being, or absolutely perfect.

Second Assumption: All change is for the better or worse.

The Argument from Perfection points out that the first assumption is something that any Christian will accept, including people who affirm the weak immutability view. The Argument from Perfection continues to say that, given the second assumption, one can see that God cannot possibly change. Why? The idea seems to be this.

Argument from Perfection: If God is the greatest possible being, then God cannot get any better. The very notion of *greatest* implies that there is nothing better. Hence, God cannot change for the better. Also, God cannot change for the worse. A perfect being can't really be perfect if it can get worse. Thus, God cannot change for the worse. At this point, all changes in God have been ruled out since all changes are for the better or worse, and God cannot become better or worse. Thus, God is unchanging in precisely the way that the strong immutability view says.

As I said before, this has been a very popular argument in Christian history, so you might be curious what the response is to this argument. Theologians who affirm weak immutability think that they can resist the Argument from Perfection. Typically, they attack the second assumption and say that it is false that all changes are for the better or worse. Here is an example.

³John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 264-276.

⁴Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 37.

Weak Immutability Response: Imagine that God creates a universe that contains only two atoms. At the first moment of time, the atoms are located next to each other in a certain way. This first atom is located on the right of the second atom. Now imagine that at the second moment of time, the atoms switch locations. Is this change in location really for the better or worse? It is hard to see how it is better or worse. Instead, this change looks neutral. So it must be false that all change is for the better or worse.

The Argument from Perfection needs that second assumption in order to work, but now it seems like the second assumption is false. Hence, theologians who affirm weak immutability see no good reason to believe that a perfect God cannot change in certain respects. In their opinion, a perfect God changes the way that He expresses His essential character depending on what the situation demands as God providentially advances His purpose for the universe.

Of course, a perceptive reader will notice that I have not offered a reason in favour of the weak immutability view. I have only explained why someone would reject an argument in favour of the strong immutability view. I have left you wondering what reason there is for affirming the weak immutability view. Theologians who affirm weak immutability say that the main reason to affirm their view is because it fits with the biblical evidence.

⁵ T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being and Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 208.

⁶ Cf. R.W.L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), chapter 4.

⁷ Francis Landy, *Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 15.

What Does the Bible Have to Say?

Now that some theological considerations have been offered, I think it is time to consider what the Bible has to say on the topic. You might be wondering why I didn't turn to the Bible first. There are several reasons for why I waited. I think it is important to understand what some of the options are before turning to scripture. Sometimes, people can miss things that are going on in the Bible when they are unaware of what the options are for interpreting various passages. Historically, there was a long period of time when theologians thought that strong immutability was the only option, and they interpreted the Bible accordingly. People who affirm weak immutability complain that this failure to see other options leads to a misinterpretation of the Bible. They say that with the options laid out clearly, people can come to the Bible with better eyes to see what is going on.

What does the Bible have to say about God's immutability? Theologians who affirm the weak immutability view say that their position accurately captures what is going on in scripture. This is because the Bible sometimes portrays God as *changing* and other times it describes God as *unchanging*. For example, God was not always incarnate in Jesus Christ. As Galatians 4:4 tells us, God sent His Son when the right time came. God was not always sending His Son. This is something that God waited to do until the right time came. God the Son changed from *not being incarnate to being incarnate*, and God and the world have never been the same again.⁵ That is a big change!

Yet there are a few passages in the Bible that say that God does not change. There are passages like Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, and Malachi 3:6 that say that God is not a man that He should change His mind. Sometimes theologians take this as evidence for the strong immutability view. However, if one affirms strong immutability and says that God does not change in any way, you get a weird puzzle when you think about the way God changed in becoming incarnate. You get the claim that God does not change, and the claim that God does change. That is a contradiction! Theologians who affirm weak immutability maintain that the Bible does not give us a contradictory description of the God we worship. They say we need to take a closer look at what is going on in these biblical passages.

They say that when one takes a closer look at the "unchanging" passages like Numbers 23, 1 Samuel 15, and Malachi 3, one can see that the Bible is really specific in the ways that God does not change. Each passage says that God is not a man that He should change His mind. In each case, the passages say that men are liars who do not keep their promises. God is not like that. When God makes a promise, He will keep it. His promises are not empty lies. Advocates of weak immutability say that what these passages teach is that the promises of God are unchanging. They do not teach that God is completely and utterly unchanging. They simply teach that God will not change His mind about the promises that He has made.⁶

What we learn from these passages is that when the Bible describes God as unchanging, it typically has God's trustworthy character in mind. This is precisely what the weak immutability view has been saying all along. However, proponents of the strong immutability view will say that their view is compatible with God having a trustworthy character. In fact, they will say that the strong view guarantees it because God is utterly unchanging.

Theologians who affirm the weak immutability view can grant this point. However, they will say that the strong immutability view cannot be consistent with certain biblical passages that explicitly state that God does change, like Hosea 11. In the book of Hosea, God asks the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute. This marriage is meant to symbolize the relationship between God and Israel. God had previously made certain promises to Israel; promises to bless them and make them prosper *if* Israel would remain faithful to God. The problem discussed in Hosea is that Israel has not been faithful to God. Israel has gone off to worship false idols. As you might imagine, Israel's unfaithfulness is deeply disturbing to God. When God asks Hosea to marry a prostitute, God is asking Hosea to understand the suffering that God is going through in the face of an unfaithful people. This is something utterly unique among the prophets of the Old Testament. Typically, the Old Testament prophets are meant to symbolically

represent Israel. But in Hosea, the prophet is asked to symbolically represent God so that we might get a glimpse into the inner emotional life of God.⁷

“ God has a deep compassion that moves Him to turn His wrath into forgiveness ”

What do we see in God's inner emotional life? As you read through the book of Hosea, you will see God say that He recoils at Israel's disobedience, and that He has plans to pour out His wrath on Israel. Clearly, God is emotionally upset by the situation. Yet, as we come to chapter 11 of Hosea, God says something very interesting. God says that because He is not a man, He will change. That is worth repeating. Because God is not a man, He will change. That is odd because we earlier saw the Bible explain that God does not change because He is not a man. But now we have Hosea saying that God does change because He is not a man. What is going on? As Hosea explains, God has compassion for His people. Because of His compassion, God will change His plan of wrath to a plan of forgiveness. Stubborn men do not change their wrath to forgiveness. Thankfully, God is not a stubborn man. God has a deep compassion that moves Him to turn His wrath into forgiveness.

The advocate of weak immutability will say that this connects nicely with what we learned earlier—God does not go back on His promises to bless Israel. God loves His chosen people. He has promised to bless them, and out of compassion, He will respond to His people in the best way to ensure that His promises are fulfilled. Sometimes that means that God will change His plan from wrath to forgiveness. Proponents of weak immutability can accept this, but the strong view of immutability cannot. Thus, it seems like the Bible is pointing in the direction of weak immutability.

Concluding Thoughts

Let me return to my original question. What is God like? What kind of God do we worship? I asked you to consider two views on immutability. The strong view says that God cannot change in anyway. The weak view says that God cannot change in His essential character, but that God can change in how He expresses His essential character. I offered a popular theological argument for favouring the strong immutability view, and explained why not everyone is persuaded by that argument. Then I asked us to look at the biblical evidence.

I think that the biblical evidence clearly favours the weak immutability view.

The biblical portrayal of God says that God is only unchanging in certain respects, and that God changes in other ways. Allow me to summarize each point in conclusion.

“ God is unchanging in His love for His creatures. We worship a God of love, and God cannot stop being a loving God. Also, God is unchanging in His trustworthiness. God cannot stop being trustworthy ”

In what ways is God unchanging? God is unchanging in His love for His creatures. We worship a God of love, and God cannot stop being a loving God. Also, God is unchanging in His trustworthiness. God cannot stop being trustworthy. When God makes a promise, you can trust that God will keep it.

In what ways does God change? Thankfully, God does change in His emotional life as He compassionately interacts with His creatures. Can you imagine how awful it would be if God's anger and wrath were unchanging? To be sure, God can become quite upset by the sinful things we do, but God's anger will not last forever. God can be moved by compassion, and His anger can turn into forgiveness. That is certainly something to be thankful for.

Let me end by focusing on one of the most amazing ways that the world has seen God change in order to keep His promise to bless humanity. I am once again referring to the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As Philippians 2:7-11 explains, God the Son did not consider His divinity a thing that we could grasp. So the Son made Himself nothing, and took the form of a servant. He became human, and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. How amazing is that? We worship a compassionate God who is willing to undergo dramatic changes by becoming human in order to demonstrate His unchanging love for us. On the cross, we see the lengths that God will go to in order to keep His promises. Truly, we worship an amazing God.

Further Reading

1. James E. Dolezal, *All That Is In God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*. Reformation Heritage Books, 2017
2. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Crossway Books, 2001
3. Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*. Baker Book House, 1975
4. R.T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*. Oxford University Press, 2016

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The Logos Institute at the University of St Andrews is a centre for excellence in the study of analytic and exegetical theology. It is committed to scholarship that reflects a concern for: transparency; simplicity in expression; clear, logical argumentation; and rigorous analysis. It also reflects a radical commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, particularly between the fields of philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the sciences. Its faculty consists of world-leading scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

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