

**The Comfort of God's Immutability**  
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“The doctrine of God is the most difficult *locus* in Christian dogmatics” (Preus 53). In a world where so many people devote their lives to describing *people* and how they act in different situations, it is not surprising that to describe God himself and to explain all his actions would be infinitely more difficult. This is especially true of the doctrine of immutability. Think of it, no one can even come to a consensus on the immutability of human beings. Some say people can really never change who they are; others claim every human is in a constant state of change. The theories about God's immutability seem to be just as numerous; even those who seek their answers out of Scripture cannot agree. They see conflicting ideas and seemingly contradictory statements, and many posit their own rational ways of making everything fit together. Our goal is to show that trying to completely understand God's immutability along with the times he seems to change his mind is not only impossible, but also wrong. Such attempts, even when meant to comfort the minds of men, only lead them into false doctrines about God and away from the comfort that God's immutability has to offer.

The Disappearance of Immutability

In the study of dogmatics today, explaining and defending God's immutability from Scripture has become out of fashion. Today's scholars need credibility, and they want to look like the credible scholars in any other field. Many times this means that treating the same doctrines and questions that the “traditional” dogmatics of the past had done becomes a waste of time, since no “new ground” can be broken. Because of this,

immutability has disappeared altogether from most dogmatics books. Looking for immutability in the index of most of them will yield no results, probably because the authors think it is not practical enough for today's readers.

In the instances that immutability does appear in modern books, it might as well not be there. The confusing, disjointed (and therefore scholarly?) writing style of the modern authors is the cause of this. Karl Barth will on the same page say that God is immutable and that "it is not true that the immutable as such is God" (494). The point he is trying to make is anyone's guess. In fact, his point is as open to interpretation as he claims the Bible itself to be. Even Lutheran dogmaticians have fallen into this trap. A section about immutability in Braaten and Jenson's dogmatics is an esoteric discussion of Israel's concept of Yahweh, the Greek concept of God, and the Christianity that resulted when the two collided in the New Testament (Braaten-Jenson 115-121). They call immutability "the central and least biblical concept of late Hellenic theology" and "the most troubling mark of Hellenic interpretation within Christian theology" (118). But do the authors believe in God's immutability? This is not clear. As with most modern writers, definitive statements or conclusions have all but disappeared, especially in connection with immutability.

#### The Definition of Immutability

"God is immutable in His essence, in His attributes, and in His will" (Koehler 24). God's immutability may be passé to defend in today's world, but it needs to be done. And when it is done, simply saying it is not enough; God's Word must be used to support it. After all, the only reason we can speak precisely about God's attributes at all is because God has made himself known in the Bible (Preus 53).

The main passage of Scripture used for God's immutability is 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." The "who does not change" in this verse is not the only part that stresses God's immutability. The comparison is made of God and the heavenly lights, which are the sun and stars, etc. The sun does not change; it always gives its light. But James realized that this comparison was somewhat imperfect. After all, the sun sets, and we do not see it all the time. That is why he adds, "who does not change like shifting shadows." The sun moves and changes, causing the shadows it casts on the earth to move, but God never changes.

This unchanging quality of God is also apparent in the name God chose to give for himself to his Old Testament church, Yahweh. "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). The name Yahweh seems to be the way the Israelites would say this, and it probably meant "he is." God showed his unchanging nature by the name I AM. He is a God of the present tense, not a God who was one way at one time and will be another way later. Instead, God is. As Calov said, "God is not of such a nature that he knows something today but not tomorrow—wills something today but not tomorrow" (quoted in Preus 100). God himself shows that his name implies immutability at other times. "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Mal. 3:6). God appeals to his name as the LORD to prove that he does not change.

But immutability is not ascribed to God in a vacuum. Immutability is most often discussed in connection with God's relationship with people, and it especially shows God's perfection in contrast to how human's act (Caemmerer 72). "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 not fulfill?” (Num. 23:19). God’s immutability is called into service to make very sharp contrasts between God and man. Men die and decay, but God does not. “They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment...But you remain the same and your years will never end” (Ps. 102:26-27). Men are not always kind, but God’s kindness and love are immutable. “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed” (Isaiah 54:10). The anger and wrath of men often shifts and changes, but God’s wrath is changeless. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

Yet this last passage brings up a question. What does it mean for God’s immutability when He threatens with his wrath but does not carry out the punishment? An example of this is Jonah’s message of God’s wrath to the people of Nineveh, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:4). When the people of Nineveh repented, however, God “had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (3:10). The answer to this question is clear when we look at the text. These were punishments that God “had threatened.” They were conditional prophecies, prophecies that depended on people doing something for them to be carried out. Such conditional prophecies do not affect God’s immutability (Meyer 10-11). In fact, God himself states that it is his *modus operandi* to use conditional prophecies. In Jeremiah 18:7-10 God clearly lays out that he may threaten evil or intend good for a certain group of people. If these people change, though, God may either not do the evil or the good on the people that he had originally intended. Thus God’s immutability is not shaken. “God

remains immutable, but there is mutability in the objects of his affections” (F. Pieper 441). But what about the other times that God seems to change his direction? Many have taken these and disposed with God’s immutability in the name of comfort.

### The False Comfort of Mutability

God’s apparent changes of direction have troubled many people, especially when bad things occur. How could a good God let these things happen? This is the question that Rabbi Harold Kushner tried to answer in his book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Kushner, obviously, is a rabbi and therefore not even Christian. His views need to be considered by Christians, for two reasons, namely because even Christian writers have agreed with him, and because he claims to use the Bible to prove his arguments.

Kushner considers that the question concerning why bad things happen is the most important question in theology. “All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting...but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care” (Kushner 6). This sets the tone for his whole book; he does not want to be a “scholar” who says things only the educated can understand. Because of this his book is very clearly written and quite readable, full of interesting anecdotes. Yet he does claim to take his main point from the Bible itself.

The book of the Bible he uses for his understanding of God is the book of Job. He does this despite asserting that there is much “wishful thinking” in biblical theology (Kushner 13), and despite the fact he does not even think Job existed (32). Nevertheless, he points out that Job was a good person who had everything conceivable go wrong. (One must remember that for Kushner, a good person is one that displays much civic

righteousness. “[Good people] work diligently to discover a cure for a disease, or they fight for the extension of the rights of the poor and the powerless” (82)). The book of Job spends most of its time with Job’s and his friends’ reasons why these bad things happened. For Kushner, the question basically comes down to a choice, either God is good, or he is “all-powerful and causes everything that happens in this world. Nothing happens without His willing it” (37). Kushner’s decision, and the decision that he claims the author of the book of Job makes, is that God is good, so he can not be all-powerful (42).

Kushner nowhere states that God is not immutable. But he does state that God is not all-powerful; one of the chapters in his book is even titled, “God can’t do everything, but he can do some important things.” But think how much immutability is wrapped up in the concept of omnipotence. Only an all-powerful being could never change, could say he would do something and then actually be able to do it every time. Kushner, therefore, is really denying God’s immutability, “If we can bring ourselves to acknowledge there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible” (45). These “good things” show the comfort that Kushner says comes from God’s mutability.

Kushner says that God is constantly changing; he is constantly reacting to the bad things that happen to us, and he is just as angry and hurt about them as we are (55). Yes, these bad things are a “sidetracking of His purposes” (50); they “do not come from God at all” (44). The comfort of this comes in that God lets us be human. If God was immutable, we could no longer really make our own choices; we would no longer be human (80). Because of this, “God can’t stop” (81) the bad things that happen. Instead

God can just let people be people and assure them that they are not alone or abandoned (129). No, God cannot prevent bad things, but he gives the strength to overcome them when they happen (141).

“You call this comforting?” Kushner is willing to throw away most of God’s power to comfort people with the idea that God mourns right along with them during tragedies. To him God is like a divine advice columnist, someone who does not cause the problem, but does give some neat hints to cope after the fact. The reason Kushner does this is that he and others who have a similar theology insist on hanging on to free will at all costs. “The cornerstone of my religious outlook is the belief that human beings are free to choose the direction their life will take” (Kushner 83). “You call this comforting?” For Kushner the answer is yes, because God lets us be human and he constantly changes to grieve along with us and help us get by. “You call this comforting?” For true Lutherans or anyone who takes the God as revealed in the Bible seriously, the answer is no.

### The True Comfort of Immutability

God’s apparent changes of direction are indeed difficult to grasp. Scripture itself does not make God’s immutability any easier to understand. On the one hand we hear about the love God has. “We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love” (I John 4:16). We also know that God works things out for the good of his people. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). But on the other hand Scripture says that God can indeed cause bad things to happen. “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (Amos 3:6). “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity

and create disaster, I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). In those disasters that the LORD causes, are believers sometimes hurt or killed? Undoubtedly. So how do we reconcile God’s working out things for the good of his people with the fact that he brings disaster on his own people as well? How do we relieve this tension? *We can’t.*

At this point it is good to remember that God’s immutability is totally wrapped up in his omnipotence and other attributes. We will never fully understand why he does what he does. “Our God is in heaven, he does whatever pleases him” (Ps. 115:3). In the book of Job (and this is something Kushner overlooks), God does not explain the cause of or reason for the bad things to Job. Instead, without offering an answer or an explanation to Job’s complaints or questions, he simply demands of Job recognition of his right to treat him like this by referring to His omnipotent works (A. Pieper 151). God is so far above us, that any attempt we make to rationalize what he does is always at the expense of clear Scripture.

For example, Kushner throws away practically the whole Bible for his doctrine. He completely neglects sin and the world’s need for a Savior. He forgets that, although the Bible sometimes says that God was grieved, God does not change himself and is not surprised by what happens in the world. God’s grieving in Scripture is really an example of anthropopathism, or using human emotions to describe God so we can understand him. Kushner forgets that “anthropopathisms must not be pushed to the point of denying God’s attributes” (Preus 102).

The reformed church, also, takes God’s immutability and uses it to promulgate false doctrines. For example, when it comes to election, we know that God is good. We also know from the Bible that not everyone will be saved (Mark 16:16 “Whoever does

not believe will be condemned”). So when verses like 1 Tim. 2:3 (“God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”) come along, the reformed theologian will say that “all men” certainly “must” not really mean all men! (Hendriksen 93-95). After all, our good God could not say he wanted everyone to be saved and then have some not be saved—there must be double predestination! In this way, human reason takes God’s immutability and turns it into false doctrine.

It is true that immutability is a difficult doctrine when we see God’s apparent changes in direction, and it is also true that Scripture itself presents us with this difficulty. But we simply cannot use our human reason and so try to understand this part of God’s immutability completely. Human reason cannot understand fully the ways of God. “He led us into this difficulty with his Word. Therefore it is his work, and not ours, to lead us out” (Becker 234). “Everything he does is right and all his ways are just” (Dan. 4:37).

Therefore we can only thank God for his immutability. After all, when Scripture speaks of immutability, it is for our good, for strengthening our faith (Meyer 9). James 1:17 speaks of God being unchangeable when it shows that He gives us “every good and perfect gift.” God loves us and gives us all our gifts, and this love will never change! What a comfort! Therefore God’s promises are also assured by his immutability. “Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Num. 23:19). God has promised to be with us always and to work out all things for our good. In God’s immutability we do not have to wonder if these promises will come true. With God they are as good as done!

And those apparent changes of direction, do we complain to God because of them? No, we thank God for them too. “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (Jas. 5:16). God may seem to change direction when we pray for something

and he does it. But thanks to God for this apparent change! We can therefore “pray big,” because God can and will do anything “for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Just think if God did not “change direction” with respect to our sin! God hates sin and the sinner, but through Christ’s perfect life and innocent death, God declares us to be without sin! We are forgiven, and in faith we will find our eternal home in heaven! God’s immutability may be difficult to understand, but its comfort, too, is incomprehensible.

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