

**Does God Change? Responding to Open Theism**

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## DOES GOD CHANGE? RESPONDING TO OPEN THEISM

### Defining Immutability

*What is God's immutability?* To say God is *immutable* means that God *does not* change.<sup>1</sup> Modern theologians have summarized the doctrine of God's immutability as follows. Norman Geisler said immutability means "God cannot change in His essence (nature or being)."<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur wrote, "God's immutability is his perfect unchangeability in his essence, character, purpose, and promises."<sup>3</sup> And Wayne Grudem said, "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises... This attribute of God is also called God's immutability."<sup>4</sup>

*What God's immutability implies.* If God is immutable—and this paper argues that he is—then it follows that (1) God does not learn (since learning is a change); (2) God knows all things; (3) God cannot forget (since forgetting is a loss); (4) God is never surprised; (5) God does not take risks; (6) God does not suffer (he cannot be caused pain); (7) God is not composed of moving parts (but is simple in essence); (8) God is already perfect (nothing can be added to his perfection); (9) God is infinite; (10) God is eternal (does not move in time); (11) God is everywhere at once (does not move in space); and (12) God is all powerful (cannot grow in strength). Put in theological terms, God's immutability relates to his other metaphysical attributes of omniscience, impassibility, simplicity, perfection, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence—even his self-existence and necessity. The list of attributes just given is what is known as 'classical theism.' Since they are all related, denying one attribute of classical theism impacts all the others.

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<sup>1</sup> The word *immutable* is composed of two Latin words: not (*in*) and changeable (*mutabilis*).

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geisler, "TH540: Theology Proper" (lecture, Veritas International University, Murrieta, CA, 2014), PowerPoint file GodImmut7.ser.pptx.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 163.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 163.

## **Objections from Open Theism**

The belief that God does not change has been the historic position of the Christian church. But there are some today who reject the doctrine of immutability, as well the other related classical attributes of God. They are called open theists or neotheists.<sup>5</sup> The position of open theism can be summarized by Clark Pinnock, et. al., in *The Openness of God*, which is considered a groundbreaking work on the topic.<sup>6</sup> In short, open theism says that “God changes” (Kindle location 1401); “God takes risks” (18); “God repents” (255; cf. 1147); “God suffers” (1413); God “opens himself up to the real possibility of failure and disappointment” (1838); “He learns” (120); “God comes to know events as they take place” (120); God “adapts to surprises and to the unexpected” (1349); God “enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us” (17); “Time is real for God” (387); God “occasionally changes his mind” (255); “God adjusts and alters his plans” (661); and “If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B” (1350).

This paper argues that classical theism is the correct view. It does so by focusing on one attribute of classical theism: immutability. It will be argued that there is biblical, philosophical and historical support for this important doctrine.

### **Biblical Support**

The first line of evidence for God’s immutability comes by way of the Bible.

*Immutability follows from God’s self-revealed name of I AM.* When Moses asked God for his name, God answered with “‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, “I AM [אֲנִי־אֲנִי] has sent me to you... This is My name forever...”’” (Exod. 3:14, 15, NKJV) This important name is a metaphysical statement that informs our understanding of God’s nature. To the Hebrew mind, the name of something is a description of its essence. God’s “I AM” self-description indicates that he, in his essence, *is* existence itself. The present tense

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘open’ in open theism is understood to mean that the future is open.

<sup>6</sup> See Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Dovers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

indicates his existence is timeless, without past/future categories.<sup>7</sup> It is God's timeless existence that provides existence to all other things. The New Testament further clarifies that God *alone* is immortal (1 Tim. 6:15, 16) because he alone intrinsically has life, while giving everything else its life (cf. Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17). In these important passages, God reveals his necessity and self-existence. But there is another very important concept—God's simplicity. This follows from Deuteronomy 6:4 (The Shema): “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! [יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה אֶחָד]” Like Exodus 3:14, this is also a metaphysical statement about God's essence. There is not only one God, but God, *in his very essence* is one. In other words, God is indivisible, not having any parts (is simple). If there are no parts to God, there is nothing that can change. There is only one indivisible essence, and it is existence itself.

*God is immutable because his nature is the same for all eternity.* The Bible says God's nature is the same for all eternity. In the first chapter of Hebrews, the writer is discussing the nature of the Son of God. The Son is not like the angels, but he is better than the angels because he is God. And as God, the Son is immutable. The quote from Hebrews 1:10-12 reads:

And, “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish [αὐτοὶ ἀπολοῦνται], but you remain [σὺ δὲ διαμένεις]; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same [σὺ δὲ ὁ αὐτὸς εἶ], and your years will have no end.” (Heb. 1:10-12; cf. Ps. 102:25-27)

Hebrews contrasts the unchangeableness of God the Son with the changeableness of all things in creation. Since the Son (in his deity) is not part of changeable creation (creation includes the angels), he remains the same forever.

*God is outside of time.* Scripture indicates that time has a beginning. The Bible says God saved us “according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” (2 Tim. 1:9, NKJV) Eternal life was “promised before time began.” (Titus 1:2,

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus clarified that the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14 is meant to be understood in the present tense in John 8:58. Per Jesus, God was not saying, “I WILL be with you” (future tense), but “I AM” (present tense).

NKJV) Since time is part of creation (it began), God must be eternal, timeless, and outside of time.

*God's counsel is unchanging.* The Bible describes God's will as *immutable counsel*. This is how it is described in Hebrews 6:17: "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise *the immutability of His counsel* [τὸ ἀμετάθετον τῆς βουλῆς αὐτοῦ], confirmed it by an oath..." (Heb. 6:17, NKJV) The word for 'counsel' here is βουλή and means "that which one decides, resolution, decision" an "action, plan, purpose, intention."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, God's decisions from eternity do not change.

*God's perfectly executes his eternal counsel.* The Bible says God perfectly executes his will. According to Numbers 23:19, "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? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" In other words, when God determines to do something, he carries it through to completion. "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent." (1 Samuel 15:29) The Bible says God finishes what he starts. Psalm 138:8 says, "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands." God's counsel is connected to his calling. The Bible says God does not change his calling. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Rom. 11:29) Here, *irrevocable* (ἀμεταμέλητα) means "something one does not take back."<sup>9</sup>

*God's promises are unchangeable.* The Bible says God does not fail to keep his promises. This includes promises made to the Jewish people who are currently in a state of rebellion to him: "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." (Rom. 11:1) The unchangeableness of God's promises relates to God's predestination of future events. Since God knows and

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<sup>8</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 181.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

predestines the future, all of God's predestined ones make it to the end. Those who are predestined will arrive at glorification. Paul declared, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." (Rom. 8:29, 30) Because God does not change his promises, we can have assurance and security of salvation. Philippians 1:6 says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

*We can have confidence because of God's immutability.* The Bible says we should have confidence in God because of his unchanging nature. Malachi 3:6 says, "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." And Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Since there is no change in him, we can draw near in full assurance of faith (cf., Heb. 10:21, 22).

In conclusion, Scripture has revealed that God is both immutable in his plans and immutable in his nature. God has personally revealed this to his creation through the special revelation of Scripture. The next section shows it is not only *scriptural*, but it is also *reasonable* that God is immutable.

### **Philosophical Support**

The second line of evidence for God's immutability comes by way of reason.

#### **Immutability Seen in God's Simplicity**

God's simplicity means he is not composed of parts. Something that does not have parts cannot change. This is because change can only happen by moving or rearranging parts. Jesus said, "God is Spirit [non-matter], and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (Jn. 4:24) Since God is non-matter and simple (not composed of parts), there is nothing in him

that can become different. This is also supported by Scripture. The Bible says God is ‘one’ in his very essence (Deut. 6:4). God’s essence is indivisible (one), hence he cannot change.

#### Immutability Seen in God’s Perfection

God cannot change because he is already perfect. It is not possible to add something to God to make him ‘more perfect.’ Neither can something be taken away from God to make him ‘less perfect.’ He cannot become better than he already is. Neither can he be denied something good (be caused pain). Therefore, God cannot change.

#### Immutability Seen in God’s Infinity

Something that is infinite cannot be counted or measured. Something infinite cannot be made ‘more infinite’ by adding one. The only being who is not able to be counted or measured is God who simple in essence (Deut. 6:4) and not capable of division. Therefore, God must be absolutely infinite in existence with no capacity for anything else to be added. Hence, he cannot change.

#### Immutability Seen in God’s Eternality

God cannot change because he is eternal. Time is the measurement of the movement of parts. But God does not have any moving parts. Therefore, God does not pass through time. Instead, the totality of time has its complete existence in God in one single act.<sup>10</sup>

#### Immutability Seen in God’s Necessary Existence

It is reasonable that there must be a Being who provides existence to all other things but has not received existence from anything else. The profundity of this cannot be overestimated. Etienne Gilson says it well when he says, “any religious God whose true name is not ‘He who is’ [Exod. 3:14] is nothing but a myth.”<sup>11</sup> If God is not existence itself, the question must be asked, “From what existing Being/Principle did God (the first Being/Principle) receive his existence?”

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere it was mentioned that Scripture shows time has a beginning (e.g., Gen. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2). But science also shows that time has a beginning (e.g., expanding galaxies).

<sup>11</sup> Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 104.

When? And how?” These questions are logically absurd. The only way to escape the absurdity is to acknowledge the first Being did not receive existence from another but is self-existent (necessary). From here, it is short step to grasp that God, as a Necessary Being, cannot be anything other than what he is. There is nothing left to actualize in God (or bring into existence) because he already is Pure Actuality with no potentiality. Since there is nothing else for him to be, he cannot change and is therefore immutable.<sup>12</sup>

### God’s Immutability Seen in Causation

Put another way, God is the first cause of all things. There cannot be two first causes. But if God had potential to change—and he did change—then there must be some other thing that brought about the change. This thing that brought about the change in God would rightly be more powerful than God. In the words of Novatian (c. 200 - c. 258), if God were to change then “He [would] cease to be God, being reduced into the power of another, in whose greatness He, being smaller, shall have been included. And therefore what contained Him would then rather claim to be God.”<sup>13</sup> There are many nice statements like this which will be looked at next.

### Historical Support

Recently, since the release of Clark Pinnock’s book *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* in 1994, some theologians have begun to question the doctrine of immutability. But there is good historical support for believing in the doctrine.

#### From Early Church Fathers

The church father Novatian (c. 200 - c. 258) said, “there is never in Him any accession or increase of any part or honour, lest anything should appear to have ever been wanting to His

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<sup>12</sup> Even if God has accidents (things predicated to his nature that are not essential to it), he must be necessary in his ‘basic’ being. And his ‘basic’ being could not change.

<sup>13</sup> Novatian, “A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian*, Appendix, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 615.



perfection.”<sup>14</sup> He added “whatever it be in Him which constitutes Divinity, must necessarily exist always.”<sup>15</sup> God is “both immortal and incorruptible, neither conscious of any kind of loss nor ending.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, if God were to change “He [would] cease to be God, being reduced into the power of another, in whose greatness He, being smaller, shall have been included.”<sup>17</sup>

Aristides (2nd century) also connected God’s incorruptibility with his immutability. He said that false gods are “not gods, but a created thing, liable to ruin and change, which is of the same nature as man; whereas God is imperishable and unvarying.”<sup>18</sup>

Melito of Sardis (2nd century) said, “He changeth not, while everything else changes.”<sup>19</sup>

Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328) said it is not possible to add or take anything from God because he “is unchangeable and immutable, who is always the same, and admits of no increase or diminution.”<sup>20</sup> Since he was writing against Arius who believe the Son was created, he added that the Son “is equally with the Father unchangeable and immutable.”<sup>21</sup>

#### From Medieval Fathers

The three big ‘A’s of the Middle Ages (Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas) firmly held that God is immutable.

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<sup>14</sup> Novatian, “A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity,” in *Fathers of the Third Century*, 614.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 615.

<sup>18</sup> Aristides of Athens, *The Apology of Aristides*, ed. Allan Menzies, trans. D. M. Kay, vol. 9, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897), 267.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “Remains of the Second and Third Centuries: Melito, the Philosopher,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, trans. B. P. Pratten, vol. 8, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 751.

<sup>20</sup> James B. H. Hawkins, “Alexander of Alexandria: Translator’s Introductory Notice,” in *Fathers of the Third Century*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 295.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Augustine (354-430), in a section titled, “OF THE SIMPLE AND UNCHANGEABLE TRINITY, FATHER, SON AND HOLY GHOST...” said, “There is, accordingly, a good which is alone simple, and therefore alone unchangeable, and this is God. By this Good have all others been created, but not simple, and therefore not unchangeable.”<sup>22</sup>

Anselm (1033-1109) said that God’s “supreme Nature” is “supreme Immutability” and “this supreme Substance... is immutable and without parts.”<sup>23</sup> He also connects God’s simplicity with immutability when he says, “...there are no parts in thee, Lord...”<sup>24</sup> Therefore God is not capable of “dissolution.”<sup>25</sup>

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) said, “God, is a mover altogether unmoved.”<sup>26</sup> And, “there is an immovable first mover which is God. Now He moves [others] as a mover absolutely immovable.”<sup>27</sup> Also, “it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable.”<sup>28</sup>

#### From Reformers and Beyond

The reformers found much to critique of the Roman Catholic Church. But none questioned the doctrine of immutability. Instead, Martin Luther (1483-1546) said, “God is not magnified by us so far as His nature is concerned—He is unchangeable.”<sup>29</sup> John Calvin (1509-

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *St. Augustine’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 210.

<sup>23</sup> Anselm, trans. Sidney Norton Deane, *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix, In Behalf of the Fool, by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1939), 66, 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, vol. 1 (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1924), 99.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.), 1.q9.a1.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” in *Works of Martin Luther Translated with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 3 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 117.

1564) believed, “Unchangeable, the Word abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself.”<sup>30</sup> Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) added, “God is described to us as in every respect immutable, not only in regard to his nature but also to his will...”<sup>31</sup>

Those immediately following the reformers agreed. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) said it is unreasonable to think “God is liable to be continually repenting what he has done... constantly changing his mind and intentions as to his future conduct; altering his measures, relinquishing his old designs, and forming new schemes and projections.”<sup>32</sup> And John Wesley (1703-1791) mentioned, “the great decree of God, eternal, unchangeable.”<sup>33</sup>

The doctrine of God’s immutability is so well established in church history that theologians who question the doctrine have a very difficult task ahead of them. It seems audacious to assert that *the entire church* has been wrong about this topic. And yet, that is precisely what open theists are proposing. Here is a closer look at their arguments.

### **Answering Open Theism’s Arguments**

Argument 1. The Bible says God repents, learns and has passions

*Problem.* Open theists say classical theists are wrong about God’s immutability because the Bible says God repented (Gen. 6:6,7; 1 Sam. 15:11; Jer. 18:10; Jon. 3:9,10; Amos 7:3). Repentance involves a change of mind. Therefore, God changed. Furthermore, the Bible says that God learns (Gen. 18:21; Deut. 8:2). But learning also involves a change from ignorance to knowledge. Therefore, God changes. Lastly, open theists argue that God has passions. The Bible says God can be grieved (Gen. 6:6, 7; Psa. 95:10), be angry (Exod. 32:13; Psa. 95:10) and be

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<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 130.

<sup>31</sup> James Arminius, *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, vol. 1 (Auburn; Buffalo: Derby, Miller and Orton, 1853), 70.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Harry S. Stout and Paul Ramsey, Revised Edition., vol. 1, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 253.

<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition.*, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 311.

pleased (Matt. 3:17; 1 Thess. 4:1). But passions are a movement from one state to another. Therefore, they argue, God changes.

*Response.* The church has long understood these passages as figures of speech. *Anthropomorphisms* are attributing physical body parts to God. This includes descriptions of God having eyes (Heb. 4:13), arms (Num. 11:23), hands (Isa. 45:12) and ears (Psa. 34:15). *Anthropopathisms* are attributing changing human emotions to God like getting angry (Exod. 4:14) or grieving (Gen. 6:6). *Anthropoiseses* are attributing human actions to God like repenting (Exod. 4:14), learning (Gen. 18:21) or forgetting (Isa. 43:25).

These are metaphorical statements not to be taken literally. To take them literally presents a view of God that is inconsistent with clear biblical teaching about God's nature. For example, if God were to literally have physical eyes, hands and feet, then God would be no different from a physical man (as Kenneth Copeland and Mormons say). But the Bible reveals that God is not a man; he is not even composed of matter but is spirit (John 4:24). Therefore, God cannot have eyes, etc. Next, if we understand "let us go down and see" (Gen. 18:21) as though God needed to actually go to Sodom to learn what was happening, it would mean God is not omniscient or omnipresent.<sup>34</sup> Finally, if we take the description of God having "wings" literally (Exod. 19:4) then God must also be a bird. Or since the Bible says God is a "rock" (Ps. 78:35; 2 Sam. 22:32) he must also be a rock. These descriptions are meant to be applied metaphorically to God.

God cannot have passions, since a passion is a movement from one state to another. But God can be immutable and still have emotions. His emotions do not change him. Joy and delight are in God (Ps. 16:11; 2 Sam. 22:20). But God's emotions are in him as a single intellectual act. God's intellectual act of emotion is different from a bodily passion. In humans, our bodies undergo a passive bodily change (e.g., our heart begins to race). But God is spirit (non-matter; John 4:24) and does not have a body to undergo change.

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<sup>34</sup> Even open theists believe God is omnipresent and did not need to travel to Sodom to find out what was happening in the present. They believe God does not know future contingencies but does perfectly know the present.

### Argument 2. God changes by prayer

*Problem.* Open theists argue if we cannot change God's mind, then why pray? But the Bible says we should pray (John 15:16; James 5:16). For example, Moses prayed, and the Bible says God relented (Ex. 32:32). Therefore, they conclude, God does change through our prayers.

*Response.* An omniscient being (who knows even the future) already knows all things. Therefore, he cannot change his mind. When we pray, God already knew we would pray. "When we pray (or have prayed), God not only knew what we were going to pray, but He ordained our prayer as a means of accomplishing His purpose."<sup>35</sup>

### Argument 3. An unchanging God is impersonal

*Problem.* Open theists argue we cannot relate to an unchanging God. If God *does not* undergo change, then God does not really understand what I go through (because I *do* undergo change). We are more drawn to the concept of the open theistic God, they say, because a changing God can experience everything we go through (including surprise, disappointment, etc.).

*Response.* God knows exactly what we experience in that he is continually supplying our very existence to us. The Being who supplies our existence at all times knows what we are going through better than anybody else. This makes God the most personal Being of all. He is not a robot with no emotions. Impassibility does not mean God has no emotions. Rather, it means God has no changing emotions. He *always* hates sin. He *always* loves righteousness. Finally, God does not just have love, but God *is* love (1 John 4:8). The Bible even says his love is unchanging (Rom. 8:39; 1 John 4:16). This makes him the most loving and personal Being of all.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two: God, Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 86.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Argument 4. To love means to be in a give and take relationship

*Problem.* Open theists say that love demands God be in a give-take relationship with others. All loving relationships involve give and take. Therefore, God changes.

*Response.* God does not have to love the same way humans love. God also does good, but he does not do it the same way we do it. Further, love in a relationship is to seek for the good of others. God is unique in that he not only *has* goodness but *is* goodness. Therefore, in willing good to others, God is willing nothing but himself. This is the highest expression of a personal relationship.

Argument 5. Classic theism came from Greek philosophy

*Problem.* Open theists argue the concept of immutability came from Greek philosophy. The only reason Christians came to believe in immutability, they say, is because the church fathers allowed themselves to be influenced by Plato and Aristotle. Instead, they should have kept to the Bible.

*Response.* There are many responses. First, truth is truth regardless where it comes from. To dismiss something simply because of its origin is called a genetic fallacy. Aristotle discovered the laws of logic. Should we avoid logic because it was discovered by Greek philosophers?

Second, every theologian of every age has been affected by philosophy. It is inescapable. Open theists themselves have been greatly influenced by the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead (a panentheist). Not all philosophy is bad. C. S. Lewis recognized the importance of philosophy when he said, “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”<sup>37</sup>

Third, classical theism is based on God’s revelation to the Hebrews (Ex. 3:14; Deut. 6:4) which preceded Greek philosophy by a thousand years. And there are many things in classical theism that are directly opposed to Greek thought. For example, Aristotle had forty-seven to

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<sup>37</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001), 58.

fifty-five simple principles that accounted for all motion in the universe, but the Hebrews/Christians had one first principle (God). And the Hebrews were the first to worship their metaphysical first principle (God).

Finally, Greek philosophy is foreign to the early church fathers' writings. They were not steeped in Greek philosophy. They were steeped in Scripture! This is evidenced by thousands upon thousands of allusions, adaptations and quotations of the Old and New Testament texts by the early church fathers. Reading through the church fathers, the modern reader is impressed and humbled with their deep familiarity with the biblical material.<sup>38</sup>

Argument 6. God could not have free will unless he could change

*Problem.* Open theists argue that only a being who can change has free will. God would not be truly free to do what he wants if he were unchanging. God must be able to change his course to be truly free. Therefore, he can change.

*Response.* God did not have to act the way he did. Classical theism says God could have done otherwise (hence, God has free will). But once God wills something, it must necessarily come to pass. God made unchangeable decisions from eternity (in one single act). But it was not necessary for him to will the way he did.

Argument 7. Creation requires changes in God

*Problem.* Open theists argue that the creation event shows that God changes because at one point there was no universe, then God created the universe. Does not that mean there was a change with God?

*Response.* It is true that God was not related to the world before creation, and after, he was. But the change of relation is from the perspective of creation, not God. There was no

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<sup>38</sup> One online database has shown 12,517 references between the New Testament the early church fathers (admittedly unverified and containing errors). See Peter Kirby, "E-catena: Compiled Allusions to the NT in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," Early Christian Writings, accessed December 8, 2019, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/e-catena/>. Others are "building an exhaustive online index of biblical quotations and allusions in Early Christian Literature" which currently has 270,000 scientifically verified references, with an additional 100,000 unchecked references. See Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, "Presentation," BiblIndex, accessed December 8, 2019, <http://www.biblindex.mom.fr/presentation>.

change in God any more than a person walking by a pillar changes the pillar. Why was there no change in God? The answer is that his creation was from nothing (*ex nihilo*). God did not create the world out of himself (*ex deo*) which would have been a change in God. But God remained transcendent (beyond and distinct) from the world. Relational change happens at salvation as well. When a person is saved, they change in relation to God, but God does not change.

### **Practical Take-Aways**

Christians can take comfort in the fact that God does not change. Because God does not change, all the following practical take-aways are true.

*We can trust the Bible.* Since God cannot learn (because learning is a change) and knows all things, prophecy cannot fail. This means that God’s prophecies are not ‘best guesses’ as the open theists suggest, but they are certain knowledge of future events. As a result, all prophecy—and the Bible itself—is infallible (not capable of being broken). This was precisely Jesus’ view of Scripture in Matthew 5:18 when he said, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

*We can trust God’s promises.* Because God does not change in nature or purpose, we know he will fulfill his immutable counsel and will (cf., Heb. 6:17). We can therefore rejoice with the psalmist because God has said, “My mercy I will keep for him forever... My covenant shall stand firm... I will not utterly take from him, Nor allow My faithfulness to fail. My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips... I will not lie...” (Ps. 89:28-35).

*We can ask God for specific guidance.* Since God is immutable, he knows the future and does not have to wait and learn. Therefore, it is good to know we can come to him for specific advice on who to marry, which job to accept, which degree to study in school, and so forth.

*We can be sure of our own salvation.* Since God does not pass through time, he already knows all and calls those who are his (Rom. 8:30). We can join Paul in saying we are “confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:5-6)



*We have a solid foundation for service.* God's immovability becomes the basis of our unswerving devotion to him. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Cor. 15:58)

### **Conclusion**

Open theism says God changes, learns, takes risks, and adapts his plans around how humans respond. Classic theism has long taught that God cannot change (God is immutable). This paper argued that immutability from classic theism is reasonable, scriptural and has been the unanimous position of the church from the beginning. There is no good reason to depart from this important understanding of God's nature. Furthermore, immutability is connected to all of God's other metaphysical attributes: self-existence, necessity, perfection, eternity, simplicity, infinity, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. To deny God immutability would be to deny these other important attributes as well. The result is a much different God than Christians have known throughout history.

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