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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2006

Attributes of God (III): Immutability

We continue our [series](#) on the attributes of God with another of the famous NOTs: **immutability**. It seems like nowadays the language of immutability is found mostly on the covers of get-rich-quick books: "The 7 Immutable Laws of Real Estate Acquisition" and so on. But immutability has deep roots in the philosophical tradition. The idea that God is immutable comes from the contrast between him as creator and us as his creatures. For us, the norm (and bane) of our existence is that we are in perpetual flux and change. The secure bedrock or foundation of this chaotic creation, however, is the creator who is himself not subject to such flux and change. He is immutable, or **not-changing**.

The significance of immutability extends beyond the mere preference for continuity over change. As we learned in our [first installment](#) concerning divine simplicity, all of God's attributes characterize his being *in toto*. Thus the attribute of immutability conditions all the other divine attributes, such as love and justice and mercy. So the point is not only that God is immutable, but also that his character is immutable. God's love is unchanging, his justice is unchanging, etc.

This seems true enough on the surface, but there are some problems. I will outline one common objection, outline a possible response, then offer a thought experiment that may offer an alternative view of divine immutability.

Common Objection:

It seems that God is not immutable. Look at Scripture. God is repeatedly said to "change his mind." God is involved in history. He responds to his creatures. The praiseworthiness of the God of Israel is precisely his mutability: his ability to adapt in relationship to his beloved people. Immutability is a Greek philosophical concept that should be shed from a Biblical understanding of God.

Possible Response:

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This objection bears witness to the deep truth that the God of Israel, the God who became human, is God precisely as the God who is involved in this history of his covenant. However, the doctrine of immutability, properly understood, need not be rejected wholesale from a Biblically-rooted doctrine of God. Immutability speaks to the **constancy** of God. In the Biblical idiom, God is faithful to his promises. Even when we are unfaithful, God is faithful to his covenant. Is this not a laudable characteristic of God? Can such a belief really be dismissed as a "Greek philosophical concept" foreign to Biblical faith? Is not the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, precisely the God who is faithful to his promises in history. The term "immutability" bears witness to the fact that God's involvement in history doesn't undermine his trustworthiness. He is trustworthy within history.

Alternative View:

I think this response is a sufficient reply to the objection as stated. However, the form of the reply reveals that there is more than one way to talk about immutability. First and foremost, there is the question of the means by which we come to know whether God is immutable. Is immutability the mere negation from the creator of the mutability of creation? Or is it a characteristic of the history of God's self-revelation in history? Which is the **more reliable method**? This question, of course, applies to all the NOTs. But it is still a good question to ask.

More specific to immutability is the question of the referent. When we say God is immutable, does this refer to his *nature* or to his *will*? Are we saying God's nature is so constructed that he is incapable of change? Or are we saying that God's will is immutable, insofar as what he wills corresponds to what he does? Here is where the thought experiment comes in. **What if immutability is a characteristic of divine willing?** God wills to be certain way, and he is that way. God wills a covenant history, and it is enacted by his initiative. God wills a law to guide the life of his covenant-partners, and it is upheld (even in the face of our willing against it). God wills to become human, and so it comes to pass despite the apparent logical difficulty of an incarnation. The immutability of God's will seems to secure God's action in history, in contrast to the immutability of God's nature which seems to contradict (or at least condition) God's action in history.

Of course, even if this thought experiment succeeds, the question remains open: in addition to the immutability of his will, is God's nature also immutable? But this raises a deeper question: **does God will his nature?** Does God decide what he will be like? Or is his character defined by something else (logical deduction, contrast with

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the world, etc.)? And if God is so defined, is this God really God? I must admit that an appeal to God's will when speaking of his attributes can be a bit scary. But it may be the way to go if the God of whom we are speaking is really God and not just a figment of our imagination (or, perhaps worse, the result of an equation).

Any Thoughts?

Is my initial explanation of divine immutability clear?

Do you concur with the spirit of the common objection?

Does the reply satisfy the concerns of the objection while retaining an affirmation of divine immutability?

What do you think of my reformulation of divine immutability along the lines of God's will rather than his nature? Is this a wise road to go down, or are their consequences that I have not yet appreciated? What might those consequences be?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [7:12 PM](#)

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5 Comments:

At [7:43 PM, October 19, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I am reading your blog on the attributes of God and Chris Bounds blog as my devotions this month--Is that legal?

At [11:05 AM, October 21, 2006](#), [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

The thing I love about good theology (even in Scripture, for that matter, if any of it may be termed 'theology') is that it forces me to believe God in a way I hadn't before. It is in this way audacious, but I suppose that is because our God is bold to break into broken humanity to make us more like him as we draw near to being one with him.

At [3:30 PM, October 22, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Another wonderful continuation of this series here, John.

I'm glad you included the common objection, and your alternate response.

I'm struck by the way the "not's" so far fit together. Is there a fundamental desire in humanity to see God as NOT like us or to see him in antropomorphic terms. So far--the God you describe (and that Christendom has accepted) is the Wholly Other who is not like us in any way.

I'm wondering now about being created in His image--when I am so apparently compound, limited and mutable.

[The Ethics of God \(Bible Brain Busters\)](#)

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Perhaps this is the great difference between our God and other gods of history--so far we haven't made our God in our image much. This God is no Zeus.

Of course, then came Jesus.

-David

At [10:10 AM, October 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Dave,

You are right that a common support for the "way of negation" that we've been follower here is that it prevents us from making God in our own image. However, we might wonder whether defining God in CONTRAST to us is really just the other side of the coin of defining God in COMPARISON to us. Both methods take us as the starting point. Some of my revisions suggested try to move from a different starting point (in God's revelation of himself in Israel fulfilled in Jesus Christ) while still retaining the grain of truth in these "metaphysical" attributes. We'll see if it works.

Do note that in November we will move on to the OMNIs, which no longer argue by the way of negation (God is other than us) but by the way of preeminence (God is greater than us). We'll have to deal with some of the same problems here to, but from a different point of entry.

At [8:25 AM, October 24, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Yes, I realize you're heading to the Omni's next... but (here I'm getting ahead of this thread) I believe the EXTENT of the Omni's are such that they place qualities of God so far beyond us that they are no longer even of the same kind.

Yes... Humanity may be the starting point, but my presence is right here as I sit and type in my office... and being present everywhere is not simply more of the same... it is much more than I can even imagine.

Okay, I'll stop now. Just noticing a bit of a trend I hadn't before. In some ways it's encouraging to know that our God is not the divine reincarnation of ourselves.

I'm also wondering if it would be helpful to extrapolate the extent to which Jesus Christ contained in all the Not's and Omni's in his person while walking the earth doing the things found in Matthew.

But again, I'm getting way out ahead of you. I can't help myself with the implicationary thinking.

Immutability. Yes. Agreed.

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