

God and Change

Millard Erickson

Millard Erickson is Research Professor of Theology at Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas. Among his numerous writings are *Christian Theology*, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, and *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*. This article will appear as a chapter in Erickson's forthcoming *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Baker).

The question of the relationship of God to change has taken on a special significance in the latter part of the twentieth century. The old Greek question of the one and the many has been given an added impetus in our day. One reason is simply that change, at least in terms of cultural change, has become commonplace in our thinking. Whole books are devoted to the subject of change, such as Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* and John Naisbitt's *Megatrends*. The change is the result of many factors. The accelerating capability of technology has meant that technological changes are more radical, more frequent, and farther-reaching. The knowledge explosion, together with radically improved means of communication, results in changes being spread over wide areas rapidly. Modern physics increasingly is coming to view reality not as static and fixed, but as dynamic and growing. Coupled with this is the rise and spread of process philosophy, with its emphasis upon the basic unit of reality as being not the fixed substance, but event, something much more evanescent.

Interestingly, much of conservative theology has not really risen to the challenge to the traditional doctrine of divine immutability. Although there has been a real outpouring of new systematic theology texts from conservative theologians in the past fifteen years, most of them really do not give much attention to this subject. Among the exceptions are Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*¹ and Carl F. H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority*.² Both volumes give major attention with respect to change and permanence

in God's nature to the challenge of process theology.

At least upon the surface, orthodox theology has much at stake in this issue, for it has traditionally maintained the doctrine of divine immutability. By this it meant that although everything else in the universe appears to undergo change, God does not. He is the unchanging eternal one. In light of the recent developments mentioned above, however, this topic needs fresh scrutiny and contemporary restatement.

Basis of the Doctrine of Immutability

A. Biblical

One source from which the doctrine of immutability has drawn inspiration is the Scriptures. Several passages seem to bear testimony to the fact that God is the unchanging one. Three passages in particular have come in for attention by theologians. The first is in Psalm 102, where the context is the discussion of God's creation of all that is, and the contrast between him in his unchanging character, and everything else, which is so subject to alteration and decay.

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end (vs. 25-27).

Here the psalmist seems concerned to demonstrate to his readers that they need not be concerned as they see all that surrounds them deteriorating and changing.

God is not like this. He remains the same, and he is endless and ageless.

A second passage frequently cited is Malachi 3:6. The context there is God's displeasure with his people, Israel. They have failed to live up to their part of the covenant that he made with them. He reminds them, however, that he is faithful to his covenant, both in terms of blessing as he has done in the past, when that is what they deserve, and of judging, when that is the proper response to their actions. As he has been in the past, he also is in the present: "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." The emphasis is upon God's unchanging action in the same situations, but underlying this is the fact that God is constant in his dealings. While there is not an explicit statement about metaphysical change and immutability, there is some implication that this is the basis of the behavioral consistency.

The final passage for our consideration is from the New Testament book of James: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (1:17). James is attempting to encourage his readers by pointing out that all good things come originally from God. These good gifts can be expected to continue to come and to be good, because the Father's character does not change at all. Of the three passages, this one seems to be the most directly addressing the issue of the constancy of God's being, in terms of not undergoing alteration.

B. Philosophical

The other source from which the doctrine of God's immutability derives is philosophy. As we noted, the earliest re-

corded philosophical treatises which we have are from Greek philosophy, where there was early debate over whether reality was fundamentally fixed and permanent or changing and temporary. The eventual solution was to divide reality into two parts, one of which was changing, and the other unchanging. This unchanging component frequently played a role in the Greek philosopher's metaphysic comparable to that of God in a theistic view.

The two major types of Greek philosophy, at least during the period of influence upon Christian theology, were Platonic and Aristotelian. Each had its own version of immutability of the supreme principle. The Platonic variety was first, both in terms of the development of the philosophy and the period of influence exerted upon Christian theology.

The major discussion of this specific topic is found in the second book of Plato's *Republic*, in a dialogue between Socrates and Adeimantus. Socrates notes that all change of a thing is effected either by that thing itself, or by something external to it, and that the best of things are least liable to be changed by external influences. This is true of the influence upon persons of meats and drinks, upon plants by winds or sun, and upon such manufactured things as furniture, houses and garments. Everything which is good is least likely to suffer change from without. Since God is in every way perfect, he cannot be altered by the influence of external things. Might he not, however, asks Socrates, will to change himself? The possibility, however, is more apparent than real. Since God is perfect, not deficient in any quality, he cannot possibly change for the better, being already the ultimate good. If he is to undergo change, it must be for the worse. Why, however, would God

or even a human ever will to change for the worse? Socrates' conclusion, with which Adeimantus agrees, is: "Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every god remains absolutely and forever in his own form."³

There is a broader feature of Plato's understanding of reality which underlies this conception of immutability. For us, influenced by modern empirical science, the visible or tangible, the perceptible, is most real, and the intangible things are less real. Plato understood reality in the exact opposite way. He expounds this in several places in his writings, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in this same *Republic*. He develops the scheme in his analogy of the divided line. The lower half of the line is the visible, and the other half (although the parts are of unequal length) is the intelligible. The lower part is in turn divided into a part composed of images, including shadows, reflections, and the like, and another part which consists of things which we see, and everything growing and made. The upper part of the overall line consists of invisible but intelligible matters. The lower part consists of ideals or forms, such as the absolute triangle and square which geometricians use. The higher part of this upper part of the line is the realm of idea of the good, where, unlike the hypotheses dealt with in geometry, one rises above hypotheses.⁴

The point is that the objects in the lower realm, subject to change, are less real than are the ideas or forms in the upper half of reality, which are absolute or pure and so do not change. While there has been much speculation among students of Plato as to the exact relationship in his thought of God and of the idea of the Good, it is apparent that permanence and fixity are

positively correlated with reality, in his understanding. This analogy of the divided line is followed immediately by the myth of the cave. Here, persons are seated, bound from their childhood by chains which prevent them from turning and looking behind them. They can only see the wall in front of them. Behind them, unseen by them, are persons, moving about, and behind these, a fire which casts its light upon these figures so that shadows of them and their movements are cast on the wall in front of the prisoners. Seeing only the shadows and never that which casts the shadows, they believe that the shadows are the reality. Actually, however, the shadows are inadequate representations of the real characters behind them. Again, the visible and the changing are less real than that of which they are images, and especially than the fire whose illumination makes it possible to see the shadows.⁵

Aristotle's approach to the matter is as different from that of Plato as is his general metaphysic from Plato's. Aristotle worked with a scheme in which potentiality and actuality were of great importance to understanding change. Change is from potentiality to actuality, when something becomes actually that which it is only potentially. He established, through his argument from motion, that for any motion to take place, there must be some unmoved mover. Change of the type that we term motion is understood in terms of potentiality and actuality, for something can only move when it is capable of being elsewhere than where it previously was. God is immovable because he is not potentially somewhere other than where he is. This is also true of other types of change besides motion. God, being fully actual, cannot change,

because he has no potentiality not already fully realized.⁶

The philosophical arguments regarding the changelessness of God have also been developed more recently. Three of these are quite closely related. Each presupposes the basic doctrines of the creation and providence worked by God. The argument advanced then becomes almost a practical one: such a view of God cannot be maintained unless he is changeless. In other words, the argument is that certain activities of God, such as creation and providence, are inconsistent with the idea of change in him.

P. T. Geach has raised the question of the changelessness of God as it bears upon the question of origins, both of himself and of other things. He contends that the question "Who made God?" does not apply to a changeless God. Such would presumably have always been as he is now. If, however, God changes, then he is one among the many beings in the world. Even if it were possible to think of such a God as causing everything else, which he does not believe it is possible to think consistently, he would still, like all other changing things, have to be caused. He says, "So I dismiss any 're-thinking' of God's changelessness; it can lead only to an alien and incoherent view of the Divine."⁷

A somewhat similar argument has been advanced by Keith Ward. He contends that divine changelessness is essential to divine providence, considered especially as preservation. If God is subject to change, then he might cease to be, or to be the sustaining ground of the world. Thus we have a guarantee of the stability, regularity and ordered continuity of temporal change only if there is a changeless God. The problem arises both on a theoretical and a practical basis. If God is

changing, then he is not the God of preservation and providence. And if there is no such guarantor of the change in the world, we cannot really relate to the world on the basis of such expectations.⁸

A final philosophical argument for immutability has been advanced by Geach. He contends that the confidence in God and his promises that Christians have can only be experienced and justified on the basis of the immutability of God. This guarantees that God can and will fulfill his promises. If this is not the case, then Christianity as it has ordinarily been understood is destroyed.⁹

To summarize the several philosophical arguments:

1) Because God is perfect, he cannot change, because all change is either increase or decrease, improvement or decline, and perfection can neither be improved upon nor lost.

2) Because God is pure actuality, there can be no change in him, for all change is actualization of potentialities which are present.

3) If God could change, he would not be uncaused, and therefore could not be the cause of anything else either.

4) If God could change, we could not have confidence in his preserving all things that are, since his ability to do so might decline or alter.

5) If God could change we could not have confidence in him to keep his promises, thus losing an essential component of Christianity.

Definitions of Change

There are many different definitions of change or varieties of change. It is helpful to look briefly at these varieties.

1) There is change that might be called decline or deterioration. This is the loss, either partially or entirely, of positive quali-

ties, or the acquisition of negative qualities.

2) There is change that can be referred to as growth or improvement. This is the opposite of change of type one above.

3) There is locational change, the movement from one place to another.

4) Relational change involves no change in the thing itself, but in the relationship to another object or person.

5) Temporal change is aging, not in the sense of the deterioration that we usually associate with growing old, but merely as the accumulation of a great number of years in existence.

6) Alteration is qualitative change, modifying the attributes or characteristics of that which changes. This could, however, be alteration which supplements, rather than contradicts, the qualities already possessed.

7) Reversal is alteration of such a radical nature as to involve actual contradiction of qualities previously possessed.

8) Change of mind involves coming to hold different beliefs or attitudes, or making different decisions than previously.

9) Change of action is a matter of behaving differently, or taking different action than previously, again either radically different and contradictory or supplementary and harmonious.

10) Change of knowledge is the acquisition of information or truth which one did not previously possess. It could involve displacement either of ignorance or of error.

Which, if any, of these types of change can be appropriately attributed to God, and which are inconsistent with the concept of God or the biblical teaching regarding him? And which of these are under dispute in the current discussions?

1) Since God presumably is not spatial

or spatially located, the sense of change as movement from one place to another does not apply.

2) Some cases of relational change are really not changes at all in the subject. The other, the object to which this subject is related, may have changed, thus changing the relationship. So, for example, if I am taller than my teenage friend and I remain the same height but he grows to be taller than I, I am now shorter than he, but this is not really a change in me. To be sure, the relationship can change through my becoming shorter than before and thus shorter than my friend. It would seem that change of the former type can be attributed to God without there really being any change in him.

3) Change as decline would certainly be genuine change in God, but this type of change is scarcely being argued for by any theologians today.

4) Change as increase or growth would also seem to be genuine change. Process theologians claim that God is changing in this sense.

5) Temporal change, or aging, is not a possibility if one holds that God is timelessly eternal. While those who think of God as of infinite duration within time might seem to be able to reconcile this kind of change with their concept of God, that may be questionable, since a God who is already and always has been infinitely old could scarcely somehow become older.

6) Alteration, in terms of either the strong or the weak sense, clearly conflicts with the more traditional view of God. It is under dispute at the present time, however.

7) Change of action seems to be clearly taught by Scripture. For example, God delivered the people of Israel from Pharaoh at one point in history, and sent his son to the cross at another. Whether

such actions represent real change or are only consistent outworkings of one unchanging and unchanging divine nature is debatable, however. To some extent, the answer here depends on the conclusion to the next variety below.

8) Change of mind is the issue currently being considerably debated, with not only process theologians but also free will theists claiming that God changes his mind and plan, often in response to the actions of human beings.

9) Change of knowledge, coming to know something he did not know before would seem to be change in God, enlarging what he possessed within himself previously. This is also currently under dispute.

Arguments Against Immutability

One argument being advanced most vigorously is the contention that the biblical description of God is of a being who changes, in his attitudes, his decisions, and his actions.

A. Repentance passages. The first of these is Exodus 32:12. There Moses implores God to change his mind and his actions, not allowing his people to perish at the hands of the Egyptians. He says to Jehovah, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people." Moses certainly seemed to think God capable of changing his commitment to a course of action which presumably he had decided upon.

Another significant instance is found in Jeremiah 26, where the possibility of God changing his mind is mentioned. So Jehovah says to Jeremiah, "This is what the LORD says: 'Stand in the courtyard of the

LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done'" (vv. 2, 3). This sounds like a clear declaration that God intends to bring judgment, but that he will change his mind, or literally repent, of that action. When Jeremiah goes to preach to the people, he repeats the message, and says the same thing about God that he has said of himself: "Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: 'The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you'" (vv. 12, 13).

A final example of God's repenting of judgment that he plans to bring is the case of Nineveh. The message which Jehovah gave Jonah to preach in Nineveh and which he finally did preach was a categorical statement of judgment: "On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned' (Jon. 3:4). When the king heard the message, he commanded everyone to turn from their wicked ways, and to show their repentance through the use of sackcloth and ashes, for he reasoned: 'Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish'" (v. 9). This indeed proved to be the case: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (v. 10).

Nor is God's change of mind restricted to repenting of evil that he has purposed to do. The opposite change also takes place. In Genesis 6, God comes to regret having created humans, and resolves to negate his creative action by wiping out wicked persons. The Scripture writer reports, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them'" (Gen. 6:5-7). This appears to be a clear indication of God reversing his plan and doing what negates, at least with respect to some persons, his earlier life-giving endeavor.

Upon their surface, these passages seem clearly to indicate a change of mind on God's part. Certainly, such a God must be subject to change, at least in terms of attitude, will, and intention, resulting in change of action from what he has already done and indicated he was about to do. Thus, for example, Richard Rice takes these passages quite literally.

The biblical descriptions of divine repentance combine elements of emotion and decision to provide a striking picture of the divine reality. They indicate that God is intimately involved in human affairs and that the course of human events has profound effects on him. . . God works toward his objectives in history in dynamic interaction with human beings. Their experiences and decisions affect his experiences and decisions. So important is the notion of divine repentance in biblical thought that it deserves to be re-

garded as one of the central themes of Scripture. It represents 'an important interpretive vehicle for understanding the divine activity throughout the canon.'¹⁰

Rice does not think this a problem in light of the sovereign nature of God, or a contradiction of his nature. Rather than being isolated incidents, the accounts of divine repentance are actually characteristic of God. He repents, not despite the fact that he is God, but because he is God. It is his very nature to repent, or to relent of action he had planned to take, in light of human action and reaction. Rice finds repentance, or a willingness to turn from his determinations and actions, a defining characteristic of God, as found in lists of such qualities in Exodus 34:6-7; Jonah 4:2; and Joel 2:13.¹¹

We cannot conclude our consideration of the question of divine repentance or change of mind at this point, however. For another set of texts seems to indicate that God does not, and indeed, cannot, repent, or change his mind. One of these is Numbers 23:18-20: "Then he uttered his oracle: 'Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor. 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? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it.'" A second is quite similar, in 1 Samuel 15:28-29: "Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.'"

Rice recognizes the difficulty of these two passages, but maintains that they do

not ultimately teach the traditional doctrine of divine immutability, or mean that God does not and cannot change his mind. He negates such an interpretation of these passages on four considerations:

1) Repent is used here as a synonym for “lie.” Thus, the passages are not denying that God changes his mind, but rather, that he never deliberately says he will do something while fully intending to do something different.

2) These statements pertain to specific promises of what God intends to do. They do not declare general principles.

3) The assurance that God does not repent in these specific circumstances presupposes the general possibility that he does or can repent. It is not that God will not repent in such cases because he cannot, but because he does not choose to do so.

4) One of the very chapters (1 Sam. 15) that affirm that God does not repent actually says twice that he does repent (v. 11, 35). “So,” says Rice, “the scope of this denial obviously is very limited. It is not a statement of general principle.”¹²

Is this rebuttal of contradictory passages successful, however? Although Rice makes a point of asserting that there are only two such passages, compared with more than forty that say that God does repent, he has not taken into consideration all of the pertinent passages. While counting every conceivable passage that asserts that God repents, he has disregarded several other passages on the other side. Two of these refer to God’s resolve with respect to Melchizedek: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps 110:4); “Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a

priest forever’” (He 7:20b-21). Another passage affirming the unchanging purpose and commitment of God is found in Jeremiah 4:27, 28: “This is what the LORD says: ‘The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back.’” Finally, Ezekiel delivers a similar message to Israel: “‘I the LORD have spoken. The time has come for me to act. I will not hold back; I will not have pity, nor will I relent. You will be judged according to your conduct and your actions,’ declares the Sovereign LORD” (24: 14).

Interestingly, these passages seem more susceptible to the interpretation Rice places upon the other two, namely, that they could refer to God’s particular purpose and action in these specific cases. That is less the case with the passages that he does treat, however. There the fact that God will not repent is tied to the fact that he is God, not a human. What he does or does not do is a result of who and what he is. The statements contradict Rice’s interpretation. One of the principles for determining whether a particular or situational statement is to be understood as universal or as only applying to that situation is whether the statement is made dependent upon or is supported by a universal or doctrinal statement. Here, that is indeed the case. God’s action derives from who and what he is.

Rice’s first point also deserves some scrutiny. He does not support his contention with any discussion of the Hebrew words involved. Interestingly, the linguistic data do not support his contention of synonymy. In each of the cases (Nu 23:19 and two occurrences in 1 Sa 15:29), the word for repent is the common one, *naham*.

This basically means “to be sorry, to console oneself,” and is an onomatopoeic word used to mean “to breathe pantingly, of a horse.” In the *hithpael*, as here, it means, “rue, repent of.”¹³ In the former case, the word translated “lie” is *kazov*, which means basically, “to lie, to tell a lie, to disappoint or fail.”¹⁴ In the Samuel passage, the word translated “lie” is *shakar*, which means, “to do or deal falsely.” Linguistically, *naham* scarcely can be considered a synonym of either of these words. It may be that Rice is claiming that there is Hebrew parallelism in Numbers 23:19, so that the two statements are equivalent, but he does not say that, and this does not really seem to be poetry. Of further interest in 1 Samuel 15:29 is the word *natzach* which can mean either “pre-eminent” or “enduring.” Many translators and commentators, basing their interpretation upon a cognate meaning of “illustrious” or “pre-eminent” in Aramaic rather than that of “pure” or “reliable” or “innocent” in Arabic and Ethiopic, translate this as “the glory of Israel.” Brown, Driver, Briggs also indicate that the word means “enduring, everlastingness, perpetuity,”¹⁵ and Keil and Delitzsch believe that in the context, the idea of “permanence” and “unchangeableness” make the best sense. They say the word

signifies constancy, endurance, then confidence, trust, because a man can trust in what is constant. This meaning is to be retained here, where the word is used as a name for God, and not the meaning *gloria*, which is taken in 1 Chron. xxix.11 from the Aramaean usage of speech, and would be altogether unsuitable here, where the context suggests the idea of unchangeableness. For a man’s repentance or regret arises from his changeableness, from the fluctuations in his desires and actions. This is never the case with God; consequently He is *the unchangeable One, in whom Israel can*

*trust, since He does not lie or deceive, or repent of His purposes.*¹⁶

On the basis of all these considerations, we must judge Rice’s second point inadequate. Rice’s third point is also questionable. He affirms that the statement that God will not repent assumes the general point that God does or can repent. That does not seem to follow, however. The assumption or hidden premise is that, “If God promises that he will not repent in a given case, that means that he can or does at times.” What is the evidence for this contention? It would seem equally possible that God is simply affirming that he has not changed, and just as he does not repent or alter his behavior, he has not and will not here. This is given as a practical encouragement, not a technical theological statement. Finally, what of Rice’s contention that 1 Samuel 15, which contains the statement in verse 29 that God does not repent, actually includes two statements (vs. 11, 35) that God did repent? Interestingly, Rice does not wrestle with the apparent contradiction. Logically, at least three possible interpretations of this phenomenon could be offered:

1) The statements in verses 11, 35 and that in verse 29 simply are in contradiction and must be understood as such.

2) The statement in verse 29 must be interpreted in light of those in verses 11 and 35.

3) The statements in verses 11 and 35 are to be interpreted in light of verse 28.

It would seem, in light of the consideration offered earlier, that the narrative statements (about what God did) should probably be interpreted in light of the doctrinal statement about what and who God is. In any event, Rice’s sliding past the issue is disturbing. It should be noted

that the major sources cited in support of his view are not persons usually identified as evangelicals (Fretheim and Knight). Non-evangelicals do not necessarily feel a responsibility to reconcile biblical statements. Perhaps non-evangelical assumptions about the nature of biblical authority have crept in, or perhaps Rice is not conscious of or forthright about his biblical presuppositions.

What needs to be asked, however, is whether this rather literal approach to the discussion of the divine willing and acting is carried through consistently, or what would be the results were we to do so. There are certain statements made in Scripture about God which, if taken literally, would produce some interesting results for the doctrine of God. For example, there is the statement by Jehovah in Deuteronomy 5:9, 10, “for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Or take Malachi’s statement, attributed to God: “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals” (1:2b-3), and repeated by Paul: “Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’” (Ro 9:13). What would be the effect upon the doctrine of God of interpreting these passages with the same literalistic hermeneutic employed on the repentance passages? Interestingly, Rice does not mention such data.

Is there a better way of understanding these statements about God’s repentance? What if we look upon those promises and warnings as being conditional in nature, so that the comprehensive form of state-

ment would be: “I will reward obedience and righteousness, and condemn or punish disobedience and unrighteousness.” Then, when God moves from promise to punishment, it is not because he has in any way deviated from his original intention, but that the recipients of those pronouncements have changed. This means that the changes to be found in God in these cases are actually relational changes. God is related differently to these persons than he had been, but not because he has changed, rather, it is they who have changed. Relational change, however, is considered by most philosophers not to be real change in the subject concerned.

To be sure, there are difficulties for the position we have outlined. One would wish, on this view, that there were not the direct statements that picture God as changing and repenting. One must, however, attempt to account for all of the relevant data, not simply those which fit one’s theory. This view is able to take into account more of the data, with less distortion and greater consistency, than is the alternative view.

B. Knowledge passages. Several passages seem to indicate that God has discovered something that he did not know. For example, after testing Abraham in connection with the command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, God says to him, “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen. 22:12). The clear impression one would get if coming to this passage without any other antecedent conception of God is that God needed this test to determine what Abraham would do, since he did not already have that information.

Much of this consideration will be examined in our discussion of omniscience, especially as it concerns foreknowledge. Here we must ask ourselves whether omniscience really is compatible with immutability. Norman Kretzmann has argued that these two are mutually contradictory. For if God is omniscient, he knows all things. In a changing world, therefore, God's knowledge changes. And to know the changing, to have one's knowledge change, is to change oneself.¹⁷

To be sure, God knows something different today than he did yesterday, namely, what is happening currently. To take a variation on a motif employed by various philosophers, God does not simultaneously know, "Richard Nixon is president of the United States," and "Richard Nixon is not president of the United States." Since God knows truth and makes no errors in his knowledge, he knows the first statement from noon on Monday, January 20, 1969 to noon on Friday, August 9, 1974. Before and after those times he knows the second statement. Does this mean then that he has changed?

Suppose, however, that God has always known, and perhaps has always intended, that Richard Nixon would be president during this period of time. If this is the case, then he has always known, "Richard Nixon will be president of the United States from January, 1969 (reckoned on the Gregorian calendar) to August, 1974." He also, presumably knows what time it is on earth, i.e., what is currently occurring there. Thus, at a given time, he knows, "it is now exactly 12:34:56 EST, July 22, 1937;" "it is now exactly 16:32:19, MST, November 4, 1962;" etc. At the moment of this writing, he knows "it is now exactly 15:14:31, CDT, July 16, 1996." He also knows that it is true that

"Erickson is typing at his computer keyboard while looking out the window at the lake." But the content of his knowledge has not really changed. It appears that what has changed is something external to God, and he is conscious of that. This is, in other words, not greatly different from relational change.¹⁸

This observation grows out of P. T. Geach's discussion of what he has called the "Cambridge criterion," because it frequently occurs in discussions by Cambridge philosophers. According to this criterion, something changes if some predicate applies to it at one time and not another. He notes, however, that something may have a change of attributes without itself having really changed in the usual sense of the word.¹⁹ Thus, as Swinburne illustrates, Socrates may at one time be thought about by Smith and at another time not be thought about by Smith, but without Socrates really having changed.²⁰

How does this analysis apply to the current question, however? When God knows something about someone and that person changes, is it not God who changes, just as in the preceding reference Smith changes, as the knower, but Socrates does not? Yet a little closer examination may negate this supposition. For although God now knows that Smith is so and so, he has always known that this would be the case. In a sense, the content of God's knowledge has not changed, only the tense of the verb.

What, however, of the question of changes in God's action, so that he does something at one time different than what he does at another? How are we to regard this? Does this not indicate some change in God? For example, at one point God looks with apparent favor upon his children, the people of Israel, and delivers

them from the injustice and oppression at the hands of Egypt. Then, after their long-standing indifference, disobedience, and even rebellion, Jehovah allowed them to be taken captive and carried off into a foreign land. When, however, there had been a sufficient period of this experience, God intervened to bring his people back from this captivity. Obviously, these were different actions by the same God at different times. Can we in some appropriate fashion argue that God has changed because he is acting differently?

One who thinks so is Steven Davis. He notes that the God revealed in Scripture does change in some ways. There are obvious cases in which he is at one point angry with someone who has sinned, and then at a later point forgives the person, who has repented. He maintains that this should be considered change, but that it is not significant to the doctrine of immutability, as biblically maintained. It is only incompatible with the strong notion of immutability, of God who does not change at all. He believes that the classical doctrine of immutability was designed to protect belief in a God who was faithful in keeping his promises, who did not act arbitrarily or capriciously. That faith can be maintained while allowing the sort of change we have spoken of here.

One way of responding to this question would be to frame it in terms of the question posed by Plantinga, "Does God have a nature?" If he does, then one possible response would be to say that God's actions change, but that what he is, as contrasted with what he does, does not change. There is another way of approaching the question, however. That is in terms of what it actually means to act. What if God has, from all eternity, chosen to take a certain action? If, then, the working out of this

within time takes different forms at different points, can we say that there has been a change in God? Richard Swinburne considers this possibility and feels that such a conception would indeed solve this problem, but at a high cost. He comments:

This difficulty could be avoided if one said that all that God brings about he has chosen 'from all eternity' to bring about. The effects (e.g. the fall of Jerusalem, the fall of Babylon) which God brings about occur at particular times (587 B. C. and 538 B. C. respectively). Yet God has always meant them to occur at those times—i.e. there was no time at which God did not intend Jerusalem to fall in 587 B.C. When 587 B. C. arrived there was no change in God—the arrival of the moment put into effect the intention which God always had. This view would need to be made more sophisticated to deal with the suggestion that God's bringing out one state of affairs, say A, rather than another, say B, was due to his reaction to the behaviour of men (e.g. men may have behaved badly and so God gave them drought instead of rain). The view in question would have to claim that in such circumstances 'from all eternity' God had intended that A-occur-if-men did so-and-so and B-occur-if-men did such-and-such.²¹

Swinburne does not consider this an attractive solution, however, for it creates more problems than it solves. Such a God would be, he maintains, a very lifeless thing. He would not be a person who "reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because he chooses to there and then." Yet such a person, he feels, is the kind of God found in the Old Testament, which is the foundation of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.²²

It would appear that performing different actions at different times is not an indication of change in a person. Human beings do different things at different

times and in different situations, but without being thought to have changed. It is only if a person acts in a way inconsistent with the earlier actions, or acts so differently that the whole pattern or tenor of the person's life appears changed, that we speak of the person as having changed.

Can this be said of Jehovah? Is it not rather the case that God's actions throughout the span of redemptive history are consistent with, and indeed are the unfolding of, the basic pattern he has revealed regarding himself from the very beginning? Examine the giving of the law, for example, where God's moral character and expectations of humans are spelled out in some detail. There is the threat of judgment upon those who fail to heed God's commands, and a promise of mercy and forgiveness for those who refuse. Some have seen a change in the God described in Scripture from the Old Testament to the New, and Marcion even posited that there were actually two different Gods involved. Yet, there was always provision for the forgiveness of sin, mediated through the sacrificial system. Nor was there a change from salvation being by works to salvation by grace through faith. Paul seems to make quite clear in Galatians 3:6-9 that Abraham was not saved by his works but by his faith, and presumably this was true of the rest of the Old Testament saints as well.

It appears that the strong objection to immutability has been motivated by a reaction to the Greek philosophical conceptions of static immobility. That kind of God, in the Aristotelian fashion, does not really act, and because thinking about what changes would itself entail change, does not really think about anything except himself. It is this static conception that is found objectionable. On these grounds,

virtually any action is deemed change, and consequently, action is basically eliminated. Both those who hold such a view of God and those who reject it define change in such a way that it virtually excludes the idea of any significant activity.

Does immutability require such, however? Is it inconsistent with any action, at all? It appears to me that what we are encountering here is a confusion of stable with static. 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. This dynamic activity, however, is stable, not unstable. His actions are in keeping with his fundamental nature, with his values, plans, and decisions. A human who acts at one time in one way and at another time in another way really can only be deemed to have changed if one or the other of these actions is in conflict with the fundamental values and moral beliefs of the person. There is nothing to lead us to believe that God acts at any point in conflict with his nature. Bear in mind that God is a much more complex being than we are, with beliefs, values, and decisions which take into account infinite possibilities. His plan will therefore be very complex, and may involve a great variety of activity, as it unfolds.

The bigger issue seems to be the question of the constancy of God's nature. Is God actually changing in his essence, growing, altering what he is? Process theology, with its view of God as changing, has basically accepted the presuppositions of modern dynamic philosophy, and in addition holds to a rather radically immanent view of God. Thus, God participates in the same change that characterizes the rest of reality.

Process theology rather openly acknowledges its indebtedness to this mod-

ern dynamic philosophy. Interestingly, although vehemently (and accurately) disavowing the theology of process theologians, the “openness of God” or “free will theism” school of theologians also appear to have adopted the presuppositions of modern dynamic philosophical views of reality. Repeatedly, they criticize the traditional view, or classic theism, for adopting the Greek philosophy of a Plato or an Aristotle, but do not ask what philosophical view underlies their own theology. It may well be that modern dynamic or process philosophy is preferable to Greek metaphysics. That, however, is what must be debated, rather than simply criticizing the latter view, while giving the impression that their view is not based upon an alternative philosophy, but is simply the way things are.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 163-68.
- ² Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, *God Who Stands and Stays*, part one (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 286-94.
- ³ Plato, *The Republic*, II: 381.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, VI: 509-13.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, VII: 514-18.
- ⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII: 5-9 (1071a-1075a).
- ⁷ P. T. Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972) 322.
- ⁸ Keith Ward, *The Concept of God* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1977) 153, 155.
- ⁹ P. T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977) 6.
- ¹⁰ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) 34. The closing quotation is from Terence Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *Horizons in Old Testament Theology* 10 (1988) 56.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the OT* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955) 636-37.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 469.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 663-64.
- ¹⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary of the Books of Samuel* (; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 158.
- ¹⁷ Norman Kretzmann, “Omniscience and Immutability,” *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973) 60-70.
- ¹⁸ Cf. P. T. Geach, *Providence and Evil*, 41.
- ¹⁹ Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 71f.
- ²⁰ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 212-13.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ²² *Ibid.*