

Love and Immutability: A Theological Adventure.

An examination of the nature of God will inevitably draw the mind into considering God in the context of divine love since the Scripture has always represented the existence and acts of God as rooted in divine love that is flawless, pure, and self-sacrificing. This love is perceived first in the reality of the Trinity, in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are ever-glorifying each other. Most fundamentally, the divine love is manifested in God's redemptive attitude toward the sinners. However, modern theological trends, especially the advocates of openness theology, suggest that classical Christian theism, with its focus on divine immutability, cannot offer anything like true love of God. Based on this criticism of Open Theology, such a God cannot meaningfully respond, suffer, and be engaged in dynamic relational love with human beings, as He cannot change. What remains to be answered is whether this is really something wrong with classical theology or the result of a misconception concerning the character of immutability and love.

To arrive at the proper understanding of immutability, the first step is to have a clear definition of immutability, which is not emotions but the constancy of God concerning His character, purpose, and promises. God never changes, increases, or deteriorates. Instead, He is eternally what he is. And divine love, too, is not a momentary feeling, but a predetermined state of goodwill in the immortality of God.¹ Paradoxically, therefore, is the fact that God does not require immutability in order to sustain love but rather the point where he places the root of the same.² A God who is indeterminate may no longer love, may interfere with his redemptive

¹ Donny Chrissutianto, "Contrasting Views about the Divinity of Christ and Their Impact on the Acceptance of the Personality of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology," *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 24, no. 1–2 (August 1, 2023): 72, <https://doi.org/10.63201/pgwc8718>.

² Daniel Kirkpatrick, "Reconciling God's Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation," *Reconciling God's Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation* 45, no. 2 (2021): 165–67.

purpose, or may not fulfill covenant promises. The dependability of God displayed in the Bible is always related to His stable nature, and immutability is a guarantee, not endangering love.

The openness theology is said to have falsely reigned the classical theism as the immutability with relational inflexibility. God, according to Scripture, is subject to responding, to mourning, and to action--but these responses are the manifestations of His eternality and not to be interpreted as elements of change in the interior nature of God. Pity of God over Nineveh or His sorrow when Noah is grieving cannot be treated as examples of the emotional instability of God, but the instances of His habitual holiness and mercy.³ Classical theology affirms that the action of God in history is factual and significant. Therefore, it is a fallacy of modern criticism to think that love necessarily involves inner transformation or emotional sensitivity.

The problem can be better understood when we analyze the way in which Barrett, Feinberg and Peckham address the conflict between love and immutability. Matthew Barrett lays a lot of stress on historic commitments of classical theism. In the case of Barrett, change is a crucial aspect of the Christian God, which is immutable. The love of God in Barrett's perception is not an emotive response; it is an immortality of perfection as per the nature of God, a love of the pre-creation past, and is in its full sufficiency as part of the Trinitarian life.⁴ Therefore, Barrett claims that immutability will ensure that God's love is stable. He dismisses arguments that an unchangeable God cannot be relational, insisting that Scripture portrays God to be immensely engaged at all times when not metaphysically changing. In the case of Barrett, to

³ Daniel Kirkpatrick, "Reconciling God's Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation," *Reconciling God's Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation* 45, no. 2 (2021): 172.

⁴ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 165.

dismiss immutability is to discredit the existence of covenantal faithfulness, confidence of salvation, and reliance on promises by God.

Although Feinberg adheres to a more broadly classical position, he presents another, more subtle form of classical theism, which is sometimes called modified or qualified classical theism. He confirms that God remains unchangeable in his fundamental being and character, but states that there are certain types of self-changeling of relations that one must defend.⁵ So, he differentiates the inner nature of God, which is unchanging, and the externality of the relations between God, which also changes as God intervenes in history. Feinberg feels that this upholds the integrity of divine love by creating a space of true relationality without loss of immutability. In contrast to Barrett, who emphasizes metaphysical constancy, Feinberg puts more emphasis on the quality of God to be involved dynamically with His creatures.

Peckham is more detached concerning classical formulations. His relational theism argues that the Scripture depicts God as being engaged in a mutual and dynamic relationship with humans. Peckham claims that God hears, mourns, repents, and is truly emotional frequently. Although Peckham does not adopt complete openness theology, he promotes the use of a relational model whereby something like love must be mutual.⁶ He therefore alters immutability greatly by intimating that the aims of the covenant by God are unalterable, but His exchange experience with creatures has elements of true change.⁷ Peckham comes to the critique of the classical model, which paints a picture of God, although not necessarily engaging in any genuine

⁵ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God, The Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 71.

⁶ John Peckham, *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions*. (London ; T&T Clark, 2020), 48.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

loving relationship, and is voicing the anxieties of openness theologians, though not necessarily fully relying on them.

Comparing the three philosophers reveals notable differences. Barrett is most adherent to classical immutability, arguing that God is endowed with a sense of the divine love by the fact that he has no change. Even Feinberg concurs that God is fundamentally unchanging, but He has a greater way of relating and responding to emotions. Peckham, who relies on biblical relationality, deemphasizes classical permanence and focuses on a model of love dynamic which gives room to actual divine response.⁸ Although Barrett and Feinberg see immutability as a vital aspect of the consistency of the love of God, Peckham perceives immutability, at least in its classical form, to be a restrictive aspect of God in relation to his or her relationships.⁹

This is not a mere abstract issue and has far-reaching consequences in the gospel and the Christian ministry. The gospel will depend upon the reliability of the character of God. In case God is not in love, his salvation promises might be changed. The uncertainty of salvation lies in the fact that God is bound to save the sinners through Christ.¹⁰ The truth that God will never undo His grace, will undo His word, or in other words, be capricious, is based on immutability. In addition, the ministry of Christianity is based on preaching a God whose love is unwavering. Counterpart Pastoral care, counseling, preaching, and discipleship are anchored on the consistency of God.¹¹ Classical immutability is a source of hope, forgiveness, and sanctification

⁸ John Peckham, *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions*. (London ; T&T Clark, 2020),51.

⁹ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019),171.

¹⁰ Donny Chrissutianto, “Contrasting Views about the Divinity of Christ and Their Impact on the Acceptance of the Personality of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 24, no. 1–2 (August 1, 2023): 72, <https://doi.org/10.63201/pgwc8718>.

¹¹ Daniel Kirkpatrick, “Reconciling God’s Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation,” *Reconciling God’s Justice and His Sovereignty in the Process of Salvation: Towards a Mediating View between Causative Faith and Reprobation* 45, no. 2 (2021): 181.

as it secures divine love like God. Meanwhile, the relational involvement of God as attested in the Bible makes the ministry not aimed at a remote God but aimed at a God who hears, responds, comforts, and acts.¹²

To sum it up, the implication of the claim that an unchanging God is incapable of expressing real love is based on a misconception of immutability as well as love. God being unchanging is not a hindrance to a relationship with Him, as it should be, the assurance of unchanging divine affection. Barrett, Feinberg, and Peckham make a valuable contribution to the discussion, offering varying points of emphasis on the coexistence of immutability and relationality. Although their models are different, both models acknowledge in one way or another that God is centered by divine love in both his actions and character.

¹² Donny Chrissutianto, “Contrasting Views about the Divinity of Christ and Their Impact on the Acceptance of the Personality of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 24, no. 1–2 (August 1, 2023): 76, <https://doi.org/10.63201/pgwc8718>

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