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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

The Immutability of God

The idea of immutability is very hard for us to understand, perhaps more so than the idea of eternity or infinity. How can ever-changing creatures such as us who live in an ever-changing reality grasp the idea of “changelessness”? The fact that everything changes has always been a truism. “Change is here to stay,” business analysts proclaim. “We live in times of change,” lazy journalists write, as if there ever were a time in history that was not a “time of change.” None of this is particularly new. After all, 2,600 years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously proclaimed, “Everything flows!”

But God does not change. At least, this is the teaching of Scripture, according to the unanimous tradition of the Christian church. However, this attribute of immutability has been increasingly challenged in recent years. Many today would question whether the idea of God’s immutability is sustainable, biblical, or even helpful. As we saw in previous articles, seventeenth-century Reformed theologians are a great help to think about God’s attributes in the right way, and perhaps none is more helpful than the English Puritan Stephen Charnock (1628–80). Charnock left us one of the most comprehensive and helpful studies of God’s attributes in a series of sermons preached in London in 1677–80 and published as *Discourses on God’s Attributes* after his death. His discourse on immutability, which occupies forty-three pages in the complete edition of his works, is particularly insightful.

First, let us try to define this attribute. What does it mean that God is immutable? It means that He is unchangeable in His essence, His nature, and His perfections. This entails, among other things, that God cannot increase or decrease in His essence or attributes. It also entails that He lacks nothing and needs nothing outside Himself (a characteristic often distinguished as another divine attribute, aseity). As Charnock puts it, He is “without any new nature, new thought, new will, new purpose or new place.” In other words, “God is a necessary being; he is necessarily what he is, and therefore is unchangeably what he is.” This also means that He does not experience an emotional life in the same way that we do. Since He has always known everything there is to know, nothing takes Him by surprise and upsets His “emotional state.” He does not have changeable passions as we do.

I think that of all God’s attributes, immutability is one that is particularly challenging for us, and even Christians have misgivings about it. On the one hand, we can easily see how beneficial to us this attribute can be: who would want an ever-changing God? As Charnock says, “What comfort would it be to pray to a god that, like the chameleon, changed colors every day, every moment?” We clearly need a God who is in control of this world and remains faithful to His promises. On the other hand, there is something unsettling if we misunderstand this attribute. When we misunderstand this attribute, we can think of God as if He were an infallible computer completely devoid of any feeling and emotion as we understand them, a being that foresees all things and decrees all things but is not affected by anything in any way whatsoever. This attribute also seems to contradict the way Scripture talks about God. Doesn’t God “repent” according to Scripture? Doesn’t He threaten judgments that He does not carry out, as in the case of Nineveh?



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I think Charnock is particularly helpful, not only because he answers those objections but also for the way he makes this attribute attractive to us. Charnock essentially does three things. **First**, he shows that, although this attribute is often proved using scholastic philosophical concepts (as Charnock himself does), it is rooted in Scripture. Charnock adduces many passages from Scripture throughout his discourse. As always, he starts from a text of Scripture that clearly sets out the relevant attribute. In this case, he starts with Psalm 102: *“They [the heavens and the earth] will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end”* (Psalm 102:26–27). This text is comforting for God’s people because it exalts God’s faithfulness to them in their time of need. God is compared to the most unchangeable parts of creation we can think of—the heavens and the earth. Yet, even they are not immutable, but He is. Not only is God eternal (*“your years have no end”*), but He is also changeless (*“you are the same”*). This text is also highly significant because, as Charnock points out, it is applied to Christ in the first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. What better proof of the deity of Christ than attributing to Him immutability, an attribute of God that is clearly incommunicable to creatures?

Second, Charnock shows that the scriptural language describing God as “changing” or “repenting” can easily be explained as an accommodation to our limited human languages, an idea already affirmed by the Reformers. For example, God’s “repentance” cannot have anything in common with our own repentance, which stems from “want of foresight, ignorance of what would succeed or a defect in the examination of the occurrences which might fall within consideration.” Repentance for God is only a change of “outward conduct according to his infallible foresight and immutable will.” Scripture expresses these things in a human way by “marking out something in God that hath a resemblance with something in us.” We use this kind of language all the time when we talk about our relationship with God. For example, we often talk about God’s “drawing near to us,” as does Scripture. But this is just a human way of speaking because “God is an immoveable rock, we are floating and uncertain creatures; while he seems to approach to us, he doth really make us approach to him. He comes not to us by any change of place himself but draws us to him by a change of mind, will and affection in us.”

This inevitably raises a question in our minds about the mystery of prayer: What is the point of praying if God knows all things and has immutably decreed all things? I believe all Christians have asked that question at some point in their lives. For example, did not God change His mind when Hezekiah prayed, and He granted him another fifteen years of life? To that common question, Charnock gives the finest answer that I know: “Prayer doth not desire any change in God but is offered to God that he would confer those things which he hath immutably willed to communicate; but he willed them not without prayer as the means of bestowing them.”

In other words, God has determined that He will do some things only as a result of our praying for them. He decrees the ends—the results of prayers—and the means that bring about those results—our prayers.

The **third** thing Charnock shows is that the misgivings we have about God’s immutability are rooted in our own finitude. The mere idea of God’s immutability exposes our hopeless mutability, both as creatures and, even more so, as sinful creatures. Our mutability as creatures is not a sin, yet it should cause us to “lie down under a sense of our nothingness,” even more so when we consider how easily we change our minds or break our promises.



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We need to meditate on God's immutability to consider our insignificance as creatures because this is the necessary starting point of a healthy relationship with God. As Charnock observes, "The arguments God uses to humble Job, though a fallen creature, are not from his corruption, for I do not remember that he taxed him with that, but from the greatness of his majesty and excellency of his nature declared in his works. And therefore, men that have no sense of God, and humility before him, forget that they are creatures, as well as corrupt ones."

The immutability of God also challenges us because it implies that God's sovereignty over us is complete. Charnock points out that God's immutable knowledge and will are the cause of all things. God cannot "grow" in knowledge; He is "*only wise*" (1 Timothy 1:17) and "*all is naked before him*" (Hebrews 4:13). This means that, unlike us, God does not know things because they are or they happen, but quite the opposite. Quoting Acts 15:18 from the Authorized Version ("*known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world*)," Charnock comments, "God doth not know creatures because they are, but they are because he knows them." Nothing that we do or even that we are can lie outside God's immutable knowledge or will.

However, far from unsettling us, God's immutability should be a source of comfort once we have accepted our insignificance as creatures and received God's grace manifested in Christ. If, like me, you are often undecided in life, you can only nod with approval when Charnock says "The nearer we come to God, the more stability we shall have in ourselves." How much do we need that divine stability in our life! But, most of all, God's immutability is the rock on which His covenantal promises are founded: "The covenant of grace doth not run 'I will be your God if you will be my people'; but 'I will be their God and they shall be my people.' He puts a condition to his covenant of grace, the condition of faith, and he resolves to work that condition in the hearts of the elect; and therefore, believers have two immutable pillars for their support." God's immutability is a wonderful attribute. There is no hope without it. ~ *Reverend Stéphane Simonin - Lecturer in church history at the London Seminary in London.*

Love's Significance

It is virtually impossible to exaggerate the importance of love. Nothing is more basic to true spirituality than this singular virtue. Nothing is more central to Christian living. At the very heart of authentic discipleship is love. Without love, we are nothing. When Jesus was asked, "*Which is the great commandment in the Law?*" (Matthew 22:36), He answered, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*" (v. 37). Christ then added a second commandment that follows directly from the first: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (v. 39). In this, Jesus asserted that our love for one another is the identifying badge of discipleship (John 13:35). The Apostle Paul further maintained that such love is the fulfillment of the Law (Galatians 5:14). That is to say, love meets every requirement of the divine standard. It is a debt that can never be repaid, so love must be given continually (Romans 13:8). In Christian living, love is not a secondary matter—it is a primary matter. Love is never incidental. It is fundamental.

Tragically, this was the very point at which the church in Corinth fell short. By all outward appearances, the Corinthian Christians had everything going for them—strong teaching, lofty knowledge, profound giftedness, dynamic worship. Nevertheless, there was one area in which this early church was glaringly deficient: love. They had everything except love. Thus, in reality, they had nothing.



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This underlying problem in the Corinthian church was due primarily to their pride. They were self-centered, self-focused, and self-absorbed. As such, they gave undue prominence to certain spiritual gifts while, at the same time, they devalued the more important virtue of love. In particular, the Corinthians elevated the public speaking gifts of preaching and teaching, promoted prophecy and speaking in tongues, and prized knowledge and learning. They treasured flashier, showier gifts that pandered to their emotions and catered to their flesh.

There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with these spiritual gifts. After all, these are gracious gifts given by God Himself. But in the Corinthian church, these gifts no longer served as means of grace to a higher end. Instead, they had become ends in themselves. Addressing this self-consumed arrogance, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, a profound passage of Scripture that emphatically underscores the priority of love. In the Apostle's view, love is so basic, so fundamental to the Christian faith, that one has absolutely nothing if there is no love.

As Paul addressed the subject of love, he clearly emphasized that Christian love is the sacrificial self-giving that seeks the highest good in another. In this, the Apostle was stressing that all genuine love requires costly sacrifice. The Bible says, "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son*" (John 3:16, emphasis mine). Because God loved, He gave what was most costly to Him. In short, there is no love where there is no sacrifice. True love costs.

This is in contrast to other forms of love that we know. For example, we know of love that is reflected in a romantic or sexual attraction. There is also the brotherly love that we experience between friends. But Christian love transcends all these. This love is a God-like love—supernatural, Spirit-produced. Such authentic love is not a mere shallow, sentimental feeling. On the contrary, this kind of love runs much deeper, being deeply rooted and firmly grounded in the will.

Further, this selfless love is the volitional choice that puts the welfare of others before one's own personal interests. This kind of love is more concerned about giving than receiving. In other words, it is not merely directed toward those who are easy to love. For example, Jesus said that even unbelievers love those who love them. But true Christian love extends to those who are a challenge to love, even to one's enemies.

With this in mind, Paul composed the first three verses of this "hymn of love" in the first person. Within the hymn, he assumes a lowly posture in order to communicate his essential point to these proud believers. Paul makes himself the focal point in order to best reveal their need for love. By this, Paul demonstrates love as he prioritizes it.

First, Paul states that speech without love is nothing. The Corinthian believers treasured the eloquence of public speakers. Athens, the iconic city that was the center of Greek philosophical thought, was located only forty-five miles from Corinth, and it exerted a cultural influence that caused the Corinthians to prize the rhetorical skills of their compelling orators. They elevated the public speakers of the Greek world, placing them on high pedestals. These golden-tongued persuaders were the proverbial "rock stars" of their day.



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What is more, the Corinthian Christians highly esteemed the spiritual gift of tongues. They sought the highly-charged, emotional atmosphere that came with these ecstatic utterances. They were excited by high-voltage surges of tongue-speaking. But all of this came at a great price. Because of this deep infatuation, they depreciated the importance of what they deemed to be everyday, garden-variety, plain-vanilla love.

Paul emphatically counters this idea. He writes, *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”* (1 Corinthians 13:1). Here, the Apostle speaks with hyperbole. Using himself as the example, Paul reasons that regardless of how well he speaks—even if he speaks in heavenly or angelic languages—he is nothing but a cacophony of noise if he does not have love. He could preach the greatest sermons, teach the profoundest lessons, offer the wisest counsel, or give the strongest witness, but without love, his words are empty and hollow. They are all sound, no substance; all rhetoric, no reality; nothing but hot air.

Second, Paul asserts that knowledge without love is nothing: *“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing”* (v. 2). The Apostle again utilizes hyperbolic language in order to grab the attention of their arrogant minds. Paul argues, “Suppose I have the spiritual gift of prophecy. Suppose I know every mystery of God’s eternal purpose. Suppose I know the future. Even suppose that I know everything there is to know. Even with all this knowledge I am absolutely worthless if I do not have love.” In other words, Paul explains that if these conditions hold, he is a spiritual zero—a highly-gifted, much-applauded zilch.

Third, faith without love is nothing. Paul continues, *“If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing”* (v. 2). Such mountain-moving faith indicates great trust in God, the ability to believe Him even in the face of enormous difficulty (Matthew 17:20). This faith is an unwavering, unshakable confidence in God. But even if Paul has such indomitable trust, he is still nothing without love. Without love he is spiritually useless, and His trust in God is pointless.

Fourth, sacrifice without love is nothing. Paul adds, *“If I give away all that I have . . . but have not love, I gain nothing”* (1 Corinthians 13:3). The Apostle now extends his reasoning yet further. For the sake of argument, if he gives away all his earthly belongings to provide food for the needy, but he does not have love, what does that make him? With self-condemnation, he declares that he remains nothing without love.

As a case in point, consider the Pharisees. They appeared in houses of worship and stood on street corners. They blew their trumpets and gave their alms to the poor. But what did it profit them? Jesus said that they had already received their reward—the honor of men—in full. Theirs was a buy-high, sell-low religion, and their net spirituality was zero.

Finally, martyrdom without love is nothing. Paul now pushes his point to the very limit. He imagines, *“If I deliver up my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing”* (v. 3). The Apostle reasons that if he makes the ultimate sacrifice and surrenders his body to be burned (presumably in the name of Christ) but performs this deed without love, he is nothing. On a scale of one to ten, Paul would be a zero.



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His sacrifice would bring much pain but no gain. With keen discernment, the Apostle does the math and quickly calculates the bottom line: anything times zero equals zero.

The Corinthians desperately needed to hear this truth. Without love, nothing else matters—not speech, not knowledge, not any religious activity. Not even martyrdom is of consequence. Apart from love, authentic Christianity says that nothing matters.

This is the significance of love to which Paul speaks. Without love, all somebodies are nobodies. Anyone wrapped up in himself makes for a small package. Subtract love from any spiritual pursuit, and it adds up to nothing. Multiply anything without love, and it equals nothing. Bottom line, giftedness without selfless love amounts to nothing.

The question then begs to be asked, “Where is such supernatural love found?” There is only one source. This kind of love is the fruit of the Spirit. Genuine love is produced in those who abide in Christ. This God-given love belongs to those who walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–24). This is where we will find love for our lives. So, let us continually look to Jesus Christ, the supreme model of selfless, sacrificial love (John 13:12–17). And, let us rest in His infinite love toward us. The more we love Him, the more we will love others. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson**

Tracing the Genealogy of Jesus

At first glance, the beginning of Matthew is a less-than-exciting literary starting point of the New Testament. It is a list of “begats” tracing Jesus’ lineage back to Abraham.

What this beginning lacks in literary punch it makes up for in theological significance. Among other things, the genealogical tables of the New Testament place the gospel squarely on the plane of history. Jesus was born “in the fullness of time”—His ministry is defined and interpreted against the background of Old Testament history.

The New Testament provides two genealogical tables for Jesus, one by Matthew and one by Luke. These tables differ at significant points. Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience and Luke for a Gentile audience. Matthew was concerned to show that Jesus legally descended from David and was therefore a descendant of Judah to whom the messianic kingship was promised. Matthew treats the legal descent of Jesus and limits the lists to three groupings of fourteen generations, allowing himself to make omissions.

Luke follows the natural descent with greater detail. He takes the list back to Adam, as it was a central theme in his Gospel to set forth the universality of the gospel. Jesus is indeed the Son of Abraham and the Son of David, but He is also the new Adam who comes to redeem not only Israel but men and women from every tribe and nation. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



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For His Glory and our Good

In times of disappointment and trials, believers take great comfort from the apostle Paul's reassuring words: "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). The promise of that verse is often a beacon of hope for suffering Christians, giving them confidence that the Lord is not indifferent to their plight.

However, the church doesn't always hold to that same confidence in God's sovereign oversight when it comes to the evil that dominates the world around us. It's as if some believers think the Lord has control over our individual circumstances, but He can't possibly have control over everything all at once.

The dangers of such a myopic view of God's sovereignty come to a head when skeptics and liberal theologians trot out accusing questions about how a supposedly good God can tolerate so much evil. Without a firm confidence in a truly sovereign Lord, some wind up capitulating to the whims and worldviews of the unrepentant world.

We have already looked at some flawed attempts to explain away the existence of evil; and we've considered what Scripture tells us about the nature of evil, God's holiness, and His sovereign control over His creation. That leaves us with the undeniable truth that the existence of evil does not somehow disprove or damage the nature of God, but that He exercises control over evil. We can say with certainty that nothing happens outside of His sovereignty.

The real question then is why? Why did God permit evil in the first place? Why does He sovereignly, willingly allow it to keep infecting and distorting His creation? In His unfolding, pre-ordained plan, what is the presence of evil accomplishing?

To Reveal His Righteousness

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul gives us the answer. He writes, "*If our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say?*" (Romans 3:5). Our unrighteousness demonstrates (Gk., sunistemi) the righteousness of God. In the context of Romans, Paul has been showing that God is faithful to His promises to Israel despite their sin and unbelief. Compared to the rebellious wickedness of Israel, God's righteousness is truly and unmistakably glorious. And that's the bottom line: We would never understand the full glory of God's righteousness if we were not so familiar with the wretched fruits of unrighteousness. Unrighteousness therefore puts God's righteousness on display.

To Reveal His Love

Later in Romans, Paul writes, "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). The presence of sin allows God to demonstrate His love. How else could He show the character of His great love that rescues enemies and sinners if there were no sinners and enemies to rescue? "*What if God, although willing [i.e., determining] to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?*" (Romans 9:22).



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For His Glory and our Good

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He demonstrates His righteousness against the backdrop of sin and evil, showing, by contrast, how utterly holy He is. God demonstrates His love at a level that would have been impossible without sin. We see and appreciate the radiance of God's love more, having endured the darkness and distress of a universe cursed by evil. *"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them"* (Isaiah 9:2). The presence of evil provided the perfect opportunity for God to display His wrath and justice along with His redeeming grace and infinite mercy, as He loved sinners enough to send His Son to die in their place.

To Reveal His Glory

But God's demonstration of His righteousness and wrath against the backdrop of evil is not merely for our benefit. The word "demonstrate" in Romans 9:22 is an aorist middle. Literally, the verse's phrasing is *"God determined to demonstrate for Himself."* God demonstrates His attributes for the sake of His own glory. Without sin, God's wrath would never be on display. Without sinners to redeem, God's grace would never be on display. Without evil to punish, God's justice would never be on display. And He has every right to put Himself everlastingly on display in all the glory of all His attributes.

Paul says God endures sin with patience. *"Endures"* is a passive verb. God keeps Himself distant from the acts of evil agents while remaining fully sovereign over them. God endures this horrible assault on His everlasting holiness. He endures the horrifying blasphemy throughout the history of fallen humanity. Why? For the sake of His glory.

Evil Is No Accident

Unrighteousness has colored our whole earthly existence, and through our deliberate sins, we have been willing participants in it. If it weren't for the facts of our fallen existence, we wouldn't know very much about God's everlasting righteousness—much less be able to give Him glory for it. We wouldn't know He is as loving as He is if it weren't for our sin. We wouldn't know He is as holy as He is if it weren't for the reality of divine judgment. God's divine attributes would be indiscernible in the sheer brilliance of God's glory if we weren't able to see Him in stark contrast against the backdrop of evil.

The murder of Christ is unquestionably the greatest evil ever committed. But under the pre-ordained plan of God, that act of supreme wickedness was also a supreme display of His grace, mercy, wrath, justice, righteousness, and other attributes. It gives us a glimpse into His loving character that we otherwise never would have seen. And revealing those aspects of His nature in turn causes us to love and glorify Him more.

In short, God tolerates sin and evil because, in the end, it brings Him more glory. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



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If you have a October birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner October 2020

*Ezekiel F. (1)
Charlene S. (3)
Ephraim W. (20)*

Andy and Emily L. (10)

Take the... "Older than Dirt" Quiz Do you remember? Can you remember at least 5?

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Drive in Movie Theaters | 11. Metal Lunchboxes |
| 2. Candy Cigarettes | 12. Books with Records |
| 3. 45 RPM Records | 13. Boone's Farm |
| 4. Party Telephone Lines | 14. Metal Ice Cube Trays |
| 5. Soda Pop Machine with Glass Bottles | 15. Roller Skate Keys |
| 6. Butch Wax | 16. Home Milk Delivery with Glass Bottles |
| 7. Studebakers | 17. Wax Coke Bottle Candy |
| 8. Blackjack Gum | |
| 9. Home Economics Class in School | |
| 10. 5 and Dime | |



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