

Welcome to “The Sovereign of God and...”



Carmel Baptist Church

The Immutability of God

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The Knowledge of the Holy – A. W. Tozer

The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking worshiping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic.

The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking.

With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence.

The Knowledge of the Holy – A. W. Tozer

We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, “Be still and know that I am God,” mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshipper in the middle period of the twentieth century.

The Knowledge of the Holy – A. W. Tozer

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

... We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that compose the Church.

Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.

George Barna in his recent report on the church today in America;

- We desire experience more than knowledge
- We prefer choices to absolutes
- We embrace preferences rather than truths
- We seek comfort rather than growth
- Faith must come on our terms or we reject it, we have enthroned ourselves as the final arbiters of righteousness, the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny we are the Pharisees of the new millennium.

George Barna says that most Americans value

Time and efficiency over everything else

Minimizing long term commitments while we maintain our independence and individuality at all costs.

Even to the point of being skeptical of institutions, of authorities external to the self, certainly the church but even the Scriptures.

Anything that stands outside of me and my personal experience and what would constitute for me my best life now.

Above all trust your feelings to guide you.

Set goals and achieve them have fun, stay in good health, discover and revel in the purpose of your life.

Bryan Chapell - Christ-centered worship

When people see the greatness of God, they fall on their faces and they say “woe is me, I am undone, if that is who God is, then I am undone by this.”

And God comes along and says “even though you are undone by this, I present you with My grace because My grace allows you to know My goodness, I assure you that you can have peace of heart through My provision.”

The Attribute of Immutability - to say that God is immutable is to say Biblically at least two things:

1. God can't change in His attributes, His essence, His very being, that is who God is as God
2. He can't change in His ethical commitments that are an extension of His own moral nature

The first aspect of His immutability is called **ontological** because this is referring to the very being of God, His essence can not change

- God is holy which means He can not be unholy (Lev 11:44)
- God is love which means He can not be not loving (1J 4:8)
- God is just and therefore can not be unjust (Is 30:18)
- God is omnipotent which means God can't lack power (Genesis 18:14 and Luke 1:37)

The next kind of immutability which is dependent upon the first one might be called **ethical** immutability.

So by God's very nature when He make an ethical commitment then He is bound to it.

For example:

God says to Abraham through you all the nations of the world will be blessed, which means when God makes that ethical commitment then He must see that it is accomplished.

Example: Genesis 15:17 - God walking through the two halves

The historical background would not be unusual to the readers of this text. Imagine for a minute that this is a treaty signing ceremony.

And you have the representatives of the great and powerful king on one side and the representatives of the lesser king on the other side. There is an aisle in the middle in which carcasses would be cut in half with each half placed on either side of the aisle.

Then the great king would make the lesser king pass through the halves in order to say in the presence of all the witnesses may the same thing happen to me as that happened to these animals if I should fail to keep these commandments.

The readers are familiar with what is going on here in Abraham's vision. But what they were not prepared for is in fact what happens in this ceremony. Genesis 15:17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.

But this is an astonishing sentence and the reason is because God is passing through the halves. God is confirming in this vision that He is the One who is the promise maker and the promise keeper. That all of Abram's hope for the future is anchored in Him and in His sworn oath and not in Abram nor anything that Abram does. And what picture do we have of Abram in this passage? He is sleeping and what is so significant about that?

This explains how Abraham in Genesis 22 can take his own son Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice.

And God promises that this promise is going to be fulfilled through Isaac so what relevance does that have?

It means that God can not break His own word.

What does Abraham know for sure if he stabs Isaac and he dies.

Abraham knows that God will raise him from the dead.

This is what we read in **Hebrews Chapter 11:17-19**

All the promises of God are sure. He is the promise maker and the promise keeper

Application for us:

We are called to have integrity to the point that we do what we say.

But in the culture that we live in today there is a total neglect in this area of meaning what our words in fact say.

This should not be the case with Christian people.

The ontological commitment of God is what you might call a first order kind of immutability

Whereas the ethical is a second order kind of immutability

What is the difference?

The ontological immutability of God is absolute, God is holy and He can never be unholy

But the promise of God (immutable) to Abraham that through him, He would bless all the nations of the world is contingent.

You might ask, contingent on who?

Well, contingent on God because He did not have to make that promise to Abraham.

The immutable promise of God is not the same thing and God's immutable character.

God immutable character is absolute and eternally what it is and it can not be other than it is.

However God's promise is always a freely given promise and once given it becomes inviolable because God can not go back on His word.

But did He have to give the promise?

Did He have to say this "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved?" No, He did not have to say that but once he does then all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Now is this something that God has to do? Answer - No

But it means once that is written and said then this is something that God must do because He can not violate His own word.

Ontological immutability is first order in that it is absolute

Ethical immutability is second order in that it is immutable only when God makes the promise

The ethical immutability of God that flows out of God's ontological immutability

God is truth, God is faithful

Therefore you can be sure that when God makes a pledge or a promise then you can be sure He will keep it.

So we can say it this way:

The ethical immutability of God is as good as His character is

God's word is as good as it is because God's character is as good as it is.

Scriptural support:

Psalm 102:25-27 (quoted in Hebrews 1 of Christ)

Psa. 102:25 "Of old You founded the earth,

And the heavens are the work of Your hands.

Psa. 102:26 "Even they will perish, but You endure;

And all of them will wear out like a garment;

Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed.

Psa. 102:27 "But You are the same,

And Your years will not come to an end.

This is quoted in Hebrews 1 of Christ. There is no question that this is extolling Yaweh, who is the God of Israel.

If you were to ask a person of ancient times what is one thing that you can point to that is stable and fixed.

They might come back with:

- The ground you sleep on at night is stable and fixed
- The stars in the heavens are always there

And the writer uses this to contrast the stability of God, which appears to us as stable but like clothing it wears out.

verse 25 - the earth

verse 25 - the heavens

Even those things that have the utmost stability will wear out when compared with God Himself.

This statement is regarding the ontological being of who God is in Himself.

Malachi 3:6 - Example of God's immutability

Mal. 3:6 "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

In this verse before we even look at the context one can see both the ontological and ethical immutability.

Ontological - For I the LORD do not change

Ethical - and because of this, you are not consumed

God has said "I have pledged and promised to keep you"

Look at the attitude of God toward Jacob as compared with the rest of the world

Mal. 3:1 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.

Mal. 3:2 “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.

Mal. 3:3 “He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.

Mal. 3:4 “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

God's covenant promise to His people is this, when judgment comes, the judgment will come in the way of refining fire, purifying away the impurities and bringing about pure gold.

And now look at what will happen when that same refining fire is brought to the world.

Mal. 3:5 ¶ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,” says the LORD of hosts.

Mal. 3:6 “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

The point or the general rule is:

When God comes as a refiners fire then He will wipe out those who are against Him. They will be destroyed and this begs the question, “why isn’t Jacob destroyed?”

Is the answer because Jacob is so good and holy and has done everything just right?

So we conclude that obviously they don’t deserve God’s judgment right?

No, the answer is God pledged to Jacob, that He would save them. And so when He comes His judgment upon them will come in the form of a refiners fire. In order that they will be pleasing to the Lord.

But upon everyone else who stands against Him there will be destruction.

How can you be confident that this will be true?

Answer in the Scriptures “I the LORD do not change.”
(ontological immutability)

Another passage for us to look at on this teaching of ontological and ethical immutability.

Joshua 21:43-45

43 So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there.

44 The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. 45 Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.

So God Himself is truthful (ontological) and therefore you can be sure that what God gives (ethical) is according to His promises.

In verse 43 - he had sworn to give their forefathers (all the land)

In verse 44 - just as he had sworn to their forefathers (peace on all sides)

In verse 45 - Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed

And do you see why?

The ethical commitments made by God flow from His ontological immutability. He always does what He says!

OK so the two go together and we can see that the ethical immutability flows out of the ontological immutability

However these categories do not exhaust the Biblical teaching as to whether or not God can change.

And throughout the history of the church there has been an unambiguous answer to the question if God can change and it has been - NO

The thinking has been that God can not change in any respect and the reason for that we have covered because of His ontological being.

So if God could change for the better than He wasn't as good as He could have been and if He could change for the worse then there can be something better.

This would be a contradiction so to avoid any of that in any way then it was held to that God could not change.

But in the last 200 years theologians have taken a closer look to see as to whether this is what the Bible says and what we should in fact hold to on the immutability of God.

And the reason this started to be examined was the Bible itself.

Or what do you do with the event at Mt. Sinai in which Moses is talking to the LORD and the people have made this golden calf.

Ex. 32:12 “Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people.

Ex. 32:13 “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

Ex. 32:14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

So maybe it would be helpful for us to develop another category when it comes to this issue of God's immutability and His willingness to change.

We are going to call this a change that different than a change for the better or a change for the worse.

There is change we can talk about that takes place where there is a change in the moral situation.

Once again; change that is appropriate when there is a change in the moral situation.

So when a parent witnesses a child that is being disobedient, perhaps being caught in a lie then it is appropriate that the parent change in relation to changed moral situation brought about by the child. And the result is the parent bring discipline to bear upon that child.

Can we call this **RELATIONAL MUTABILITY**;

That God in His relationship to us is a God who changes in appropriate ways to changed moral situations.

For example the story of Jonah going to Nineveh;
God says preach this message “40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed”

And so what does Nineveh do?

Well there did exactly what Jonah feared they would do, they repented. And it was the exact reason that Jonah did not want to go.

So in response to the people turning and repenting what does God do?

He forestalls judgment on these people.

Now ask the question; do this change God's character in any way?

Answer - No

Does this change who God is as God?

Answer - No

Now here is the question we are getting to;
Does it change God's ethical commitments?

Some have argued that God said it and therefore He must do it.

But don't we have underlying throughout Scripture a principle that God makes clear from the beginning and it pervades all through the Scripture.

If people turn from their wicked ways that God will hear their cry for mercy and He will bring forgiveness.

So implicit in the statement “40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed” is the condition unless you repent.

This is in the fabric of God’s relationship with sinners from the get go.

We see that Nineveh repents and God therefore changes from One who is fixing to vent His wrath on them to now bringing merciful forgiveness to them.

This is not a change in His ethical commitments but in fact God’s merciful response is an expression of His ethical immutability.

God's relational mutability, changing from wrath to forgiveness, is an expression of God's ethical immutability.

Which is the ethical commitment by God that whenever a sinner repents then God will forgive.

Jeremiah 18:6-10

Ezekiel 18:19-32

End of Session #2 on the Doctrine of Immutability