

C. Immutability and Impassibility (Unchangeability)

If God is independent of creation, does that mean that he cannot be affected by creation? Before we answer too quickly one way or the other, it's important to acknowledge that this is a more complicated question than we might think at first. After all, to say that God is affected by creation implies change. If the world can somehow change God, then we can hardly say that he is independent and self-existent. Even more, we cannot say that God is eternally perfect, since change involves either improvement or loss.

However, this important question cannot be settled by logical speculation. When we turn to Scripture, questions still arise. On one hand, God reveals his character in an unfolding historical drama in which it would seem that he is affected by what human beings do. For example, in Exodus 32:10–14, God is about to carry out his threatened destruction of Israel for worshiping the golden calf, when Moses intercedes and God relents. Similarly, God relents from bringing the threatened judgment upon Nineveh when the people repent (Jnh 3:10). In 1 Samuel 15:11, God regrets having made Saul king. On the other hand, verse 29 adds, “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”

Some conclude that while God does not change in his moral attributes, he changes his will and purposes in response to human actions. However, this distinction seems arbitrary. According to Scripture, it is not only God's character but also his eternal purposes that do not change. If they did, then the covenant partner would never have any future. In fact, this is Israel's only assurance in the face of God's judgment: “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6). Even “if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Ti 2:13). It is God's immutable being and eternal oath that guarantee the salvation of the faithless covenant partner (Heb 6:17–18). Indeed, God works all things together for the good of his people (Ro 8:28), who were “predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11). There are more

passages in Scripture affirming God's unchanging will than even his unchanging nature.

Nevertheless, we have to distinguish between God's *revealed will* and his *hidden or secret will*. Deuteronomy 29:29 distinguishes explicitly between "secret things" and "things that are revealed." The passages that speak of God relenting do not refer to God's secret plan, decreed from all eternity; indeed, these decisions are hidden from us. Rather, they refer to the revealed will of God in his word. God promised blessing for obedience and judgment for disobedience. Yet even in covenantal breach, the faithless partner is at the mercy of a God who is free to be compassionate toward whomever he will. He may relent from the judgment threatened in his revealed word, but this says nothing about what he has predestined.

Here is an amazing mystery that our minds cannot comprehend: even while relating the world to himself in an intimate bond, freely acting in history, upholding every atom, God nevertheless remains qualitatively distinct from creation. Totally involved (immanent), while remaining totally distinct (transcendent), God can be a character in his own story with us even while remaining qualitatively different from every other actor. In that story, God condescends to meet us at our own level. He represents himself as a player among other players: as a king, a shepherd, a judge, a warrior, a friend, a husband, a father and mother. God hides his majesty behind such masks in order to interact with us as covenant partners. While the analogies succeed for the purposes intended, they all finally break down if we try to measure God's hidden being. We have to let the analogies do their work as analogies, never turning them into exact and literal descriptions of God's eternal majesty, which will always elude our gaze. God reminds us that he transcends infinitely all creaturely comparisons (Nu 23:19; 1 Sa 15:29; Isa 44:8–9; 46:4; Hos 11:9). It should be noted that in his covenants, God binds himself freely to act in certain ways (judgment and grace). By acceding to the pleas of Moses (e.g., Nu 14:13–25), he strengthens the role and office of the covenant's mediator in the eyes of the people. All of this serves ultimately to point forward to Christ, the mediator of a better covenant (Heb 8:6–13).

With these categories in mind, we return to the question: if God does not change, either in his character or in his secret purposes, does that mean that he is unaffected by what we do? *Immutability* (changelessness) seems to imply *impassibility* (immunity to suffering). Yet this seems to fly in the face of explicit passages that represent God as being provoked by creaturely circumstances and actions. Of course, God did not change from being unloving to being loving by observing the oppression of his people in Egypt. Nevertheless, wasn't he moved to compassion when he heard the cry of his people?

It is important to define what we mean by "impassibility." Undoubtedly, for some philosophers and theologians it has meant that God is untouched and unprovoked by us and our circumstances. There is the danger of a Stoic ideal of a deity who is blissfully detached from others. However, this is hardly a god worth praying to and is far from the biblical view of God. That the Greek word *apatheia* (translated into English, via Latin, as "impassibility") had such a connotation in Stoicism is true enough. However, as with many inherited terms, Christian theology transformed the concept in the light of biblical revelation. Most often, *impassibility* simply meant that God is not like the pagan deities, which were little more than exalted human beings. Determined by their passing whims and passions, the gods could without notice range from beneficent aid to benign neglect to a drunken rage. Slaves of their lust, greed, and power, they could also exhibit virtue on occasion. They were generally capricious and unpredictable.

Key Distinction:

hidden/revealed (the will of God)

God's word reveals his promises and commands, as well as his actual execution of judgments and deliverance. However, his eternal plan includes everything that happens, although not revealed to us.

However, everything that has been said so far in this chapter already eliminates such conceptions from the biblical doctrine of God. An implication of God's independence from the world is that he is who he is eternally and will always be. All of God's acts are consistent with his nature. God determines the world's course; the world does not

determine God's course. As Gerald Bray observes concerning the patristic doctrine of impassibility, "The emphasis was not on tranquility in a state of indifference, but on the sovereignty of God." So when the Westminster Confession says that God is "without parts or passions," it is not denying God's responsiveness to creaturely actions; rather, it is denying (a) that God is "made up" of various faculties or emotions and (b) that God is taken captive by anything other than his own nature. Like Greek *apatheia*, Latin *impassio* means "nonsuffering," in the sense of God's not being overwhelmed or overtaken by something external to himself.

The consistent biblical testimony is that while God may be opposed and provoked, God cannot be *overcome* by surprise, distress, anger, compassion, or opposition. Again, this is good news for us, because we do indeed provoke God's wrath. Yet God can execute or withhold his wrath, depending on the wisdom of his judgment and ultimate purposes: "I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hos 11:9). God is always in charge; whatever occurs in creaturely affairs does not catch him off guard. As we have seen, this is good news for us. Those who attribute anthropomorphisms (humanlike emotions) to God's essence ordinarily focus on passionate love and compassion. However, we know from Scripture that God is just as capable of wrath. If he were determined in his very being by what we do, then we would have no confidence that he, like Zeus, might not as easily destroy us in a fit of rage as weep helplessly over our condition. If God's response were determined by what we do, rather than by his own eternal counsel, we would have long since perished from the earth (Mal 3:6). Only because God cannot be overwhelmed by his creatures can we be confident that he will indeed wipe away every tear of suffering in the age to come (Rev 21:4). Thank God that he is different from us!

D. Eternity (Immortality) and Omnipresence

"Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands," the psalmist praises. "They 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” (Ps 102:25–27). In this doxology all that we have just affirmed is expressed, with the addition of God’s eternity. God transcends the world in every respect, including time. Although God relates temporal creation to himself, he is not circumscribed by or contained within it. The world is changed by God, but God is not changed by the world.

While God freely bestows everlasting life and immortality on us in the resurrection (2 Ti 1:10), God alone *is* eternal life in his very being (1 Ti 1:17). Not even angels, or the human soul, are immortal by nature. They come into being by God’s word and exist only by that same word. Yet God not only lives; he *is* life. The psalmist exults, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man!’ For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night” (Ps 90:1–4). As with the other attributes we have considered, God’s *eternity* marks the infinite-qualitative distinction between God and creation.

Again, affirming God’s eternity depends to some extent on definitions. Traditionally, Christian theology maintains that God transcends time. Some, like Augustine, revised Plato’s concept of **eternity**, reasoning that it is the fullness of time rather than a pure negation of time. Many today, however, prefer Aristotle’s view of eternity as endurance in time without beginning or end. This view is usually called sempiternity. In my view, **sempiternity** means that at least at one point (time), God is not qualitatively but merely quantitatively distinction from creation. Does God just have infinitely more time than we do?

It might help if we think about God’s relation to time together with his relationship to space. Scripture extols God for his transcendence of both. It is ludicrous to imagine that God could be contained within a particular space, even a temple (1 Ki 8:27; Ac 17:24). “Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord.

Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord” (Jer 23:23–24). God can dwell “in the midst of [his people]” (Ps 46:4), but even in doing so he remains omnipresent. Even in the incarnation, God assumes our nature fully while transcending it in infinite majesty. Again, this is a mystery beyond our comprehension—that a God who transcends spatial categories altogether can nevertheless be present, for us, in promised blessing and grace. Just as it is true that God not only has been everywhere but transcends the category of space, God not only endures through all ages but transcends time altogether. Precisely for this reason, he can be present for us simultaneously in all times and places.

With Augustine, I believe that time comes into being with creation itself. Again, this underscores God’s freedom *from* creation as the very presupposition of his total freedom *for* it. To draw an analogy, there is no more intimate connection than the mother-child relationship in the womb. And yet, from fertilization to delivery, the child is wrapped in an environment all its own. Of course, this analogy too breaks down—especially since it involves two *creatures*. Nevertheless, the point is that time, like the fetal sac, is intrinsic to creation—whether of angels or stars or earthly creatures. The God-world relation is different from that of the soul to the body; it is more like the relation of mother and child. Though always dependent on God’s eternal Word, we are given our own creaturely space-time. We are not autonomous, but we are also not automatons. Not only in our dependence upon but also in our difference from God we find our own significance. Whenever we try to make God more like us, our distinct existence as well as God’s sovereignty is threatened. Just as the God who *is* life gives us our own creaturely lives, the eternal God gives us time, our own way of being in the world.

II. Communicable Attributes

Only God is independent, immutable, immortal, and eternal. This cannot be said of any creature. That is why most of these attributes carry the negative prefix and we call them incommunicable attributes—attributes that are not shared with us, even analogically. However,

because human beings are created in God’s image, they do share other attributes with God, analogically. Where we have attributes similar (analogous) to God’s, he is always qualitatively different and greater. Therefore, these **communicable** attributes will often have the “omni” (all) prefix attached to them.

Communicable Attributes	
ATTRIBUTE	DESCRIPTION
Wisdom	The power to discern truth from error and righteousness from unrighteousness, and to make deliberate choices that eventuate in good rather than evil
Knowledge	Possession of truth, including contingencies; in God’s case, knowledge of all things from eternity—includes the free acts of creatures
Power	Ability to act as a free agent; in God’s case, comprehensive freedom as Lord of all
Holiness	As glory is a weightiness (significance), holiness is a separateness from all unrighteousness and injustice; for God, it is both an ontological uniqueness and an ethical purity.
Righteousness	Similar to justice, righteousness is integrity; in God’s case, an inability to sin.
Justice	Conforming desires, actions, and judgments to the standard of truth rather than expediency, favoritism, or personal advantage; in God’s case, absolute commitment to what is right and to judging transgressors
Jealousy	In God’s case, a love for his people that zealously binds them to himself, over against both the involuntary servitude and voluntary embrace of other lords
Wrath	In God’s case, the righteous and holy response to transgression
Goodness	Faithful to his own character, God also seeks the welfare of his people.
Love	Favor toward and regard for the other; mutually interdependent in the case of human beings, but utterly free of reciprocity in God’s case
Mercy	God’s favor toward those who deserve his wrath

A. Wisdom, knowledge, and power

Wisdom, knowledge, and power are predicated of human beings, yet God is all-wise, omniscient, and sovereign. Our knowledge is always piecemeal and partial. We learn this, now that; we never comprehend every piece perfectly, much less the whole puzzle. God's **knowledge** is different. First, he does not learn anything because his knowledge is eternally perfect and comprehensive (1 Sa 23:10–13; 2 Ki 13:19; Ps 139:1–6; Isa 40:12–14; 42:9; Jer 1:4–5; 38:17–20; Eze 3:6; Mt 11:21). God does not depend on the world for his knowledge any more than for his existence. No more than his omnipresence can his omniscience be limited or circumscribed within boundaries. God knows all things, including all future free actions of creatures (Pss 44:21; 94:11; Isa 44:7–8) because in his wisdom he has decreed the end from the beginning and “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11). At the same time, we must recall that none of God's attributes is independent of the others. God's knowledge is inseparable from his **wisdom** (Ro 8:28; 11:33; 14:7–8; 1 Co 2:7; Eph 1:11–12; 3:10; Col 1:16).

God has the kind of wisdom, knowledge, and power that are unique to the only sovereign of heaven and earth. “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24:1). We do not have even 1 percent of that kind of **power**. Rather, we have 100 percent of the natural freedom that God deemed appropriate to the creatures he made in his own image. Instead of pieces rationed between God (a larger portion) and creatures (a smaller portion), God has his “pie” (sovereign, Creator-style freedom) and we have our own as well from him (dependent, creature-style freedom). Our freedom is like his, but always with greater difference. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Ac 17:28), so even our ability to think, will, and act is dependent on God's sovereign gift. We reflect God's glory, but God does not give his own glory to a creature (Isa 48:11). “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9).

So God is not just one player among others—one thinker, planner, and actor in the mix of agents. God's wisdom, knowledge, and activity are incomprehensible to us. No one has been his counselor or given

him anything that obligates a gift in return (Ro 11:33–36). Nor is God a tyrant, smothering creaturely freedom in his own sovereignty. Rather, it is precisely because of his sovereignty that he freely chooses to give human beings their own creaturely freedom. The relationship between divine and human freedom is a deep mystery—indeed, a paradox. It is never resolved in Scripture, but simply affirmed. In retrospect, Joseph (raised by God to Pharaoh’s prime minister) could tell his brothers who long before had thrown him into a pit, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Ge 50:20). In the same breath, Peter could attribute Christ’s death both to the wicked action of human beings and to God’s gracious plan (Ac 2:23).

Sometimes it seems in Scripture that God’s plans are frustrated by human beings. Even Jesus could lament, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Mt 23:37). Yet, at the same time, he says that no one can come to him apart from his gracious determination and activity (Jn 6:44; 14:6). This is not a contradiction, however, because God’s secret decree is distinct from his revealed will (Dt 29:29). We do not know what God has planned from all eternity before it occurs, but we do know what God has said he will do under certain circumstances.

It is not God who is circumscribed by this relationship, but the covenant partner. In the historical drama of Scripture there is a genuine covenantal relationship, with give-and-take. This mutuality is entirely appropriate if God is to enter into genuine relationships with human beings, but this in no way entails that such mutuality is intrinsic to God’s being. Though unbound in his eternal nature and purposes, God freely binds himself to relate to his people in certain ways. God promises blessing and warns of danger, depending on the response of the covenant partner. This does not mean that God’s eternal purposes are determined or thwarted by human beings, but only that God’s revealed plans may change. God says he will destroy Israel if the nation sins; the nation sins, but Moses intercedes, and God relents. However, there is no reason to infer from this that God has changed his eternal plan. Rather, he has in fact fulfilled his eternal plan—

displaying his glorious grace—precisely in and through the give-and-take of the covenantal drama. As we have seen above, God could reveal his regret with having made Saul king (1 Sa 15:10–11), and yet “the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret” (v. 29). God changes his revealed plans, but not his secret plans, and this is a great assurance for us, whose fickleness and unfaithfulness would otherwise defeat God’s saving work.

B. Holiness, Righteousness, and Justice

The noun **holiness** comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “to cut or separate” and is translated in Greek as *hagios* (verb: *hagiazō*). Set apart from creatures, Yahweh is transcendent in glory. It is especially God’s *holiness* that underscores the strangeness of God that I discussed earlier (pp. 35–36). Thus, holiness refers to an *ontological* difference between God and creation. Beyond this, it refers also (and especially in the Scriptures) to God’s *ethical* difference from sinners. God cannot tempt or be tempted to evil (Jas 1:13). God’s holiness and glory are closely related, especially in passages like Isaiah 6. In that vision, the mere glimpse of God’s holy majesty provokes in sinners an overwhelming xenophobia. Only this is a *healthy* fear of a stranger: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Only when the seraph touches his lips, announcing, “Behold ... your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for,” can the forgiven prophet rise to his feet in joyful service to his commission: “Here I am! Send me” (Isa 6:5–8). The appropriate response to God’s holiness is reverence and awe, as well as confession and repentance.

Righteousness is a legal and ethical term that refers to a right relationship; the Hebrew and Greek terms translated “righteousness” are closely related to those languages’ terms for “*justice*.” Revealed especially in his law, God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice are never abstract ideas but are exercised in concrete relationships with covenant creatures. God’s moral commands are never arbitrary, but

reflect the proper relationships that his eternal character demands of human beings—in relation both to him and to each other.

God can no more relax his holy justice than he can suspend his love, omniscience, or any other attribute. In the cosmic courtroom, God must be true to himself by punishing sin. Here, as in the other attributes, Christ—especially at the cross—most fully displays the coinherence of holy love and holy justice.

C. Jealousy and Wrath

God's jealousy and wrath are exercised only in the context of a violation of his holiness, righteousness, and justice. Once more we see that the difference between God and creatures is qualitative, not just quantitative. After all, jealousy is condemned in us, but praised in God. How can this be? It is because "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps 24:1), while we pretend in our sin to possess that which does not truly belong to us. God's **jealousy** is revealed in the context of his covenant, analogous to the jealousy of ancient Near Eastern rulers for their name, people, and dominions. Any threat against the good of the empire is a threat against the emperor. Similarly, God declares, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer 7:23; cf. Ex 5:1; Lev 26:12; Dt 7:6; 2 Ch 7:14; Ps 53:6; Isa 52:6; Jer 11:4; 18:15; 24:7; Lk 1:17; Heb 11:25; Rev 21:3). The church is Christ's bride (Jer 2:32; Hos 1–4; Jn 3:29; Eph 5:25–32; Rev 19:7; 21:9; 22:17). Although the bride is often unfaithful, he remains faithful—though jealous in judging her lovers and separating her from their fatal embrace.

Yahweh alone has a rightful claim on his people and this claim is exercised directly by Jesus Christ, who is the only mediator. There is no other name to call upon for deliverance, since Jesus has been raised and exalted to the seat of all authority (Jn 14:6; Ac 4:12; Php 2:9–11). So he is jealous for his people and also for his name. Challenges to these rightful claims provoke his wrath, which is "quickly kindled" toward rivals (Ps 2:12). Precisely because of the other attributes we have considered, his *wrath* is not the capricious willfulness or temper tantrum of sinful human beings—or of the gods of Mount Olympus. Rather, it is the holy and wise wrath of a just judge.

Thus, even God's jealousy and wrath reveal his electing love for his people as well as for the honor of his own name.

D. Goodness, Love, and Mercy

God's knowledge, wisdom, and power are inseparable from his goodness. In fact, in the strict sense, Jesus said, "No one is good except God alone" (Mk 10:18). Whatever **goodness** we discern in creation—including each other—is but a reflection of its source. As with God's other attributes, goodness, love, and mercy are exhibited in his works—particularly in his relationship with human beings.

We have seen that God not only has life, as we do, but is life; similarly, God not only loves, he is **love** (1 Jn 3:1; 4:8, 16). It is natural for us as interdependent creatures to love those who return love, but God loves without any compulsion or necessity. In fact, God "hates the wicked and the one who loves violence" (Ps 11:5). "The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man" (Ps 5:5–6). Yet God's uniqueness means that he is free even to love his enemies, whom he is perfectly free (and just) to hate (Mt 5:44–45; Jn 3:16; 16:27; Ro 5:8). We do not determine the meaning of love from our own experience and then apply it to God, but define love according to God's works: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10).

God's **mercy** is the form that God's love takes when the objects of his love are sinners. Strictly speaking, God's mercy is something that could be revealed only after the fall. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit never had any occasion to show mercy to each other, since there could never be any fault. There was no need for God to show mercy, even to human beings before the fall. God loved his faithful covenant partner and is good to all that he has made, but mercy is shown to sinners. With love as his essential being, God cannot choose to be unloving. God "is merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love" (Ex 34:6; cf. Pss 86:15; 103:8; 116:5). Nevertheless, God is free to be merciful to whomever he will: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Ro

9:15, appealing to Ex 33:19). By definition, mercy is not required. God's freedom is nowhere more evident than in his merciful love and grace. And in Jesus Christ, God's grace "has been *manifested*" (2 Ti 1:9–10; cf. Jn 1:17). Grace is not just a divine attribute, but the merciful action of God in history.