

# ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## 5. ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

### A. METHODOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

#### 1) DEFINITION

Last time we took a look at two attributes to illustrate the importance of understanding God holistically, that is, in balance of both his transcendence and immanence. God who is transcendent, this self-sufficient God who exist in and of Himself complete sufficient, full, rich, infinitely possessing of every quality intrinsically an incredible concept, the self-sufficiency of God. This transcendent God is the same who has deemed it good and right to create and relate to a creation He doesn't need. It is an awesome thing to realize that God was not this empty water trough and created a world so it would fill Him up but rather in creating overflows of the fullness of His own being and then breaths into existence and then sustains and for His people seeks to bring to us His own character in finite measure filling us up with Him. It is an amazing thing. We become holy as He is holy. We take on His character bit by bit by bit. We are filled with Him. As we are filled, we then are able to minister.

In order to understand God correctly, we have got to see God's transcendence and immanence in balance and do it in a way in which neither side jeopardizes or diminishes the reality of the other side.

Secondly, we have got to go in the order of transcendence to immanence. You have got to start with the God who is in Himself independent of any world of anything else. From that, think about the fact that He has created this world and has chosen to relate to the world.

### B. INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES

The term "incommunicable" they cannot be communicated or are not communicated doesn't mean that God does not tell us these things. It isn't communicated in that sense of passing onto us the truths. If God had not passed on the truths of these attributes we have nothing to talk about. The term "Incommunicable" means attributes which are not communicated in the sense of passed on in substance to His finite creation.

#### 1. SELF-EXISTENCE (ASEITY)

This attribute means that God has existence within Himself or it is His nature to exist. God is not caused to exist as is everything else. Everything else owes its existence to something else. In most cases that is true in both a direct and an indirect fashion. You owe your existence in a direct fashion to your parents who conceived you and brought you into this world; indirectly to how many others do you owe your existence? And ultimately to God who created the human race. It is true to anything else you point to in the universe that its existence is derivative upon another. But God's existence is intrinsic to Himself. It is His very nature to exist. He cannot not exist.

The very point of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The beginning is not God because it doesn't say, "In God's beginning," rather, "In the beginning God..." The point of Genesis 1:1 is that before the beginning there is God. Before the beginning of what? Creation, everything else that exists there is God. The implication of that is He has no beginning. He exists eternally. His existence is part of His very nature. I think self-existence is also indicated in the name of God given to Moses in Exodus 3. Moses asks God, "When I go back to the people of Israel in Egypt and tell them that I have met with You and You commanded me to bring them out of Egypt and they ask me, 'Who sent you?' What shall I tell them?" And God says, "Tell them I AM has sent you." We get the name YAHWEH. The term just means, "I AM." It's sort of this notion of the being of God, His existence.

John 5:26 speaks of the Father who has life in Himself and the Son who has life in Himself. I think that is a very strong passage of the independent existence of God.

Passages that speak of God's self-sufficiency that we looked at last time also imply self-existence. If God is really self-sufficient, the most basic quality that anything could have is existence. There is no point in talking about whether something is good or has power or knowledge if it doesn't exist. So, self-sufficiency entails self-existence.

First on the list of God's incommunicable attributes is God's self-existence intrinsically, within His own nature. It is His nature or essence to exist, self-existence.

## 2. SELF-SUFFICIENCY

God possesses within Himself or intrinsically every quality in infinite measure. Any quality you can think of, whether it is goodness or beauty or truth, or knowledge or power, God possess that quality as what constitutes His very nature; He does so infinitely.

Self-sufficiency Key Texts

Psalm 50.

Isaiah 40:12-17.

Acts 17:24,25

If God created all there is, there is nothing else out there with independent existence that could add to the fullness of God. God is infinitely full. The only reason creation exists is because God gave of His fullness to bring into being something that had no existence or qualities apart from God granting them what they have, granting us what we have.

These doctrines are so important because they establish the supremacy of God, the magnitude of His greatness, the infinite extent of His perception. We have to take these to heart because the whole drift in our culture is to conceive of a God much more like us, almost to a pathetic being, in many, many ways. This is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is one before whom we should absolutely marvel that He would deem to create and care about us.

## 3. INFINITY

This is a negative attribute, it is that God is not finite. What is finitude? Finitude is boundedness or limited. So infinite is not bound, not limited. God has no limits. All of His qualities are infinite, boundless.

Don't confuse this with self-imposed limits that God purposefully puts upon Himself. For example, God promised to Abraham, through you Abraham all the nations of the world will be blessed. Doesn't that diminish God's power? No. Once God has promised on thing He must deliver it. It rules out other things that might have been the case but now that He said this, He can't do that. There can be self-imposed limitations on God which in no way threatens the limitedness of His nature. There are other ways that it appears prima facie (on the surface) it appears God is limited but in fact what it really means, what it really shows is that God is unlimited. For example, according to Scripture God cannot lie. We are told that in Titus 2.

Tit 1:2 in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,

There is a limitation on God. He can do certain things, He can speak in certain ways but He can't in others. Isn't that a limitation? God is unlimited in the quality, yet the point here, the quality of truth telling, honesty, faithfulness. He can't break a promise. We have a weakness. You and I can die, God can't. Does that mean that

God has a limitation that we don't? We can do something God can't do. God has the limitations, we don't. No it means that doesn't have the limitation that we have. We have the limitation on our existence by which our existence can end. He has no limitation on His existence. His existence can never end. God in mind this notion of boundlessness or limitedness has to do with the qualities of truth ensure us that God can never lie. The quality of existence, the infinite, assures us that God can never die. The quality of faithfulness, that is infinite assures us that God can never break a promise. What great thing that is.

Job 11:7-9 expresses this concept in a beautiful way.

Job 11:7 "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth And broader than the sea.

Psalms 147:5 uses a Hebrew term for boundlessness and applies it to God's knowledge.

Ps 147:5 Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is boundless

The NASB translates it "infinite, limitless." I take it that is an expression that could be said of all the attributes of God. He is focused here in this Psalm on God's knowledge. But it true that there are no limits in God and His attributes of His nature.

A self-imposed limit is not true limitation of nature. If I said to you, "I will fight you but I will put both arms behind my back." That is a self-imposed limitation. It doesn't indicate that my nature is limited, it indicates that I have chosen to do something that limits otherwise I wouldn't have a limitation of doing. When God makes a promise to Abraham or a covenant with David or whatever the case may be, He pledges Himself on one way that rules out God doing other things that He might well have done. In other words, there is no constraint upon God to do just that. Self-imposed limitations are not true limitations, that is the point I am making there. That is limitations of nature, that is one thing I am trying to rule out as an apparent limitation that isn't real.

The second one appears to be a limitation of nature. We can do things that God can't do. I can lie, God can't. I can tell the truth and I can lie. I have a breadth of expression that God doesn't have, He is limited. The problem with that is that it doesn't understand what limitless qualities mean. God has the limitless quality of truth telling, that means that it never ends, or it is never jeopardized, or it is never threatened or denied. The negative quality of lying that we are capable of is never true of God. The same thing with dying the limitless existence of God which cannot be threatened cannot be ended then indicates that He cannot die.

Both in terms of self-imposed limitations which are not true limitations of His nature and secondly in terms of what might appear to limitations of nature but in fact are not. They are expressions of the fullness, boundlessness of His nature. In neither case is God limited.

#### 4. OMNIPRESENCE

Theologians have for centuries have wanted to talk about two particular ways in which God is not bound. He is not bound in relation to space, that is this attribute, omnipresence, and He is not bound in relation to time, and that will be the next one we look at, eternity. Omnipresence should be understood in that God is not limited in His existence by space. To put it positively, ***God transcends all spatial boundaries and is present everywhere at once.***

Second Chronicles 2:6 speaks of God not being able to be contained, too large, too great to be contained.

Jeremiah 23:23,24 uses the metaphor of God being in the heavens, throughout the heavens, indicating His presence everywhere.

Psalm 139:7-10. The strongest passage and the most beautiful and precious to Christian people over the years.

Psalm 139:7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. 9 If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, 10 Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

God is everywhere present, the heavens, the earth and the depths, everywhere present which meant in Psalm to be a comfort and encouragement. No matter where you go, no matter ministry God calls you to, no matter what remote parts of planet earth God might send you, no matter if anyone else is with you God is there. God is your ever-present help, strength, protector, guide, all that He is, is always there for you.

Of course, this teaching also has its sobering aspects too. In every moment of temptation, in every moment of private sinning God is there. It works both ways. It is a two-edged sword, God doesn't miss anything and everything will be held accountable before the Lord. He is always there to help with His people constantly.

One more comment in terms of biblical theology. There is this theme that you find through the Bible that would seem on the surface to undercut this doctrine of omnipresence. That is this theme of, "I will be with you" that He promises His people.

In Isaiah 43 where He comforts His people to know that no matter they are going through He will be there.

Isaiah 43:1 But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! Isaiah 43:2 "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you.

Isaiah 43:5 "Do not fear, for I am with you;

Does this mean then that God is not with other people? What is the point of saying, "I will be with you" if God is omnipresent? It is one thing to have the attribute, it one thing to have the expression of it. It is different to talk about God's omnipresence verses what might be called His manifest presence. That is, God is there in a focused, deliberate, intentional way watching over. Not just there seeing everything that happens but attending to, caring for, providing for, strengthening, enabling, protecting, these ways in which God manifest presence is there.

The church has not had as much difficulty with this doctrine as with eternity. The church seemed always to be able to hold the view on this doctrine that apart from the created world there was not space. He created it. He created the spatiotemporal world that is here. Before the world, you would talk about God as a non-spatial reality. God in Himself doesn't occupy any space whether it is finite or infinite. God is non-spatial in His nature as God, but when He creates the world, He creates a spatial environment, this universe, and He inhabits all that He creates. He fills with His existence the spatial realm that is not native to His own nature.

## 5. ETERNITY

God is not limited in His existence by time. Scripture speaks of God as everlasting, or eternal. Some of the riches passages in the Scriptures about God's greatness or supremacy have to do with His being the eternal God.

Psalm 90:1 A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

I think the point of that is no matter which direction you would think, everlasting past, everlasting future God always is. There is a sense in which He is the eternal, present tense, He eternally is God.

1 Timothy 1:17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

So the everlasting God, the God of the ages, the one who always exists.

Exodus 3:14 I think this is conveyed in the notion of "I AM", the always existing God.

The metaphor of the "Alpha and Omega", the first and the last that you find in the book of Revelation. This notion of no matter which way you go, God is there.

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Everything else had a beginning, God has not beginning, He is eternal.

*Eternity is clearly taught in Scripture.*

The question has been, this has been a very difficult theological question over the centuries, in what sense should we understand God being eternal? *Is it temporally eternal or timelessly eternal?* These are the two options; temporally eternal or timelessly eternal. The one that won out early in the going was timeless eternity. There were several reasons for this. One reason that comes up a lot, that I don't think is a good reason for holding to timeless eternity is it safeguards God's immutability. It safeguards God's absolute immutability. Timeless eternity does do that. But I don't want to safeguard God's absolute immutability. In fact, I want to show that notion is wrong. If you hold that God is absolutely timeless in every sense of that word, then what the early church theologians said is right; namely it is impossible to talk about change in relation to God in any respect what-so-ever, because time is the necessary medium of change. Try to think of change without time. This why the early church theologians went this way, one of the reasons they went this way. If God is absolutely timeless, then there is no way you can talk meaningfully of any change in God what-so-ever. And they thought that was a net good, a net gain.

Augustine, both in his "Confessions" and in "The City of God" talked several times about this issue of God and time. Augustine proposed the notion that because God created the world, the world being a place of space and time therefore God apart from that world must be neither spatial nor temporal. That became the prevailing view of the church. Boethius is the theologian who developed the notion of God's timeless eternity more carefully and nuanced than anyone else preceding him. It became the established view in the church. The way Boethius conceived of God's relation to time was He stood as a fixed point that is non temporal, you might think of it as eternal present tense, not as I mentioned just a moment ago namely as always is existing - not that sense, but that

the experience of God is like the experience we have at this present moment. Take a present moment of our experience and extend it infinitely in both directions. That is what God experiences. This eternal present tense. God doesn't experience past or future. God experiences only "is" he experiences only "now" and He does so eternally. God is this fixed point, as it were, this eternal present tense. From this vantage point God can see the beginning to the end of time. God knows the end from the beginning, He knows the whole thing and He can see it from His vantage point. Everything is immediately present to God in the way Boethius thought of it. So Adam and Eve in the Garden and Christ on the cross and you me right here, and the second coming of Christ, it all is to God present before Him, there is no temporal distinction in His own experience or in reality.

The other main notion is *temporal eternity* sometimes called everlastingness. That God is everlasting, that He exists in time but He exists in all of time, there never is a point when God does not exist. All the time in the past God has existed, God does exist now and God will exist at every point of time in the future; everlasting existence. Until recently this view has not been advocated seriously by Christian theologians. But in the past sixty years or so it has become increasingly considered and by some advocated. Probably the strongest argument for it is that the biblical language uniformly speaks in ways that would indicate God's existence in what appears to be a temporal framework.

Psalm 90:1 A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

What is the context? With our forefathers You were with us, with us now You are here, we can anticipate in the future, future generations You will be there with us. It looks as though the framework of that statement is temporal.

I really do think that theologians who go this way have much to commend the notion that the Bible wants us to think of God in time, not outside of time.

## 6. IMMUTABLE

A definition of divine immutability: To say that God is immutable I believe, biblically, means that God cannot change in his attributes, his essence, or his very being, that is, who God is as God. And secondly, he cannot change in his ethical commitments that are an extension of his own moral nature.

Ps 102:25 Of old you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. Ps 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. Ps 102:27 But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end.

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

I call the first aspect of immutability "Ontological Immutability" because it is the very being of God. "Ontos" is the word for being. The very being of God, his nature, his essence cannot change. God is holy; he cannot be unholy. God is love; he cannot be not loving. God is just; he cannot be unjust. God is omnipotent; he cannot lack power. Of all of the attributes that are true of God, he cannot be other than who he is as God, his very nature. The other kind of immutability that really depends on the first one might be called "Ethical Immutability," that is, his very moral nature requires that when he makes an ethical commitment he is bound to it. For example he says to Abraham, "All the nations of the world will be blessed." Once God has made that ethical commitment he must see to it that the promise is fulfilled, that all of the nations of the world are blessed through Abraham. I think that this is exactly why Abraham could take his son Isaac in Genesis 22 to Mount Moriah and have every intention of putting a knife through his chest and killing his own son. He could do that because God promises through Isaac this promise will be fulfilled, not through anyone else. God can't break his word. It has to be Isaac. What does this mean if he plunges the knife into Isaac and kills him? What will God do? Raise him from the dead. This is what we read in Hebrews 11. He believed that God could raise from the dead, that one that he received back as a type. The promises of God are sure. He is the original promise keeper, before the movement ever started. God is the promise-keeping God. One application of that to us is we are called to be like God. We live in an age where people's word means almost nothing. This should not be the case with Christian people. We should be like God in being people of our word; that our promise is absolutely sure. We take an oath and keep it, even to our own hurt as we are told in Proverbs.

Notice that the ontological commitment of God is what you might call a first order kind of immutability, whereas ethical immutability is a second order kind. The ontological immutability of God is absolute; God is holy; he has been eternally; he cannot be other than holy. Whereas God's promise to Abraham is immutable; it is unchangeable. But God's promise to Abraham, "Through you, Abraham, all the nations of the world will be blessed" is contingent; it is not absolute. It is contingent upon God making the promise. He didn't have to promise that. God's immutable promise is not the same thing as his immutable character. His immutable character is absolute eternally what it is; it cannot be other than what it is. Whereas every promise God gives is a freely given promise. Once it is given it is inviolable. God cannot go back on his word. But did he have to give it? Did he have to promise, "Whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved"? Did he have to do that? No. Once he has, whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord "will" be saved because God said so; God promised. Ontological immutability is a first order kind of immutability; it is absolute. Ethical immutability is a second order; it is immutable only when God has made that promise, so it is contingent.

Here is another difference between them. It looks as though the ethical immutability of God is what it is because it flows out of his ontological immutability. That is, because God is truth, or because God is faithful, when he makes a pledge or a covenant or a promise because of his character, he will keep what he has said. The ethical immutability of God is as good as his character is. There is a lesson for you; people's word is as good as their character. God's word is as good as it is because his character is as good as it is.

The following are passages that underscore these two kinds of immutability.

""Psalm 102:25-27""

Psalm 102:25-27 is one of the most famous passages in Scripture on God's immutability. It is a beautiful text. It is actually quoted in Hebrews 1:10-11 of Christ. It is astonishing when you come across this in Hebrews 1 that this is quoted of Christ because this is YAHWEH. There is no question that this is extolling the God of Israel, YAHWEH, and when Hebrews refers to it, this was said of the Son.

What is interesting here is if this was written by David (we don't know for sure if it was) or any ancient person and you ask them, "What is stable? What is that you could point to that is fixed?" The ground that you sleep on at night is stable, and the stars you look up to in the heavens are always there. There is a pattern as the seasons change, but the stars remain the same season after season, year after year, generation after generation. So what is stable? The heavens and the earth. He uses that to contrast the stability of God to what appears to us as stable but in fact is like clothing that wears out.

Ps 102:25a Of old you founded the earth,

There is that stable earth that we lay down on at night.

Ps 102:25b And the heavens are the work of your hands.

Ps 102:26 Even they

Even those objects of utmost stability.

Ps 102:26 Even they will perish, but you endure, and all of them will wear out like a garment;

The heavens are like socks with a holes in them compared to you. Your years will never come to an end. You are always the same.

This is one of the great statements of God's immutability. Here I think the emphasis is altogether on the first category, ontological immutability. The Psalm taken as a whole might stress his ethical immutability insofar as this is given to cause us to trust him, hope in him, and look to him because of who God is. But nonetheless, this statement in and of itself is about who God is in himself.

""Malachi 3""

Here is another marvelous statement on God's immutability. The statement is in verse 6, then we will back up to what leads up this.

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

Just taking that verse in itself before looking at what leads up to this, you can see both ontological and ethical immutability. Therefore my promises to you are sure. I have pledged myself to you; I will save you; I will redeem you O sons of Jacob because I the LORD do not change therefore you can be confident in my promise that you will not be consumed but will be true. You can see how the ethical immutability of God flows out of his ontological immutability.

Look at what precedes. What shows this as so powerful is how distinct is God's attitude toward his own people, Jacob, compared to the rest of the world and what he going to do to them.

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.



By the way, can't you imagine that this verse went through John the Baptist's mind many, many times. I think we have talked about the occasion when he writes from prison to Jesus, are you the appointed one or should we look for another. This text must have been going through his mind because he was the messenger. What was the Messiah suppose to do? The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. So the refinement that would happen and the purging and the destruction of the enemies of God, where is it?

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.

So God's covenant pledge to his people is when judgment comes, the judgment will come in the form of refining fire, purifying away the impurities and bringing about pure gold. Then look what will happen when that same refiner's fire is brought to the world more broadly.

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 is, when God comes as a refiner's fire he will wipe out those who are against him. They will be destroyed. Why isn't Jacob destroyed? Is the answer because Jacob is so holy; Jacob is living righteously before God? Obviously they don't deserve God's judgment. No, the answer is God's pledge to Jacob that he would save them. So when he comes, his judgment on them will come in the form of refining them to make them as he says in verse 4 so that they would be pleasing to the Lord, refined people. But his judgment on everyone else who stands against him is destruction. How can you be confident that this will be true? I the Lord do not change, so my promise is sure.

""James 1:17""

Jas 1:17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

So God himself is not changeable. There is no variation or shadow of changing in God himself. Therefore, with ethical immutability, you can be sure that what God gives is good not evil. Look at verse 13

Jas 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself does not tempt anyone.

This is what God gives. God give evil; God tempts is the claim or the charge that hides behind that verse. God tempts. James says, no.

Jas 1:14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Jas 1:15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Jas 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Jas 1:17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

The point is because God is who he is, he only gives good gifts; he never does evil; he does not bring temptation in the sense in which he is talking about in here.

The two go together. Ethical immutability flows out of ontological immutability.

I have come to the conclusion that these categories, as true as they are and as important as they are, do not exhaust biblical teaching on the question, "Can God change?" That is what this attribute is about. Through the history of the church there has been an unambiguous answer to that question. Can God change? No, absolutely he cannot change in any respect whatsoever. The reason for that is because they were fearful of holding to any sense that God could change for better; if he changes for the better he wasn't as good as he could be before, so he wasn't God earlier. Or if he changes for the worse he can't be God anymore because there is something better than God, and that is a contradiction. So in order to avoid any hint of change for the better or change for the worse, why not just say God cannot change? This what the church held through almost all of its history until the last couple hundred years where this attribute was reexamined. Theologians began looking at this again and questioning whether we could hold this absolute immutability. What would lead them to start questioning this? Basically, the Bible. What about the simple statement, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit"(Eph 4:30)? What does this mean if God cannot change at all in any respect whatsoever? You have to turn that into some kind of mysterious eternal reality which is not connected in any way to what God experiences at all and accounts for it. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit means don't do a thing that the Holy Spirit disapproves of. But is that what it means when it says, don't grieve the Holy Spirit? What do you do when you come to Mount Sinai? Moses is on the Mountain with the Lord and the Lord tells Moses the people have made this golden calf and they have bowed down to worship it; they have rejected me, and I am going to go down and slaughter them. Here is God absolutely ticked; he is angry. What do say of that?

I have drawn the conclusion that we should have another category in our whole discussion of God and change. In this other category is a kind of mutability. Karl Barth called it "holy mutability;" that is the phrase he liked for it. In other words there is more to change than just change for the better or change for the worse. There is also change that is appropriate to a changed moral situation. There is change that is appropriate to a changed moral situation. When a parent witnesses a child being flagrantly disobedient, perhaps caught lying, the parent ought to have a change in relationship to that child in a way appropriate to the changed moral situation and bring discipline to bear. Why not call this relational mutability? This is the name I have given to it. I think it gets the main point across that God in relationship to us is a God who changes in appropriate ways to changed moral situations. Take the Jonah story. Jonah goes to Nineveh begrudgingly, but he finally goes and preaches what he was suppose to that in 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed. What did they do? They did exactly what Jonah feared they would, exactly why he didn't want to go; the worst thing was happening; they were repenting. In response to their repentance God forestalled judgment. A change takes place. Is this a change in God? Does this change God's character? No. Does this somehow change who God is as God? No. Does it change God's ethical commitments? Some have argued it kind of looks like it does because he did say 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed; he just flat out said it. But isn't there underlying, throughout Scripture, a principle that God makes clear from the beginning that pervades all of the Bible that if people turn from their wicked ways. God will hear their cries for mercy and will bring forgiveness. So implicit in the statement, 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed, is the condition that unless you repent. It is an implicit condition. It is in the fabric of God's relationship to sinners from the get-go. Nineveh repents and God changes from one who was at throws of venting wrath against them and judgment against them, and now he is bringing merciful forgiveness to them. I would say that this is not a change in his ethical commitment. In fact his merciful response is an expression of his ethical immutability. His relational mutability changing from wrath to mercy, wrath to forgiveness is precisely because of his ethical immutability, namely the ethical commitment of God that when a sinner repents I will forgive. So he keeps his word. He honors his own promise to people.

Does God change emotionally? If we look back at the history of this doctrine and trace it through, early church theologians had one of two answers to this question.

One was no. Emotions are human, so all the emotional statements in the Bible are anthropomorphic. When it talks about God being angry, or God being joyful or any kind of emotion, it is just like Scripture talking about God's hand or his arm or his eyes. They are anthropomorphisms. Anthropomorphism is a human way of speaking about God that is not literally true of him. The strong right arm of the Lord is a human way of talking about God's strength. He doesn't literally have a right arm. The eyes of the Lord is human way talking about God's watching; he is there seeing everything that happens but he doesn't have literal have eyes. Some theologians argued it is the same thing with emotions when it talks about God's emotions or his wrath or his anger or his joy or whatever the case might be. God doesn't have emotions; these are anthropomorphic. He has responses; he does things, but he doesn't actually feel anything. Emotions are creaturely. They argued that because essentially they thought, what do emotions do to us? Emotions get us in such trouble as human beings. They viewed God as sort of the ultimate mind, Spock for Star Trek fans from a previous period. Spock, the absolute reasoning person, was not affected by emotions whatsoever because look what emotions do to us. They lead us astray; they cause us to have fits of anger, and they just cause all kinds of problems. Emotions just are horrible the way they thought about it. Certainly emotions are really imperfections or an aspect of finitude that can't be true of the infinite perfect God.

The other view that was held in the early church was yes he has emotions and they are emotions only of eternal bliss. So there is an emotion appropriate to God, and that emotion is bliss. So no anger; none of these things that are true for us are true for God.

I ask myself this question: Is there a basis in Scripture for denying God's literal emotions in the way that there is a basis in Scripture for denying God's literal body parts, eyes, hands, ears, arms, etc.? I drew the conclusion, no. How do you know when you have an anthropomorphism in the Bible? How do you know when what it is saying is, in fact, anthropomorphic? Here is my suggestion to you. You know you have an anthropomorphism when Scripture presents God as transcending the very finite human quality it elsewhere attributes to him. With bodily parts (hands, eyes, arms), Scripture presents God as transcending those when it teaches us that God is Spirit, when it teaches us that God created matter. Matter is created; God is Spirit, so we have a biblical basis for refuting Mormons who say God is bodily, a bodily being. He is just one of us grown up in Mormon theology. Mormons are wrong about that because Scripture presents God as transcending the very finite qualities, namely bodily parts, which elsewhere are attributes to him. Is there anything in Scripture that would lead us to think God transcends what appear to be to us, finite human qualities like anger, wrath, joy, happiness, frustration emotions, that it elsewhere attributes to him. It certainly does attribute them to him all over the place. To my knowledge there is no place in the Bible where we are encouraged to think that God is not really like that as we are encouraged in regard to bodily parts. I have drawn the conclusion we are meant to understand God is really with us, really a person. Abraham Heschel in his two volume work on the prophets says, "The emotions that we read about of God and us are theomorphic not anthropomorphic." I think he is right; they are theomorphic. They are aspects of God's personhood that he has allowed us to share in. Just like god has reason, we have reason; nobody disputes that point. Yet we can use our reason in horrible ways to do terrible things. We can plot ways of killing people secretly so that no one can catch us and put an entire region in fear of their lives for going to the grocery store. Look what a human being can do with reason. Plotting, strategizing, very careful planning; that is reason. God has reason. Why don't we say, "Look at what people do with their reason, and we don't want to have this problem with God, so God doesn't have reason?" Isn't it interesting that no theologian ever proposed that? God has reason; we have reason. God has emotions; we have emotions. So emotions are theomorphic rather than anthropomorphic.

One more comment. What about passages in Scripture that talk about God changing his mind or repenting, as it is sometimes translated? There are 28 affirmations and 7 denials of God's repentance in the Old Testament. Twenty eight times it says God repented or changed his mind, and seven times it says God's can't or doesn't change his mind or doesn't repent. To get to the nub of this in a way that I think helps is to look at 1 Samuel 15:11,35. In verses 11 and 35 we read that God repented or he relented of the fact that he made Saul king.

1 Sam 15:10 Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, 1 Sam 15:11 "I regret that I have made Saul king,

That is the Hebrew word "nacham", which means to relent of having done, to change from having done this is the idea.

1 Sam 15:11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not carried out my commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.

1 Sam 15:35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Here you have to uses of "nacham", this Hebrew word for relent or regret or change of mind. He changed his mind in regard to Saul being king. There is a third use of the word in this chapter in verse 29.

1 Sam 15:29 "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man that he should change his mind."

Here you have in this one chapter a very interesting case study on this question. Either the author is nuts and you have flagrant contradiction within a few verses, or you give them the benefit of the doubt that probably they have some way of reconciling this in their mind or they wouldn't write it this way, and certainly that is the case with the biblical writers. This is under inspiration, this is not contradictory. In what sense can we say with verse 11 and 35 God repented or relented or regretted that he made Saul king and then with verse 29 the Glory of Israel "cannot change his mind." Is it possible that verse 29 establishes an absolute rule that God cannot literally change his mind or relent from what he has said in the way that we do as human beings. My point will be this, when we read verses 11 and 35 we dare not think that God relents of something in a way that we do, namely that he learns something new and goes, "Ah shucks, what a mess; if I had only known that Saul would be such a jerk I wouldn't have done this, what a mistake; I wish I hadn't made him king." We dare not think that God relents in the way we do. How do we relent? We learn something that we didn't know before; we see something that we didn't see before. We think differently of it because of that. We dare not think that is how God repents. Because the Glory of Israel cannot lie, will not lie or change his mind for he is not a man that he should change his mind. Here is my argument on verse 29. The Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind. Almost the same phrase is used in Numbers 23:19 in Balaam's second oracle. This is God speaking through Balaam. An almost identical same language is used I that. So you have two places in the Bible where we are told God cannot lie or change his mind.

If you hold the view of Open Theists (people like Greg Boyd, John Sanders, and Clark Pinnock), then the way you reconcile these passages is by saying verses 11 and 35 indicates that sometimes God does change his mind and in verse 29 sometimes he doesn't. Here is my problem with that way of understanding this. In verse 29 when it says, "the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind" it looks like he is treating lying and changing his mind in parallel ways. So if we say in this particular case, in verse 29 God doesn't change his mind, and in other cases he does (verse 11 and verse 35), then what do we do with lying. In this particular case God doesn't lie, but in other cases he

does. Is that acceptable theologically to say in some cases he doesn't lie, but in other cases he does. No, it is not acceptable to say that God sometimes lies and sometimes doesn't. He doesn't ever lie. So when you put the two together, the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind shouldn't you treat change his mind the way you do lie? The Glory of Israel will never lie. He will never change his mind.

Second argument, look at the second half of the verse, "for he is not a man that he should change his mind. What do men do? What do human beings do? The point is God isn't like a man. In order to make the openness interpretation work you would have to say because he is God, he sometimes changes his mind and sometimes doesn't. What must be true of men then? They always change their mind or they never change their mind. Which one is it for human beings? The answer is neither one. Actually, what is true of human beings is sometimes they change their mind and sometimes they don't. The Glory of Israel is not like a man. He does exactly what Open Theists say that God does. Sometimes he changes his mind and sometimes he doesn't. So in order to contrast God with humans, who sometimes change their minds and sometimes don't, what must be true of God? He never changes his mind, never relents. So here we have in both ways, the first half of the verse with the comparison with lying indicating absolutely doesn't relent; the second half of the verse the contrast with humans absolutely never relents unlike humans who sometimes do. So verse 29 is saying God, as God, never relents.

What about verses 11 and 35? When we read in those other verses that God regretted that he made Saul king, we dare not think that God regretted as we do. Which is, look at what he did; I didn't know that Saul would be such a jerk, what a failure as a king, what a mistake. We dare not think that of God because he never does that. Don't you think the point of putting verse 29 in the middle of those two other verses is precisely to disabuse us of the mistaken notion that somehow God could learn something new and see it differently and wish he hadn't done this? That is exactly why it is there. What does it mean? I take it, it means God, knowing what Saul had done, observing the history as it unfolds, watches Saul's disobedience, watches his presumption of instead of sacrificing everything as God told him to, he saves the best to sacrifice to the Lord. But God told him to kill them not bring them back and he didn't. This is the presumption of his false piety and God detests it. God observes this, and in his relationship with Saul, as God deals with this disobedient rebellious king of Israel, he wishes that the king of Israel were not this way. But don't think for a moment this means that God didn't expect it or didn't anticipate it, that God learned something new because of it. He regretted that the king of Israel would be this. What did he do in its place? He takes the Spirit from Saul, gives the Spirit to David, and puts a new king who will be the prototype king; the Messiah will come as the son of David. I take that these statements of God's change, like in verses 11 and 35, if you look at them strictly speaking, are anthropomorphic; that is, they cannot be true literally of God. What they are stating is some truth using this vehicle of what looks to us like God changing his mind. Just like in the book of Jonah when Nineveh repented it says God relented, and he forgave them. In the book of Jonah, do you really think that God didn't anticipate the repentance of the Ninevites? If God didn't anticipate this he missed an awfully good cue for Jonah who did anticipate it, and that is why he fled to Tarshish. Did you get the point of that in the story? Jonah knew they would repent; Jonah, the dumb prophet, knew this. Did you think that God anticipated this was going to happen? Absolutely. It is not like God went, "My goodness look at what happened; I'm going to change my plan." No. This is all part of plan A; there isn't a plan B. So when it says God repented and forgave them, what does it mean? Not that he learned something new, but he changed in relationship to them from what he had said earlier. What does that look like to us? He changed his mind. That is what it appears like, so he is using human ways of understanding to express something that is not literally true of God in that fashion.