

The Immutability of God

by Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

Malachi 3:6:

I. The Text Opened

A. Malachi 3:6

1. "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." (Mal. 3:6).
 - a) A natural implication of God's aseity is his immutability.
 - b) At first blush this immutability seems to have little support in Scripture.
 - c) For there God is seen as standing in the most vital association with the world.
 - d) In the beginning he created heaven and earth and so moved from not creating to creating.
 - e) And from that beginning he is, as it were, a coparticipant in the life of the world and especially of his people Israel.
 - (1) *He comes and goes, reveals and conceals himself. He averts his face [in wrath] and turns it back to us in grace.*
 - (2) *He repents (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:11; Amos 7:3, 6; Joel 2:13; Jon. 3:9; 4:2) and changes plans (Exod. 32:10-14; Jon. 3:10).*
 - (3) *He becomes angry (Num. 11:1, 10; Ps. 106:40; Zech. 10:3) and sets aside his anger (Deut. 13:17; 2 Chron. 12:12; 30:8; Jer. 18:8, 10; 26:3, 19; 36:3).*
 - (4) *His attitude toward the pious is one thing, his disposition to the ungodly another (Prov. 11:20; 12:22).*
 - (5) *With the pure he is pure; with the crooked he shows himself a shrewd opponent 12 (Ps. 18:26-27).*
 - f) In the fullness of time he even becomes human in Christ and proceeds to dwell in the church through the Holy Spirit.
 - (1) *He rejects Israel and accepts the Gentiles.*
 - (2) *And in the life of the children of God there is a consistent alternation of feelings of guilt and the consciousness of forgiveness, of experiences of God's wrath and of his love, of his abandonment and his presence.*
 - (3) *How is he immutable in light of this?*

II. The Doctrine and Philosophical Considerations

A. DOCTRINE: God always remains the same.

1. At the same time the Scriptures testify that amid all this alternation God is and remains the same.
 - a) Everything changes, but he remains standing.
 - b) He remains who he is (Ps. 102:26-28).
 - c) He is YHWH, he who is and ever remains himself.
 - d) He is the first and with the last he is still the same God (Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 46:4; 48:12).
 - e) He is who he is (Deut. 32:39; cf. John 8:58; Heb. 13:8), the incorruptible who alone has immortality, and is always the same (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; Heb. 1:11-12).
 - f) Unchangeable in his existence and being, he is so also in his thought and will, in all his plans and decisions.

- g) He is not a human that he should lie or repent.
 - h) What he says, he will do (Num. 15:28; 1 Sam. 15:29).
 - i) His gifts (charismata) and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).
 - j) He does not reject his people (Rom. 11:1).
 - k) He completes what he has begun (Ps. 138:8; Phil. 1:6).
 - (1) *In a word, he, YHWH, does not change (Mal. 3:6).*
 - (2) *In him there is “no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).*
2. On this foundation Christian theology constructed its doctrine of divine immutability.
- a) Mythological theogony could not attain to this level, but philosophy frequently named and described God as the unique, eternal, immutable, unmoved, and self-consistent Ruler over all things.
 - (1) *From the presence of motion in the universe Aristotle inferred the existence of a “first mover,” an “everlasting immovable being,” who is one and eternal, necessary, immutable, free from all composition, devoid of potentiality, matter, change; and who is pure act, pure form, unadulterated essence, absolute form, “the very nature of a thing, primary substance.”*
 - (2) *Philo called God “unchangeable, self-consistent, invariable, steadfast, firm, fixed, unalterable.”*
 - (3) *And with this assessment Christian theology concurred. God, according to Irenaeus, is always the same, self-identical.*
 - (4) *In Augustine, God’s immutability flows directly from the fact that he is supreme and perfect being: “It is instinctual for every rational creature to think that there is an altogether unchangeable and incorruptible God.”*
 - (5) *This concept of an eternal and unchangeable being cannot be obtained by the senses, for all creatures, also humans themselves, are changeable; but within their souls humans see and find the immutable something that is better and greater than all the things that are subject to change.*
3. If God were not immutable, he would not be God.
- a) His name is “being,” and this name is “an unalterable name.”
 - b) All that changes ceases to be what it was.
 - (1) *But true being belongs to him who does not change.*
 - (a) *That which truly is remains.*
 - (b) *That which changes “was something and will be something but is not anything because it is mutable.”*
 - (2) *But God who is cannot change, for every change would diminish his being.*
 - c) Furthermore, God is as immutable in his knowing, willing, and decreeing as he is in his being.
 - (1) *“The essence of God by which he is what he is, possesses nothing changeable, neither in eternity, nor in truthfulness, nor in will.”*
 - (2) *As he is, so he knows and wills—immutably.*
 - (a) *“For even as you totally are, so do you alone totally know, for you immutably are, and you know immutably, and you will immutably. Your essence knows and wills immutably, and your knowledge is and wills immutably, and your will is and knows immutably.”*
 - (3) *Neither creation, nor revelation, nor incarnation (affects, etc.) brought about any change in God.*
 - (4) *No new plan ever arose in God.*
 - (5) *In God there was always one single immutable will.*

- (a) *“In God the former purpose is not altered and obliterated by the subsequent and different purpose, but by one and the same eternal and unchangeable will he effected regarding the things he created, both that formerly, so long as they were not, they should not be, and that subsequently, when they began to be, they should come into existence.”*
- (b) *In creatures the only change is from nonbeing to being, from good to evil.*
- (c) *The same idea comes back repeatedly in the scholastics and Roman Catholic theologians as well as in the works of Lutheran and Reformed theologians.*

4. This immutability of God, however, was frequently combated from the side of both Deism and pantheism.

- a) In the opinion of Epicurus the gods totally resemble excellent human beings, who make changes with respect to location, activity, and thought (etc.); and according to Heraclitus and later the Stoics, the deity as the immanent cause of the world was also caught up in its perpetual flux.
- b) Opposition to God’s immutability in Christian theology was of the same nature.
- c) On the one hand, there is the Pelagianism, Socinianism, Remonstrantism, and rationalism, which especially opposes the immutability of God’s knowing and willing and makes the will of God dependent on—and hence change in accordance with—the conduct of humans.

(1) *Especially Vorstius, in his work “On God and His Attributes,” criticized the immutability of God.*

(2) *He made a distinction between God’s essence, which is simple and unchangeable, and God’s will, which being free does not will everything eternally and does not always will the same thing.*

5. Much more serious even is the opposition to God’s immutability from the side of pantheism.

- a) Common to all pantheistic criticism is that the idea of becoming is transferred to God, thus totally obliterating the boundary line between the Creator and the creature.

(1) *The idea of God as “substance,” as it occurs in Spinoza, proved to be an abstraction devoid of content.*

(2) *In order to breathe life into that concept, philosophy frequently substituted “becoming” for “being.”*

(3) *In that connection it makes a big difference, naturally, whether or not this process—by which God himself comes into being—is conceived in unitarian or trinitarian terms and whether it is viewed as occurring immanently in the being of God or transitively in the world.*

(4) *Belonging in this category are, first of all, Gnosticism, but further also the theosophy of the Kabbalah, of Böhme, Schelling, Rothe, Hamberger, and others, having an aftereffect in the doctrine of kenosis, and finally the pantheistic philosophy of Fichte, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, and others.*

(5) *However variously it may be elaborated, the basic idea is the same: God is not, but becomes.*

(6) *In and of himself, in the initial moment, he is an “unknown oceanic depth (βυθος άγνωστος),” purely abstract potential being, unqualified nature, contentless idea, a dark brooding urge, a blind alogical will—in a word, a form of being that is nothing but can become anything.*

(7) *But from that mass of potential existence, in the form of a process, God gradually heaves himself into actuality.*

(a) *He is his own Creator.*

(b) *He produces himself.*

(c) *Very gradually, either within himself or in the world, he matures into personality, self-consciousness, mind, spirit.*

6. Under the influence of this philosophical idea of the Absolute becoming, also modern theology has repeatedly denied or delimited the immutability of God and with a passion favored calling God his own cause (*causa sui*), a self-actualizing power.

a) As Luthardt puts it: "God is his own deed."

b) Others speak of "God's self-postulation."

c) In a special treatise Dorner, attempting to avoid both Deism and pantheism (acosmism), sought to reconcile God's immutability and his "aliveness."

d) He believes he can achieve this goal by locating God's immutability in the dimension of the ethical.

e) Ethically, God is immutable and always self-consistent.

f) He remains holy love.

g) But for the rest, Dorner believes that as a result of the creation, the incarnation, and the atonement, a change has come about in God; that he stands in a reciprocal relation to humankind, that he only knows reality from his interaction with the world.

h) This means that for God, too, there is a past, a present, and a future; that he becomes angry, justifies; and that in general his disposition corresponds to that of humans.

(1) *Many theologians on the doctrine of God also refrain from speaking about this important attribute but on the doctrine of creation, or the incarnation, or the kenosis only let their readers know that they accept mutability in God (Ebrard, Hofmann, Thomasius, von Oettingen, et al.).*

7. Nevertheless, the doctrine of God's immutability is highly significant for religion.

a) The difference between the Creator and the creature hinges on the contrast between being and becoming.

b) All that is creaturely is in process of becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, in search of rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest only in him who is pure being without becoming.

(1) *This is why, in Scripture, God is so often called the Rock (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31, 37; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:3, 32; Ps. 19:14; 31:3; 62:2, 7; 73:26; etc.).*

(2) *We humans can rely on him; he does not change in his being, knowing, or willing.*

(3) *He eternally remains who he is.*

(4) *Every change is foreign to God.*

(5) *In him there is no change in time, for he is eternal; nor in location, for he is omnipresent; nor in essence, for he is pure being.*

(6) *Christian theology frequently also expressed this last point in the term "pure actuality" (purus actua).*

(7) *Aristotle thus conceived God's being as the "primary form" (reality) without any change (δυναμις), as absolute actuality (ἐνεργεια).*

(8) *Scholasticism, accordingly, began to speak of God as "utterly pure and simple actuality" to indicate that he is perfect and absolute being without any capability (potentia) for nonbeing or for being different.*

(9) *Boethius states, for example, that God does not change in essence “because he is pure actuality.”*

(a) *For that reason, too, the expression “causa sui” (his own cause) was avoided with reference to God.*

8. The idea of the absolute becoming was first clearly voiced by Heraclitus and subsequently recurs again and again in philosophy.

a) Plotinus more than anyone else made use of this concept, applying it not only to matter but also to that which he held to be absolute being.

b) He taught that God had brought forth his own being—that he was active before he existed.

c) Granted, Christian theology indeed spoke of God as “a being who exists of himself” and hence of his aseity.

d) Lactantius, Synesius, and Jerome, moreover, used the expression “causa sui” (his own cause).

(1) *Jerome wrote: “The God who always is does not have any other beginning; he is his own origin and the cause of his own substantiation, nor can any other thing be imagined to exist that stands on its own.”*

(a) *But this expression was always understood to mean that, while God existed of himself, he had not become or been brought forth by himself.*

e) Descartes later accorded primacy to the will of God over his intellect and made the essence of all things depend on that will; he indeed made God’s existence the product of his own will.

(1) *He said: “God in truth preserves himself.”*

(2) *God is his own cause and derives from himself—not in a negative but in a positive sense.*

(3) *“God is the efficient cause of his own existence.” He derives his being “from the real immensity of his own power.”*

f) Hearing these things said by him, a few of his followers did adopt this expression (causa sui), but Reformed theologians wanted the expressions (“his own cause,” “self-derived existence”) interpreted exclusively in a purely negative sense.

(1) *Being “one’s own cause” in a positive sense is an impossibility because in that case the self same object is at one and the same time said to exist, insofar as it produces itself, and not to exist, insofar as it is being produced.*

g) Now it is not hard to understand why monistic philosophy should resort to this idea of absolute becoming in order to furnish at least a semblance of an interpretation of reality.

(1) *But Herbart rightly subjected this idea to sharp criticism, and his adherents have not without reason expressed their amazement at the fact that this idea should be so well received in speculative theology.*

(2) *Indeed, the idea of becoming predicated of the divine being is of no help whatever in theology.*

(3) *Not only does Scripture testify that in God there is no variation nor shadow due to change [James 1:17], but reflection on this matter also leads to the same conclusion.*

(a) *Becoming presupposes a cause, for there is no becoming without a cause.*

(b) *But being in an absolute sense no longer permits the inquiry concerning a cause.*

(c) *Absolute being is because it is.*

(d) *The idea of God itself implies immutability.*

- (e) *Neither increase nor diminution is conceivable with respect to God.*
- (f) *He cannot change for better or worse, for he is the absolute, the complete, the true being.*
- (g) *Becoming is an attribute of creatures, a form of change in space and time.*
- (h) *But God is who he is, eternally transcendent over space and time and far exalted above every creature.*
- (i) *He rests within himself and is for that very reason the ultimate goal and resting place of all creatures, the Rock of their salvation, whose work is complete.*

(i) *Those who predicate any change whatsoever of God, whether with respect to his essence, knowledge, or will, diminish all his attributes: independence, simplicity, eternity, omniscience, and omnipotence. T*

(ii) *his robs God of his divine nature, and religion of its firm foundation and assured comfort.*

9. This immutability, however, should not be confused with monotonous sameness or rigid immobility.

- a) Scripture itself leads us in describing God in the most manifold relations to all his creatures.
- b) While immutable in himself, he nevertheless, as it were, lives the life of his creatures and participates in all their changing states.
- c) Scripture necessarily speaks of God in anthropomorphic language.
- d) Yet, however anthropomorphic its language, it at the same time prohibits us from positing any change in God himself.
- e) There is change around, about, and outside of him, and there is change in people's relations to him, but there is no change in God himself.
- f) In fact, God's incomprehensible greatness and, by implication, the glory of the Christian confession are precisely that God, though immutable in himself, can call mutable creatures into being.
- g) Though eternal in himself, God can nevertheless enter into time and, though immeasurable in himself, he can fill every cubic inch of space with his presence.

(1) In other words, though he himself is absolute being, God can give to transient beings a distinct existence of their own.

(2) In God's eternity there exists not a moment of time; in his immensity there is not a speck of space; in his being there is no sign of becoming.

(3) Conversely, it is God who posits the creature, eternity which posits time, immensity which posits space, being which posits becoming, immutability which posits change.

(4) There is nothing intermediate between these two classes of categories: a deep chasm separates God's being from that of all creatures.

(5) It is a mark of God's greatness that he can condescend to the level of his creatures and that, though transcendent, he can dwell immanently in all created beings.

(6) Without losing himself, God can give himself, and, while absolutely maintaining his immutability, he can enter into an infinite number of relations to his creatures.

10. Various examples have been employed to illustrate this truth.

- a) The sun itself does not change, whether it scorches or warms, hurts or animates (Augustine).

- b) A coin remains a coin whether called a price or a pledge (*idem*).
- c) A pillar remains unchanged whether a person sees it on her right or on her left (Thomas).
- d) An artist does not change when he gives shape to his inner vision in words or in tone, in voice or in color, nor does a scholar when he puts down his ideas in a book.
- e) None of these comparisons is perfect, but they do suggest how a thing may change in its relations while remaining the same in essence.
- f) This is especially true of God since he, the immutable One, is himself the sole cause of all that changes.
 - (1) *We should not picture God as putting himself in any relation to any creature of his as though it could even in any way exist without him.*
 - (2) *Rather, he himself puts all things in those relations to himself, which he eternally and immutably wills—precisely in the way in which and at the time at which these relations occur.*
 - (3) *There is absolutely no “before” or “after” in God; these words apply only to things that did not exist before, but do exist afterward.*
 - (4) *It is God’s immutable being itself that calls into being and onto the stage before him the mutable beings who possess an order and law that is uniquely their own.*