

DENYING DIVINE CHANGELESSNESS: A TAXONOMY OF DEVIATIONS AND DENIALS OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY¹

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Abstract: *While the doctrine of divine immutability has enjoyed a relatively strong affirmation throughout theological antiquity, there have been Christian thinkers who saw fit to provide some tweaks, deviations, or even denials concerning God’s changelessness. The following essay is a modest proposal for a possible taxonomy which seeks to group thinkers and movements based on their impulse of deviation or denial. This article does not attempt to address the deviations and denials, simply to categorize them. Therefore, this essay should not be read as constructive nor definitive: rather, this is a single possible taxonomy for the seemingly growing body of literature which alters the doctrine of God’s inalterability.*

Key Words: Divine Immutability, Divine Attributes, Theology Proper, Process Theism, Doctrine of God.

INTRODUCTION

Denials and Deviations

A survey of recent theological literature surrounding divine immutability reveals the discussion of God’s changelessness to be a mutable conversation about an immutable God. Denials of God’s unchanging nature have compounded in the last century and now flow from several springs. Repudiations of immutability are not confined to one denomination, continent, or theological era. Rather, the cast whose pen writes of a mutable God seems to be increasingly diverse. From process theists to evangelicals, and many variations in between, modern remonstrances against immutability proliferate. One dissenter, Isaak August Dorner (1809–1884), put the reality this way: “The traditional axiomatic immutability of God is nowadays in dispute by a majority of contemporary thinkers from a variety of perspectives,” which led Dorner to conclude that “there must be a renewed theological investigation of this question in order to prepare a more

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satisfactory doctrine of God.³

These deviations from a teaching of an unalterable God are not going unnoticed. Indeed, it would prove difficult to remain ignorant of the rising tide of literature against classical immutability, especially as the theological conversation pushes into the modern era. In his 1983 essay, Richard A. Muller points to the ingenuity of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling and says that under their tutelage, “the older ontology of immutable being was replaced by an idealist ontology of the gradual self-realization of the absolute idea, in short, an ontology of becoming or of the becoming of being.”⁴

Muller’s insightful point picks up on the trend in modern theology to move from the absolute to the unactualized. As we will see, a trade such as this stems from several sources, as the impulse to diminish the absoluteness of God’s unchanging nature is invoked for different reasons. Brian Davies, working on the interconnectivity of God’s perfections of simplicity and immutability, helpfully lists five such reasons theologians might be prone to deviate from a classic understanding of an unchanging essence in God: (1) if God lives and acts, then he changes; (2) if God loves, then God changes; (3) if God is immutable, then God is not free; (4) if God knows, then God is changeable; and (5) the Bible says that God changes.⁵

While the impulses to deny immutability are variegated, enough time has passed—and enough deviations published—to reveal theological patterns. One could use any number of several strategies to traverse the arguments *contra* classical immutability in hopes to provide a taxonomy of deviations and denials away from the doctrine. For instance, you could cover the pertinent material chronologically, examining the denials of immutability as they appear throughout history. You could opt to cover the literature via the lens of denominational affiliation, showing the denials by way of tribal affirmations and denials. Or one

³Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Claude Welch and Robert T. Williams, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 81.

⁴Richard A. Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), 22. Muller continues to demonstrate the impact of these theological architects, saying, “The impact of this alternative ontology upon theology was enormous, particularly in Germany. Theologians like Dorner, Thomasius, Biedermann, and Gess all concluded that change, becoming, could be predicated of God.”

⁵Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 165. James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 9, puts the significance of this discussion in perspective when he claims, “Perhaps no question more clearly illuminates the conflict between the older teaching of classical Christian theism and the newer commitments of theistic mutualism.”

could organize the arguments by theological position; this method would treat groups instead of individuals and look at entire segments, such as process theologians, open theists, or evangelicals. While each of these models are helpful, this essay instead seeks to explore the deviations and denials of divine immutability by categorizing them inductively. Patterns emerge as theologians work through the pages and authors denying the doctrine of divine immutability. Using these patterns, we can develop a taxonomy of denials and deviations to catalog why modern theologians are willing to ascribe movement to God.

While others may exist, there are five major “problems” leveraged at a classical articulation of divine immutability that become apparent in working through the literature. Moreover, it would not do justice to the breadth of theological literature to argue that deviations of divine immutability are monolithic. On the contrary, even within this taxonomy of denials, arguments are variegated. As pertaining to deviations and denials of divine immutability the following five categories will be our working taxonomy for the remainder of this essay:

- (1) the problem of relations and soteriology
- (2) the Incarnation
- (3) creation and divine action
- (4) volition and knowledge
- (5) and divine freedom and contingency.

The remaining space of this essay works through each problem respectively, discussing key ideas, theologians, and groups who have contributed to and ascribed that change to God. Of course, an exhaustive treatment of each problem is impossible and is out of line with the *telos* of this project. Instead, each category focuses on a few representative examples. It should also be noted that when theologians deny immutability, they often do so on multiple fronts. So, when we treat representatives for each ascribed remonstrance, we will focus on an aspect of their denial while other aspects may remain.

The Problem of Relations and Soteriology

Of the problems ascribed to God above, the relational/soteriological dilemma is both the most important for this project and the most frequently used deviation from a classical approach to divine immutability. The former is true because this remonstrance against divine immutability shares the impulse of our thesis. These theologians worry that a Thomistic conception of changelessness renders God unable to save in the manner the biblical data seems to depict. The concern that drives their reasoning is soteriological in nature; and, in this way, these

theologians share the foundational conviction of this work, namely, that our theology of God's being influences and impacts our theology of God's redemption. This connection is why Richard Swinburne referred to the classical notion of God as a "lifeless thing," saying if God possessed "Fixed intentions 'from all eternity' he would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because he chooses too there and then."⁶

The latter reason for the importance of this complaint is true since the cast that employs this line of argumentation is not confined to one theological era, denomination, or tribe. On the contrary, asserting the seeming negative soteric effects of classical immutability found favor across the theological spectrum. Given the size of the pertinent literature, some delineation is needed; we will confine our survey to three theologians who represent both the strength of this argument and the diversity – Isaak August Dorner, Charles Hartshorne, and Bruce Ware.

Isaak August Dorner

No treatment of divine immutability would be complete without interaction with I. A. Dorner. Between 1856 and 1858, Dorner wrote a collection of three essays, published originally in *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, which have had a remarkable influence on the conversation of God's changelessness.⁷ The ghost of his articulation of divine immutability outlived him through the pens of many theological children.⁸ The most prominent of these theological children is Barth.

⁶Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 221. This is why Swinburne declares that God must have "continual interaction" with men such that God is "moved by men."

⁷One needs to only look at the explosion of secondary literature interacting with Dorner to witness his significant impact on the conversation. While this list is far from exhaustive, see: Robert Brown, "Schelling and Dorner on Divine Immutability," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 237–49; Stephen Doby, "Divine Immutability, Divine Action and the God-World Relation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 (2017): 144–62; Matthias Gockel, "On the Way from Schleiermacher to Barth: A Critical Reappraisal of Isaak August Dorner's Essay on Divine Immutability," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000): 490–510; Piotr J. Malysz, "Hegel's Conception of God and Its Application by Isaak Dorner to the Problem of Divine Immutability," *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 81–8; Robert Sherman, "Isaak August Dorner on Divine Immutability A Missing Link Between Schleiermacher and Barth," *Journal of Religion* 7 (1997): 380–401; and Robert R. Williams, "I. A. Dorner: The Ethical Immutability of God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 721–38.

⁸Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1957), II.1, 493. Richard Muller, *Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism*, 23 (cf. fn. 3), praising Dorner's essay in *God and the Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), says: "In all honesty, Dorner's essay in this volume (pp. 105–80) on the problem of divine immutability is a brilliant exposition and must be seen as a primary dogmatic source for all subsequent reflection (cf. Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg) on change in God."

Introducing his section on immutability, Barth nods to Dorner: “I. A. Dorner has made this clear in a way that is illuminating for the whole doctrine of God. . . . [T]hose who know the essay will recognize as they read this sub-section how much I owe to Dorner’s inspiration.”

The occasion for Dorner’s three essays on immutability was a response to the growing popularity of kenotic Christology. In Robert Williams’s fine introduction to Dorner’s essays, he states: “Dorner’s analysis of kenoticism reveals that it both fails to solve the christological problem and errs in simply rejecting divine immutability.”⁹ Dorner believed that an aspect of divine immutability must remain for there to be hope in God’s consistent goodness and benevolence. Moreover, if we rid every shred of divine immutability, Dorner feared that the end result would inevitably be a pantheistic problem. However, Dorner found the Thomistic conception of immutability less than satisfying in its attempt to articulate God’s real relations with his creatures. Dorner had a multifold thesis, but the most pertinent to this discussion follows:

Exhibiting in a positive dogmatic way the necessary and true union of the immutability and vitality of God in a higher principle, which will contain at the same time the supreme norm for correctly determining the relation of the trans-historical life of God to his historical life, of God’s transcendence to his immanence in the world.¹⁰

The tension in Dorner’s thinking appears in that he aims to keep together both the “trans-historical” life and the “historical” life of God. In doing so, Dorner proposes that we can maintain the constancy of essence needed for divine benevolence while upholding a form of mutability that allows for reciprocal relations with God’s creatures. Since Dorner argues that these features in God must not be thought of as rooted in God’s essence, Dorner fits in our categorical movement of will and knowledge.¹¹ However, while Dorner would affirm mutability of knowledge and will, this is ultimately foundational to his relational understanding of mutability. Any articulation of immutability that presses for more absoluteness without these concessions, according to Dorner, is a “defect [in] the doctrine of God” that is “taken over from scholasticism.”¹²

Ultimately, Dorner’s three-part essay sought to root God’s immutability

⁹ Robert Williams, “Introduction,” in Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 19.

¹⁰ Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 131.

¹¹ The same can be said for the movement of creation/divine action, as Dorner stated: “The idea of *creation* also is certainly in general not compatible with a doctrine of God’s simple, unmoving, rigid essence” (Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 141, emphasis original).

¹² Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 133.

in his ethical nature. After denying the immutability of God “in his relation to space and time” and “in his knowing and willing of the world and in his decree,” Dorner then asks, “In what then does the center and the essence of divine vitality consist?” He continues: “We answer: in the same thing in which the center of his immutability also consists, namely, not in his being and life as such—for these categories, which in themselves are still physical, lead us forever to Deism or pantheism in restless interplay—but in the ethical.”¹³

The move to ascribe ethical immutability to God saves Dorner from a rigid immutable essence found in the Thomistic conception of the doctrine while also saving him from the kenotic and pantheistic notion of a being who has no actuality apart from the creation. Avoiding these two theological pitfalls—both of which he saw as soteriological nightmares—was crucial for Dorner. Summarizing Dorner’s position as a *via media* between rigid absoluteness and pantheistic dependence, Robert Williams stated:

Dorner seeks a middle ground between these concepts. However, he does not engage in purely speculative metaphysical inquiry for its own sake; rather he contends that Christian theology has an important stake in this debate. For Christian faith makes soteriology central. The soteriological interest has two requirements for the doctrine of God: 1) some concept of divine mutability is necessary as instrumental to salvation, and 2) some concept of divine immutability is necessary as grounding the finality of salvation in God’s goodness. God’s ethical goodness is perfect and cannot change. Hence God must be conceived as immutable in some respects and as mutable in other respects.¹⁴

Dorner ascribed significant movement to God in his articulation of God’s mutable vitality and immutable ethics. From his pen we see our first example of using the movement of relations/soteriology to deviate from and deny the classical understanding of immutability, yet it is far from the last.

Charles Hartshorne and Process Theism

Conversations on the doctrine of God took a decisive turn in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the rise of process theism. The consequences of process theism were severe, and theologians working after the rise of process literature will inevitably have to deal with the repercussions of this theological

¹³ Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, 165.

¹⁴ Williams, “I. A. Dorner,” 721.

movement. As Bruce Ware stated, “any responsible assessment of the doctrine of God’s changelessness must devote special attention to process theology’s proposal, both for its own sake, and because of its pervasive impact on current discussions of the doctrine.”¹⁵ The process proposal has caused a number of theologists to reexamine their thinking regarding the doctrine of God, especially as it pertains to divine immutability.¹⁶ Process theist Barry Whitney, writing of the process concern, says: “Process thinkers insist that the traditional Christian interpretation of the doctrine of divine immutability (as formulated by St. Thomas and others) cannot be reconciled with the Bible’s revelation of divine love and care for the world.”¹⁷ While we could debate Whitney that the *telos* for all process theists was biblical fidelity since Hartshorne “develops his entire doctrine of God without reference to the biblical texts,”¹⁸ nevertheless, divine immutability—along with most divine perfections—went under the critical microscope in process thought. Whitney followed up this claim, concluding,

An immutable God, being eternally and fully complete in himself, would remain the same whether or not the world was created, whether or not there was an incarnation, whether or not we pray or suffer, and so on. How could such a God love us? How indeed could we love such a God?¹⁹

While a number of process theologians have come and gone, arguably none stood taller than Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). Hartshorne, together with Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), provided the process movement with its metaphysical framework. The Hartshorne-Whitehead framework made use of two theological and philosophical categories that proved to be vital to the process understanding of God—a dipolar view of God and the theory of

¹⁵ Bruce Ware, “An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984), 249.

¹⁶ Writing on modern interactions between process theists and catholic theologians, Whitney states: “A number of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians are now in dialogue with the Whiteheadian-Hartshornean challenge.” He then works through ten Roman Catholic theologians who have been, in some way, impacted and influenced by the process proposal. The list includes James Felt, Norris Clarke, Joseph Donceel, Piet Schoonenberg, Walter Stokes, William Hill, John Wright, Anthony Kelly, Martin D’Arcy, and Karl Rahner. See Barry L. Whitney, “Divine Immutability in Process Philosophy and Contemporary Thomism,” *Horizons* 7 (1980): 52–9.

¹⁷ Whitney, “Divine Immutability,” 50.

¹⁸ Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 172. However, as Richards points out, Hartshorne was convinced that his articulation of dipolar deity was more in tune with the biblical data than his classical counterparts.

¹⁹ Whitney, “Divine Immutability,” 50.

surrelativism.²⁰ Both of these philosophical tools shape Hartshorne's denial of classic immutability. Hartshorne found the concept of an unalterable God abhorrent and did not attempt to hide his distaste for the idea. In a 1967 essay he stated, "I regard the unqualified denial of divine change (in the form of increase of content) and the unqualified denial of relativity or dependence as catastrophic errors, and of course I am far from alone in this."²¹ These "catastrophic errors" were so egregious to Hartshorne, that he said in the same essay: "If I were to accomplish nothing else than to bring about the definitive abandonment of the traditional notion of God's *pure* necessity, not simply for existence and essence but for all properties whatever, I would not have labored in vain."²²

The dipolar depiction of deity in process theism gets at God being simultaneously absolute and relative. This, of course, is contrary to any articulation of the divine that would insist on a monopolar emphasis of absoluteness. Hartshorne defines "absoluteness" as the "independence of relationships" and states that God is metaphysically unique in the sense that he is the only being who can be described as "maximally absolute, and in another aspect no less strictly or maximally relative."²³ While this may ring as a contradiction in the ears of Hartshorne's hearers, he argues this is not the case based on an asymmetrical relationship between the absolute and relative. About this asymmetrical relationship he says, "The same reality may in one aspect be universally open to influence, and in another aspect universally closed to influence."²⁴ In short, God can have absolute properties such that it would be appropriate to ascribe immutability to them while also having properties that are open to influence. Hartshorne's major concern in his exposition of dipolar deity is to bring balance to the emphasis on the transcendence and immanence of God. He is motivated by what he sees as an unfair emphasis of the absolute essence in classical theism found in doctrines like pure actuality, aseity, and immutability.

As for the second philosophical category, surrelativism, Hartshorne's

²⁰While both theologians were important to the development of the process framework, they certainly differed. See David Ray Griffin, "Hartshorne's differences from Whitehead," in *Two Process Philosophers*, ed. Lewis S. Ford (Tallahassee: American Academy of Religion, 1973), 35.

²¹Charles Hartshorne, "The Dipolar Conception of Deity," *The Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967): 273.

²²Hartshorne, "The Dipolar Conception," 273.

²³Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 31. Richards, *The Untamed God*, 191, helpfully summarizes Hartshorne's dipolar view, saying: "The concept of divine dipolarity has an important metaphysical function. It allows Hartshorne to attribute certain dualities or contrasts, such as abstract-concrete, necessary-contingent, absolute-relative, to God without contradiction."

²⁴Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (London: Open Court, 1970), 233.

1948 publication, *The Divine Relativity*, is significant. In this work, Hartshorne describes what he means by God's relativity and ability to intake influence. Hartshorne writes, "my proposition is that the higher the being the more dependence of certain kinds will be appropriate for it."²⁵ To illustrate this point, Hartshorne calls his readers to play a "mental experiment" with him. This mental experiment called readers to consider a poem being read before a number of characters. These characters include: (1) a glass of water, (2) an ant, (3) a dog, (4) a human being who does not speak the language of the poem, (5) a human being who knows the language but is not sensitive to poetry, and finally (6) a person who is both sensitive to poetry and who speaks the language. About this cast of characters, Hartshorne says, "Now I submit that each member of this series is superior, in terms of the data, to its predecessors, and that each is more, not less, dependent upon or relative to the poem as such, including its meanings as well as its mere sounds."²⁶ His point, with this seemingly silly mental exercise, is to show that the cup of water is the most impassible and immutable object amongst the bunch, yet an outside observer to the situation would not ascribe worth on this basis to the glass of water. Instead, we would say that the final individual—the one who knows the language of the poem and is sensitive to poetry—is most worthy of praise for superiority in ability to be impacted.

For Hartshorne, this experiment is aimed at demonstrating the "metaphysical snobbery toward relativity" that classical theists display.²⁷ For it could only be with an abstract deity, and nothing else, that hardness toward being influenced would be a praiseworthy virtue. Instead, Hartshorne argues that God demonstrates his superiority in being constantly impacted by the happenings of those he has created and, in this way, demonstrates his immutability—he is immutably changing as he is constantly influenced by, and is the supreme recipient of, the actions and emotions of that which he created.

Bruce Ware and Evangelical Reexaminations

Our final representative of relational/soteriological movement is evangelical scholar Bruce Ware. In comparison to Dorner and Hartshorne, Ware is closer to articulating a classic understanding of divine immutability, as he would drastically break from Hartshorne's mutable essence as well as from Dorner's mutable knowledge and will.²⁸ Though closer to classical theism than Dorner and

²⁵Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 48.

²⁶Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 49.

²⁷Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 50.

²⁸See Ware's critique of Charles Hartshorne and process theism in Bruce Ware, "An Exposition

Hartshorne, Ware still deviates from a classical definition of divine immutability on account of his ascribing change to God by virtue of relational movement, repentance, and change in emotions.²⁹

An important feature of Ware's approach to the conversation is his understanding of what it means for a doctrine to be "evangelical." He explains his methodological approach: "theologizing, then, bases itself squarely upon God's self-revelation as given us in the Scriptures and proceeds or builds from this foundation alone."³⁰ Ware worries that classical theism has put too much emphasis on "speculative concepts" instead of the biblical data. He states:

The modern criticism of classical theism here is in part valid, for indeed the tradition stemming from Augustine through the medieval scholastics and protestant orthodox did tend to take as primary a certain philosophic or speculative conception of the divine perfection which then regulated all its subsequent talk of God's relatedness to the world.³¹

However, Ware intends to set himself up as a mediating position as he claims that modernity is guilty of the inverse error—ascribing relativity to God such that it becomes the driving principle in the face of data that suggests independence of essence and being.³² His claim is that neither position does justice to *all* the biblical material, as each overemphasizes either transcendence or immanence.

The method of the *via media* approach is made possible, for Ware, by affirming that there are proper ways to speak of God's immutability *and* proper ways to speak of his mutability. Ware declared that this indeed is the depiction of "revealed immutability," that "the incredible and humbling testimony of God's self-revelation is that God is *both* self-sufficient (i.e., transcendently

and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability," *Westminster Journal of Theology* 47 (1985):175–96. See also, Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 404, in which he "utterly rejects" the process project. Although, it could be argued that Ware's affirmation of an actual repentance in God could denote a change in volition and knowledge.

²⁹In the end, I ultimately break from Ware's proposed tweaks to the doctrine of divine immutability. However, I do wish to express gratitude to him for his work on the subject. While I disagree in the end with his conclusions, his work treats Scripture with the utmost reverence, and it is obvious to me that he arrives at his conclusions in trying to do the most justice to the biblical data.

³⁰Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 380. See also Ware's essay-length summary of his dissertation, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (1986): 431–46.

³¹Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 384.

³²Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 387.

self-existent) *and* wholly loving (i.e., immanently self-relating).³³

Ware gives two ways regarding how it is proper to speak of God's immutability—ontological and ethical—while giving three ways that are proper to speak of God's mutability—relational, repentance, and emotions. Of the former two, Ware states: "God is immutable not only with regard to the fact of his eternal existence but also in the very content or make-up of his eternal essence, independent of the world."³⁴ Also, as it relates to his ethical immutability, Ware wrote: "The God of the Bible is also unchangeable in his unconditional promises and moral obligations to which he has freely pledged himself."³⁵

After describing the "onto-ethical immutability" of God, Ware moved into what he called the "proper sense" in which we can speak of God's mutability. While he gave three examples of God's mutability, the most important of the three is relational mutability. Ware wrote:

The Scriptures affirm one predominant sense of God's changeability under which specific manifestations of it are evident, and this may be called God's "relational mutability." From the creation of Adam and Eve to the consummation of history, God is involved in pursuing, establishing and developing relationships with those whom he has made. . . . That God changes in his relationship with others is abundantly clear from Scripture.³⁶

Ware gives credit to both Dorner and Barth and cites Barth's conception of a "holy mutability of God"³⁷ such that God changes in "his attitudes, conduct, and relationships with humans" which allows for genuine reciprocal relationships.³⁸

Ware goes on to describe two more ways in which we can "properly" speak of God's mutability—repentance and emotions, albeit with much less detail

³³Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 406.

³⁴Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 417. He defines ontological immutability, saying: "The God of the Bible is unchangeable in the supreme excellence of his intrinsic nature. This may be called God's "ontological immutability"—that is, the changelessness of God's eternal and self-sufficient being" (Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 434).

³⁵Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 436. While Ware affirms, like Dorner, an ethical immutability in God, he nevertheless desires to separate his understanding of ethical immutability from Dorner's, saying: "The problem with Dorner's view, however, is that he bases the ethical consistency or faithfulness of God strictly on God's unchanging ethical nature (e.g., that God is always loving, holy, just) rather than on a more complete sense of the fullness and supreme excellence of God's immutable being" (Ware, "Evangelical Reexamination," 437).

³⁶Ware, "Evangelical Reformulation," 438–9.

³⁷Barth *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, 496.

³⁸Ware, "Evangelical Reformulation," 440.

than his discussion of the relational model. Though Ware offered them as unique modes of talking about divine mutability, he said of repentance that “these passages refer fundamentally to God’s relational mutability as discussed above.”³⁹ Passibility, or Ware’s third proper way to speak of God’s mutability, is also related to his relational dynamic of change. Ware said, “The abundance of Scriptural evidence of God’s expression of emotion and a more positive understanding of their nature lead to the conclusion that the true and living God is, among other things, a genuinely emotional being.”⁴⁰ Ware correlated this to the relational dynamic by elaborating that while God is immutable in his essence, he has nevertheless chosen to relate with us, and his relational dynamism predicates his variability in terms of emotional experiences and change.

While Ware has the most sophisticated and robust study of divine immutability, he is not the only Evangelical theologian to deviate from a classical understanding of divine immutability. A quick look at Poythress’ *The Mystery of the Trinity* will prove necessary to demonstrate this point. In the introduction, Poythress states six key problems his book seeks to address. The second in the list is, “How can God be immutable (not able to change) and act toward the world?”⁴¹ In answering this question, Poythress—through his work—advises Christians to avoid two “suction pools” relating to both God’s transcendence and immanence. The first suction pool, which is a danger in overemphasizing immanence, is “mutuality theology” or, as Poythress playfully calls it, “quicksand theology.” The other suction pool, which is overemphasizing transcendence, is “monadic theology” or, as Poythress playfully calls it, “black hole theology.”⁴²

Taking time to note and appreciate that Poythress works with carefulness is important. He even gets close to affirming a classical understanding of immutability in multiple instances throughout the book. For example, Poythress writes, “God does not change. Indeed, he cannot change, because he is God and

³⁹Ware, “Evangelical Reformulation,” 443. After discussing the hermeneutical concept of anthropomorphism regarding the passages where God is depicted as repenting, Ware concludes, “In general it seems best to understand God’s repentance as his changed mode of action and attitude in response to a changed human situation.”

⁴⁰Ware, “Evangelical Reformulation,” 446.

⁴¹Vern Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2020), xxiv. Beyond the second question listed, others in Poythress’ list have relevance for our discussions here. For example, Question 1 asks, “How can God be independent and yet have relations to the world and things in the world?” and Question 6 asks, “How can God’s attributes be identical with God and also be distinguished from one another?” (Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, xxiii–xxv).

⁴²Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 440–1; 475–6; 505.

he cannot be other than the God he is.”⁴³ Or, elsewhere, Poythress writes, “It is not right, but misleading, to say that “God changes,” even if the speaker’s intentions are good. There are better and clearer ways of saying what we need to say in order to make the point that God is active in many ways in the world.”⁴⁴

However, after examining Aquinas, Turretin, and Charnock and looking at doctrines such as immutability, simplicity, and infinitude, Poythress asserts that classical theism does not, at this point, have the tools to avoid both suction pools. Indeed, Poythress goes as far as saying that “Classical Christian theism needs enhancement, not merely reiteration, in order to go forward.”⁴⁵ Poythress’ worry is that the classical articulation of divine immutability, while partially correct, relies on unnecessarily complex theological terminology and has a hard time doing justice to the real relations which the Scriptures seem to attribute to God in his covenant-making relationship with man.

While not residing within the walls of Evangelicalism, it is important to note another book which would not only agree with Poythress but states his conclusion with more emphasis. John C. Peckham’s 2021 publication, *Divine Attributes*, focuses on the “nature and attributes of God” in search of “what we have biblical warrant to affirm with respect to such questions, in order to better understand the living God whom Christians worship and to whom Christians pray.”⁴⁶ For Peckham, this includes examining questions such as “Does God Change? Does God have emotions? Does God know everything, including the future? Is God all-powerful?”⁴⁷

Peckham makes several affirmations that align well with classical theism. For example, he affirms a strong Creator/creature distinction.⁴⁸ He also makes a similar methodological move as classical theists when it comes to the economic and immanent life of God; he writes that a proper theological interpretation of Scripture, “carefully attends to biblical depictions of God, seeking to affirm all that Scripture teaches about God without conceptually reducing God to the way he is portrayed in the economy.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 57.

⁴⁴ Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 585.

⁴⁵ Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 485.

⁴⁶ John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 1.

⁴⁷ Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 1.

⁴⁸ Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 2.

⁴⁹ Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 17. Peckham later gives a great analogy of collapsing God’s essence to what is revealed in the economy. He writes: “At the same time we must be careful not to conceptually reduce God to the way he represents himself to humans in the economy of biblical revelation. It would be a mistake to take a letter I wrote to my nine-year-old son and assume on the basis that my

While Peckham affirms these aspects of classical theism, he eventually deviates from classical theism, and its account of divine immutability, due to what he says is his hope to allow Scripture to norm all theological articulation. He puts forward what he labels “covenantal theism.”⁵⁰ In the end, his methodology leads him to deny the doctrine of pure actuality and to deviate from a classical understanding of divine immutability. In sum, he writes:

The claim that God is pure act, then, runs directly counter to the way Scripture consistently depicts God. The situation relative to biblical warrant, then, is this. Abundant biblical data depicts God as undergoing changing emotions, but there appears to be no biblical warrant for pure aseity, strict immutability, strict impassibility, or the interpretive move of negating biblical depictions of changing divine emotions. In light of this and other data, I believe the view that God undergoes changing emotions is biblically warranted, and if God undergoes changing emotions, then God is neither strictly immutable nor strictly impassible.⁵¹

Outside of Bruce Ware, another well-known movement away from classical immutability within Evangelicalism is John Frame. We will deal with Frame’s view later when dealing with methodology and language for God. However, he ought to be noted here as his concern is like those we have seen above. Frame is concerned that the classical articulation of divine immutability, while having some true things to say, does not do justice to all the biblical data concerning the life of God. For example, he is worried with the methodological move of chalking all instances of change depicted in Scripture to a mere anthropomorphism. He writes: “The historical process does change, and as an agent in history, God himself changes. On Monday, he wants something to happen, and on Tuesday, something else. He is grieved one day, pleased the next. In my view, *anthropomorphic* is too weak a description of these narratives.”⁵²

Frame can still hold to a measure of immutability while affirming the above quote by predicating two existences to God. He argues that God possesses an atemporal existence and a historical existence. Frame states that “neither form of existence contradicts the other. God’s transcendence never compromises his

vocabulary is fourth-grade level. God is always greater than can be revealed to creatures” (Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 35).

⁵⁰ Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 37.

⁵¹ Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 62.

⁵² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 377.

immanence, nor do his control and authority compromise his covenant presence.”⁵³

While we will not treat his work at the same length as the others, it is important to note that another Evangelical, Scott Oliphant, finds Frame’s argumentation here persuasive. Oliphant also worries that a classical understanding of anthropomorphism is simply too weak to do justice to the variegated biblical data. Moreover, he argues that Christology is the primary way Christian theologians should look to the perfections of God. Therefore, in presenting attributes considering God’s condescension and his “covenantal properties,” Oliphant writes: “When Scripture says that God changes his mind, or that he is moved, or angered by our behavior, we should see that as literal.” He continues, “We should also see that the God who really changes his mind is the accommodated God, the *yarad-cum-Emmanuel* God who, while remaining the “I AM,” nevertheless stoops to our level to interact, person-to-person, with us.” He continues: “His change of mind does not affect his essential character, any more than Christ dying on the cross precluded him from being fully God. He remains fully and completely God, a God who is not like man that he should change his mind, and he remains fully and completely the God who, in covenant with us, changes his mind to accomplish his sovereign purposes.”⁵⁴

These three representatives—Dorner, Hartshorne, and Ware—exemplify modern deviations from the classical understanding of divine immutability with a relational/soteriological impulse. Though all three examples predicate change to God based on *more* than just relational dynamism, the soteriological impulse is strong behind all three lines of reasoning.

Now, we turn to the remaining four arguments which seek to ascribe movement to God. We treat three of the arguments with much more brevity than the first because, while the following three are important and prevalent, the first category proves most relevant to our thesis as we seek to articulate the inverse of their conclusions. While Dorner, Hartshorne, Ware, and many like them seek to deviate from or deny the classical understanding of divine immutability for fear that it impedes a robust soteriology, this project moves in the opposite direction

⁵³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 377. Frame goes on to admit that his view of God’s having two existences “bears a superficial resemblance” to modern process theology. He notes that process theology also recognizes two “poles” to God’s existence—the primordial and consequent natures of God. However, using Charles Hartshorne, Frame makes significant differences between his view and process theology and ultimately determines that process theology is “deeply unscriptural” (Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 378).

⁵⁴ Scott Oliphant, *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 124.

and aims to demonstrate the soteriological significance of absolute immutability. Yet, first, let us examine, in brief, four more alterations predicated to God.

The Problem of the Incarnation

With cosmic consequence, the Second Person of the Trinity took on flesh and dwelt amongst us. Two key texts depicting this event have been used by those wishing to describe movement in God via the Incarnation—John 1:14 and Philippians 2:6–11. In the former, John writes four words that caused theological marvel and mystery for millennia, “the Word became flesh.”⁵⁵ In the latter text, Paul describes the Incarnation as Jesus’ “emptying” himself as to be found in the form of a servant.

Both these texts in particular, and the divine mission of the Incarnation in general, have led some to conclude that God is alterable since it is hard to make sense of the Incarnation if he were not. The two primary lines of argumentation built on the foundation of these texts are kenoticism and Christological mutability.

Kenoticism and Christological Mutability

Kenotic Christology insists that the “emptying” described in Philippians 2 entails a literal detraction in the Godhead. Oliver Crisp, who helpfully delineates between two forms of Kenoticism—functional and ontological—defines the movement, saying, “the view, drawn from New Testament passages such as Philippians 2:7, that, in becoming incarnate, the second person of the Trinity somehow emptied himself of certain divine attributes in order to truly become human.”⁵⁶ C. Stephen Evans helps readers understand what the kenotic theologians mean when they describe God “emptying” himself: the Son “in some way limited or temporarily divested himself of some of the properties thought to be divine prerogatives, and this act of self-emptying has become known as a ‘kenosis’.”⁵⁷

While several theologians have espoused something like kenotic theology throughout the last two centuries, the view finds its origins in German theologian Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875). His most important work, which launched

⁵⁵Unless otherwise notated, all verses will be taken from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

⁵⁶Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118. Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 355–421, also uses the distinction of functional and ontological when describing kenoticism.

⁵⁷C. Stephen Evans, “Introduction,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

a small avalanche of subsequent volumes, was *Christi Person und Werk*.⁵⁸ In it, Thomasius described the event of the Incarnation, saying, “a divesting of the divine mode of being in favor of the humanly creaturely form of existence, and *eo ispo* a renunciation of the divine glory he had from the beginning with the Father.”⁵⁹ This “divesting” of the divine mode renders immutability impossible as the Second Person of the Godhead changes in his shedding of divine properties. Thomasius assures readers that this is not a shedding of divinity as Christ still possesses the essential perfections that are necessary for God to be God. However, even if this was not a violation of divine simplicity, it would still violate divine immutability. Torrance, offering a varying interpretation of the pertinent passage, opines: “There is nothing here about any so-called metaphysical change in God the Son such as an emptying out of God the Son of any divine attributes or powers.”⁶⁰

Though kenoticism jeopardizes divine immutability, it is not alone in its ascribing change in God via the event of the Incarnation.⁶¹ For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar contends that the Incarnation “shatters” a classical understanding of divine immutability. He writes:

It implied coming through a narrow pass: not so to guard the immutability of God that in the pre-existent Logos who prepares himself to become man nothing real happens and on the other hand not to let this real happening degenerate into divine suffering . . . one has to say that P. Althaus is right: “On this realization, the old concept of the immutability of God is clearly shattered. Christology must take seriously that God himself really entered into suffering in the Son and therein is and remains completely God.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Gottfried Thomasius, “Christ’s Person and Work,” in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, ed. Claude Welch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁵⁹ Thomasius, “Christ’s Person and Work,” 48. Cf. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 358.

⁶⁰ Thomas Torrance, *The Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 75.

⁶¹ See, for example, Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change? The Word’s Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River: St. Bede’s Publications, 1985). Weinandy works through patristic, medieval, kenotic, and process literature in a survey of deviations from classical immutability and impassibility in the Incarnation.

⁶² Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Mysterium Paschale,” in *Mysterium Salutis*, ed. J. Feiner and Magnus Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1969), 151–2, cited in, Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability*, Second Edition (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 199. Dodds, however, correctly concludes: “When properly understood, the incarnation, far from denying the immutability of God, rather requires it. For if God changed in becoming human, he would no longer be truly God, and Jesus Christ would not be truly God and human” (Dodds, *The Unchanging of Love*, 200).

Like the relational/soteriological movement, those theologians who predicate movement to God by virtue of his Incarnation vary chronologically, geographically, and denominationally. However, what they share is a view that deviates from the great tradition's understanding of divine immutability.

Moltmann, Pannenberg, and the Theology of Hope

Theology is never done in a vacuum and therefore the cultural context in which theologizing takes place is important in considering any theologian's program. This is especially true for those theologians who studied and wrote under the umbrella of "the theology of hope." Coming off the heels of global war and confusion in the 1960s the theologians of hope constructed their volumes in an era where the horrors of the Third Reich and Hiroshima were still fresh in the mind of society. The cultural context of these few decades meant that the confusion which persisted because of national turmoil longed for architects of hope that could divert the gaze of society away from their current plight and toward a future glory. It would, of course, be disingenuous to conclude that the theologians of hope reached their conclusion by virtue of their cultural context alone. However, the theology of hope became an ever-important outlet of theology in this particular cultural moment.

Describing the theological confusion which persisted in the climate of the 1960s, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson write:

In the middle of the confusion a book appeared from a virtually unknown young German theologian, which seemed too many to provide the needed new approach for theology in the latter half of the century. The book was *The Theology of Hope* written by a thirty-nine-year-old professor of systematic theology at Tübingen, West Germany – Jürgen Moltmann. In this work Moltmann called for a shift to eschatology, to the traditional doctrine of last things but reinterpreted and understood afresh, as the foundation for the theological task.⁶³

The methodological move of resetting theology's foundation towards eschatology had significant christological implications. For, as Grenz and Olson note, the preeminent theme of the body of Moltmann's literature became, "hope for the future based on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁶⁴ For this reason,

⁶³ Stanley J. Grenz, Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 171.

⁶⁴ Grenz and Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 172.

even while we could point to a number of divergent paths in which Moltmann and Pannenberg break from a classical conception of divine immutability, we can rightly treat their view under “the problem of the incarnation.”

The incarnate life of Jesus Christ was, for Moltmann, of supreme importance for articulating a doctrine of God. In fact, Moltmann so emphasized the economic aspects of God’s *ad extra* life that he eventually affirmed Rahner’s rule verbatim. Moltmann wrote, in affirmation of Rahner, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.”⁶⁵ By collapsing the economic and immanent Trinity, Moltmann’s understanding of the divine life was captivated by observing the incarnate life of Jesus Christ as the primary mode of revelation and reason. Doing theology proper from the starting point of Christ’s Incarnation was, for Moltmann, a way to not “speculate in heavenly riddles” and therefore, “Anyone who really talks of the Trinity talks of the cross of Jesus.”⁶⁶

This discussion of methodology is important in discussing Moltmann’s doctrine of inalterability because it is in his methodological decisions that Moltmann separates himself from both the classical theists and the process theists. Contra classical theism, Moltmann is weary of philosophical speculation regarding the divine life. Yet, at the same time, Moltmann did not hold to a process view over God’s relativism. Instead, Moltmann’s approach to God’s change was one of self-change. He writes: “God is not changeable as creatures are changeable. However, the conclusion should not be drawn from this that God is unchangeable in every respect, for this negative definition merely says that God is under no constraint from that which is not God.”⁶⁷ According to Moltmann, God’s freedom actively allows changes to himself, which is what happens in the case of the Incarnation and suffering of Christ. In the theology of hope, the glory of God is seen primarily through God’s willingness to share in our suffering which means we will ultimately share in his eschatological resurrection.

Comparing Rahner and Moltmann’s view of God’s unchangeability, Susie Paulik Babka concludes:

Especially in the Incarnation and Cross, as revealing God’s personal

⁶⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 207. Moltmann is quoting Rahner here; see Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 22. For more on Moltmann and Rahner’s doctrine of divine immutability, see Susie Paulik Babka, “‘God is Faithful, He Cannot Deny Himself’: Karl Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann on Whether God is Immutable in Jesus Christ” (PhD Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2004).

⁶⁶Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 207.

⁶⁷Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 229.

identity as willing in love to “become” for the sake of the other (Rahner) or to “suffer” for the sake of the other (Moltmann). Because Moltmann endorses Rahner’s *Grundaxiom*, both believe that God’s self-communication to what is finite, or not-God is a radical sharing of God’s very being . . . they [both] move beyond traditional metaphysics of absolute divine immutability and impassibility.⁶⁸

Wolfgang Pannenberg, while differing from Moltmann in some points, affirmed his colleagues’ eschatologically minded ontology. Pannenberg argued, like Rahner and Moltmann, against dichotomizing the economic and immanent Trinity. Pannenberg stated that, in the Scriptures, “the divine name is not a formula for essence.”⁶⁹ Rather, the divine name is “a pointer to experience of his working.” Therefore, “the question of essence thus becomes that of the attributes that characterize God’s working.”⁷⁰ Just a few pages later, Pannenberg asserts, “the qualities that are ascribed to him rest on his relations to the world which correspond to the relations of creatures to him.”⁷¹

Maybe the most important piece of methodological consideration for this project comes in Pannenberg’s pages on the Trinity. In the Trinitarian section of his *Systematic Theology*, he bemoans the “one-sided” development of philosophical theism and writes that as early as Athanasius’ work against the Arians we can see the regrettable detachment of the economic from the immanent. Pannenberg is worth quoting at length here as he directly relates this faulty practice to divine immutability:

Understandable, too, is the fact that in the provisional outcome of this history of interpretation in the dogma of Nicea and Constantinople, the thought of the eternal and essential Trinity broke loose from its historical moorings and tended to be seen not only as the basis of all historical events but also as untouched by the course of history on account of the eternity and immutability of God, and therefore also inaccessible to all creaturely knowledge. If the Son and Spirit were known to be of the same substance as the eternal and unchangeable Father, then under the conditions of Hellenistic philosophical theology this Trinity had to be at an unreachable distance from all

⁶⁸ Babka, “‘God is Faithful,’ ” 357.

⁶⁹ Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:360.

⁷⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:360.

⁷¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:364. See also, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 119–83.

finite, creaturely reality. The immanent Trinity became independent of the economic Trinity and increasingly ceased to have any function relative to the economy of salvation.⁷²

Pannenberg continues and calls for revision of what he perceives to be a dangerous theological error:

Today we see that differentiating the eternal Trinity from all temporal change makes trinitarian theology one-sided and detaches it from its biblical basis. This situation obviously calls for revision. But the related problems are greater than theology has thus far realized. Viewing the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity as one presupposes the development of a concept of God which can grasp in one not only the transcendence of the divine being and his immanence in the world but also the eternal self-identity of God and the debatability of his truth in the process of history, along with the decision made concerning it by the consummation of history.⁷³

Like Moltmann, the justification for treating Pannenberg under “the problem of the incarnation” lies in his collapsing the immanent and economic Trinity. For, instead of language of divine immutability in the *ad intra*, Pannenberg preferred language of divine faithfulness in the *ad extra*. Since, for Pannenberg, the immanent and economic are identical, our theologizing of theology proper ought to arise out of an explicit examination of the economic activity of God, since this is what is available to us. Pannenberg makes this point explicit, saying, “whereas the predicate of immutability that derives from Greek philosophy implies timelessness, the truth of God’s faithfulness expresses his constancy in the actual process of time and history, especially his holding fast to his saving will, to his covenant, to his promises, and also to the orders of his creation.”⁷⁴

As a final point showing the connection between the items treated in this section which are: (1) the theology of hope, (2) deviations from a classical articulation of immutability, and (3) the problem of the Incarnation, Pannenberg summarizes his understanding of divine changelessness in relation to the Incarnation saying:

In distinction from the idea of immutability, that of God’s faithfulness does not exclude historicity or the contingency of world occurrence, nor need the historicity and contingency of the divine

⁷² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:332–3.

⁷³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:333.

⁷⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:437.

action be in contradiction with God's eternity. If eternity and time coincide only in the eschatological consummation of history, then from the standpoint of the history of God that moves toward this consummation there is room for becoming in God himself, namely, in the relation of the immanent and the economic Trinity, and in this frame, it is possible to say of God that he himself became something that he previously was not when he became man in his Son.⁷⁵

The Problem of Creation and Divine Action

As we will see, there is an inseparable connection between God's immutability and his eternity. This is the exact relationship that comes into question as God acts throughout history. Surely, some scholars insist, God's gracious involvement in the world—whether it be his creation *ex nihilo*, Incarnation, or simply his providential interfering in the lives of his people—calls into question any understanding of a non-successive life of God. Does it not suppose, for example, that there must have been a change in God as he moved from passivity to actuality in the creation of all things? This was the view of Thomas Torrance (1913–2007), who wrote:

While God was always Father and was Father independently of what he has created, as Creator he acted in a way that he had not done before, in bringing about absolutely new events—this means that the creation of the world out of nothing is something *new even for God*. God was always Father, but he *became* Creator.⁷⁶

Torrance applies the same logic to the divine action of the Incarnation and Pentecost. These movements, for Torrance, seem to indicate a Triune mover who acts and changes in time as each member of the Godhead moves in time and space. Ultimately, for Torrance, these three acts—creation, Incarnation, Pentecost—display the freedom of God. Furthermore, Torrance argues they “tell us that far from being a static or inertial Deity like some “unmoved mover,” the mighty living God who reveals himself to us through his Son and in his Spirit is absolutely free to do what he had never done before, and free to be other than he was eternally.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:438. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 208.

⁷⁷Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 88. For a response to Torrance, and others like him, see Steven J. Duby, “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity” in *God of Our Fathers: Classical Theism for the Contemporary Church* (Idaho: Davenant Institute, 2018), 87–104. In “Divine Immutability, Divine

R.T. Mullins also articulates an issue with a classical understanding of divine immutability by virtue of creation and divine action.⁷⁸ Mullins states that it is “utterly baffling” to him to conceive of a God who creates and does not undergo real change in a real relationship with the creation. Mullins uses the analogy of a builder to demonstrate his point: “It seems quite clear that the builder who decides to start building does in fact undergo change. It also seems that a God who is not creating and then creates does undergo a change. He is not standing in a causal relation to anything, and then he is standing in a causal relation to creation.” Mullins continues: “Activity out of a capacity involves change and time, for it at least creates before and after in the life of an agent.”⁷⁹ Ultimately, Mullins concludes: “The Christian God cannot be timeless, strongly immutable, and simple.”⁸⁰

Colin Gunton sees a similar issue and writes about the “tangled web” of a classical doctrine of God.⁸¹ He writes: “there is a tendency to identify the divine attributes by a list of ‘omni’s’ and negatives . . . and then paste on to them conceptions of divine action, especially that central to the Bible’s account of what is called the economy of creation and redemption.”⁸² Later, he explicitly defines “divine action” as “personal and intentional acts designed to bring about some purpose or change in the world.”⁸³ This definition leads him to insist that the presence of divine action means that we should be “against the necessity of constructing God’s immutability in a Platonizing manner.”⁸⁴ Gunton brings Barth to bear in his line of argumentation, who says:

God is constantly one and the same. But . . . his consistency is not as it were mathematical. . . . The fact that he is one and the same does not mean that he is bound to be and say and do only one and the same thing, so that all the distinctions of his being, speaking and acting are only a semblance, only the various refractions of a beam of

Action and the God-World Relation,” Duby deals with divine action as it relates to the doctrine of immutability and utilizes John of Damascus, Aquinas, and Johann Alsted and the “virtual distinction” to provide proper grammar in speaking about God’s external and temporal acts.

⁷⁸This is not Mullins’ only difficulty with immutability; his work primarily deals with atemporality and only by derivation the doctrine of immutability. See, R.T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷⁹Mullins, *End of the Timeless God*, 114.

⁸⁰Mullins, *End of the Timeless God*, 126.

⁸¹Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 22.

⁸²Gunton, *Act and Being*, 22.

⁸³Gunton, *Act and Being*, 77.

⁸⁴Gunton, *Act and Being*, 57.

light which are eternally the same. This was and is the way that every form of Platonism conceives God. It is impossible to overemphasize the fact that here . . . God is described as basically without life, word or act.⁸⁵

We can see from the pens of Torrance, Mullins, Gunton, and Barth that substantial concern exists that a classical conception of divine immutability leaves little room to do justice for the divine movement of creation and divine action. Indeed, much of modernity would affirm that to impose a metaphysically absolute, changeless God on the textual data and experiential realities of apparent dynamic interaction is to promote a lifeless, immobile being.

The Problem of Volition and Knowledge

The fourth category of movement ascribed to God is movement of the will or knowledge. Though there are several variations of arguments that insist on the denial of God's immutability based on his apparent volitional alterations or advances in his knowledge, we will briefly look at two – open theism and the exegetical decision to interpret the “divine repentance” passages literally.

Open Theism and Intellectual Movement

Open theism is an appropriate place of examination in this sub-section treating the apparent movement of God's will and knowledge; however, one could argue that it would be just as pertinent to cover it in the relational/soteriological sub-section because open theists articulate God's self-limiting of his knowledge to his desire for a real relationship with his creatures. What is at stake in a God who immutably knows all things is the freedom of his people. Therefore, though he could control all things, he has nevertheless chosen to limit his own epistemic life to establish freedom. As Clark Pinnock states: “It holds that God could control the world if he wished to but that he has chosen not to do so for the sake of loving relationships.” He continues: “Open theism does not believe that God is ontologically limited but that God voluntarily self-limits so that freely chosen loving relations might be possible.”⁸⁶ This self-imposition is relationally aimed. Again, Pinnock is a useful example of this point, as he writes: “Had God not granted us significant freedom, including the freedom to disappoint him, we would not be creatures capable of entering into loving relationships with

⁸⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, 496, cited from Gunton, *Act and Being*, 57.

⁸⁶ Clark Pinnock, “Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 44 (2005): 237. Pinnock explicitly states the relational motivation: “The main emphasis of open theism is that God created the world for loving relations” (Pinnock, “Open Theism,” 238).

him. Love, not freedom, is the central issue. Freedom was given to make loving relations possible.”⁸⁷

If God knew beforehand what creatures would do, they would not be free to do otherwise at the risk of God being incorrect in his knowing. Therefore, for the sake of creaturely freedom God welcomes self-imposed ignorance. Consequently, not only does God change, but he is also in constant change as he continually learns as his creatures act and live. In this way, the Creator/creature distinction is absolved as the Creator’s knowledge mirrors creaturely knowledge in that epistemic advancement is relationally limited as we grow in knowledge with the happenings of time. For example, I only know what my Australian shepherd dog will do next as he does it. My knowledge is therefore relationally tied to the actions and progression of my dog. So too, says the open theist, it is with God and those he loves. An immutable God is an impossibility in the open model, which predicates significant movement of the mind.

Another popular open theist, Greg Boyd, points to the vast number of texts throughout scripture which seem to indicate an openness of mind by virtue of God intellectually relenting. Boyd writes: “Unfortunately for the classical interpretation, the text does not say, or remotely imply, that it looks like the Lord intended something then changed his mind.” Boyd continues, “Rather, the Lord himself tells us in the plainest terms possible that he intended one thing and then changed his mind and did something else.”⁸⁸

One need not be an open theist, however, to ascribe mental change to God. We could point to a few theologians, especially in the last one hundred years, who would predicate mental movement in God. Jay Wesley Richards gives an example of how one might deny the concept of divine immutability, or at least alter it in substantial ways, by virtue of atemporality’s relationship with changelessness. Richards writes:

To this point, then, the argument is that God’s knowledge relation can and does change, for the simple reason that, in order for God to know what is the case, he will have to know what is the case at a time. And what is the case at time t will usually differ from what is the case at time $t + 1$. So, given God’s omniscience, if John Brown is running at time t , and John Brown is not running at $t + 1$, then God will know John Brown is now running at t , but he will know John Brown is not

⁸⁷Clark Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 45.

⁸⁸Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 77.

now running at $t + 1$. So presumably, if God is omniscient, then his knowledge will change to account for changes in what is the case.⁸⁹

While Richards' example is simply an intellectual hypothetical, William Lane Craig gives us an actual example of asserting this conception of atemporality and immutability when he says:

We have seen that God's real relation to the temporal world gives us good grounds for concluding God to be temporal in view of the extrinsic change he undergoes through his changing relations with the world. But the existence of a temporal world also seems to entail intrinsic change in God in view of his knowledge of what is happening in the temporal world. For since what is happening in the world is in constant flux, so also must God's knowledge of what is happening be in constant flux.⁹⁰

Whereas Craig would denounce the conclusion of open theism, the relationship between God and temporal items means that we are forced to predicate intellectual movement to God. What is more, as we will see, what often accompanies intellectual movements in God as he increases or decreases in knowledge is volitional movement as particular revelations entail a change in action for God.

The Volitional Movement of a Repenting God

A more comprehensive analysis of the passages that describe God as repenting or having volitional movement would prove to be a worthy project. However, given that theologians usher in these passages as justification for denying a classical conception of divine immutability, it is worth mentioning them here as well. The argument for this denial of immutability is straightforward—a plain reading of particular passage necessitates the conclusion that God changes at least as it pertains to his volitional action seen in his repentance. Genesis 6, for example, describes a God who examines the wickedness within humans, which leads to his regretting that he ever made them. A similar kind of regretful change is expressed in 1 Samuel 15 as God divulges that he regrets making Saul king.

Moreover, there are passages within the prophetic oracles that indicate a volitional dependency. Meaning, for threats or promises to be genuine, God's volitional decision making must be reactive to the obedience or disobedience of his people. For example, God says in Jeremiah 18:10, "and if it does evil in my

⁸⁹ Richards, *The Untamed God*, 202.

⁹⁰ William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 97.

sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.”⁹¹

Terrence E. Fretheim points out that there are “40 explicit references to divine repentance.”⁹² He defines repentance as “a metaphor whose roots are to be found in the dynamics of interpersonal human relationships.” He continues: “Generally, the use of the word ‘repentance’ presupposes that one has said or done something to another and, finding that to be hurtful or inadequate or dissatisfactory in some way, seeks to reverse the effects through contrition, sorrow, regret, or some other form of ‘turning.’”⁹³ Fretheim correctly notes that biblical instances of God’s “repentance” “is a metaphor.” However, Fretheim argues that every metaphor contains “both a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ (an ‘is’ and ‘is not’) with respect to God.”⁹⁴ This understanding leads Fretheim to conclude that the “no” of the divine-repentance metaphor is that God does not repent like humans, i.e., from sin toward righteousness. Nevertheless, the “yes” of the metaphor demonstrates there is real volitional turning in God.⁹⁵

The Problem of Divine Freedom and Contingency

The problem of divine freedom and contingency is related to the problem of creation and divine action. The mere existence of creation entails, so some argue, a problem for classical theists. Often, the problem of divine freedom is brought up as an issue pertaining to the doctrine of divine simplicity. However, the conversation necessarily bleeds into consideration of divine immutability as well. Simply put, the problem references the dilemma proponents of divine immutability and divine simplicity face regarding the choice between divine freedom and divine contingency in relationship to divine action and knowledge.

For example, if we affirm the apophatic predicate of simplicity and renounce composition in God, his actions are necessary given that his *ad extra* acts—such as creation—are necessary expressions of his simple essence, so the argument

⁹¹Unless otherwise noted, all passages will be taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

⁹²Terrence E. Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 (1988): 47. For this point, I am indebted to Steve Duby and his article, “‘For I am God, not a Man,’ Divine Repentance and the Creator-Creature Distinction” in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12.2 (2018): 149–69.

⁹³Fretheim, “The Repentance of God,” 51.

⁹⁴Fretheim, “The Repentance of God,” 51.

⁹⁵A similar strategy to divine repentance can be found in Ware, “An Evangelical Reexamination,” 431–7; and Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 194–6. For a response to Fretheim and those like him, see Duby, “‘For I Am God, Not a Man,’” 149–69.

goes. This follows from attributes such as God being called “Lord, Creator, Redeemer, and Refuge” since if these attributes are said to exist in a simple God, they must exist necessarily.⁹⁶ Therefore, in this model, God lacks freedom as he must create or he must redeem, etc.

Those who wish to deviate from or deny classical immutability by virtue of the problem of divine freedom might concede and affirm that the attributes of “creator” or “redeemer” exist within God necessarily by virtue of his divine simplicity. However, to give into this concession creates the alternative conundrum—that of contingency. If God creates necessarily, it will mean that there is not a possible world in which God could not have created or existed alone apart from creation.

We can find two modern expressions of this line of argumentation in the works of R.T. Mullins and Jay Wesley Richards. Mullins argues that divine simplicity should not be listed amongst the divine perfections as he thinks it is not “metaphysically compossible with who God is.”⁹⁷ He argues this on the basis that “the Triune God is perfectly free, and freedom . . . is not compossible with pure act. One should recall that as pure act God has no unactualized potential. If God has any unactualized potential, he is not simple.”⁹⁸

Given his understanding of divine freedom, Mullins argues we should conclude that it is possible that God could have created an alternate universe from the actual one we inhabit. Asking if it so that God could possibly perform such an action, Mullins notes, “the answer seems to be ‘yes,’ if God is free.” However, he continues: “If God did not create a different universe, he has unactualized potential. Divine simplicity should push one to say that God did create another universe. In fact, simplicity should push one to say that God created an infinite number of universes.”⁹⁹ The answer, for Mullins, is to deviate from the doctrine of pure actuality, along with strong immutability and simplicity with it.

Elsewhere, Mullins argues that a classical Thomistic articulation of logical, non-real, relations simply does not solve the problem of divine freedom and contingency. Using the example of God’s gracious act in the economy of redemption, he writes:

Augustine and Lombard will quickly appeal to the doctrine of predestination at this point to avoid any change in God. God has, from

⁹⁶These are the problem attributes put forward by R.T. Mullins in “Simply Impossible: A Case Against Divine Simplicity” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013), 191.

⁹⁷Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 194.

⁹⁸Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 194.

⁹⁹Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 195.

eternity, decreed to love Peter, they will say, so God has undergone no change in his decree. Does this really solve anything? Not at all. God's eternal decree to bestow grace upon Peter is not identical to the actual manifestation of that grace upon Peter for Peter does not eternally exist. God cannot bestow grace on Peter or express his love toward Peter until the actual concrete particular that is Peter comes into existence. God can express all sorts of loving gestures toward Peter before Peter comes to exist (e.g. eternally decree to send the Son and temporally send the Son), but certain expressions of love simply cannot occur until Peter in fact exists. This involves God activating a potential that he did not previously actualize: bestowing grace on Peter. It also involves God coming to have an accidental property: the bestower of grace on Peter. God has undergone a change, and Augustine and Lombard have failed to rebut this difficulty. They might try to appeal to the denial of real relations again, but it seems difficult for any Christian to seriously maintain that God only stands in a relation of reason to creation in the economy of salvation.¹⁰⁰

Jay Wesley Richards argues in a similar vein, asserting that pure actuality is a difficult doctrine to accommodate. Instead, he insists that Christian theologians ought to accept God's possessing potentiality to protect divine freedom. Dealing with the awkward tensions that simplicity and immutability have with divine freedom and contingency, he argues that the solution of either eternity or "Cambridge properties" are not sufficient. Ultimately, he proposes a form of "mutability" which might better do justice to divine freedom than a strict changelessness could account for. He writes:

Even if from eternity God knows what he chooses to create, if God's choice to create is free in the libertarian sense, then he could have chosen differently. In that case, what God would have known from eternity as actually created would be different from what he actually has created. Therefore we should conclude that God is immutable in those respects relevant to his essential perfection and aseity but "mutable" with respect to certain contingent properties because of his freedom.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Mullins, *End of a Timeless God*, 125. He concludes, "The Christian God cannot be timeless, strongly immutable, and simple." He is also worried that a notion of divine simplicity runs the risk of a "modal collapse." We will not treat this argument here but interested readers can see Mullins' thought in *End of a Timeless God*, 137–43.

¹⁰¹Richards, *Untamed God*, 212. While it is not the aim of this essay to answer these deviations and

CONCLUSION

Even though the doctrine of divine immutability has enjoyed relatively unanimous affirmation throughout most of Christian antiquity, the last few centuries have brought about various waves of deviations and denials from a classical understanding of God's changelessness. These deviations and denials are variegated in both source and content, yet each of them predicates movement in God or presents a "problem" in one of five ways: relational/soteriological, incarnational, creation/divine action, knowledge/will, and divine freedom/contingency. This essay, along with the groupings and categories therein, is not meant to be a constructive work, nor an apologetic work. Instead, the goal of this essay is a modest one, to provide a possible working taxonomy for deviations and denials of divine immutability through some of church history. Of course, this taxonomy is not exhaustive, nor is it conclusive. Theologians could demonstrate a taxonomy of similar material using differing categories and figures, which could prove helpful. The material here is simply an attempt at providing a working taxonomy that might be used in theological dialogue and discourse concerning God's changelessness.

denials of divine immutability, readers interested in a counter perspective to Richards and Mullins research project should consult Steven J. Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation: Dogmatic Responses to Some Analytic Questions," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012), 115–42. Instead of deviating from immutability or simplicity, Duby makes use of the helpful scholastic categories of "absolute" and "relative" attributes (Duby, "Divine Simplicity," 126). Employing these categories allows Duby, and those in the classical tradition, to affirm divine simplicity, divine immutability, *actus purus*, God's freedom of indifference with respect to creation, and creation's contingency upon God.

